

# **The Impact of Cultural Adjustment on International Female Students' Learning Process**

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## Focus of the Presentation

- The focus of this presentation is to highlight the issues and problems that Asian and Latin American international female students encountered during their stay in the Southwest Border region.

# In-Depth Phenomenological Interview

- In-Depth Phenomenological Interview
  - Three 90-minutes interviews with each participant
  - Each interview has a particular focus:

Interview 1:           What led you to become an international student in the United States?

Interview 2:           What are your present experiences?

Interview 3:           What does it mean to be an international student in the United States?

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Seidman, I.E. (1991). Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences. New York and London: Teachers College, Columbia University.

# PARTICIPANTS

- Latin American Participants (10):  
Mexico, Venezuela, Peru
- Asian Participants (11): China, Indonesia,  
South Korea, Taiwan, Japan



# Cultural and Social Issues in the Participants' Home Countries

## Women's Rights and Equalities

- Economic Status of Women in their Home Countries:
  - Women are often pushed out of jobs and forced to be economically dependant on their male family members.
- Validation in the Society and Family:
  - Women are validated for their roles as mothers and homemakers.
  - Boys have priorities in the family.
  - Mothers often perpetuate oppressive discourses.

# Tara, Peru

Boys are more important in Peru for their families. For example, I saw it all the time with my acquaintances: If the daughter came to her mother and said, 'Mom, I am hungry,' the mother would say, 'Ok, go to the kitchen and cook something for yourself.'--'But I am busy, I need to do my homework.'--'Never mind, if you want to eat, go and make something.' And then her boy enters the room and says, 'Mom, I am hungry.' She would call her daughter, 'Maria, come cook something for your brother.'--'Mom, I am studying.'--'Well, you have to take care of your brother first.' Even here [in the U.S.], I saw this *machismo* images on TV and in real life, but in Peru it is worse.



# Participation on the Job Market

- Discriminative hiring practices
- Abusive attitudes
- Lower salaries
- Women have to be young, single, highly educated, and physically attractive

# Gabby, Mexico

Oh, there is this *machismo* in Mexico. You find it in all jobs. I saw at my job: for example, the last year was the first time ever that a woman became an editor of a newspaper. We were really happy because she could show that a woman can do the job that men do.

Another example is that when I was working in the newspaper and I was doing this simple job, but I was working there only part-time. I asked my boss, “Please, I want to be a full-time and I want to report on something bigger than garbage collection!” But he said, “Oh, you are still a student, and I need you to finish your study. I know you need time and you need to go to school.” And one day I discovered that one of my classmates who was at the same year at school as I was got the full-time job! I thought: What? Why? I was working at this newspaper longer than him.





# Educational and Social Status

- Women are discouraged from getting higher degrees
- Belief that women should stay home
- Boys have better opportunities for education and careers



## Jennifer, Taiwan

I have a friend in Taiwan, and I often call her. She really wants to come here to study, but her parents told her no. If she was a boy, they would say yes. They told her, 'You already have a good job; you don't need to study more. You need to marry somebody. After you get your Master degree, it will be hard for you to get married.' I was lucky I was already married. If I was not married and was going to get Master's, it would be difficult to find someone.



# Formation of the Body Image

- Body Image and Its Construction:
  - Influences of media, advertising, beauty, and toy industries
  - Women learn to validate themselves by the way they look
  - Participants feel less pressure in the U.S.

## Barbie, Mexico



I used to play with dolls and a little house. My favorite doll was Barbie because it was a typical pretty woman, and all girls had to be like her. I remember when I was a child, I thought: Oh, I want to be like her. She is very pretty, and her hair is up, and her eyes and body are so perfect. And also she has a beautiful boyfriend. And the most attractive thing for me was that the Barbie had her own world: her car, her supermarket, and her hotel. It represented to me a world in my childhood.

# Attitudes Towards Marriage

- Marriage is important for being socially accepted.
- Extremely negative attitudes towards divorced and single women.

# Pasha, Mexico

- Well, to be socially accepted, you need to be married. Nowadays, these things are changing, but it is still not common. Some women study, and then they decide to stay home. As for me, yes, I like to be with my kids, but I worked all my life. So, maybe on vacation I enjoy to stay home a whole day, but after a few weeks, I need to go to my office to do something. Maybe, for other people who see me it seems that: Oh, poor Pasha, she has so many things on her hands. But they don't think that maybe I enjoy my life.



# Building Social Awareness

- Mothers as the Role Models:
  - Mothers encouraged their daughters to continue their education.
  - Some of the mothers raised their children alone.
  - Some of the mothers participated in women's groups.

# Ana, Venezuela

- At the beginning, my dad disagreed because it changed my mom's life in a different way, like: I am a woman and I can do things I want to do. So, it changed things at home because now she could say: If I can do house chores, you can do it too. So, she tried to create equal environment at home: If I clean the house, then my husband can do it and my children can do it. And my brothers started doing this: They got used to clean their room and wash the dishes, which they didn't do before.

So, that changed a lot for me because at that time I was little and I was going to school. I didn't have to do all the housework because my brothers and my dad were helping, too. So, it was the equal thing that she tried to do and she did. Now at home, we help each other. It changed my mind a lot. If I have a family, I want it to be like my family. I want to be able to work and at the same time to study.

That is why I am going to school, and I do many activities that will increase quality of my life.





# CULTURAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES ENCOUNTERED IN THE U.S.

- Social Adjustment and Cultural Challenges

## Image of the United States

- Rural vs. Urban
- Mono-cultural vs. Multicultural
- Mono-lingual vs. Bilingual

# Ana, Venezuela

- Oh, it was completely different. From TV shows and stuff like that, I thought it was more developed and more city-style with tall buildings, traffic, and a lot of things to do. . . . We came here, I was so disappointed: It is a country town and there are many Hispanics already here. I immediately knew it would be different here: I wouldn't have much fun. You see, in Venezuela we see the U.S. as Florida, and Florida as the U.S. We see Miami like: Oh my God, if the U.S. is like that, I want to live there. And here, it is completely different. That was my idea of this town. I thought it would be like Miami, but without a beach. So, when I came here, everything was shocking. I was dying.



# Closeness to the Mexican Border and Influence of Mexican Culture and Spanish Language

- Sometimes, I don't know if I like it here because people at this university speak Spanish and English. Sometimes, it is difficult for me to speak English. Sometimes in the classroom, we have a group project that we need to discuss, but many students speak Spanish and I don't know any Spanish. In times like that, I don't like it here. It is already difficult for me to speak English, but they don't speak even English--they speak Spanish! So, I cannot discuss the topic because I don't know what they say. It happens in a computer class. We have three students in a group: I am an international student, and two others are Americans, but they speak Spanish to each other. At the beginning I thought my English was not very good, so I didn't understand what they said. But after a few weeks, I thought: Hm..., it is not English--it is Spanish! Because I couldn't understand one single sentence they said. (Jennifer, Thailand, Int.1, p.3)
- It might have been harder if I would have been in the Northern state. Since here, there are a lot of Hispanic people who speak Spanish; it is easier because people who speak Spanish are better accepted. While in another state, they may look at you more different since they don't see it as much as they see it here. It is easier here to adapt because here they even celebrate *Cinco de Mayo* and stuff like that. I don't think I would see that in Massachusetts or in Washington. (Andrea, Mexico, Int.2, p.13)

# Making Friends

- International students vs. U.S. students:
  - The participants promoted contacts because of their desire to learn the culture and language.
  - The participants found it difficult to make friends with American students and decided to look for friends among other international students.
  - The participants had difficulties to make friends among U.S. students because of different socialization and social symbolism of linguistic expressions.

# Ella, South Korea

- In my country, if we don't know each other, we don't say anything . . . . Korean women are very soft inside. They don't talk too much to people who are not close to them. Koreans have to understand a lot about people and how they feel without much talking or asking direct questions. Here, I have to tell if I have a different thought or if I am not comfortable with something. I have to tell, and it is very difficult for me. And they don't understand me here if I don't express myself. In Korea, we can feel or assume what others feel, but here one needs to say it out aloud.



# Heidi, Taiwan

- You know, if your American friend told you ‘I’ll give you a call tonight,’ for us it is definite that this person would call. Otherwise, why even bother saying that? So, for the first few times when people told me they would give me a call, I would sit and wait in the dorm. And they never did! And I was like: Well, maybe my English is not good, and I didn’t understand what they said. I don’t understand this because I still keep my culture: If I promised something and couldn’t do it, I always apologize at least. It makes you really confused, and you wonder if they mean what they say or they just say things. Because how would you know if what they say is true or not? Now, when they say, ‘Hey, let’s go for a cup of coffee,’--I just say okay.



# American Women

- American women enjoy more respect from men.
- Self-confidence and independence of American women came from being equally treated in their childhood.
- American women have more time for self-improvement because of the availability of the household appliances.
- American women can dissolve their marriages and still expect to be respected.
- American women enjoy better social atmosphere and less pressure to keep their body image.
- Many participants expressed their desire to stay in the United States because of better opportunities for improving their careers and personal lives.

## Ella, South Korea

- I would prefer to stay here because here I can live more free than in my country. As I said before, in my country it is hard to keep a job if I get married or have a baby. Korean companies don't like these kinds of women, so I will have to quit the job and become a housewife. Besides, it is hard to work and to take care of the family at the same time. If I stay here, probably my husband would help me a lot even if he is a Korean. Here is the United States, a different culture, so he will have to help. It is kind of an American way of living. So, I will be able to keep the job and to do the housework.



# EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES AT THE SOUTHWEST BORDER UNIVERSITY

- Importance of Education for Women:

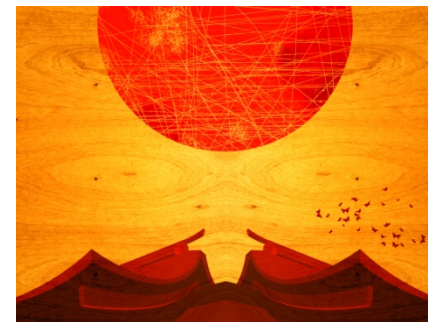
Education is important for career, independence, and personal life.

## Andrea, Mexico

- There are people who think that you are going to get married and you wouldn't need your education. And you might not, but what if you get divorced, or what if something happens? You have to be able to take care of yourself. Just be ready for everything. I think it is important not to take chances leading to 'what if.' And I think it is a pretty good experience to be in school and to learn a lot: stuff that you never thought is there. It is rewarding to have education. I am just better prepared for many things.

# Ani, China

- If I don't go to the university to study, I maybe just stay home, or watch some TV. I will become a very boring woman, very useless woman. It is terrible. If I do that, my husband will not love me anymore, but I would still love him--it is bad. Also, I need to make my life interesting, not only cleaning my apartment. So, it is important to continue my education. Also, when you come to the university, you communicate with other people from different cultures and have different experiences.



# Studying Abroad

- Most of the participants had prior international experiences (traveling, student exchange programs, or teachers, relatives, and friends who studies in other countries).
- The participants saw the opportunity to better their lives through study abroad programs.
- Most of women finance their education with their own funds.
- Some of the participants had to fight their families' resistance.

# Heidi, Taiwan

- I was exposed to different things, and I met some foreign teachers from Australia, England, and the United States. I always heard something good about their cultures, so I learned a lot of things from them, and, since I received so much information, of course I wanted to see the world.

But my parents didn't want me to go because I didn't know anybody here, I didn't have any relatives here, and at that time, I didn't have any friends here. So, they were worried because you know: 'A girl like you is going to travel to the place you don't even know.' I was persuading them for a few years because I wanted to go, and I wanted to go.

And another thing was that my dad thought women didn't really need that much education. He thought after I get married, all I would have to do--just stay home and take care of the kids. And since my brother didn't receive that much education, how come I should, you know. It wouldn't be fair to my brother. So, he was kind of narrow-minded for a while. But I tried to persuade him, and I told him, 'You know, it is going to be my future, and it is going to help me with my career.' I guess my mom helped me too: She was trying to persuade my dad as well. So, a few years later, he said, 'Okay, if you want to go, go.'

# Reasons for Studying in the United States and Choosing the Southwest Border University

- The U.S. graduates are valued in their countries.
- Importance of the English language for their future careers.
- Advice of their teachers, friends or relatives.
- Low cost of living and tuition.
- Availability of financial assistance and student jobs.

# Educational Experiences at the Southwest Border University

- Public education in the participants' home countries is poorly funded.
- Education is traditional, teacher-oriented.
- Strong tracking system.
- Women are channeled into women's fields.
- In the U.S., some of the participants were able to change their majors.
- Participants do not see gender discourses in education.

# Challenges Encountered at the Southwest Border University

- Classroom Environment and Learning:
  - Cultural behavior
  - Fear of classroom discussions
  - Problems with English
  - Dissatisfaction with programs, advising, and classes
  - Intensity of studies



# Cultural Behavior: Jennifer, Taiwan

- I was scared because I think they were different: I am Chinese and they are Americans, and the culture is different. For example, in the computer class, the professor gives us a disk to use, but by the Chinese tradition, we would give the disk to the older student first, and after they finish, the younger ones use it. But the first time I did it here, they thought I was not a good student--I don't want to learn new things. But it is not true. It is just a cultural difference. Students here are active, so I feel strange.

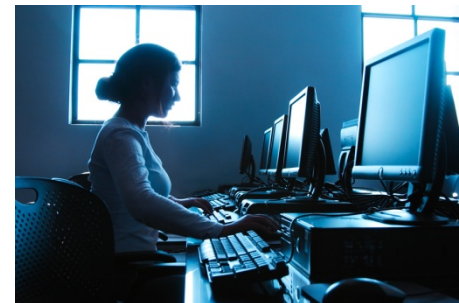


# Fear of Classroom Discussions: Mira, Japan

- I am Japanese. I am not good at showing myself. In the Japanese educational system, we are just told what to do, we don't learn to think deeply, and we don't write about ideas. It is very difficult to discuss topics because I have to show what I think. It is the cultural differences I think. I think women here show themselves more, and they tell what they are thinking more than Japanese women.

# Problems with English: Ella, South Korea

- We have a lot of discussions, but I don't talk because sometimes I cannot explain myself even if I have knowledge about something. After the class, I can talk freely, but during the class I get too nervous and cannot talk. . . . Sometimes in the classroom I just say something even if it is not related to the question, but when I come home, I just cry and want to go home. When I cannot speak well, even if I have something to say, I cannot express myself, and it makes me feel stupid. . . . I am very nervous in my major's classes because I have to know a lot, and I have to do better than others. I have a lot of stress because I don't speak English well, and I don't participate in discussions much because of this, but I know much about my major. It makes me feel really stressed up.



# Teacher-Student Relationship

- Relationships with professors are less formal than in the participants' home countries.
- The participants follow their cultural upbringing by using subordinate linguistic patterns when addressing a teacher.
- The participants appreciated their instructors' understanding and help.

# Student-Student Relationships: Difficulties with teaming up with U.S. students

- My worst experience is that Americans don't want to work with me on a group project. I am the only international student, so I feel lonely in this class. Sometimes, I need to present an article, but my partner wants to present without me because he thinks I am an international student and I cannot speak English well. So, every group presents together, but in my group--I present by myself and my partner presents by himself. So, it makes me feel sad. I am not stupid. . . . Sometimes, I want to cry. Maybe, they think I cannot speak English very well, maybe they think I am strange because of my culture. I didn't say anything, but I think it is not my fault. My professor, every time we need to do the group project, helps me to find a partner. I don't feel so embarrassed because if nobody wanted to team-up with me, I would feel terrible. But I know I cannot always hope for a professor to do it for me.  
(Jennifer, Taiwan)

# COPING TECHNIQUES

- Change of Attitude

Social adjustment:

- Accepting some changes and values, such as socialization.

Educational adjustment:

- Accepting responsibility for the study.
- Accepting their American friends without judgmental attitudes.
- Taking an active approach to problem solving (make friends with the U.S. students by offering to help with assignments; learning discussion in small groups; approaching professors for help, using the university learning facilities).

## Coping (cont.)

- Seeking Social Support from Family and Friends
  - Building network among international students
  - Seeking help from ethnic community
  - Seeking emotional support from husbands and parents (Mexican participants are in a privileged situation because of the closeness to the border)

## Coping (cont.)

- Rethinking Identity:
  - Embracing the ethnic culture
  - Embracing changed identities



# CHANGES

- The participants noticed that they became more outgoing.
- They noticed that they became more open-minded and tolerant toward some of the social issues, such as divorce, homosexuality, etc.
- They became more self-confident and independent.
- Some of the participants express their willingness to become agents for change once they return to their home countries.

# Recommendations

- Make programs more inclusive and relevant to the international students' goals.
- Offer programs with broader international context.
- Offer courses on International Education.
- Offer courses on Women's Education.
- Work in close relation with Women's Studies program.
- Incorporate issues of women's education into curricula as a part of international education.

## Recommendations (cont.)

- Strengthen the leadership role of Centers for International Programs.
- Organize seminars and workshops for international female students.
- Help international students to build social network by connecting them with the local population and U.S. students.
- Organize workshops and seminars for faculty.
- Classroom discussions: start with small groups and encourage female students to talk.
- Encourage U.S. students to work collaboratively with international students.
- ESL courses: pay more attention to speaking and listening skills, include more discussions into the classroom activities; offer socio-linguistic courses.