

The Conflict of Self-identity in Multiple Cultures: Adolescents' Moral Choice of Cross-cultural Education

Jiamei Ma

*Faculty of Social Sciences and Law, University of Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
by24383@bristol.ac.uk*

Abstract. The deepening of globalization has promoted the mixing and collision of various cultures. An increasing number of young people are situated in the educational environment of multiple cultures. Adolescence is regarded as a critical stage for the development of self-identity. However, because of the complexity of cross-cultural education and the particularity of adolescents' psychological development, the development of adolescents' self-identity will encounter obvious challenges. Therefore, assisting adolescents to establish a sense of self-identity in cross-cultural education has become one of the core issues in the education field. This study centers on the group of students aged 13-22 who are studying abroad, with the goal to explore strategies and approaches to solve the problem of adolescents' self-identity in cross-cultural education. Various research methods, such as literature review and theoretical analysis, are adopted in this study to discover the main factors that have an impact on adolescents' self-identity development in cross-cultural education. In addition, on the basis of social identity theory and self-categorization theory, the research finally puts forward methods to advance adolescents' self-identity development. Meanwhile, the results of this research also provide references for expanding the research on the connection between adolescents' self-identity and their moral choices in cross-cultural education.

Keywords: Cross-cultural Education, Adolescents, Self-identity, Social Identity Theory (SIT), Self-categorization Theory (SCT)

1. Introduction

With globalization's deepening, different cultures, values, and social norms carry out combination. In such contexts, the educational environment also presents a trend of multiple and cross-cultural development [1]. Multicultural education may assist schools in constructing an open and inclusive culture, and thus promote the establishment of more peaceful, cohesive, and democratic nations [2]. Adolescence is regarded as a critical period for self-identity development. In cross-cultural education, adolescents need to face the influence from their native culture and adapt to differences coming from other cultures; therefore, this will become a critical challenge during their self-identity development period. Meanwhile, because self-identity and moral decisions have close connection, multiple cultures will further exert influence on the formation of adolescents' moral values. Hence, guiding adolescents to develop a sense of self-identity has become a significant issue in education field. At present, some existing researches have examined the impact of peer influence [3] and social belonging [4] on adolescents' emotional development and mental health under cross-cultural

education. Meanwhile, other scholars also have focused on the role of parent-child relationships in different cultures for shaping adolescents' self-identity and self-control ability [5]. However, from cross-cultural education perspective, there is a lack of researches on the relationship between adolescents' self-identity and their moral choices.

This research centers on the field of 13-22-year-old overseas studying students, with the goal of probing into how to guide them to foster a self-identity sense. The 13 to 19 years old phase is of critical importance for the cultivation of self-awareness, and international schools provide an environment that is a combination of local culture and foreign culture. Hence, the research in this stage possesses both theoretical and practical property.

Therefore, this research is set under the background of multiple cultures, with self-identity as a consideration item, and its main content is to probe into tactics and measures for guiding teenagers to foster a sense of self-identity. To cope with this problem, we adopt literature analysis method, and key problems in self-identity development are thus identified. In addition, this research inspects related theories and practical experiences, and as a result, puts forward practical tactics and measures as a reply. Lastly, corresponding conclusions will be drawn according to the research outcomes.

This study sets its research question as that of how to develop adolescents' self-identity and moral values within cross-cultural education background, thus providing two noticeable contributions to existing research. Firstly, the main factors exerting influence on adolescents' self-identity development in multicultural education context are summarized by this research. Second, through theoretical research and empirical analysis, methods for advancing adolescents' self-identity development are put forward by this paper.

2. Literature review

As reported by UNESCO, the past twenty years have observed a notable growth in the global quantity of international students, thus causing an expanding appearance of teenagers in multi-cultural educational settings. They are subjected to cultural shocks from different cultures [6]. Some social issues that are caused by culture differences, like ethnic discrimination, produce negative influence on the study and growth of young persons in cross-cultural surroundings [7]. As a result, the multicultural environment poses important challenges to the physical and mental development of adolescents.

Developing a coherent sense of self and identity is recognized as one of the key developmental tasks of adolescence [8]. Self-identity is expressed as the understanding and internalization of one's own characteristics, values, beliefs, and personal attributes [9]. Adolescence is a critical period for the development of self-identity. They will face important challenges in reconciling the development and integration of their unique identities into the social environment. Some existing research shows that cultural environment can significantly affect the moral identity of adolescents [10]. In cross-cultural education, language obstacles, acculturation process, and unclear futures can arouse mental health issues such as lack of belonging feeling in adolescence. Hence, the problem of adolescents' self-identity from cross-cultural education angle should receive wide-ranging attention.

Adolescence is regarded as a stage with extremely notable changes in moral development sphere. The social surroundings where adolescents are living can push forward the forming of their value views and moral self-beings. Some academic researchers put forward that cultural and ethnic groups produce influences on adolescents' behaviors related to morality [11]. Moreover, the self-identity of adolescents has close connection with their moral identity. Those persons who possess a more strong and stable moral identity have higher possibilities to do the correct moral selection [12].

Social identity theory (SIT) explains how individuals feel a sense of belonging to a group and how they feel about their social identity [13]. In the multicultural context, the development of a

social identity can help adolescents construct a holistic sense of self and improve their ability to adapt. Self-categorization theory (SCT) states that individuals categorize themselves according to their personal identity or various social identities. Such categorization is highly relevant to the context in which people find themselves [14]. As a result, in cross-cultural education, self-identity problems arise where the personal identity of the adolescent does not coincide with the identity of the cultural context. Social identity theory and self-categorization theory provided theoretical support for this study.

3. Identification of adolescents' self-identity problems in cross-cultural education

3.1. Self-identity between mainstream culture and national culture

In cross-cultural education's background, cultural identity exerts a notable function on teenagers' self-identity troubles. In this research, adolescents' cultural identity means the identity of their native and mainstream cultures in their present living surroundings. Adolescence is considered as a crucial stage for exploring and defining national values. At the same time, they are undergoing the acculturation process, which refers to adapting to their host country's cultural environment [15]. In cross-cultural education, adolescents bear heavier burden when developing self-identity and suffer from cultural identity confusion. This is mainly because cross-cultural education's acculturation has high complexity feature due to different cultures' integration and conflict. In this case, adolescents need more energy to learn about mainstream cultures and pay less attention to consolidating their native culture. Therefore, adolescents need to spend more energy on learning mainstream cultures and pay fewer attention to consolidating their native culture. This may cause them to reduce the importance of or give up some parts of their cultural traditions, thus producing feelings of guilt, confusion, and loss. In addition, such confused feelings and adaptation pressure can also bring about psychological troubles. For example, students from collectivist cultures have higher possibility to face mental health and psychological issues when they receive education in individualist cultures, such as America [16]. This mental-related acculturation stress raises psychological weakness and stops them from carrying out positive and objective self-identity building.

In general, when adolescents are fronted with strong pressure coming from the cultural environment, they tend to produce negative emotions like confusion, anxiety, self-doubt, and self-depreciation; therefore, their capability of cultural adaptation will also receive negative influence, thus making them unable to carry out objective recognition on the differences between mainstream culture and their native culture, hence hindering the formation of a consistent self-cultural identity.

3.2. Self-identity between group belongings and self-disclosure

When adolescents are growing up, they frequently make hard struggle between the wish to gain peer group's acceptance and the insistence on developing one unique personal identity. Existing research has proven that peer exclusion produces negative influence on adolescents' immediate and long-term well-being, because it can cause loneliness, low self-esteem, and social anxiety [4]. In the field of multicultural education, adolescents have strong eagerness to fit into their peer groups, specially those who share same national culture. Therefore, this situation can help them reduce their feeling of isolation and lessen the stress that comes from dealing with cultural differences.

Meanwhile, adolescents hold the desire that their uniqueness and personal values get recognized. Adolescents show their self-concept through sharing private personal information; this action is frequently accompanied by the display of their individual character and the expression of their inner values. Thus, such behaviors are of essential importance for the development of a consistent

self-perception, namely self-identity, and also for the building of relationships with their peer groups [3]. However, not all acts of self-disclosure can obtain recognition from peers. Especially when teenagers are living in a multicultural surrounding, they may fail to gain approval from peers with different cultural backgrounds, because of differences in communication ways, value systems, and social norm rules. If they cannot receive feedback regarding their inner feelings, thinking contents, and daily behaviors, therefore, they will produce confusions toward their self-identity.

Hence, in cross-cultural education, adolescent people pursue a feeling of being accepted among peer groups and have a strong wish to show their true selves in an authentic way. When these two kinds of needs cannot be fulfilled at the same time, adolescent people will face hard struggle between following the general trend and showing their own unique characteristics. Therefore, this kind of struggle may give rise to emotions like self-doubt; hence, it will block the building of an objective self-value identity.

3.3. Self-identity between exclusion and inclusion

Exclusion of foreign cultures, like fixed wrong images and unfair treatment, still stands as one of the core difficult problems for young people in cross-cultural education. Such experiences can bring bad influence to their self-respect and cause feelings of shame or anger to their own culture, making it hard for them to accept a multicultural self-identity. A study displays that most non-native English-speaking young people have met “language fixed wrong images” in English-speaking educational places. This means that people think they have poor English ability, no matter what their real English level is [17]. Therefore, this often causes feelings of being not good enough and self-criticism. It can also make young people refuse to join the main culture, hence holding more tightly to their original culture. This can block the building of a balanced, well-combined self-identity. Meanwhile, some scholars pointed out that when facing fixed wrong images and unfair treatment, international students may refuse to connect with their native cultural group, because they want to avoid possible discrimination and stigmatization [18]. However, this can make them separated from local cultural groups while keeping away from their own. Thus, this may further raise their feeling of being detached and not safe.

Adolescent groups hold psychological vulnerability in sensitivity. Therefore, if they absorb negative stereotypes and internalize such contents into their own self-structures, they will possess higher possibility to form non-genuine self-judgments and self-recognition. Thus, this kind of situation can bring psychological harms to them, and hence exert negative impacts on their future achievement and study capability.

Adolescent groups hold psychological vulnerability in sensitivity. Therefore, if they absorb negative stereotypes and let these stereotypes become inner components of their own selves, they will possess higher possibility to form non-genuine self-judgments and self-recognition systems. Thus, this kind of situation may bring psychological damage to them, and hence exert harmful influence on their future achievement attainment and study ability.

4. Strategies for developing adolescents' self-identity in cross-cultural education

4.1. Strengthening intercultural contacts

In multicultural education, the distinctions between national culture and mainstream culture are able to block adolescent social identity development. Therefore, this situation mainly comes from their shortage of efficient methods to carry out cross-cultural activities for lessening such distinctions. Intercultural contact can aid adolescents to build a sense of social belonging, fight against isolation feelings, and set up important social support networks via interactions like group projects, cultural events, and language exchange programs. According to social identity theory, when adolescents'

belonging sense and adaptability abilities are strengthened, thus they have higher possibility to form a positive psychological state. Hence, this psychological state can make them conduct active exploration of their self-identity under mainstream culture.

In cross-cultural education, common types of intercultural contact are inclusive class rooms, after-school cultural exchange activities, and intercultural team work inside the classroom [19]. These undertakings supply young persons with more chances to have interaction with mainstream culture. It helps them to study the stages and dynamic states of cross-cultural identity development, and also give them power to build their self-identity with self-confidence. Besides this, it can also advance inclusion, and make adolescents feel proud for their cultural heritage when they study about other cultures, thus cultivating mutual respect and acceptance. Therefore, adolescents can carry out better understanding of the differences between their own culture and the mainstream culture. This decreases psychological pressure things such as language anxiety, and as a result leads to the improvement of physical and mental health results.

4.2. Developing new peer relationships

Loneliness in adolescent period and worries about being excluded by peers are important blockades for adolescents' self-categorization in multicultural education places. According to self-categorization theory, adolescents will have higher possibility to categorize themselves into a certain society if they can discover similarities between their own selves and the peer members of that society; therefore, this can help them make clear their self-identity. To find such peer similarities, one useful method is to build new peer relationships in the dominant cultural environment. Friends from various cultural backgrounds can support adolescents' self-exploration by offering different viewpoints, thus making them capable to learn about diverse cultures and grow a sense of social belonging. Hence, schools can cultivate this kind of relationships via group activities or intercultural workshops, so as to promote understanding and empathy among peers.

It is important to note that while inclusion in peer groups can help adolescents construct a social self-identity, peer pressure and the desire for acceptance can significantly influence adolescents' moral decisions [4]. This is mainly due to the fact that, for avoiding social risks and peer refusal, adolescents select behaviors which receive approval from their peer group. These behaviors include both positive ones, for instance participating in community voluntary projects, and negative ones, like running a red light when crossing a street. Therefore, hence adolescents need to build peer relationships with carefulness and obtain critical thinking abilities, so that they can establish their self-identity at the same time as they develop suitable moral values.

4.3. Fostering open dialogue and providing experience

Adolescents must obtain one chance to face the self-identity problem inside cross-cultural education and gain experience on how to handle it. Open dialogue is necessary for adolescents to express their inner feelings and manage their identity within cross-cultural education. Building group meeting activities or one-by-one talk can assist adolescents to share their own life stories, cultural traditions, or hard situations they met when adjusting to a new culture. This raises mutual understanding among same-age people, and let adolescents get approval from others who have similar difficulties or views with them. Hence, they are more possible to get a feeling of being part of a group and bravery to face self-identity problems. At the same time, one key cause why adolescents have trouble to develop self-identity in cross-cultural education is that they lack related experience or methods to solve these problems. Therefore, schools can link adolescents with teachers and upper-grade students who have successfully gone through acculturation, thus getting suggestions and experience in handling identity challenges [20]. In cross-cultural education, building open

dialogue and mentor-student connections gives adolescents power to develop a positive self-identity. This can help them feel being supported and establish self-confidence when developing their self-identity in a multicultural surrounding.

5. Conclusion

Based on social identity theory and self-categorization theory, this research finds out key elements that cause adolescents' self-identity difficulties in cross-cultural environments, and puts forward pointed practical resolutions. Therefore, from the angle of cross-cultural education, this study also extends the research about the connection between adolescents' self-identity and their moral selection.

This research places strong emphasis that two principal factors are able to account for adolescents' self-identity problems inside cross-cultural education. First and foremost, acculturation stress blocks the capacity of adolescents to develop a complete cultural self-identity, and this situation is mainly caused by the tense relation between their native culture and the dominant mainstream culture. Therefore, the conflict between the search for a peer group sense of belonging and the wish to carry out authentic self-expression has connection with adolescents' social adaptation stress. Hence, it produces harm to the development of adolescents' social self-identity.

Social identity theory and self-categorization theory provide theoretical support force to this research. Hence, this study proposes that consolidating intercultural communications and constructing new peer relations are effective measures to solve adolescents' self-identity problems in cross-cultural education. Consolidating intercultural connections can aid adolescents to get involved in new cultural environments. Therefore, this may improve adolescents' sense of cultural belonging and adaptability, assisting them to go through and explore their self-identity within the mainstream culture's structure. In addition, constructing new peer relations helps adolescents identify similarities between themselves and their society peers and conduct self-categorization. These outcomes have obvious theoretical and practical values for guiding adolescents to build a sense of self-identity in cross-cultural education.

References

- [1] Lipura, S. J., & Collins, F. L. (2020). Towards an integrative understanding of contemporary educational mobilities: A critical agenda for international student mobilities research. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 18(3), 343–359. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2020.1711710>
- [2] Parkhouse, H., Lu, C. Y., & Massaro, V. R. (2019). Multicultural Education Professional Development: A Review of the Literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 89(3), 416–458. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654319840359>
- [3] Vijayakumar, N., & Pfeifer, J. H. (2020). Self-disclosure during adolescence: Exploring the means, targets, and types of personal exchanges. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 31, 135–140. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2019.08.005>
- [4] Tomova, L., Andrews, J. L., & Blakemore, S.-J. (2021). The importance of belonging and the avoidance of social risk taking in adolescence. *Developmental Review*, 61, 100981. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2021.100981>
- [5] Mancinelli, E., Liberska, H. D., Li, J.-B., Espada, J. P., Delvecchio, E., Mazzeschi, C., Lis, A., & Salcuni, S. (2021). A Cross-Cultural Study on Attachment and Adjustment Difficulties in Adolescence: The Mediating Role of Self-Control in Italy, Spain, China, and Poland. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(16), 8827. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18168827>
- [6] Weber, S., Stiglbauer, B., Kronberger, N., & Appel, M. (2021). The individual development of cultural identity and psychological well-being among adolescents with a migrant background in Austria: A longitudinal study. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 27(4), 684–695. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000451>
- [7] D'hondt, F., Maene, C., Vervae, R., Van Houtte, M., & Stevens, P. A. J. (2021). Ethnic discrimination in secondary education: Does the solution lie in multicultural education and the ethnic school composition? *Social Psychology of Education*, 24(5), 1231–1258. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-021-09651-w>
- [8] Chatlos, J. C. (2023). ADOLESCENT IDENTITY FORMATION VERSUS SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION: With Anindita N. Balslev, ““We” and “They”: Why Must We Engage in Cross-Cultural Conversation?”; Carolyn

- J. Love, "Complex Identity: Genes to God"; Andrew B. Newberg, "Identity and the Brain: The Biological Basis of Our Self"; and John Calvin Chatlos, "Adolescent Identity Formation versus Spiritual Transformation." *Zygon*®, 58(1), 156–182. <https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12862>
- [9] Zhang, Y., & Qin, P. (2023). Comprehensive Review: Understanding Adolescent Identity. *Studies in Psychological Science*, 1(2), 17–31. <https://doi.org/10.56397/SPS.2023.09.02>
- [10] Jia, F., Krettenauer, T., & Li, L. (2019). Moral identity in cultural context: Differences between Canadian and Chinese university students. *Journal of Moral Education*, 48(2), 247–262. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2018.1499504>
- [11] Malti, T., Galarneau, E., & Peplak, J. (2021). Moral Development in Adolescence. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 31(4), 1097–1113. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12639>
- [12] Schipper, N., & Koglin, U. (2021). The association between moral identity and moral decisions in adolescents. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 2021(179), 111–125. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cad.20429>
- [13] Harwood, J. (2020). Social Identity Theory. In J. Bulck (Ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Media Psychology* (1st ed., pp. 1–7). Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119011071.iemp0153>
- [14] Reimer, N. K., Schmid, K., Hewstone, M., & Ramiah, A. A. (2020). Self-categorization and social identification: Making sense of us and them. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/gub8a>
- [15] Baumert, J., Becker, M., Jansen, M., & Köller, O. (2024). Cultural Identity and the Academic, Social, and Psychological Adjustment of Adolescents with Immigration Background. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 53(2), 294–315. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-023-01853-z>
- [16] Ma, K., Pitner, R., Sakamoto, I., & Park, H. Y. (2020). Challenges in Acculturation among International Students from Asian Collectivist Cultures. *Higher Education Studies*, 10(3), 34. <https://doi.org/10.5539/hes.v10n3p34>
- [17] Dovchin, S. (2020). The psychological damages of linguistic racism and international students in Australia. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 23(7), 804–818. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2020.1759504>
- [18] Tikhonova, E. V., Kosycheva, M. A., & Efremova, G. I. (2021). Primary Professionalization of Foreign Students: Barriers, Stigmatization, Adaptation. *Integration of Education*, 25(4), 608–628. <https://doi.org/10.15507/1991-9468.105.025.202104.608-628>
- [19] Bethel, A., Ward, C., & Fetvadjev, V. H. (2020). Cross-Cultural Transition and Psychological Adaptation of International Students: The Mediating Role of Host National Connectedness. *Frontiers in Education*, 5, 539950. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2020.539950>
- [20] Athanassoulis, N., & Han, H. (2023). Role Modelling Is Beneficial in Moral Character Education: A Commentary on Carr (2023). *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, 30(3), 240. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1111138ar>