UNDERSTANDING EDUCATION AND UNDERSTANDING YOURSELF AS A REFUGEE LEARNER SEEKING ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA: INSIGHTS FROM A PILOT STUDY

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This article presents findings from a PhD pilot study exploring access to higher education for students in a protracted refugee situation in Malaysia. The study seeks to understand access from the students' perspective through a consideration of the ways in which they understand education and how, in turn, they construct understandings about themselves. The study uses a socio-cultural approach of learner identity to explore the personal meanings students develop, focussing specifically on concepts of internal and external recognition and their interaction. Three students with refugee backgrounds currently enrolled on higher education programmes were interviewed and data was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The analysis involved a model of co-production in which participants were consulted regarding the interpretation of the results prior to publication and had the opportunity to contribute to the meanings that emerge. The results show that education is central to students regaining a sense of self after having their learning trajectories abruptly severed upon seeking asylum. Considering processes of internal and external recognition reveals how a new socio-cultural context influences the understandings students develop about themselves in relation to education. This is manifest through their changing subject choice at the tertiary level and a renewed appreciation for the value of education. It also provides a means to understand how concealing their refugee status influences their relationships with other students on campus. These patterns of interaction are shaped through a dual layer of being perceived-to-be-perceived as they interpret others' actions to suggest they are being recognised as refugee students despite not having revealed their status.

Keywords: Learner identity, Recognition, Higher education, Protracted refugee situation, Malaysia

"In [my home country], education was all we knew, you know, like, our parents, they always just wanted us to study and, you know, get to universities and secure good jobs so, you know, that was the kind of mindset…that was the main goal, to get education, to be educated, so when that was taken away we were, like, we didn't know what else to do in life, so we felt like our future is gone."

– Sarah (pseudonym),
student with a refugee background in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Introduction

In this short extract, Sarah demonstrates the centrality of education in the ways that we come to understand ourselves, essentially asking, who am I if I am not educated? Without education she cannot see a clear pathway to the future she imagined and the sort of person she wanted to become. For most of us, education is a fundamental, albeit taken-for-granted, part of growing up. However, the educational futures of millions of youth around the world are jeopardised when they are forced to flee their home countries and seek asylum. This is especially true for those who find themselves in a protracted refugee situation (PRS), defined as a situation in which a person remains displaced for "five or more years after initial displacement, without immediate prospects for implementation of durable solutions[1]" (UNHCR, 2009, preamble). It was estimated that at the end of 2016 two thirds of the world's refugees lived in PRS (UNHCR, 2017), which includes refugee camps as well as urban areas, like in Malaysia, where those with refugee status are not formally recognised. This lack of recognition is a major barrier to accessing educational opportunities. Having the proverbial rug pulled from beneath them can be a jarring experience for youth in PRS that have dreams of pursuing higher education. This is reflected in Sarah's comment, which highlights the need for youth in PRS to negotiate new ways to understand themselves and their futures in the absence of education.

The increase in people claiming asylum in host nations in recent years is straining education systems around the world (McBrien, 2016) and more recent crises mark a shift in demand towards the tertiary sector. For example, of the half a million university-aged Syrians who have claimed asylum abroad, the Institute of International Education estimates 150,000 are qualified for university admission (Kiwan, 2017). Lack of formal recognition presents a barrier to accessing education at all levels with access falling at higher years of schooling. In 2016, 36% of the world's youth were enrolled in higher education institutions, however only about 1% of the youth in refugee populations is accounted for in this number (UNHCR, 2017). The striking disparity in post-secondary access highlights a need to understand the barriers to enrolment in higher education and explore ways to overcome these barriers so that individuals in PRS can participate equally in higher education. Previous research has suggested that youth with refugee backgrounds view higher education as an important means for restoring dignity, security and hope (Lenette, 2016). However, this observation does not tell us how youth with refugee backgrounds interact with barriers to higher education or how overcoming these barriers meaningfully restores dignity, security and hope. Therefore, we must first explore the understandings that youth with refugee backgrounds develop about education and in turn, what sorts of understanding this leads them to construct about themselves. We will then be in a better position to devise ways to improve access with truly emancipatory outcomes for marginalised youth, like Sarah.

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[1] Durable solutions sought by UNHCR are repatriation, local integration and resettlement.

This paper will present and explore the emerging themes from a PhD pilot project that seeks to understand perspectives about barriers to higher education from students in PRS using the concept of learner identity. The project was born out of my experience teaching in a refugee learning centre in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, a diverse PRS hosting predominantly stateless people (e.g., Rohingya) as well as those from Myanmar (Burma), Yemen, Syria, Pakistan, Somalia, Sri Lanka and others. Many of these students aspire to attend university, consistent with Crea's assertion that "those at the margins are hungry for higher education" (2016, p. 21). For this paper, the terms "youth with refugee backgrounds" and "youth in PRS" will be used to describe those with in settled and protracted refugee situations respectively. This is to encompass a variety of statuses, including refugees, asylum seekers and stateless people with shared challenges in accessing higher education. The presentation of the early findings from this ongoing project will be structured as follows: firstly, an overview of theoretical and methodological considerations informing the research, followed by a brief background to the pilot study and participants. The results from the pilot interviews will then be presented alongside a discussion of the emerging themes to demonstrate how the theory and methods can be employed to extract deeper understanding of the student's experiences. Finally, the limitations and implications of the work will be considered and how these can inform the subsequent PhD research.

Literature Review

Wenger (1998) describes learning as an act of *experiencing* identity in various formal and informal settings. In addition, Coll and Falsafi claim that "the institutions of formal education are fundamental arenas for, not only construction of knowledge, but also the construction of a sense of self" (2010, p. 213). These writers highlight a fundamental connection between the process of learning and ways in which we construct understandings about ourselves or identity. The concept of *learner identity* has been used to interrogate this connection as well as the related ideas of *academic self-concept* (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2002; Whannell & Whannell, 2015) and *academic identity* (Hejazi, Lavasani, Amani, & Was, 2012). To avoid becoming entangled with semantics I will use the term learner identity to theorise a link between identity construction and processes of learning as it was more prevalent in the literature reviewed. Hatt defines learner identity as "the ways we come to understand ourselves within and in relation to the institution of schooling and how this independently shapes our own self-perceptions of efficacy, ability, and success in relation to academic potential, performance and achievement" (2012, p. 439), while Mercer as "the active and actionable representation of one's self-beliefs, which are defined through autobiographical self-narration to construct an internal representation of [oneself] as a learner" (2017, pp. 11–12). Each agrees that learner identity relates defining a sense of self as an individual to a context in which we fulfil the role of a learner. However, Hatt puts greater emphasis on how we perceive our performance in the role, whereas Mercer frames identity as an ongoing narrative through our lives. Separating learner identity as a specific form of identity implies other modes of identity that intersect and overlap, such as cultural, ethnic, nationality and gender. Although these could be explored in their own right, Osguthorpe (2006) argues that learner identity is a main identity around which others are oriented based on the centrality of learning in constructing knowledge of the self.

Gee (2000, p. 100) draws on several key strands of research regarding identity as a broader concept to provide a framework that conceives learner identity from four interconnected perspectives in education research:

• Nature identity – a state of being, e.g., as learners we are either born intelligent or not;

• Institution identity – a position or role we hold, e.g., leader in a group learning task;

• Discourse identity – dependent on meanings attributed to recognisable traits, e.g., an enthusiastic learner;

• Affinity identity – defined in connection to wider groups we encounter in society, e.g., a member of an academic reading group.

Either of these perspectives may be foregrounded in a given context but they can all exist simultaneously and complement one another. For example, understanding learning as a nature identity implies some of us are born as better learners (or smarter) than others, whereas as an affinity identity it means we adopt traits as a learner based on the group we associate with, for example "jock" or "nerd" (see Akerlof & Kranton, 2002, p. 1168). Similarly, *refugee* can be understood as an institutional identity because people who claim asylum must register as refugees or asylum seekers through host country governments or UNHCR. Yet at the same time the identity refugee can be constructed through discourse around what it means to be a refugee, for example images of helplessness and need (Hattam & Every, 2010). These two identities can then be looked at through the dynamics of intersection to make inferences about what it means for identity to be a learner from a refugee background.

The identities we adhere to, or the knowledge that we can construct about ourselves, depends on the combination of these four identity perspectives and understandings about each that have developed historically through different cultures in a given context. This leads to the emergence of socio-culturally situated identity profiles, recognisable through certain discursive practices, which are upheld by persuasion, consensus and complicity (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). The act of recognition of a person as embodying a given identity type dictates the identities or personal understandings that we can legitimately construct about ourselves (Bernstein, 2000). Gee refers to these legitimate identity tropes as Discourses (with a capital 'D'), stating "Discourses are ways of being 'certain kinds of people'" (2000, p. 110). This idea has been theorised under different headings by other writers, such as *communities of practice* (Wenger, 1998), *activity systems* (Engeström, 1999), *practices* (Bourdieu, 1990) and *discourse* with a lower case 'd' (Foucault, 1980) to name a few. What each of these shares is the idea that within a community of people we make bids to be recognised in certain ways as embodying socio-culturally embedded identity types using different combinations of behaviours, or discursive practices, that we understand to be associated with that identity. These behaviours may result in us being recognised in different ways in different places and at different points in history (Lemke, 2000; Wortham, 2006).

In addition to these external acts of recognition into socio-culturally situated identity types there must also be an internal process of recognition for an individual to accept embodying that identity type. Burke and Reitzes (1991) propose a model based on a cybernetic control system to describe this kind of internalrecognition. This is analogous to a thermostat, which measures the temperature of a room, compares it to an internal setting and then turns a heating system on or off to match the temperature to the setting. Similarly, we take in information from our environment, compare it to an internal identity standard and change our behaviour to achieve a match in our internal meaning and implications from the social interaction. In this way, we use our behaviour to achieve identity confirming input from the social environment. An example is given of a college student who structures their learner

identity around "academic responsibility" (1991,p. 242). When others disagree that the student is academically responsible, the student might abandon these relationships and seek friends that will recognise them the way they imagine. Alternatively, they might engage in behaviour to change their opinion, e.g., spend more time studying or use discursive strategies to convince them.

Coll and Falsafi (2010) develop this idea further with a model of identity construction at two different timeframes. This explains how we can keep a consistent internal sense of self whilst also developing through various interactions. The first is the *Learner Identity Process* or *LIP*, which occurs in short timescales and is spatio-temporally situated. The second, referred to as the *Learner Identity* or *LI*, occurs at a longer timescale and is cross-situational and can therefore carry self-meanings from situation to situation. These two aspects of Learner Identity are in constant interaction, and our subjective experiences of learning and how we make sense of ourselves in the long term cannot be separate from the experience of making sense in specific learning situations. The interaction provides a space for often imperceptible changes to our learner identity in terms of construction, reconstruction and confirmation of previously held understandings. Despite focussing on experience at different timescales, unlike Burke and Reitzes's (1991) cybernetic control model, both theories arrive at the same point: that for coherence we tend to participate in actions that lead to confirmation of previously held understandings about ourselves (or self-recognition) through behaviour that seeks external recognition of these understandings.

A small body of literature exists that uses the concept of learner identity for students with refugee backgrounds in their country of final settlement (Bal, 2014; Dumenden, 2011; Morrice, 2013; Tandon, 2016). However, the literature search performed here found no research that applied a theory of learner identity to students in PRS. Bal (2014) explored how the social and institutional discourses experienced by students with refugee backgrounds at a school in the US was key to development of their identities through recognition. Central to this investigation was a discourse built around the idea of "difference as deficit" (Ball, 2014, p. 278). For example, collaboration between the students with refugee backgrounds, while encouraged for some activities, was deemed to be cheating or disruptive when repeated in other class activities. As a result, the students were labelled ELL students and withdrawn from class to have additional language learning. This designation was made based on what was deemed to be poor behaviourin class rather than through a language assessment. Over time, the ELL class became populated with disruptive students from many backgrounds and thus became more like a SEN class rather than additional language support. The cultural and linguistic differences of the students with refugee backgrounds were constructed as learning problems intrinsic to the learner, which marked a positioning as "learning disabled" in the students' learning trajectories (Ball, 2014, p. 272). This example demonstrates firstly how recognition led to identification in different identity categories that had been constructed both through broader national discourses around what it means to be learning disabled, for example, that had been further developed at the local level of the classroom. Secondly, it shows how behaviour transplanted from one school culture can be recognised in different ways in a new context and have a profound impact on students' learning trajectories.

Learner identity could be a useful tool to explore how youth in PRS understand themselves in relation to education as it presents a way to think about how students construct personal meanings through the process of learning. This idea resonates particularly well for youth in PRS, as refugee learning centres are usually the first formal institutions where they have prolonged participation. It follows that refugee learning environments could be important arenas in which new learner identities are

constructed that will influence future learning trajectories of students with refugee backgrounds, such as access to higher education. Applying learner identity in this research differs to its previous application as it will seek to understand identity construction in the context of legislative exclusion from education and an abrupt cleavage in learning trajectories. Underlying the theory of learner identity outlined by Gee is the dual processes of internal and external recognition. Bal's example above demonstrates the importance of external recognition in influencing the earning trajectories of students with refugee backgrounds. It also highlights the problems that may arise when students are faced with new modes of recognition in a new socio-cultural setting. The additional challenge of applying a theory of learner identity to PRS is exploring how modes of recognition may play a role when students are faced with more extreme forms of exclusions from the host nation's education system. In addition to applying the theory in the context of PRS, this research will also contribute to extending knowledge in the field of refugee education by considering the internal mode of recognition as well as the external. To explore the issue of recognition and the impact on learner identity and trajectories, the following research questions are therefore posed:

1. How do processes of recognition, both internal and external, influence the way in which students construct learner identities in PRS?

2. How does the construction of learner identities in PRS influence students' learning trajectories?

The following section will outline the methodological approach taken to address these questions.

Methodological Considerations

A methodology grounded in phenomenology lends itself well to this research due to the focus on exploring personal understandings and student experiences. Phenomenology as a methodological approach was established through the work of Husserl, who argued that to understand the way individuals experience phenomena we need to go "back to the 'things themselves'" (Husserl, 2001). The *thing* in question is the content of the experience in the consciousness of an individual. Although influenced by the work of Husserl, Moustakas viewed phenomenology as a transcendental project, trying to understand the nature of consciousness and the value-free essence of experience itself (1994). This later approach to phenomenology embraces the hermeneutic element, acknowledging that our understanding of other's experience is influenced by interpretation and is therefore essentially perspectival. The specific approach adopted here is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), developed by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), which is based on concepts drawn from hermeneutic phenomenology. IPA is also viewed as idiographic in its attendance to the experiences of particular people and contexts rather than being nomothetic. The hermeneutic flavour of IPA requires the researcher to reflect on their interpretation of the account being given by the participant as well as interpreting the account itself. This dual layer of participants making sense of their own experience, perhaps for the first time in an explicit sense, and the reciprocal interpretation of the researcher creates a double hermeneutic (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010).

Navigating layers of different, maybe contradictory, perspectives requires an interpretative process that assesses the relationship between how an interviewee understands the experience they are relaying and how the researcher perceives the way the interviewee constructs this understanding. This cyclical

process is known as the *hermeneutic circle*, which implies an iterative approach to analysis rather than a linear or step-wise process (Grondin, 2016). Through such a process phenomenology and hermeneutics work hand-in-hand, as Smith and colleagues argue, "[w]ithout phenomenology, there would be nothing to interpret; without the hermeneutics, the phenomenon would not be seen" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 37). Achieving this through IPA requires managing the dual process of understanding what the interviewee reports in its own right, free from pre-conceived understandings (standing beside), and using previous theoretical insights to challenge what is reported and develop or shed new light on what was previously understood (standing opposite). When analysing the interview data, the researcher will then proceed in an iterative fashion through layers of interpretation using the hermeneutic circle to try to understand the interviewee's experience as closely as possible to how they understand that experience themselves.

Thinking about interpretation requires researchers to engage reflexively with different regimes of interpretation. The experiences reported by students in this research can be obscured by epistemological violence and the associated concept of hermeneutic injustice. Epistemological violence is a form of violence that is produced through the construction of knowledge. It does not derive from empirical data itself but the interpretation of that data that problematises the concept of an "Other" (Teo, 2010, p. 298). Spivak (1993) highlights structural dimensions that privilege Eurocentric views to research above indigenous knowledge, which gives rise to epistemological structures that are "non-mutual and hierarchical" (Griffiths, 2000, p. 165). Hermeneutic injustice arises when informants are treated merely as bearers of knowledge and are excluded from its interpretation (Fricker, 2007). Medina also contends there is a communicative aspect to hermeneutic injustice (Medina, 2012). This may be realised through misinterpretation of the researcher due to a lack of adequate interpretative responsiveness in the research or because an individual struggles to articulate their experience due to "structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource" (Fricker, 2007, p. 155). The result of these flawed interpretative practices is that the conclusions reported do not match the personal meanings of the knowledge bearers of the research and as such an act of violence has been committed against informants through marginalisation in the research.

Issues of epistemological violence and hermeneutical injustice are clearly important to PRS since the students exist in a state of exile as part of marginalised communities with very few rights. Medina calls for an "agential and interactive approach to hermeneutical injustice" (Medina, 2012, p. 216), which requires that we be reflexive about our role as researchers and how the process of research may uphold structural inequality. It also requires reflexivity about our communicative practice in interviews to ensure positions of privilege in the research context do not put words into participants' mouths or obscure their genuine meaning. In this research, a model of coproduction is used that involves the students in the process of interpretation rather than just as informants in unstructured interviews. This was achieved by first ensuring the co-researchers were aware of their rights in the research through a briefing and information sheet. The co-researchers were then allowed to ask any questions before starting the interviews. Attention was paid to hermeneutical gaps that could have opened within interviews by drawing on Smith et al. and their notion of standing opposite and standing beside the co-researcher to challenge and try to comprehend what they express (2009). Medina also states that "[n]othing short of … reversibility and reciprocity [in communicative relations] can guarantee the equality in communicative participation required by fair epistemic practices" (2012, p. 204). The interviews were therefore approached in an unstructured and conversational style and the students were encouraged to ask their own questions. The interviews

were then analysed, and the results were shared with the co-researchers so they could check and contribute to the understanding of emerging themes. This stage was fundamental in the process as each co-researcher in this study identified areas where interpretation had been misunderstood or was inaccurate. It also allowed for follow up and further development of themes according to what the co-researchers felt were most important.

Due to the increased vulnerability of refugee populations, a robust ethical framework is required when engaging such populations in research (Leaning, 2001). Literature related to the ethics of working with individuals from refugee backgrounds is sparse (Ellis, Kia-Keating, & Yusuf, 2007), however, Kia-Keating has developed a framework for this kind of research centred around three domains: values, power and rights (2012). It is argued here that universal frameworks, such as the one provided by the American Psychological Association (APA), are tied to western values and may overlook issues pertinent to ethics in non-western settings. To engage with this framework using an IPA approach reflexivity is essential. As Leaning notes, language, culture, educational background and social norms may be a barrier to engaging with research that comes from a western perspective (2001). The three domains framework provides a structure around which I will centre this reflexivity to ensure that any potential issues related to this can be discussed with co-researchers through discussion when seeking informed consent. Acknowledging potential differences in values and the power disparity based on my position as a western researcher engaging with non-western co-researchers will also be important in the analysis stages. Consulting the co-researchers meaningfully at this stage will ensure that the co-researchers have greater ownership of the information generated, helping to overcome mismatched values or a power imbalance. It is only by attending to these two points that the rights of the co-researchers beyond those laid out in international ethical frameworks can be guaranteed.

Background to the Pilot Study

The pilot study involved interviews with students known to the researcher about their experiences in accessing higher education, both pre and post access, via Skype. They were all born in the same developing country before seeking asylum in Malaysia and chose the pseudonyms Ahmad, Sarah and Jack. They are already enrolled in higher education programmes at International Higher Education Institutions that accept applications from students registered with UNHCR; Sarah and Jack in one institution and Ahmad in another. Targeting the post-access demographic allowed engagement with the IPA approach and reflection on the issues related to interpretation of qualitative data discussed above but also generated some themes for comparison with pre-access students that will be targeted in the full research project.

Despite the lack of legal recognition for students with refugee backgrounds in Malaysia, these research participants are three of the limited number of students with refugee backgrounds enrolled on post-secondary education courses in Malaysia   thanks to MOUs signed by tertiary education partners with UNHCR (Bailey & Inanc, 2019; UNHCR, 2019). Prior to beginning their post-secondary programmes each student also completed a short higher education bridging course. This course provided information about post-secondary institutions that receive applications from students with refugee backgrounds and aided the development of soft skills related to the application process (see: Opening

Universities for Refugees (OUR), 2016). The following section will present the emerging themes from the pilot study in relation to the research questions outlined in the previous section.

Emerging Themes and Discussion

Losing and Regaining a Sense of Self

Although all the students described the move to Malaysia as being very abrupt, they were quite hopeful about living a life with more freedom. Ahmad stated that he felt he had, "came to, like, very high post… or very good place, there we can start our new life." This was related to the assumption that he no longer had to hide his religious status, however, he realised this wasn't the case, commenting, "I was like, okay, now here we can tell that we are [a religious minority], [but] my mum told, 'No it's still the Muslim country.'" He realised the difficulty of life seeking asylum: "I start feeling that my those feelings shattered, that those happiness shattered." He imagined a life with a higher status in society, but instead was faced with a potentially worse situation with greater challenges than he had faced before. Sarah also uses the verb *to shatter* to explain her disappointment at not being able to access tertiary studies upon arrival:

> "In [my home country] education was all we knew… that was the main goal, to get education, to be educated, so when that was taken away we were, like, we didn't know what else to do in life, so we felt like our future is gone… we will only be able to do, like, small jobs, like, you know, so it was quite shattering."

Here, Sarah refers to education in terms of a status; *being an educated person* therefore defines the type of person that you are in a social hierarchy. This is quite central to her identity since without education she considers her future to be gone and that there would not be anything for her to orient herself toward in the future. Describing the disillusionment as *shattering* emphasises the extent to which their imagined futures have been completely destroyed. For Ahmad, this is in not reaching a societal status in which he does not have to hide his religion and for Sarah, it is the prospect of a future without being educated.

Each of the students came from a context in which education was an important part of their everyday experience, however, the normality of education led to it being a taken-for-granted part of their everyday lives. This is reflected in Sarah's comment, "in [my home country] education is more often norm, you know, it's a very normal thing, you don't really, you know, pause and think that, oh, why I'm doing this?" However, upon claiming asylum, the sense of loss expressed by each student led to a renewed appreciation for the value of education, summarised by Jack:

> "Now we realize that how important is education and even though in [my home country] also our family always value education but in this particular situation we really, really now accept that without our education we really cannot do anything."

The increased awareness of what value education has in their lives then motivated the students to seek out opportunities and take independent action to study and reclaim what was lost, as Ahmad comments:

"When you don't have anything you will try to get the thing so… you don't have the teachers, and you don't have that much opportunities, that thing will make a desire inside you and make a motivation that you want to study. OK, you will achieve it independently."

Having a sudden educational barrier placed between them and the future they envisaged challenges the students' identities in terms of what sort of meanings they can construct about themselves. Sarah and Jack talk about this more explicitly in terms of how education is part of a construction of a sense of self. However, for each student participation in formal education becomes crucially important for orienting their identities and achieving a consistent sense of self. This is consistent with Osguthorpe's assertion that learner identity is the central one around which others are oriented (2006). The conflict between their identity and the reality they face could also be understood in terms having to recognise yourself in a dramatically different way. The source of this conflict could arise from the difficulty in achieving these new, perhaps less desirable, forms of self-recognition as the students seek to engage in activities that would confirm previously held understandings of themselves (see Burke & Reitzes, 1991; Coll & Falsafi, 2010). As learning is an important means through which we can build and reinforce these previously held understandings, it would seem logical that the students would engage in learning opportunities to recognise themselves and their futures in familiar ways. Jack and Sarah had to wait 4 years to finally attend university, however, during this time they were able to maintain some sense of self by taking steps and focussing on the possibility of education that lay ahead. Trying to maintain a consistent sense of self does not mean that their identities were not under construction during this time, since Coll and Falsafi suggest that imperceptible changes occur through the short time-frame identity process. For example, Ahmad reflected on his transformation from a "lazy" student in his home country to a student that took more agency in the process of learning, commenting, "I am very proud that I took that opportunity and I am still studying."

Changing Course

A more tangible example of the ways in which the students' learner identities developed during their time so far in Malaysia is their course choice. All three students changed their original subject choice when it came time to apply for tertiary study. Jack and Ahmad switched from Engineering to Business and Accountancy respectively and Sarah switched from Biotechnology to Communications and film. Sarah explains this transition:

"In [my home country]… [it's] understood, OK, if, you're a girl you are going to do something related to Bio, and if you're a guy you will do Engineering or something, and if you are not really good in studies you do Arts, so that's the, you know, mindset… but when we came to Malaysia, for me it's like, now I'm thinking what's the best of, you know, I like, I'm thinking in terms of my future, what I really want to do, what motivates me."

The new context opens-up a new space for the students to construct kinds of identities that were perhaps alien to them before. Previously, external processes of recognition organised the students into recognisable identity categories based on prevalent ideas about gender and learning or success measured in terms of a socio-culturally situated education system. Being away from this context allows learner identities to develop along a path of how the students feel they would best like to recognise themselves.

The new context, however, does not provide a blank cheque upon which the students can author new identities. Comments from Jack and Ahmad demonstrate how the new environment still directs what sort of choices they can make:

> **Jack:** "after moving to Malaysia there was something that attracted me the most was the economic shift, you know, compared to [my home country] and Malaysia, and all these things here were, you know, quite fascinating, the currency difference and, so, and I also see that Malaysia is the hub for business and all the international brands are here, so, all these things actually really motivated towards learning business."
>
> **Ahmad:** "since child we are told you can be either Engineer, you can be either Doctor. Here only, I came here and got to know there's something known as Accountancy, like, there is a subject as Accounts and Business…we never thought that we study business. I only thought that they only do business."

Both responded to the educational environment around them in directing their subject choice. Although they chose to study subjects they had never entertained before as options, they are still fairly typical course choices in the Malaysian context. They are therefore making choices within a system that directs students in different ways to the context they are familiar with. However, in facing these new socio-cultural pressures the students have demonstrated a degree of reflexivity in engaging with the unfamiliar education system to follow trajectories in which they can satisfactorily align their learner identities. These considerations potentially highlight the importance of agency in constructing learner identities; that is not dealt with explicitly here but is a theme that should be considered and elaborated upon in the main phase of the PhD research.

'Refugee' Identity on Campus

Issues related to external recognition of identity were manifest through experiences of being a refugee on campus. All of the students followed advice given by their respective higher education institutions and did not reveal their refugee status to other students and staff. Part of the reason for doing this was concern over potential negative reactions; as Jack comments, "it's never really safe because you don't know what kind of reaction you are, we are going to get from the local people." He also had concerns over the response that he would get from international students from his home country:

> "In our campus there are a lot of [my home country] students who are international students, so, if they find out that we are from [the same country] also and we are refugees, so, we might get some negative feedback from our own country people."

In addition to avoiding negative responses, Sarah viewed life on campus as an escape from a variety of connotations associated with refugees in the predominantly Christian community she interacted with at home:

> "[Campus] is, it's like an escape, you know, so here everybody knows you're refugee here, if it is some people would look down on you, some people would be nice, some people would pity you, so all those things, you know, I, its way from me to, you know, forget about it."

Being able to distance herself from these concerns allows her to get on with the business of being a student. However, concealing their status raises some difficulties in interactions on campus.

Jack and Ahmad discussed the awkwardness of interactions surrounding visa applications and such with international students and having to fake their way through such conversations to avoid having their status revealed. The students would generally refer to the idea of refugee as a status, rather than an identity. However, when discussing how she felt about concealing her refugee status from other students she had become close to on her campus, Sarah referred to this more in terms of an identity:

> "Sometimes it does make me feel bad, like, my really close friends, they don't really know who I, who I actually am. And sometimes I think, would it make any difference were they unfriend me or something, you know, if they come to know that I am a refugee or something?"

Talking about *who she really is* frames her status as a refugee, or experience living with this label, as being part of her identity. These examples of interactions with other students on campus reveal a conflict in the ways in which the students recognise themselves internally and the external recognition they experience in their adopted roles as *international students*.

Although Ahmad has not revealed his status as a refugee and has had it confirmed that those that worked in admissions have not shared this with his lectures and other staff, he is suspicious that some of the Malaysians on campus speculate this to be the case. He stated that, "I think there is something in their behaviour that will make me feel these things," and further elaborating, "first thing is they don't want me to be part, to be the part of the conversation, maybe, and the second thing I avoided because of this behaviour." He refers to times when he felt excluded from the group of local students in his class as they went to lunch together and did not invite him. When asked why he thinks that to be the case he suggested, "I think that, I am poor, and they think they are rich, and I cannot afford the things they do." He feels that the assumption is based on his nationality and the assumption that most of the students at his institution from his home country have refugee status. This example demonstrates a double layer in recognition; Ahmad's perception of how he thinks he is being perceived by others. The exclusion he feels when he is not included in daily social activities is similar to the exclusion he feels based on his refugee status, and conflating these experiences shapes the way he interacts with the other students.

The students differ in their association with other refugees on campus. Jack and Sarah are friendly, but generally avoid spending too much time with other refugee students due to their concern with being identified as refugees through association. Ahmad interacts with other refugees more freely, but these interactions are limited due to differing timetables. Jack and Sarah's case demonstrates the ways that they avoid being recognised in a certain way through association, which is consistent with the suggestion that we use our behaviour in bids to be recognised as certain sorts of people. Ahmad feels a level of solidarity with the other refugee students and feels more comfortable socialising with them. He says, "when you feel [there is] someone who also know[s] that he's [at] your level-. Actually, not level, [other students] only made the level that we are low level." Here he challenges an idea that he feels is imposed upon him from the local students that his refugee status gives him a lower status. This suggests an internal struggle between how he recognises himself and the external recognition he perceives. Even if the other students do not really suspect he has refugee status, it seems that despite resisting the internalisation of being lower status as part of his identity, he faces difficulty in achieving the external recognition at the same social or academic level as the other students.

Conclusion and Final Reflections

The themes that have emerged from this pilot study suggest that processes of recognition, both internal and external, shape the way students understand themselves in relation to education through realignment of learning goals and behaviours to reclaim a consistent sense of self. Achieving this consistency is manifest through pursuing learning trajectories along different subject lines that have been shaped by socio-cultural expectations of the new learning environment. Maintaining consistency in sense of self requires the students to be reflexive in negotiating between the internal and external forms of recognition, e.g., perceiving yourself to be on a path towards being an educated person but realised through a different academic field. The dual layers of being perceived-to-be-perceived also show how issues of recognition can drive students' interactions with others. The students' perception of themselves in relation to education is therefore influenced by how they perceive external recognition to be operating, creating tension in their learner identity where this is mismatched with their internal recognition. The discussion here has demonstrated that IPA can be applied fruitfully to explore the concept of recognition as it pertains to learner identity for students in PRS, which has given an insight into the ways these students understand themselves and their education. Although beyond the scope of this paper, interpreting instances of recognition causes us to think about agency in the construction of identities. To what extent can we influence the ways in which we are recognised in a given socio-cultural context and how is this manifest in PRS? Agency could therefore be an important concept to be considered moving forward with the main phase of the research and could provide a deeper understanding of the kinds of learner identities students in PRS develop.

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