

# Living and Studying in the US: An Ecological Systems Perspective

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## Living and Studying in the US: An Ecological Systems Perspective

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**Abstract:** International students encounter many issues when living and studying in the United States. It is essential to understand how these adult students make meaning of these experiences. The purpose of this study was to gain insights into the meaning of the lived experiences of international students living and studying in the U.S. six months after returning to their home country. Phenomenology was the research approach used to explore participants' perspectives of their lived experiences. Findings show how the interactions between participants' development and the multiple systems they lived through influenced their experiences and perspectives and contributed to their identity development. Findings show the need for adult educators to be aware of the challenges and opportunities international students encounter and provide support to encourage growth and development.

**Keywords:** ecological systems theory, identity development, international students, perspective transformation

### Introduction

According to the Institute of International Education (2017), more than 1.07 million international students were studying in the United States during 2017. Many of these students hail from China, the Middle East, and Latin America. International students face many challenges adjusting to the American educational system. These adjustments include language barriers, lack of social and emotional support, financial problems, and cultural differences (Chapdelaine & Alexith, 2004; Wilton & Constantine, 2003). Terrazas-Carillo, Hong, and Pace (2014) found that students' adjustment upon moving to the U.S. is influenced by campus and community locations that are congruent with their psychological well-being. These students reported that having an opportunity for social interactions in defined spaces, augmented their emotional experiences positively. Students' mental processes and behaviors helped them adapt to new environments.

International students encounter many issues including culture shock, language barriers, fear of failure, and external pressures to succeed from their families, friends, and the countries that sponsor them (Hyun et al., 2007). It is important to examine how these students

cope with adaptability to their new living experiences. Although studies have examined international students' adjustment, acculturation, socialization, and engagement (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2003), these studies do not go beyond their educational experiences after they return to their country of origin. Therefore, this study attempted to fill this gap by examining the transformative learning of these students and their identity development.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Bronfenbrenner's (1976; 1979) Ecological Systems Theory (EST) provided the framework for this study. EST approaches the environment through a socioecological lens and incorporates the nuances and subtleties of human development. Bronfenbrenner (1979) recognized that human development did not happen in a laboratory. While many behaviorists acknowledged that a person interacts with their environment, few researchers focused on understanding the determining factors that influenced personal development. Bronfenbrenner (1979) observed that a person often exists simultaneously within multiple environmental systems and negotiates the interplay from the most personal (home) to a public system (school) and then to the world beyond (society and culture). Each of these systems inevitably interacts with and influences each other in every aspect of the child's life. Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological theory organizes contexts of development into five systems of influence: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The mesosystems and exosystems stem from the interplay amongst other systems, such as the interaction between microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The exosystem contains the outside influences upon the microsystem.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to gain insights into the meaning of the lived experiences of international students living and studying in the United States (U.S.) six months after returning to their home country. Phenomenology was the research approach used to explore participants' perspectives of the meaning of their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study answered the following questions: In what ways can the ecological systems of international students influence their identity development? What experiences did impact student development and growth? How did these experiences affect students' worldview?

Two groups of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) Brazilian students who studied in an urban higher education institution in the Midwest of the U.S. participated in the study. These students were in the U.S. for 18 months. Participants included two cohorts:

Cohort 1 (n= 14) and Cohort 2 (n= 19). All students were digital natives, lived in campus housing, participated in campus activities, and used campus transportation.

Survey research was the method used to collect data. Study participants answered six open-ended self-reflective questions through Qualtrics software program. Survey questions focused on the challenges confronted during the experience in the U.S., opportunities encountered in the foreign country, rewards of the lived experience after returning home, change in perspective of the home country, and the meaning of their experience living and studying in the U.S. Mezirow's (1996) transformative learning theory served as the basis for the survey questions, which posits that adults experience a myriad of values, concepts, feelings, and responses which in essence defines their world. Critical reflection challenges assumptions that adults believe by assessing their validity in light of new experiences. Using reflection as the process in which one becomes aware of one's assertions and revisits these assertions by revising them, this study asked participants to critically reflect on their assumptions about their experiences living and studying in the U.S.

Analysis of survey responses was based on Bronfenbrenner's (1976; 1979) Ecological Systems Theory. Researchers agreed upon a coding system based on the five ecological systems. Each researcher was assigned to 2-3 ecosystems to review survey answers. Subsequently, researchers met to review the initial level of analysis, classify and rank data, and to eliminate double coding. Then, researchers brought together answers from both groups and cross-examined all themes that emerged from the findings. Researchers looked for themes within each ecological system and identified sub-themes. Researchers then placed the themes and sub-themes within Bronfenbrenner's model and developed a structural explanation.

## **Findings**

Study findings show how the interactions between participants' development and the multiple systems (microsystem, exosystem, macrosystem, chronosystem, and mesosystem) influenced their experiences and perspectives and contributed to their identity development.

### **Microsystem**

Participants in both groups confronted many challenges during their experience in the U.S. related to their immediate environment (microsystem). These challenges involved making new friends and facing new cultures on campus; understanding the cultural differences; learning a new language; and adapting to a routine, weather, and food. Making new friends was uncomfortable for the participants. One student explained how challenging was to meet people

from other cultures: “Facing new cultures [...] was the biggest challenge. Each culture has its own way for treating and sometimes it was hard to absorb differences.”

Another challenge was to make new friends as this participant stated, “It was [challenging] to make American friends. They are very friendly but I had some difficult[ty] [hanging] out with them and [having] personal conversations.” Making friends was also difficult because of the age difference. Some of the participants lived with freshmen in the dorms, which made the experience more difficult: “I think it was especially hard to make any relationships because I was living with teenagers coming from high school.”

Adapting to a new language was challenging when participants had to deal with people who were not their peers. For one participant, the most significant challenge was the cultural shock as represented in this statement: “I took some time to adapt [...] to a new routine, with different food, language, weather, behavior. It was a kind of [scary] in the beginning but after I comprehended [the] American culture, [I] learned how to love and admire it.”

Not having what was familiar to them made them homesick of their family and friends from Brazil. This happened mainly during the winter when participants stayed at home studying for exams. In addition to adapting to people, food, language, and climate, participants felt that learning the academic system was a challenge. However, this also provided great opportunities to them as these two participants stated: “I had the opportunity to make new friends, learn a different culture, and experience the American teaching methodology” and “I learned to live in the college and to participate in organizations, like Intervarsity that helped me a lot in my Christian life and I made a lot of friends there.”

Though participants missed their family and friends from Brazil, they also felt the opportunity to be in the U.S. outweighed their challenges. Learning was central to their experiences – be it formally at the university or informally with others within their immediate environment. These experiences contributed to their growth and development and were noted upon their return to their home country.

### **Exosystem**

The exosystem involved relations between the microsystem and the system in which participants were not directly involved such as other cultures, job opportunities in the U.S., and networking. Survey responses showed participants’ interactions with other cultures having an impact on their growth and development while in the U.S. Interacting with other cultures was not a common behavior in their native country, so interacting with a variety of cultures was an opportunity to know other people from a variety of cultures. One participant expressed how this feeling impacted the sense of perspective about the world: “the opportunity to see how big

the world is and how different people are. And above all the differences how people are always able to love and respect each other.”

### **Macrosystem**

The macrosystem of the study participants involved the culture in which they lived while in the U.S. as compared to the Brazilian culture. They were asked to describe how the experience in the U.S. changed their perspective of their home country. They explained their macrosystem contributed to their awareness, recognition, and change in perception regarding their own country and the educational systems. For some of the participants, the people in the location where they lived had an impact on their experiences: “people from [state name] were so kind that they welcomed me in the best way as possible.” Another participant stated: “It was a great opportunity to meet new people, make friends, [...], and also rethink some concepts in life.” This participant explained how the experience of making new friends in the U.S. would be difficult to gain in the home country: “I made many friends and I learn[ed] a lot of things that would be impossible to learn in a Brazilian university.”

Comparing the educational systems seemed to be an important part of the participants’ experience in the U.S. This person started seeing the cons of the Brazilian educational system: “I changed how to see the educational system in my country. In Brazil, we need to stay in class for a long period of the time that many times is unproductive.”

The experience in the new environment gave awareness about their country. It made the respondents recognize their own country from a different perspective as this participant said, “Now I’m able to see and to be sure Brazil is far behind in many things. While in the U.S., I could see how things work.”

### **Mesosystem**

The mesosystem of study participants involved the relations between the different microsystems or connections between contexts. Comparison of both Brazilian and American systems was a common response among the majority of study participants. Twelve statements show a comparison between Brazil and U.S. systems (regarding transportation, health, academics, and culture). Participants reflected on the pros and cons and the differences between the two systems. One example of a reflection includes:

In my point of view, there are pros and cons. The pros are that I know Brazil is a great place to live, we have the most beautiful places in the world, the best food and we do have honest people. Now, in my everyday life, I try to find ways to do stuff different, always thinking on how I can change my country to a better place.

The cons are that I found the U.S. a better place to live, because they offer all the support you need, security, great structures in universities, the prices are better.

Upon returning home, this participant saw some of the limitations of the home country:

Now I'm able to see and to be sure Brazil is far behind in many things. While in the U.S. I could see how things work. The public transportation is good, people are polite and the prices are fair (except the health system). I think that Brazil and the Brazilians can't help it to be the way they are: corrupted and impolite.

Completing an internship also provided an opportunity to reflect on the differences as this person explained: "My internship gave me the opportunity to be familiar with the 'American workplace,' that in some way, is quite different than the one I was used to work[ing] in Brazil."

Another part of the comparison was the feeling of being away from family and valuing family ties as this participant expressed: "Now, I value my culture and my family as I never did. Living in the U.S. I could realize how important is to value our roots, even very simple things to the biggest ones." Another participant went further and articulated that "Living out of my home country made me like more my home country, but at the same time made me curious to learn more about other cultures."

### **Chronosystem**

The chronosystem involved environmental changes that affected participants' growth and development. Participants were asked to describe the meaning of their experience living and studying in the U.S. Some of the participants said the experience in the U.S. brought them a new perspective. The following terms described this change in perspective: personal growth, building relationships, and valuing their culture and country differently.

Seven individuals described their experiences as personal growth. Some participants used terms such as "mind-opening," "change in life perspective," and a "new perspective in my life" to express their personal feelings about the experience. For one participant, the experience gave the feeling of "it is a time that you pretty much can do anything: you can grow as a person, as a student, and as a professional." Learning a new language also had an effect on one participant: "speak[ing] in English obligated me to rethink my first language in order to speak correctly." Another participant realized that it was not necessary to have a lot of education "to transform the world into a better place. I only need to be kind and respectful and the world will give me back kindness and respect." Personal growth also meant the ability to know "that I know nothing" or "[being] flexible to differences in general."

Three participants described their change in perspective about building relationships. One participant stated, "I could change the way I build relationships. I care more about people

and how to help [to change] the world.” Having an open mind allowed one participant to be “able to live with different cultures.” The opportunity to learn more about academics was very relevant, “but more important, [was] about living in community, sharing, forgiving and respecting” as one participant expressed.

The experience changed their perspective about their culture and country. One participant said, “I appreciate even more my culture and my country. I am more concerned about political, social, and environmental problems and willing to do what I can to help in these causes.” Comparing both cultures was a constant feeling and gave a sense of pride as these two participants explained: “Formerly I thought that just Brazil had problems. But now I could see that all places have problems, and that in some points Brazil is better than in other places” and “Now I can compare both countries and help my country to get better, overcome some challenges in its structure and culture, and do my part to make this place the best one to live.”

### **Conclusions**

Based on the study findings, we conclude that three central themes emerged from the data derived from participants’ lived experiences: personal growth, perspective transformation, and future positive. While participants attended higher education in the U.S., they encountered a myriad of learning experiences. These experiences included improving a foreign language; learning new academic skills; living with other cultures; and interacting with friends, instructors, and employers in a new environment. These experiences gave them a global outlook on their lives in relation to other cultures, a sense of purpose, and personal growth. Study participants realized that the experience in the U.S. also gave them a new social, political, and environmental perspective. This new perspective expanded their horizon about themselves and their role in the world, open up their minds about their country and society, and resulted in perspective transformation. Once study participants returned to their home country, they felt that they could contribute to the future of their country positively. This feeling showed an appreciation for their home culture, gratitude for their family roots, and a sense that they could contribute to something greater than themselves.

Educators of adults need to be aware of the challenges and opportunities international students encounter and use support strategies to encourage growth and development of these students. Programs that sponsor international students in the U.S. need to be aware of the positives and negatives of the lived experiences of these students to provide services that help students be successful in their academic journey. Institutions of higher education need to be



responsive to the needs of international students while living and studying in their university as a service to the global community.

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