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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION BOOKLET

An Archipelago of Belonging:
**Community, Conflict, and Coping of Filipino
International Students in Hungary**

By: Neil Cezar Labay Sapungan

Supervisors:

Adél Pásztor, Ph.D. habil.

Anna Laura Hidegh, Ph.D.

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Introduction: Conceptual Metaphor — Likened to a Train Journey

The transnational experiences of Filipino international students in Hungary can be understood through a journey metaphor.

The train that began its journey—carrying passengers from the Philippines to Hungary, through the varied landscapes of academic adaptation, social navigation, and personal transformation. This dissertation observed a few things you can find in the train carriage: communities develop when people share a sense of vulnerability; there are tensions created by being too close together; passengers create ways to deal with the challenges they face while travelling; and they change as they travel.

But the train does not stop there. New passengers board each year, bringing fresh aspirations and different capital endowments. Once graduates, they leave the train; they are forever changed and take that experience into some ambiguous new life path. Those passengers will be shaped through the institutional legacy of the carriage—the

Hungarian higher education system, the legacy of scholarship programs, and the legacy of migration systems. Part of these ongoing changes are visible, and other parts are not as easily seen.

What this dissertation offers is not a final destination but a detailed map of a particular segment of the track. The routes we travelled are presented here through the eyes of the people who made those journeys. Theories have been used to give structure to our travels, and questions have been created from our unique experiences while travelling. These stories are meant to be used by new travelers and anyone interested in supporting them as a source of inspiration or caution; a source of caution because of the many invisible walls that will need to be negotiated while on the road track, and a source of inspiration to know that you are not alone, that you can overcome the obstacles in your way, and that those who do so will have changed—not as a result of the struggles they faced—but rather, because of the lessons learned from facing their struggles.

I. Research Background and Relevance

Anchored in the concept of knowledge migration as a transnational mobility—understood as the dual process of students moving to accumulate cultural capital and navigating a pathway intended to link education to future labor mobility (see Findlay, 2011; Findlay et al., 2012; King & Raghuram, 2013)—this research critically engages with and complicates dominant narratives of transnational student flows. The study explicitly rejects the idea that international students are a homogeneous group of "migratory elites" (see Murphy-Lejeune, 2003)—a view that ignores significant differences within this group. In accordance with Pásztor (2015), this study affirms that international students have many different and unequal socio-economic, cultural, and institutional positions on a spectrum; they do not all belong to one elite category.

Within this framework of stratified knowledge migration, the presumed seamless trajectory of personal and professional advancement is revealed as deeply problematic. The unanticipated outcomes of students who

study abroad, including access to jobs; barriers to "settling" in the host country; and the precarious "portability" of foreign credentials, are heavily influenced by the resources, networks, and commonly available services that influence the lived experience of students (see Knight, 2012; Moskal, 2017). For students from non-elite backgrounds, the transition will have been marked by "class disadvantage and resource inadequacy" as they navigate through "compromise and complicity," rather than being a transition of elite status, as it is perceived by the individualist human capital model (see Brooks & Waters, 2010).

Hungary has become an important hub for international higher education students in recent years, especially through governmental scholarship programs like Stipendium Hungaricum. Within the context of Filipino Stipendium Hungaricum scholarship holders, Tempus Közalapítvány (2020) reported that there were two Filipino students in 2016-2017; nine in 2017-2018; eighteen in 2018-2019; twenty-three in 2019-2020, and forty-four in 2020-2021, becoming a constant 35 slots

allotted for Filipino international students up until the present. This shows an increasing number of Filipinos in Hungary, more than fifteen times since 2016; thus, it is becoming relevant to study this student group.

Hungary, however, as a semi-peripheral European study destination, has some differences from typical Western European study destinations to note—the Hungarian language (which is not part of the Indo-European language family), post-socialist institutional practices, and migrant-state relationships, among others. While research has been conducted on international students who study in Hungary (see, e.g., Pabingwit, 2025; Suchi, 2025) highlighting issues such as language acquisition struggles, cultural adjustment challenges, and financial difficulties, there has been no study examining the experiences of Filipino students studying within these institutions specifically. This study sought to fill this gap by asking how Filipino students navigate Hungary's unique amalgamation of opportunity and constraints.

From a sociological perspective, the problem involves analyzing how these differentially positioned individuals

negotiate belonging and construct community within transnational social fields (Levitt & Schiller, 2004). The dual embeddedness of Filipino international students in Hungary and their home country serves as both a resource and a source of stress that varies significantly within the range of socio-economic status. From an anthropological and Bourdieusian perspective, much attention has been paid to the conflict that arises when deeply internalized dispositions (Lehmann, 2007) are confronted with Hungarian academic and cultural practices and norms, as well as to the clash between old and new habitus that results from this conflict.

Consequently, conflict arises not only from cultural differences but also from the interaction of precarious legal status, dependence on financial resources, and inequalities in resource access—all of which disproportionately affect individuals lower on the socio-educational continuum (see Mosneaga & Agergaard, 2012). Thus, coping must be viewed as a social and embedded practice of tactical agency (see Harris et al., 2018) and varies across the student population. The

fundamental issue is how to understand the dialectic relationship between community (formed across borders from different positions), conflict (originating from an asymmetrical position within knowledge migration systems), and coping (as differentiated according to cultural knowledge).

II. Methods and Data

To address the research questions and analyze the complex interplay between community, conflict, and coping among Filipino international students in Hungary, the study employed a qualitative research design grounded in narrative inquiry. The qualitative design has both a theoretical and epistemological grounding based on the primary argument of this dissertation, which asserts that international student mobility, especially when conceptualized as a hierarchical knowledge migration, cannot be fully explored through economic, policy-oriented, or quantitative means.

This study employs the concept of lived experiences intentionally to emphasize the complex entanglement

between the discursive (i.e., how student lives are talked about) and the phenomenal (i.e., how student lives are lived) dimensions of identity and experience. Following narrative inquiry traditions, this research recognizes multiple meanings of "experience," including its role as "the most authentic kind of truth," "the prior existence of individuals," and "the process by which subjectivity is constructed." The most relevant framing for this study is the articulation of experience as "the lived realities of social life," which centers the agency, authenticity, and embodied realities of Filipino international students.

The interdisciplinary theoretical framework brings together theories from sociology (transnational social fields, agency in mobility, Bourdieusian capital and habitus) and anthropology (liminality, symbolic violence, narrative meaning-making) used throughout this study. This framework allows for investigation into the nuances of social inequality, power dynamics, and identity formation on multiple levels such as social class, nationality, and institutional hierarchy.

The data are based on semi-structured, in-depth narrative interviews conducted with 26 Filipino holders of Stipendium Hungaricum scholarships studying at Hungarian universities. The sampling technique combined purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Participants were located at universities across Hungary, with the majority based in Budapest. Those who did not attend university in Budapest were studying at universities in smaller cities and provincial areas, such as Debrecen, Szeged, and Pécs.

Interviews were conducted using either English or Filipino, depending on what each participant preferred. Audio recordings of the interviews were obtained from participants who gave consent, and each interview lasted 60-120 minutes, allowing enough time for in-depth experience sharing.

III. Scientific Results of Dissertation

Findings reveal that international student mobility functions as a stratified knowledge migration process, shaping life experiences across personal, social, and

transnational contexts. Challenges faced include academic disorientation, linguistic exclusion, institutional barriers, and economic insecurity, often compelling individuals to develop coping strategies, build communities, or engage in strategic withdrawal.

More specifically, the key findings of the study include:

The Transnational Journey: From Pragmatism to Transformation

Across all 26 transcripts, students chose Hungary because of the Stipendium Hungaricum scholarship and not because they felt affinity for Hungarian culture, language, or society. In fact, students often stated they knew little about Hungary before applying. This finding clearly dispels the notion that international students are cosmopolitan and able to choose between multiple similarly desirable destinations. Rather, study abroad is a "calculated leap" that abruptly places students in a novel, and often confusing, academic culture. The greatest adjustment relates to how education changes from didactic, schedule-based learning in the Philippines to an extreme degree of student independence.

Economic insecurity represents a key dimension of stratification among students who are part of what appear to be similar groups of scholars. Students with family support are able to construct ongoing academic paths different than those who must work to support themselves while pursuing their studies. Despite—or perhaps because of—these accumulated struggles, students undergo profound personal transformation. According to Tran's (2016) conceptualization of mobility as "becoming," this embodies fundamental identity transformation in addition to skill acquisition.

Students negotiate multiple intersecting barriers daily, preventing them from fully integrating into Hungarian society. Barriers exist at four different levels: linguistic, social, institutional, and embodied, all of which create a state of prolonged *outsiderness*. The best way to conceptualize this experience is by utilizing the notion of liminality (Van Gennep, 2022; Turner, 2017) as a theoretical framework. Students find themselves in a constant liminal state, being neither fully integrated into

the social fields of the Philippines nor yet fully accepted into the society of Hungary.

Community Dynamics: Formation, Fragmentation, and Reconciliation

The findings indicate that the formation of communities is not simply an automatic byproduct of shared nationality but rather an intentional strategy used to respond to the particular vulnerabilities associated with an individual's ability to move internationally.

The establishment of a community commences prior to actually arriving; much of this bonding occurs through connections made during the application period via online meetups. Upon arrival, the anticipatory community transforms into an active support system. The importance of shared cultural customs in uniting the community is regularly highlighted in the data. The community's importance is underscored by its formalization into an official Association of Filipino Students in Hungary (AFSHU).

While formation is a response to threats outside of the community, fragmentation identifies the internal strife

created among many community members by this vigorous formation process. The data show that the very elements of closeness that allow the Filipino community to be an essential form of support for community members also create the opportunity for significant conflict between community members. This is known as the "tight-knit" paradox; as communities come together in response to similar vulnerabilities, they become places of intense emotions, scrutiny, and conflict amongst themselves.

By far the most common answer to where internal conflict stems from was gossip. Gossip is interpreted through the Filipino cultural concept of "crab mentality," where someone would pull down someone who achieves success. The study theorizes that gossip serves as a form of social cartography. When formal forms of recourse are limited because student migrants tend to exist in small and restrictive groups, informal communication serves as a critical method for regulating their lives on a day-to-day basis.

Beyond overt conflict, the data revealed that community fragments through natural processes of life stage divergence. Social class differences—often unspoken—constitute a significant source of friction. Differing political ideologies concerning the political situation in the Philippines are a potential source of considerable division between students. Educational level further distinguished participants' placement in the Filipino community.

Meanwhile, reconciliation for these students means not only repairing their friendships but also incorporating their friends into their overall social network differently than before. The most significant coping strategy is the formation of friendships with international students from other countries. Concurrently with diversification, students develop more selective engagement with the Filipino community. Strikingly, when students do describe reconciliation with former friends, they frame it as an achievement of personal maturity rather than the restoration of the original relationship.

Coping as Negotiated Resilience

Students consistently described the Hungarian educational system as "lighter" than what they had experienced in the Philippines. The most frequently cited academic coping resource was the policy allowing multiple exam attempts. Over time, students developed the capacity for self-directed learning. A crucial collective strategy for managing academic pressures was peer learning within the Filipino community.

Language was possibly the biggest barrier and challenging issue faced by students. Students began to develop strategies to cope with language barriers that transformed from shock to increasingly sophisticated levels of language navigation. The most immediate coping strategy was technological. Students turned to their phones as essential tools for navigating the Hungarian-speaking society. All students were required to take Hungarian language courses, generally for the duration of two semesters, but these courses were limited in scope. When technology and classroom learning

proved insufficient, students turned to peers for translation assistance.

The most frequently noted cultural difference was the perceived "coldness" or *reserveness* of Hungarians, particularly in contrast to Filipino warmth and sociability. Students who successfully formed friendships with Hungarians described a distinctive pattern: initial reserve gradually giving way to deep loyalty. Not all students pursued Hungarian friendship. Many adopted a strategy of selective engagement.

Furthermore, students faced challenges with their scholarship stipend, described by all participants as not being sufficient to meet their basic needs. The most common response to material precarity was part-time employment. For many students, family support was essential to making ends meet. Beyond individual employment and family support, students developed collective economic strategies that leveraged the Filipino community.

Being separated from family is probably the largest emotional difficulty in the student experience. To offset this distance, various strategies were employed by the students, from frequent communication to the intentional avoidance of emotional attachment. For most students, regular communication with family was essential to emotional survival. Yet students also acknowledged the limits of virtual connection. Aside from communicating directly with their families, students dealt with emotional separation through establishing a "home" in Hungary.

The coping strategies employed by students generally indicate important similarities: they were negotiated rather than imposed; adaptive rather than transformative; relational rather than just individual.

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V. List of Publications on the Topic

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Sapungan, N. C. (2023). An ethnographic study of friendship among Filipino students in Hungary – *Oxford Ethnography and Education Conference (OEEC), Oxford, United Kingdom* <https://ethnographyandeducation.org/>

Sapungan, N. C. (2023). Am I being ‘othered’? The emergence of ‘othering within’ through an autoethnographic case of a Filipino student abroad – *Rethinking Educational Ethnography Conference, Freiburg, Germany* <https://www.ph-freiburg.de/>

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