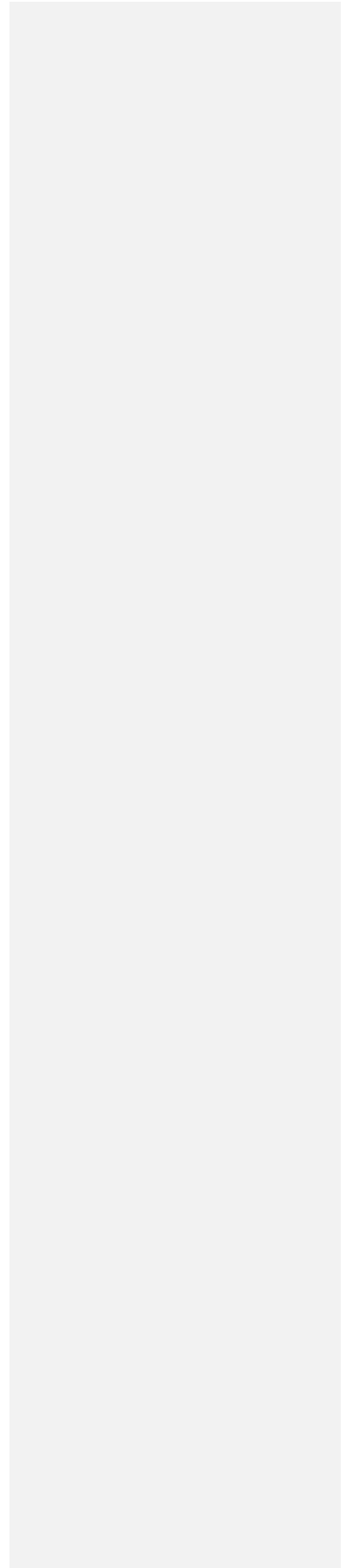**Fear of the unknown: a pre-departure qualitative study of Turkish international students**

Dr Lorraine Brown and Dr Gurhan Aktas

Abstract

This paper presents findings from eleven in-depth interviews with Turkish undergraduate students, who were, by the time of data collection, about to spend a semester at a European university under the Erasmus exchange scheme. The students all agreed to be interviewed about their feelings about studying in a foreign culture, and were found to be anxious prior to departure about the quality of accommodation in the new destination, their language ability and the opportunity to form friendships. Fears were expressed about possible misconceptions over Turkey as a Muslim and a developing country. Suggestions are made for HEI interventions to allay student travellers' concerns.

Key words

Introduction

There is a well-documented relationship between income generation and overseas recruitment in Higher Education, the US, Australia and the UK being the most popular destinations for international students (Ryan & Carroll 2005). Indeed Llewellyn-Smith and McCabe (2008) note that international students constitute around 20% of all international travellers, making student travel a multibillion dollar business. The economic contribution made by international students should not be underestimated. Spending on accommodation, food, travel and leisure features among the widely cited benefits of the proliferation of international education. As Ritchie et al. (2003) point out, educational tourists, who travel to a destination to participate in formal learning experiences and whose primary purpose is to gain a qualification, carry an impact on the destination that is similar to other categories of tourist.

A growing segment of the educational tourism market is made up of exchange students who undertake a course of assessed study at an overseas university, usually for a period of one semester or one year (Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008). There are no tuition fees; in this, exchange agreements are unique. There is a two way movement of students based on reciprocity, the aim being to balance the numbers of outbound and inbound students (Ritchie et al., 2003). It must be noted however that exchange arrangements are not always equally balanced, largely because fewer UK students can study abroad because of their lack of foreign language proficiency than can their international counterparts. Nevertheless, exchange students have been identified as a segment of the educational tourism market that has significant growth potential. There has been an increase in research into the international sojourn, in a bid to improve understanding of the issues facing students. If support structures are enhanced, student retention is improved and positive word of mouth increases recruitment (Ward 2001; Smith 2006). Ryan and Carroll (2005) argue that responsible recruitment demands that adequate provision is made to cater for the special needs of international

students: welfare provision should not be confined to crisis management. It is often argued that HE institutions (HEI) do not provide timely pastoral and academic support for what is sometimes described as a vulnerable group (Ward 2001; Lord & Dawson 2002).

It is widely recognised that the problems faced by international students and other categories of sojourner are caused by acculturative stress. However, as globalisation entails a gradual homogenisation of cultural identity, it is often claimed that using theories of culture to explain and understand attitudes and behaviour will become less relevant (see Featherstone 1995; Bradley 2000; Todres, 2002; Martin & Harrell 2004). Hofstede (2001) counters that though there is evidence of some change in individual countries, cultural divergence will remain, and differences may in fact be increasing. A growth in individualism among countries that have become richer is pointed out. Similarly, instead of diminishing power distance, the process of globalisation is acting to widen the power gap. Sitting alongside the contemporary debate over cultural homogenisation versus cultural divergence, is the common premise in the current literature on transition that most sojourners will experience some degree of stress following their immersion in a new culture. This is based on the notion of cultural difference between societies and on the move from a familiar to an alien environment (see, for example, Kim 2001; Ward et al. 2001; Brown & Holloway 2008), and indicates a rebuttal of claims for cultural homogenisation and decreasing cultural distinction.

The early definitions of culture shock have thus retained their currency and are widely used today. Culture shock is commonly defined as anxiety that results from losing the familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse, and their substitution by other cues that are strange (Hall 1959). The emotions associated with familiarity and strangeness are unpacked by Detweiler (1980) and Gudykunst (1998): familiarity is associated with the comfort and reassurance of recognisable phenomena whereas unfamiliar stimuli prompt feelings of anxiety, disturbance and meaninglessness.

A critical overview of the literature shows that the term 'culture shock' is not universally accepted, that there is much dispute over the inevitability of the sojourner's encounter with acculturative stress. Advocates of the culture learning approach, such as Furnham and Alibhai (1985), Ward et al. (2001) and Cushner and Karim (2004) argue that stress can be managed and difficulties prepared for. Furnham (1993) rejects the psychological approach to the study of adjustment on the grounds that it stigmatises those who cannot cope, and Crano and Crano (1993) caution against the tendency to psychopathologise the international student experience, and to exaggerate the stress endured by students. Furthermore the generalisability of the experience of culture shock is questioned by many theorists of adjustment such as Martin and Harrell (2004), Gao and Gudykunst (1990) and Brown and Holloway (2008) who prefer to view transition as a unique and subjectively-lived experience that cannot be made to fit a prescriptive model of adjustment.

Whether or not authors subscribe to use of the term 'culture shock', the move to a new environment has nonetheless long been cited as a traumatic life event as sojourners are required to cope with substantial cultural change (Gudykunst 1998; Kim 2001; Hofstede 2001). There is a substantial body of work which reveals the initial stage of the sojourn to be a time of anxiety and communicative difficulty, leading to the development of stress and coping models of adjustment (see Kim 2001, and Berry 1994; Brown & Holloway 2008). It is during these times that counsellors must be prepared to face the culturally-specific problems that clients may bring. As argued by McLeod (2009), counsellors need to learn to be culturally flexible. Meanwhile, Gordon (2005) points to the need for counsellors to grasp the power relations that are played out in the cross-cultural encounter, which are themselves influenced by the economic and political differentials between host and visitor. İndeed, multiculturalism in counselling and psychotherapy is criticised by Moodley (2007) for ignoring questions of power relations, and for emphasising the cultural differences of ethnic

minority groups rather than focus on their similar predicaments of racism, sexism, misogyny, homophobia and economic oppression.

Emphasising further the emotional cost of culture shock are those researchers who liken the experience to a period of mourning for the home world, characterized by feelings of grief and separation anxiety. The title of Garza-Guererro's paper published in 1974 is indicative of this approach: 'Culture shock: its mourning and the vicissitudes of identity'. Published in *The Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, this paper found an association between transition and impaired mental health problems that is corroborated in later research by Brown and Holloway (2008). Though it is usually agreed that mental health is only temporarily affected, in the extreme, culture shock can provoke psychiatric illness (Hamburg et al. 1974; Teoh 1974; Ko 1978; Yeh et al. 1981; Berry 1994), and it can also have consequences for physical health (Detweiler 1980). To illustrate, Storti (1990) and Mori (2000) found that stress manifested commonly in physical illness. This is also shown in students' own links between stress, sleeplessness and minor illness in Brown and Holloway's study (2008).

The experience of culture shock is mediated by many factors. Despite a tendency towards over-simplification of the stages of adjustment that afflicts many models of adjustment, there is nonetheless some recognition that the severity and duration of the experience of culture shock are a function of environmental, cultural and individual differences (Furnham 1993; Ward et al. 2001). As Brown and Holloway (2008) found, culture shock is not a universal or generalisable experience. Not all sojourners suffer culture shock; and individuals differ in the type and degree of shock experienced. This view is also reflected in studies by Martin and Harrell (2004) and Madison (2006) whose empirical work showed the sojourn to be a

uniquely subjective experience, influenced by a myriad of factors that a single model cannot capture.

Of the main factors that determine the ease of adjustment, *cultural distance*, measured by the degree of similarity and affinity between the symbols and values of cultures, is most commonly cited. There is consensus that cultural groups which have made a large cultural journey may be less adaptable than others (Gudykunst 1998; Redmond 2000; Ward et al. 2001). Secondly, *personality* is judged to play an important role in the adjustment process. Individual variations in response to a new culture are often noted, for example, Gudykunst and Nishida (2001) emphasise the capacity for withstanding short-term anxiety, which is influenced by an individual's coping capability. Hayes (2007) argues that confrontation with such anxiety is an increasing feature of postmodern, globalised society, and as Brown's (2009a) study found, though debilitating, it can also offer a therapeutic opportunity for philosophical musings and self-exploration.

Thirdly, *preparedness for change* has received much attention from researchers; indeed it is cited in Kim's (2001) predictive framework as a vital variable. Being prepared for change refers to being psychologically ready; usually this involves acquiring knowledge about the new culture in advance or as new situations demand (Kim 2001). This understanding lies at the heart of the culture learning paradigm, which holds that stress can be offset by acquiring culture-specific knowledge.

Finally, the level of acculturative stress experienced is commonly portrayed as a function of the *social support* received by sojourners (e.g. Berry 1994; Ward et al. 2001; Baker 2008). A clear link between friendship and psychological adjustment was established in Brown's (2009b) research. Its value lies in the access it offers to the emotional response to loneliness and conformity pressure and to tension between the desire for cross-national interaction and the urge for the comfort of the ethnic group.

The problems associated with the move into a new sociocultural environment are greatest upon arrival. The symptoms attributed to culture shock are evident in this first stage, but there is variance in their experience and duration. Transition is best understood as a process of change that is especially stressful at first, with problems being the greatest upon arrival and stress decreasing as a function of various variables (Biddle 1979; Ward 2001, Brown & Holloway 2008). Inaccurate understanding of what comprises the student experience in the initial stage of the sojourn could have serious consequences for the pastoral support offered to newly-arrived students. Whilst an institution cannot completely offset all associated symptoms, awareness of the painful adjustment journey often made by international students may inform the provision of institutional support (Ryan 2005). Brown and Holloway (2008) argue that pastoral support structures must be in place throughout all stages of the academic year, and particularly at the outset, when an introduction to university support services should be made, such as Counselling, the Students Union and Chaplaincy in order to raise awareness of support and reduce students' reluctance to seek help. As noted by Luzio-Lockett (1998) and the National Guidance Research Forum (2010), there are cultural differences in attitudes towards psychological support and counselling services.

A shortcoming in the literature presented thus far, and one which our study hopes to address, is the lack of attention paid to the Muslim international student population, despite the recognition that faith may impact on the travel experience. Different challenges are faced by Muslim sojourners owing to global tensions which impact on host receptivity and intergroup relations, and it is arguable that the impact and experience of the sojourn will differ for this group (Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010). Furthermore, little research has been conducted into the experiences of exchange students, despite ongoing increases in their number worldwide (Van Hoof and Verbeeten 2005; Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008). It is also here that our study helps to fill a gap in the literature on the international student experience.

This paper reports from an inductive qualitative study of Turkish Muslim students' feelings about participating in a four-month Erasmus student exchange to a European country. It captures their expectations of travel from the Middle East to Europe and from a Muslim to a Christian country. The themes generated by analysis help to further our understanding of this unique section of the international student population. The implications for counselling international students will be drawn out.

Methodology

Qualitative research was selected as the approach to data collection in this study in order to enable students to express their opinions and feelings freely and without restriction. In August 2008, in-depth interviews were held with all eleven undergraduate students who had been selected as exchange students by the international office of the home university. They were about to embark on study in a number of countries included in the existing bilateral agreements between the sending and receiving universities at the time of data collection. Students participated in individual exchanges; they did not travel as a group. The voluntary participation of students in the research was encouraged by one of the authors, who currently acts as International Relations Co-ordinator of the Department of Tourism Management of the sending university in Izmir, who had no influence on student selection for exchange programs. This led to full representation of the small student group of eleven students selected by the sending university for exchange programs in the academic year 2008/9.

Students were invited to interview sessions by e-mail; they were offered alternative dates and times so that a mutually convenient time could be agreed. They were provided with information on the research and its aim, and were assured about the confidentiality of the information they would provide, and about the sole purpose of data collection being research.

Students were told that the aim of the research was to find out how they were feeling about their imminent exchange trip. Students' interest and willingness to participate in the research were high, probably because they felt that they could talk about the exceptional nature of their experience with someone who showed an interest in it (van Hoof & Verbeeten, 2005).

A profile of the student interviewees is as follows:

1. Female, 4th year undergraduate student, 2008/09 autumn semester in Hungary
2. Male, 4th year undergraduate student, 2008/09 autumn semester in Hungary
3. Male, 4th year undergraduate student, 2008/09 autumn semester in Hungary
4. Female, 4th year undergraduate student, 2008/09 autumn semester in Hungary
5. Female, 3rd year undergraduate student, 2008/09 autumn semester in the Netherlands
6. Female, 3rd year undergraduate student, 2008/09 autumn semester in the Netherlands
7. Female, 4th year undergraduate student, 2008/09 autumn semester in France
8. Female, 3rd year undergraduate student, 2008/09 autumn semester in France
9. Female, 4th year undergraduate student, 2008/09 autumn semester in Finland
10. Female, 3rd year undergraduate student, 2008/09 spring semester in Finland
11. Female, 3rd year undergraduate student, 2008/09 spring semester in Finland

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Interviews were held prior to the orientation program in order to access students' unspoilt perceptions and feelings. While the interview guide was used in each interview, the researcher tried to encourage students to express their opinions and feelings with on-the-spot questions emerging from new or altering data sources. Thus each interview proceeded differently, depending on the bias of the interviewee. As Mason (2002) notes, the hallmarks of the semi-structured interview are its flexibility and spontaneity.

Interviews took place in the researcher's office a month prior to students' travel abroad. Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to an hour, and were held in Turkish as both interviewees and interviewer are native Turkish speakers. The tape-recorded interviews were then transcribed into text documents and were translated into English for research purposes. The translation of the findings was made by the bilingual researcher, and was checked by the English native-speaker co-author. In order to confirm an accurate and congruent translation of the Turkish findings, the English text was repeatedly analysed and checked by the Turkish bilingual Turkish author.

Thematic analysis was used to generate research categories. As Holloway and Wheeler (2010) advise, the first step of thematic analysis involves immersion in the data, thus transcripts were repeatedly read, in order to get a sense of the whole. Subsequently, a process of coding was conducted whereby the transcripts were separated into manageable chunks and labelled as discretely as possible. Codes were then placed into broader categories, which represent the main themes of the research, as reflected in the section headings of the results section. As is appropriate in an inductive study (ibid), the research categories are emergent from the data and reflect participants' particular biases.

Qualitative researchers acknowledge that a small sample makes generalisation impossible (Mason, 2002), they refer to the transfer of theoretical concepts found in one situation to other settings and conditions (Daymon & Holloway, 2010). As Hammersley (1992, p.16) argues, it is possible to produce research that identifies generic features: "to find the general in the particular; a world in a grain of sand". The setting for this research enables the transfer of findings to similar HEI settings and travelling students. Firstly, there is a sizeable and growing number of exchange programmes, and secondly, international education is on the increase (UKCISA, 2009). There is thus a transferability of findings to students about to embark on study abroad, and particularly to the Muslim section of that population, which is under-researched.

Results and discussion

Feelings of loneliness

There was recognition among all students that confrontation with some stress caused by the move to a new culture was inevitable. There are many symptoms attributed to the generalised state of culture shock, not all of which will be experienced in exactly the same way by every sojourner (Brown & Holloway 2008), including those anticipated by our participants. There was firstly fear of loneliness and isolation, as the following comments show:

I may get lonely. When I feel deserted, I get depressed.

Getting isolated and feeling like an outsider would worry me.

I am slightly worried that I may not be accepted by other students and I may feel lonely.

Loneliness is common among sojourners, cited in both theoretical and empirical studies of transition. For example: Owie's (1982) study of international students in the US found a high degree of isolation; Sam and Eide's (1991) study showed that loneliness, tiredness, sadness and worrying were reported by nearly 1 in 4 students; Okorocha's (1996) study revealed loneliness to be endemic among international students; Yang and Clum (1995) painted a portrait of depressed, anxious and lonely students; Bradley's (2000) survey of the needs of international students indicated a high degree of mental health problems in students, caused by isolation, academic pressure and accommodation and finance problems. Finally, research

conducted in the US showed that loneliness was pronounced in university students who perceive themselves to be marginalised (Casado, 2009).

Brown and Holloway's (2008) study of international students in the UK also found a high degree of loneliness in the early stage of the sojourn, and in common with the present study was the perception that their mixed-nationality friendship group would act to diminish this loneliness. Without the succour of fellow international students in a similar situation, isolation would be pronounced. The following comments were typical, and reflect the importance attached by students to their shared foreignness in a new culture:

Everybody will be foreign. I believe that this will bring us closer.

Wherever other international students come from, we will all be foreigners.

We will all come to the same stage but from different backgrounds.

In the old (but oft-used) typology put forward by Bochner, McLeod & Lin (1977), the mixed-nationality friendship group is classed as the least important of the three possible friendship networks (compatriot, host national and other nationality friends), because it offers neither the emotional support offered by the compatriot nor the language and cultural learning offered by the host. Research by Brown (2009b) into international student friendship groups shows however that the international enclave should not be undervalued. Firstly it is a source of sustenance in a time of upheaval, owing to students' shared foreignness in a new country; and secondly, it offers the route to cultural learning. Indeed, participants claimed that an enduring memory of peace and community would outlast their sojourn and impact on future group relations. This is supported by Gudykunst (1998) who argues that the outcome of cross-

cultural contact is the development of a mindful attitude, which equips individuals to build a world community based on civility and tolerance.

An unfamiliar diet

Food shock is also a commonly cited symptom of culture shock (Brown et al. 2009; Brown, 2009b; Gosden, 1999), and was mentioned often by students as a possible obstacle to adjustment; both the taste of origin food and the sociability surrounding mealtimes would be missed:

> *Probably, the only difficulty we may have, would be cuisine-related.*

> *I expect their cuisine to be totally different than ours. I expect them to use pork a lot. Considering that I am not crazy about pork, I will have problems there.*

It is widely recognised that food is an integral part of cultural identity and of individual well-being. During a time of upheaval, the food eaten by sojourners can make an important contributor to happiness levels (Brown, 2009b), as during absence from the home culture, it becomes a nostalgic object (Locher et al., 2005). This explains migrants' and sojourners' difficulty in adjusting to a new food culture. According to Warde (1999), eating habits are the last to change in sojourners. Indeed, Brown's (2009b) study showed that the response to the dislike of local food was the decision to follow the home country diet. Meanwhile it is documented in the theoretical and empirical anthropological literature on the experience of migration that the physical act of eating a foreign diet can have consequences for emotional well-being (Locher et al. 2005). Physical and mental health problems are therefore hard to disentangle.

The quality of accommodation

In this study, the quality of accommodation in the new country was a universal source of worry. There was consensus that adequate accommodation supply was an important aspect of student well-being not just at the beginning but throughout the stay. This is expressed by the following student:

> *I would like to feel at home when I go back to my room in the dormitory. I want that room to be comfortable, clean and peaceful. If I don't find that, I would feel bit anxious.*

Inferior accommodation would mar the sojourn experience; it was seen as a source of stability and a way to offset other stressors associated with the sojourn. This reflects the increasing attention paid by HEIs to the quality of student accommodation, being not only a factor in student satisfaction and in the decision-making process over choice of institution, but also an important income stream (Poria & Oppewal, 2002). The importance of the quality of student housing in the satisfaction of international exchange students was also found in research by Llewellyn-Smith and McCabe (2008), who recorded dissatisfaction with this aspect of the exchange. This is arguably because long- staying students, unlike short-stay holiday makers, expect accommodation facilities abroad to match their residence at home in comfort and cosiness. These are also points of concern for parents (van Hoof & Verbeeten, 2005).

Mastering the lingua franca

Language ability was a further source of anxiety, cited by all students as important in facilitating cross-cultural communication, both with the host and with other international students. Anxiety over the role of language in adjustment is supported in the literature on the international sojourn, which acknowledges both the stress caused by using a foreign language and the part played by language ability in successful communication with different cultural groups (Luzio-Lockett, 1998; Brown, 2008a; Kim, 2001; Ryan, 2005). The usual medium of communication would be English, and its improvement was mentioned by all as an important advantage in studying abroad with other nationalities. In a business world in which the lingua franca is English, this is commonly mentioned in research into international students, who link improved English with improved employability at home and abroad (Brown, 2008a; Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008; Ryan & Carroll, 2005). Given the importance of language prowess, there was inevitable widespread anxiety over the problems that might be caused by shortfalls in their spoken English. This is expressed simply by the following student:

> *I really want to communicate easily with no language barriers, and I want this to happen as quick as possible.*

A clear understanding that improvement in language ability was needed to overcome communication hurdles and to facilitate interaction was coupled with a positive attitude and a determination to maximise language learning opportunities. According to many researchers, this attitude is often absent among international students who tend often to remain in mononational enclaves, thus restricting language and culture learning (Brown, 2008a; Kim, 2001; Ward, 2001). The stress of the opening encounter is often sufficient to push students to minimise foreign language use. In his work on stigma, Goffman (1972) describes communication breakdown as a disruptive event that causes confusion, discomfort and embarrassment for all parties and often leads to defensive practices whose aim is to avoid 'discrediting occurrences'. In Brown's (2008a) study of language-related anxiety, students

were extremely stressed in the first few weeks of the sojourn about their academic and general linguistic competence. This was reflected in the frequent use of such vocabulary as *nervous, scared, embarrassed, ashamed, not confident*, *frightened, panic, confused* and *shy* to refer to language use. Student anxiety was intense and lasted many weeks, its lessening being a function of the development of some communicative fitness, reflecting the link between time and adjustment. Indeed, according to Gudykunst and Nishida (2001), the individual's capacity to withstand and to manage the stress induced by early miscommunication episodes influences the interaction patterns formed during the sojourn.

Adopting a defensive stance

A fear of negative judgement over Turkey's status as a developing economy was prevalent. Students were anxious that they would be treated as inferior by those from more developed economies. Quarantelli and Cooper (1972) argue that it is the perceived rather than the actual response from others that more often determines self-concept. Cooley (1972) describes this perceived response as the self-idea, the imagined effect on another's mind that can stimulate feelings of pride or mortification. Giddens (1991) argues that self-esteem is continually vulnerable to the reaction of others, and this is reflected in the following comments:

> They may have some biases against Turkish students. They may not know enough about our country, our education system or our culture. They may think that we do not have an equivalent education system, just because we are a developing country.

> Those coming from developed countries would be biased against Turks. During visa applications, they asked us to take a tuberculosis test. That was insulting.

> *I am slightly worried that I have to convince people that we are nice people.*
> *Those who attended similar programmes in the past say that it takes several*
> *weeks to overcome biases against Turkey and Turkish people.*

Though students trusted that face-to-face contact would overcome negative stereotypes, previous research suggests that their fears are grounded. In their treatise on culture shock, Ward et al. (2001) report that in a cross-cultural situation, differentials in economic and political power mean that a student from a poor country is often perceived differently and treated less respectfully than a student from a wealthy country, by both the host and international student community. Meanwhile, Brown's (2008b) study of international student adjustment revealed a negative association between economic status and collective self-esteem, among students from China, Thailand and Iran. It has been noted that stigmatized group membership can lead to deleterious consequences for individuals and for academic performance too (Chateignier et al. 2009; Harrison et al. 2006). Brown (ibid) notes a tendency to react to demoralisation by denigrating the perceived source of threat. This is described by Branscombe and Wann (1994) as out-group derogation, a defensive strategy which is used to protect a threatened self-esteem. According to Gudykunst (1998), however, the tendency towards derogation is lower if the level of collective self-esteem is high, as was the case among Turkish students pre-departure. This is revealed in the following comment:

> *I will try my best to change this perception among the students I meet. I think our*
> *university should select students who can represent Turkish people accurately in*
> *foreign countries.*

Reflecting a common tendency among immigrants and sojourners (Bochner 1986; Cushner & Karim 2004; Brown 2008b), students saw themselves before departure as national ambassadors, informing people of their country's assets. As Rex (1991) points out, identity is

highly charged emotionally: "the individual who has achieved identity does not merely know himself or herself. He or she also has a positive emotional attitude towards that which he or she knows." (p.6). Students' patriotic behaviour was permitted by a high degree of identification with their country. It was not yet accompanied by derogation of the source of the threat to social identity, which tends to be commonplace (Crocker & Luhtanen 1990; Branscombe & Wann 1994). Rejecting low status appeared to be essential to the preservation of personal and national integrity, and it seemed to act as a mirror on a growing global movement to obstruct western domination of the world economy and ideology (see Todres 2002). Whether students would encounter prejudice remained to be seen, as would their reaction to it, clearly. Pettigrew (2008) notes that real or perceived threats to the minority group represent an important mediator in cross-cultural interaction, and he points out that this is a subject that has received insufficient research attention.

Being an object of suspicion

Participants expressed concern that Turkish students may be treated unfavorably because of their faith: Turkey is a Muslim country, though the country is a secular state (with constitutional reforms starting in 1923 and being completed in 1937). The source of anxiety was centered around students' awareness of the global détente between Islam and the West, as encapsulated in the following question posed of the researchers: *what happens if they call me a terrorist?* The current tension between Islam and the West along with increasing incidences of Islamophobia mean that this section of the international student body may have unique needs and experiences of life in a secular western country. Indeed, the impact of global politics on Muslim students in a western country is an area of research that is virtually untapped. This study is unusual in the perspective it offers on the Muslim section of the international student body.

As shown in the following excerpts, students were anxious that negative judgements would be made about their faith due to a link in the popular media between Islam and terrorism, which is only fuelled by incidents of terrorism that are claimed by groups such as Al Qaeda. Such fear was exacerbated by word of mouth about acts of Islamophobia in western countries, particularly from internet chat rooms:

> *I log into various chat and blog sites on the Internet. There, if you are involved in any discussion groups with other nationalities, the topic of Islam-Christianity arising is just a matter of time. Some are really biased and believe what they are told about Islam. Meeting with such people in Hungary may be unavoidable.*

> *Despite all the advantages of France, I know that their people can be quite racist. They are not really happy with Turks living in their country. That is probably because they think of Turks as bit conservative, religious and isolated, who only mix in their own groups. I am slightly worried that they will approach me with bias, or they will not approach at all.*

> *I am concerned about religious issues. I suspect that the possibility of foreigners being biased against Islam is much higher than biases against Turks.*

Vindication of students' fears is found in studies by Brown (2009c) and Appleton (2005), which point to a high incidence and fear of bigotry against Muslim students, if faith is outwardly detectable. This is supported by Bunting (2006) and The Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding (2007) who argue that Islamophobia is the main source of bigotry in Europe. The rise in statistics on the verbal and physical abuse of Muslims in the UK since the terrorist attack on the US on September 11 in 2001 tends to justify students' concerns, and points to the precariousness of their position in a western country that

they perceive as being in favour of the Iraq war. Tension between a suspicious non-Muslim population and a vilified and vulnerable Muslim community makes for an insecure living environment for those visitors caught up in this unresolved struggle (Brown 2009c). As Omar (2006) states, Muslims in western countries live in a state of generalised anxiety. It may be worth considering whether or not the reverse is applicable; i.e. do non-Muslims living in Muslim enclaves also experience a persistent anxiety?

According to Briggs (2001), the confusion of foreign nationals with the activities of their country is commonplace, sometimes taking the form of punishment of individuals for their country's perceived crimes. In Brown's (2009c) study of Muslim international students, the following incidents were documented: an Egyptian student was verbally and physically attacked in the street; a Jordanian student was told to 'go home'; a Turkish student was assaulted in a nightclub, a Bangladeshi student was refused service in a local shop, and the university's Islamic prayer room was defaced. Students concluded that they were subject to harassment because of unresolved tension between Islam and the West, revealing the connection between the international student experience and the macro context. A clear link was detected between a visible manifestation of affiliation and vulnerability to attack: physical dissimilarity made students targets. This was evidenced in relief that faith was not always detected by the host community. In a climate of Islamophobia, it was felt that their safety was guaranteed by mistaken identity as an external appearance that allied them with the host, or with the Christian world, allowed them to relax their vigilance. This supports the claim that visitors are less vulnerable if their separateness isn't reflected outwardly (Brown 2003).

Coping mechanisms

Notwithstanding the above fears and anxieties of Turkish exchange students, equanimity was found in the temporariness of the sojourn:

> *There may be events or things which I would find shocking or surprising. You cannot really say that you will embrace everything in 4 months. It is a short period of time. Maybe that is why it is more of an experience during which you do not necessarily need to get adapted to a new culture. We will observe more rather than trying to fit into the society.*

As Ward et al. (2001) and Brown and Holloway (2008) observe, the finiteness of the sojourn is helpful in enduring stress and in maintaining cultural identity: the return home is imminent; the discomfort is only temporary. Whether such equanimity would survive the confrontation with the stress of immersion in a new culture was however yet to be tested.

Of further assistance in alleviating their apprehension about moving to a new country was pre-arrival preparation. The support offered by the sending university in Turkey and the receiving university (in the form of welcome emails and letters) was commended by all students; it helped to make them feel more comfortable about their trip. Conversely, its absence was keenly felt by students in the research into exchange students in Australia (Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008). The importance of pre-arrival orientation is acknowledged in the literature on transition. According to Biddle (1979), psychological readiness is an important determinant of the level of culture shock experienced by the sojourner.

Indeed, pre-arrival information is an increasingly important part of the service offered to international students by sending and receiving countries. Also important are word of mouth and websites dedicated to offering pre-arrival advice to fellow travellers (Brown & Holloway, 2008). In this study, students made much use of these informal networks in their bid to

prepare for the new life experience. In fact, the importance of the internet is highlighted as a source of pre-travel information, which is also noted in research into travel decisions by Wong and Yeh (2009), Brown and Holloway (2008), and Xu et al. (2009), all of whom cite the Internet as the main information source among student travellers. It is important to note, however, that not all stress can be eliminated by pre-arrival orientation. According to David (1971), the truth of cultural differences is often only revealed in direct experience.

Implications for practice

Based on the research findings, the following interventionist strategies are suggested to ameliorate possible pre-arrival anxiety as well as initial stress upon arrival:

* An informational approach can be useful in offsetting some symptoms of culture shock. Pre-arrival information can be offered to applicants via a dedicated website, providing information on those issues of concern that were reported by students, such as diet, accommodation, language and social activities, as well as offering links to a range of university support services.

* The cultivation of awareness in academic and administrative staff of the painful journey undertaken by most international students will improve their both their empathy and their responsiveness to signs of distress and requests for help, thereby alleviating students' sense of isolation;

* Students were anxious about becoming homesick and lonely. It has been shown that such feelings can be alleviated by social contact: this could take the form of regular social

gatherings, which should be organised at department level so that students enjoy a sense of belonging with each other and with the institution;

* The intervention strategies to be used by those offering pastoral or psychological support to international students (including personal tutors, programme administrators, lecturers, Chaplaincy) should be available at the start of the sojourn when stress is usually at its height, as feared by this study's participants. However, access to support should be ongoing in case of stress suffered, as students indicate, through confrontations with prejudice or suspicion based on religious affiliation.

* An introduction to student welfare services such as Counselling should be made during induction week: this would raise awareness of support and may reduce any reluctance students may feel to seek help.

* Finally, it is recommended that counsellors who are likely to face a culturally diverse clientele undertake training to equip them to face such diversity. As McLeod (2009, p. 163) argues, the membership of a culture is one of the main influences on the development of personal identity. Thus, the culturally-ingrained nature of self must be borne in mind by counsellors. As pointed out by the National Guidance Research Forum (2010), mental-health professionals are not adequately prepared to engage in multicultural practice, and current theories of counselling and psychotherapy are inadequate to cope with current cultural diversity. Diversification is taking place so rapidly that mental-health professionals will increasingly come into contact with clients who differ from them racially, culturally and ethnically. The National Guidance Research Forum (2010) calls for the inclusion of a multicultural dimension in a counsellor's training. This would involve the development of self-awareness as an essential starting point in acquiring multicultural competence (Hofstede

2001). As Katz (1985) notes, dominant cultural norms act as an invisible veil until they become aware of the influence of culture on self. Also important is the acquisition of cultural specific knowledge (McLeod 2009' Suinn 2010). McLeod (2009) argues that multicultural counsellors cannot be expected to have an exhaustive knowledge of the culture and norms of different groups of people, but that they can internalise a mental checklist which will facilitate cultural flexibility and sensitivity. Such training would benefit not only international students but also the increasing number of economic migrants and refugees who might need to access counselling and/or training, although their special circumstances are beyond the focus of this paper.

Conclusion

This study offers a unique insight into the feelings and perceptions of Turkish exchange students whose trip to a secular western country was imminent. It is shown through qualitative interviews that students, regardless of specific destination country, shared fears and anxieties over both everyday practical concerns such as accommodation and food and issues that might influence individual and collective self-esteem such as loneliness and religious and national identity. Implications for practice have been pointed out.

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