



“Would they pick a rusty, dusty and ugly nail like me?” – Creation of a new identity in a target culture

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between personal identity in a native culture and perceptions about the types of identity that will be valued in a target culture. It was a qualitative case study of a Vietnamese college student who had completed one year of university in Vietnam and was beginning the process of applying for admission to undergraduate programs within United States universities. The student, in the process of writing personal essays to include in the application package, attempted to create a new identity based on speculation about how various personal characteristics would be assessed by people in a position of power in the target culture.

E-mails and initial essay drafts, reflecting multiple attempts at choosing a suitable topic and approach for these essays, were analyzed to determine which personal characteristics were perceived as being valuable in the target culture. The paper focuses on the student's efforts to evaluate the worth of his current identity based on its perceived value in the target culture, while not entirely dismissing the relative value of the same characteristics in the current culture. It was clear that although the student had been quite successful based on his personal accomplishments in his native culture, he attempted to reinvent himself based on his perception of an identity likely to be successful in the new context. There was a clear conflict between the real and the created identity, but characteristics vital in the native culture, “modesty” in particular, were adhered to even as other hypotheses about the target culture showed clear differences in worth.

Key words: *identity, discourse, culture, cross-cultural, narrative*

Introduction

Ochs and Capps (1996) describe personal narrative as potentially taking many possible forms, and as simultaneously being “born out of experience” and “giving shape to experience” (p.20). They state that, “in this sense, narrative and self are inseparable” (p.20). In addition, they believe that narratives are essential resources “in the struggle to bring experiences to conscious awareness” (p.21).

Narratives certainly are “versions of reality” and these semiotic analyses of self-become more complex when produced in a cross-cultural context. Attempting to describe oneself to an audience with a different cultural framework makes the efforts of trying to achieve self-awareness within a known context even more complex.

Triandis (1989) designates three different aspects of the self – public, private and collective – and states that, “people sample these three kinds of selves with different probabilities, in different cultures, and that has specific consequences for social behavior” (p.507). He defines the self as, “an active agent that promotes differential sampling, processing, and evaluation of information from the environment, and thus leads to differences in social behavior” (p.506).

Goffman (1958), in describing the process of giving information about oneself to individuals that one is unacquainted with, states that individuals wish to express themselves in such a way as to lead observers to “act voluntarily” in accordance with their own plans (p.4). People wishing to convey a



particular impression “play a part”, implicitly requesting “observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them (p.17).

Although sometimes the performers might or might not be “fully taken in” by their own acts. Goffman describes the “mask” put on by the individuals as representing the “conception we have formed of ourselves” (p.19). Gee (2001), But regardless of the intention of the act, it still relies on the effect created in the minds of the reader(s) in discussing the importance of discourse in identity, writes about D-identities (discursive identities) as those created by the “discourse or dialogue of other people” (p.103). The integration of both global and local identities is required in the professional identity creation process of international students (Tubin & Lapidot, 2008),

The college application essay is such an example of identity creation. By definition, this composition is a performance aimed at observers with no previous knowledge of the author/applicant. According to the College Board, the “students’ college essay is their opportunity to reveal their best qualities and to show an admission committee what makes them stand out from other applicants.”¹

The importance of the creation of an identity is highlighted in the suggestions that the essay “reveals something important about you that your grades and test scores can’t - your personality. It can give admission officers a sense of who you are.”²

College admission essays are a genre that is foreign to Vietnam, where admission to higher education is based solely on test scores.

Methodology

Case study

This paper is an individual case study, relying on a qualitative analysis of one student’s essays. Although the findings are only related to this individual, I believe that the cultural and genre issues raised are relevant to other international applicants to higher education within the United States. In addition to my review, these essays were analyzed by another reviewer from the United States – a colleague who is a professor with experience reviewing admissions essays from foreign students, mainly at the graduate level. She agreed to read the student’s essays to evaluate how she thought they would be received from U.S. college admission officers. Her comments follow the essay descriptions.

The participant

Quốc (pseudonym), a former student of mine, is 19 years old and currently in his second year at a private university located near Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. He recently became interested in transferring to a school overseas, with a particular interest in academic institutions in the United States. He did not have previous experience with American-style application processes, and wrote me an e-mail asking me for help with the essay portion of his application.

Ethical concern

His original e-mail stated:

I am trying to compose a self-portrait essay that is used as a supplement in my application form for international schools (As I have told you before, Vietnamese universities hold a national examination to choose students for their own school, and we do not need to write any essay). I want the school admission committee to know more about me through this story.

The essays he produced as part of his quest for a “self-portrait” were illustrations of his construction of self, a performance attempting to create an identity for himself which would encourage the observers –

¹<http://professionals.collegeboard.com/guidance/applications/essay>

²<https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/get-in/essays/8-tips-for-crafting-your-best-college-essay>



the admissions board – to respond in a positive fashion and judge him worthy of admission to the educational institution.

There were at least two potentially conflicting main goals for the identity presentation in these essays. First, the student wished to create a statement reflecting the characteristics which he felt that he did (or should) possess based on his own cultural values and second, he attempted to reflect the characteristics he predicted were likely to be valued by the reader in the target culture in the United States. There were two factors making these judgments particularly complex. First, there were the well-recognized differences between Asian and Western cultural worldviews, and second, there were the characteristics the student felt actually described him that were different from the perceived Vietnamese cultural ideal. In the latter case, the presentation of self was deliberately calculated to give a particular impression. Therefore, writing the essay is a calculated expression of the applicant's self-interest "to control the conduct of the others, especially their responsive treatment" (Goffman, 1958, p.3).

The portrayals of main differences between Asian cultures (including Vietnam) and Western cultures generally focus on collectivist versus individualist cultural values. These essays certainly reflect collectivism, but also show the interplay of collectivist and individualistic characteristics.

Hong (2001) stated that research into self-description between Asians and North Americans revealed that when North Americans are asked to describe themselves, they mention more "abstract personality traits (e.g., I am honest) and private autonomous self-descriptions (e.g., I am happy) than do Asians." Hong found that Asians, "make reference to more concrete, context specific characteristics (e.g., I am smart at school) or public, social descriptions (I am a university student)" (p.252).

The issues of cross-cultural implications of international students have been the subject of research. Johnsrud (1993) explored the effect of graduate study abroad on careers of Korean university faculty members. Tubin and Lapidot (2006) studied the construction of identity among Israeli graduate students pursuing their studies at research universities in the USA. The aim of this paper is to investigate a student's attempted creation of identity before immersion in the target culture.

I will focus on two of Quốc's essays and some selected e-mails for this paper, using them to illustrate some of the major cultural differences faced by this student in his striving to create a new acceptable and appropriate identity. The first essay, entitled "Journey of The Little Nail" was a metaphorical self-portrait, describing the efforts of anthropomorphic nail to get to a factory where he could join other building materials and contribute towards the completion of a project. The second, entitled "Travails From My Harvard-Dream" was a (mostly) fictional account of efforts made by a student trying to raise funds for his education.

Findings and discussion

After reading his first drafts of these two essays, I was appalled at how poorly they were constructed. The primary problem was not the grammatical or semantic flaws; the tone and subject matter was completely inappropriate for the stated purpose. I knew Quốc as a good student, but would have dismissed him as completely unsuitable for college admissions if the essays constituted my sole knowledge of his aptitude. There was such a large disconnect between the student I knew and the portrayal in the essays that I asked a colleague with experience reviewing admissions essays from foreign students, mainly at the graduate level, to read Quốc's essays to evaluate how she thought they would be received from US college admission officers. Her comments follow the essay descriptions.

The student' self-portrait 1

Collectivist

In the introduction to the first essay draft, the student wrote a story in which he, as the narrator - the "little nail" - becomes separated from a group headed towards work at a factory, and attempted to reflect the student's Vietnamese values. He began, "While the truck is swiftly rolling along the rough road winding of the hill, my siblings: spoons, bowls, irons and I are euphorically talking about our new true life-work and contribution."



He then detailed his subsequent efforts to be reunited with the other workers and become a productive part of a group. His self-characterization as “a nail” was quite modest, seemingly inconsequential and unexceptional. However, Quốc attempted to create a sympathetic identity for his alter ego, describing the nail’s emotions at finding himself lost, writing, “Whenever my head was sporadically preoccupied with these thoughts, the maroon feelings took hold of me, my eyes became puffy and a hot tear rolled down along my cheeks....”

The reflection of collectivism is clear in the attempt by the writer to place himself in a familial situation by referring to his fellow parts as “siblings”, and in his focus on contribution to a group goal. When the “little nail” gets bounced out of the truck, the reaction of, “NO..o..o, the day I jubilantly work in the factory is now just a dream” demonstrates the student’s ambition, and his desire to be part of working towards a goal. The idea of “jubilant” factory work is, again, a reflection of both a collectivist mentality and the significance of blue-collar work, not generally valued in western, individualistic cultures.

Perseverance

The desire to portray perseverance is also reflected in the essay, as the “nail” narrated, “Day by day, I dragged along the endless road in the hope of finding the factory.”

Seeing a young girl, part of group of children on a school trip collecting scrap metal, the nail “used all [his] strength to jump from the mound to hit her sandals, and upon hitting the ground, I could clearly hear the heart drumming in my chest. Stars fluttered around my head; however, I saw somebody’s hand gently touched me.” The efforts made by the nail once again indicated the value placed on family and contributions to a whole. Described discussion among the scrap metal included a statement from “Uncle Screw” whispering, “You guys know what? We’re goanna the factory tomorrow!”

Nature centricity

Quốc also wished to display a Vietnamese value he called “nature-centricity”, demonstrating the “beauty of humans and other things based on the flawless beauty and perfect structure of nature.” He stated that this philosophy was the main goal of the following paragraph, describing the little nail’s experiences after getting bounced out of the truck taking him to the factory:

After 385 days of travails, I was for the first time listening, feeling and looking at the beautiful, bright, clear scenery around me. I tuned to the sound of the birds singing and chirping away as if they were creating a song. I felt the light breeze coming down through the trees, rustling their leaves. I spotted the wild cherry blossoms in full bloom as the sun shimmered between the passing clouds. Green palm trees were swaying rhythmically in the breeze as if they were saying goodbye to me. I turned back and exuberantly waved my hand to them.

Quốc seemed to recognize the purpose of the essay, to describe his identity in such a way that showed his suitability for admission to a U.S. university. When he was asked about his goals for his first essay, he stated that he wanted to show the admissions committee that he was “creative, imaginative, cooperative and humble.” He emphasized that his essay was full of Communist/Vietnamese values. He stated, “As you can see, the essay tells the story of the nail who is eager to get back to the factory and work with other people, although his contribution is small.”

Although he indicated that he was trying to create an appropriate identity, the writing was inconsistent with the genre as generally understood.

Violation of genre

In their analysis of blog genres, Rulyova and Zagibalov (2012) write that, “genres are defined by both form and social context, and bloggers actively construct their online discursive identities through their choice of a specific genre” (p. 1529). In her definition of genre as social action, Miller (1984) states, “that a rhetorical sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish” (p. 151) The student application genre has rules for what is considered to be an appropriate construction of identity, and has a very specific goal. There are certainly a wide range of satisfactory options for handling the genre, but Quốc’s “little nail” essay violated some of the most basic rules.

My colleague had an extremely strong negative reaction to this writing. Her first response was visceral, saying that the tone of the essays was, “quite odd and read like propaganda.” She felt that



the writer was being “manipulative” - not just that the student wasn’t being honest and straightforward, but that he also violated the cooperative principle by errors in quality and quantity. She stated that,

He didn’t provide the information that was asked for. He didn’t produce what would usually be considered an essay; he wrote a children’s story. The violation of genre would have been acceptable if acknowledged and explained, but this wasn’t the case. He didn’t write an essay as it is usually defined by the college essay genre, and his failure to explain this deviation illustrated that he didn’t understand the nature of his violations.

She thought that the metaphorical essay would only be acceptable if it included a direct statement of his reasoning, stating, “If he views himself as a “little nail”, he needed to explain why the university would want such an object. “She was especially offended by the fact that he, “tried to pull at my heartstrings rather than appeal to my intellect.”

The definition of oneself as being “nature-centric”, and the subsequent reflection of this characteristic in an autobiographical narrative would clearly be an unusual inclusion in the college essay genre within the United States. It is somewhat different than the usual concept of collectivism, which usually refers to one’s position within a group of other humans. The inclusion of this section in a college essay is likely to be somewhat confusing to the Western reader, as this attitude of placing nature in a central position to individual identity is very different from its position in a Western value system. However, it is a clear statement of Vietnamese cultural values.

One theme running through the essay is the concept of the narrator being a small, modest part of a greater whole, and this is consistent with the goal of the student to express his self-described Communist values. For example, when the nail successfully reaches the factory, it states (as narrator), “We will manufacture our products, which will travel ubiquitously to serve the beloved country. Inside every single product, there is a small contribution of mine: the little nail.”

The student’ self-portrait 2

When advised that the “little nail” parable might be too much of a metaphor and too abstract for an audience of Western college admissions officers, the student wrote a second essay entitled “Travails from My Harvard-Dream”. This was a more direct attempt to create an identity, and was especially interesting as it took a real incident from Quốc’s past and changed it to be more consistent with both collectivist values and with the assumed individualistic values of the target culture. This essay reflected Quốc’s attempt to reinvent himself based on how his actual identity differed from his perceptions of a Vietnamese cultural ideal.

Different interpretation of dependence/independence

Beginning with a list of some of the fees required to be paid as part of the application process, in the essay Quốc then began an internal dialogue about how to raise the \$250 needed for SAT tests and application fees, writing, “Letting out a long sigh of despair and I again quiescently stared at the huge amount of the fee. ‘Fee Waiver maybe’ I pondered, “Can’t rely on it for my whole life. No schools would accept a dependent student.” This opening tried to establish the narrator as independent and self-reliant, presumed characteristics of the target culture. However, it is unlikely that any Western student would be at all uncertain about the ethics involved in accepting a fee waiver, especially when faced with the prospect of funding 4 years of an education. In addition, the stated belief that a university would consider an applicant for financial aid as “dependent” shows a basic misunderstanding of the concept of individualism as usually reflected in U.S. academic culture.

Self-reinvention

The solution arrived at in the narrative was consistent with the student’s Vietnamese experience – investing all of his savings (\$27) in vegetables to sell at the local market. The idea of starting one’s own business is actually quite common in Vietnam’s entrepreneurial society. However, the story continues with chronicling his lack of success in this endeavor:

I still vividly recalled the feelings of having something stuck inside my larynx, my face turned red while my heart was striking 200 beats per minute whenever prospective customers stopped at my place. Body language: nodding and shaking was my dominant means of communication to customers as my tongue was stiff and my lips forgot their ability to pronounce.

My colleague, after reading this section, stated that it sent, “shivers down my spine. If he’s getting that upset about a vegetable, I would question his ability to function in the stress of an academic environment.” On the student’s part, the failure was attributed to lack of courage, but he then attempted to overcome the situation by approaching a likely customer:

After the first week, I realized how foolish and childish I was when practicing such sedentary methods and letting humiliation defeat me so easily. Turning over a new leaf, I brought my goods and approached a middle-aged lady “I know that you’re finding fresh vegetables for your meal. Could you please kindly take a look at my products?” She asked me in a mellifluous voice “Good job, boy. How much?” I thanked her profusely and exuberantly put two gold staining VND5,000 coins into my pocket.

After his success in earning his first 10,000 VND (approximately \$.50) and presumably selling the remainder of his produce, the narrator continued his story with his return home. Quốc once again invoked the idea of “nature-centricity” with his poetic description of “hay-liked aroma of the crumpled paper money” he received.

The essay was an attempt to invoke the student’s journey of self-discovery, motivated by what he presumed were the ideals of capitalism and American individualism:

It was my Harvard-dream that exhorted me to get over my humiliation and sell vegetables all along. I have realized how profoundly I am shaped by my Harvard-dream. It has helped me to become independent, confident and competent.

Knowing that this student was considerably more intelligent than this story suggested the complete lack of logic shown by this anecdote made me write him to question its veracity. Quốc’s subsequent admission indicated:

This essay is a true story, to some extent. I did sell vegetables in the market which I depicted. Yet, the reasons I began selling vegetables were completely different from what I said in the introduction that initially I intended to catch the attention of the Committee.

The true story of the vegetable selling took place when Quốc, who was born into a wealthy family, was in 10th grade. One day, he bragged to his friends how easy it was to make money, and was challenged on this assertion. In a subsequent e-mail to me, he described how one of his friends told him to, “Prove it. In 1 month, you have to earn 1 million VND (around \$60) accounting profit because it’s easy to you Mr. Pompous.”

Quốc described who he was at the time of this incident, saying, “I was in grade 10, very young, very green and very confident as I was always the very best student.” He agreed to the challenge, although he admitted that, “Later, I would like to give it a second thought, but I wanted to keep my face as the head student. Thus, I decided to carry out my promises”

The true result of this challenge was, “After 1 month, I in fact only earn 900,000 VND and my friends made fun of me.” The real story actually demonstrated a much greater sense of individualism than the fantasy version. Although collectivism was still shown in the student’s concern about “face”, the importance of maintaining one’s position within a hierarchical social structure would be familiar to any U.S. high school student. The rewriting of this anecdote actually eliminated some of the characteristics which showed distinctiveness and entrepreneurial spirit.

When asked why he changed the details of this story, Quốc replied,

I did not want to share the real story because I feared that the admission committee would not accept me. I became a loser because I was so competitive, pompous and over-confident about myself. I hoped the admission committee could see through my fraud story that I was mature, courageous, confident, independent, and competent. I thought the admission committee wanted to see the above characters, thus I decided to change the details into the fictional story.

Although the student believed that he was altering history to establish an identity more suitable to the admissions committee, these changes were actually a reflection of the importance of collectivism and Vietnamese culture. The changes from the reality of a wealthy family to that of a poor one revealed a belief that affluence might be a negative trait. Quốc modified the foundation of the act of selling vegetables from true youthful arrogance - inconsistent with a collectivist society - into a fantasy of

overcoming one's shortcomings to achieve success, a goal consistent with Vietnamese cultural values.

Violation of genre

My colleague also had a negative reaction to this essay. She stated that, "using metaphor rather than being direct might be appropriate in fiction, but the expectation is the college admission essay is nonfiction, that the student will level with the admissions office about why he wanted to come to the University and what makes him capable of functioning in the environment." Instead of achieving the student's goal of appearing "confident", she stated that some of the "style issues made him come across as pretentious." In fact, Quốc did freely use a thesaurus, choosing some unusual adjectives and adverbs such as "*mellifluous* voice", "*quiescently*" stared and "*exuberantly* put two [coins]" without having the cultural understanding of implications of pretentiousness in the context.

My colleague was especially disturbed by the student's description of his parents' reaction upon his return from the market, "I would never forget ... my parents' warm-hearted voice 'You're ready for Harvard' while a tear rolled along their crow's-feet." In his attempt to demonstrate the Vietnamese respect for the elderly, he once again abandoned intellectual arguments for emotional appeals. My colleague called this, "inappropriately histrionic or dramatic", and was taken aback by the inclusion of the parents' opinion of their son's readiness, stating, "How would they know and why should the admissions committee be influenced by their judgment?" In addition, she felt that this statement might invoke some stereotypical problems that Universities are wary of – inappropriate involvement or influence of parents. This is a clear example of how a cultural disconnect might result in serious misinterpretations.

The final act of redefining identity to fit in with a target culture came when I received an e-mail from someone named "Victor Kingsley". Although I didn't know anyone by this name, I decided to glance at it before deleting it, only to find that it was from Quốc. As our names are central to our identity, I asked him why he felt it necessary to change his. He had three main reasons. First, he stated that his real name was difficult for even a Vietnamese to pronounce, and foreigners would find it impossible. Second, that there has long been a trend for Vietnamese to use English names to show that they are well educated, and fashionable.

Third, he desired a Western name so that he could, "become a part of the Western society." He wondered why, "God chose the U.S as the Promising Country but not Vietnam?" Hoping that he, "could become a bridge between the U.S and Vietnam", he had, "an illusion that after 4 years reading books about America, I could understand the Western society."

All of these reasons show a willingness to subjugate one's own identity to attain the goal of becoming part of the target culture, and a belief that the foreign culture was somehow better than one's own. However, the story went on to show that even such a seemingly blatant effort to blend into a target culture as changing one's name can still reflect truly important aspects of one's true identity and culture.

Quốc described being given the English name "John" by his teacher in a private English school he attended. When he asked the meaning of the name, he was told, "It's just a name, like any other names in Vietnam. It has no meaning." This response was somewhat shocking to the young student, and reflected the ignorance of the teacher, as Vietnamese names (and nicknames) certainly have meaning, and are quite important parts of identity creation. Being insulted by the implication that his real name was meaningless, Quốc refused the designation of "John", and required that the teacher and fellow students call him by his given name.

Choosing a meaningful name was quite important to him and his identity creation, so he originally chose the English name "Victor King", stating that he, "arrogantly considered myself as the Emperor of Glory." Requiring a name to have meaning is certainly consistent with Vietnamese tradition, and Quốc continued to reflect the importance of his Vietnamese identity when he decided that the English name required some modification as the two words were "not harmonious". After searching the web and reading history books to find a prestigious family with two-syllables beginning with King, he found one, a royal family 'Kingsley' and stated that, "after 4 years, the name Victor Kingsley was born."

I expressed some distress at this name change, indicating that using a Western-sounding name might be perceived as a lack of pride in who he is, or as a subterfuge. I wasn't certain that his intention – to



pay homage to the U.S.A. while maintaining his pride through a name that was meaningful to him – would be recognized, and therefore the reaction of his audience might not be entirely positive. After receiving my opinion on the issue, Quốc quickly changed his e-mail designation back to his true name, stating, “I must respect my Vietnamese name as Vietnamese blood flows in my body....” Names continued to be a very significant identity issue, however. When I asked his permission to write about his efforts to create a narrative and an identity, I asked him to choose a pseudonym for the purposes of this paper. He quickly chose ‘Quốc’, letting me know that it meant “beloved homeland” in Vietnamese.

Conclusion

The student’s struggle with creating an appropriate identity through the admissions essay raises a number of issues. Defining an identity is difficult enough within one’s own culture, but layering on different worldviews and cultural stereotypes makes the effort much harder. Foreign students need to figure out how to position themselves within both their home and target cultures, while coping with an unfamiliar genre.

To a large extent, it is certainly the applicant’s responsibility to research the expectations of a particular genre, but for a form as culturally specific as the college admission essay there needs to be some awareness of the potential reasons for deviation on the part of the admission committees. Within the frame of critical pedagogy, it might not be fair to react negatively to someone’s cultural viewpoint. However, students seeking admission to a university within the United States need to be able to function effectively within that educational system. If they are working with a different set of rules, no matter how appropriate in their home culture, the adaptation may be quite difficult.

My colleague who reviewed these essays noted serious problems with, “lack of directness and genre, complicated by inappropriate register.” She indicated that reading the essays and interpreting them was, “just too much work to go through.” The social consequence of the genre problem was a feeling that he wasted her time by not bothering to read or understand the question before writing the essay.

A failure to be able to act in a culturally appropriate manner within the frame of the essay may raise additional questions about a student’s ability to adapt to the rules of a target culture. For example, attitudes towards and definitions of cheating and plagiarism are certainly culturally specific, but these actions are absolutely inappropriate within the United States system. U.S. faculty members may have had bad experiences with cultural clashes of this type, and an essay that flouts genre rules may invoke concerns about what other rules might be problematic for the applicant. An inappropriate essay is certainly not an indication that the writer is unable to cope with change, but it could fit into some stereotyped notions of foreign students.

At the very least, foreign applicants should have the opportunity to be instructed on many aspects of adapting to the target culture, but the admissions committees should also maintain awareness of cultural assumptions that might be inaccurate with foreign students. How this cultural disconnect in interpretations is received is the important aspect. U.S. universities are asking students to envision themselves in a Western paradigm. Since the system is unlikely to change, it is important for the student to demonstrate an ability to function with it. Finding a solution deserves further consideration and study. Is it the responsibility of admissions offices to accept cultural differences in identity and genre, or is an inability to transform one’s identity to be consistent with the target culture an indication of an inability to perform adequately or to meet the standards of the Western model?

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