

**Article**

Received: 15-01-2019; Accepted: 07-02-2019; Published: 28-02-2019

## US Students' Experience in the Indonesian Abroad Programs: Narratives as Awareness of Cultures and Identities

Peter Suwarno

*Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona 85281, USA*  
*Peter.suwarno@asu.edu*

### Abstract

The study is about the perception of the US Students towards Indonesian culture and language when they visited Indonesia. The purpose of this study is to explore the way the US students shaped their point of view about Indonesians and their identities after their living in Indonesia during eight weeks. Data of the research are narrative texts of written assignments about Indonesia and note taking resulted from interviewing and advising during the program. In analyzing the texts, the researcher selected only texts that contain surprises, joys, and concerns due to cross-cultural experiences and are translated into English. The results show that the expressions of surprises, joys and concerns depict the differences they perceive between their own culture and that of the host. The difference creates awareness that their identity is different from the host community. Their view reveals that they present their colonial attitude and identity, in learning and acculturating in Indonesian communities. The such view may be due to their limited period of staying, so they only saw the surface level of the host culture.

**Keywords:** perception and identity; acculturation; colonial identity; self awareness

---

### 1. Introduction

As human are becoming more globalized, universities across the world emphasize the importance of their students experiencing different cultures through abroad programs. While student sojourners interested in Indonesia can find information from various sources, first time visitors can expect to face surprises and shocks.

The purpose of this paper is to explain how acquisition of cultural and language competence by living in Indonesian communities shaped the US students' views of host communities and increased awareness of their identity. For this purpose, this study will treat various students' texts produced during the abroad programs as narratives analyzed to discover major significant themes as a revelation of their views and attitude of the host communities.

This study focuses on the narratives of US students participating in summer intensive Indonesian abroad programs from 2008 to 2018, who have the advantages over most other visitors for several reasons. First, these students had the pre-departure orientation, guidebook, interviews and/or trainings, which prepare them for living abroad. Second, they have high interest and motivation in learning the local language and culture, so that challenges and shocks are parts of their learning activities. Third, they stayed

only for eight weeks -- a short honeymoon period when they still do not have to endure long-term shocks [1]

However, having their own cultural identity, these students must achieve significant language proficiency and cultural competence in eight-week intensive immersion programs. This learning intensity leads to the end of their honeymoon period after about two weeks, when their discourses of excitement begin to change into issues and concerns.

While Oberg [1] defined culture shock with four stages: honeymoon, crisis, recovery, and adjustment [2], Ward, Bochner & Furnham [3] propose the ABC, which stands for Affect (feeling and emotion), Behavior (learned skills to adjust), and Cognitions (maintenance and development of identity). Moule [4] defines identity as the awareness of oneself that is “formed by the successful integration of various experiences of the self into a coherent self-image.”

The intensive immersion learning activities to acquire linguistic and cultural knowledge and skills constitute a degree of acculturation or an adaptation process to a new and different culture resulting in cross-cultural communication between one’s own cultures with that of another [5]. Berry [6] proposed four acculturation strategies: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization, which depends on two conditions: the interest of maintaining one’s own original culture and one’s willingness to cooperate and adapt to the other culture. However, the acculturation process may not apply to these US students due to their relatively short stay in Indonesia.

## 2. Methods

This study examines two kinds of data on the students’ experience of surprises and shocks: 1) written assignments in Indonesian consisting of home works, weekly reports, and final projects; and 2) my notes taken during advising and interviews, containing the students’ surprises, joys, and concerns. These data were collected during my assignments as the Resident Director in three Indonesian summer abroad programs: 1) the Consortium for the Teaching of Indonesian (COTI), 2008 in Salatiga; the Critical Language Scholarship (CLS), 2010-2012 in Malang; the Arizona State University’s Critical Language Institute (CLI) 2016- 2018 in Denpasar, Bali.

Treating the students’ texts as stories [7], this paper follows Riesman’s three approaches of narrative analysis, i.e. thematic, structural and dialogic approaches [8]. Due to the limited space, this study employs only the thematic orientation that focus on harvesting the main themes of the narratives while looking into human agent’s language use in evaluating the events in the stories [9] . As Burke [10] suggested, through the structure of the narratives’ plots and events, narrators have goals and motives. Human experience and motives find their significance in the form of stories that reflect who we are, including our strategies of sense making, dealing with issues, and revealing our identity [11], [12].

This paper identifies main themes of students’ stories as revelation and sense making of their personal experiences that present their views of the Indonesian people’s identity and at the same time reflect on their own identity as they adjust to the new culture [13]. As Wertsch [13] argues, narrative is a means of expressing and representing experience to (re)create identity in particular socio-cultural settings.

In analyzing the students’ expressions as narratives, it will select only texts that contain surprises, joys, and concerns due to cross-cultural experiences and are translated into English. Following Burke [10] ] and Bamberg [7] , I will select the themes and expressions based on frequencies, representativeness,

significance, and coherence.

### **3. Major Themes of the Students' Narratives**

Following Riesman's [8] thematic orientation of narrative analysis, the identified major themes that significantly represent US Students' narratives include: food, personal matter & privacy, transportation, social interaction, garbage & cleanliness, and religiosity. Due to a limited space, the discussion below will present selected students' expressions in bracketed numbers referring to the appendix.

#### **3.1 Food**

Blessed with rich varieties of herbs and spices, Indonesians have been creating various traditional dishes that excite these young Americans about the local culture. Issues that they most frequently brought up in their stories about foods are adjustment challenges, type and taste, food handling and attitude toward food. While the students enjoy the savory taste of various food creativities that excites their appetites and enrich their experience, after only two weeks, they crave for what they are used to: bread and pasta (1 & 2), marking the end of the honeymoon period. While enjoying cheap and abundant flavorful local delicacies from easy-to-get street vendors (3 & 4), it also began to affect their health, when some students became sick and complained about hygiene and food handling (5-7). Students also think that Indonesians are not aware of the importance of eating healthy: consuming more fried food, carbohydrate and sugar, but less protein and fresh vegetables (8-11). In addition, the students also learn that mealtime is not usually a social time such as in the US, when they observe that most people focus on their food and conversation mostly occur prior or after the meal (12-13).

#### **3.2 Personal Matter and Privacy**

While the students have been aware of personal and privacy matters in Indonesia, they did not anticipate how experiencing these issues affected them emotionally. Indonesians are interested in discussing personal matters, including inquiry on practicing a religion, marriage, dating, dos and don'ts about men-women relationship in the US and in Indonesia.

While they understand that every Indonesian must have a religion, recent development also indicates movements toward a more conservative religiosity [15], reflected in the questions about the students' religiosity (14-16). Dating and marital status are the other personal matters that Indonesians frequently ask and discuss (17-19). The discussion often extends to differences between the US and Indonesia concerning age and marriage, pre-marital sex, and even promiscuity in the US (19-22). While this discussion about sex and marriage are limited to the Indonesian friends of similar age, the American students feel that their local friends think Indonesians are religiously and thus morally superior to the American students (23-25). On the other hand, the US students also pointed the Indonesians' hypocrisy, in that, in this strictly religious community, prostitution is widespread (26-27). A topic that is taboo to discuss in the US is Indonesians compare their body parts, shape, or colors, signifying the Indonesians admiration

for the white skin colors while inferring the Indonesians being inferior for their darker skin (28-32).

### **3.3 Infrastructure and Transportation.**

While the students knew in advanced that traffic is a problem in most Indonesian major cities, they were eager to discuss challenges in their mobility. They were surprised of how difficult, unsafe and dangerous it would be to walk in most Indonesian streets because of the unavailable, broken, or unpassable sidewalks with no clear rules or warnings and the ignorance against pedestrians in traffics dominated by cars and motorbikes (33-43).

However, these students also learn about the importance of motorbikes in the Indonesian transportation culture due to its mobility, efficient use of space, and low cost. They also praised the creative, smart, efficient, safe and patient use of the limited transportation facilities to accommodate the mobility of a large number of people (44-53).

### **3.4 Social Interaction**

As a communal society, where members pay attention to each other's affairs, Indonesians have to show inclusiveness, solidarity, and friendliness toward each other in daily interaction. The students' narrative that show differences between Indonesia and their home communities confirm that Indonesia is more collectivist while the US` is more individualist society. In this type of community, the students enjoyed pleasant surprises such as the caring, attention, and sometimes admiration received from members of the family and communities (54-61). In addition, they liked a slower pace of life compare to where they are from, because an easy-going life with less pressure help them to adjust to the new culture (62-68). They admitted Indonesians are generally very tolerant about time; spending extra time speaking to someone to build relationship is more often more important than being on time for their meeting.

However, the students also expressed discomfort when it comes to individual space, where closeness in relationship and interaction leads Indonesians to have less privacy. With a concept of individual space in Indonesia being different from Western countries, Indonesians tend to stand much closer to each other and there is often no queue (69-73). In this communal society, people respect each other in their interactions, including with the students. However, the students also notice that in informal setting Indonesians can be rude when teasing each other, joking about and mocking their body parts, which are unthinkable even among close friends in the US (74-78).

### **3.5 Religiosity, Garbage, Cleanliness, and Noise.**

Interestingly, a number of students esteemed the commitment and dedication to communal religious activities; i.e. Indonesians celebrate everything from seven-month pregnancy, childbirth, puberty, circumcision, and marriage, in addition to regular religious prayer gatherings in places of worships and during community's celebration of religious holidays and other festivities. However, they are also questioned the time, energy and money wasted on religious practices (90-93).

The students' expressions also show admiration for the efforts to clean the house daily and concern

for public cleanliness. However, they realized that concept of cleanliness is subjective; e.g. while using toilets, Indonesians clean with water and American with tissues. While they dislike taking off shoes in wet bathrooms, they admit that using water instead of tissue is cleaner (81-84).

Students questioned why there is no discipline in trash and garbage collection and no sense of public cleanliness. They care only about their own homes and space but not the public spaces, such as streets and rivers (85-89).

Another issue that annoyed these US students are the noises that they are unfamiliar with; these include noises and sounds very early in the morning, such as roosters' crowing and calls to warship from several mosques, as well as during the night from people gathering and motorists. Most of these students were amazed at the possibility that Indonesians never really sleep (94-98).

These perceptual expressions are subjective to the experiences of these US students. From many themes that students discussed in their essays and interviews, these are the ones that most frequently discussed by these groups with their own unique previous experience that may not apply to other groups in different Indonesian abroad programs.

#### **4. Discussion**

The common themes with their narrative expression above reveal how the students adjust to the new culture in the immersion program and how their perception, views and attitude of the host community's culture was shaped. The expressions of surprises, joys and concerns depict the differences they perceive between their culture and that of host community, creating awareness of their identity, which is different from the host communities. As San Antonio & Ofori-Dwumfuo [16] suggested, studying in different country helps students become more aware of not only the host culture and identity, but also their own. For example, about the delight of tasty and spicy food eventually they realized who they are when they became sick or missed Western food, which has been part of the students' cultural identity.

The social interaction also reveals the students' awareness of differences, mostly their grasp that they belong to more individualist US society as opposed to more collectivist Indonesians. As Mead [17] and Hofstede [18] suggested, cultural differences are shaped by the degree of cooperation versus competition commonly called collectivism versus individualism. Some collectivist societies may emphasize different features, such as in-group harmony, modesty, conflict avoidance, and confrontation, more than individualist ones. In some cases, collectivist and individualist societies share similarities and differ only in some features [19]. The host community members treat these students as special guests and family members, such that, unlike in the US, the attention including personal inquiries the students received confirmed that Indonesia is a more collectivist community where members show personal interests, inclusiveness, solidarity, and hospitality in their daily interaction.

While the students relished this personal attention, and admire the host culture, their narratives also uncover their critical views of Indonesia, when discussing hygiene, cleanliness, garbage, traffic discipline, and hypocrisy on vices. In this process of identification, the students' narratives differentiate their own culture from that of the host families in a way that their culture is superior. Their narrative about the Indonesians' admiration of their physical appearance enhance this superiority awareness, augmenting the colonial attitude of the students coming from one of the most advanced country in the world.

When this happens, it defies the program's purpose of engaging the US students in intercultural experiential learning without the elitist colonial attitude. In addition, as Cohen (1972) suggested, these US students enjoy experiencing the novelty of the new culture from the security of selected host family's environment that support the old familiar habits. Students' own cultural values determine their risk-taking and desirability to engage in intercultural experiential learning. Based on Renn's (1992) argument that more colonial students tend to take less risk in engaging with the host culture, these students still have much to learn about Indonesian local culture and enculturation into the Indonesian communities.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper present a narrative thematic analysis of the US students' experience in the Indonesian intensive abroad summer programs in order to reveal their views, attitude and perception of the Indonesian culture and identity which, in turn also increased awareness of their own. The narratives that seems to center around their shocks, surprises, joys and concerns, uncover the expression of differences between Indonesian and their own original culture.

The analysis also that the differences of both cultures leads to unfavorable and positive perceptions of both cultures. While the students admire and enjoy some features of Indonesian culture, the students still, at least subconsciously, present their colonial attitude and identity, in learning and acculturating in Indonesian communities. Due to limited period of stay and the students' strong identification with their own culture, acculturation was limited. Therefore, while most of these programs were deemed successful at least in terms of language proficiency levels, the eight-week programs still produced narratives that reflect the students' minimum grasp of the complexity of the host cultures and understanding of host native's views of US cultural worlds.

## References

- [1] Oberg, K., "Culture Shock and the problem of Adjustment to the new cultural environments" *World Wide Classroom Consortium for International Education & Multicultural Studies*. 29 Sept 2009.
- [2] Kim, Y., "Adapting to an unfamiliar culture in Gudykunst, W.B." *Cross-Cultural and Intercultural Communication*. (243-257). London: Sage Publications, 2003.
- [3] Ward, C. A., Bochner, S., & Furnham, A. *The Psychology of Culture Shock*. Philadelphia: Routledge, 2001.
- [4] Moule, Jane. *Cultural Competence: A Primer for Educators*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning. 2012.
- [5] Berry, J. W. "Acculturation and Adaptation in a New Society". *International Migration*, 30, 69-85. 1992. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.1992.tb00776.x>.

- [6] Berry, J. W. "Understanding the Process of Acculturation for Primary Prevention". Refugee Assistance Program--Mental Health Technical Assistance Center, University of Minnesota, Box 85, Mayo, Minneapolis, MN 55455. 1988
- [7] Bamberg, M. "Stories Telling and Identities". In C. Daiute & C. Lightfoot (Eds.), *Narrative Analysis: Studying the Development of Individuals in Society* (pp. 135-157). London: Sage. 2003.
- [8] Riessman, C.K. *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*. London: Sage. 2008
- [9] Labov, W. *Language in the Inner City*. Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press. 1972.
- [10] Burke, Kenneth. "A Grammar of Motives". University of California Press, 1969.
- [11] McAdams, D. *The Stories We Live by: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self*. New York: Guildford. 1993.
- [12] Randall, W. L. *The Stories We are: An Essay on Self-creation*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press. 1995.
- [13] Illouz, E. *Saving the Modern Soul. Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-help*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. 2008.
- [14] Wertsch, J. V. *Voices of Collective Remembering*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2002
- [15] Ricklefs, C. C. *Islamization and Its Opponents in Java: a Political, Social, Cultural and Religious History, c. 1930 to the Present*. Honolulu: Iniversity of Hawai'i Press. 2012.
- [16] San Antonio, L. M., & Ofori-Dwumfuo, C. "Understanding Communication Dynamics among International and Domestic Students: A Case Study of a Global Living-Learning Community". *Journal of College and University Student Housing*, 42(1), 128-143. 2015
- [17] Mead, M. *Cooperation and Competition among Primitive People*. Boston: Beacon. 1967
- [18] Hofstede, G. *Culture's Consequences*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage. 1980
- [19] Leung, K. "Some Determinants of Reactions to Procedural Models for Conflict Resolution: A Cross-national Study. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 53, 898-908. 1987

- [20] Cohen, E. "Toward a Sociology of International Tourism." *Social Research*, 39(1), 164–182. 1972.
- [21] Renn, O. "Concepts of Risk: A Classification." In S. Krimsky and D. Golding (Eds.). *Social Theories of Risk*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger. 1992.

### Appendix

Selected expressions of US students' narratives from students written assignments and interviews based on representativeness, frequency, significance and coherence.



1. "they always eat rice for all meals;"
2. "too much rice, I miss bread, pasta, and cheese"
3. "Delicious and cheap food is abundant?"
4. "you can find food even after midnight"
5. "street food is very delicious but not hygienic"
6. "it is not clean; the sellers don't wash their hands"
7. "They use bear hands to put food into my plates."
8. "Everything is fried; they even fry mushroom and vegetables,"
9. "The tea and coffee is always very sweet."
10. "they do not seem to eat much fresh vegetables"
11. "they always offer me to eat more,"
12. "they really focus on the food when we eat, not much interaction"
13. "Almost no conversation at dinner."
14. "yes, they asked about my religion"
15. "they frowned on me when I said I am an atheist"
16. "they do care if you believe in God or not"
17. "they asked if "I have a girlfriend"
18. "do you have a boyfriend"
19. "they asked why I am not married,"
20. "They asked if in America is it common to live together without married."
21. "They asked about free sex in America?"
22. "they think we are promiscuous"
23. "they showed and emphasized that it is important to pray regularly and on time"
24. "they emphasized that women have to cover up in their communities"
25. "there are both in Indonesia strict religious practices and avoiding vices"
26. "they seem to be strongly against promiscuity but prostitution is everywhere"
27. "prostitution is apparently against the law, but it is very easy to find one"
28. "they find white people being attractive"
29. "the girls
30. jokingly wished they had pointed noses like us"
31. "among close friends jokes on body-shaming is common"
32. "the whiter the more attractive"
33. "they sell many whitening products"
34. "many streets do not have sidewalks,"
35. "the sidewalks are narrow, sometimes they are broken and unpassable"
36. "sidewalks have big open holes, but no warning"
37. "There are always vendors on the sidewalk."
38. "too many fast-moving motorbikes"
39. "Motorbikes go through the sidewalks."
40. "The roads are just too narrow for the number of vehicles."
41. "there is no right of way",
42. "People do not follow the signs."
43. "Very difficult to cross the streets; they don't care about pedestrian."
44. "they honk a lot"
45. "it must be stressful to drive in Indonesian cities, but they are used to it"
46. "Motorbikes are the most efficient means of transportation."
47. "People are very patience and understanding when another motorist is cutting their right of way."
48. "There is near collision every day, but there is rarely any serious accident."
49. "traffic jam everywhere, but I have never seen an accident"
50. "They could squeeze 12 people in that small minibus."
51. "I saw a father with four children in one motorbike"

52. "People have to be very patient, and move slowly because of the crowd."
53. "No road rage for being inadvertently cut off by passing vehicles."
54. "It is easy to get *grab* or *gojek* practically from anywhere."
55. "They always look at me when I walked by."
56. "They always smile and say 'hi'"
57. "They smile when they see you even if they do not know you."
58. "They always want to take pictures or selfie"
59. "They always offer me to come and stop by."
60. "They paid attention to me more than my own family."
61. "Everyone seems to care about you."
62. "They wanted to show me off to their friends".
63. "They always have much time to talk."
64. "I like it; life is more relaxed here."
65. "I am not in a hurry, times go very slow here."
66. "People have lots of time to talk with you."
67. "people are slow moving"
68. "they are always late"
69. "They usually start about half-an hour late"
70. "I cannot have my own privacy;"
71. "they always want to talk to me"
72. "They do not knock before entering my room"
73. "People are so interested in what I am doing"
74. "Why do they always want to know where I am going?"
75. "You can call them by names, but if you don't call you *mas* or *mbak*, you must be very close to them."
76. "Talk and joke about shape and size of body parts."
77. "When they mock each other, they are really close friends."
78. "When they are familiar they use dirty jokes, I sometimes don't understand."
79. "I am different, and they treat me differently."
80. "The house is clean; they clean the house everyday"
81. "We always have to take off shoes in the house, even in wet bathrooms."
82. "There is no bath tissue in most bathrooms."
83. "You must bring toilet papers everywhere you go."
84. "It is difficult not to get wet when using squatting toilet."
85. "Actually it is cleaner to use bidet"
86. There are non-biodegradable trash everywhere.
87. People throw trash everywhere. They throw trash into the river.
88. Rivers are garbage dump.
89. There is not enough public trash bin. The trash bin are too smalls.
90. The rivers that run through the cities are sewers.
91. Indonesian have lots of holidays
92. They have many of religious celebration.
93. The Balinese have many ceremonies.
94. Indonesians spend much time, money and energy for religious rituals.
95. "I cannot sleep after 3 AM because of roosters' crowing."
96. "The traffic is so loud even after midnight"
97. "I always wake up very early because of the call to worship from several mosques."
98. "I can hear some people gathering talking and laughing almost all night long."
99. "When do Indonesians sleep?"