Exploring Students' Self-Identity in theContextofCultural Diversity at AlAin University, United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

Societies are becoming more culturally diverse under the external influence of new communication technologies, easier long-distance travel, labour migration, refugee flows and new transnational religious and aesthetic movements. Several recent reports have highlighted the importance of educating students for a diverse democracy. It has been found that interactions inside and outside the classroom affect students' learning and the incorporation of knowledge about diverse groups in society. Nevertheless, there has been little research into cultural diversity among university students, a gap which this paper aims to fill by examining the influence of multicultural education on students attending Al Ain University in United Arab Emirates. It addresses two questions: How do students react to members of groupstheyperceive as different? How does the mixture of cultures affect their social identity and academic performance?Ten students participated in the study (two Palestinians, two Egyptians, two Sudaneseand twoJordanians) from various colleges at Al Ain University.Focus group discussions were used to collect information from participants. Theresultsshow that students belonging to different cultures react differently and that cultural diversity has both positive and negative impacts on academic outcomes.

Keywords: cultural diversity; social identity; work outcomes

1. Introduction

1.1 Culture, diversity and cultural diversity Culture is, according to Hofstede (1980), "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group from another". Culture comprises commonly shared beliefs which determine the 'oughts' and 'shoulds' of existence (Sorooshian, 2016, p.300). For the members of a given culture, it provides a source of identity. It is common to talk about culture as nationally based; however, culture can also develop around organizations, occupations and many other things. Besides, many national populations include numerous ethnic cultures due to increased immigration and historical combinations (Tung, 2008).

Diversity is a subjective phenomenon created by group members themselves, who on the basis of their different social identities categorize others as similar or dissimilar: "Agroup is diverse if it is composed of individuals who differ on a characteristic on which they base their own social identity" (O'Reilly, Williams&Barsade, 1998, p.186).

Loden and Rosener(1991) define diversity as that which differentiates one group of people from another along primary and secondary dimensions. The primary dimensions of diversityarethose exerting majorinfluences on our identities, i.e. gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, age and mental or physical abilities and characteristics. These shape a person's basic self-image and fundamental worldview. Additionally, they have the greatest impact on groups in the workplace and in society. The secondary dimensions of diversity are less visible, exert amore variable influence on personal identity and add subtlety and richness to the primary dimensions. They include educational background, geographic location, religion, first language, family status, work style, work experience, military experience, organizational role, income and communication style. Thesesecondarydimensionsinfluence self-esteem and self-definition.

Conflict in identity can arise when these dimensions interact with and influence one another, as theyemerge or are displayed differently in different contexts, environments and circumstances (Mazur, 2010).

Cultural diversity "refersto the representation in one social system of people with distinctly different group affiliations of cultural significance" (Mazur, 2010, p.8). It is also defined as differences in ethnicity, race, language and nationality which are represented within a group (Cox &Blake, 1991).

1.2 *Identity*

The concept of identity is defined in various ways in the literature; different researchers have focused on different aspects of identity and have thus arrived at different views. This paper adopts the model ofHollandet al. (1998), who have a particular interest insociocultural and social practice theories of identity construction, whereby people engaged in an activity have 'agency' and are able to 'author' the world.

Agency is an important conception relation to identity; Inden (1990) defines human agency thus:

> The realized capacity of people to act upon their world and not only to know about or give personal or intersubjective significance to it. That capacity is the power of people to act purposively and reflectively, in more or less complex interrelationships with one another, to reiterate and remake the world in which they live, in circumstances where they may consider different courses of action possible and desirable, though not necessarily from the same point of view. (p.42)

Cultural identity is described as a situated sense of self that is formed by cultural experiences and social location (Antony, 2016). Thus, the dominance of each element of identity is not static but dynamic, making the concept of diversity more complex.

1.3 *Definition of 'multicultural'*

Multiculturalism has been defined by Love-to-know corp. (2018) as applying to "something that incorporates ideas, beliefs or people from many different countries and cultural backgrounds". For example, when people who belong to different cultures come together tocelebrate and share their different traditions, this is a multicultural event.

Thus, it can be said that culturally diverse teams cover a broad area of information and can result in greater creativity, adaptability and problem-solving (Horwitz&Horwitz, 2007).

Several researchers have found that overseas experiences tended to have a positive influence on students' global perspectives. It provided the opportunities for students not only to open their minds to people with different ideas and values but also to sharpen their awareness and appreciation of cultural diversity (Odell et al., 2002; Zhai&Scheer, 2002).

1.4   Performance

Team performance is defined as the extent to which agroup executes itsobjective and achieves the results it intended to achieve (Thomas, Ravlin&Wallace, 1996). Since this study focuses on students, their performance ismeasured as the degree to which agroup of students achieves its purpose. Team performanceinvolves creativity, satisfaction and social integration (Stahl et al., 2009).

1.5   Multi-identities

Holland (2003) uses social practice theory to analyse the identity of hunters in the Appalachian mountains of south-western North Carolina who found themselves caught in a conflict over land use with environmentalist newcomers. The hunters are seen as selfauthoring and needing to transform and create a new identity in order to defend and make a space for themselves within this culture. The account is informed by the concept of 'history in person', i.e. the development of self and identity in relation to local contentious practice and in the connections between local practice and local institutions. Holland (2003) argues that multiple, potentially conflictive identifications such as those of hunters and environmentalists are not inherently problematic for a sustainable sense of self; rather, they are made so in social struggle.

Similarly, Ewing (1990) considers the 'wholeness of identity' to be an illusion and tries to show how individual selves throughout the world continuously reconstitute and shift themselves into new and different identities in response to internal and external stimuli. In her view, the ways in which individuals form these new identities are highly dependent on context, so that their changing identities may often appear mutually inconsistent. Her contention, as with Holland, is that "the most important implication of the dialogical perspective on the self is that it is not an intra-psychic but a relational phenomenon that transcends the boundaries between inside and outside, between self and other" (p.18).

Day and Leitch (2001) argue that we have many identities: What we believe, say, act and feel differs from one role to another and depends on how we find and define ourselves in such contexts. Similarly, Sowell (2005) writes:

> Issues of identity (including gender, ethnicity, class, race, etc.) can be viewed as static categories that we claim and author ourselves through. However, they can also be viewed as fluid positions that we hail and resist constantly throughout the day as we renegotiate who we are. Every new conversation, in every new situation, forces us to take up and /or reject various discourses in order to take up a comfortable storyline, to claim an "I," or in other words, to

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have an identity. While the process may be fluidly constructed, the product is often viewed as concretely fixed. (p.1)

What Sowell is arguing is that individuals "select from a multitude of identities in various situations throughout the day". By assertingthat we "negotiate who we are" (2005, p.1), he argues for the fluidity of these identities, which change according to our influences and experiences. They are socially constructed through the mediation of various practices. As we belong to multiple cultural worlds and are engaged in different roles and practices, this helps us to create multi-identities in practice (Holland et al., 1998). Identity is thus seen as a dynamic entity which "can change from moment to moment in the interaction, canchange from context to context, and of course, can be ambiguous or unstable" (Gee, 2001, p.99).

Meijl and Driessen (2003) note that identity "is no longer seen as exclusive, as individual, but more and more as *dividual*,as*divisible* and therefore as multiply constructed across different, often intersecting yet antithetical, discourses, practices and positions" (p.22).

1.6   Diversity, social identity and work experiences

According to Slavin (1999), learning which takes place among groups of studentsworking on common tasks is associated with both interpersonal skill development and improvements in student outcomes.Individuals from diverse cultures bring completely new means and sources of informationprocessing to the group (Stahl et al., 2009).Interactions between individuals with different norms and perspectives create conflicts and tensions that may prevent students from putting effort into their basic tasks. On the other hand, the tensions associated with diversity may encourage mutual inspiration and facilitate learning. Diversity ensures richness of input that may facilitate creative and innovative work outcomes (Van der Zee et al., 2004).

Those adopting a sociocultural approach to identity formation, such as Mead (1934), Holland et al. (1998), Meijl and Driessen (2003), Lave and Wenger (1991), and Wenger (1998), emphasise the relation between context or practice and identity; they agree that identity is socially and culturally constructed and constantly renegotiated through everyday activities, rather than being a simply individual or stable phenomenon. These are but a few of many scholars taking this approach, who did not all come to it via the same tradition or history. One example is the American school of social psychology that claims Mead (1934) as its founder. Mead believed that having an identity means having a sense that one's actions in a social world reflect back upon one's self. The person puts his/her self into the actions that he or she performs in the cultural world to which the identity is relevant.

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For instance, Mead (1934) views individual identity as socially formed through the interaction of the self with the other. Likewise, Rogers (1971) notes that becoming a person is a never-ending process of being open and sensitive to experience and learning to trust feelings as indicators of one's state of being (cited by Volkmann et al., 2004).

On the other hand, Lave and Wenger (1991) assert that people do not have a single, stable, consistent or lifelong identity; rather, it is represented as changing, each element of identity being constructed as individuals move through different cultural contexts. As people are members of multiple communities, one's identity is therefore defined at the nexus of these multiple memberships (Wenger, 1998). It cannot be considered stable, nor is it singular in scope: It is a 'plural' entity which is continuously changing from one role and from one place to another, in order to adapt to each new situation (Meijl&Driessen, 2003, p.23).

Holland et al. (1998) explore how identities form through everyday activities and examine the roles they play in mediating personal experiences, motivating personal action and shaping social life and its transformations. They view identity as constantly constructed in sociocultural and historical worlds and through the process of engagement in social practice. Holland et al. (1998) propose that "living identities do not come into being, take hold in lives, or remain vibrant without considerable social work in and for the person. They happen in social practices" (p.vii).

Enyedy, Goldberg and Welsh (2005) also believe that identity comes as a result of everyday activities. People's actions and experiences both inform and shape their identity. They act on the basis of who they believe themselves to be. Evidently, we should keep in mind that it is difficult to know the reality, as direct observation may change peoples' behaviour. Robson (1993) and Patton (1980) describe the observer's presence as often causing distortion.

Wenger (1998) also discusses identity in social terms and views the individual as someone who is a part of his or her communities of practice. For him, identity provides

> …a pivot between the social and the individual, so that each can be talked about in terms of the other […]. The resulting perspective is neither individualistic nor abstractly institutional or societal. It does justice to the lived experience of identity while recognizing its societal character – it is the social, the cultural, and the historical with a human face. (p.145)

This is can be linked with the ideas of Williams et al. (2007), who refer to the subject in relation to the object of activity. They argue that subjectivity "with subject-object dialectic in mind […] must be understood in relation to the activity and the meaning it holds

for the subject, that is, essentially in relation to its object" (p.5). Through this activity, students develop an awareness of how cultural identity is contested and negotiated through everyday lived experiences (Antony, 2016).

In this sense, Holland et al. (1998) consider the subject as an active agency producing and produced by practice. People, across the limits of cultural traditions and social forces of power and domination, improvise and find spaces to re-describe themselves and create their cultural worlds anew. They have the ability or agency to influence their lives and environment, while they are also shaped by sociocultural factors. Thus:

> The relationship between the individual and society is one of inclusive separation, that is, one in which individuals are not only constituted in and through social activities, but are simultaneously constituted of cultural meanings and social structures(p.271).

2. Methods

2.1   *Sampling and participants*

The researchers collected data from ten students (two Palestinians, two Egyptians, two Sudaneseand twoJordanians) from various colleges at Al Ain University, in order to examine how the context of cultural diversity informed students' identity and affected their performance.

Merriam (2009) states that since qualitative inquiry seeks to understand the meaning of a phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants, it is important to select a sample from which most can be learned and one whose voices will tell a representative and complete story. Thus, in selecting the participants for this study, purposeful sampling was used. According to Patton (1980), "the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth analysis from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, hence the term purposeful sampling" (p.169).

2.2   *Research methodology*

Qualitative methods were used toaddress the research questions**,** involving multiple data sources, the main data collection instruments being semi-structured group and individual interviews. Qualitative methods are by their nature concerned with exploring the perspectives of participants and examining their experience in the contexts in which they occur (Smith, 2005). Qualitative examinations of students' self-reports of their experience suggest that this is a robust pattern (Chavous et al., 2003).The interview protocol still

allowed for the conversation to shift if necessary, as is typically the case in focus groups (Maxwell, 2005).

2.3   Data analysis

Grounded theory (Glaser &Strauss, 2006) and the constant comparative method, making comparisons between items of data and among cases (Miles &Huberman, 1994; Lincoln &Guba, 1985), were useful procedures in the analysis of the data. During the second stage of analysis, discourse analysis, informed by Gee (1999), was also adopted.

The aim of this research was to develop a theory derived from the data and which was capable of explaining and understanding how the context of cultural diversity informed students' identity and affected their performance. Therefore, we selected this approach for this study to explore and build, rather than confirm and test, the dynamic set of relationships between cultural diversity and students' identity (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory was found to be the best approach for this study, since it allowed the researcher to go "into and close to the real world so that the results and findings are 'grounded' in the empirical world" (Patton, 1990, p.67) and to "connect the multiplicity of perspective with

patterns and processes of action/interaction that in turn are linked with carefully specified conditions and consequences" (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p.280).

Phase one: Grounded theory analysis

We first applied the three types of grounded theory coding listed by Glaser and Strauss (1967): open coding, axial coding and selective coding. The approach is defined as "bringing fragments of data together to create categories of data" on the basis of "having some common property or element [...] relating to some particular topic or theme", thus "linking data fragments to a particular idea or concept" (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, p.27).We have tried to identify these codes in the analysis of the data.

Phase two:Discourseanalysis

In the secondphasewe identifiedphrases in the data which reflected students' senseof themselves in relation to practice. We explored these in relation to two aspects of their identity: identity-in-practice and self-identity. We then began to examine the interview texts, which showed how these two aspects were embedded in students' voices through interpretation of their practice and outcomes.

Identity-in-practice

To explore identity-in-practice, we looked for passages in the interviewswhich started with a first-person statement; for example:

I believethatmyperformance can be much better if most of my classmates come from the same country and share the same culture.

I found it difficult to learn in multicultural classrooms.

Self-identity

In order to focus on self-identity, wethen looked for statements which began more specifically with 'I am' and which illustrated students' 'visualization of self'; for example:

I am a hardworking student in this multicultural classroom.

I am unhappy about my performance. My performance is worse because I am Sudanese, in a multicultural classroom.

3. Results and Discussion

The purpose of this study is to explore the students' identity formation in the context of the university's cultural diversity and its impact onacademicperformance. The results are discussed here in relation to the topics addressed by each of the research questions.

Students' reactions to members of groupstheyperceived as different

The following main themes emerged in relation to the first question.

Positive and warm university culture

Most of the students described the university's culture as being open to cultural diversity, encouraging them to work cooperatively with other students:

Each teacher teaches me something new, teaches me to seek new ways to think and learn...to respect and appreciate our own culture and heritage.

The university setting helps all students become respectful of the multitudes of cultures...

Teachers offering opportunities for us to communicate with each other about our culture, origins and background as part of the learning programme (presentations, debates, writing ...is a very effective method of demonstrating respect for cultural diversity.

I find the mix of nationalities among us is very interesting and motivates me to learn.

An empowering culture in the context ofa multicultural education setting is one in which all students feel welcomed and valued and in which all are seen as contributing members of the community. For example, in a study of a national sample of eighth graders,

Voelkl(1995) found that school warmth led to higher levels of student participation in class, which in turn led to higher levels of achievement. Creating and empowering school cultures for all requires measures to ensurethat a school is equally warm and welcoming for all students.

Several researcherssuggest that creating environments that feel warm and responsive can encourage individuals to participate and be active agents. Learning occurs best when the educational environment supports interaction under conditions of equal status(Wanless, 2016; Merritt et al., 2012).

Aronson (1996) statesthat in order to change and improve the outcomes of schooling for both students and teachers, there are features of the school culture that must be changed.

Students' self-identity and practice in conflict

Many of the interview responses highlighted how students interpreted themselves in a multi-conflict voice or from different 'I-positions', so that conflict and tensions often emerged between these two voices, or between primary and secondary discourse (Gee, 2001): one expressing who they believed they should be and the other concerning how they positioned themselves currently in this culture and described themselves in the context. The interpretation of the data shows that in defining and positioning themselves, thestudents drew upon the models of the current culture and the traditional meaning of what it is to be a student in relation to their culture. According to Bakhtin's perspective:"Persons develop through and around the cultural forms by which they are identified and identify themselves, in the context of their affiliation or disaffiliation with those associated with those forms and practices". (Cited in Holland et al., 1998, p.33)

Based on the data, it would appear that there was a struggle and tension in the voicing of the two aspects of identity: self-identity and identity-in-practice. The study reveals phenomena that can be understood through the discourse analysis of thisdouble-sidedness of identities.

The following extractsfrom interviews illustrateidentity conflict in relation to students' experience of diversity in the university's social culture:

> *I love my field of specialty and love to learn, but sometime I feel unmotivated because the majority of my classmates are local.*

> *Education means a lot to me and I am always motivated to learn... Sometimes I become unmotivated and powerless when I start thinking why I am not in my home country with my extended family.*

Gee (1999) states that: "The various Discourses which constitute each of us as persons are changing and often are not fully consistent with each other; there is often conflict and tension between the values, beliefs, attitudes, interactional styles, uses of language, and ways of being in the world which two or more Discourses represent."(p.7).

This is linked with the suggestion by Holland et al. (1998) that identity is framed as a self-in-practice: "This self-in-practice occupies the interface between intimate discourses, inner speaking, and bodily practices formed in the past and the discourses and practices to which people are exposed, willingly or not, in the present…"(p.32).

Differences among participants in identity formation/work outcome in response to cultural diversity

Positioning by negative identification in practice

The data indicate that the majority of the students believed thattheir work outcomeshad been directly affected by their experience of diversity, which influenced their actions negatively. Analysis reveals that most defined themselves as much less professional, in terms of their commitment, motivation and the effectiveness of their action, in comparison totheir culturalsenseof what it meant to be a student. They expressed a feeling that as students they were not as good as they ought to be, according to their beliefsand cultural meanings and perceptions of what it is to be a goodstudent, as their practice came into conflict with their historically constituted beliefs about learning and what it means to be agood student.

The data also show that students' previous and current senses of themselves were in contradiction.These extracts from interviews show how thework outcomes of Sudanese students tended to be influenced negatively by their experiences of cultural diversity:

> *I feel I am ina besieged environment and I cannot talk about my home country (Sudan) as we have to follow laws and principles that donot belong to my home country ... The cultural differences sometimes do not help me to communicate, especially as I am a black student.*

> *When I first came to the Emirates I was afraid to deal with people...I was scared of every white person... Emiratipeople despised me and would say: "Why you are here? You should go back to your own country", and of course I hated this...*

An Egyptian student said:

> *I wish I had studiedin Egypt where I could be more creative, as oneof the things that I suffer from in this diversified society is that I am frightened to deal with people*

> *from other cultures and I always have to be careful how Iinteractwith Lebanese or*
> *Syrian people ...”*

According to Davies (2005), "we are all unique in the ways that different histories combine in our identity, albeit sharing with others the fact that none of us is 'pure' in a nationalistic way" (p.635).By comparing themselves with 'others', both communities and individuals become aware not only of who and what they are but who and what they are not (Petkova, 2006).

This is linked with the suggestion by Holland et al. (1998) that identity is framed as self-in-practice:This self-in-practice occupies the interface between intimate discourses, inner speaking, and bodily practices formed in the past and the discourses and practices to which people are exposed, willingly or not, in the present… (p.32)

Research in education and diversity suggests that diversity experiences have significant effects on the extent to which graduates live racially and ethnically integrated lives. Through these opportunities students are able to practice and develop the skills needed to live effectively in a diverse world (Hurtadoet al., 2002).

Positioning by positive identification in practice

On the other hand, the data indicatethat some Syrian, Egyptian and Palestinian students showed their agency in a positive mannerin terms of increasing their sense of belonging, commitment and effectiveness, as a way of coping and adapting to the cultural diversity.

They considered that their experiences of educational cultural diversity did not influence their academic performance negatively, but had helped them to develop a sense of efficacy and motivation, or even to be more creative. For example, a student from Egypt stated:

> *Well, for me, livingand learning in this culture does not impact on my enthusiasm.*
> *I keep going in my work. I even sometimes believe that I should give more and more.*

> *Cultural diversity does not influence me negatively... Dealing with people from*
> *other cultures is a positive thing... It gives you experience in dealing with others*
> *and you learn about their culture. For example, if I thought about going to Egypt*
> *tostudy, I should be able to know about the nature of Egyptian people, their thoughts*
> *and their beliefs, as this is a positive thing to develop my personality...*

A Palestinian student made a similar point:

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I feel that the university encourages diversity among us as students. I also feel happy when I benefit from the experience of my classmates from different countries … I've never treated other students differently because of their nationality...

Antonio et al. (2004) assertthatimmigrantsperform better in raciallydiverse environments,where they are motivated to maintain the dominance of the in-group.This perhaps provides support for the idea that people create their agency in order to make a space for themselves in a changing world and that by doing so they are able to author their own worlds(Holland et al., 1998): "People tell others who they are, but even more importantly, they tell themselves and they try to act as though they are who they say they are. These self-understandings, especially those with strong emotional resonance for the teller, are what we refer to as identities". (p.3)

This also understandable as an identity adaptation or as a process through which students are able to maintain or increase their capacityto differentiate and integrate their understanding of their selves in relationship to their world without becoming destabilized (Coleman and Lowe, 2007).

4.   Conclusion

In sum, the research shows that diversity within a student body can have both positive and negative outcomes. We have found some evidence to support theories which propose that cultural diversityaffects teams in a negative way, as it creates difficulties andconflict in relation to students' experience of diversity in the university's social culture. Conversely, much of our analysis is consistent with the perspective suggesting a positive effect of diversity on teams. Thus, it can be said that culturally diverse teams cover a broad area of information and can result in greater creativity, adaptability and problemsolving (Horwitz and Horwitz, 2007).Moreland, Levine, and Wingert (1996) argue that diversity is associated with both positive and negative outcomes. Thenegative impacts of diversityconcern group cohesion and conflict, while the positive onesrelate to superior group performance (Sommers, Warp& Mahoney, 2008).

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