Chapter 2

Understanding Cultural Difference: Examination of Self-Authorship among International Students

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ABSTRACT

Relying on the theoretical underpinnings of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, and Baxter Magolda’s theory of self-authorship, the authors conducted a quantitative analysis to better understand how culture influences the development of self-authorship. Data analysis used descriptive statistics and Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to identify potential relationships amongst these two theoretical constructs. Findings revealed that self-authorship can serve as an avenue to develop reliable measurements to enlighten our understanding of this complex and multidimensional construct. The authors in this chapter highlight these relationships and discusses findings as it concerns to the development of international students.

INTRODUCTION

The 2014 Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange stated that the number of international students at colleges and universities in the United States increased to a record high of 886,052 in the 2013/14 academic year (IIE, 2014). Association of International Educators (NAFSA, 2013) shows that international students’ spending in all 50 states has contributed approximately $24 billion to the U.S. economy. Nearly 313,000 jobs are supported or generated as a result of international student spending.

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on tuition and living expenses while in the United States. This means that for every seven international students enrolled, three U.S. jobs are created or supported by spending occurring in the following sectors: higher education, accommodation, dining, retail, transportation, telecommunications, and health insurance (NAFSA, 2013).

This growth in enrollment has created opportunities for American colleges and universities to promote cultural diversity and international understanding. However, the opportunities are also linked with a current reality: international students enter American universities with a variety of cultures, values, social norms, languages, and academic and social skills, which were constructed in their country of origin. When they enroll in colleges and universities in the U.S., international students bring this background with them, and continue to develop their identities, influenced now not only by the culture of a new country, but also by a number of sub-cultures existing on their campuses and communities.

With this implicit understanding of how cultural background can shape and influence the identity development of individuals, we argue that culture can have a major impact on determining a sense of identity for international students. In other words, culture can play a key role helping international students answer questions such as: “who am I?”, “how do I know?”, and “how do I construct relationships with others?” According to Baxter Magolda (1998), Self-Authorship is a theory that examines the process of identity development of individuals seeking to answer these three questions. Baxter Magolda defines self-authorship as the “ability to construct knowledge in a contextual world, an ability to construct an internal identity separate from external influences, and an ability to engage in relationships without losing one’s internal identity” (p. 12).

While the development of self-authorship is widely recognized as one of the most important outcomes for college graduates, research findings indicate that the large majority of students continue to graduate from college without having achieved the ability to become the authors of their own life (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Baxter Magolda, et al., 2007; Kegan, 1994; King, et al., 2009). Baxter Magolda, et al. (2007) provides evidence that suggests that less than 10 percent of college graduates have entered the early stages of developing self-authorship. Likewise, Abes and Jones (2004) concluded that developing self-authorship would be “exceptional for college students” (p. 626). Thus, raising two key questions: What do we know about self-authorship and how can we foster its development?

In Baxter Magolda’s (2001) work, developing self-authorship is associated with exposure to two kinds of experiences: (a) individuals had to make a decision for which there was no formula for success, or (b) individuals wanted to start making changes because they were discontented with their present situations. Baxter Magolda (2001) suggested college students were likely developing self-authorship because they encountered provocative experiences – the experiences that disrupted students’ equilibrium and they felt compelled to figure out what changes need to be made and how to make them on their own. Consistent with this idea, a number of studies suggest that students’ intellectual development, and in particular self-authorship, may be promoted when students face challenging situations. In particular, the literature reveals that certain populations of students might be more likely to develop self-authorship because of the experiences they encounter.

For example it is noted that students from underprivileged backgrounds might develop self-authorship earlier than their counterparts from privileged backgrounds. In a longitudinal qualitative study of Latino students’ development in college, Torres and Hernandez (2007) found that participants often confronted racism and negative stereotypes. The researchers noted that these experiences can be very influential, in particular in what Baxter Magolda describes as the “crossroads phase” of self-authorship, where students attempt to find a balance between external influences and their internal voice. Torres and Hernandez