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## Social and psychological features of inter-cultural adaptation of Russian students in different universities

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### Abstract

Modern globalisation processes, the rapid entry of Russia into the world community, have given more opportunities to interact with various ethnic groups ranging from short-term tourist and business contacts to complex processes of migration and emigration. Migrants and visitors have different goals for staying in a new country, meanwhile the researchers note a lot in common within the adaptation processes of both groups. In particular, tension, stresses and experience of cultural shock during adaptation are observed. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct psychological studies not only of migrants who come for a long time to a new country, but also of visitors, i.e., interns, students who come to study in foreign universities. Anyway, all migrants face difficulties in interacting with local residents whose behaviour cannot be predicted. The host country's customs often seem mysterious to them, and people seem strange.

**Keywords:** Adaptation, bologna process, ethnopsychology, exchange students.

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## 1. Introduction

The beginning of the 21st century is characterised by the intensification of migration processes. Migration is becoming a permanent component of the development of the society. Labour and academic migration acquires a special scope which is relevant in the whole world in particular, in the science and knowledge transfer sphere. Moreover, it is not just a matter of academic migration many countries are focusing their attention at the level of foreign students: smart students are needed, there is a struggle for minds. Some measures are being developed to attract such students, for example, scholarship support through national educational department or through universities themselves, etc. Various foreign ratings take into account the number of foreign teachers and foreign students. Sometimes there is a condition about the presence of an international faculty as a unit providing conditions for supporting academic mobility and training foreign students. It is generally accepted that in a prestigious university the number of foreign students should be about 10% of the total number of students (Vaulina, 2014).

The results of comparing the share of different countries on the educational services market for foreign students show that by 2009, there was a tendency for increasing of foreign students in the Asia-Pacific region and decrease in regions traditionally attractive to foreign students. Niels Klabunde basing on statistical data from UNESCO and the OECD analyses the trends in the struggle for a foreign student in the modern world. According to the statistics from 2000 to 2009, the United States is losing its position, insignificant losses of foreign students have affected the UK, Germany and France. Russia was among the countries with positive dynamics: the number of foreign students in Russia in 2000 was about 2% of the total number of foreign students in the world, and in 2009 the number constitutes about 4% (Klabunde, 2014).

Foreigners enter Russian universities according to the quotas of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation on the basis of intergovernmental agreements or independently on a paid or free basis in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation. The number such foreign students is recognised as one of the main criteria for the university international activity effectiveness. Training of foreign students in a higher education institution is also a major indicator of the quality and effectiveness of the educational activities within international rankings.

In modern science, much attention is paid to the problem of personal adaptation to the constantly changing environmental conditions, including sociocultural ones. However, despite numerous studies, there are still many questions and problems in the psychological science and practice as well as in understanding and qualifying the essence, types and structure of the phenomenon of personality adaptation, as well as some factors that determine this phenomenon.

According to Mnatsakanyan (2004), intercultural adaptation is a relatively new concept. At the same time, many studies of the problems of human adaptation to a new cultural or ethnic environment relied on the definitions of more developed and well-known theories and concepts of socio-psychological adaptation.

Due to this in modern works on this problem, intercultural adaptation is considered as a kind of socio-psychological adaptation (for example, the terms 'ethnocultural', 'sociocultural' and 'cross-cultural' are often used as synonyms for intercultural adaptation). However, these terms do not fully reflect the essence of the phenomenon being studied and are not synonymous in the full sense even despite the fact that they refer to one semantic field. As a consequence, there is a need for special studies to clarify the semantic content of each of these concepts. According to Stefanenko (2009) intercultural adaptation is 'the process of entering a person into a new culture, the gradual mastering of its norms, values and behaviour patterns. At the same time, genuine adaptation presupposes the achievement of social and psychological integration with another culture without losing one's own wealth'. In our opinion, the following definition can be proposed as a working one of the phenomenon under the study: 'Intercultural adaptation is a complex, multilateral process of entering an individual in a sociocultural environment' mastering its norms, values and behavioural patterns, which result in

mental health, a sense of creativity, a clear sense of personal and cultural identity, participation in the socio-cultural life of a new group and effective interaction with representatives of different cultures’.

Studies on the problem of intercultural adaptation used to be performed on the basis of a survey of refugees and temporary migrants and a little later on the basis of this phenomenon with missionaries and volunteers. At the same time, the issues of the influence of a new culture on the process of adaptation of a person immersing into this culture during short-term contacts remain relatively poorly studied. The changes in the structure of ethnic identity and human values under the influence of various elements of this new culture require study; the possibilities of a tolerant attitude of a person towards representatives of other cultures; psychological aspects of the international contacts development in a multilingual environment.

These issues remain relevant when studying adaptation processes of foreign citizens who come to educational institutions of our country in the framework of international exchange programs. Such students have to adapt not only to the conditions of the study at the university and to living in a dormitory but also in general to the life in a foreign country, have to get used to a different way of life, to the need to communicate in Russian, to the absence of relatives, to new weather conditions, etc. Such kind of adaptation conditions are often extreme for the students and they allowed L. Ward to suggest using the term ‘foreign student syndrome’ within the problem. This syndrome is characterised by extensive complaints of physical condition, passive and insular communication style and a careless and sloppy outward. As a result, L. Ward writes about depressed and ‘culturally shocked’ foreign students (Sholokhov, 2002).

More than 8 years have passed since Russia entered the unified European space of higher education having signed the Bologna Parliament. The main goal of this European agreement is ‘to establish a European zone of higher education, as well as to activate the European system of higher education on a global scale’.

Initially, the Bologna Process was designed to increase the competitiveness and attractiveness of the European higher education, to promote student mobility and to facilitate employment by introducing a system that makes it easy to determine the level and degree of graduates. However, this innovation contributed not only to the outflow of Russian students abroad to get higher education in the countries participants of the Bologna Agreement but also to the increase in the foreign students number studying in Russian universities.

Issues of social adaptation became the object of study only from the beginning of the 20th century, which was promoted by the acceleration of the rhythm of social changes in the world community. In Russia, this social phenomenon was not practically studied until the 1960s although mass migration processes made the problem of adaptation relevant throughout the whole century (Korel, 1997).

Intercultural adaptation being one of the forms of social adaptation was first systematically studied by scientists W. Thomas and T. Znaniecki. The next wave of interest in this subject reflects the works describing the difficulties faced by Peace Corps volunteers who arrived in the 1960s to developing countries to assist (Pearson, 1964).

The problem of intercultural adaptation in Russian science has only recently become the object of the study. The problem has an interdisciplinary character and is covered in the works of such researchers as K. A. Abulkhanova-Slavskaya, T. G. Stefanenko, M. A. Ivanova, N. A. Titikova, E. V. Vitenberg, N. K. Ikon-nikova, S. G. Ter-Minasova, T. L. Smolin, and others. The works of L. V. Kovtun, T. B. Solomatina, L. A. Ann-Wilson, I. A. Grebennikova, T. N. Yazvinskaya, S. Yu. Rodonova and others dedicated to the topic of intercultural adaptation of foreign students in Russian universities.

The approaches of scientists to the problem of intercultural adaptation are so different that it is often problematic to correlate the data and to note the facts that influence adaptation. The theoretical analysis of psychological and pedagogical literature in this area allowed to identify the four most common models of adaptation in a new culture.

The first is the theory of the cultural shock of K. Oberg and 'U-Curve' by S. Lysgard.

The 'U-curve' model of intercultural adaptation was built on the basis of correlating the success of the adaptation of Scandinavian students and of the time they spent abroad. Central to this theory were three periods of adaptation: the initial period of high spirits and optimism, the period of depression and confusion (the period of cultural shock) and the recovery period.

Later S. Lysgard described this process as a 'W-curve' which covers both adaptation in a foreign language culture and preadaptation in the native culture on returning home when the person re-experiences the state of dis-adaptation followed by the second stage of recovery (Milton Bennett, 1986).

The theoretical concept of cultural shock was first introduced into scientific use by K. Oberg. He considered this concept as some kind of 'occupational disease' of those who unexpectedly found themselves in a new culture that differs from the native one.

The main characteristics of the culture shock are the following:

- nervous tension due to the need of psychological adaptation;
- sense of loss and deprivation due to the lack of relatives and friends left at home, a change in status (often lowering) and the absence of favourite household items;
- feeling retentiveness by new environment or unwillingness to communicate with a new cultural group;
- confusion in old and new social roles, values, identities, etc.;
- feeling of surprise, anxiety and sometimes even disgust or indignation at the sight of cultural differences;
- feeling of powerlessness and helplessness due to social inadequacy in the new cultural environment (Oberg, 1960).

A more modern version of this model is 'recovery', but not after illness due to being in a new cultural environment but after a crisis of a personality or its ethnic identity (Stefanenko, 2009).

Looking at the adaptation of a person to an unfamiliar cultural environment as a natural process of learning new things, we can take this phenomenon as a model of intercultural adaptation (its representatives, K. David, A. Fournharn and S. Bochnar).

Within this model, different directions of intercultural education corresponding to two different approaches to the mechanism of intercultural adaptation are being highlighted. The first direction is concentrated within the field of communication, here the basis of the theory that communication skills determine the ability of an individual to act in all life circumstances lies (Burnham, 1986).

Here, intercultural adaptation is viewed as the process of learning communication skills which are necessary for effective communication and preventing mistakes in verbal and non-verbal communication that are inevitable in a foreign country.

Representatives of the second direction believe that the success of adaptation depends on the implementation of appropriate social behaviour but in contrast to the communicative direction they focus on teaching behaviour that corresponds to a certain cultural situation and to the norms and traditions which are peculiar to this culture (David, 1976).

Successful adaptation within the framework of the described model is first of all the preservation of one's own culture and at the same time, the knowledge of the new one, the development and the enrichment of one's inner world. However, here, the process of adaptation is viewed not only as making the unfamiliar familiar but also to accept this unfamiliar which means to come to an agreement with the new types of behaviour, values and beliefs.

Another scientific model is intercultural adaptation serving as a cultural journey. In its framework, the concept of M. Bennett based on the principle of psychological dissonance is the most relevant.

Taking into account that people react not to the events they experience but to the values attributed to these events within the framework of their familiar culture, Milton Bennet (1986) considered successful inter-cultural adaptation as the acquisition of new skills and behavioural stereotypes which help the correct interpretation of the behaviour of a partner in intercultural communication.

The travel model symbolises the development of intercultural susceptibility with increasing contact with a new culture. It has contributed to the understanding of the cognitive processes which are in the intercultural adaptation but is rather descriptive in nature, it gives little attention to the types and dynamics of the adaptation process in all its complexity.

Representatives of the homeostatic model (I. Torbjorn, S. Grove) believe that the intercultural adaptation is a dynamic and cyclical process of the stress reduction.

In his conception, Torbjorn (1982) considers intercultural adaptation from the point of view of the changing relationship between the perceptual system of a person's coordinates, his behaviour and the new environment. A person independently evaluates this relationship from the point of view of his social competence or compliance with the external conditions. The level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction of an individual in the developing process of adaptation is a kind of engine. Achieving the desired level of functioning is defined as a state of balance the state of internal balance, in turn, leads to satisfaction, imbalance—to disappointment.

The relevance of the topic of this research work is based on the fact that within the process of intercultural interaction people face problems caused by the discrepancy in the surrounding world perception by the representatives of different cultures.

The purpose of our work is to study the social and psychological factors, types of intercultural adaptation of Russian students.

The object of the research is the process of intercultural adaptation of an individual.

The subject of the research is the features and types of intercultural adaptation of students during their studies in foreign universities.

### **1.1. Objectives of the study**

1. To analyse theoretical approaches to the problem of adaptation to a different cultural environment and to highlight the main indicators of intercultural adaptation.
2. To determine how the basic indicators of intercultural adaptation (ethnic identity, tolerance and values) change within the adaptation process.
3. To disclose how 'culture shock' manifests during adaptation.
4. To conduct an empirical study of the peculiarities of the socio-psychological adaptation of Russian visitors: interns in foreign universities and courses.

### **1.2. Research group**

The base of the research: Belgorod State University, Faculty of Foreign Languages. The study involved students of —three to four courses aged from 19 to 21 who had taken short-term internships in foreign universities. The number of respondents is 14 people.

## **2. Method**

To accomplish the tasks, the following psycho-diagnostic research methods were chosen:

- A modified version of the test 'Personality Adaptation to a new socio-cultural environment' (L. V. Yankovsky);
- 'Ethnic identity types' (G. U. Soldatov, S. V. Ryzhova);
- The author's developed questionnaire 'Intercultural Adaptation of Visitors'.

According to statistics from UNESCO and the OECD of 2009, more than 60% of foreign students were studying in higher education institutions in the EU and North America. The following countries were the leaders in attracting foreigners to study at their universities: USA (18%), United Kingdom (10%), Australia (7%), Germany (7%) and France (7%). They accounted for almost 50% of the total number of foreign university students.

## **3. Result and discussion**

An important point for many students who are going on internships in foreign universities is the question of 'how': how to establish interpersonal contacts in a new environment, how to master the values, norms and role structures of foreign culture.

A theoretical analysis of the problem of intercultural adaptation has shown that the intercultural adaptation is understood both as a complex process by which a person achieves compliance (compatibility) with a new cultural environment and as the result of this process.

Traditionally, the inner side of adaptation expressed in the sense of satisfaction and of fullness of life and its external side which is manifested in the participation of an individual in the social and cultural life of the new group are pointed out. The process of 'entering' of an individual into a new cultural environment cannot be carried out without the interaction of different cultures: his own in which he was born and raised and the new one which he acquires or cognises.

The features of intercultural interaction are determined by a number of factors: peculiarities of interacting cultures, historical, social context of interaction, behavioural, individual and personal and emotional characteristics of a person.

As a result of the study, it was found out that the majority of respondents have an average level of adaptation according to such scales as adaptability (%), conformance (%), interactivity (%) and nostalgia (%). A low level was found on the scales of depression (%) and alienation (%). Only in five people showed a high level of adaptability, which is (%).

After analysing the levels of adaptation according to the different scales which characterise the socio-psychological adaptation prevailing types of adaptation among Russian students while studying in foreign universities were defined. The obtained data are presented in Figure 1.

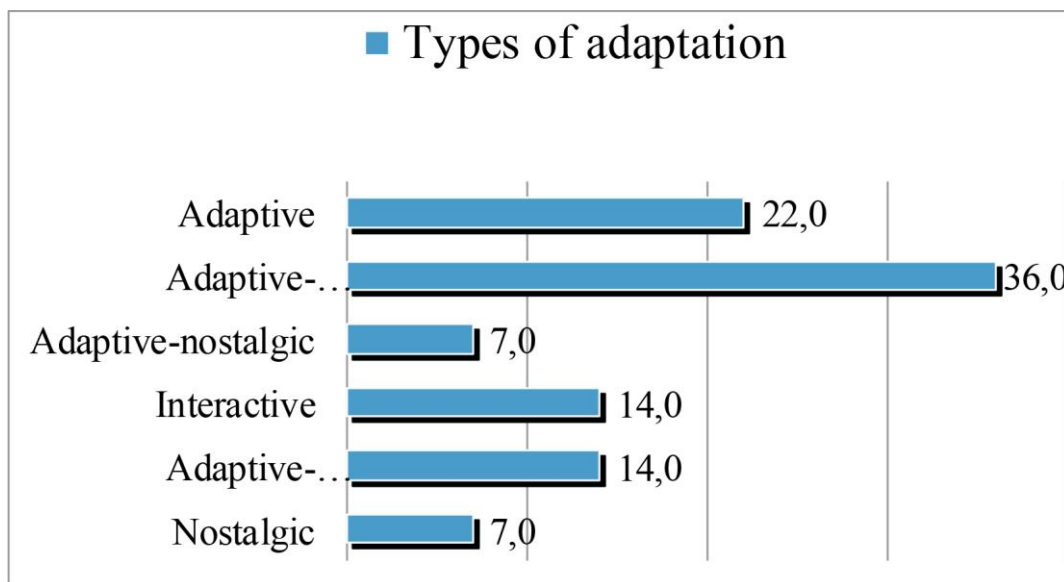


Figure 1. The predominant types of adaptation among Russian students

As it can be seen in Figure 1, the most common type of adaptation is the adaptive–interactive type (36% of the total number of the respondents), which involves the students accepting a new sociocultural environment, an active entry into this environment, a desire to expand social ties and the feelings of confidence in their capabilities combined with personal satisfaction.

Adaptive type was detected in 22% of the students. It shows personal satisfaction of the students, positive attitude towards others and their acceptance and a sense of social and physical security.

Interactive type and adaptive conformal type are found within 14% of the respondents. The interactive type indicates the students' control over their own behaviour taking into account the social norms, the roles and social attitudes of a given society, the focus on a specific goal and the self-subordination to this goal. The adaptive-conformal type means the desire to maintain relations with people under any conditions, focus on social approval and dependence on a group.

The adaptive–nostalgic type is found within 7% of the students as well as the nostalgic type. The adaptive–nostalgic type testifies to an internal disorder and confusion in the soul of the students arising from the sense of disconnection with traditional values and standards. Nostalgic type means connection loss with the culture, the loss of participation in it.

Also, one of the important indicators of intercultural adaptation is the features of ethnic identity. Forty three percent of respondents showed positive ethnic identity. This is a combination of a positive attitude towards one's own nation and a positive attitude towards other nations. Twenty two percent of students have a positive ethnic identity combined with ethnic indifference, which implies a partial bluer of ethnic identity expressed in the uncertainty of ethnicity, irrelevance of ethnicity.

Fourteen percent of students have ethnonigilism. It implies a distancing from one's own ethnic group and manifestation of intolerance towards one's own ethnocultural environment. Also, 14% of students showed ethnophanicism—a willingness to take any action in the name of the ethnic interests and well-being of their people. The changes in the structure of ethnic identity and human values under the influence of various elements of this new culture require study; the possibilities of a tolerant attitude of a person towards representatives of other cultures; psychological aspects of the international contacts development in a multilingual environment (G. U. Soldatov, S. V. Ryzhova).

Seven percent of respondents revealed a relative positive identity in combination with ethno-egoism which can be expressed in a harmless form at the verbal level. Sometimes, it manifests

itself as tension and irritation towards representatives of the 'alien' culture. Usually, successful adaptation is defined as a feeling of harmony with the closest socio-cultural environment and the main attention is devoted to the analysis of the feeling of satisfaction, psychological well-being and mental health of 'aliens'. Possible acculturational changes fixed in the notion of 'cultural shock' and in similar concepts of 'shock of transition', 'cultural weariness' are practically not affected (Ionin, 1998).

Studying some aspects of intercultural adaptation, it was revealed that the main problems for respondents in the new socio-cultural environment were insufficient language knowledge (40% of respondents), differences in mentality (30%), lack of slang understanding and of some host country cultural realities (20%) and differences in transport systems in Russia and abroad (10%).

The main factors-irritants are excessive pragmatism (62%) as well as taking respondents as foreigners (30%) and people of non-traditional orientation (8%). As for the positive factors, the respondents liked friendliness of the indigenous people (30%), their openness (20%), desire to help (15%), freedom of self-expression (14%), good breeding (15%) and the fact that social and cultural realities do not coincide with traditional stereotypes (6%).

According to the Russian students, the main differences between the new sociocultural environment and Russia are: good breeding (40%), lack of hostility among local residents (20%), desire to preserve cultural heritage and traditions (27%) and people's calm (13%).

The main signs of the 'acculturation shock' are: high level of culture (40%) of those countries where the respondents had their language internship. They also noted well-organised work of various services (street cleaning, transport and hospitals) (30%), the behaviour of young people (5%), the difference between capitals and major European cities and Russian (8%), respect for other people (10%) and willingness to help (7%).

#### **4. Conclusion**

The empirical study has showed that knowledge of a foreign culture by itself is not enough (all the respondents had knowledge of the culture, ethnic community, history of the host country, customs and traditions of the people).

However, the knowledge gained did not always alleviate the cultural shock, and the information often did not correspond to the nature of direct contacts with locals. In addition, it is quite obvious that whatever the volume of theoretical information transmitted, students cannot be fully prepared for the life in a foreign country. That is why during the surveys of the visitors returning to their homeland, it turns out that they consider the ability to cope with psychological stress and to establish interpersonal relationships, to communicate effectively with local residents as the most important for successful adaptation.

We see a technological solution of the problem in the practical development of a cultural assimilator and in trainings focused on direct interaction with members of other groups:

- training which include real intercultural contacts where situations arising from personal contacts of representatives of the two peoples to which the participants belong are discussed.
- attributive training in which the emphasis is on teaching how the representatives of different peoples and cultures interpret the causes of behaviour and the results of activities.



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