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IDENTITY AND INTEGRATION

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Habitus, self-identity, and positioning: The multifarious nature of study abroad

Jane Jackson

Abstract

For the social theorist Pierre Bourdieu, habitus denotes 'the durable motivations, perceptions and forms of knowledge that people carry around in their heads as a result of living in particular social environments and that predispose them to act in certain ways' (Layder 1997:23). When individuals move from their home environment to unfamiliar social settings they are naturally exposed to different, and sometimes unsettling, ways of being (e.g., linguistic and cultural practices). While some border crossers develop a sense of belonging in the new milieu and experience identity and linguistic expansion, others retreat to the safety of their L1 and habitus. What might account for differing outcomes on stays abroad? Drawing on an ethnographic case study of Chinese sojourners in England, this paper explores the complex interplay between language, identity, and sociocultural context. Weaving together data from various sources (e.g., open-ended surveys, interview transcripts, diary entries, field notes) sensitized me to the contradictory, relational, and dynamic nature of self-identity and the influence of social relations, power, and access on L2 acquisition and intercultural adjustment. Individual, social psychological factors also impact on sojourn outcomes. Some students took advantage of linguistic and cultural affordances in their environment, opting to 'converge' and appropriate the discourse of their hosts (Bourhis et al. 2007). By contrast, those who experienced identity misalignments and felt constrained in new social fields clung to their L1, national identity, and familiar habits. The unique and diverse developmental trajectories of these sojourners underscore the complexity and multifarious nature of study abroad.

1. Introduction

For the past decade, groups of English majors from a Hong Kong university have been travelling to England as part of a study abroad program that is specially designed to enhance their intercultural communicative competence. To better understand their language and cultural learning, I have conducted ethnographic investigations of most of the cohorts (Jackson 2008, 2010). When analysing the data I discovered interesting differences in developmental trajectories and sojourn outcomes. To help account for these variations, this paper draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, who drew attention to the context-dependent sociocultural and political dimensions of language and cultural learning.

2. Bourdieusian social theory

To fully grasp the implications of Bourdieusian social theory for the sojourn experience, it is essential to be familiar with the constructs of *field, linguistic capital,* and *habitus*. The former refers to a social arena in which individuals or 'social agents' compete for desirable resources (e.g., status, knowledge, wealth). Social positions and relations are thought to be structured internally in terms of power differentials, with values and worldviews largely determining what individuals consider worth striving for. For example, when the linguistic and cultural capital (worth) of English is prized, people in non-English speaking countries may invest considerable time and effort into mastering this global language.

Also central to Bourdieu's (1977, 1991) social theory is the notion of *habitus*, which refers primarily to the non-discursive elements of culture that influence our thoughts and behaviours, reinforcing bonds with other members of the social groups we belong to. For this theorist, *habitus* encompasses the learned habits (e.g., daily practices), skills, styles, tastes, values, and beliefs shared by specific groups, societies, or nations. This 'set of dispositions' is believed to guide the actions and discourse of individuals in social exchanges. Basically, *habitus*, from a Bourdieusian perspective, involves the 'durable motivations, perceptions and forms of knowledge that people carry around in their heads as a result of living in particular social environments and that predispose them to act in certain ways' (Layder 1997: 236).

Bourdieu (1991) coined the term 'linguistic habitus' to describe the 'sub-set of dispositions' acquired while learning to communicate in a socially acceptable manner within specific sociocultural settings (e.g., at home, at school, with grandparents). Similar to other forms of *habitus*, a social agent's linguistic habitus is a cumulative product of experience and socialization, which serves as a guide for language use in daily life. Through the process of language and cultural socialization, dispositions are influenced by prevailing sociopolitical conditions and hierarchies in the environment. Therefore, *habitus* affects linguistic practices (e.g., the use of a particular accent and style of communication) and, as Vann (1999) points out, it impacts on one's perceptions of the symbolic value of these practices in various social arenas or what Bourdieu refers to as a *field*.

Within Bourdieu's theory of practice, linguistic exchanges are regarded as 'situated encounters between agents endowed with socially structured resources and competencies' (Thompson 1991: 2). When communicating through language, Bourdieu (1991) argues that individuals call on their repertoire of linguistic resources and, to varying degrees, adapt their discourse to their interlocutor, taking into account the social '*field*' of the interaction. Speakers who have been socialized in the same environment typically observe learned norms of behaviour, reinforcing prevailing social structures.

What happens when social norms and hierarchies are not recognized or adhered to? Bourdieu (1991) warns of the miscommunication and disorientation that can occur as a consequence of incongruence between a *habitus* and a *field*. For example, when individuals cross cultures, they travel with sets of dispositions (*habitus*) linked to the socialization process they experienced in their home environment. Initially, their behaviour, values, and worldviews may be an uncomfortable fit within the new *field*. Consequently, they may experience culture shock when exposed to practices and values that clash with their own. In the host culture, they may find it difficult to express their thoughts and emotions in their second language in a way that is understood by their hosts. Further, they may be unsure about what is considered 'appropriate' in a range of sociocultural settings that are foreign to them. They may then suffer identity misalignments, frequently feel misunderstood, and begin to question their place in the world.

Even if newcomers adjust their behaviour to conform to local norms (e.g., appropriate local expressions of politeness, imitate a local accent) as

articulated in the communication accommodation theory (Bourhis, el-geledi, and Sachdev 2007; Gallois, Ogay, and Giles, 2005), host nationals may still view them as outsiders. Much to their chagrin, locals may not recognize or accept their new identity. Instead, they may continue to deny the newcomers 'in-group' membership status, as Joseph (2004: 75) explains:

> Even the individual who in a wilful, active way undoes the identity they were born and socialized into and takes on a new identity (thus undercutting the very basis on which the habitus stands) is still going to be perceived, interpreted, and measured by those around them in terms of their relative place within a network of social hierarchies based on the distribution of cultural capital.

While individuals possess the ability to understand and make choices about their own behaviour, Bourdieu (1991) maintains that the degree of agency is limited by prevailing power structures and hierarchies within a *field*. Even if newcomers engage in the act of 'convergence' (e.g., 'adapt their communicative behaviours in terms of a wide range of linguistic (e.g., languages, accents, speech rates), paralinguistic (e.g., pauses, utterance length), and nonverbal features (e.g., smiling, gazing) in such a way as to become familiar to their interlocutor's behaviour' (Bourhis et al., 2007: 37), they may still be denied access to resources and their preferred self-identity (Joseph, 2004; Webb, Schirato, and Danaher, 2002). Bourdieu's social theory raises our awareness of the potential challenges facing border crossers who enter a new environment and seek to become accepted in the new community. The remainder of the paper explores Bourdieusian notions that help elucidate variations in the trajectories of second language sojourners.

3. The short-term study abroad program

Since 2001, the Chinese University of Hong Kong has been offering a study abroad program for second year English majors. It is specifically designed to enhance their English language proficiency, intercultural sensitivity, literary awareness, and intercultural communicative competence. The program encourages the participants to become more confident when communicating in English in a variety of contexts, including informal, social situations.

The program consists of pre-sojourn seminars in applied linguistics (ethnographic research), intercultural communication (culture-general/ culture-specific elements) and English literature; a five-week sojourn in England; post-sojourn debriefing sessions; and an undergraduate dissertation related to the experience abroad. The sojourn includes a homestay component, literary and cultural studies at a university in central England, excursions (e.g., to the theatre, museums), and small-scale ethnographic projects (Jackson 2006). All elements of the program are credit-bearing and integrated into the Bachelor of Arts program of studies.

3.1 Ethnographic investigations of the sojourn experience

To better understand the language and cultural development of the participants, from 2001-9 I conducted ethnographic investigations of most offerings of this program. By spending more than a year with each cohort in informal and formal situations, I was able to observe and record their language and intercultural development both in Hong Kong and England. This allowed me to track their trajectories in a range of environments and better understand the impact of the sojourn experience.

3.1.1 The participants

Since the first offering of this program, I have observed more than 115 participants, with an average of 13 students in a cohort each year. All of them have been full-time English majors in the second year of a three-year BA program; the vast majority have been female, reflecting the gender distribution in the English Department at the home institution. On entry into the program, the students have had an average age of 20.2 years and a grade point average of 3.2. All of them have grown up in Hong Kong and nearly all declared Cantonese to be their first language. A few spoke Putonghua (Mandarin) or a Mainland Chinese dialect as an additional language (usually the mother tongue of a parent) and many also knew some basic French, Japanese, or German. All of the students have had an advanced level of proficiency in English on entry, with an average of 'B' on the 'Use of English' A-level

examination at the end of their secondary schooling. Only a few had participated in other exchange programs before travelling to England with their peers (e.g., a summer language immersion program in Canada or the U.S.). For most, forays outside Hong Kong had largely consisted of short family trips to Mainland China or organized tours to other Asian countries.

Before joining the program, none of the participants had ever taken a course in intercultural or cross-cultural communication, anti-racist education, or multiculturalism. Further, except for the few students who had visited an English-speaking country, their use of English had largely been confined to academic settings in Hong Kong. Most had had very limited exposure to informal, social English before travelling to England. Only a few had personal relationships across cultures.

Each year, all of the participants signed a consent form as part of the home institution's research ethics review procedures. Although free to withdraw at any time, none did.

3.1.2 Data collection

The ethnographic investigation of each cohort consisted of three distinct phases: pre-sojourn, sojourn, and post-sojourn. Pre-sojourn data included: each student's application letter to join the program, a language and cultural identity narrative and an intercultural reflections journal written in the intercultural communication course, open-ended surveys, and interviews that prompted the participants to reflect on: their cultural background, language use, identity, previous travels/ study abroad experiences (if any), intercultural contact, and aspirations/ concerns about the impending trip to England. During this phase I kept detailed field notes.

Data collected during the sojourn included a diary and weekly open-ended surveys designed to draw out student views about: their intercultural adjustment, their awareness and reactions to cultural differences, their use of English in daily life, their identities, their perception of their intercultural communication skills and sensitivity; and their investigation of a cultural scene (e.g., pub scene, charity shop). Data about the students' intercultural adjustment and behavior was also gathered from their instructors and homestay co-coordinator at the host institution. I accompanied most of the groups to England and recorded

my observations and ethnographic conversations in my field notes.

Post-sojourn data included: an open-ended survey and an interview with the participants about their sojourn and re-entry experiences. In particular, the interviewees were encouraged to reflect on the impact of study abroad on: their intercultural awareness and sensitivity, self-conception, and intercultural communication skills. During a three-month period, I supervised the development of the ethnographic dissertations of those who chose this option. This afforded me the opportunity to have further informal discussions with them about their sojourn and re-entry experiences. I continued to keep field notes during this phase of the study.

From 2006 to 2009, I also employed the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI, version 2) (Hammer and Bennett 2002) to measure and track the participants' intercultural sensitivity at strategic intervals: on entry, after the pre-sojourn preparation, and immediately after the sojourn.

3.2 Procedures and analysis

Each year, once the students in a cohort agreed to participate, I set up a project database for them in NVivo, a qualitative software program. Each piece of data was entered soon after it was gathered, resulting in a rich database of oral and written narratives, digital images, and IDI scores (for post-2006 groups) (Jackson 2008, 2010). Using an 'open coding' approach (Grbich 2007), I devised codes to reflect what I saw in the material rather than restrict myself to preconceived notions. As I triangulated data types and sources, new categories continually emerged, while others were reorganized as I gained more awareness of the relationship between items. Similar steps were repeated with each offering of the study abroad program and the NVivo analyses for all cohorts were then merged to form a large database. This permitted the development of a more comprehensive picture of the language and cultural learning and self-identity changes of all program participants over time. Due to space limitations, the remainder of this paper focuses on elements of Bordieusian social theory that help explain variations in sojourner trajectories.

3.3 Discussion of Findings

All of the students who joined the study abroad program had an advanced level of proficiency in English and took part in the same pre-sojourn preparation in Hong Kong. While in England, they lived with their own host family for five weeks and joined the same excursions, cultural and literary studies courses, and weekly debriefing sessions. All of the young sojourners conducted small-scale ethnographic projects in a cultural scene of their choice and on a daily basis were exposed to numerous cultural practices ('actions with a history') (Bourdieu 1991) that differed from what they were used to in Hong Kong. Despite these similarities, there were profound differences in the way their sojourns unfolded.

While some of the students (e.g., Niki and Elsa), experienced significant growth in terms of their linguistic and cultural learning, others (e.g., Ada and Cori) never felt at home in the new environment and were less satisfied with their progress, which they largely measured in terms of academic development (e.g., knowledge of English grammar) (Jackson 2008). Some participants engaged in various 'acts of convergence' when interacting with locals (e.g., Elsa, Niki, and Jade experimented with the more direct communication style of their hosts), while others resisted (e.g., Ada and Nora adopted an exaggerated style of Hong Kong English that distinguished them from host nationals and bound them closer to their Cantonese-speaking peers) (Jackson 2008, 2010). Some of the sojourners (e.g., Elsa and Jade) embraced the emergence of a more cosmopolitan, global sense of self, while others (e.g., Ada and Cori) were very troubled by identity misalignments in new *fields* and clung tightly to a national or ethnic identity (Jackson 2008, 2010). How might Bourdieu's social theory contribute to our understanding of these disparate outcomes?

Prior to the sojourn, all of the participants recognized the 'linguistic capital' of English (Bourdieu 1991), convinced that fluency in the language was essential to gain access to 'symbolic and material resources' in their own community (e.g., a lucrative job and higher status). Before travelling to England, the majority displayed a primarily instrumental motivation towards the learning of English, focusing on pragmatic aims. Even at this early stage, however, there were noticeable differences among the participants. Some expressed the desire to make the language more a part of their life and draw closer to the world outside Hong

Kong. Prior to departure, they made more of an effort to practice English outside of class and talked excitedly about the opportunity to make friends across cultures in England. While their peers were preoccupied with the enhancement of their academic English language proficiency and job prospects, these individuals sought to enhance their social English and experience another way of life.

As the sojourn unfolded, I observed that some participants (e.g., Elsa, Jade) paid attention to colloquial expressions and appropriated markers of politeness in the host culture; others (e.g., Ada, Cori) were disinterested and resisted this trend, seeing no relevance to their use of English in Hong Kong (Jackson 2008, 2010). The latter engaged in the act of 'divergence', 'a dissociative strategy where individuals change their communicative behaviours to become less similar to their interlocutor's behaviour' (Bourhis et al., 2007: 37).

The analysis of the sojourners' oral and written narratives disclosed a wide range of factors (e.g., individual, sociocultural, psychological, historical, political) that impacted on their willingness to communicate in the host language and establish bonds across cultures. While some made an effort to use English throughout the sojourn, others found this uncomfortable and preferred to chat in Cantonese with their peers to relieve stress as they struggled to adjust to unfamiliar practices. These sojourners remained more fixated on Hong Kong affairs and did not take full advantage of the opportunity to explore new cultural and linguistic scenes in England. In their narratives, some disclosed fears that they would lose their first language even though their period of residence in England was only five weeks.

Those who were less successful in coping with culture shock and displayed a more rigid personality remained uncomfortable with values and modes of behaviour (e.g., communication styles) that differed from their own (*habitus*). Less attuned to host norms of politeness in new *fields*, they appeared oblivious to gaps in their intercultural communicative competence. Believing it sufficient to just be themselves, some were not aware that their communication style (e.g., degree of self-disclosure, indirect discourse) might be adversely impacting on relations with their hosts. The intercultural competence of these sojourners lagged well behind their academic proficiency in the host language.

Aware of their non-native speaker status, some were afraid of making mistakes when using English and felt disadvantaged in a community where they were surrounded by 'Westerners' who conversed fluently in

the language. Feeling threatened in an alien environment (*field*) where they were a visible minority, they frequently retreated to the computer room at the host university to connect with friends and family back home via the internet. Drawing closer to a Chinese identity, they remained distant from their hosts and spent much of their free time with their peers. In surveys, they lamented the lack of opportunity to use English in the host environment and were not satisfied with their linguistic gains.

By contrast, others more fully embraced the opportunities that the host environment afforded them. Instead of rejecting everything new as 'strange' or 'irritating', these individuals made much more of an effort to suspend judgment and find out what lay behind these practices. In the weekly debriefing sessions, they asked more focused questions about linguistic and cultural elements in the host culture that had captured their attention. Exhibiting a more flexible, open mindset, I also observed that they experimented with novel ways of being (e.g., appropriating local expressions) as they became more relaxed in their surroundings and better acquainted with their host families. By choosing to spend much of their free time with their hosts, they gained more exposure to the host language and culture. Gradually, these 'social agents' displayed more sociopragmatic awareness (e.g., recognition of local norms of politeness) and became more confident communicating in English in informal, social situations. By the end of their stay, they took pride in their bilingual status, degree of independence, and more sophisticated sense of self. In most cases, their perception of English broadened while in the host culture; they drew closer to the language by using it to function and build personal relationships in their daily life. More invested in enhancing their social English, they interacted with host nationals at bus stops, in grocery stores (service encounters), as well as in their homestay. Where some of their peers saw only limitations, they recognized opportunities.

Agency certainly played a role in how the sojourn unfolded. The choices the participants made in their free time, for example, impacted on their degree of exposure to the host language and culture. This, however, does not fully explain the different learning trajectories. Sociocultural and political elements and the positioning of the Chinese sojourners in the host environment also impacted on their language and cultural learning, as predicted by Bourdieu's social theory. While all of the participants were placed with their own homestay family, not all

situations were equal. Some benefited from a warmer welcome and more access to a wider variety of social scenes (e.g., exposure to their hosts' hobbies, frequent family dinners and gatherings, relaxed conversations in the lounge and kitchen, weekend visits with relatives of their hosts, trips to the pub for a meal). In these homes, the students were treated like a member of the family and often spent their evenings chatting together, which helped deepen their bond.

By contrast, some hosts were very busy with work or personal affairs and spent little time with their 'guests'. In fact, several of the students never had a family meal or joined their hosts on outings. In these homestays, the students experienced far less exposure to cultural scenes and also had less opportunity to develop a relationship with their hosts. Not surprisingly, many of these sojourners never felt fully secure and throughout their stay were keenly aware of their newcomer status (e.g., racially different non-native speakers in a largely white neighbourhood).

The degree of mutuality and respect in the homestay proved to be a key factor in determining sojourn outcomes. From the onset, some hosts appeared to be genuinely interested in their 'guests', often asking about their interests, family background, and life in Hong Kong. These hosts expressed appreciation for Chinese culture and were willing to try Hong Kong dishes when the students prepared a special meal for them. They also tended to be more aware of and sensitive to the students' preferred identity (e.g., Hong Konger not Mainlander). Their stance helped the students feel at ease and adjust to the new environment. Not all of the sojourners experienced this degree of warmth, respect, and openness, however. A few had to repeatedly tell their hosts that they were from Hong Kong and not Japan. These participants sensed a large cultural distance between themselves and the 'large, white Westerners' and never established a personal connection with their hosts. Access, agency, and degree of mutuality all play a role in how sojourns unfold.

4. Conclusion

The ethnographic investigations of Hong Kong sojourners have revealed that the relationship between language and culture learning on stays abroad is far more complex and variable than what is often conveyed in the literature. It is naïve to assume that all students will automatically enhance their proficiency in the host language simply by

being present in the host culture. Placement in a homestay situation does not guarantee that the experience will be positive and lead to enhanced intercultural communicative competence and a broader sense of self. As Bourdieu (1991) warns, identity misalignments and hostility can arise due to incompatibility between a *habitus* and a *field*, especially when different values collide.

If students are resistant to anything new and not mentally prepared to cross cultures, the outcome can be detrimental. Without effective coping strategies, culture shock may endure and negative stereotypes of host nationals may become further entrenched (Jackson 2008; Stangor, Jonas, Stroebe, and Hewstone 1996). Students may even return home with 'a strengthened sense of national identity' (Block 2007; Jackson 2010) rather than a more open, global mindset.

What are the implications of this? To enhance the learning of student sojourners, adequate linguistic and cultural preparation is essential. Well-designed pre-sojourn programs can play a vital role by fostering the skills they need to cope with the natural ups and downs that occur when one crosses cultures. By developing a range of strategies to make sense of unfamiliar linguistic and cultural scenes, students will be better prepared to adjust to a new environment. Reducing fears and providing encouragement throughout a sojourn can nurture the independence and personal expansion of sojourners. Regular debriefing sessions can prompt deeper reflection and the refinement of language and cultural learning goals throughout a sojourn.

These ethnographic studies of Hong Kong sojourners (Jackson 2008, 2010) also raise awareness of the need for host institutions to attract and retain host families who are genuinely interested in other cultures and prepared to share their daily life with international students. This is critical as students who have supportive, respectful hosts are much more apt to experience significant personal, linguistic, and cultural growth, even during a short stay in the host culture.

Language instructors and study abroad educators who have a realistic grasp of the affordances and constraints facing sojourners in the host culture are better positioned to help second language students optimize their stay abroad. Pre-sojourn programming, on-site support, and re-entry debriefing/ sharing sessions can then be designed to enhance and extend the learning of student sojourners.

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