A Phenomenological Study of International Students in US Graduate Programs Through the Lens of Personal Growth Initiative Construct

Hannah E. Acquaye PhD
University of Education, hacquaye@westernseminary.edu

Cari Welch
Western Seminary, cnwelchgrad@gmail.com

Leah N. Jacobs
Western Seminary, leahnjacobs@outlook.com

Arielle Ross
Lewis and Clark College, Arielle.x.ross@gmail.com

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Abstract

Humans, unlike other creatures, have an inherent desire to develop and grow. This desire to grow, *Personal Growth Initiative*, is an intentional way that humans cognitively and behaviorally navigate their environment and resources to effect change. While many researchers argue that this construct works only in individualistic cultures, others contend that the construct is applicable to collectivist cultures as well. We therefore undertook an exploration of the lived experiences of eight international students from predominantly collectivist cultures, through the lens of the Personal Growth Initiative theory. Using a phenomenological qualitative methodology, we interviewed these doctoral students via semi-structured interview questions. Results of the data indicated that participants cycled through the four factors in the construct to handle both successes and challenges in school. Recommendations for international students' offices and recruitment agencies are provided.

Keywords

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A Phenomenological Study of International Students in US Graduate Programs Through the Lens of Personal Growth Initiative Construct

Hannah E. Acquaye
Department of Counselling Psychology, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

Cari Welch and Leah Jacobs
Counseling Department, Western Seminary, Portland, Oregon, USA

Arielle Ross
Graduate School of Education and Counseling, Lewis & Clark College, Portland, Oregon, USA

Humans, unlike other creatures, have an inherent desire to develop and grow. This desire to grow, Personal Growth Initiative, is an intentional way that humans cognitively and behaviorally navigate their environment and resources to effect change. While many researchers argue that this construct works only in individualistic cultures, others contend that the construct is applicable to collectivist cultures as well. We therefore undertook an exploration of the lived experiences of eight international students from predominantly collectivist cultures, through the lens of the Personal Growth Initiative theory. Using a phenomenological qualitative methodology, we interviewed these doctoral students via semi-structured interview questions. Results of the data indicated that participants cycled through the four factors in the construct to handle both successes and challenges in school. Recommendations for international students' offices and recruitment agencies are provided. Keywords: Personal Growth Initiative, Graduate International Students, Non-Native Speakers of English, Phenomenology, Doctoral Students

The desire and pursuit of personal growth and development may be one of the most defining characteristics of human beings. Across multiple counseling theories, human growth has been conceptualized as extending across the lifespan; growth that occurs through personal cognitive restructuring, and in how we relate to others (Robitschek, 1998). This pursuit of personal growth can be described as the *Personal Growth Initiative* (PGI; Robitschek, 1998). Robitschek explained PGI as the intentional and purposeful reconfiguration that people make at both the cognitive and behavioral domains to bring about change in several areas of life.

The uniqueness about PGI is the purposeful and strategic way people go about assessing and using resources to bring about self-change. PGI applies to the effort a person uses personally, as well as efforts used on behalf of others. Moreover, this personal growth can occur with or without the awareness of the person experiencing? it, and through resistance or acceptance. For example, when children develop into adolescence, growth occurs without their awareness. However, when a family decides to migrate to a more economically advanced country to provide more opportunities for their children, growth happens with awareness. This purposeful and strategic process of assessing and using resources could be attributed to the growing number of international students in the US and other advanced countries (Acquaye et al., 2017; Institute of International Education [IIE], 2016; Yakunina et al., 2013). The Personal

Growth Initiative construct (Robitschek, 1998) may be a helpful lens in examining the experiences of the individual in the US who is both a student and an immigrant, especially in the wake of ongoing socio-political changes in the US.

PGI is not limited to a particular race, age group, country, or culture; it involves skills that people can learn at every stage in their lives (Robitschek et al., 2012; Shigemoto et al., 2016; Weigold et al., 2018; Yakunina et al., 2013). The PGI construct is divided into four discrete yet interconnected factors – *readiness for change*, *planfulness*, *using resources*, and *intentional behavior* (Robitschek et al., 2012; Weigold et al., 2013). *Readiness for change* measures an individual's ability to identify specific growth areas. *Planfulness* focuses on the individual's ability to plan his or her personal growth process. *Using resources* happens when people are able to obtain assistance for personal growth – assistance beyond their current abilities. Finally, in *intentional behavior*, individuals apply these new resources to improve themselves. The purposeful reconfiguration which engages the cognitive aspect involves *readiness for change* and *planfulness*, while the behavioral aspect encompasses *using resources* and *intentional behavior*. Even though some researchers argue that PGI is a western-based construct, others have argued for its cross-cultural nature, especially in collectivist cultures' ability to bring honor to communities instead of the western frame of self-fulfillment (Yakunina et al., 2013).

Contribution of International students

According to the International Institute of Education (2016), United States is first among the 16 main host nations for international students. In the 2016/2017 academic year, international students comprised 5.3% of total US enrollment with 1, 078, 822 people from all over the world, but especially from countries on the continent of Asia (IIE, 2016). These international students are mainly in graduate programs (85%), having completed their baccalaureate degrees outside of the US. On average there was 3.5% increase in international student population from the 1999 academic year till after the 9/11 attack when the numbers started dropping significantly. This decrease lasted for almost a decade, gradually rising in the 2008/09 academic year (IIE, 2016). There seems to be a contradiction concerning the shift in numbers of international students studying in the US (IIE, 2016; Moody, 2019). Whereas Josh Moody, a reporter at US News indicated that international student enrollment in US schools is trending downwards after hitting its lowest in a decade in fall 2017, the International Education Exchange in their Open Doors report announced the opposite (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2019). The IIE quoted Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural affairs, Marie Royce, as she expressed her joy at the continued growth in international students' numbers in US. She is reported to have admitted that "international exchange makes our colleges and universities more dynamic for all students…" (2016). Thus, whether there is an increase or decrease in international students' numbers, one fact remains that international students are present in US colleges, and are making a contribution to these institutions on a social level as well as to the nation on an economic level.

Economically, the U.S. Department of Commerce (IIE, 2019) indicated that international students in 2018 contributed $45 billion to the U.S. economy, with 62% of all international students receiving majority of their funding from non-US sources (IIE, 2016). Furthermore, for every seven international students, three U.S. jobs were created, providing almost half a million jobs (Banks, 2019). Aside the economic gain, international students provide both all students and faculty with a level of global consciousness beyond the scope of books and lectures (Altbach, 2010). Institutions of higher education, therefore, marry the needs of local students with socio-economic benefits by opening their doors to international students (Altbach, 2010; IIE, 2016). This open door, while bringing in economic benefits, also provides

an opportunity for students to learn and compete in a global economy. International students themselves undergo both challenging and enriching major life adjustments as they move from their home country to study in culturally different countries (Çankaya et al., 2016). Based on the economic and social benefits of international students, it behooves institutions to ensure the success and continued inflow of international students.

Because of the increasing number of international students (IIE, 2016), many of whom speak some other language apart from English in their home countries, it is unsurprising that many studies have documented language barrier being the major cause of acculturative stress (Constantine, Okazaki, & Utsey, 2004; Yeh & Inose, 2010). Many international students come from cultures that are more collectivists than the culture of mainstream US (IIE, 2016). This difference in culture heightens their cultural shock and sense of discrimination, and decreases their social support Yeh & Inose, 2010; Shigemoto, Low, Borowa, & Robitschek, 2017). The cumulation of these stressors can lead to various emotional, psychological, and academic problems (Constantine, 2004). The distress that is evident in acculturation of international students, when viewed through the lens of Personal Growth Initiative, could provide some tools for advisors in helping connect students to resources that can enhance their cognitive and behavioral success. Earlier research on international students focused on their challenges; however, with the era of positive psychology, much recent research is laying emphasis on the resilience and hardiness in international students, many of whom are non-native speakers of English (Acquaye et al., 2017; Çankaya et al., 2016).

Purpose of the Present Study

Based on literature on international students that document their acculturative stressors as well as their resiliency traits, we wanted to explore the lived experiences of a mixture of international students who are non-native speakers of English, through the lens of the Personal Growth Initiative, and examine how their use of the four domains within the construct helped or hindered their transition. The overarching research question was "what are the lived experiences of international students who are non-native speakers of English, and are enrolled in US graduate programs?

Positionality Statement

Creswell (2013) describes the concept of "bracketing" as the process where researchers discuss personal experiences with the phenomenon under study. Bracketing allows researchers to focus attention away from their own experiences and on the experiences of participants. Bracketing also allows readers to learn about researchers' experiences so they can judge the findings of a study for themselves (Moustakas, 1994).

The first author, at the time of data collection, was a non-native speaker of English in a doctoral program in the U.S. She discovered that conversations during most international students' gatherings involved challenges faced in school. However, during her studies, she discovered the concept of resilience and post-traumatic growth – experiences that people gain despite traumatic experiences. She therefore decided to use a positive psychological lens to explore her own experiences. When she had an opportunity to conduct a qualitative research study, she chose to explore the narratives of other international students enrolled in U.S. doctoral program, while suspending her own beliefs about what it meant to be a non-native speaker of English enrolled in a US doctoral program (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The first author used reflective writing to explore how different or similar her own experiences were to her participants and allowed her co-researchers to engage her on how her views and experiences could play a role in understanding the themes of the data.

The second author adopted a non-native speaker of English and had the chance to navigate the U.S. educational system with an adolescent who was just learning to speak English and understand the nuances of the language. The third author comes from a Greek-immigrant family, and experienced her maternal grandfather taking college classes while learning English. While in college, she lived in a building which integrated non-native English speakers with native English speakers, thus exposing her to students from around the globe. She admits seeing a connection between these students and her family – a connection that describes a strong ambition and drive to change one's personal life and that of the family. The fourth author experienced being an English-speaking American in countries that spoke other languages than English; and could connect with some of the experiences of the participants in this study.

Method

The objective of this study was to explore the lived experiences of international students who were non-native speakers of English and enrolled in doctoral programs in the US. There are several genres within qualitative research. Some build theory from participants' perceptions or experiences – Grounded Theory (Chamaz, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018), while others investigate a cultural experience - Ethnography (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because this study set out to examine the shared sensory experiences of this purposefully selected sample, the phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2013; Husserl, 2013; Moustakas, 1994) was deemed acceptable (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). We chose Moustakas' (1994) definition of phenomenological study, which explains the common meaning a person or several persons make of their lived experiences of a phenomenon. In this study, we sought to describe the common experiences that our participants shared as non-native speakers of English in US doctoral programs (Creswell, 2013).

Participants

After approval from the institution review board (IRB), the first author liaised with the coordinator of the doctoral programs who sent an email to all international students enrolled in doctoral programs. The inclusion criteria for participation was individuals who had English as a second or third language; individuals who had been in the US for four years or less; and individuals who were enrolled in doctoral programs. The coordinator supplied the email address of the first author in the email, and those willing to participate to contact me. All eight individuals who contacted the first author were interviewed (see Table 1).

The purposeful sampling method was used (Creswell, 2013) because participants needed to have had experiences in their position as non-native speakers of English in US doctoral programs. The participants were individuals on F1 or equivalent visa. To protect the identity of participants, we gave each a pseudonym, as well as indicated their continent instead of their country of origin. Participants self-reported as male ($n = 4$), female ($n = 4$), married ($n = 5$), and enrolled in education-related field of study ($n = 7$). Participants' home continents were Asia, Africa, and South America.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Name	Continent of Origin	Field of Study	Gender	Familial Relation	Current Status
Ahmet	Asia	Counseling	Male	Engaged	Completed the program and went home
Mania	Asia	Science Education	Female	Married	Completed the program and in academia in US
Nonso	Africa	Business	Male	Married	Completed the program and in academia in US
Sofìa	South America	Teaching English as Second Language	Female	Single	Completed the program and went home
Sung-Ki	Asia	Counseling	Male	Married	Completed the program and went home
Ying	Asia	Teaching English as Second Language	Female	Married	Completed the program
Zainab	Asia	Educational Administration	Female	Married	Completed the program and is set to go home in a month
Bai	Asia	Sports and Exercise Science	Male	Single	Completed the program

Participants' countries of origin, clustered according to continent, was very consistent with the national statistics on international students in US. On average, participants had spent about 2.5 years in the US. About five (62.5%) of the participants had done their masters in their home countries, one (12.5%) had obtained her master's in the UK, and the other two (25%) had had their master's in the US.

Procedure

Participants were purposefully selected using the criterion sampling method because the focus of the study required some personal experience of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Inclusion criteria for participation included: (a) graduate student; (b) non-legal resident in US on F1 or equivalent visa; (c) been in the US for less than 5 years; (d) English is not a primary language spoken at home; and (e) able to communicate in understandable English.

After initial contact was made, the first author communicated with each participant, and a mutually-agreed-upon space was used to conduct semi-structured interviews that explored the research question. The first author used the first five-ten minutes to establish rapport with participants (Patten & Newhart, 2018). This building of rapport process included the informed consent process which spelled out to participants the voluntariness of the study, as well as their right to withdraw from the study without penalty (Creswell, 2013). Upon agreement to participate in the study, participants were invited to complete a demographic questionnaire about their country of origin, course of study, how long they have been in the US, and possible family status.

After completing the questionnaire, the first author asked an open-ended question that allowed participants to share their experiences as non-native speakers of English in a US doctoral program. Some of the questions asked included "tell me about your decision from your home country to US to become a doctoral student"; "please tell me about your experiences in the first couple of weeks as a graduate student in US"; "what you have found to be helpful towards your success or lack of it in school?" Interviews of participants lasted about eight weeks over the course of the semester. Each of the interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the first author. Participants were not given any incentives. After initial themes were extracted from all the interviews, the first author communicated with participants who were available, who confirmed that the themes were consistent with their experiences as non-native speakers of English in US doctoral programs.

Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research

Creswell (2013) describes trustworthiness as validation – a process used by investigators to examine the "accuracy" of the findings of the study as described by both the participants and the investigators. To ensure trustworthiness, the authors undertook several recommendations by Creswell (2013). We chose to use audit trail, bracketing interview, and external audit. In using the audit trail, the first author who did all the data collection maintained comprehensive record of how data were collected.

Another way of ensuring trustworthiness involved using "bracketing interviews." Bracketing interviews involve continuous investigator reflection on their connection to the topic being studied. The first author, at the time of data collection, was herself a non-native speaker of English in a doctoral program. She was able to connect easily with participants because they shared similar characteristics of being non-native speakers of English in doctoral programs. However, the familiarity may have blinded her from asking possible pertinent questions that would have allowed participants to share some other types of experiences that align with the Personal Growth Initiative. To make up for this possible bias, the second author who is American and native English speaker asked probing questions of the first author during the coding process. Questions like "how were the participants' experiences similar or different from yours?" allowed the researchers to address possible biases in the coding process.

The third approach we chose in establishing trustworthiness was external audit. The third author served as an external auditor by establishing that participants' narratives were appropriately clustered under each of the factors within the PGI construct. The third author had experienced being part of several qualitative research projects and could bring her expertise in methodology to the external auditing process. The external auditor assessed whether the findings, interpretations, and conclusions made were supported by the data (Creswell, 2013). She did this by reading and re-reading the transcripts, compared them to the themes, and checked them against the conclusions. There were regular communications for clarifications and suggestions to make sure the transcripts lined up with themes and conclusions.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Data Analysis

Semi-formal interviews were conducted over a two-month period. Verbatim transcripts, done by the first author, began after the last interview. While transcribing, the first author made notes on how participants' experiences were similar to or different from her own experiences on her journey towards becoming a doctoral student (Moustakas, 1994). Based on the first author's training, and some recommendations from Saldaña (2016), each participant sentence in the transcripts was given a number to allow co-researchers understand which expressions were clustered under themes. Researcher questions, however, were not given numbers. Figures 1 and 2 show samples of transcripts from Ahmet and Sophià. In these transcripts, the turquoise color was used to highlight statements or phrases that described experiences consistent with planning towards a better future. The pink color was used to describe participants' perception of available resources or the use of these resources on their journey towards doctoral education in US. Statements or phrases consistent with readiness for change were given the color green. Participants' narratives that spoke to intentionality in behavior were given the color yellow. Finally, statements occurred that described personality traits or how participants viewed themselves (Figure 1). These statements were given a grey color. These statements were later read and re-read to explore their connection to the experiences of participants.

25. But at the same time, I had a lot of inferiority, feeling of inferiority.
26. I had really limited opportunities in that time even though I was studying in the capital of _____
27. The opportunities were great but not for me because I didn't know English.
28. And in _____ sometimes you need some people to support you to go farther.
29. And I didn't have; my family is very middle class and we didn't know anybody to support me.
30. And my professors, my faculty, they didn't know me.
31. Even though I talked to some of them, they said "ok you can do it, you can do it" but they never followed up to check.
32. And I applied to master's program in the same University that I had my bachelor's in.
33. One of the professors saw me and asked me which university I had my bachelor's in.
34. "From your university", I said.
35. And I had talked to him about master's and Ph.D.
36. He had suggested me to do it in the United States.
37. So when he asked me this question, I felt very inferior in that moment.
38. I wanted to be the best and to get the best but I felt I didn't have the opportunities.
39. In the third year, I learned about a fellowship.
40. It was that our government is paying all the expenses, tuition, and passport, and provide stipend to study in the United States.
41. That was amazing and it was a huge huge decision for me to leave everything and come here for the next six years.
42. I searched and search and learned about this.
43. But after graduation, I applied but couldn't get because my score was a little bit low.
44. We had something that's kinda like GRE.
45. I therefore worked as a school counselor after my bachelor's.
46. During that time, I didn't give up.
47. I knew that I had to work because I needed money.
48. And I prepared because I knew I had to increase my score again.
49. I did and I got really high scores – 96 out of 100.
50. It was the best among the counselors, and I could choose any university I wanted.
51. So that's how it started.

Figure 1. Sample of numbered transcript of Ahmet

Because we wanted to explore participants' experiences with personal growth initiative, the second and third investigators read and re-read the transcripts and highlighted or listed any statements or phrases that "spoke" to the personal growth initiative theory. For example, the question "tell me about your decision from your home country to US to become a doctoral student" elicited several responses. Ahmet decided to share his experiences about the events that came together to inform his decision to pursue his masters in US and later, his doctorate. On the other hand, Sophià appeared to have had the desire to pursue doctoral studies percolating in her subconscious, "…continue to do my PhD. But it was always at the back of my mind."

18. Aha, so I did my masters in England.
19. I earned em, a scholarship from   to do it.
20. Then I was waiting to have a scholarship to do a PhD but that was not coming so I decided to apply on my own.
21. England was very difficult; very expensive; difficult to rent places.
22. Now I am getting more mails about assistantships and PhD in England.
23. But when I decided to apply to um, to scholarship, I thought of em, thought of Fulbright.
24. According to apply for Fulbright, I need to do like em, do an investigation of universities in which did some courses were offered.
25. But I did but I didn't get the Fulbright at that moment because I had already attended a professional development course through Fulbright scholarship, so Fulbright was not going to give me another, another grant.
26. So, but I had the investigation of the universities and one of them was _____.
27. And then I applied and got accepted and I had the assistantship which made everything possible to come here.
28. And then eastern costs, also I don't know why I thought about eastern costs.
29. Yes, yes, I had to sit for TOEFL and GRE. And GRE eh….
30. I came for a professional development course in 2010 in Virginia.
31. And that is when I went back to campus and decided that I wanted to continue to do my PhD.
32. But it was always at the back of my mind.
33. But after the MA, I needed to go back to work.
34. So, we're always torn between working and being able to continue studying; It's not been easy.
35. I was always working - I went to England for a year and went back to work - attended this professional development course and went back to work.
36. And then PhD; so, all of them are great opportunities to continue learning.
37. The only thing is that all the time I have to manage work and how I'll get the money.
38. I am a full-time student, so I resign my school, my work at school in _____
39. I couldn't keep my position any longer, and here I am a graduate assistant which

Figure 2. Sample of transcript from Sophià

After the highlighting the statements that connected to the Personal Growth Initiative construct, we set out to use the collective narratives of the participants to create a story of their experiences as doctoral students. Even though each of the factors within the theory was identified in this storyline, participants' journeys did not follow a linear pathway. Instead, when these statements were clustered under the factors, they appeared to cycle from one to the other in a seeming unpredictable fashion (Figure 3). Each of the factors was not distinct in of itself but participants seemed to start at a point, hold a particular factor loosely, while they transitioned into other factors and went back to those held loosely to help them succeed. Finally, the sub-theme of personality traits was found to connect with how participants worked to ready themselves for change; in their planful attitudes; in how they sought for and applied resources; and in the intentionality of their behaviors.
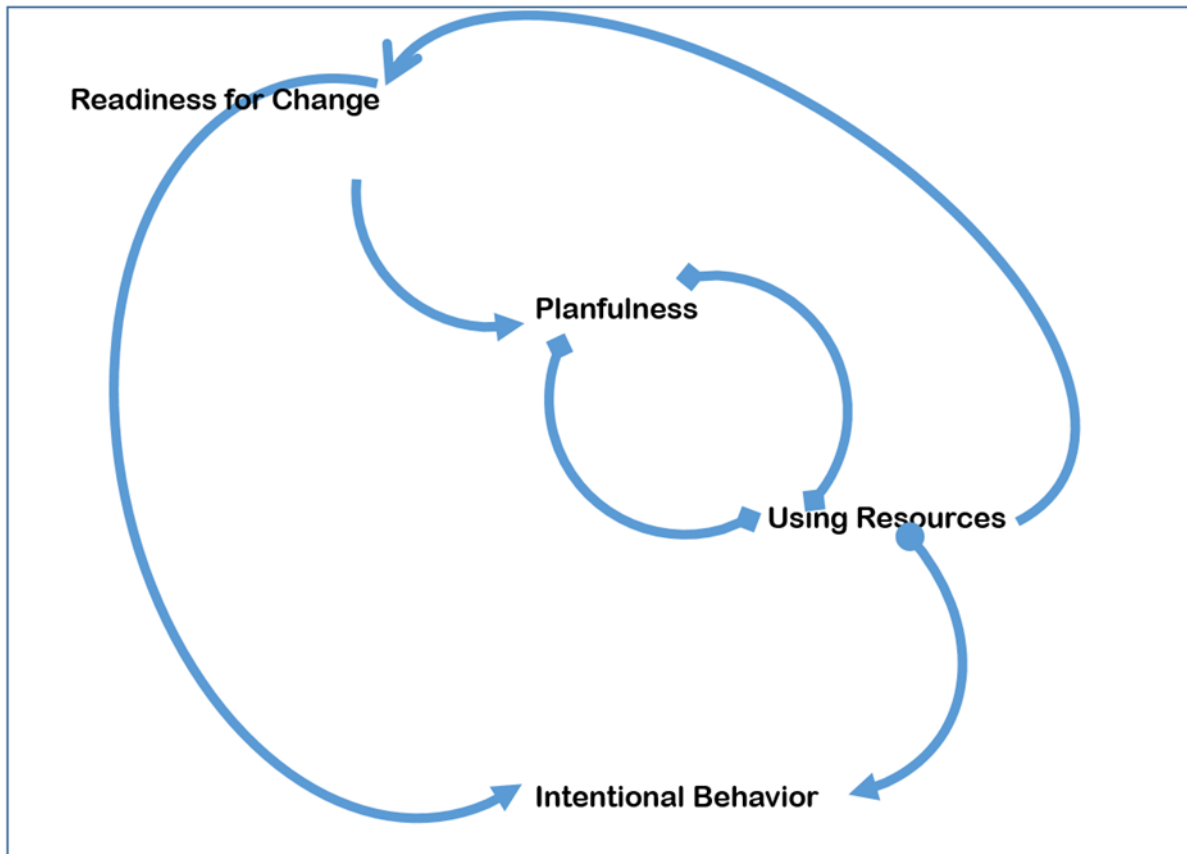
Figure 3. Cycles within the four factors

Discussion

Readiness for change. R*eadiness for change* was seen in participants' decision to leave their home countries, travel for many miles and study in a language that is not their primary tongue. Ahmet described how he noticed the behaviors of his professors and wanted to be like them. In deciding to come to the US, he reassured himself that if he could spend six years away from loved ones, it would be worth the sacrifice because he would come back in a better position than when he left. Sung-Ki observed that "…But if I study in the US, it will definitely be a new experience and I will have more opportunity for my career." Zainab reiterated this *readiness for change* when "I decided that this was not what I wanted, and I needed to improve my education, but not from my country. I needed to learn a new language, new culture and improve myself from everything." This desire for "better than what I am now" – a yearning for differentiation, is best described by Nonso who verbalized his cognitive processing this way:

> …And then one of the other guys who joined the organization with me left after the first year and came to US to do his masters and PhD. I kept in touch with him and we kept talking back and forth.... Anyway, UK is not like my dream place to go… because we have a lot of people in UK. My thinking is like, you need to differentiate yourself. You don't need to do like them.

Even though the majority of the participants used *readiness for change* as a positive propeller, others also grew from their negative experiences. Bai indicated that "a couple of months after I came, I nearly gave up because everything was so overwhelming for me."

Inasmuch as *readiness for change* was seen in participants' pre-arrival to the US, others cycled through that process when they interacted with the new culture and understood that they had to be ready for change in order to survive in the culture as well as in school. When Ying came into the US, she realized that "I needed to work hard to familiarize myself with English. It became my motivation to learn the language so I could understand people and be understood by them." Ahmet on the other hand, used *readiness for change* as a lens to explore harmful tendencies that could impede his success in school.

> Because I'm really motivated, and having perfectionist tendencies, I am preoccupied with my writing, and classes, and research. This makes me busy and I always focus on them. And most times, I don't have any break. And this makes my following week horrible. This is harmful, clearly harmful… I need to enjoy time here.

An awareness of these harmful practices helped Ahmet to be intentional about his study habits and to provide some helpful recommendations for students who may be coming from his country to US to undertake higher education.

Planfulness. *Planfulness*, which includes an intentional behavior that seeks to actively work and take every opportunity seemed to be a progression from *readiness for change*. Participants conducted an assessment of their strengths and weaknesses in terms of doctoral programs and sought available resources to help them succeed. Ahmet described how he employed *Planfulness* as "...I took care of my classes a lot. Every time after the school, I was going to the library. I read every single detail of the syllabus by using dictionary. I note every single detail before the class." Mania's *Planfulness* cost her years in doing what might have been considered "inconsequential" even though she considered the cost involved and decided it was worth the price. She describes her experience as:

> So for two years, I would go to the library to read books, write and observe people. I had lots of notes; I just looked at people and started writing. I had lots of great experiences and observation just sitting down and watching people. I never went back home to visit because we have a single-entry visa and we have to stay here. And the other thing is that you have to work constantly to be successful here.

While Ahmet used detailed syllabi to understand the structure of class, and Mania used observation to understand the culture, Sung-Ki discovered that he needed to understand the profession in which he was obtaining a terminal degree. He therefore "went to the school's counseling and psychological services to receive my own counseling there." He explained that even though he wanted to watch how Americans conducted counseling so he could practice it in his practical classes, he ended up gaining help towards emotional and academic success. Nonso, like Mania, clarified the need to work hard to be successful, by explaining to the interviewer that "that's why I am here today, on a Sunday afternoon, writing a paper for seminars." In *Planfulness*, these participants understood what their weaknesses were, especially because English was their second language, coupled with the different educational systems between the US and their home countries. They therefore accepted that they had to put in a lot more effort than their local colleagues to succeed.

Using Resources. Because of *Planfulness*, it was easy for participants to transition smoothly into *Using Resources*, especially when they needed to obtain resources outside of

themselves. Bai describes how he navigated this factor – gaining help outside of himself by reaching out to the Asian community. He describes how his association had arrangements with some apartment complexes to gain discounted accommodation for him. He also sought help to have free English tuition from both his church members and community members. Sofìà explained how having good classmates to talk with as well as a good supervisor for guidance was a way for her to get help outside of herself. Zainab described her faith as important in providing help outside her natural resources. She stated that "What kept me going was my faith. I felt because I have faith, I can do it." Nonso describes how he had to take special classes to help with his accent so he could succeed. He states

> I actually took a bold step by asking like one of the professors. I went to meet her and told her I think it's getting to the point where I'm not sure I'll be able to cope … because I'm not getting much from the class. I'm struggling with the accent and I think they're struggling with my own accent too…. She gave me one book which has to do with like cultural shock, dealing with cultural shock, and asked me to go and see the international students' service office because they deal with international students. They got me an accent reduction consultant.

Nonso further admitted that not all his professors were helpful. He explained

> One of my professors said that any time you're talking in class, slow down, slow down, slow down. So I also told him you too, any time you're talking in class, slow down because you know someone is also in class that does not understand.

Ying on the other hand combined *Using Resources* with *Intentional Behavior* when she iterated it this way:

> I decided to take on a positive attitude and actively seek out help whenever I felt overwhelmed. I wouldn't seek help from my fellow Asians but would look for anyone willing to speak with me in English because I appreciated the diversity and realized I could learn a lot from other people.

Intentional Behavior. *Intentional behavior* occurs when people actively work to take all the opportunity they can to grow personally. Ahmet describes the opportunity he took to grow personally. He describes

> I was reading chapters twice. First, I would read the chapters with a dictionary – every single word by paying attention. I took about 4-5 hours to go through once. I was completing every paper one week in advance because I didn't have the confidence to wait till the last minute. In classes, I compare my speaking with native speakers.

Nonso described his desire to protect his wife who had not yet come to the US from the stressors he was going through. This was *intentional behavior* to balance his feelings of insecurity in school with his feelings of protectiveness for his family. He states that "My wife was not aware of all the problems I was going through… I didn't want to complicate their problems at home."

Cycling. Some of the participants cycled between *Using Resources* and *Readiness for Change*. It appeared to be transitioning from *Using Resources* into *Readiness for Change*

before coming to *Intentional Behavior*. Sofià admitted that she explored options available to apply for Fulbright scholarship. Upon investigation, she discovered she could not get that scholarship. However, through that investigation, she determined she could do a program in one of the public universities in the southeast. She thereafter trained her ears to adapt to the southern accent so she could survive in the area. Ahmet, on the other hand, used skills he had learned in his field of study to identify habits that were harmful to his overall success. He describes his process:

> I smoke! This is harmful, not related to my success but to my health. When I smoke, I get relaxed to study but it's not good for my health. I am trying to quit right now. Right now, I am better and my success is better. I can use the opportunities more right now and increase my self-efficacy.

Under each of the factors, "cost" was a sub-team that occurred in the form of financial decisions, loss of support systems, loss of familiar habits, and loss of independence. For example, cost for Ahmet was be found in both planfulness and *using resources*. Cost for Sophià was found in *intentional behavior* and *use of resources*. Cost for Nonso as well as Zainab was in *intentional behavior* and *readiness for change*. Cost for Sung-Ki was in intentional behavior. For both Sophià and Ahmet, this "cost" concerned finances or lack thereof that informed their choices about scholarships as well as places to study. For Nonso, "cost" occurred in his inability to share all his struggles with the people who were the most to provide the needed support. For Sung-Ki, "cost" occurred in his choice to stay with familiar language and TV programs at the expense of moving into the unknown and getting familiar with English to help him in his school work. Similarly, Bai chose to stay with the familiar and people from his own country and language and experienced some disconnect because of this language barrier. Thus, even though the major themes fit under the factors within the PGI theory, sub-themes identified sprinkled within the broad factors as well.

Findings

The Personal Growth Initiative (PGI) construct provided a lens that allowed the exploration of those factors which aided international students during their education in a foreign country. The age of participants was as different as their countries and continents of origin, confirming Robitscheck and colleagues' (2012) study on the ability of PGI to include people of all age groups. This diversity is confirmed by Weigold and colleagues' (2018) assertion of PGI's reach across age and ethnicities. Moreover, participants' narratives further confirmed that PGI involved skills that people learn at every stage in their lives, as confirmed by Ahmet's describing of going through his syllabi to make sure he survived doctoral education.

Moreover, whereas the data from this study confirmed the discrete yet interconnected nature of the factors within PGI (Robitschek et al., 2012; Weigold et al., 2013), our data supported other sub-themes that included personality traits as well as cost involved in each of the discrete factors. Invariably, participants identified specific areas of growth in their lives that contributed to their decisions to embark on doctoral education. Thus, *planfulness* and *readiness for change* in our participants appeared to be inter-twined in the way each factor informed the other, as well as played a role in subsequent factors. Additionally, participants' *use of resources* either enhanced or impeded their success in graduate school, and this contributed to *intentional behavior* in the way they applied these resources.

Each of the participants described their families of origin and culture in a way that confirmed that their decision to leave their home countries to study in US had family backing

and approval. Even their desire for support and family-connection in their new places of study confirmed supported their collectivist worldview. Therefore, it was not surprising that the factors within the PGI was demonstrated in their narratives (Yakunina et al., 2013).

Throughout the semi-structured interviews, participants verbalized the four factors included in the PGI without a specific cycle of use or direct definition of a factor demonstrating a genuine personal experience that matched with the studied framework. Given the flexible structure of the interview, the participants illustrated unique uses of each factor for their different needs at the time. *Intentional Behavior* was used to meet needs of being prepared ahead of time to eliminate stress. Others used *intentional behavior* towards the health in relationships during school. *Readiness for change* occurred in conversations prior to coming to US or even observations in others who had studied outside participants' countries of origin. Planfulness, like readiness for change, also occurred in pre-travel conversations, but went beyond conversations to action taking. Participants' *use of resources* included country-available resources, family resources, and personality traits that enhanced active planning and movement towards achieving goals. In all, the four factors within PGI appeared within participants' experiences as doctoral students in US, yet looked different for each participant, thereby speaking to the versatility of the construct.

Recommendations for Future Research

It is noteworthy that studies on international students are exploring their strengths instead of their challenges. This study adds to the discourse on strength-based lens in the study of second language speakers of English in graduate programs in the US. Future studies could look at Personal Growth Initiative of international students who did not complete their doctoral studies and explore the similarities and differences in their cognitions and decisions to leave their doctoral programs. We believe this understanding could help international students' offices in providing the necessary information to these students on what could help or impede their journey towards completion of their program.

Another area of exploration is to increase the sample size and allow international students to theorize the construct. In a grounded theory qualitative research, participants' narratives could shed some light on how western-based constructs appear in non-western samples. Understanding how others theorize personal growth initiative would provide some other descriptors for professors of international students without necessarily pathologizing them for acting in a way that is consistent with their culture.

Finally, international statistics confirm both economic and social contributions of international students in host countries. It will be interesting to explore host students' narratives on the academic and social contributions of their "guests" within their classrooms. A comparative study pairing non-native speakers of English with their English-speaking hosts within specific courses could provide a fuller picture of all that goes into the experiences of international students on US campuses of higher learning.

Limitations of the Study

Because data collection was completed before analysis, it is likely that deeper experiences were missed. Had data collection been done concurrently with initial analysis, it could have informed future questions. Another aspect of concurrent data collection and analysis is that it informs researchers when they need to interview more participants as they strive to reach for saturation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Summary

This phenomenological study used the *Personal Growth Initiative* as a theoretical lens to explore the lived experiences of non-native speakers of English enrolled in doctoral programs in the US. Themes extracted from semi-structured interviews were clustered under the four factors of the theory - *readiness for change*; *planfulness*; *using resources*; and *intentional behavior*. In this sample, participants did not transition linearly along the four factors but cycled among and between them depending on their unique needs. Counselors are recommended to pay attention to the personal growth initiative of international students in higher education in order to guide them toward successfully completing their programs.

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Author Note

Hannah E. Acquaye is assistant professor of counseling at Western Seminary, Portland, Oregon, USA. She is currently with the Department of Counselling Psychology, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana. Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Hannah E. Acquaye, Counselling Psychology Department, University of Education, Winneba, P. O. Box 25, Winneba, Ghana. Please direct correspondence to heacquaye@uew.edu.gh.

Cari Welch and Leah Jacobs are graduates of Western Seminary's Counseling Program.

Arielle Ross is a graduate of Marriage and Family Therapy Program at Lewis and Clark College, Portland, Oregon.

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