Original Paper

Socialization Experiences of First Year non-Western International Master's Students at a Mid-Western University

Emmanuel E. Akanwa[1*]

[1] Department of Educational Leadership, Central Michigan University, Mount Pleasant, MI 48859

[*] Emmanuel E. Akanwa, Department of Educational Leadership, Central Michigan University, Mount Pleasant, MI 48859

Abstract

As the international student population continues to increase in the United States' higher education institutions, the need to explore the significance of socialization as a necessary predictor to academic success has become inevitable. While most studies on students' socialization had investigated socialization experiences of students in general, there has been a paucity of research that specifically explored the socialization experiences of first-year international master's degree students from non-Western countries. This study's findings revealed respondents' varying perspectives on adjustment, group support, social experiences, making friends, among other constructs, and implicated the need for more support services as well as the need for international students to take ownership of their socialization, determination, and persistence.

Keywords

Socialization, international students, non-Western, experiences, cultures, higher education, persistence

1. Introduction

Given the increasing population of international students on U.S. campuses, it is important for higher education leaders to increase efforts towards understanding and supporting this student population (Guzman, Garza, & Wu, 2015). This understanding could "motivate administrators to work more actively to foster meaningful group memberships for international students at their institutions" (Buus, Glass, & Wongtrirat, 2015, p. 84). Understanding international students' socialization patterns is crucial because it could help educators "to be able to target the potential nonpersisters with programs and services that will encourage persistence [socialization]" (Adewale, 2015, p. 3). Understanding international students and their adjustment needs is an important step toward addressing the challenges

faced by international students. From the literature there are several studies which confirm that international students' problems and situations are often not accurately understood by administrators, staff, and faculty (Galloway & Jenkins, 2005; Sherry, Bhat, Beaver, & Ling, 2004). To that end, efforts must be geared towards understanding them and the challenges they face as that could be a significant roadmap to gaining an enriching international education experience.

Socialization is critical to the international student experience, especially, to those students from non-Western countries and cultures including Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. Socialization into campus community and culture is an important indicator of potential success to an international student's academic and social life. Arguably, without socialization, this student population may not have an enriching and engaging academic experience. In the same vein, the extent to which a student is socialized to campus cultures and practices could largely determine how adjusted that student could be to campus life and culture.

It was not until recently that some studies began to emerge which examined the persistence and retention of international students vis-à-vis socialization (Andrade, 2006; Behroozi-Bagherpour, 2010; Johnson, 2008; Kitson, 2012; Kwai, 2010; Lee, 2012; Mamiseishvili, 2012; Tompson, &Tompson, 1996; Voyles, 2012; Washam, 2009; Wong-Davis, 2012). Of the few studies that discussed various indicators of international students' persistence, none of the studies focused specifically on the influence of socialization on the lived experiences of first year non-Western international Master's degree students. The dearth of literature describing the influence of socialization on first year non-Western international master's students depicts a disservice to the various efforts educators, researchers, policy makers, and university leaders have continued to put in place toward understanding, caring for, and providing support services for this student population.

Despite the scarcity of literature that describes international student socialization there is however a substantial number of studies that characterize the influence of socialization in general (Beausaert, Grohnert, Kommers, &Rientes, 2012; Severiens & Wolff, 2008; Weidman, 1989a). Central to the findings of these studies is an assumption that socialization is critical to the overall student experiences, both for international and domestic students. If socialization is a necessary factor to the educational experience of domestic students, it therefore could be argued that socialization is more pertinent to first year non-Western international Master's students given that they are new to the unfamiliar U.S. educational experience and its associated adjustment challenges (Johnson & William, 2011).

2. Literature Review

The presence of international students on U.S. campuses is critical to the overall goals of realizing a global education experience which embraces diversity, globalization, and intercultural competency (Jon, 2013; Luo, 2016). Despite the importance of international students to U.S. higher education institutions, relatively little is known about their socialization experiences on U.S. colleges and universities (Adewale, 2015; Carini, Kuh, & Zhao, 2005). This section examines the literature on international

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students' socialization, as well as the influence of socialization on their overall experience. In other words, this section explores some literature that focus on international students' experiences with socialization, and the influence of socialization on their determination and persistence.

In describing the influence of socialization on international students' performance, Beausaert et al. (2012) found that international students from mixed or Western backgrounds did not have any issues with socialization, while those from a "non-Western background are less integrated compared to other international students" (p. 686). Beausaert et al. (2012) further stated that international students' socialization is a necessary predictor of persistence. As such, the socialization of international graduate students deserves a priority attention given how critical socialization is to their persistence and performance.

Similarly, Strayhorn (2012) argued that graduate student socialization is an important recourse for students especially when they are in an unfamiliar environment or feel marginalized. Strayhorn's (2012) study found that socialization is critical to graduate students irrespective of fields of study or discipline. Specifically, Strayhorn (2012) found 1) Socialization matters because it helps graduate students to acquire needed information about the values, norms, and beliefs of the department. Through formal and informal activities, graduate students are trained to become self-directed learners and professionals before and after graduation. 2) Socialization fosters a sense of belonging in graduate school because "it produces certain outcomes that move students from being perpetual 'outsiders' to valued 'insiders' (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 101). 3) Sense of belonging enhances successful performance in graduate school; this point is critical given that the hallmark of socialization is an increased sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). Above all, Strayhorn concluded that when graduate students are provided with the support needed for them to overcome challenges, it could effectively enhance their sense of belonging in graduate school (Strayhorn, 2012). Strayhorn's (2012) study, although not focused specifically on non-Western international master's students, has a far-reaching implication to this student population because navigating the challenges of graduate school requires a great deal of socialization, especially, for international students who struggle with understanding the U.S. academic cultures andexpectations.

From the foregoing, socialization could potentially predict persistence and good academic outcomes. In a related study, Mamiseishvili (2012) conducted a quantitative analysis of international students in U.S. post-secondary institutions and focused on factors that inform their persistence. The study utilized the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS) data set to look at factors that influence international student's persistence. The study examined international students' characteristics with regards to persistence in their first year of college. Findings from the study revealed, "Grade Point Average, degree plans, and academic integration were positively related to persistence of international students, while remediation in English and social integration had the negative effects on their persistence outcome" (Mamiseishvili, 2012, p. 1). Given that the study was conducted using first year international college students, it does make sense if social integration did not influence their persistence *per se* because as freshman students in a foreign university, their primary focus was on academic

integration and success. To that end, they could experience academic success without necessarily being socially active (Mamiseishvili, 2012).

The unrelated relationship found between socialization and persistence of first year international college students (Mamiseishvili, 2012), support a few previous studies which indicated international students in their first year of college needed to limit their participation in social activities to focus more on their studies (Andrade, 2007; Carini, Kuh, & Zhao, 2005; Mamiseishvili, 2012). With regards to making a choice between academic and social integration, Andrade (2007) affirmed that international students always had the option "to choose between having a social life and doing well in their course" (p. 68). Andrade (2007) also found that proper time management and focus on academic works were major sources of persistence for international college students in the first year. Similarly, Carini, Kuh, and Zhao's (2005) study showed similar trends about the socialization of international students compared to American students. Carini et al. (2005) study found that first-year international students in college spent relatively less time on socializing and relaxing activities than did American students. By implication, socialization could negatively influence international students' persistence in first year of college because at that stage they are vulnerable; however, this trend changes as they mature in colleges and advance to graduate schools due to increase in experience and socialization. Further, "academic success might require some sacrifices from international students, especially during their initial entry in the U.S. when they are still adjusting to an academic environment in a foreign culture and language" (Mamiseishvili, 2012, p. 15).

Recently, international student athletes have started to gain critical attention in the literature though with limited research focusing on their socialization, persistence, and retention. In his investigation of the factors that impact the recruitment and retention of international student athletes in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division 1 institutions, Kontaxakis (2011) found that major driving forces informing international students' athletes' decision to enroll in a U.S. higher education institution included the ability of the institutions to effectively combine academics with sports, as well as the institution's generosity with financial aid packages. Kontaxakis (2011), however found that language barriers, differences in culture, homesickness, and balancing the roles of a student and an athlete significantly influenced international student athletes' socialization and persistence at the institutions.

Conversely, Kitsos (2012) explored the academic experience of international student-athletes at NCAA Division 1 institutions. Kitsos (2012) study examined various responses from institutions' support personnel with regards to academic performance of international student athletes, and the university support services they believed to be helpful in supporting athletes. The study found that although there were no specific support services for international student athletes beyond the general support for all student athletes, international student athletes had higher graduation rates than domestic student athletes. The higher performance of international student athletes in Kitsos (2012) study were attributed to their decision to maximize their use of university support services and academic support programs.

Specifically, these international student athletes formed professional relationships with academic support personnel, utilized support services available for student athletes, and sought help even before they experienced any difficulty with their academics. Kitsos (2012) findings were different from Kontaxakis' (2011) study which characterized balance between academic and sports, language, homesickness, and cultural difference as factors that inhibited persistence. In other words, participants in Kitsos (2012) study were more socialized because they had the ability to seek out support and access university services than those in Kontaxakis' (2011) study, and that accounted for the obvious differences in the studies' outcomes.

Based on the foregoing need to contextualize the socialization experiences of international students, the present study aims at understanding the influence of socialization on first year non-Western international masters' degree students at a Mid Western University. To understand their lived experiences regardingthe research question, a phenomenological research design was utilized to generate informed research data. By adopting a phenomenological approach to the study, participants' voices and experiences could be quite informative in addressing the socialization experiences of international students to university administrators, faculty, and policy makers. Although the study utilized a variety of probing and follow-up questions, the primary research question that guided the study is: #In terms of socialization, how would you describe your lived experiences as an international student at this university?

3. Research Method

This study was conducted following a qualitative research methodology; interview was the means through which data was gathered, and the interpretive framework was phenomenological research design. Qualitative research methodology was deemed appropriate given the purpose of the study and the type of interview protocol used for data gathering. Qualitative research thrives in the quality and richness of data, otherwise called "thick description" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Geertz, 1973). By using a qualitative methodology, the data collected through participant interviews were rich and "thick" in describing the influence of socialization on participants. Further, qualitative methodology is appropriate to the study because it opened "up a world to the reader through rich, detailed, and concrete descriptions of people and places . . . in such a way that we can understand the phenomenon studied and draws our own interpretations about meanings and significance" (Patton, 2002, p. 438).

Through open-ended structured interview questions, I explored the lived experiences of first year non-Western international master's students in terms of the influence of socialization on their experiences. By so doing, the study investigated their perspectives based on the meanings they construct from their individual experiences. To that end, the study relied "as much as possible on participants' views of the situation" (Creswell, 2013, p. 24) to form interpretations of their lived experiences at a Mid-Western University.

4. Participants and Sampling

Participants for this study were international students that fall within the following categorizations: from non-Western countries; English is not their first language; degree-seeking international Master's students; Completed first year in a Master's program; first time in the U.S., and first time studying outside of their home countries. These selection criteria for research participants were essential to keep "the pool of participants as homogenous as possible" (Adewale, 2015, p. 74), and to ensure participants' are international students who have experienced the same or similar phenomena (Creswell, 2013). By keeping the pool of research participants homogenous *vis-a-vis* their experiences of a common or similar phenomenon, I was mindful of the fact that no two individuals could experience a phenomenon the same way. The selection criteria take into cognizance the fact that human beings experience phenomenon differently, and those differences are the uniqueness and richness of qualitative [phenomenological] research (Van Manen, 1990; Creswell, 2013). The participants' names, represented by pseudonyms, and countries of origin are: Steve (The Gambia), Sammy (Ghana), John (Bangladesh), Rose (Nigeria), Amaka (Nigeria), Kate (India), Peace (China).

The sampling strategy was purposeful sampling, (Patton, 2002). Central to purposeful sampling is the selection of individuals or groups of individuals who are knowledgeable about a phenomenon of interest or those who have experienced the said phenomenon for the purpose of generating research data (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011).According to Patton (2002), "the logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth" (p. 230). By using purposeful sampling of non-Western international master's students, I was aware of my positionality not only as an international student, but also as an integral part of the research process (Creswell, 2013). I ensured that my bias did not influence the research process.

While I may be knowledgeable about the phenomenon under investigation, I relied fully on the participants' responses in my quest to maintain objectivity in the process. By acknowledging my positionality and utilizing purposeful sampling, I focused the research attention on gathering essential data "from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (Patton, 2002, p. 46). To that end, my knowledge and experience about international student socialization did not interfere with data collection, analysis, interpretation, and conclusion of findings. Specifically, I interviewed seven first year non-Western international Master's students from Ghana, Nigeria, The Gambia, Bangladesh, India, and China. Their responses and emergent themes were analyzed to understand their experiences with regards to socialization. The research findings were juxtaposed with extant literature in the field and the theoretical implications are discussed.

4.1 Data Gathering

Data gathering began after I got approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study. I sent an email invitation to the Director of International Students and Scholars Services to disseminate to international students inviting them to contact me if they were interested to participate in the study. I did not receive any email replies from students indicating their interest to be interviewed.

Therefore, I proceeded personally with recruiting study participants from the contacts and network of international students I have at the University. The first interview was not recorded, it was an informal interview to intimate participants with my study and to discuss their roles as interviewees. After initial interviews I scheduled the actual data gathering interviews with participants. This one-on-one face-to-face open-ended interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Also, there was a third-follow-up interview, but this was done via email. Of the seven participants, five responded to the third follow-up interviews.

Data was gathered using open-ended structured questions (Borg, Gall, & Gall, 2003). The "open-endedness allows the participants to contribute as much detailed information as they desire and it also allows the researcher to ask probing questions as a means of follow-up" (Turner, 2010, p. 756). The interview protocol included questions which focused on students' perspectives about socialization; influence of socialization on the international students; how often these students used campus resources; how satisfied they were with support services, and their general lived experiences with regards to socialization in and around the University. Also, there were additional probing questions to further generate informed perspectives from interviewees.

4.2 Theme Analysis

Emergent themes from the study were analyzed based on van Manen's (1990) theory of theme analysis. van Manen (1990) illustrated the importance of approaching theme analysis as a critical process in the research work, especially when the goal is to formulate meanings and interpretations from emergent themes. According to van Manen (1990):

Making something of a text or of a lived experience by interpreting its meaning is more accurately a process of insightful invention, discovery or disclosure—grasping and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of seeing meaning (p. 79).

van Manen (1990) proposed three distinct approaches to identifying or isolating emergent themes from a research text or transcript. The approaches are: 1) the holistic or sententious approach 2) the selective or highlighting approach 3) the detailed or line-by-line approach. Specifically, the holistic or sententious reading approach entails reading a text as a whole and focusing on phrases or sentences that capture the main significance of a text as a whole, "we then try to express that meaning by formulating such a phrase" (p. 93). The selective or highlighting approach involves reading a text several times and in that process, the researcher looks for phrases that "seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described" and "circle, highlight, or underline" them (p. 93). In the detailed or line-by-line approach, a researcher reads through every single sentence in a text to identify what the sentence or cluster is describing about the phenomenon under study.

Consequently, a researcher could approach thematic analysis from a variety of perspectives but bearing in mind that it is "a process of insightful invention, discovery or disclosure" which "is not a rule-bound process but a free act of seeing meaning" (p. 79). I approached the theme analysis using the selective or highlighting approach to explore the critical themes that are contained in the interview transcripts. By

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using the selective or highlighting approach to theme analysis, I was aware that "grasping and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of seeing meaning" (p. 79) which could be subjective. After transcribing the interviews, I listened to the audio-recordings for clarity. I also read the transcripts several times while paying attention for phrases, sentences, or clusters that revealed the participants' lived experience. As I read the transcripts I highlighted the sentences/themes for analysis.

5. Findings and Emerging Themes

Given the purpose of the study to understand the influence of socialization on the lived experiences of first year non-Western international master's students at a Mid Western University, some of the questions were framed to elicit responses from participants with regards to their experiences upon arrival to campus, experiences with socialization, campus support services, factors influencing socialization, and their actual experience of being an international student. Each emergent theme was not necessarily matched to a research question because there were overlaps between the questions, the responses, and the themes. Drawing from the interview questions and follow-up interviews, and responses gathered, the various themes that emerged, and which formed the basis of participants' perspectives of socialization include the following:

- Adjustment: overcoming initial difficulty
- Group support
- Satisfaction with social experiences
- Making friends with American students
- Comfortable relating with those from the same or similar culture
- Support services and improving their experiences

These findings/emergent themes are discussed in the next session—Analysis, Discussion, and Implications.

6. Analysis, Discussion, and Implications

To understand the influence of socialization on this student population, I used hermeneutic phenomenological research design given the focus of the study. Hermeneutic phenomenology, apart from being rooted in science of understanding and interpretation (Arminio et al., 2006; van Manen, 1990), is "concerned with clarifying the specific and recognizing phenomena through the eyes of the participants" (Irby & Lunenburg, 2008, p. 90). Through this process, I was able to understand "what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). Additionally, I was able to understand how study respondents represented the various experiences they had at the University. Those unique experiences contributed to the richness of the data and provided a critical framework to highlight the larger implications of the study.

6.1 Adjustment: Overcoming Initial Difficulty

Two study participants stated that they did not encounter any major difficulty upon arrival because they had friends already in the U.S. who put them through some orientation about what to expect and how to navigate themselves in a U.S. university. This pre-orientation helped the two participants to be mentally and emotionally prepared prior to their arrival to significantly reduce their adjustment difficulty. However, that does not suggest they did not feel overwhelmed, shocked, or challenged by the new environment as that was their first time in the U.S. More so, Guzman, Garza, and Wu (2015) affirmed, "international students cannot escape the cultural shock and change they experience during their studies in the US" (p. 2). But the larger implication of providing students with prior orientation and suggestions on how to adjust upon arrival could significantly improve the experiences of those students.

All the other participants said they had trouble with initial adjustment as they began their studies. Specifically, participants listed the following as some of their challenges: new environment, strange weather, snow, adapting to the educational system, communication barriers, professor speaking too fast, feeling isolated, adjustment, and difficulty with fitting in and socializing. These challenges are consistent with several studies in the literature which detail the challenges international students face, including feeling overwhelmed, stress, anxiety, inability to make friends, English language barriers, cultural challenges, unfamiliar educational system, depression, adjustment issues, among other challenges (Andrade, 2005; Andrade, 2006; Andrade, 2007; Andrade, 2008; Braxton et al., 1997; Chui, Thomas, & Sherry, 2010; Constantine et al., 2005; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2003; Hanassab, 2006; Han, Luo, Jacobs, & Jean-Baptiste 2013; Kuo, 2011; Mori, 2000; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Zhao et al., 2005).

While the above challenges are true of the participants' experiences, it is important to note that they have continued to persist and to improve upon themselves and their adjustment needs. According to the participants, the willingness to pursue their education in the U.S despite these obvious challenges is due to the perceived value they believe a U.S. education will add to their lives. As such, some of them were not bothered about those challenges, rather, they spent their time in the library to get the best from their degree programs.

6.2 Group Support

The literature on international student experiences is replete with studies that characterize the importance of group support to international students (Mori, 2000). To have an engaging socialization experience and be able to fit into the system, study participants had to rely on support from groups, associations, networks, and friends. Participants described how they have adjusted or are still adjusting to the American academic and social systems by utilizing support from the various groups to which they belong. For example, Rose stated:

I get along with people easily and then the church had afforded me an opportunity to mix with people. I belong to a student organization group on campus, basically the International Student Organization. It

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has given me the opportunity to mix with people, especially with people from different cultures and background.

Likewise, Amaka stated:

I would say I'm engaged in some of those [group] activities and they've been really nice because I get to meet a lot of people. I belong to the university's international student organization, and so I get to see people and mix and talk with people from other countries.

Although group support was a critical emergent theme that characterized how international students negotiated their socialization through various support networks, it is criticalto state that international students' group support came primarily from fellow international students or co-nationals, which is consistent with the literature (Adewale, 2015; Andrade, 2005; Andrade, 2007; Andrade, 2008); international student organizations to which they belong; and the church or other religious organizations. In other words, international students' support came primarily from those they are *comfortable* to relate with, and those are fellow international students and religious organizations. It is clear from the literature and the present study that international students typically find support and socialization from fellow international students, however Mori (2000) warned that relating primarily with co-nationals and fellow international students could be detrimental given that international students on campuses are relatively fewer in number and this could severely hinder or affect interactions with domestic students and other members of the university community.

6.3 Satisfaction with Social Experiences

To discuss the theme of satisfaction with social experiences, I have employed van Manen's (1991) definition of reflection as the basis for understanding the responses that gave rise to this theme. For van Manen, reflection is "a form of human experience that distances itself from situations in order to consider the meanings and significance embedded in those experiences" (p. 100). After reading through the transcripts and following up with participants, I concluded that experiences with social satisfaction differed significantly among respondents. For example, in describing his satisfaction with social experiences since becoming an international student, Steve stated, "it has been a very great experience. I cannot even describe it. I'm short of words describing my experience here. It has been very overwhelming, very awesome experience to say." Sammy stated that "it has been an awesome experience because I'm someone who love to learn. I've also been a part of a couple of organizations on campus."

Similarly, other participants—Rose, Amaka, and Kate expressed satisfaction with their socialization experiences. Rose said she gets along with people easily, also the church she attends and the student organization to which she belonged had afforded her opportunities to mix with other people from different cultures. Likewise, Amaka expressed satisfaction with socialization by stating how the organizations she belongs to, as well as the church she attends, have helped her to socialize and integrate to the system. Kate stated that because of socialization she was able to understand the community and fit into the culture. Kate recalled how skeptical she was about how to fit into the

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culture when she newly arrived and how she felt bad and singled out whenever she wore an Indian cloth, "but now, people like my attire. They don't see me as a different person. They just consider me as a friend. I feel that belonging now, even though I'm from a different culture."

Even though international students encounter several challenges, after conducting these interviews I got a different perspective which is almost antithetical to some existing literature. It was surprising to note that six participants out of the seven I interviewed had significant experiences with socialization. Speaking from various individualized experiences, study participants made a unique contribution to the discourse on international students by stating that they have had incredibly satisfying social experiences. However, participants' satisfaction with social experiences largely depended upon individual factors. The six participants with great socialization experiences had something in common—they purposefully decided to explore their environment and to become a part of that community against all odds. By implication, they each determined to be socialized, to be determined, and to persist along their educational journey.

On the other hand, Peace has not had a very satisfying experience with socialization; that is primarily due to her personality which she described as "not outgoing" and other factors which included language barriers. For example, Peace said she prefers to stay in her apartment or at the library because "I am not [a] very brave person, and I'm sometimes afraid to talk to the new person" [and] sometimes I feel I don't know what things I should say." Peace further added, "sometimes in the class, I still cannot understand some academic words during the class . . . I needed more time to translate, and then to understand that. I think that is the most challenge for me."

Although Peace was the only Chinese student interviewed for this study, findings gathered from her interview conforms to a previous study which found that Chinese students generally face language anxiety when it comes to verbal and written English in the U.S. institutions of higher learning (Cheng & Erben, 2012). For students like Peace, university leadership and administrators could help to improve their language proficiency by providing more opportunities for international students to participate in organized activities and providing incentives for international students to attend. Participation in social activities that bring domestic and international students together could potentially increase the English language proficiency of international students.

6.4 Making Friends with American Students

Participants' opinions about making friends with domestic students are divided, hence, responses yielded a dichotomy of perspectives. For some participants, they found it easy to start talking to American students on campus and friendship was developed, while some study participants found it difficult to make friends. This dual perspective to the experience of making friends with American students shows that friendship between international and domestic students is relative and depends of several factors. Whether respondents found it easy to make friends with Americans or not, this largely depended on the personality and worldviews of both the international and the domestic students. Therefore, experiences in this regard were relative to factors which could be personal, behavioral,

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situational, psychological, and cultural, among a variety of other factors. As such, there is no single interpretation of the factors influencing international students' experiences with making friends (Ryder et al., 2013).

This assertion was reinforced by Kate's description of her experiences with making friends. Kate stated that it was easily for her to make friends because she spoke English and was always willing to discuss her culture with Americans. Kate argued that those who did not find it easy to make friends could be because "They don't get time to discuss much about their cultures, and how they treat certain thing. I don't think they show interest on other culture, and they don't get time to spend with each other, so they don't get the time to develop the trust or the bonding between them." And for Kate, "right from the beginning I was very keen to have an international experience, and to have good friends back in America here, and that is the reason why I always was very interested to know their culture."

Peace had an unpleasant experience with making American friends when she was new to the university, but over time, she was able to become friends with one American student, thus transcending her initial fears and feelings of rejection. The experiences of Kate and Peace with making friends clearly indicate that friendship could be difficult in the beginning but may well be actualized at the end as one socializes and integrates more into the system. However, making friends with domestic students would not have been difficult for international students if the higher education systems encourage diversity and multicultural perspectives to its systems and processes. For example, U.S. higher education institutions prioritize American values above other worldviews and cultures, and that is internalized by American students and influences how they perceive and relate to other students (Johnson & William 2011). While some participants said they made friends with American students and attested to how that is helping with their socialization, others reported that they have not found it easy to make friends with domestic students.

For participants who have not found it easy to make friends with domestic students, their experiences profusely align with existing literature that details international students' difficulty in making friends with American students (Johnson & Williams, 2011; Urban & Palmer, 2016; Geary, 2016). It also reinforces the report of a 2012 survey which found that about 40 percent of the survey respondents had no close American friends and would have liked more helpful interactions with American students; however, that friendship is determined by several factors including language proficiency, one's country of origin, and the particular part of the U.S. one resides—from the survey, all these were some of the factors that determined if Americans could become friends with international students or not (Jaschik, 2012).

Contrary to all participants in the present study and in previous studies agreeing that it is easy for them to make friends with American students (Johnson & Williams, 2011; Palmer & Urban, 2016), most of the participants said they are rather more comfortable making friends with fellow international students than with domestic students because they have some lived experiences in common and could be more easily understood by other international students. Palmer and Urban's (2016) found the same trend as

reported in their study:

Our participants believed that it was easy to make friends with other international peers, which corroborates other researchers' conclusions that the shared experience of being treated as a member of an out group creates a sense of identification with other international students, facilitates a sense of belonging, provides a supportive social and academic network, and alleviates stress related to negative experiences (Hanassab, 2006; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Urban et al., 2010).

Likewise, Sato (2016) affirmed that international students are more likely to connect with fellow international students with whom they share some similarities. Sato (2016) described these students as sojourners who tend to establish social bonds with peers from their native countries and cultures (e.g., Asian international students who mostly seek out and establish relationships with other Asian peers while studying abroad in the U.S.) (Hodge & Sato, 2009; Hodge & Sato, 2013;Uba, 1994). Forming social connections with international students from the same or similar cultures serves as a strong network of support for international students and could be quite empowering and tremendously helpful to their experience, "whereby psychological security, self-esteem, and a sense of belonging are provided, and anxiety, feelings of powerlessness, and social stresses are reduced" (Church, 1982, p. 551).

6.5 Comfortable Relating with Those from the Same or Similar Cultures

Most of the participants stated they preferred to socialize with and be friends with fellow international students instead of domestic students. When I asked them the reason why they feel that way, they told me it was because they have some things in common and could easily understand each other. Though they may be international students from different countries, they believe they are able to understand each other because language is not a barrier between them. Also, they resorted to those from the same or similar cultures due to the difficulty some of them encountered while making friends with domestic students. This finding is similar to previous studies which found that in the face of adjustment challenges, international students resort to fellow international students for support (Hanassab, 2006; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009).

It is important to state that what international students need from fellow international students is friendship and a network of support, not necessarily academic support. International students are able to face their academic challenges alone without seeking help from friends or from domestic students. However, interactions with friends and those from the same or similar cultures could potentially influence academic and other experiences. Participants in the present study have adjusted to the academic environment; they really do not need help with academic works from anyone apart from their professors. As such, their friendship with fellow internationals is to help their social experiences and general adjustment needs, but it could also be argued that such interaction could have a positive influence on academic performance.

Montgomery and McDowell's (2009) study challenged the assumption that international students are disadvantaged due to a lack of interaction and friendship between them and domestic students. Their

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study found that instead of feeling lonely and disadvantaged, international students formed stronger friendships with other international students, and this helped them with social and academic adjustment. The larger implication of the foregoing is that when international students socialize, interact, and relate with fellow international students, they form a bond of support that ultimately leads to the development of stronger resilience and determination. Invariably, their socialization and interaction with each other often reinforces their persistence and determination, which are the hallmark of international students' academic success.

Although international students do not learn American culture and ways of life by relating to those from their home countries, they resort to each other as a critical support network. Socializing with fellow international students resolves the apparent difficulty some of them experience in acculturating to the host country. Additionally, Montgomery and McDowell (2009) remarked against the possible assumption that international students need to form academic and social bonds with host students to be successful in their studies because international students have the motivation to be successful amidst all challenges. Although Montgomery and McDowell (2009) argued that international students embody the motivation to be academically successful, their study however fore grounded the importance of socialization, determination, and persistence as critical factors that inform international students' academic experience. To that end, to be academically successful in their various institutions of higher learning, international students must be willing to socialize with others; interact with each other; be determined to succeed; and be ready to persist through the process. In a nutshell, the relationship between socialization, determination, persistence, and academic success is that these factors are inseparable to the academic success of international students. Arguably, socialization alone is not enough to drive academic success because students on their own must be determined to succeed and be ready to persist in their academic journey. This fact was evident from the study participants' own lived experiences; it is equally consistent with the literature (Hanassab, 2006; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Mamiseishvili, 2012).

6.6 Support Services and Improving International Student Experiences

Participants clearly admitted that the university has resources and facilities for students, both domestic and international. In fact, some participants said they are not utilizing all available resources due to time constraints, class schedules, and the fact that they spend most of their time in the library working on class projects. The various resources participants have used included the library, writing center, Help Desk/technology center, university accounts services, office of international affairs, math assistance center, and instructor office hours.

Notwithstanding the fact that participants agreed the university has resources, they expressed dissatisfaction with support services. Of course, the University's resources are physical facilities which students use from day to day, but those are different from actual support services put in place to assist students when they need such. The present study characterized international students' need for support services in several areas, which included transportation, housing/accommodation, funding, increased

campus events, faculty training, and successful transition upon arrival. Participants stated their adjustment could have been easier if those support services were in place. Therefore, they expressed dissatisfaction with the level of support available on campus.

For these students, if the university could assist with transportation within the campus and to the airports, this could greatly relieve them of the stress associated with how to move around town, and to airports when they want to travel. Note that transportation was a major concern to study participants because of the nature of the small town in which the university is located. Further, one participant described his arrival experience with housing and accommodation, and he wished the Office of Residence had handled his situation differently. This participant stated he did not make housing arrangements prior to his arrival on campus from his country. Given his inability to make prior housing arrangements, the coordinator of Residence Life advised him to look for a hotel, pay out of pocket, and stay there until the Office was able to assign him an apartment. The student eventually spent two days in a hotel before getting his own apartment. The student thought that it would be good if the university had a contingency housing plan for new arrivals like himself as that could save them the cost of booking and paying for a hotel out of pocket, with its associated hassles.

Moreover, participants wanted to see an increase in the number and type of events offered on campus that focus on bringing international and domestic students together. For most of the participants, the activities done on campus should be increased, purposeful, targeted, and well-advertised to the campus community to attract many students. Participants believed that with such organized events, international and domestic students could have a platform to interact with each other and exchange knowledge and cross-cultural ideas. This will help domestic students to learn a bit more about their international counterparts, while the international students could utilize the opportunity to interact with domestic students. By engaging with domestic students in informal conversations, international students could refine their language and communication skills and that will in turn improve socialization and interaction among domestic and international students.

Some participants expressed the need for professional trainings to be organized for faculty members who teach international students. This training should focus on cultural awareness, international students' backgrounds and experiences, instructional strategies for teaching international students, and understanding best-practices in the pedagogy of international students. The importance of faculty training to understand international students and how that could help with academic adjustment was clearly obvious as exemplified by study participants. Organizing trainings for faculty on how to work with international students could help to increase faculty's understanding of international students and their worldviews.

Another pertinent theme to participants was the need for the university leadership to be involved in the transitioning stage of international students. Study participants believed that international students' experiences could be improved if the university system was fully committed to their arrival and transitioning needs. This would involve helping with pre-arrival and post-arrival orientation to ensure

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that these students are settling in well and adjusting to the new academic and social environment. This transitioning could help reduce culture shock, homesickness, adjustment, and acculturation challenges, and could prevent international students from feeling like, "what have I done to myself" like Rose felt when she newly arrived. This observation affirmed Guzman et al. (2015) study which stated, "some preparations need to be made by the university that will embrace international students upon their arrival" (p. 1).

On the other hand, funding was another issue that could help to improve international students' experience. One respondent stated that she is happy because she has a graduate assistantship and that has made her life easier because her department is paying part of her tuition fees. On the contrary, another respondent expressed real difficulty in meeting up with his tuition payment. This student was unable to register for full credits due to lack of funds. He described financial challenge as a serious difficulty and wished he could receive any form of financial help. In contemplating on this difficulty and its impact on his academics and life, Steve noted "At times I find it very difficult to concentrate knowing that there is a tuition fee I need to settle. I believe with the university helping in that area . . . it will be very helpful."

In a recent study, Choudaha (2016) observed, that "International students need, deserve, and want more in terms of academic and career support (p. ii). Based on the above findings, international students have genuine need for support services in various areas that could help to improve their lived experiences, help with their socialization, and enrich their overall campus experiences. However, those support services are not always there for them. These findings support previous studies which found that international students' needs in terms of support services, are not adequately been met by their institutions of higher learning (Choudaha, 2016; Choudaha & Schulmann, 2014).

These findings clearly support several other studies which detail the support needs of international students across U.S. universities and colleges. In a 2012 report by the American Council on Education, it was found that "While efforts to recruit international students are on the rise, the data do not show a commensurate increase in support services for these students" (p. 5). Similarly, Green (2013) stated that "too many institutions have ramped up their goals without planning for the accompanying investment in student services, language support, or programs to facilitate integration into the local and campus community" (p. 53). According to Glass, Buss, and Braskamp (2013), "it is imperative that institutions devote more attention (and perhaps also more resources) to this surprisingly neglected, though powerful, student demographic" (p. 44). Given the apparent dissatisfaction with support services for international students, some scholars have out rightly questioned the place of international student recruitment in universities' strategic mission and values. Green (2013) inquired, "To what extent do our practices in recruiting and providing a positive educational and social experience for international students align with the values and principles we articulate?" (p. 2). Likewise, Özturgut and Murphy (2009) concluded that U.S. institutions "are not 'practicing what they preach' when it comes to meeting the needs of international students. They are not using the research to drive practice in accommodating

international students" (p. 374).

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand the influence of socialization on the lived experiences of first year non-Western international master's students at a Mid Western University. After conducting the interviews with seven study participants, I analyzed the transcripts to derive the themes discussed above. This study focused on the various experience participants have of socialization, and those experiences were theorized and juxtaposed with existing scholarship.

I approached the data analysis from Van Manen's perspective on thematic analysis of research text (1990). Van Manen (1990) argued that thematic analysis is "a process of insightful invention, discovery or disclosure" [which] "is not a rule-bound process but a free act of seeing meaning" (p. 79). Consequently, I approached the theme analysis using Van Manen's (1990) selective or highlighting approach to examine the themes contained in the interview transcripts. The selective or highlighting approach involves reading through the interview data and highlighting all pertinent points and phrases that are critical to understanding the phenomenon under investigation

Findings from the study revealed respondents' varying perspectives on adjustment, group support, social experiences, making friends, relating with fellow students, and university support services. Although participants expressed satisfaction with availability of university resources and facilities, most of them expressed several areas where they needed help and support. The present study supports existing scholarship which argued that although "efforts to recruit international students are on the rise, the data do not show a commensurate increase in support services for these students" (American Council on Education, 2012, p. 5). Likewise, in his assessment of the frustrations experienced by this student population, Green (2013) contended, "too many institutions have ramped up their goals without planning for the accompanying investment in student services, language support, or programs to facilitate integration into the local and campus community" (p. 53). Helping students to socialize and integrate into the campus and community life should be a matter of strategic imperative given that socialization is a necessary predictor of academic success.

While the literature and study participants agree on the critical importance of socialization to the international student experience, it is equally important to state that there is a significant relationship between socialization, student determination, persistence, and academic success. In other words, while university leadership is providing enabling environments for students to socialize, acculturate, and integrate to the system, international students on their own part need to make a purposeful decision to socialize, persist, and be determined to succeed. As such, beyond socialization is the place for determination and persistence. Arguably, when students are determined, socialized, and persist in their studies, it often results in academic success.

The implications of this study to U.S. higher education institutions include but are not limited to the following: provide pre and post arrival orientation and mentoring; make contingent plans for

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international student arrival; organize targeted and purposeful events and programs; encourage a multicultural campus community; provide all necessary support services; and provide cross-cultural training for staff and professors. While all the efforts put by university leaders and administrators in serving their international student population are recognized and appreciated, there is no doubt stating that the international students' experiences could greatly improve if international students fully engage in socialization activities, make determined efforts to succeed, and persist despite all odds.

7.1 Perceived Limitations of the Study

The study has several limitations, which is characteristic of qualitative studies. The most obvious limitation arising from scholarship/literature is the fact that up till date there has not been any critical educational theory on the socialization of international students in general, and international master's students in particular. International student socialization theory would have been helpful from a theoretical perspective to understand what influences the socialization of this student population. Also, the study used a purposeful sampling of first year non-Western international master's students at a Midwestern University. This campus has witnessed a significant increase in the number of enrolled international students for the past ten years, but it is a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) located in a city that is *83.6 percent White* and *3.7 percent Black.* I am wondering if the predominant white culture of the city and the university have any influence on the experiences of these students, and if that impacted their experiences and interview responses.

Consequently, findings from the study may not represent the experiences, perspectives, and opinions of other international students across the U.S. who live and study in more diverse cities and states. Additionally, the findings cannot be generalized; however, it helps our understanding of the lived experiences of the participants in terms of their perspectives and experiences of socialization.Another possible limitation is the fact that two participants had significant level of difficulty expressing themselves in the English language. Although they tried their best to communicate, I could not stop wondering if there were other concerns or feelings they wanted to express but decided to suppress those responses due to English language barrier and difficulty in clearly expressing themselves. Language barrier for those two students could potentially impact the responses they gave me, and that could mean a loss of critical data that would have otherwise further enriched the study and its findings.

7.2 Suggestions for Future Research

Although findings from this study reveal the "truth position" from the perspectives of participants, future studies should examine the socialization of international master's students using a more robust sample and population that includes participants from several universities with diverse international student population. Also, future studies should examine the influence of socialization on non-Western international master's students beyond the first year of graduate study. Future study should be expanded to understand students' perspectives of socialization in the second and third year of a master's degree program. In the same vein, because the international student transaction involves university administrators, faculty, staff, and stakeholders, I equally suggest that a future study be conducted that

will investigate the influence of socialization on international students from the university standpoint, to provide an insight into what faculty, administrators, and staff think of the socialization of this student population. Such a study will help to bridge the gap between international students' perception of socialization and university's perspectives.

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