

## **CULTURAL IDENTITY BACKGROUND TOWARD THE FIRST YEAR INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION LIFE OF INDONESIAN PHD MUSLIM WOMEN STUDENTS IN THE USA**

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### **Abstract**

This study aimed at investigating first year experience of international communication life of Indonesian PhD Muslim female students in the USA deal with their cultural background. Therefore, their cultural background influenced the host community in receiving their existence in the new environment both as international students and part of the the society. This study tried to explore how far Crenshaw intersectionality theory and Ting-Toomey's theory on intercultural communication has assisted to formulate and answer the following: (1) How far is the influence of the cultural identity background has helped the students living in a country? and (2) To what extent does intercultural communication diminish the cultural background to formulate the success of these students?

This study is a qualitative approach using auto ethnography of depth interviews to picture the problems faced by the students. The study revealed that the ability to well-managed the cultural background in the circle of intercultural communication might help the success of the students both in the academic and social life.

**Keywords:** *cultural background; intercultural communication; Indonesian PhD female students*

## **Introduction**

Having experience of studying overseas is like two sides of a coin. One side states that it is a blessing of full outstanding new experience but on the other side it is like living in a mysterious labirin. Someone might face unpredictable situation as the new atmosphere is like a trap. This situation is called someone lives in a lost translation. Later, this generates to visible situation that might influence directly to the academic record.

Each person who lives and stays in a new environment often face unknown condition as he/she is not used to have in that situation. He/She brings his cultural background that is obviously different from the host atmosphere. Generally speaking, this difference causes severe situation that may distract both academic and social achievement.

The first year living experience in overseas might reflect the real situation faced by an international student. The first year is sometimes noted as the toughest days. If an international student cannot solve his first year living experience, he might fail during the stud duration. This might directly influence not only his physical body but also his mental condition.

Most of international Indonesian PhD Muslim women students who are pursuing study in the USA are awardees of certain scholarships. They obtain the donors from the home country, Indonesia, or from the host country, the US. They have achieved the scholarship after fighting for certain requirements. It is mostly understood that competing scholarship to the US universities needs extra effort as the requirements to meet are very hard. The challenge is not merely only about the academic and administrative reports but also the environmental situation. As muslim women students who are representing Islam, these women should be able to cover the big difference in living temporarily in secular country that has bad experience after WTC attack that has led to Islamophobia. This country is not used to assertive to women with hijab.

However, time has changed that the situation has generated to be more mutual for international students, or international voyagers, to stay in the US. Though, it does not guarantee that there some inhabitants of the country who are still too suspicious toward new comers who come to the country bringing with them different agendas. Most of these new

comers come to the US for economic reason. Unfortunately, the previous reason is also one of the motive though the most prevailing reason is to obtain degree from famous and notable universities. Graduated from the US universities is a blessed for graduates. They will be noted as fortunate and outstanding awardees.

This study applies theory of intersectionality of Kimberle Crenshaw and Ting-Toomey Intercultural Communication approach to dig up the cultural identity background of the Indonesian Phd Muslim women students in the midth of intercultural exposure who represent themselves as muslim women living in a secular country and as Indonesian women with their communal rather than personal background. Later, this cultural identity is deeply understood in an international conversation named intercultural communication. It is a situation where two or more different cultural background of speakers take part in the communication. Thus, intercultural communication theory of Stella Ting-Toomey is very helpful to manage this feature.

Reflecting from several research done by Amirul Mukminin himself for his dissertation completion in 2011 entitled '*From East to West: A Phenomenological Study of Indonesian Graduate Students*' and by Amirul Mukminin and his co-researchers that concerned about international situations experienced by Indonesian PhD students in the US. Amirul Mukminin research in 2013, for example, it only focused on the narrative life of Indonesian students as international students. However, this study also tries to explore the international situation from the angles of cultural background possessed by the Indonesian PhD Muslim women students that has influenced the acceptance of their surrounding during the intercultural communication. This study also reflects these students as Muslim women staying temporarily in a country who has sharp view on Islam. Thus, this study is very far different from the previous research. Hence this study tries to fill the gap due to the situation to view a better understanding about the position of Indonesian PhD Muslim women students in an international relationship. The cultural identity is seen by understanding the intersection from these women's personal background in an intercultural communication situation.

## **Research Method**

Applying a descriptive qualitative based on the auto ethnography approach taken from virtual interview of the Indonesian PhD Muslim women students in the US, this study ties to explore the influence of cultural identity in shaping identity of the students in the midst of intercultural communication. The first year living as temporarily transnationals in the US universities circumstances is the main range of time to get a clear picture of the students experiences concerning about their cultural background that determines the success of intercultural communication life in the global conversation.

Based on eleven interviews results from Indonesian PhD Muslim women students studying at State Albany University, Boston University, and Northern Illinois University, they were compatible to represent unique characters both as individuals and students who were struggling to finish their degrees in the middle of international life challenge. Without denying their personal statuses whether they were married or unmarried, these features also assisted to understand applied strategies of these students dealing with their concern as international students who were culturally different from the host communities.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Temporarily Living as International Students in the Midst of Multicultural Atmosphere**

Most of these Muslim women students state that living in a multicultural country background as the US is challenging. They have to understand the host culture by making some strategies. Arifin in her article (2021) states that the Indonesian PhD Muslim female students need to construct an understanding dealing with the different cultures situation by undertaking acculturation, socialization, interaction, and other forms of social exposures with the host communities in the US. Here, the host communities are inhabitants in both the university and neighborhood. She adds that communicative competence through language exposure might help to communicate the diversity under the using of English as media of conversation. Of course, active

communication is applied to minimize the misunderstanding of the difference.

The different cultures experienced by these Muslim female students are not merely about the situation surround the living environment. As the are international students, they have to adapt with the university life by which of very different from their home situation in Indonesia. These students should adapt with the university curriculum if they are willing to be success on their academic record. Salma, one of the respondents, state that she has to take several months during her first year stay to achieve her best academic record. She came to her supervisors, lecturers, and academic staffs to manage her achievement. She reveals her experienced on being stigmatized as she is Asian which is regarded as students with low effort for the records. Fortunately. Her intended communication with other parties has helped her to figure out her university life situation.

Religious background is one of major to execute diversity on cultures. Though not most of these female students wear *hijab* (clothes to cover hair for Muslim women), most of them experienced questions on being Muslim women. The stigmatization on Islam is still existing though it is not tangible. Conversation on personal belief is something taboo in the global context as this relates to the human rights. However, questions on this might appear when the friendship exists. Most of these students also experience sort of questions mostly on why being Muslim, rituals in Islam, *hijab*, and the like. Surprisingly, they are very positive to answer the questions as these ways also part of their different identity background (cultural belief for most of Indonesians) that should be negotiate in a country with different belief. Arifin (2011) revealed the similar thing that most of the Indonesian PhD Muslim female students are eager to answer question on Islam and its surrounding by making long and clear discussion with the host communities.

Thus, adaptation becomes way to minimize problems caused by different cultural background. However, adaptation also finds its trigger when conflict between individuals appear. As cultural background also one of many identities owned b individuals, it would be important to make a safety effort that assists of obtaining mutual communication.

Furthermore, both a successful and failed adaptation of individuals will influence the identity changing that invites to another challenge of the swift. Ting-Toomey in her statement stated that challenge caused by adaptation appear in several forms: 1) the difference of belief, value, and the social norm of between home culture and host culture; 2) the disappearance of valuable values of home culture's norms; and 3) the incompetence of the new comer's feeling in responding the new environment accurately and effectively (1999: 245). Thus, a new comer in a certain environment accompanied by his cultural identity need to make a conscious identity negotiation through an effective adaptation to ignore the fatal failure for the following phase.

### **Intersecting Cultural Background in the Global Exposure for Indonesian Transnationals Students**

Deciding to be international students, these Indonesian PhD Muslim women students cannot resist themselves from self-motivation to take part in the international exposure. A motivation to obtain degree from well-known universities in the US gives benefits not only about obtaining degree but also economic and social status achievement. Personal bargaining for future career is too obvious not to be neglected. Arifin (2011: 191) states that graduates from the US universities will receive bargaining position to support their chosen and future career. However, most likely of these students must provide extra effort to achieve the degree in a limited time duration. Thus, the success on their first year living experience is very notable.

The university circumstance, as they are international students, must be prioritized. Some of these students as Nuril and Nurul state that their university life success will be positive situations to generate both their personal and social life outside their roles as transnationals. Arifin (2011) explains that Indonesians as international students tend to have unfortunate situation caused by different system of education that demand for extra intensive surveillance during the thesis/dissertation completion compare to host students. Felix and Lawson (1994) in Arifin (2011) state that international students frequently experience pressures more on laboratories research and essay accomplishment. The pressures

also influence the tutorial, lecturing, and seminars as the straightforward culture is not Indonesians type.

The US academic cultures which tend to be individual work, competitive and informal are very different from Indonesians ones. This is in line with Robinson (1992 in Mukminin, 2012) statement that the US academic culture apply common values of individualism and competition, similarity and informality, pragmatism, and reasoning style and philosophy of knowledge. Arifin (2021) shows that Indonesian education system put harmony and mutual assistance between students to relate each other.

Outside their academic life, these Indonesian PhD Muslim female students are also parts of their temporarily social environment. The cultural background frequently leads to uncertain condition as they are still making tight bounding with their home country. Arifin (2011: 195) state that most of these Indonesian students are not aware to keep their tight bounding with Indonesian culture. This situation is agreed by most of the students of this research. To them, cultural bounding with their room country is very important as they will go back to Indonesia and feel that their home cultural background with the symbol of cooperation cannot be compared to other cultures. Nurina reveals her statement that she has to keep tight with her culture as she only stays temporarily in the US. She adds that her first year living experience by keeping her cultural background identity was the toughest time. This situation is in line with Weiss and Ford result (2011). Meanwhile, Thurber and Walton (2012) also adds that international students in general experience transition/swifiting situation from their home to host country during their first year living.

Mukminin (2012) in Arifin (2021) stated that hopes in the first year staying might be difficult to achieve. Low cultural background owned by most of Indonesian by relying life in mutual, social, and communal respect is very different from the host inhabitants of high culture value who are more independence and individual. Hoftside (1986 in Mukminin, 2012) state that the US individual culture cause any individual not to to tight each other. On the other hand, most of Indonesian citizens tend to maximize the help of other Indonesians who

have already stayed in the US as social supports who later is called as conational relationship (Widjanarko, 2011).

### **The Cultural Background Influence the View of Indonesian PhD Muslim Women Students in the Intercultural Communication Context.**

The aim of intercultural communication is to obtain a mindful situation to generate benefits for the communicators in the middle of international exposures. Ting-Toomey (1999) in Arifin (2011) has offered a precise and effective verbally and non-verbally skills to deepen awareness on different cultures and issues in the host communities by making a change, transition, understanding the beliefs, values, and communication style of the surroundings.

However, cultural background of a new comer frequently disturb the process of adaptation. The self-belief of admitting self-culture as the most comfort compare to other might influence the integration process. Some of problems appear in surface experienced by a new comer in a host culture are varied. One of this is homesickness. Arifin (2021) state that homesickness as unable feeling to get rid of the longing situation of home country when he/she is far from home. This feeling might end up to uncomforted zone while staying in a new country. This also influences the adaptation process in the daily communication. Of course. This natural condition is also experienced by the Indonesian PhD Muslim women students while they are living temporarily in the US. The acceptance of the local students also generates this homesickness feeling. Hotta and Ting-Toomey (2013) in Arifin (2021) state that local students intolerance toward the process of adaptation of international students cause this unconditional situation. The different values of having independence and individualism rather than cooperation, having more concentration on academic record This might be they prefer to concentrate more on their academic achievement rather than to help out the international students. This situation make those transnationals to feel 'alienation' (Klomegah, 2006), 'marginalisation' (Brown, 2009), discrimination and other forms of rejection that cause them in 'loneliness' (Sawir et. al, 2008), and fasten 'helplessness' (Klomegah, 2006). This



uncertain condition is then figured out by maximizing conational engagement to make mono-cultural interactio) (Li & Zizzi, 2018) where in a certain case of intercultural communication is not good for the future living in overseas as they only depend on the assistance of friends from similar origin. Hendrickson et. al. (2011) state that conational interaction will cause the transnationals to loose opportunity in the intercultural communication and distract the acculturation process with the new culture. This happened as socially international students frequently experience difficulty and anxiety to make friends that generates the severe homesickness (Thurber & Walton, 2012min Arifin, 2021).

In her article, Arifin (2021) states about problems that might show up when the cultural background of the Indonesian PhD Muslim women students takes more participation in the process of integration to a host culture. One of them is homesickness. This situation is the most challenging in studying overseas as the closeness with the home country is disturbed by the distance and time. Norma as one of the participant of the research states that homesickness might be harmful for future life as international students. Though she is single, family support and conational relation with other Indonesians are beneficial to reduce and alter situation of longing home.

Activities that invite homesickness to reveal are the food, the people, and the environment condition. Food is very important party to be able to survive as these students, Muslims, must find halal food for meals. However, the halal certification for food is not common in the US. Aside food, Arifin (2021) states also about temperature which needs extra effort for the adaptation process. The difference temperature even takes longer time to get along with. Salma, one of the participant, reveals that temperature is hard to survive especially for her children especially during winter. To be used to living in a tropical country, she must be stay in an optimal health as she is responsible not only for herself but also for her children also. She thanks her mother who has advised her to bring some herbs and traditional medicine to overcome the inconvenient temperatures.

Other forms of different cultural background that contribute to mis-adaptation in the intercultural communication as a revealed by the

Indonesian PhD Muslim women students are dislocation or negative place attachment, culture shock, and financial problems.

To Jorgensen. and Stedman (2001), place attachment is a bounding formed by people with the place they live in that should grow and be in a positive form. These students also play their psychological condition to maintain the integration with their new bounding. They state that they experience uncertain mental standpoint caused by the cultural different especially the language handicap. They have to push the limit of language difference by pushing to use it in their social connection with people even with their conational support. Again, personal view on this situation is very important. Hashemnezhad (2013 in Arifin, 2021) states that there is a connection between the level of '*place attachment*' and individual's bounding where they become more concerned about the place. This should be done in order to be mutual with their intercultural atmosphere.

If this situation is failed then they will experience dislocation (*negative place attachment*) and it is a common situation to have this negative emotion to a new place. Of course, this situation is also common for a new comer who firstly enters and stays in a new surrounding (Ting-Toomey, 1999). Thus, these students change their mindset by turning the place they live in to be more bounding, cozy, and homey with mutual psychological support from people in their surrounding.

The most prevailing situation caused by cultural difference is culture shock. Arifin (2021) states that this situation frequently occurs when a new comer from different culture feels shock and uncomforted with the host habits. For the Indonesian PhD Muslim female students, the distinguished academic system in the USA is the biggest challenge to overcome aside of the using of English in the campus life and different customs. Hellsten (2002) and Hedges and Soutar (2003) state that personal and social adaptation in the country to pursue study and the characteristics both inside and outside the class is the key toward academic adjustment. As international students, this situation must be solved as soon as possible as it will caused another severe problems.

Relating to this situation, Ting-Toomey (1999: 245) states that culture shock is a social phenomenon as the cognitive disorientation of a

new comer has influenced on his identity. She adds that culture shock itself has double faces. If it is not solved, it might cause both physical and mental health. It happens as the different behavior influence the emotional and social life. Surprisingly, culture shock might improve a new comer to be self-independence, cognitively flexible on way of thinking, self-confidence and open-minded in the interaction process.

Financial problem is one of cultural background difference in maintaining adaptation for the process of intercultural connection. Though all of the students in this research are awardees of scholarship, they still bargain for stable financial management. The policy not to have extra job outside their duty as students often bear problems. The decision to bring family also force them to make financial management (Warsono, 2010). They have consider about this decision before they left Indonesia. They have to learn on making priority before spending the money.

Though they had enough savings before they decided to take the scholarship from their previous jobs in Indonesia as civil servants or lecturers, they still rely on their husbands assistance to have extra jobs to fulfil daily needs, house rents, children's schools, and another necessities. Strategy to make food for meals is also success to overcome financial imbalance. This is also way to avoid food that could not meet their personal situation as Muslim who must flag on halal certification for food. Another way to manage finance was self-cooking for meals and bringing food to campus.

To add, these students also maximize second-hand clothes from stores like the Salvation Army where they can save money not to buy more for clothes.

### **Problems of Mis-Integration Caused by Cultural Background in the Intercultural Situation Faced by the Indonesian PhD Muslim Women Students in the USA**

Mis-integration problems caused by cultural background in the intercultural communication faced by the Indonesian PhD Muslim female students are discrimination, cultural counterpart and self-confidence.

As Muslim women students with hijab, visual/tangible discrimination might appear in the surface. Their clothes are very clear as objects of discrimination that influence the acculturation process in the host country. Moreover, as international students, acculturation is positive for their academic record (2008: 80 in Arifin, 2021). Conversely, discriminative insights from the local students to the international pupils can cause stressful condition and disturb the acculturation process that downgrades educational record (Arifin, 2021). However, most of these students stated they experience a weird glance from outsiders due to their clothes performance. Fortunately, they could manage this situation by making clarification of their clothes' choosing when the surrounded people questioned for their physical appearance with local students and other parties in the university (Lecturer, staffs, and supervisor).

Cultural counterpart is a state when two parties in the intercultural communication prioritize their cultures to be higher than others. Loyalty to origins also contributes to negative stigma toward the host culture that the host culture does not fit with their presence. They perceive that their home culture is better than the later one.

On the contrary, this cultural difference can be positive for a new comer who is easily adapt and interact with the surrounding. Arifin (2021) the difference cannot be the reason to move forward though this is something mysterious as culture is not only a matter of something seen visually. Though it is a mystery, the cultural understanding can be done through interaction ion. Darmastuti (2013, 27) state that interaction in cultural understanding communication might in the forms of individuals and groups interdependence, respectful manner, and norms and values protection.

Surprisingly, the Indonesian PhD Muslim women students are well-prepared and smart related to the cultural difference to manage the situation by making efforts to ask both the conational and local friends. Their big efforts could enhance the understanding toward cultural backgrounds.

Meanwhile, self-confidence is something personal concerning cultural difference. Here, exposures play important role in determining the success of intercultural communication though cultural background might disturb its result. Some international students claimed that chances

to interact with people from different backgrounds help their comfortless to stay in a new environment. By giving information on backgrounds would ease the international students to make friends. The obtained information assists in enhancing self-confidence. The friendship among international students from different countries is driven by similarity problems of being different in a certain country.

The growing self-confidence of these Indonesian PhD Muslim women students is generated by the intense interaction with different persons. Self-confidence is closely related to self-adaptation that helps to create comfortless within the society. This comfort situation within the intercultural communication can avoid tension in the society. The more to make intense interaction the more obtained experience and insights both verbally and non-verbally. with strangers without leaving their origins. The active participation in the communication become adaptive strategy in enhancing self-confidence.

## **Conclusion**

Thus, ability to mutually understand cultural background that might distract intercultural communication success is very important. Adaption, interaction, and internalization the situation are meaningful to create and obtain a concrete and mindful a mindful intercultural communication.

First year living in different country with contradicted culture is influential in determining the in relation to the situations on the intercultural communication lives of the Indonesian PhD Muslim women students in the USA. The support from the host people, here local students and the common inhabitants, positively supports the success of these students. Arifin (2020) states that local students may help these educated transnationals in the intercultural atmosphere by revealing support for social integration.

The different cultural background that has successfully intersected with the local culture on belief system such as norms, custom, religious affiliation, preference on manner etc. is not problems that should be tools to clarify the difference. Moreover, the willingness to construct their understanding on different cultures by undertaking many forms of social

exposure such as acculturation, socialization, interaction, and other forms (Arifin, 2020), might help the success of these students deal with their intercultural communication exposure.

The ability to figure out problems caused by different culture is also strategy to internalize their understanding about the difference during the interaction. Again, the intercultural communication is to fulfill the feeling of being understood, the feeling of being respected, and the feeling of being supported (Ting-Toomey, 1999: 46). Moreover, Ting-Toomey (1999) pushes the implementation of knowledge, awareness, and skill in the intercultural communication success. This can be achieved by implementing creative strategy resulted from problems faced by the students (Arifin, 2020).

Cultural difference is better to be viewed as a uniqueness of a certain civilization. The difference is a tangible and shows a character of the culture. In an intercultural communication, the cultural difference supports the existence of this different conversation between parties. If this intercultural communication only consist of a homo or mono-cultural stand, the intercultural communication does not show off the core meaning of intercultural that promote different culture in a mutual relationship.

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