

JELENA PREDJEVIĆ DESPIĆ
Institute of Social Sciences, Belgrade

SOCIO-CULTURAL CONNECTEDNESS: EXPERIENCES OF FOREIGN STUDENTS IN SERBIA AND SERBIAN STUDENTS ABROAD

Abstract

This paper aims to contribute to understanding the challenges and opportunities of socio-cultural connectedness with the environments of origin and destination through the experience of international students, that is, Serbian students who have studied abroad and international students who study in Serbia. This paper's qualitative analysis relies on broader empirical research results. The results show that the respondents were faced with numerous challenges and attained different levels of socio-cultural connectedness in the process of intercultural adaptation in a transnational context, depending on their positioning in the new environment. The respondents who developed positive strategies regarding their positioning relative to other people in the discourse have demonstrated a greater determination to learn about other cultures while also considering the possibility of staying in the destination country when asked about their future. Some respondents have developed only partial socio-cultural connectedness with the new environment and/or limited competences for accepting multicultural connectedness and, from their perspective, a different way of life. Insufficient knowledge of the local language has significantly limited their opportunities for interactive positioning, stressing the need for social support in the process.

Keywords: international students, socio-cultural connectedness, host country's language, Serbia

INTRODUCTION

For the past several decades, international migration and mobility in Europe have witnessed a markedly increased number of migrants and diversity in their typology. This is mainly due to global educational processes and the ever-diverse population of international students. However, research analyses have shown that international student mobility flows are becoming increasingly disparate and centralised and that the role of institutions, that is, so-called migration industry, further exacerbates that disparity within the complex power dynamics of the process of globalisation of education (Shields, 2013).

On the other hand, international students' agency (Предојевић-Деспић, 2009), commonly defined as "the agentic power of youths to make choices and take actions in forming and pursuing their educational aspirations" (DeJaeghere, McCleari, & Josić, 2016:2) within educational discourse, should not be overlooked either. In this context, international students should be seen as a cultural asset with the potential to act as a link between the complex population of international and domestic students, as well as a link between the societies of origin and destination (Baxter, 2019; Urban & Palmer, 2014). However, Lehto and associates (Lehto, Cai, Fu, & Chen, 2014) deduce that it is precisely between these two primary groups – domestic and foreign students – responsible for building where the relationship of disconnectedness is forged, owing to linguistic and cultural barriers, parallel social lives, and the relationship based on a low-risk approach to accepting diversity. Gargano (2008) notes that existing research is mainly focused on how global flows affect student mobility trends and only seldomly considers the complex transnational movements and processes, their effect on students and the way they navigate their time and studies abroad (Gargano, 2008). This is especially true for students who are enrolled in non-English-taught study programs.

The aim of the paper is to contribute to a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities brought on by socio-cultural connectedness with the environments of origin and destination through the experiences of two groups of international students: Serbian students who have studied abroad and foreign students studying in Serbia.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In this paper, the concept of connectedness is understood as per the definition offered by Tran and Gomes (Tran & Gomes, 2017), who have shown that cultural (dis)connectedness plays an essential role in shaping and building identities, as well as international students' academic performance and aspirations during the time spent living and studying abroad (Tran & Gomes, 2017). In the introduction of their study on the identity and connectedness of international students, the authors (Tran & Gomes, 2017:7) define connectedness as a relational concept referring to both physical and virtual relationships international students hold with people, places, communities, and organisations. The research stresses that students' international connectedness is closely related to the sense of belonging to both the host and home countries. According to Tran and Gomes (Tran & Gomes, 2017:7), socio-cultural disconnectedness, both within and outside the academic context (Dang & Tran, 2017), is an equally important category; in other words, the partial or complete lack of sense of belonging to a community or value, whether

in host or home country (Tran & Gomes, 2017). In this regard, the language of the host country plays a vital role (Kennedy & Furlong, 2014).

Through their analysis of the experiences of international students in Australia and how they develop and establish connectedness during their studies abroad, Hasnain and Hajek (Hasnain & Hajek, 2022) stress the multi-faceted nature of connectedness, including social aspects, with emphasis on their network of contacts in the host country; cultural aspects, or the way international students develop their sense of belonging to cultural and social values; political and media landscape of the host country; spatial aspect, or the way they experience the environment in which they live and study; and trans-local aspect, consisting of networks and contacts allowing students to maintain the relationship between the home and host country (Hasnain & Hajek, 2022: 33).

International students' experiences of should be analysed from the perspective of transnationalism, that is, translocality and transnational social fields, which, according to Gargano (2009), focus on individuals as members of networks and communities involved in intercultural exchange, in spaces (fields) intended for exchange, organisation, and transformation of ideas and practices (Gargano, 2009). Translocality is also described as belonging to different locations simultaneously (Hasnain & Hajek, 2022) and the ways in which the origin and host communities expand through spatial mobility and interactions between the contexts of origin and destination (Conradson & McKay, 2007). Also, various papers show that being transnationally established in multiple cultures allows young talents, people with higher education, and experts to better understand the differences between the societies of origin and destination and develop innovative approaches to applying improved communication and/or transfer knowledge and skills between two environments (Predojević-Despić, 2022; Erkmen, 2018). Furthermore, such an approach may reveal the limitations and power relations in a broader context and contribute to a better understanding of how social, cultural, and academic networks of support on transnational and transcultural levels contribute to students' experience-building and self-presentation (Gargano, 2009).

In considering sociocultural connectedness, the assumptions of positioning theory are also relevant, as they examine how individuals perceive and describe themselves (reflexively) and others with regard to rights and responsibilities emerging from and through interaction (Harré et al., 2009; Davies & Harré, 1990). At the same time, the framework of positioning theory makes room for the interpretation of fluid, dynamic, and contextually dependent development over a certain period, which may lead to repositioning (Kayi-Aydar, 2014). Introducing the positioning theory into an examination of intercultural (dis)connectedness of diverse groups of international students, as is the case with this paper, is essential because it may reveal how our target groups position themselves over time and

in the context of the country of origin, country of destination, and the so-called “space of possibles” (Marginson, 2014; Dang & Tran, 2017). The results interpreted here are part of a broader research involving international students. The basis of the research is a thematic analysis of data collected from three focus groups and 19 semi-structured in-depth interviews.¹

SOCIO-CULTURAL CONNECTEDNESS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS – RESULTS ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Cultural (dis)connectedness

In their statements, the respondents considered their connectedness with cultures of origin and destination, and the relationship towards the language of the host environment, positioning themselves reflexively with regard to their current identities.

A participant in a focus group described her one-year specialist training abroad as a great success that profoundly influenced her identity and positioning even after she returned to Serbia, her home country.

“I had a chance not only to spend time in that University, to study with those people, spend time in a different manner than here, and I had a chance to travel around that country, to meet the culture of many people... It was certainly a phenomenal success for me and an experience that shaped me and brought me much more confidence.” (F, 37, USA)

A medical training student from Syria spent a year in Serbia. She says she is proud to have joined the Serbian government’s “World in Serbia” scholarship program. According to her, Syria sends only its best students to Serbia. She describes Serbia as culturally close to Syria, noting that even before her visit, she felt a great sense of belonging. The main reason for this was her being familiar with Serbia and Yugoslavia since primary school when she learned about the Non-Alligned Movement and the relations among developing countries.

“I have like I know like a new style of life that I just know for years and go with them. I loved to listen about Serbia. It’s like, I think it’s the center of the world packing in coming back in time when it was like Yugoslavia, I was interested in Yugoslav culture and history. I learned a lot of about Tito, on the culture of Non-Alligned Movement. It was in base grade. Yeah. It was like the leaders from the

¹ Detailed methodological explanations and respondents’ socio-demographic characteristics can be found in Chapter 1 of this publication.

Arab world, from many developing countries that they were together. Yeah... So, it was like something in the center of the world. It is the same tradition. So, I am here, you know, in person." (F, 23, Serbia)

However, a respondent who spent a year in Hungary and had little touch with the host culture felt largely isolated from the new cultural environment. In adjusting to the new environment, she relied largely on a good friend from her home country, who was also her classmate and roommate, the fact that made her feel less lonely, as previously noted in a study by Sawir and associates (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland & Ramia, 2008). From the perspective of her current identity and the future she imagines for herself, she doesn't see herself as part of the culture of her host country.

"The only thing I miss is the warmth... Individualist culture, every man for himself, that's how I see it. Friends are not too eager to help you, they don't socialise here as much as we do... We are used to sitting for a coffee for two or three hours. Here it's not like that. I live with my best friend, so we still do it, but not with Hungarians. This stuff may not seem that important at first, but it certainly may be a decisive factor for everyday life. You'd simply be happier somewhere else other than here specifically." (F, 23, Hungary)

Conversely, a respondent from Argentina, who is in her third year of doctoral studies, has developed mechanisms for navigating the new environment that would lead her to positive adaptation (Hasnain & Hajek, 2022; Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008). She sees connecting with a new environment as a process. She believes in gradually introducing the elements and values of a new culture and getting used to ever-weaker connectedness with elements of the culture of origin. Whenever she goes through a rough period due to missing her old lifestyle, family, and friends in her home country, she tries to deal with them as transient crises; otherwise, she would have had a very hard time connecting with the new environment, especially during the initial phase of her stay in Serbia. She believes that positive strategies of adaptation and connection are crucial, especially during the initial phases of one's stay in the destination country. However, the research into these aspects of international student migrations is scarce (Smith & Khawaja, 2011)

"...I think for migrating you have to focus more on the things that you will discover in your country and not the things that you leave behind because if not, it's terrible. So maybe instead of thinking of the food that you miss, like thinking, okay, I will discover here that I have a new favorite food that I didn't try yet and that type of things... and maybe that you have friends that you didn't

meet yet ... because if you really start thinking about all the things back home you get depressed and it's terrible." (F, 30, Serbia)

One may, however, develop connectedness with the destination culture in some segments while remaining disconnected from it in others, resulting in the sense of not belonging to the host country (Dang & Tran, 2017), both in terms of reflexive and interactive positioning. A doctoral student from Pakistan thinks of herself as highly successful. She has high educational expectations and wishes to position herself as a young researcher with a developed academic portfolio as soon as possible. In this regard, she wishes she could make more and faster progress. However, despite expressing the need to improve her competences to her mentors, she is left with a frustrated ambition. Therefore, she sees her future in a more economically developed country. Her example proves that unmet educational expectations add to the stress of adjusting to a new environment (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). However, not meeting her needs has led the respondent to develop a partial socio-cultural connectedness by accepting the insufficient academic stimulus as an immediate inevitability and recognising that it's important to slow down and do self-care instead of burying herself in work and focusing solely on a career. This shows that the process of building connectedness and retaining the sense of not belonging may coexist and develop simultaneously, in line with the findings by Dang and Tran (Dang & Tran, 2017). Phinney's research (Phinney, 1990) into the bi-dimensional concept of cultural identity, which allows individuals to identify with both their original and destination countries independently, also contributes to explaining this aspect of socio-cultural (dis)connectedness.

"It changed my way of thinking towards people after coming here. That you have to be peaceful. I mean, you cannot force things on them. They will do the things on their own whenever they feel like doing it. So, I cannot force them. ... No matter how much pressure you give them on them, like, I have these deadlines, they will do their things when they have their perfect mood or whatever, and they want. What I learned from here is self-care. The priorities for yourself (...) You can see, people good lifestyle I have observed here which has impacted me." (F, 29, Serbia)

Social (dis)connectedness

Relationship-building among international students, as well as between foreign and domestic students, and between foreign students and other categories of domestic population, contribute to social connectedness in the destination country (Hasnain & Hajek, 2022; Tran & Gomes, 2017; Sawir et al., 2008). However, the

results of multiple research papers (Tran & Gomes, 2017; Lehto et al., 2014; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Zhou et al., 2008; Sawir et al., 2008) show that international students face various challenges and barriers when making friends and acquaintances, especially with the local population. One reason for this is the differences between individualist and collectivist cultures (Lehto et al., 2014; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Zhou et al., 2008), the western and eastern hemispheres, that is, the global north and south. Given that collectivist cultures boast strong relationships with family members and friends, their absence in the country of origin may present itself as a burden or a barrier to the process of adaptation to individualist cultures of the global north, where they usually emigrate for studies (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

A focus group participant, who returned to Serbia following a three-year master's degree study program in England, describes the impact that the shift in communication and his relationship with friends and family in his home country had on his decision to return and his positioning in building (dis)connectedness with the host country. The findings of research into highly educated returnees to Serbia (Predojević-Despić, 2022) are similar, showing that, in their strategies of social positioning, the respondents defined the extent to which some elements of host countries' cultures have impacted their decision to return to their home countries.

"In northern Montenegro, we are pretty close to our families, I have a wider circle of friends and while you are away you intensively maintain those connections and often wish you could come here (...) There (in London, A/N) you feel like a stranger, as much as it's international, you still feel like a stranger. Not a single English friend, they're cold. Especially regarding career advancement, there are limits." (M, 37, England)

A student who spent ten years in Graz, Austria, where she completed her master's degree studies, failed to develop a sense of belonging to the destination country despite having built a strong connection with the environment and the city. She chose Graz because she liked the city, and over time, she managed to feel safe, a feeling that should serve as a critical factor in developing a sense of belonging to the destination country (Hasnain & Hajek, 2022). Also, she wanted to experience living and studying abroad. She said she was ready to renounce her citizenship during the application process. However, it wasn't until she spent some time abroad before she realised she wasn't ready to take that step.

"I've always been open, like I was interested in different things, but only after going abroad did I realise how closed off I was for certain things (...) When you start to receive or identify yourself with another culture, that's when you start noticing whether and how fast you can become estranged (...) what you really

had at home (...) what's important to you. And then, at a lightning speed, priorities start to sort out." (F, 33, Austria)

These two examples show that during the process of academic internationalisation, international students are not always ready to accept multiculturalism, that is, to transform their attachment to the cultural values of their home country. This is corroborated by a finding that many international students tend to accept what they perceive as similar to their previous lifestyle (Beech, 2019).

Still, a doctoral student from Argentina believes certain similarities between the cultures of her home and host countries, such as being open and cordial, outweigh considerable differences between those cultures. Apart from time, building connectedness with the local population and Serbian socio-cultural values required a positive attitude in the process of interactive positioning in and through the discourse. It was only after her interactions with colleagues from different European countries that she realised she was better equipped to develop interpersonal relationships in the Balkans and Serbia than in Western Europe, that is, how close she was to the host country's culture. Being determined in her endeavour was of great help, which according to Hasnain and Hajek, is an important prerequisite to getting to know a new culture better (Yang, Zhang & Sheldon, 2018; Hasnain & Hajek, 2022). Consequently, or rather causally, in imagining the future, she can see herself staying in Serbia upon completing her studies.

"We also like to talk randomly with people. You are there in the bus station and people are talking to you literally out of the blue. That happens also a lot, like both in Argentina and here (in Serbia, A/N), but are very sociable in that sense, which for example I didn't find in western Europe... They don't talk among each other unless it's strictly necessary, which was a shock, I really felt it personally and I was offended ... The only people that I made small talk it was either the Latino migrants or the Balkan migrants, so they are the same." (F, 30, Serbia)

Social support is essential for stimulating adaptation to a new environment. Various research papers have shown that limiting socialisation to fellow nationals is important for the adaptation process but not enough to prevent loneliness, a feeling many international students get (Sawir et al., 2008). On the other hand, introducing other international students into one's network of acquaintances and having support from the host environment is crucial (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Berry, 2005).

Before coming to Serbia for her master's studies, a respondent from Capo Verde completed her undergraduate studies in China. Although she had excellent accommodation in a student dormitory in China, she had virtually no contact with domestic students. She says she doesn't mind far poorer student accommodation

in Serbia. On the contrary, she is happy to live with domestic students in the same dormitory and share the same space, challenges, and experiences. She shares a room with a girl of a different faith and culture. At first, she says she had difficulty adapting to the new circumstances, even though they were both fluent in English. Over time, however, they established a close friendship, which served as much-needed social support for both.

"I have a roommate from Iran. And imagine, I'm African and she's from the Middle East. So, we have so much culture differences. She's Muslim, I'm Christian. And her routine is different from mine, but I never found someone that fits with me so well." (F, 27, Serbia)

The example above shows how the respondent's determination to accept diversity – to share a room and experience everyday life with a girl of a different religion and considerably different cultural habits – has improved her adaption process and influenced a positive attitude towards the host environment. It's worth mentioning that her determination was influenced by several factors, such as trans-local connectedness of experience from her origin country and the countries where she previously studied (Hasnain & Hajek, 2022), as well as her decision to pursue studying abroad again, a factor that Yang and associates' research has found to be of great importance for coping with culture shock among students going through the process of adapting to a new environment (Yang et al., 2018). Namely, she has become aware of the need for closer contact with students from other cultures because she hadn't had much opportunity for closer contact in her previous experiences. Her decision to emigrate once again in pursuit of international master's degree, following her undergraduate studies in China and a brief work experience upon returning to her home country, was according to her additionally strongly motivated by far more favourable professional positioning in business circles of her home country.

The role of language of the host country in socio-cultural (dis)connectedness

The example of the student from Capo Verde shows that being fluent in English is an important resource for smoother adaptation and establishing social connectedness, especially with other international students. However, learning the language of the host country offers far greater opportunities for adaptation in both socio-cultural and educational sense (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

The results of the research conducted by Poyrazli and Kavanaugh (Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006) show that lower levels of English proficiency are associated not only with poorer academic performance among foreign students in the

US but also with the overall outcomes of socio-cultural integration. At the same time, this is one of the main challenges for international students (Trice, 2003), especially if they don't know the language of the new environment very well or if they never learned it before their studies abroad, as is the case with foreign students of the World in Serbia program, who attend Serbian-taught classes. Furthermore, Kayi-Aydar (Kayi-Aydar, 2014) shows that students' positioning strategies may either stimulate or make host language learning opportunities and experiences more difficult.

However, there is little research into the challenges posed by international academic mobility in non-English-speaking environments, studying in a language that isn't considered a world language, or interactive positioning and coping strategies foreign students adopt when adapting to new environments.

The story of a doctoral student in Germany shows that reflexive positioning, that is, the decision to master the German language on his own even before he emigrated, greatly facilitated his adaptation. It also allowed him to apply for and join a scientific project that fit his ambitions and professional orientation.

"It was very helpful that I have for purely recreational reasons studied German before. I studied it a lot. In 2015, I passed the C1 level exam at the Goethe Institute without a particular need. I just wanted to learn that language. This was very helpful because the Germans prefer to speak German. In the Netherlands everybody speaks English. From a child who's 7 to a granny who's 85. Here is a different story, people like to speak in their own language, and it was very helpful that I learned it before, it helped with emigration." (M, 30, Germany)

On the other hand, a student who had undergone undergraduate studies and later earned a master's degree in Germany didn't speak German upon arrival. Therefore, numerous administrative procedures were an additional source of stress and negatively impacted the student's intercultural interaction. Being faced with administrative and linguistic barriers, however, shows that social and academic structures where foreign students' intercultural relations occur may very well act as obstacles to their active engagement and shape their intercultural relations and connectedness (Tran & Pham, 2015).

"They have institutions where foreigners come, where they have a first encounter with Germany, and they are forbidden by law to speak English... I ask do you speak English. He says: I do, but I'm not allowed to. I said but this is an institution and an office for foreigners who came here from who knows where, how do you imagine this. They shrug (...) It's a big problem that when you need something, there is no translator. Gestures, waving hands (...) There were

situations when someone would say okay, let's speak in English. In some crucial situations the answer was – no.” (M, 34, Germany)

Insufficient knowledge of the host country's language limits the opportunities for interactive positioning and engaging in everyday communication with the local population, adding to the feeling of loneliness in the new environment. A respondent cited an example of Serbian students in Austria who hung out mostly among themselves. As a result, their mastering of the German language was greatly hindered, creating additional sources of stress (Smith & Khawaja, 2011) and interfering with the adaptation process and the possibility of connecting with the host environment.

“First and foremost is to learn the language. To get rid of our people. I ran from them like a bat out of hell until I started speaking properly, because I knew, it's something I noticed and thought it was devastating for every student, the fear of leaving your comfort zone (...) It's a new environment for you, new society, everything is new, a new system and what inevitably happens are cliques, but those are not popularity cliques but nationality cliques.” (F, 33, Austria)

A focus group participant hailing from Suriname is a holder of the World in Serbia scholarship program. He believes that in order to better integrate into his Serbian-taught medical studies, he should considerably improve his knowledge of the Serbian language. The reason for this has less to do with staying on top of classes and more with the need to have more lively and complex interactions with the domestic population and during regular practical sessions. An additional motivation is the need to understand his fellow Serbian colleagues better. As highlighted by Kennedy and Furlong (Kennedy & Furlong, 2014), this is precisely the positioning that contributes to acquiring better intercultural competences and connecting with the culture and people in the host country – through an attempt to understand the semantics of the Serbian language.

“I was able to learn from the culture and that is the reason why I can understand Serbian a little bit better than before ... There's a lot of sarcasm within the Serbian language which is hard to understand. So sometimes they say A, but might mean B. So I had to, I wanted to know why, and I wanted to really try to live and understand from the perspective of a Serbian. And that also allowed me to actually talk not only with Serbians from my faculty, also with Serbians on the street.” (M, 26, Serbia)

CONCLUSION

Thanks to the globalisation of academic education, the ever-increasing population of international students has the opportunity not only to improve their human capital and competences but also to exchange ideas, enrich their social capital, and build connectedness with other cultures through cross-cultural communication in transnational social fields.

This research confirms these claims through a qualitative analysis of the experience of international students – whether Serbian students who have studied abroad or foreign students who are studying in Serbia. However, the results also point to considerable challenges foreign students face in the process of intercultural adaptation and socio-cultural connectedness, especially if they take up studies in non-English speaking countries or if their study programs are not taught in English.

In that sense, our respondents' narratives show that intercultural adaptation and connecting are continuous processes influenced by various factors, including but not limited to individual factors (socio-demographic features, expectations and communication skills, including linguistic competences, social resources, and others), the role of family, the length of their stay in the host country, their previous migration and academic experiences, and opportunities for making contact with the local population (Hasnain & Hajek, 2022). In this regard, the respondents' ability to establish social and cultural connectedness with the new environment also varied, as suggested by the findings of other research papers (Hasnain & Hajek, 2022; Tran & Pham, 2015; Kayi-Aydar, 2014; Gu, Schweisfurth & Day, 2009).

Furthermore, the findings of this research suggest a considerable interdependence between linguistic competences and individuals' identities, that is, how they position themselves and others in interpersonal relations and the process of adaptation, as well as the multidimensional connecting with the host environment (Shi, 2023; Lendák-Kabók et al., 2020; Anderson, 2009). For instance, some of our respondents positioned themselves at the periphery of the host society, leaving them feeling disconnected from the host culture. This is especially true for foreign students in Serbia and Serbian students enrolled in non-English-taught study programs. At the same time, their self-positioning has prevented them from proactively engaging in reciprocal cross-cultural interactions, as shown by the results of other research papers dealing with international students (Tran & Pham, 2015; Berry, 2005).

The results of the research lead us to conclude that facilitating cross-cultural communication in the host country is vital for international students and their learning process, their adaptation, and establishing connectedness with the new environment (Tran & Pham, 2015). In this regard, our findings point to recommendations

from other research papers, which emphasise that the availability of social support and favourable conditions for establishing contacts and connectedness among international students are closely associated with the prospect of a positive change (Gu, Schweisfurth & Day, 2009) and that the better understanding of the influence international academic mobility has on students – especially if their study programs are taught in languages they weren't familiar with before migration – should be key to improving the academic internationalisation policy (Gargano, 2008).

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