

Cultural Identity reconstruction in the study abroad context: The case of Algerian Sojourners

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Abstract

The way individuals define themselves is assumed to be tightly linked to social and cultural values of the environment they are raised in. Yet, identity is not static and forming a cultural identity requires adopting beliefs and practice of one or more cultural communities. Hence, this paper is an attempt to bring the issue of *identity construction* in question as a result of direct contact with people from different cultures and what it may engender as a change in social, cultural behaviour and positions. The present study investigates the impact of study abroad experience on Sojourners' cultural identity. It tries to highlight the nature of the crossing borders experience, and how it strongly contributes to the creation of a new cultural identity. This research work relies on a case study that consists of 25 Algerian students who are actually enrolled in a long-term programme at different universities in the United Kingdom. The data were gathered through the use of both questionnaire and semi-structured interview administered to these Sojourners. Then, data were analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The findings first display the competencies developed by students while abroad. Second, the study explores how cultural identity is being reconstructed and negotiated during the intercultural communication. Third, the extracts of the study reveal that the Sojourners are aware of the cross-cultural adaptation process and they try to cope with the challenges they face as well as avoiding communication breakdowns and misunderstandings. As a result, we contribute to the literature concerning constructing and negotiating identities in different socio-cultural contexts.

Keywords: Cross-cultural Adaptation, Cultural Identity, Identity Negotiation, Intercultural Communication, Study Abroad

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1. Introduction

Some time ago, before surrendering to the cultural globalisation, before witnessing technological development and before investing in communication and transportation tools, individuals used to identify themselves as members belonging to a specific society. They used to live their culture separately, although there was an external contact but, it was not strong enough to influence them or make change because only a few people had the chance to across the generations such as soldiers, traders and Sojourners (Samovar & Porter, 2003). However, in today's highly connected world, individuals may identify themselves as world citizens, people who belong to a global village that gathers different countries and different cultures.

This world community made them more interconnected than ever before due to technological and transportation tools. It is worth mentioning that this interconnectedness facilitated people's lives. Yet, the fact they are exposed to different cultures makes them reflecting on their own cultural patterns. Hence, this connection process brings identity in question and makes it subject to change.

Recently, identity is extensively used in different academic fields; it is considered as a key element for explaining different phenomena in modern social and human sciences. According to Jenkins (2008, p. 8): 'Everybody has something to say: Anthropologists, sociologists, geographers, historians, philosophers, political scientists, psychologists and sociologists'. Despite the fact that identity is bound up with everything, there is no unique and clear definition of the concept. Its complexity, in fact, is inherent in the term itself. It is about similarities, but it implies differences (Buckingham, 2008). Identity, first, has been introduced by psychologist Erick Erickson in 1950's. Later, many researchers and scholars contributed to explaining the concept.

In a broad sense, identity refers to the factors that we use to define ourselves with such as language, values, traditions, culture, customs and religion these factors make us belonging to a specific group of people, at the same time, that is exactly what differentiates us from others. In the same vein, Weedon (2004, p. 9) claims that: 'Identity, in fact, is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others'. Hence, it is considered as a socio-cultural feature that brings individuals together on the basis of shared cultural and social values.

Hall (1991, p. 23) argues that 'Identity is not given once and upon for all: It is built up and changes throughout a person's lifetime'. Accordingly, Identity influences individual's behaviour when acting or communicating within a specific society. Moreover, it can be influenced by many external factors. According to Norton (2000, p. 5), identity refers to: 'How a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space and how a person understands possibilities for the future'.

Unlike the traditional view that considers identity as a fixed and unitary phenomenon. In the poststructuralist view, identity is regarded as something adaptable and flexible. In this regard, Kouhpaenejad and Gholaminejad (2014, p. 200) argue that: 'In a globalised, poststructuralist and postmodern world, identity is considered to be fluid, multiple, diverse, dynamic, varied, shifting, subject to change and the contradictory'.

Identity, therefore, is dynamic in nature, and forming cultural identity involves adapting the beliefs and practices of one or more cultural communities (Jensen, 2003). In fact, it is seen as a process since individual identities are not fixed; they are always negotiated and performed according to different social contexts (Block, 2007). In the same vein, Llamas and Watt (2010, p. 01) assert that 'neither our identities nor our languages are static. However, both are constantly changing to the ever-changing contexts of our interactions'. Ultimately, it is strongly expected that Sojourners will adapt or even change their cultural identities according to the actual context.

Study abroad can be considered as a double-edged sword; it is, on the one hand, noted as a vital

element that enhances the educational institutions and provides their students with the necessary skills to compete globally (Giedt, Gokcek, & Ghosh, 2015). On the other hand, it can be recognised as one of the factors that influence identity since people move from one cultural environment to another.

In addition to its importance, study abroad experience gives students the opportunity to experience various cultural differences in their daily lives (Byram & Weng, 2006). Hence, the adventure of living and interacting with people from a different culture triggers the awareness of one's own cultural identity. More precisely, they are constructing and negotiating their identities when communicating. After all, identities are like cultures they are expected to change through time (Ting-Toomey, 1990). Similarly, Jewett (2010, p. 636) argues that 'identity is negotiable whenever one is faced with new context'. Hence, in addition to the negotiation process, Sojourners try to adapt to the new environment. They are, in fact, obliged to change to cope with the cultural differences. Shaules (2015, p. 180) defines cross-cultural adaptation as 'allowing for change in oneself as response to adaptive demands from a different cultural environment'. In another words, Sojourners are forced to change since their normal way of doing things will not work in the new conditions.

2. Literature Review

A lot of studies have been conducted to investigate the impact of study abroad experiences on Sojourners' lives. Smith (2013) studied the positive and negative effects of study abroad programmes. The information in her study was mainly gathered from online articles, statistical databases, online survey and personal interviews. The survey sample, in fact, was not random and chosen purposively from Ithaca College students who have been involved in a study abroad programme. These students have first-hand accounts of their encounters with foreign people and places; they expose the good and bad elements of their experiences. The final conclusions of this study indicated that the study abroad programmes can be the key in achieving cross-cultural open-mindedness, since they are annually evolving to adapt to changes in global networks and communication. Furthermore, one's perception of a foreigner may change if this person became a foreigner in others' land. Hence, the study abroad programme can bridge the gap and help people to have a real-life experience rather than teaching them how to be culturally aware.

Nguyen Jefferies and Rojas (2018) made contribution in the field of study abroad by investigating the impact of short-term experiences. The participants of this study were 79 students from the United States. These American undergraduate students studied in a 5-week programme in Puerto Rico and U.S. virgin lands (Saint Croix, Saint John and Saint Thomas) in the summer of 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015. The results demonstrated that the benefits associated with the traditional study abroad programmes may also be associated with short-term study experiences. Besides, the findings indicated that such programmes helped the students to reach personal growth and awareness.

Stone and Petrick (2003) made a theoretical investigation of the benefits of educational travel experiences. That research paper revealed that educational travel experience may have many advantages where the students will have significant gains in personal awareness, intercultural competence and academic progress. Furthermore, personal awareness may include growth in areas such as self-confidence, motivation and personal identity.

In another research, Jewett (2010) wanted to give the study abroad a different perspective. She focused on the fact that this experience may go beyond meeting and living with other people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It rather helps them to experience themselves differently. The research investigated the perspectives of eight students with regard to socio-cultural identities, historical representations and teacher practices since she had the role of instructor and

researcher in that project. The findings revealed that through the study abroad programming, university students engage in relational encounters between self (home culture) and other (host culture). Moreover, the study demonstrated that these encounters did not take place only during students' time abroad but also well before it since students construct and exhibit various identities through performances, representation and discourse. These practices displayed at home will certainly shape the ways in which students create meanings abroad.

Sato (2014) conducted an investigation about the impact of study abroad on second language identities and language learning. The aim of that study was to focus more on the formed identities through one's second language in the study abroad contexts, unlike the previous studies which focused only on language proficiency and adaptability to different cultures through study abroad. His study was based on the narrative inquiry of three Japanese students who participated in a short-term study abroad programme. The findings exposed that all participants constructed their second language identities. They become active in learning and using English by the interaction with local people and through self-enlightenment that was generated by finding a person they admire, and this impact has lasted well since they returned home. They also became aware of linguistic analysis and pragmatic at the same time.

The outcomes of the previous studies showed that generally, the study abroad has a positive impact on Sojourners' lives, academic progress and intercultural competence. In this research paper, we aim at contributing to complement the existing literature by studying the advantages of study abroad experience and its impact on Algerian Sojourners' cultural identities and how the latter is being reconstructed and negotiated in a different socio-cultural context. To do so, the present investigation addressed the following research questions:

- 1) How does study abroad experience affect Sojourners' cultural identity?
- 2) What are the reasons that lead to cultural identity change?

The mentioned research questions led to the formulation of the following hypotheses

- 1) Sojourners are living in a new cultural environment in which they will be more reflective. They may also develop many competencies and skills that may contribute to the formation of their cultural identity.

Sojourners' cultural identity may change as they recognise the importance of cultural adaptation, they will be aware of the cultural differences and they may negotiate their identities when communicating.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

The selected participants in this study were 25 Algerian Sojourners. They were enrolled in a long-term programme called the Algerian Doctoral Initiative. The indicated period of stay is 4 years and above. All of them are PhD students in English literature, linguistics and language teaching in the United Kingdom. Moreover, this study comprised a convenience sample population, they had been asked to voluntarily fill out the questionnaire by their colleagues or friends who kindly cooperated in this research. In this, a snowball sampling strategy was implemented to reach as many students as possible. The Sojourners' age ranged from 25 to 30. All participants' first language is Arabic and they are all living in Algeria.

3.2. Instruments

In this investigation, we used two main research instruments: Online questionnaire and semi-interview. The questionnaire, actually, was divided into three main sections: (1) Personal information, (2) previous educational experiences and (3) previous participation in cultural exchange programmes. It also contained two types of questions: Likert scales and closed categories. Besides, in the questionnaire participants were asked to participate in a follow-up interview and only 14 of them agreed. The purpose of the semi-interview was to explore more details about the addressed issues in the questionnaire. The interview lasted for 2-4 min for each individual based on their answers to the questions. Four interviews were conducted face to face, the rest was done online.

3.3. Data collection and analysis procedures

Before starting the distribution of the questionnaires, an email was sent to Sojourners inviting them to participate in the study. The emails also contained a detailed description of the study and probable interview arrangements. The questionnaire was completed by 25 participants, distribution was unbalanced: 11 males and 14 females. The interview was conducted with 5 males and 9 females Sojourners. The data were analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively, the answers of the questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics, and then, the interview answers were thematically analysed (Creswell, 2014). The questionnaire and survey were all undertaken in English.

4. Results

The results are presented and discussed as follows. Gender, previous educational experiences, previous participation in cultural exchange programmes, students' beliefs about their identity and how it is influenced by the new cultural environment, students' desire to integrate into the target community and their attitudes about learning its cultural patterns. Questionnaire data are reported in terms of frequencies and percentages and semi-interview data are presented analysed thematically, a part of it was transformed to form quantitative measures.

Table 1. Gender

Gender	n	p (%)
Male	11	44
Female	15	56

Note: N: number, P: Percentage.

Table 2. Being abroad for academic purposes

Answers	n	p (%)
Yes	6	25
No	19	75

Note: N: number, P: Percentage.

The results in Table 1 demonstrate that there are 44% male and 56% female. The majority, 75% did not have the previous study abroad experiences. However, the rest 37.5% did. Their experience took place in the United Kingdom; it was 5-6 months programme in which they studied about IELTS exam, then they learned about the research proposals.

Table 3. Being abroad for touristic purposes

Answers	n	p (%)
Yes	9	37,5
No	16	62,5

Note: N: number, P: Percentage.

Most of the students, 62.5% had not been abroad for touristic purposes before getting accepted in the programme. Only 37.5% had the chance to travel. Those students mentioned that the period abroad was between 15 days and 1 month and they went to Arabic countries only such as Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Turkey. The answers are shown in Table 3.

Table 4. Cultural exchange programmes

Answers	n	p (%)
Yes	13	53
No	12	47

Note: N: Number, P: Percentage.

Most of Sojourners, 51.5% did not have the chance to take part in previous cultural exchange programmes. However, the rest 47% did participate. Some of them went for short-term programmes that took a period of 4-6 weeks, they mentioned some of these experiences such as: Association International des Etudiants en Sciences Economiques et Commerciales and Middle East Partnership Initiative which was directed only to Middle East and North Africa people this programme was offered by the United States of America. Others had participated in the Global Understanding Project that took place at University of Tlemcen. In fact, it was an American programme created by the University of East Carolina within the framework of cultural exchange between the world's universities (Global Understanding Partners) through courses of English aiming to promote peace and understanding. Besides, the participants demonstrated positive attitudes about this type of programmes and mentioned a lot of things that they learned such as flexibility, tolerance, open-mindedness, cultural awareness and appreciation of cultural differences.

The questionnaire, also, included some Likert scale questions to measure students' beliefs, attitudes and agreements. The answers are illustrated in the following tables:

Table 5. Identity is influenced by communication

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
Your identity influences your communication	15%	0%	7%	37%	43%

Note: SD: Strongly disagree, D: Disagree, N: Neutral, A: Agree, SA: Strongly agree.

Table 6. Cultural identity is influenced by the new environment

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
Your cultural identity is influenced by the new environment	7%	14%	21%	36%	22%

Note: SD: Strongly disagree, D: Disagree, N: Neutral, A: Agree, SA: Strongly agree.

Table 7. Sojourners' identity is changing

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
Sojourners' cultural identity is changing overtime and according to the new social context	15%	14%	21%	22%	29%

Note: SD: Strongly disagree, D: Disagree, N: Neutral, A: Agree, SA: Strongly agree.

The results of Table 5 reveal that the highest percentage (43%) of the agreement was reported for the fact that students' identity influences the communication process. Only 15% who disagreed with that followed by 36% of agreement on the fact that their cultural identity can be influenced by the new cultural environment (Table 6). Agreement rates again raised 29% (SA) and 22% (A) for the statement of the cultural identity is changing overtime and according to the new social context (Table 7).

Table 8. Integration in the target community

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
Sojourners seek integration in the target community	14%	22%	14%	35%	15%

Note: SD: Strongly disagree, D: Disagree, N: Neutral, A: Agree, SA: Strongly agree.

Table 9. The change of traditions according to different circumstances

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
Traditions are adaptable to changed circumstances	0%	14%	14%	43%	29%

Note: SD: Strongly disagree, D: Disagree, N: Neutral, A: Agree, SA: Strongly agree.

Table 10. Learning foreign cultural values

Statement	Sometimes	Often	Never	Always
Learning cultural values and patterns	29%	28%	0%	43%

The results in Table 8 show that the Sojourners have an intention to integrate into the target community, as the highest percentage (35%) was reported for that. Table 9, then, revealed that most of Sojourners (43%) agreed on the fact that their traditions are adaptable and can change according to different circumstances. The findings in the last Table 10 demonstrate that 43% of students keep learning the cultural patterns of the target community.

Moving to the semi-structured interview, not all the participants accepted to take part in the interview, only 14 participants who were included in the study: 5 males and 9 females. All students 100% agreed on the fact that the study abroad experience helped them to develop many competencies and skills; they mentioned that it deepened their knowledge and widened their horizons.

The developed competencies as mentioned by Sojourners were: (1) Academic skills such as critical thinking and language skills including reading and writing and research skills; (2) personal skills such as mental growth, self-independence, responsibility, interpersonal skills, time management, confidence and resilience and (3) cultural skills are intercultural communication skills, tolerance and flexibility. Moreover, most of participants (92%) agreed on the fact that their behaviour has changed. They also acknowledged the impact of study abroad experiences on their personalities mainly in terms of

independence, confidence and self-reliance. Others have mentioned the fact that they have been exposed to a new cultural environment, and getting in touch with people from different cultures helped them to reflect on themselves, to be more conscious, more sensitive, less judgmental, tolerant and open-minded. The answers are represented in Table 11

Table 11. Changes in participants' behaviour

Statement	n	p (%)
No	1	8
Yes	13	92

Note: N: number, P: Percentage

Actually 57% of the informants reported that they faced intercultural misunderstanding and 43% mentioned that they never fell in such a situation. The reasons for that varied getting exposed to British culture before going there, being included in cultural exchange programmes which helped them to be more sensitive rather than judgemental. For those who faced that, they mentioned that they could manage it through different strategies such as making friends, patience, trying as much as possible to be tolerant and sensitive, explaining and clarifying things rather than keeping distance, apologise if needed and what was mentioned by most of them is accepting cultural differences as they are, trying to understand. The results are exemplified in Table 12.

Table 12. Facing intercultural misunderstanding

Statement	n	p (%)
Yes	8	57
No	6	43

Note: N: Number, P: Percentage.

Table 13. Identity serves as a bridge when communicating

Statement	n	p (%)
Yes	10	75
No	4	25

Note: N: Number, P: Percentage.

The results in Table 13 demonstrate that most of the interviewees (75%) agreed on the statement of 'identity serves as a bridge between culture and communication'. That is why this question was included, to see Sojourners' attitudes towards their identity and see the situations where they found themselves expressing their identities. Actually, most of girls (41%) consider their clothes as an identity marker (they wear Hijab: Headscarf); others mentioned that they participated in cultural events where they represent their customs with the traditional dress too. Some also declined invitations, etc. What is remarkable in their answers they are religiously guided.

Table 14. Having difficulties during the adaptation process

Statement	n	p (%)
Yes	9	64,28
Only in the beginning	4	28,51
No	1	7,14

Note: N: Number, P: Percentage.

Concerning the difficulties, only one informant said that he did not find any difficulties trying to adapt. 28.51% of participants had only few difficulties in the beginning in terms of technology, English accents, transportation and education. Others, about 64.28% mentioned other difficulties such as cultural differences, discrimination, educational system and interactive situations.

Table 15. Identity negotiation

Statement	n	p (%)
Yes	9	64,28
No	5	35,72

Note: N: Number, P: Percentage.

Most of the interviewees (64.28%) negotiated their identity when communicating and consider the fact that they argue, explain and convince when necessary. Others (35.72%) did not negotiate. Informants also mentioned some strategies used to adapt to the environment such as tolerance, flexibility, cultural sensitivity, accepting cultural differences and developing intercultural competence.

5. Discussion and Interpretations

Unlike the other studies that focus more on the linguistic outputs and the fact that studying abroad experiences help students to develop their language proficiency in the target community, this investigation focuses more on the cross-cultural experience itself and cultural identity. Therefore, this research aims to contribute to the existing literature about cultural identity reconstruction in the study abroad context. As mentioned in the previous parts of this research, identity can be affected by many factors, and the intercultural approach views cultural identity as a dynamic and always in process. As a result, this research paper offers insights into cultural identity reconstruction in a new socio-cultural setting.

The first one is considering the study abroad experience and its advantages. The findings revealed that Sojourners have developed many skills and competencies which have been put into three main categories: Interpersonal, academic and cultural. This experience extends to include changes in personality and behaviour and it brings identity to questions since one can only experience his true cultural identity once experiencing another self (Hall, 1990). From the intercultural communication perspective, identity is subject to change according to different social and cultural factors (Brandt, 2001; Hall, 1997), it is not static (Kim, 1994; Stockton, 2015) and it is always in process. Hence, the process of intercultural communication shapes Sojourners' cultural identity. Furthermore, most of the interviewees agreed on the fact that their cultural identity is influenced by the new environment they are living in.

Moreover, Sojourners are embracing daily intercultural communication; this latter may take us to the second insight which includes identity creation through the process of negotiation. The data indicate that the interviewees made an attempt to be good intercultural communicators and they consider themselves as good intercultural competent persons. Most of them relate the definition of identity to personality and personal features of individuals. This may explain their agreement on the statement that Sojourners' identity is changing over

time; according to new social and cultural contexts. They consider themselves as ambassadors of their cultures, at the same time, they try to adapt and understand the cultural differences. In expressing their identities, some Sojourners celebrate the cultural days organised by the universities where they represent their cultures. Others consider their clothes, mainly girls, as cultural and religious identity markers. From intercultural and communication research perspectives, identity is reflective self-images which are constructed, experienced and communicated by individuals within a culture and in particular interaction situation (Ting-Toomey, 2015). She argues that identity, like cultures can and do change over time. The Sojourners tend to negotiate their identities mainly when communicating, they mentioned that they became more tolerant, flexible and less judgmental. They also learned to accept cultural differences and if they face misunderstanding or judgements about their identity change, they would rather argue explaining the reasons for that change. Others indicated that they will not argue and just let it go as long as it does not hurt or break the communication. This paves the way for the third insight.

The findings reveal that most of Sojourners seek integration in the target community through the frequent learning of cultural values and patterns. Studies show that the real cross-cultural experience is completely different from the virtual one. The first one should involve changes in Sojourners' behaviour since their usual way of doing and treating things simply will not work in a new environment. However, the second one could be considered as a surface experience (Shaules, 2015). At this level, most of the Sojourners face some challenges trying to adapt such as culture shock, discrimination and stereotyping. Others mentioned that the cultural exchange programme before that crossing border experience helped them to reduce these difficulties and made them familiar with cultural differences. Thus, as mentioned in Shaules' (2015) work, the adaptation process is really needed to cope with different situations. Yet, it is limited to their desire to change. Most of them opt for strategies such as tolerance, accepting cultural differences and diversity, developing cultural empathy.

6. Conclusion

The research findings demonstrated that the study abroad experience, in consequence, has a tremendous impact on Sojourners. In addition, they developed many competencies and skills before that programme, for those who went abroad, and during their sojourn. They also faced some challenges trying to adapt to the new environment, but the developed competencies helped them in the adaptation process. All these factors contribute to forming a cultural identity that goes with the new conditions. The results also show that intercultural communication has a great role in shaping Sojourners' cultural identity. Hence, the researcher tried to follow Kim's work and to analyse the construction of identity beyond one's own culture. In such context, the concept intercultural identity should be introduced in the actual situations. Kim considers it as an extension to cultural identity where we should move our attention from 'who we are' to the question of 'whom we may yet become'.

This study offers some interesting findings in understanding how Sojourners' cultural identity is being reconstructed and transformed abroad. This process includes three main phases: Development of competencies, negotiation of identities and cross-cultural adaptation. The limitations of this study

can be summarised as follows: All Sojourners are still studying. They have a long-term experience in the UK. No one has finished the studies or came back to live again in Algeria. Hence, the final conclusion about the fact that they completely changed and developed an intercultural identity cannot be done. This set the implications for future research about post-experience. Ultimately, the present work dealt only with one aspect which is cultural identity and how it is formed abroad.

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