

***A BRIEF CRITICAL REVIEW OF THEORIES AND MODELS OF CULTURAL
IDENTITY AND ADAPTATION IN CROSS-CULTURAL TRANSITION***

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Abstract

As the number of student sojourners increases exponentially over the last decades, they have become burgeoning groups of new research interest. They differ significantly with other immigrating and sojourning groups since the students often have high competency in the host culture's language. They move to the host culture for academic purposes and in general stay there for a temporary time. In addition to the acculturation stress, they also suffer from the pressure of academic adaptation. Despite the short sojourn, their cultural identities are sometimes subject to change during cross-cultural transition. However, a brief review at the literature in intercultural communication and cross-cultural transition shows that most of the prominent theories (and models) in the field are originally developed based on studies of immigrants and refugees, thus, may have little pertinence to sojourners. This paper, therefore, aims to synthesise and evaluate some of the influential theories and conceptualisations of cultural identity and adaptation in cross-cultural transition and their limitations within the extant literature. In particular, intercultural communication theories often examine cultural identity changes but fail to consider the adjustment process of the sojourner, whereas, in the field of cross-cultural transition, the theoretical focus remains around adjustment rather than on cultural identity. Further integration between the two fields is highly suggested. The paper also reviews the relevance of these theories for the study of sojourners in general and student sojourners in particular.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication, Cross-cultural Transition, International Students, Student Sojourners, Identity and Cultural Identity

1. Introduction

The increase in international mobility has turned the world into a tightly knitted web of the interdependence of cultures, nationalities and religions. We are now living in the world of the puzzling and startling interface of national and cultural traditions. Culture, as its purest

form, is becoming a nostalgic idea and ideal concept; the differentiating line between “us and them” is being gradually blurred and one’s identity is being constantly questioned.

In the field of intercultural communication, traditionally, researchers are interested in studying immigrants and their struggles to preserve cultural heritage and traditions; and their quests for cultural identities within new host countries. Since the 1950s when foreign exchange programmes started to gain their popularity, sojourners¹ in general and student sojourners, in particular, have become burgeoning groups of new research interest (Ward and Kennedy, 2001; Ward, 2001). However, the traditional approach to study immigrants, as well as their cross-cultural transition and cultural identity formation, proves to be problematic for the study of sojourners. In particular, the traditional approach portrays the process of cross-cultural transition and adjustment as depressing, anxious and stressful, which may influence the mental health of immigrants; and the failure of adaptation is often blamed on the individual incapability (Furnham, 2004). Contemporary approaches, on the other hand, seem to be more suitable since they perceive this process as transformative and developmental and not necessarily linked with ‘shock’ and fatigue (Ward, 2001).

Nevertheless, there is still a lack of a single overarching theoretical concept that can fully capture this process of cross-cultural transition, adjustment and adaptation of sojourners while integrating the concept of cultural identity within the whole process. This paper, therefore, aims to synthesize and critically evaluate the relevance of some important and well-developed concepts, theories and models which are originally created to explain the case of immigrants, to the study of sojourners.

¹ The term “sojourner” refers to people who have travelled and lived in different host countries for temporary time with particular objectives. For more information, see Ward, C. and Kennedy, A. (2001) 'Coping with cross-cultural transition', *Journal Of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 32(5), pp. 636-642.

2. Cultural identity and its relevance to the study of sojourners

Although the author acknowledges differences among the concepts of *nation*, *culture* and *ethnic*, as well as the complexity of the concept *identity*, *cultural identity* is applied here as a generic term to refer to the sense of belonging of individuals to cultural groups (Ting-Toomey and Chung, 2005). As Sussman (2000) further explains, cultural identity is the communal identity which is obtained from the awareness of individuals of their in-group memberships. Individuals find their existence embedded within “a larger existence in a collectivity of one’s group” (Yinger, 1988, p. 21). It offers them “a ground on which to stand” (Giordano, 1973, p. 16) and ideally, the formation of cultural identity happens when their personal identity is harmoniously merged with their collective identity (Erikson, 1993). This ideal concept of the harmonious combination of personal identity and the collective one, however, has been recently attacked by many post-modernistic scholars and will be explained further in the paper. In this review, ‘cultural identity’ refers to the affective attachment of individuals to their cultures and the cognitive awareness of their in-group memberships.

In addition, cross-cultural transition refers to the transition of individuals from one cultural environment to a relatively new one. The change in the cultural environment may trigger the individuals to re-organise their sense of identity (Larrain, 2013). Therefore, the cross-cultural transition is often seen as one of the important events that could possibly shape and reform identity. In particular, living in a new cultural environment, individuals may need to adopt new cultural behaviours or learn new cultural beliefs, all of which grant them a chance to self-reflect on their “old” cultural practices. This process, as a consequent, may lead to the process of identity reconstruction (Knafo and Schwartz, 2001).

Traditionally, immigrants and refugees, with their long and sometimes permanent overseas stay, are often the groups receiving much research attention since their identities are

often vulnerable and subject to change during the immigration. The extent of the change, however, differs depending on the immigrant's context. For most of the time, cultural identity is strongly influenced after the transition which has received much attention from immigration research. Yet fewer attempts are made to study cultural identity shifts of sojourners in general and student sojourners in particular.

Recently, more attention has been given on studying the re-entry phase of sojourners to their original home cultures. This phase has been widely referred to as the extended process of cross-cultural transition (Martin, 1986). A recent research on American student sojourners who have studied in France for a few months reveals that almost all of them experienced the distressing feeling of inbetweeners who were trapped between the two cultures, and most often they felt "a vague sense of change" in themselves (Pitts, 2016, p. 429). The change is sometimes so significant that these sojourners, in some research, are often referred to as 'cultural strangers' to their own home cultures (Gudykunst and Kim, 1984). It is logical to assume that despite their short duration of stay in the host culture, the cultural identity of sojourners can also be influenced during the cross-cultural transition. Therefore, more focus should be given to study sojourners and their cultural identity shifts during the cross-cultural transition.

3. Is cultural identity unidimensional or bidimensional?

The approach to study cultural identity has also been developed and gradually changed over time. Traditionally, modernist scholars suggest that although identity is complex and always changing, the identity change happens in a unidimensional way that maintains identity continuity. Therefore, it is suggested that the change in cultural identity in cross-cultural transition should be positioned in a continuum, with 'exclusively' identified with home culture lying at one extreme and with host culture at the other end (Ryder *et al.*, 2000). The 'birth' of the new cultural identity, at the same time, puts an end to the original home cultural identity

(Gordon, 1964). Similarly, the personal identity of individuals is also expected to co-exist harmoniously with their collective identity.

On the contrary, identity, in postmodernism, has been perceived as a fragile concept and identity continuity is a myth (Hall *et al.*, 1992). Multiple identities can exist within an individual, which are sometimes contrary and even impossible to be combined into one singular identity (Hall *et al.*, 1992). Postmodernist scholars, therefore, suggest that cross-cultural transition may 'add' another dimension to cultural identity, resulting in the existence of the bidimensional cultural identities (home cultural and host cultural identification) within individuals (Berry *et al.*, 1987; Ryder *et al.*, 2000). Currently, many researchers have been applied research scales or measurements to examine cultural identities as a bidimensional concept. Many models and scales have been developed to measure bidimensional cultural identities, for instance, Berry *et al.* (1987); Ward and Rana-Deuba (1999) and Ryder *et al.* (2000). Cultural identities, therefore, have sometimes been used as plural.

4. Review of theories and models of cultural identity and adaptation in cross-cultural transition

In general, cultural identity is often studied in the field of intercultural communication and cross-cultural transition, however, the theories or models of cultural identity in the extant literature of these two fields vary significantly in terms of focus. The paper will first review some widely used theories in the field of intercultural communication, followed by the critics of theories in the cross-cultural transition field. Finally, it will evaluate the relevance of these theories to the study of sojourners, specifically student sojourners.

4.1 Cultural identity in the field of intercultural communication

Although there are numerous theories of cultural identity in the field, these three theories, namely social identity theory, identity management theory and identity negotiation theory, are

often applied to study cultural identity in an intercultural environment and cross-cultural transition. The theories will be examined and reviewed as follows.

4.1.1 Social Identity Theory (SIT)

SIT studies the group identity of individuals within intergroup interactions and seems to examine this process of cross-cultural transition and identity change through a pluralistic perspective (Tajfel, 1981). In particular, when in contact with the alterity of other cultures, the old communal identity (ingroup membership) becomes more salient, and at the same time, a new cultural identity (outgroup membership) emerges. The juxtaposition of these opposing memberships, in return, enhances the original cultural identity of individuals (Sussman, 2000). For instance, a study in multicultural working environment confirmed that employees working in multicultural corporates had a higher level of identification towards their home cultures, compared to their peers working in mono-cultural companies (Stryker and Serpe, 1982).

Interestingly, SIT indicates that individuals often experience and construct cultural identity in an emotionally driven way rather than in a rational strategy (Kim, 2008). When the outgroup relationship seems to conflict with or even threatens the ingroup membership, individuals often respond defensively or even discriminatively to the outgroup member (Kim, 2008).

4.1.2 Identity Management Theory (IMT)

IMT, developed by Cupach and Imahori (1993), proposes a new idea which focuses on the emergence of relational identity in an intercultural relationship. Relational identity is, in this case, defined as “a privately transacted system of understandings” that influence an individual way of “knowing, being and acting in relation to each other and the outside world” (Wood, 1982, pp. 75-76). IMT suggests that within an intercultural relationship, participants can develop a relational identity by finding similarities and references among them, forming

rules or roles for interpersonal behaviours and renegotiating their cultural identities based on their newly emerged relational identity. During this process, intercultural relationships are becoming interpersonal and cultural identities (and cultural differences) are temporarily 'subdued'. Since it was introduced, IMT has been used in many studies to mainly explain and examine the formation of intercultural relationships and friendships (Lee, 2008). Some studies applying IMT are the series of research on facework strategies and relational identity in intercultural relationships of Cupach and Imahori (1993) and Imahori and Cupach (2005); and studies on the activities and stages which form a relational identity in the intercultural relationship of Lee (2006) and Lee (2008).

4.1.3 Identity Negotiation Theory (INT)

INT was firstly proposed by Stella Ting-Toomey and since then has been edited and fine-tuned several times. The latest version in 2005 emphasises five identity dialectical themes that are important for the adjustment process and the formation of high-quality intergroup relationships of immigrants and refugees (Ting-Toomey and Chung, 2005). Some of the themes identified as relevant for the case of student sojourners are identity security – vulnerability, identity inclusion – differentiation, and identity consistency – change (Ting-Toomey, 2015). Briefly, identity security – vulnerability refers to the sense of security within their in-group memberships. Feeling secure with their ingroups, individuals may feel comfortable interacting to other different cultural groups; whereas the lack of security (or also called vulnerability) may result in avoidance of these intercultural contacts. Identity inclusion – differentiation indicates the degree of perceived acceptance by others. High level of identity inclusion may make individuals wonder about their personal identity whereas high identity differentiation could cause them to feel excluded from their cultural groups. Identity consistency – change highlights the stability and development of identity over time (refer to Ting-Toomey and Chung (2005) and Hotta and Ting-Toomey (2013) for detailed explanation of these themes).

INT highlights the tension of competing forces in a communication system (coined as “*dialectics*” in this theory). From the battle of these competing discourses, individuals start to negotiate their socio-cultural and personal identity. The “*ideal*” identity negotiation outcomes are “*the feelings of being understood, respected and affirmatively valued*” (Ting-Toomey and Chung, 2005, p. 218).

In general, these theories of identity change (or negotiation or management) focus largely on examining how identity is managed in intercultural communication (i.e. the communication pattern or the relationship and behaviour of the individual set within an intercultural environment). There seems to be little integration of cross-cultural adjustment and adaptation in the theories. Moreover, the focal point of the theories is more on the individual agency rather than on the environmental affordance. Little is known about the interface of the individual agency and environmental influences. The theories also give little information on the dynamics and the development of identity and intercultural relationship over time. They seem to “frame” identity change within a particular intercultural contact at a particular time.

4.2 Cultural identity in the field of cross-cultural transition

There are two contemporary approaches that lay the foundation for the study of cross-cultural transition, adjustment and adaptation: *cultural learning*; and *stress and coping* (Ward, 2001). The former focuses on the behavioural learning process of individuals, whereas the latter emphasizes the psychological adaptation of individuals when they live in a new socio-cultural environment (Ward, 2001). However, individually, none of the approaches above can thoroughly portray the process of cross-cultural transition. A combination of both is usually required so as to offer an all-inclusive image of this dynamic process.

Underlying these theoretical approaches is the emphasis on the importance of social environments and relationships surrounding individuals, which is highly influential to the

success of the adaptation and adjustment of individuals. Despite a large number of theories and models of cultural identity and adaptation within the field, the paper will mainly analyse the two popular and influential theories in the recent literature, which are an *integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation* and *acculturation model*.

4.2.1 Integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation (ITCCA)

Developed by Young Yun Kim, ITCCA encompasses both approaches to stress and coping and social identity theory to explain the transformative effect of cross-cultural transition and adaptation on individuals (Kim, 2001). As Kim (2001) explains, only when living in the new socio-cultural environment, do individuals experience identity conflicts. This is originated from the desire to maintain old behavioural customs to preserve the original cultural identity, on one hand, and the need to adopt new behaviours to adjust to the new environment, on the other hand. This conflict leads to the stress (or internal disequilibrium) that ignites the “*instinctive human desire*” to restore the internal mental balance (Kim, 1988). Individuals are now “pushed” to adjust and even adopt new behaviours to enhance their performances in the new environment. As this process of stress and adaptation repeats over time, the individuals achieve psychological growths in which they successfully “unlearns” the old behaviours of their home cultures to obtain the new “accepted” behaviours of their host cultures (Kim, 1988). After this process, individuals’ original cultural identity is replaced by a new identity called interculturality, which embraces both of the concepts of “cosmopolitan” and “meta-identity” (Kim, 2008, p. 364). This new concept of interculturality transcends some concepts of “hybrid identity” and even “multicultural identity”; and it is suggested as the advanced level of communal identity (Kim, 2008, p. 364). Their cultural identity is no longer tied with the membership of one particular group but is one in which individuals see themselves as members of a larger whole called “the globe” (Kim, 2008). Thus, interculturality is sometimes described as the identity of “*a citizen of the world*”.

ITCCA is frequently employed as the guiding theory in many qualitative studies in cross-cultural adaptation and cultural identity. It was originally applied to study the case of immigrants but recently has been expanded to research sojourners. Nevertheless, ITCCA is often criticised for its portrayal of the cross-cultural adjustment and adaptation as a zero-sum process in which success is perceived to be only when deculturation (“unlearning” the “old” cultural custom) and acculturation (adopting the “new” custom of the host culture) occur. This assumption intensifies the “burden” of assimilation on individuals and is in danger of elevating assimilation as the single possible way for individuals to be accepted in the host culture. Other ways of adapting (integrating both cultures, for instance) are ignored. This, however, may not be the case for sojourners who move to the host culture for only a temporary period of time, therefore, they are less likely to prefer assimilation over integration.

The concept of “interculturality” in ITCCA is original yet problematic and has been criticised by many scholars in the study of cross-cultural transition. Recent research on immigrant women in transnational marriages in Taiwan shows that half of the interviewees persisted to be identified with their original cultures and only a quarter perceived themselves as of ‘mixed cultures’, yet none mentioned “interculturality” or any relevant concepts (Sandel and Liang, 2010). See also other similar findings in other research of Croucher and Cronn-Mills (2011) and Croucher (2013).

4.2.2 Acculturation Model

Berry (2005) model of acculturation is developed to study the process of adjustment of immigrants and has been considered by many scholars in the field as the foundational model for the study of cross-cultural transition. As Berry (2005) explains, acculturation is a process where, after the prolonged time of being exposed to different cultures, individuals experience a shift in their attitudes, behaviours and identity. This process is often accompanied by

acculturative stress, which refers to the decrease in the psychological, somatic and social balance of individuals (Berry *et al.*, 1987; Berry, 2005). It is worth noticing the difference between acculturative stress and internal stress mentioned in ITCCA. Acculturative stress is a result of the arduous process of acculturation whereas internal stress is psychological reactions of the human desire to restore inner balance and it functions similarly to the motivation behind the adjustment process.

Individuals may apply different strategies to acculturate into the new culture and these have been identified by Berry (2005) as “four acculturation strategies”: 1/ *assimilation* (accepting the host culture and rejecting the home culture), 2/ *separation* (rejecting the host culture yet preserving the home one), 3/ *integration* (accepting both cultures), and 4/ *marginalisation* (refusing both cultures). Integration and assimilation strategies are suggested as most beneficial for the process of adjustment (Berry, 2005).

This model, however, was originally developed for immigrating groups, thus may have little pertinence to student sojourners with temporary stay in the host culture (Sussman, 2000). The pressure of thorough acculturation for them might be lower than that of immigrants. Moreover, in this era of globalisation and internationalisation, distinctions among cultural groups are ambiguous and it is becoming more challenging for individuals living in the twenty-first century to clearly identify whether they belong to any particular culture. The idea of complete acceptance or rejection of home or host cultures, therefore, becomes problematic (Weinreich, 2009).

Nevertheless, the acculturation model still has a significant contribution to the study of cross-cultural transition since it acknowledges the diversity of acculturation strategies and that assimilation should not be the only possible strategy. It is also one of a few models that

proposes the concept of bidimensional cultural identities and thus successfully depicts the complicity of the concept of “cultural identity” in postmodernism.

In general, theories in the field of cross-cultural transition are originally developed to study immigrants and refugees; therefore, may have some points that are of little pertinence to the case of sojourners, specifically student sojourners. Moreover, these theories focus extensively on the significance of socio-cultural environments on individuals. On the other hand, theories from the intercultural communication concentrate mainly on the individual agency, thus, may lack some considerations of environmental influences on individuals. It is suggested that a new model should be created which can bridge the gap of the approaches of these two fields and may give a detailed explanation of the case of sojourners.

5. Conclusion

This paper has reviewed some of the popularly used and important concepts of cultural identity and cultural adjustment in the fields of intercultural communication and cross-cultural transition (i.e. SIT, IMT, INT, ITCCA and Acculturation Model). Despite the growing significance of student sojourners and the importance of cross-cultural transition on their cultural identity, there is still a lack of an overarching theory that explains the process of cultural identity change in cross-cultural transition and integrates it with the whole process of adjustment and adaptation. On one hand, the theories that can comprehensively explain identity change in intercultural (or intergroup) contacts (i.e. SIT, IMT and INT) fail to examine the adjustment process during the cross-cultural transition. The theories that successfully capture the dynamics of identity change within the adjustment process (i.e. ITCCA and Acculturation Model), on the other hand, encounter some issues with their conceptualisations of identity. Moreover, these theories were originally created to study immigrants and refugees, thus, may have limited applicability to the study of sojourners. Therefore, it is highly suggested that a

new theory or model should be developed to depict the dynamics and complexity of cultural identity and its significance to the adjustment and adaptation of the student sojourner in particular and the sojourner in general.

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