Critical Literature Review

The Complexity of International Student Identity

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ABSTRACT. Complexity Theory is a revolutionary research paradigm that emphasizes holism, uncertainty and nonlinearity, and de-emphasizes reductionism, predictability and linearity (Grobman, 2005). This critical literature review applies Complexity Theory to the area of student development, arguing that Complexity Theory is a fruitful theoretical lens to examine the complex issue of cross-cultural identity construction of international students. From this theoretical lens, international student identity should be seen as an open system that is fluid and emergent in nature, and educators should contribute to an additive international student identity that embraces multiple languages and cultures. A perpetual state of discomfort due to the development of a narrative identity should be encouraged as a cross-cultural strategy conducive to international students’ continuous learning.

RÉSUMÉ. La théorie de la complexité a été un paradigme de recherche révolutionnaire qui souligne l’holisme, l’incertitude et la non-linéarité et désaccentue le réductionnisme, la prévisibilité et la linéarité (Grobman, 2005). Cet examen critique de la littérature applique la théorie de la complexité au domaine du développement des étudiants, en faisant valoir que la théorie de la complexité est un point de vue théorique fructueuse pour examiner la question complexe de la construction de l’identité interculturelle des étudiants internationaux (EIs). Dans ce point de vue théorique, l’identité du EI doit être vue comme un système ouvert qui est fluide et de nature émergente, et les éducateurs doivent contribuer à une identité additive de les EI qui englobe plusieurs langues et cultures. Un état d’inconfort perpétuel dû au développement d’une identité narrative doit être encouragé comme une stratégie interculturelle approprié pour l’apprentissage continu des EI.

Keywords: Complexity Theory, international students, identity, narrative identity, care.

INTRODUCTION

There were over 5.3 million international students around the world as of 2017, up from 2 million in 2000 (UNESCO, 2020). Away from home, international students face many common challenges, such as language barriers, financial difficulties, cultural adjustment, and an uncertain future (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). They need to adjust to new social and learning environments that pose difficulties related to different learning expectations, a sense of non-belonging, and even mental health issues (Hale et al., 2020). At a deeper level, the intercultural learning experience of international students is both transitional and transformational, and necessitates identity change to a greater or lesser extent (Gu, et al., 2010). The ability to
successfully manage one’s identity reconstruction in the international education context is a necessary cross-cultural competence for international students and scholars (Deardoff, 2006). Helping international students successfully navigate the cross-cultural identity reconstruction process is an important dimension of international student education in host universities and countries.

What is the role of international educators in this regard? What attitudes should educators adopt and what approaches should they take in order to contribute in a constructive way to identity reconstruction for international students? In this critical review paper, we first discuss different definitions of identity in the context of international education from diverse perspectives, which serve to show that cross-cultural identity reconstruction is a potentially challenging and even painful process. We then critique the unidirectional, ethnocentric, and acculturational discourse commonly found in international student education practices as part of a harmful postcolonial paradigm that works to perpetuate the current inequitable world structure. Based on a review of the highly complex nature of international student identity, we endeavor to develop a new philosophy of international student education and development, drawing on insights from Complexity Theory as it relates to narrative identity.

An effective critical review presents, analyses, critiques, and synthesizes representative literature from diverse sources with the goal of generating new knowledge about a topic in the form of a new model, a new framework, or a new perspective (Grant & Bootht, 2009; Torraco, 2005). We cast a wide net in this review of the theoretical literature on identity in the context of international student education by including both older, classical works and more recent publications. The collaboration of an international educator and an educational philosopher with a common interest in Complexity Theory allowed us each to tap relevantly into the literature in our respective fields. Without claiming to aggregate and synthesize all available literature in an explicitly structured way, a critical review focuses on the conceptual values of relevant literature to provide new insights on the chosen topic (Grant & Bootht, 2009). In other words, it is supposed to purposefully and critically select the most relevant works in relation to the topic. We decided to include the works in this study based on their contribution to the construction of the three pillars of Ontology, Epistemology, and Axiology as they evolve around Complexity Theory as a new philosophical paradigm for understanding international student identity. Pedagogy is added as a pillar to demonstrate how the new paradigm applies to international student education on the ground. The paper does not claim to be an endpoint in the discussion of the issue of international student identity. Instead, it hopes to start a new phase of conceptual understanding of international student development informed by a radically different philosophical perspective from the dated one still prevalently used today.
IDENTITY RECONSTRUCTION FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

In the area of student development, identity is often understood as students’ secure and comfortable conception of who they are as autonomous, independent individuals (Checkering, 1969). Words like “autonomous” and “independent” emphasize the agency students have over their own identity choices, agency which is advocated for in this paper. Words like “secure” and “comfortable” signify stagnation in student learning and development, a concept which is questioned in this paper. One’s identity can also be defined as a person’s personally held beliefs about self in relation to social groups and the ways one expresses that relationship (Torres et al., 2009). We prefer this definition, as it does not suggest an end state of “secure and comfortable” self. Instead, defining identity as personal beliefs of self suggests its potentially fluid nature. It also suggests the relational nature of self, including the position of group membership in one’s identity construction.

From a poststructuralist perspective, identity has been seen in the light of “how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (Norton, 2000, p.5). This definition further strengthens the complex, subjective, fluid, and relational nature of our identity, which resonates strongly with the theme of this paper. From a psychological perspective, identity reconstruction is typically seen as the result of perceived disequilibrium or dissonance between the current self and a possible self (see Marcia, 2002). Environmental changes, such as international traveling and sojourning, create opportunities and conditions for identity reconstruction (see e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The intercultural learning experience has the potential to bring about profound changes in overseas students’ self-perception, transforming their understanding of the learning experience, self-knowledge, awareness of the other, values, and worldview (Gill, 2007). Cross-cultural identity reconstruction can be said to be an important aspect of intercultural learning for international students as they have to ask deep questions about who they are in new cross-cultural contexts.

The reconstruction of self-identity coincides with a process of leaving the comfortable world of self and encountering and interacting with the cultural other (Gill, 2007), and within such an intersubjective space, it is an imperative for international students to re-examine self in relation to new cultural and social groups (Bruner, 1996). Psychological disequilibrium in cross-cultural identity shift can be understood as the psychological discomfort experienced by people who have moved out of their cultural comfort zone. Such discomfort can be small to some individuals, but can be nerve-breaking to others. As the phrase “culture shock”, a phrase commonly used to characterize the cross-cultural experience, indicates, identity change is a potentially confusing, challenging, and even painful journey—so much so that research from the 1950s to 1980s often saw it as a mental health issue (see Ward et al., 2001). A better understanding of the nature of international student identity change and reconstruction is needed to better assist them in this challenging aspect of their international learning journey.
ACCULTURATION AS AN APPROACH TO INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EDUCATION

International student mobility is influenced by “push and pull” factors (Altbach, 1998). International students are “pushed” by unfavourable conditions at home, and “pulled” by more favourable conditions host countries offer. As a result, the direction of movement of the world’s international students tends to be away from developing countries towards industrialized western countries (Altbach, 1998). Asian students represent 53% of all international students enrolled worldwide, mostly from China and India; of that, 83% study in G20 countries and 77% in OECD countries (OECD, 2020). Similar to the direction of mobility, the cross-cultural transition of international students has been historically conceptualized as a unidirectional and unidimensional journey. As they acquire the values, beliefs, and cultural behaviors of the host country, they are expected to discard those of their home country (Schwartz et al., 2010). It is this acculturational approach to international student education and development that we take issue within this paper.

The most dominant paradigm in work with international students today is still an ethnocentric one (Davis, 2011). It positions the host country language and culture as the superior centre, and the acquisition of the host language and culture is believed to hold the potential to elevate international students into first-class world citizenship (Lin & Liu, 2019). Under the influence of this unidimensional discourse,

It is fair to say that the international student education/service in most English-speaking countries still focuses on students’ acculturation, adjustment, adaptation, and integration into the host university, changing their previous habits in learning or living to fit into the new academic environment. (Liu & Lin, 2016, p. 357)

The acculturation perspective reinforces the marginalization of non-western national identities and cultures. The path of international students has been seen as a one-way path. But what alternative theoretical paradigm can take the place of such a postcolonialist stance on international education and better serve the cross-cultural development of international students? This paper is an attempt to address this question.

THE COMPLEXITY OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENT IDENTITY

In the 1980s, a dual dimensional approach was introduced in cross-cultural research, upon the realization that the newcomers’ acquisition of host country culture does not necessarily require the abandonment of their home culture (Berry, 1980; Schwartz, et.al, 2010). In Berry’s (1980) multicultural model, host culture acquisition and heritage culture retention are seen as two independent dimensions. The two dimensions intersect to create four cross-cultural strategies for new immigrants: assimilation (adopting the receiving culture and discarding the heritage culture), separation (rejecting the receiving culture and retaining the heritage culture), integration (adopting the receiving culture and retaining the heritage culture), and marginalization (rejecting both the heritage and receiving cultures). Of Berry’s four categories,
integration is thought to be the most beneficial strategy in securing the newcomers’ social and psychological wellbeing. Though it is an improvement on the unidimensional model, Berry’s dual-dimensional model has been criticized.

One important limitation is that it adopts a “one size fits all” approach, and thus has failed to consider many other contextual factors—such as type of migrant, the countries of origin and settlement, the socioeconomic status and resources, the ethnic group in question—and their fluency in the language of the country of settlement (Rudmin, 2003). Such factors are highly individualized and their combinations are potentially impossible to exhaust in studies that hope to pin down the patterns of change for all international students as a uniform group. Recognizing this complexity, Schwartz et.al (2010) believe that, although it has been clear that something is assumed to change as newcomers adapt to life in the host cultural context, “exactly what that something is has been difficult to pin down” (p. 240). The experience of each newcomer is so diverse and complex that it can be seen as a cross-cultural black box. Any attempt to simplify or reduce such diversity and complexity to a few finite options is futile. Any attempt to conceptualize international student identity development in fixed, linear, and temporal phases (e.g., Eunyoung, 2012) is limiting and potentially harmful. A broader theoretical lens is needed to allow international educators to understand the complexity of the identity development processes of international students.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT IDENTITY AS A COMPLEX OPEN SYSTEM: THE ONTOLOGY

To replace the dated acculturational approach to international student identity development, this paper proposes the adoption of Complexity Theory as an alternative philosophical framework on this issue. Complexity Theory is a breakaway from the Newtonian view of the “clockwork universe”, in which the society is seen as a rational, closed, controllable, and deterministic system (Morrison, 2008). Instead, Complexity Theory emphasizes holism, uncertainty, and nonlinearity, and de-emphasizes reductionism, predictability, and linearity (Grobman, 2005). It acknowledges life as a complex system. “Life is complicated. It is simplifying but dangerous to have one overriding concern that makes others unimportant.” (Bateson, 1994, p.106) Complexity Theory embraces the irrational, open, uncontrollable, and fluid nature of the human condition, as “(f)luidity and discontinuity are central to the reality in which we live” (Bateson, 1989, p. 13). The theory sounds complex and even messy, but it is at the same time liberating and empowering, as there are multiple paths for one to follow.

Relating complexity to identity, Hall (1992) believes that there are three competing conceptions of self: the enlightened self, the social self, and the postmodern self. The enlightened self is the innate, core self-identity, which moves along a linear trajectory of development. We can see that the enlightened self does not honour the complex and fluid nature of identity. Different from the enlightened self, the social self is seen as the result of interaction and mediation between self and social context. One’s social self identity is defined by group membership, and positive self-esteem relies on a sense of belonging to a community. The third, postmodern self is an identity that is not fixed but fluid, dynamic, evolving, and performative in nature.
The social self and the postmodern self interact to make identity construction a highly complex process. According to Carr (1986),


One is born into a family and a society not of their choosing. In this sense, one is assigned social roles and a set of social relationships, and there is a certain expectation that one lives up to these roles and maintains these relationships. When students travel to another country to study, they get in touch with new social groups in the host country. In other words, their lives become more intersectional (Dill & Zambrana, 2009), assuming more memberships and playing an increasing number of roles in addition to the roles they have had before. Such increased intersectionality of roles in different cultural settings creates social identity complexity (Roccas & Brewer, 2002), the effect of people holding memberships in multiple social groups whose values are not fully convergent or overlapping. In this sense, social interaction choices are central to the formation of the mind and the self, as “it is through our varying degrees of involvement with different social groups that we are able to carve out a sense of individual identity” (Grimshaw & Sears, 2008, p. 265). One international student from India is quoted by Gu et al. (2010) as saying,


What the student is experiencing here is something we often call an “identity crisis,” and that crisis results from identity options, particularly when there are tensions between these options. We need to stress here the issue of language in the international student identity reconstruction process. In the social turn of second language research (Block, 2003), language learning is seen as a social practice and a socialization process. One who is short of native-like proficiency in the language of the host society, which is often the case for international students, tends to suffer from a “reduced personality” and the identity of “being a half-wit” (Harder, 1980). According to Bourdieu (1977), language has symbolic power, and such power is distributed unevenly. In Liu’s (2014) autobiographical account of his ESL learning experience, he recalls:


The high status of English in China turned into my inner motive to acquire an identity as someone who speaks English well. However, at a more advanced competency level, I experienced a crisis of identity split between my English identity and my native Chinese identity, especially after becoming aware of an unequivocal postcolonial linguistic discourse that positions the two languages differently. (p. 264)
Due to the close connection between national language and national identity, one may experience tension between their native language and the target language they are acquiring, as different languages carry different value systems and representational powers.

The poststructural perspective views identity as a site of struggle influenced by unequal power relations (Norton, 2000). Some identity options are more valued than others in the dominant discourse. For international students, integration by acculturating to the host country standard and speaking the host country language at the level of first language proficiency is often held above all other identity options. However, international students are not totally at the mercy of external structure and conditions. According to Weedon (1987), one has agency to negotiate a relationship with the social community. Similarly, Norton (1997) believes that one can exert agency by making different levels of investment in acquiring a new language and thus the new cultural identity that is tied to the new language. Along the same line of thinking, Ricoeur (1992) suggests that we are like characters in a story, aiming towards a better life through change in words and action. The identity negotiation and reconstruction process is the process of “self-organization” (Montuori, 2003), self-adjusting and evolving in response to disequilibrium presented by changing environments.

There is a tension here between social determinism and human agency. This is the tension between the postcolonial condition that perpetuates unfair power structures and the postmodern condition that supports individual agency in identity choice. The social self and the postmodern self intersect dynamically to make an international student’s identity extremely complex. It is an intercultural imperative to see international student identity in cross-cultural transition as a complex system due to the increased layers of challenges in their experiences, such as cross-cultural transition and second language acquisition. The system is subject to structure-agency dialectic tension and the different levels of involvement with different social groups as a result of exerted self-agency and choice. For complexity theorists, each learner is a non-linear, organic, open, and emergent system that involves constant change, evolution, adaptation, and development. According to Osberg (2005),

[i]f we want to shape human subjectivity in a way that is not linear or deterministic, then we cannot assume we know (once and for all) what or who we are dealing with at the outset, and we cannot have a pre-set goal (an idea of what this person should become) […]. From this perspective, if we try to shape human subjectivity in a predetermined way, we obstruct the emergence of human subjectivity. (p. 82)

One important note we need to add here is that students should have their own personal goals, and educators should play a role in showing them the options and encouraging them to pursue higher ones, but educators are not in a position to impose on their students a goal of their determination, no matter how good the intention is.

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INTERNATIONAL STUDENT NARRATIVES AS IDENTITIES TO LIVE BY: THE EPISTEMOLOGY

If the ontology of international identity is an open, fluid, and complex system that emerges through self-organization and self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001) in response to dynamic social conditions, how do we go about studying it? Ricoeur (1992) points out that our identity is narrative in nature, and thus our identity is our narrative identity. Ricoeur describes narrative identity as the ability to recognize that our story is changing and that we have some control over that change through our interpretations and actions. Different from the grand narrative (see Lyotard, 1976), which is considered fixed and consistent in nature, Ricoeur’s narrative identity views identity as self-interpretation and stresses “self-hood” over “sameness” within its potential for change. “It is through our own narratives that we principally construct a version of ourselves in the world, and it is through its narrative that a culture provides models of identity and agency to its members” (Bruner, 1996, p. xiv). According to Bruner (2004), our narratives are a continuing interpretation and reinterpretation of our experience. In this sense, identity is a self-constructive entity and should be studied as such.

It is through stories that people create coherence of meaning in life; identity is thus people’s stories to live by (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As Husserl suggested (in Keybe, 1991), life is linked through a continuous series of temporal pretentions (projections of a future) and retentions (consciousness of the immediate past), which add density and cohesion to the ongoing present. Thus, identity has both the quality of change and continuity, and it connects the past, the present, and the social context into a narrative that makes sense (Josselson, 1996). Ultimately, identity is the result of a personal meaning-making process, and the best way to look into an international students’ identity and its process of transformation is nothing other than sitting down and hearing their stories about their own lives. Authenticity is thus a personal entity, as the ontology is not what actually happened, but the meaning one makes out of their lived experiences and the self-identity constructed based on such an ongoing personal sense-making process.

Kegan (1994) proposes four types of knowing, and the four types of knowing can be understood as four strategies to deal with the complexity of modern life: (1) Absolute knowing, where facts are information that are right or wrong, and knowing is having information; (2) Transitional knowing, where students begin to see uncertainty in some areas of knowing; (3) Independent knowing, which is understanding as relative to the individual; and (4) Contextual knowing, which becomes self-authorship, where students combine various points of view into their own, using their knowledge to test its validity. Transitional knowing, independent knowing, and contextual knowing are important strategies to recommend to international students in interpreting and reinterpreting their life experiences as stories. A narrative approach needs to fully respect the uniqueness of each student’s life experiences, which are under the influence of a unique set of multiple and nuanced contextual factors, such as source country culture, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic background, target language proficiency, and prior cross-cultural experiences. A narrative approach should also respect the agency and subjectivity of the individual student in
the perception of their life contexts, their chosen course(s) of action, and their future aspirations.

Stories have educative potential for identity development and action (Sarbin, 2004). Human experience is moulded by narratives; the stories we tell shape the way we experience the world (Crities, 1971). “Just as art imitates life [...] life imitates art. Narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative” (Bruner, 2004, p. 692). For this reason, the exercise of having international students tell and retell their cross-cultural stories contributes to their transformational identity construction/reconstruction. As an epistemological approach, narratology best suits that complex, open, and fluid nature of international student identity construction and transformation. International students’ cross-cultural identity is a result of their constant reflections on their cross-cultural experiences as stories. And yet narrative identity is an identity with perpetual disequilibrium (Osberg, 2005), and thus, in helping students develop a narrative cross-cultural identity through reflection, we will need to prepare them for a perpetual state of discomfort.

ENCOURAGING A PERPETUAL OPTIMAL DISTANCE: THE PEDAGOGY

Successful reconfiguration of international student identity requires the successful management of diverse issues—surrounding language learning, social interaction, personal development, and academic outcomes—and the availability of differentiated and timely support in the process (Gu et al., 2010). Guidance in identity evolution management should be an important part of educators’ job to mediate the international education journey. What advice from the educators would be most beneficial in relation to international students’ identity negotiation and reconstruction? As students are open systems—fluid and evolving with open-ended outcomes—what educators can do is build an encouraging, warm, and interactive learning environment, rich in learning resources and support—an environment referred to by Osberg (2005) as “a space of emergence.” In this sense, educators need to participate in and contribute to the shaping of students’ narrative identity in an extremely flexible and responsive way, in accordance with the current moment and current space; teaching and learning are products of the emerging situation. In other words, education should be seen as generative (Jorg, 2011). Each student in this space of radical contingency is a completely unique and singular individual, and the educators’ job is to give support to the emergence of individual identities of their own choosing (Kumaravadivelu, 2008; Osberg, 2005). Educators should strive to create opportunities/spaces for students to see the potential of their learning within the complex and open systems in which they exist.

Earlier language learning research has shown that when learners perceive themselves to be too close or too distant from either their home country culture or host country culture, they tend to be poor language learners (Acton, 1979), and when language learners are very advanced in their language learning and too assimilated into the target culture, they tend to experience anomie, a feeling of social uncertainty, or even alienation (Lambert, 1967). Liu (2014) describes it as an intercultural identity split. For the above reasons, Brown (1980) believes that there should be an optimal distance that learners keep from the target culture. That is to say, to
maximize one’s potential, a student has to stay in an eternal state of discomfort and uncertainty. Feeling uncomfortable is fundamental for improving performance, enhancing creativity, and deepening learning (Dennis, 2022). One does not learn much in a comfort zone. One also stops learning when they settle into a new comfort zone. Patterns in complex systems emerge, change, and re-emerge constantly. If one wants to embrace complexity and maximize learning opportunities, they need to acquire the skills of an action researcher, constantly collecting evidence, reflecting on actions, and revising the course of action. This is not to say that international students are doomed to live in cultural limbo. Instead, what is stressed here is that educators should encourage a balanced bilingual, bicultural identity—an identity that retains one’s home culture while acquiring the new language and culture. Such an additive identity, which includes newly-acquired cross-lingual and cross-cultural competences, empowers learners with the desired fluidity to survive and thrive in both cultures and in-between.

Embracing an additive, fluid identity allows international students to move between different cultural spaces and not be stuck in any one. It offers the freedom and competence to function in their home culture, their host culture, and any “Third Space” hybrid culture (Bhabha, 2004) between the two. The acquisition of such cross-cultural competence within an additive, fluid identity makes an individual’s international education experience a truly liberating, empowering, and transformative one. In essence, the educational goal of identity reconstruction for international students is not to settle into a new, secure, and comfortable self. Research in Applied Linguistics has shown that there is no end state in second language learning and becoming too comfortable with the target language results in language acquisition fossilization (see Ellis, 1994). Similarly, there should be no end state in second cultural learning, and becoming too comfortable within the host culture likely results in a cultural learning plateau. International students should be made aware of this and be encouraged to benefit from such a perpetual state of discomfort and tension. To maximize the learning outcome of cross-cultural experiences for international students, we, as educators, must recognize the open, emergent, fluid, additive and, most of all, narrative nature of their cultural identity, and we must create space and encourage students to constantly reflect on their evolving experiences as new stories to live by. Helping them get comfortable is not an ideal goal.

ALTRUISTIC CARE IN PRAGMATIC IDENTITY EXPRESSION: THE ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

One’s behaviour is not informed by one singular identity alone, but by multiple identities intersected (e.g., Jones, 1997). We all possess multifaceted personalities, and we reveal different facets, depending on the context (Goffman, 1990). As discussed above, the desired goal for cross-cultural identity (re-)construction is not one singular assimilated identity, but additive intersectional identities that are emergent and fluid. According to Holliday et al. (2004), culture should be viewed as a resource, and multicultural individuals can selectively draw on a collection of symbols and behaviours in order to achieve a particular purpose in a particular setting, like playing a pack of different identity cards to manage their impression on different interlocutors. In a similar fashion, Molinsky (2013) believes that one needs to develop competence in “cross-cultural code switching,” the ability to modify behaviour in specific
situations to accommodate varying cultural norms. By learning to “switch” behaviours, they can adapt more successfully to another country’s value system in international business endeavours.

According to the above liberal and pragmatic view, international students’ narrative identity can be expressed through multiple selves, pragmatically foregrounded as social capital when interacting with different interlocutors in different social and cultural contexts. That is to say, one of an individual’s multiple cultural identities may become salient in a response to a given cultural context. But this may create an ethical dilemma. Molinsky (2013) points out that one may experience the authenticity challenge while adapting behaviour across cultures, including anxiety, distress, and even guilt as a result of the disingenuous feeling that the new behaviour is in conflict with their internalized system of cultural values and beliefs. How does one stay true to themself when engaged in behavioural code switching in order to navigate the “culture map” (Meyer, 2014)? Does such pragmatism threaten one’s ethical integrity? What are the rules of this card game of identity (Holliday et al, 2004), as all card games need to follow rules? Noddings (1984) believes that care should be the foundation for ethical decision making in education. According to Ricoeur (1998), care is the most important driving force in the formation of narrative identity. Thus, the pragmatic fluidity of narrative identities should be employed with utmost altruistic care. The ethics of care should be the foundation of international students’ pragmatic identity expression.

Why should we care for others? Do we have the duty and obligation to care for others? There have been many philosophical discussions on the rationale for the ethical practice of care. Based on Goodin’s (1985) vulnerability theory, we have moral obligations to help fellow strangers in the same way we would our family and friends, as they are just as vulnerable to our actions. Baier’s (1985) dependency theory suggests that the normative grounds of care ethics come from the fact that we have been, are, and will be dependent on others, and thus we have the duty to care. Baier’s (1997) fairness principle posits that all of us have the responsibility to contribute our fair share to the maintenance of a cooperative society that we all benefit from. According to Gewirth’s (1978) generic consistency principle, if we aspire for individual freedom and well-being, we must logically recognize the right of others to freedom and well-being. Engster (2005) synthesized all the above perspectives and proposed the principle of consistent dependency. Since we depend upon the caring of others to sustain not only our own lives but also human life, we must logically recognize the rights of others to care and endeavour to provide it.

In Durkheim’s (1947) concept of *Organic Solidarity*, social bonds function in two ways: either through a valuing of difference, or through a valuing of similarity. Organic solidarity is based upon the valuing of difference, believing in the power of difference and the empowerment of altruism. We only have power in concert with others. As we regulate ourselves, others give us more freedom, thereby allowing us to take on greater responsibility. Thus, the valuing of difference and the altruist empowerment of others should be instilled in students as an ethical bottomline of self-regulatory behaviour in their strategic expression of a fluid identity. According to Ricoeur (1998), it is through caring for self as well as for others that people realize their imagined potential and good life. Through organic solidarity, the students’ aspiration for self
personal improvement and the societal need for good global citizenship are united and achieved together. Altruistic care should be the base line and the fundamental principle in international students’ pragmatic use of their multicultural competences and identities.

What is the role of educators in fostering a sense of altruistic care in international students? The goal would be to have them uphold the moral standard of utmost altruist care for others when pragmatically playing their multiple identity cards and refrain from purposeful deception or manipulation. In other words, the ethic of care should be part of their narrative identity constructed so as to help bring a psychological and ethical peace to the multiple selves. Ethical internationalization in higher education should not simply capitalize on the opportunities of worldwide student mobility brought by the globalized world; instead it should take the responsibility to resist the ill effects of neoliberalism by constructing a truly fair and sensible international community in the world and by educating truly globally aware and globally responsible students as future global citizens. Social justice and equality is the most fundamental principle in global education in the sense that the betterment of our lives should not come at the price of others’ worsening (Wringe, 1999). It is the educators’ responsibility to help students develop the knowledge, values, attitudes and skills to aspire and fight for a better and more equitable world for everyone (Ibrahim, 2005). An ethical connection evolves as they come to reflect upon how others are implicated by their actions and how others are a part of their narrative identity (Ricoeur, 1998). In this context, the self becomes self-organizing and at the same time connected to the world. Care for others, in addition to self-care, should be scaffolded into students’ narrative construction of their cross-cultural identity.

CONCLUSION

Personal change and perspective transformation are key components of international students’ intercultural experiences. Conceptualizing the development of international student identity construction within a finite number of options and directions fails to credit the complexity of the phenomenon and the agency students have in life choices. Thus, international student identity is best taken as a complex open system that is fluid and narrative in nature. Only when an international student’s identity is perceived as a fluid open process can educators recognize their potential to imagine a better life, a desired cultural self, and a transformative cross-cultural learning experience. In a multicultural social context, a student is given the agency and thus has to take the responsibility for her own identity transformation and reconstruction. Complexity Theory is a broader theoretical lens through which to study the identity of international students; it allows recognition of the complexity of cross-cultural learning contexts and the agency that individuals have in negotiating their multiple identities.

Educators can help international students recognize the emerging patterns of self-development in relation to others in the ever-changing world. They can instil in students a willingness and resilience to live in and learn from a perpetual state of discomfort and change in order to maximize their cross-cultural learning experiences. But of course, doing so does not mean that educators shall leave students unsupported, nor shall it create another one-way street of expectations for international students. As was argued above, the educators’ role is to create a
generative environment and to contribute to students’ additive identity development. Valuing students’ individuality, educators’ caring engagement in students’ narrative identity reconstruction could offset some degree of the discomfort and messiness of being in a complex world. In coming to know themselves better as intercultural persons, students can become stronger and less uncertain. Educators are also welcome to engage in their own narrative reflections on their experiences working with international students as an approach to professional development (Lin & Liu, 2019). International educators are also an open system, and should consider and be encouraged to constantly reflect on their practices in order to continually learn and grow as devoted, mindful, and caring professionals in international education.

On a larger scale, the transition from Acculturation to Complexity as a theoretical lens in the discussion of international student identity development and transformation should be seen as a purposeful ideological shift in our understanding of the kind of world we hope to live in. Underlying the Acculturation stance is the postcolonialist world structure with a Western centre and non-Western periphery. The Acculturation approach to international student development also serves to encourage and perpetuate the advantages of the centre and the disadvantage of the periphery. As the above analysis demonstrates, the acculturation approach is reductive and unidirectional, and is thus an unhelpful approach both at the personal and societal levels. By applying Complexity Theory to international student identity, we are imagining a different world structure embedded in postmodernist conditions. With the new conditions, international students who move from the non-Western periphery to the Western centre for better-quality higher education opportunities are seen as embarking on the path to becoming, not new members of the elite Western centre, but global citizens with global experience, global awareness, and global competence. Equipped with cross-cultural fluidity and multiple cultural identities, they have the potential to be sensible world leaders with an ethical sense of duty and altruistic care, working to build a fairer and more equitable world. In this sense, international education would not be a process of the diffusion of Western values, but a process of diffusion of universal values of care, justice, freedom, and peace.

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