



An Autoethnography about Being an International Student

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Abstract

The number of immigrant and international students in Canada and other Western countries has increased in recent decades. This group of people faces many challenges, especially at the beginning of their entrance to the host country, such as different expectations regarding two different cultures, being away from their family and loneliness, financial problems, language limitations, and racism. As the experiences of these students can affect their satisfaction and success during their academic years, it is essential to explore the experiences of this growing population during their higher education. In this paper, I explore my own experience as a female international student. My first several years in Canada illustrate the everyday struggles I have faced to attain social, cultural, and linguistic development and build a new life in a new country. Using evocative autoethnography as a research methodology has revealed layers of my consciousness by connecting my personal experience to culture. This autoethnographic study presents the reflections of an Iranian female scholar's experiences in Canadian higher education; it explores how my personal status as an Iranian female scholar, along with social factors, have shaped my academic experiences in Canada.

Keywords: autoethnography, international student, higher education, Middle Eastern, Iran, racism, language limitation

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Introduction

Universities are growing as international spaces, making it essential to understand the experiences of international scholars. Immigrating to and studying in a new country can be highly challenging (Khawaja et al., 2017). International students can face difficulties integrating into new settings (Mikkonen et al., 2016) due to a lack of clarity about role expectations (Rogan et al., 2006) and matters related to English language performance and academic skills and inadequate support to address them (Earnest et al., 2010; Harris & Marlowe, 2011; Bowen, 2014; Mikkonen et al., 2016). There have been numerous calls for professional development in teaching methods that benefit international students (Pitkäjärvi et al., 2012). However, international students are less satisfied overall with their educational experience in a new country than those who speak English as a first language. Salamonson et al. (2015) argue that this could be due to facilitators being less skilled in meeting situated learning in the practice needs of international students. Earnest et al. (2010) also state that the difficulties encountered by international students are compounded by the fact that these students are mostly unaware of the issues they face and how they might impact their academic performance. In addition to the challenges that international student face during their studies in a new country, the messages they receive from their surroundings because of their race and language limitations can affect their overall satisfaction.

In this paper, I share my experiences as an international female scholar enrolled in graduate school in Canada. I share my narratives of struggle and triumph and my insights from different positionalities. As a scholar, I consider these narratives as personal, emotional, and intellectual. My testimonies deconstruct the meaning of identity formation processes, socializing, learning, and living in Canada. My experiences as an international student, some of which will be explored here, have led me to present an understanding of the central research question: What does it mean to be an international student? My goal is to add another voice to the limited number of shared experiences by using autoethnography and exploring practical and conceptual possibilities to better understand international students in graduate programs in Canada.

I chose autoethnography as a methodology to explore my experiences as an international student. My experiences are presented to provide insight to those who are struggling to build a new life in a new country and to gain insight into my own experiences. Mairs (1993) states that the ability to tell our stories is a gift, as our stories potentially offer readers companionship when they desperately need it. Also, writing difficult stories is a gift in itself, a struggle to build meaning in life and to heal or grow from our pain (Ellis, 2007). Before introducing the paper on this special issue, I explore the autoethnographic methodology and explicate the practice of autoethnography.

Methodology

This study benefited from the autoethnographic methodology. Autoethnography is an intriguing method that is increasingly utilized to study social phenomena through the author's personal experiences (Stahlke Wall, 2016). It provides deep insights into experiences that are not

always possible to attain through other methodologies (Ngunjiri et al., 2010). It shows struggle, passion, and an attempt at sense-making in situations in which people have to cope with difficult situations and a loss of meaning (Ellis & Bochner, 2006).

Autoethnography foregrounds the researcher's personal experience and connects this autobiographical story to broader cultural identities and contextual, political and social meanings and understandings (Manning & Adams, 2015). It is a back-and-forth movement between experiencing and examining a vulnerable self and observing and revealing the broader context of that experience. When an author writes about herself, she also writes about others (Ellis, 2007). In autoethnography, personal experiences cannot be quickly or definitively separated from social and relational contexts. In this way, the personal experience becomes a valid, permanent, and essential form of data that can be used to make meaning and apply in research (Manning & Adams, 2015).

Autoethnographers use storytelling devices such as narrative voice, plot, and character development to represent their experiences (Manning & Adams, 2015). They write about their private experiences not only to better understand those events themselves but also to demonstrate to others how they make sense of and learn lessons from them and to offer guidance and wisdom to others (Manning & Adams, 2015). An autoethnography can have many different applications. These may include a study focusing on the self (Pelias, 2003) to inquire into groups the researcher is part of (Ngunjiri et al., 2010). Or, it might extend the inquiry to other groups the researcher is not part of, but through the method of investigation they become a co-creator in recreating the stories (Ellis & Rawicki, 2013; Rawicki & Ellis 2010).

Autoethnographers engage in honest self-reflective attempts to explore sociocultural forces and practices through their personal experience and the research process (Grant et al., 2013). More specifically, reflexivity allows autoethnographers to identify, inquire, and make precise the permanent interaction between personal-cultural experiences; consider their roles in conducting research and creating a study; and hold themselves responsible for their mistakes or faults in judgment in a research project (Ellis, 2007). Given the use of reflexivity, autoethnography stands in contrast to traditional social scientific studies in the sense that it does not use terms such as objectivity, researcher neutrality, and firm meaning. These terms are avoided in favour of understanding the researcher's precise and reflective exploration of lived experience and the research process (Grant et al., 2013).

Autoethnography covers a range of purposes such as seeking meaning in situations that are not pleasant circumstances (Ellis & Bochner, 2006), exploring issues that have personal significance within an explicitly acknowledged social context (e.g., Holt, 2001; Sparkes, 1996), and critiquing existing work on matters of personal importance (e.g., Muncey, 2005; Wall, 2012a). Therefore, autoethnography deals with diverse topics such as work activities and experiences (Duncan, 2004; Mischenko, 2005), family life (Muncey, 2005; Wall, 2012b), educational experiences (Pelias, 2003), membership in alternative community groups (Calley Jones, 2010) and experiences in which individuals feel shame, confusion, and disappointment (Herrmann, 2012).

One way in which autoethnography is used to reframe the author's voice is called evocative autoethnography. Authors attempt to make texts evocative by using techniques to provoke readers' thoughts, emotions, and actions (ELLIS, 2004) in order to experience others' experiences (ELLIS, 1993). Evocative autoethnography focuses on narrative presentations that open up conversations and evoke emotional responses to share aesthetic and evocative descriptions of personal and inter-

personal experiences. Evocative autoethnography involves stories about authors who view themselves as the case and write evocative narratives specifically focused on one aspect of their life (Ellis, 2011). Evocative pieces are the most controversial form of autoethnography for traditional social scientists, as they are not accompanied by more traditional forms of analysis and scholarly literature connections. Evocative autoethnography proposes to understand oneself or some aspects of life as connected with a cultural context, and it invites readers to see the author's world and learn from their experiences to help them cope with their own lives (ELLIS, 2004). In this paper, I benefited from evocative autoethnography, as it helped me explore my educational experience as an international student.

Where I am From

I was born and raised in Tehran, Iran. Iran is a country in Western Asia in the Middle East that used to be called Persia and is now officially called the Islamic Republic of Iran. My father was the breadwinner of my family. This left him no choice but to work hard every day to provide for our family's needs. My mother was a housewife and looked after the family, which is not an easy task. They came from a harsh time when resources were scarce, and making a living was not easy. Looking back at my childhood, my mother and father always made sure we were all well-fed and warm. They always wanted my siblings and I to be happy. I now realize that this is the way my parents expressed their love for their children.

I grew up in a country where there were many rules that a girl had to remember. A girl had to let a man lead and protect her. When she is single, her father and brothers will protect her, and when she gets married someday to a man, she will depend on her husband. Women in my country do not have equal opportunities as men. They are limited in their rights, such as their access to higher education or living independently only because of their gender. I was fortunate, as my parents did not agree with the dominant beliefs about girls, and they did not treat my sisters and I according to our gender. My parents always encouraged my siblings and I in our educational journey. They did not always agree with my opinions, but they always supported me.

With the support and encouragement of my parents, after finishing high school, when I was 18, I entered one of the most well-respected and reputable universities of my country. Gaining admission to a well-known university is challenging in my country, as there is a highly competitive entrance exam. After I graduated with a bachelor's degree, I worked as a vice principal at a high school before I decided to attend graduate school. Then, my academic career continued when I gained admission to a master's degree program in Iran. During the last year of my master's degree program, I got married. Five years after our marriage, my husband and I decided to immigrate to Canada. I first came to Canada four years ago with my husband, as he was offered a position at Memorial University in Newfoundland and Labrador. Even though I have always had an inquiring mind and I am open to new experiences, before immigrating to Canada I had a stable life and immigrating has been a big change that has affected all aspects of my life.

Coming to Canada

Immigration meant not only leaving my home country but also leaving a country where I had many memories and putting behind all my family members, friends, and all the valuable and memorable parts of my life there. I cannot describe my feeling when I left my country; at that time, I only wished that my country were a better place to live and that I was not being forced to leave. After arriving in the new country, I started living in a new area, meeting new people, and experiencing new things, and I can only begin to describe them through the story.

After moving to Canada, I realized how language, accents, culture, and racism intersect in ways I had never understood before. Since 2016, I have been occupied by thoughts about identity, belonging and place issues, which had never been part of my life while living in Iran. For the first time, I understood some aspects of what many immigrants have gone through: the identity crisis, the emotional costs, the sense of loneliness, dealing with microaggressions regarding one's accent and cultural background, the ignorance and rejection of the cultural richness immigrants carry, the challenges of cultivating a sense of belonging, and the efforts required to surround oneself with a supportive community that cares for one's well-being. All these situations made me frustrated, and I wished I could go back to my country.

During my several first months of living in Canada, I felt loneliness. Therefore, I decided to engage myself in Canadian society and make new connections. As I always have been curious about learning new things, I decided to continue my education and, in this way, I started to make new connections and engage in new communities. Fortunately, one year after immigrating, I started my educational pathway to earning my second master's degree in education. The education courses were powerful, heartbreaking, rewarding and depressing all at the same time. Sometimes, the comments I received from others made me disappointed, but I continued, nonetheless.

During the first semester of my master's degree, I had a course in which two of my classmates and I were assigned to do a teamwork project. When we met to speak about the project, one of my teammates asked me what my name is. I surprisingly responded "Tayebah", as half of the semester had passed, and she had heard my name every session. Then, she said, "OK, I do not think I can learn that. Let's call you 'T'". I only smiled and kept silent. All the names in this country are new to me, but I am trying to learn them and pronounce them as appropriately as I can. One of the things I have always taken caution about, which I believe is rooted in my religious beliefs, is that I always try to treat others the same way as I want to be treated. That day, even though I kept silent, not being treated in a respectful manner was annoying for me, as my teammate did not even try to pronounce my name and simply chose the first letter of my name without asking me whether she could call me "T". Elder and Paul (2020) refer to this as "intellectual integrity", which means that individuals should act towards others in the way they want people to act towards them and respect others in the way they want to be respected.

My academic experiences in Canada have assisted me in understanding my identity as an immigrant better, an identity that has been continuously shifting and ever-changing, and I am always learning new things about the world and myself. All those experiences and many more have allowed me to better understand being an international student during the years I have been in Canada. The biggest challenges I have experienced during my years of living in Canada as an international student have been related to my race and my English language limitations.

Being a Visible Minority

As a Middle Eastern scholar in higher education, I cannot escape feeling like an outsider who always stands out and is secondary to other majority groups. Hooks (1990) describes such feelings of marginalization as ‘part of the whole but outside the main body’ (p. 149). I can sense that people know that I am different. My race is a noticeable feature that everyone notices immediately when I meet them. Usually, when I begin a conversation with individuals, a question they often ask is "Where are you from?" I have answered this question many times, and for me it means that it is obvious that I am not from here. Haney López (1994) believes that race is evident even when immigrants walk down the street. I am always a Middle Eastern female who can not escape being different. Ancheta (2006) describes Middle Easterners as ‘other non-Whites’ who are foreigners.

Even though universities, especially at the graduate levels, are more multicultural than other places, I can see that my race is also obvious there, as there are fewer Iranian scholars than scholars of other nationalities. The research revealed how the number of female scholars has sharply increased in higher education (Aguirre, 2000; Turner et al., 2008). However, female scholars comprise less than half of the population. Also, the number of Middle Eastern female scholars is the smallest of all minority racial groups (Turner, 2002). Because of this, female scholars in higher education often have a difficult time finding a mentor or a role model in academic settings, a difficulty that is related to their identity (Hernandez et al., 2015). Furthermore, most materials that have been taught are written by American, Canadian, and Western authors. During my years of receiving education in Canada, I have not come into contact with any material, even a single article, that has been written by an author from my country or the Middle East. I sometimes ask myself "Where are the well-known authors from my country?" I wish I could hear the names of the authors who are leaders in the field of education in my country.

One of my annoying experiences is related to the rejection of the cultural richness that immigrants might carry, and immigrants being judged as outsiders. Once, my son and I were in a taxi, and the taxi driver asked me where I was from. I replied that I am from Iran. He pointed to my son and mentioned he is lucky that he will be raised here. I replied, “I think so”. He continued, saying, “I follow other countries' news. If he was in Iran, he would be forced to work from childhood. I read a lot of news from your country saying that children are forced by adults to work and earn money, such as selling flowers in intersections.” The short conversation between the taxi driver and me was shocking, and I was unwilling to continue it. Although a small number of children in my country are mistreated, it is not a common phenomenon. There have been many movements to protect children, and it is illegal to start working before the age of fifteen in my country.

Sometimes, it is assumed that Middle Eastern females do not experience racism, as they often do not seek help or support (Museus & Kiang, 2009). I believe, however, that Middle Eastern females are used to hiding their emotions and keeping silent. They have learned this from childhood, as they are not treated as equal to men in their society. As Stanley (2006) argues, it is common for international females to remain silent against racialization and discrimination.

Language Limitations and Communication

I am a Middle Eastern female who is afraid of making a mistake in speaking English as a second language, and sometimes I prefer to keep silent instead. The problem is not only learning a second language, as Grosjean (1989) argues that being bilingual is not only the equivalent of knowing two different languages but also about being familiar and behaving according to the norms of two different cultures. Familiarity with the dominant culture of a country can be gained after living in a place for several years and building connections with people. I speak English with a particular accent, and I am aware that my accent is different from monolingual English speakers, and some individuals might need to pay more attention to understand what I am saying. I have had to repeat certain words several times, and sometimes my attempts did not work, and the person I am speaking to could not understand what I said. Obviously, I write bilingually as well. However, I always try to increase my knowledge in English literacy. I am actively curious about my blind spots, and I believe this is an important step to communicating in the new society I have chosen to live in. Also, learning and sharing ideas is important to improving my English. Elder and Paul (2012) argue that one important step in intellectual development is that individuals need to accept that they are human and they do not know everything but must live in such a way as to routinely seek knowledge of one's ignorance.

One discouraging comment that international students commonly receive during their educational pathway is that sometimes people pay close attention to grammar errors in what international students are trying to say. One of my friends, who is from Saudi Arabia, explained that she once met her supervisor to speak about her piece of writing, and she received a lot of comments about grammar errors. The comments she received were so disappointing for her that it caused her to forget what she wanted to ask. She always complained that her supervisor paid more attention to grammar errors than to the ideas she had developed through her pieces of writing.

English is accepted as a universal language, and the number of people who speak English as an additional language is significantly higher than the number of people who speak English as a first language. In other words, English is increasingly used to communicate by global multilingual users rather than monolingual English users (de Jong, 2011; Norton & Pavlenko, 2019). Even though international people need to do their best to meet the standard of the other language, native English speakers should keep in mind that learning a new language is not an easy task and can not happen in a short time.

Building a New Life

Despite the changes I have had to deal with during these years, the beauty of living in a new country has also shown its face during this time. One of the challenges that has affected my life was that because I have been culturally and linguistically isolated, I have sometimes found myself alone. Eventually, however, I started to create new communities with my new peers. Most of my close friends are immigrants and international students from different countries such as Sudan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and China as well as people born in Canada. With them, I can say one

word, and they will understand. I do not need to labour emotionally around them. My communities allow me to be me, and they see my struggles and relate to them. To these communities, I belong; within them, I feel like I am home. As Block (2009) writes, "to belong is to act as an investor, owner, and creator of this place" (p. 3). My communities are filled with beautiful languages, accents, traditions, and, most importantly, understanding and empathy. Even though international students are often worried about their family abroad (Joyce et al., 2010; Harris & Marlowe, 2011; Lawson, 2014), there are other connections that are not limited by geographical borders as they use technology such as video-chats, emails, and social media. My experience and perspectives support the model minority stereotype, which presumes that immigrants are perfectly assimilated people who have successfully overcome all adversities (Suzuki, 2002).

Furthermore, building relationships with others and furthering my educational career help me to improve my language abilities. Even though I have a long way to go to be perfect, I am aware that I am improving. At the very least, I feel more confident about speaking in English. Moreover, although I immigrated four years ago, I still feel like a visible minority, but I accept being different as part of my identity as an international immigrant. After years of living in a country with many different races, which is not common in my home country, I believe these differences are part of the beauty of the world.

Also, after the first year of my master's program, my son was born. He has brought a lot of happiness and joy to my life. After his birth, I have felt more of a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging is not only related to space but also a meaningful relationship. Being a full-time mother and a full-time student is challenging, as all of my immediate support system, except for my husband, is more than 6,000 miles away. However, all of the new situations I have faced have helped me get to know myself even better.

From my education pathway perspective, even though the challenges I have faced have sometimes made me feel disappointed, I have always told myself "I can" and encouraged myself to be strong. I have always had a plan in my life, and when I was struggling in certain situations, I did not forget my plan. At some stages, my plan seems like a dream, but I believe that even dreams can be accomplished through planning, acting and perseverance. I set clear targets, and I am convinced that whatever happens, I will do my best to succeed. I always tell myself "never give up" and encourage myself to work through any difficulties or challenging issues. I never give up on learning when the learning gets tough. Instead, I embrace intellectual struggles and persist toward greater understanding. Paul and Elder (2014) refer to this as intellectual perseverance. This is the disposition needed as one struggles with confusion, difficulties, and frustrations in order to gain understanding and insight. It is also known as intellectual tenacity and is a way of thinking that involves "persistence, struggle and rigorous engagement" (Baehr, 2013, p. 1). This characteristic helps me persist on my educational pathway. After completing a master's degree, I decided to pursue a Ph.D., and I am still here.

Conclusion

I attempt to explore my experience as an international student from the Middle East and provide alternate realities through storytelling. While my stories cannot be used to generalize ex-

periences for all international students, I hope my experiences could potentially contribute to the positioning of higher education in an era of globalization. Also, reflections from this autoethnography reveal the need for greater emphasis on educational research relevant to the racialization of Middle Eastern international students, who are forced to grapple with conceptions such as the minority.

In this paper, I shared my experiences and feelings about immigration and being an international student. My testimonies portray deep self-reflective processes that assist me in understanding my identity formation better and accepting my challenges, as sharing experiences and providing a space to give voice allows the healing of wounded selves (Hooks, 2003). I believe my roots are in my culture, traditions, ancestors, family, and friends back home, while immigration to a new home has created a situation that has led me to develop my personality, abilities, and ideas. I have tried to develop a bicultural life, which illustrates how one develops an ability to function effectively as a subordinate group member in another country while retaining one's racial or ethnic identity (Alfred, 2001).

I invite the reader not to reduce our identities to the stereotypical view of a foreigner with an accent or other constraining categories. I embarked on this embodied, intellectual, and writing exercise to raise awareness about being an international student. This narrative advocates for better understanding international students from different backgrounds and better supporting our transition to a new academic and cultural environment. I hope my experiences can strengthen institutional efforts to create diverse, inclusive, and welcoming spaces. In universities, knowledge and understanding have become a bidirectional process. These possibilities are the practical goal I hoped for in writing and sharing my testimony. As Pensoneau-Conway et al. (2014) state, in writing autoethnographies, writers hope that they can enrich dialogues, relationships, and communities with the possibility of transformation and growth.

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