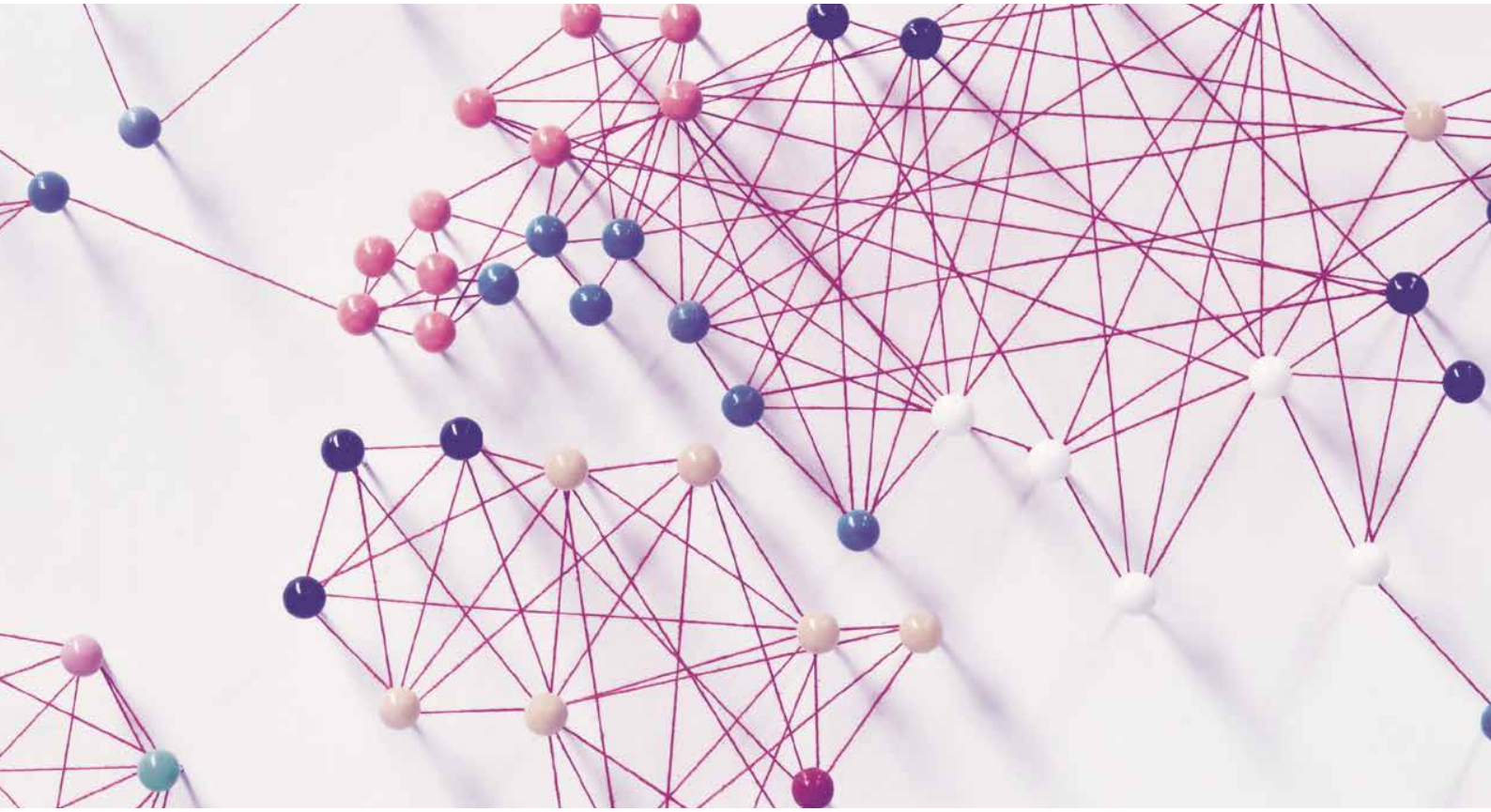
SHIFTING IDENTITIES

Sarah Conn explores the complex feelings that accompany being an international student in the UK

For almost 18 years I have worked as a counsellor in a university setting. It has always interested me that international students of non-European backgrounds did not readily access counselling services (except when referred by medical or academic staff, often following a crisis). I wondered if they perceived counselling to be 'not for them'. Were their experiences disappointing? Had there been too narrow a focus on individual/psychological issues, with inadequate attention to the complexity and impact of other external elements, including culture? For those who made it over the threshold, did they not feel sufficiently recognised? The persistent uneasiness, curiosity and 'unknowing' that I felt about these observations, formed one of the major motivations for my practitioner doctoral research. It inspired the endeavour to explore such students' experiences of help-seeking and coping patterns. I was interested to tap a vital knowledge resource from the 'experiential experts', ie the students themselves, about how they understood their own experiences. To unlock that information and find ways to disseminate it, is to make available possibilities to guide practice and policy. The ultimate aim is to contribute new knowledge to the transcultural discourse, which can benefit both practitioners and clients. There is the hope that the study outcomes can also contribute to enhancing cultural engagement in educational settings.

To some extent we all share the experience of a shifting identity. Often, changing circumstances and new experiences seem to be the prompt. Whether we would concede that it relates to our cultural identity might be a perspective seldom considered by most people; at least for those of us hailing from the dominant groups, which includes myself as a white European woman. My interest in culture and identity deepened when I embarked on the study on which this article is based. Cultural identity involves at its core a sense of attachment or commitment to a cultural group and is thus both a cultural and psychological phenomenon.[1] When a person's attachment is challenged through exposure to new conditions, and they are distanced from their cultural group, geographically and psychologically, it is inevitable that they will be changed in some way by that experience. At a key point in developmental terms, this can profoundly shape one's sense of self, and evolving identity.

Eighteen international students of non-European backgrounds, from 11 different countries, took part in the interviews conducted to explore self-development and self-disclosure. The prominence given to students' voices is deliberate. It allows the experience of an underrepresented section of the student population to be heard. Names have been replaced by pseudonyms, and any other potentially identifying information has been removed or changed.



Self-development related to cultural change

Issues of self-development characterise a key transition from adolescence into young adulthood and are shared by all students regardless of their cultural background. International students may have much in common with local students, at the same developmental stage. This aspect can almost be overlooked as it is familiar and unspectacular, yet for many students it is the baseline, in addition to all the other complexities of identity management.

Maya explains how much she craved the space to develop her independence:

'When I am at home in my country, if I can't do something, my parents will always be there to pick up the pieces. Here I have me and it feels good to be independent. If someone is always there, it minimises how independent you can be. You tend to just lean on them. I wanted to overcome my fear and if something happens, know I can handle it.'

Tarif spoke of the practicalities of acquiring life skills that helped him to feel more confident and responsible:

'I've learned a lot. This experience is not only the degree. The fact that I'm living here; from the morning, I have to plan my day. Like what I'm going to eat, when to study, when to wash my clothes. I also work two days. Back home everything was taken care of. Doing things by yourself makes you more responsible. I don't have to depend on my parents now for pocket money. The confidence is much more in me.'

Selma was also attuned to the opportunities for personal growth.

'You're starting all over again. Everything is new. You are carving out your identity in the new place. This is one advantage I've have gotten out of living away from home. I've learnt more about myself. If I'd stayed at home, I wouldn't have had the chance because of the cultural bindings. It's not considered normal to be on your own (in my country). People think "Are you OK?" Communities and families revolve around being with other people. It has good aspects, because there is that social support structure where you're never really going crazy on your own.'

Selma has learned to embrace her own company and solitude as part of her self-development. She equates strength with being able to be on her own.

Many students commented on the benefits of exposure to other cultures, but admitted it was a challenge. Alma advocated integration. Yet she shared that this was effortful and required perseverance. In study matters, she struggled to remember recently acquired knowledge.

'I think its better for me, the mix between different cultures. Sometimes I feel shy when asked a question because I didn't have the answer. When I am reading something relevant to my study, I always understand,

but after a while, I can't remember. Because you know it's in English and my mind is Arabic.'

Alma is progressing her academic development, sometimes slowly and painfully. Her succinctness in describing the current duality of her world is poignant. Her mind, she says, is 'Arabic' and yet she is in a situation where all transactions of daily life, most crucially study, are conducted in English. The added linguistic challenges to achieve self-development in these terms, is surely immense.

My analysis highlighted students' awareness around changes to identity: the subtle, barely perceptible changes through to the more radical shifts, which involved revealing a hitherto hidden part of identity. It would seem that for development to occur, some form of detachment from one's own culture may be necessary, to allow space for growth. To be totally identified with one's own culture can prevent the self from developing and maturing.[2] It is worth noting that many aspects of identity appeared unchanged and stable, for example spiritual identity for those who professed a faith; also personality, which most interviewees perceived as remaining consistent. When shifting occurred, the anchoring effect of other elements of identity seemed important for coping and facilitating self-development.

Stereotypes

The subject of stereotypes was a hot button issue. Sometimes this was in a grievance context, regarding the misrepresentative and damaging stereotypes that the students believed Americans and Europeans held about them. On further enquiry, some openly revealed the stereotypes they held about Americans, suggesting that these too were unhelpful for developing understanding between the cultures. Students who had travelled and lived in Europe and America often made these assertions. Omar expresses his ambivalence about the aspects that are good in his culture and the aspects of American culture, which he disparages. Later he gives a different rendition, weighing the positive aspects of his experience with individual Americans, against his misgivings about the cultural aspects that suppress expression of identity in his own country. Such ambivalence is consistent with stages on the Culture Shock model[3]

'I have studied a little about American culture. Our group life is greater than theirs. They live individually. Their decisions are made by their own instincts. They have been taught in different conditions to 'live the dream'. They call it the 'American Dream' and you have to be the American hero, by yourself. You have to achieve a lot of things. They don't expect any guidelines from their parents. If we try to teach them, they object (saying) "Do you think I am weak and cannot go ahead?"'

Omar revealed that he was upset by the stereotypes that Western people held about people from his country. A fierce sense of loyalty made him want to correct what he felt was a failure of perception.

'They think our people are very backward, that they are conservative, that they don't talk to women, that they don't drink... and they avoid them.'

Later, he offers the stereotypes of his conditioning.

'In my country, the same stereotyping is there and about 60 per cent of it is wrong. I have been told Americans are proud, they don't care about others, they are selfish, they are stupid, they use women like toys, they have no values. I have been there and met people. They have their own culture. Most of them are helpful. I was surprised when I met people who have guided me. So what we need to do is to meet people and talk to them to understand them. One day we will bridge that gap.'

I was struck by the honesty, in speaking so directly about stereotypes. Stereotypes prevail in every culture as a way of distancing and reducing those who are different. They can seriously damage the wellbeing of individuals from different cultures, who feel repeatedly subjected to negativity, usually ethnic or religious groups, in a minority setting. In reference to the attacks and hostility directed at Muslims after the 9/11 atrocities,[4] it's important to be aware of the negative impact of misconceptions on the psyche of Muslims, especially on young people who are already struggling with identity issues. This carries an implicit exhortation to professionals to recognise our own biases and stereotypes, as well as acquiring knowledge of the client's beliefs and heritage, when working transculturally. Knowledge can help to bring to the forefront any biases held by the practitioner and help to decrease the impact of transference and countertransference. This is an important aspect of building the therapeutic alliance and essentially contributes to culturally competent practice.

The presence of stereotypes (usually unspoken), present a barrier to relating at a genuine level, necessary for therapeutic work. Stereotypes are more likely to persist if the counsellor has little knowledge of the cultural differences or the legacies of historical impact of past and present discrimination and racism. Mckenzie Mavinga speaks of racism, which affects both the victim and the oppressor, and the need for intercultural learning to work through these issues at training

level and in supervision.[5] She goes on to emphasise how internalised oppression for the black client is a feature of the hurt and prejudice that affects a developing identity, terming the powerful feelings evoked by such discussions as 'recognition trauma'. An uncertain grasp of one's own culture, especially if white, and how this may be playing out in the transference and countertransference of a therapeutic encounter or indeed an everyday encounter, is an especially crucial area for practice and training. When clients are not recognised, understood and accepted for who they are, the experience can result in 'identity traumatisation' where the client's sense of self is threatened and seriously undermined.[5] Although the context of this assertion is transcultural work with UK clients of black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds, the value rings true for international students who share aspects of cultural identity.

I WAS STRUCK BY THE HONESTY, IN SPEAKING SO DIRECTLY ABOUT STEREOTYPES

How the client and counsellor view their cultural identity has an impact on the counselling relationship. When I first came across identity development models (Helms,[6] Carter,[7] Lee,[8]) I found them immensely useful for positioning my own development, for tracing where I had come from as a white female with an early rural conditioning, without exposure and opportunities for cultural mixing, in my formative years. Absence of formal cultural awareness training in my early professional career did not help to address this lacuna of learning.

That came much later, in part motivated by my intense discomfort about not feeling equipped and knowledgeable, yet wishing, as a minimum, to 'do no harm' when engaging with clients with diverse cultural backgrounds. The desire to develop my awareness and practice involves continued engagement with issues examining my own stereotypes, my relationship with my privileged history. I also considered how internalised oppressions of others, including my own, make themselves felt in my interactions across the spectrum of clients' identity – whether clients are black, white, of mixed heritage or have shifting and plural cultural identities. What particularly resonated with me was the recognition that the counsellor needed, at least, to match the client or be further advanced in their identity development, for a helpful, constructive therapy to have a starting chance. Where there is a mismatch, in other words if the counsellor is not sufficiently cognisant of these issues, for example taking a 'colour blind' approach, described as the first stage of white identity development, this can be particularly damaging for the client of colour. Thomas describes such race avoidance as 'falling prey to the colour blindness syndrome which ignores human diversity and uniqueness.'[9]

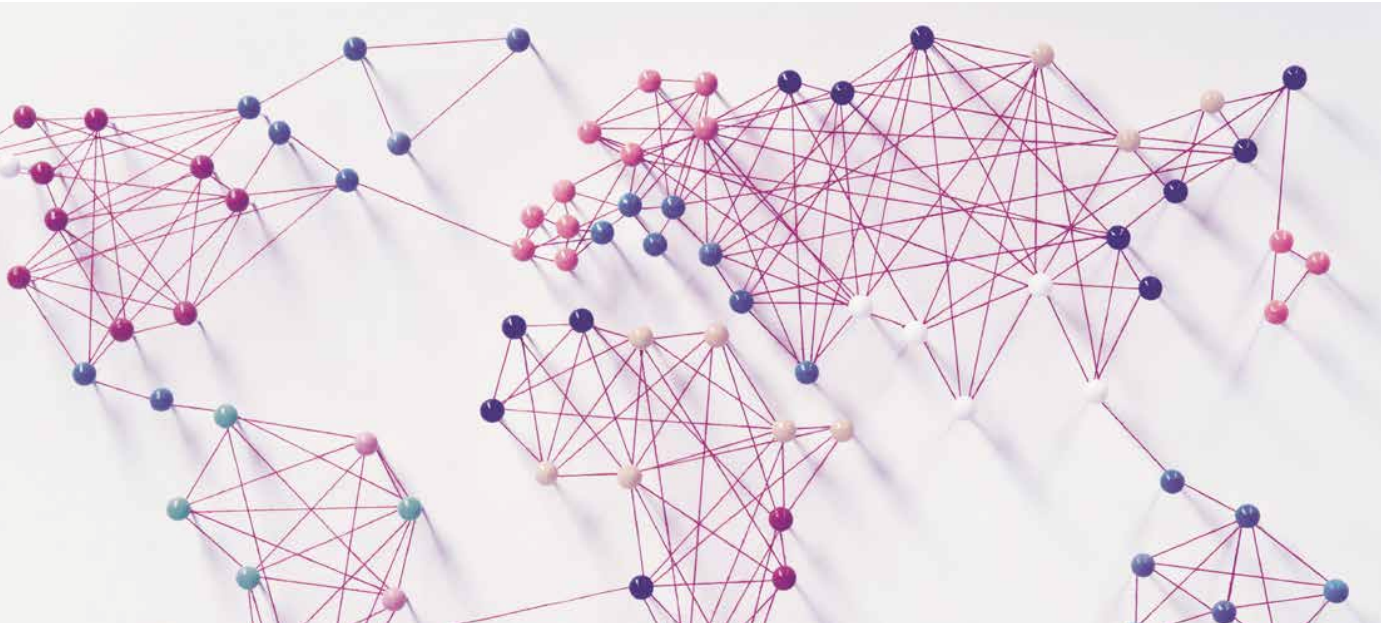
On issues relating to cultural identity, within my study there was a perception that counsellors lacked cultural understanding, leading students to avoid discussing cultural matters. A startling challenge to the profession, yet entirely recognisable and not surprising. Typical student statements: 'I'd be wary if the counsellor can fully understand the background, especially if it's culturally related'; 'What are the counsellors going to tell me apart from what they have read in a textbook?'; 'The psychologist might misdiagnose the problem and multiply the problem.' If our profession is going to overcome this resistance, which is sadly well-founded in many instances, then a wake-up call is urgently required to address key areas, such as inclusion of cultural competency in professional BACP accredited trainings.

Twenty years after gaining my professional qualification, it would seem not much has changed, in regard to integrating cultural training. Such training deficits are out of step with the needs of a changing demographic of prospective counsellors and clients from diverse backgrounds

Giving voice to unspeakable truths

In the course of the study, two male students disclosed their sexual orientation, possibly for the first time to an independent person. One called it 'an unspeakable truth'. For safety and self-protection, they needed to be secretive about this aspect of their identity. Discovery of homosexuality in either of their countries was dangerous and could result in imprisonment and even death. It is not possible to explore the ethics and confidentiality issues raised by these issues here, except to say the students' concerns about confidentiality were addressed and post-interview support offered and accepted.

'There is one problem I'm going through lately: it's regarding sexual orientation. It has been affecting me for a couple of years. It's like it has infected my brain. I really can't think what's morally right, what's religiously right. It's always a constant battle between my heart and my brain. My heart and soul say something else and my brain says, 'No; this fact is wrong'. It's something that's not even in the society. It's completely prohibited in my country.'



Not only was Tariq concerned for his own welfare, but that of his parents. Although he was afraid of their reaction, he was also concerned about the societal impact of prejudice.

'This is not something I can discuss with my parents. Even if they do understand, there's a social pressure to reject it, like it's going to destroy them. I've tried hard to get it out of my mind and the more I try, the harder it gets.'

I sensed that Tariq would go to great lengths to protect this sensitive information from his cultural group. It would seem that the new cultural situation had offered him an outlet to express a formerly hidden part of his identity.

The interplay between the needs of the individual to express his/her identity, when it's in conflict with the dominant identities subscribed to in their group, is a serious dilemma. Tariq felt tortured by his divided allegiances: to satisfy the needs of his parents, not to provoke rejection from his cultural group, yet to find a way to be true to another vital part of his identity – his sexuality. He struggled to reconcile these seemingly disparate parts in order to satisfy the most natural human condition of seeking intimacy with a significant other. Seemingly, the prohibitions made it impossible to integrate these elements of his identity while in his own country. There was a silent self-sacrifice, requiring him to suppress some aspects of identity in order to keep faith with others. Having geographical and cultural distance from the issue, perhaps taking flight to a more permissive setting, was the 'time out' that he needed to process these profound reflections for his identity development.

Caspar approached the issue of sexual orientation more obliquely. He described the precarious, intractable and dangerous nature of his dilemma, which potentially could break bonds with the group.

'I will be suffering for a while until I find the right resolution. Here, when you talk about sexuality, it's an unspeakable truth. Our culture is inherited in us. Of course I can try to ignore it, but I feel this aspect will hurt me. I know in some things you have to express your feelings to deal with problems. All these things relating to sexuality... it is something natural. But when it comes to this, it is a very sensitive issue in my culture and I have grown up in that, so I know it is there. I feel in my mind, in my heart, it is very easy, in this state now. It totally depends where you are.'

These were intense and powerful insights, depicting the serious conflict existing at the core of Caspar's identity. He had a strong sense of self and knew his sexuality was not 'wrong', despite the threatening messages from his cultural heritage. Simultaneously he was proud of his heritage, despite the repressive cultural aspects. Breaking the ties of tradition implies betrayal – to suppress a vital part of identity is another betrayal.

The experiences of Tariq and Caspar highlight the physical and psychological risks and concern for safety, related to 'coming out'. Cultural sensitivity is essential to provide the transitional space, somewhere to exist and be, where they can experience themselves.[10] This would be especially important at a time when the client's cultural beliefs are impacting on other aspects of identity, thus precipitating shifts. These raise implications about how to support a student returning to their country.

The way forward

Personal identity has flexible and stable aspects. The seeming paradox offers some insight into the conundrum of why identity shifts can be experienced as self-development for some and not others. Those

who are unable to find resolution for their conflicting identifications from the heritage culture and the new culture, are more at risk. This speaks of potential lost opportunities to evolve identity. It also makes students more vulnerable to existential crisis. A collectivist, traditional and usually spiritual background that emphasises 'being strong', especially for the males, underlines the delicacy of accessing help in a way that does not demean, patronise or activate archaic shame-based feelings of 'not coping'. The concept of a 'self' is conceived of differently in a collectivist society, emphasising the need for other 'helping agents' within a university, such as academic staff, to be culturally aware and knowledgeable about the possible implications for their role as referral agents. This has implications not just for professional training but more generic-based cultural awareness for all university staff who have direct student contact. Many students from non-European backgrounds are largely unfamiliar with the idea of personal choice, a concept associated with individualistic societies, therefore explaining the low occurrence of self-referral. Strong networks and collaboration between services, informed by cultural awareness, are therefore essential for risk management, early detection of distress and ease of referral.

Continuous lack of investment in university counselling services, or worse – the degradation of a service, by outsourcing it completely, as happened in my (former) university this year – spells serious, irreversible damage to the delivery of counselling. 'Hard to reach students' like the participants of this study, are often the most affected. Maintaining and investing in embedded 'in-house' counselling gives some chance to build on others' work, to co-create a culturally sensitive ethos, or at least spaces, for students' identities to shift, evolve and achieve. Such an endeavour relies on the will, perseverance and collaboration of all staff involved in the support and education of international students of non-European backgrounds. To disregard the evidence for good practice[11] suggests a failure to acknowledge fully those students' human potential and indeed risks exposing the hollowness of public institutional declarations about commitment to student wellbeing. ●

ALL THESE THINGS RELATING TO SEXUALITY... IT IS SOMETHING NATURAL

About the Author

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