Emotional Intelligence, Coping Responses, and Length of Stay as Correlates of Acculturative Stress Among International University Students in Thailand

Maria Belen Vergara\textsuperscript{a,*}, Norris Smith\textsuperscript{b}, Bruce Keele\textsuperscript{a,b}

\textsuperscript{a}Webster University Thailand, 143 Moo5 Tambon Sampraya, Phetchaburi, Thailand, 76120

Received January 17, 2010; revised February 6, 2010; accepted March 9, 2010

Abstract

This study sought to determine the relationship of acculturative stress with emotional intelligence, coping responses, and length of stay in Thailand, and to identify the best predictors of acculturative stress. The participants were 216 foreign students with the majority attending undergraduate courses from seven universities in Thailand. The findings showed that stress due to change or culture shock, perceived discrimination, and homesickness defined participants’ experience of acculturative stress. Low levels of acculturative stress were found to be significantly correlated with length of stay in Thailand, emotional intelligence, active coping responses (logical analysis and seeking guidance), and passive coping responses (cognitive avoidance, acceptance/resignation, emotional discharge). However, emotional intelligence and acceptance were significant predictors of acculturative stress. Implications for enhancing adjustment to acculturative stress among international students and future research directions are discussed.

Keywords: acculturative stress; emotional intelligence; coping; international students

1. Introduction

International students comprise a special population that has received much empirical attention in the area of acculturative stress in recent years. Their significant role in facilitating cross-cultural exchange of knowledge and cultures in pursuit of their educational goals (Heppner, 2006) and the challenges they face in the process of acculturation (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994) have stimulated researchers to focus on factors that affect their adjustment and well being.

International students go through a process of cultural change that results from repeated direct contact between two distinct cultural groups and this process is known as acculturation (Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987). As they go...
through this process, international students carry with them their own culture as they face the demands of adjusting to the culture of their host country along with the cultures of people of diverse ethnicity in the academic and social environments. When students encounter difficulties and conflicts as a result of adjusting to unfamiliar social norms and customs of a new culture, this situation is known as acculturative stress (Lin & Yi, 1997). Acculturative stress is triggered by a host of stressors which are distressing life events connected with adjustment to a new culture. The acculturative stressors of international students are perceived discrimination, homesickness, perceived hate, fear, stress due to change or culture shock, and guilt (Sandhu & Asbaradi, 1994). Perceived discrimination refers to the tendency of students who are sensitive to language and cultural differences to perceive social distance as racial discrimination. Homesickness pertains to loneliness due to separation from emotional and social support of significant others. Perceived hate denotes the hypersensitivity to perceived verbal and nonverbal behaviors of others. Fear is defined as a sense of security that comes from unfamiliar surroundings. Stress due to change or culture shock is experiences as a sense of strangeness from differences in culture, language, values, and aspects of daily life. Guilt pertains to the feeling of betrayal of native culture upon adapting the values of the host culture.

Acculturative stressors such as language, academic, psychosocial and cultural, financial, and political have been found to have significant effects on acculturation (Pan, Wong, Chan, & Joubert, 2008). They may have mild to debilitating effects on the emotional (Paukert, Pettit, Perez, & Walker, 2006), and psychological, social, and physiological dimensions of adjustment (Williams & Berry, 1991). The amount of emotional support has also been linked with acculturative stress as indicated by inadequate parental social support (Thomas & Choi, 2006), lack of interpersonal social support (Duru & Poyrazli, 2007; Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timimi, 2004), low level of emotional support from online social groups (Ye, 2006), and problems with culture shock and social adjustment (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1998). Emotional and physical well being are likewise affected by acculturative stress as seen in negative emotions (Paukert et al., 2006), anxiety and depression (Wei et al., 2007), and a host of health problems which include lack of appetite and sleep, low stamina and energy levels, and headaches (Ye, 2005), and psychosomatic illnesses (Greenland & Brown, 2005). Acculturative stress has also been associated with self efficacy as demonstrated in general self-efficacy (Kim & Omizo, 2006), language (English) proficiency (Duru & Poyrazli, 2007) and intercultural competence which refers to effectiveness in intracultural and intercultural interactions (Torres & Rollock, 2004). Studies have also shown a relationship between acculturative stress and satisfaction with academic and social life (Ye, 2005) and meaning in life (Pan, Wong, Chan, & Joubert, 2008).

High levels of acculturative stress among international students have been found to be associated with variables such as length of stay in the host country, emotional intelligence, and coping responses. Some studies (e.g., Kuo & Roysircar, 2004; Wei et al. 2007) associated longer stay in the host country with acculturative advantages among Chinese students in Canada while others asserted that this variable is neither related with nor contributed to the prediction of acculturative stress among Hispanics in America (e.g., Torres & Rollock, 2004).

On the other hand, emotional intelligence which is defined by competencies such as intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness, adaptability, stress management, and general mood has been found to contribute significantly to coping with stress (Bar-On, 1997). Emotional intelligence as a skill minimizes the negative stress consequences among nursing students (Montes-Berges & Augusto, 2007), moderates problem solving skills among Bahraini students (Alumran & Punamaki, 2008), and predicts active coping strategy among Chinese prospective and in-service teachers (Chan, 2008).

Moreover, studies on adjustment to acculturative stress have identified the differential effects of various types of coping. Coping refers to cognitive and behavioral efforts to reduce the negative emotions from stressful events (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Generally, problem solving and other types of active or approach coping have been described as more effective in mitigating the negative effects of acculturative stress as compared with passive or avoidance approaches. Active approaches such as problem solving can facilitate responsive communication style, enhance emotional states, and encourage social support (Folkman, 1997). Passive approaches may be a mismatch to the demands of a new culture so that they do not help optimize adjustment (Torres & Rollock, 2004) as evidenced by avoidance coping as related to high level of acculturative stress and poor adjustment as compared with active coping (Crockett et al., 2007). However, some studies highlighted the dynamic reciprocal relationship between approach and avoidance coping responses among persons who manage severe and pervasive stressors (Moos, 1993), the adequacy of cognitive avoidance as self-protective measure against recall of stressful, intrusive memory...
Considering the importance of understanding the acculturative stress experience of international students, researchers have steered future research directions toward identifying demographic variables (e.g., Kuo & Roysircar, 2004), exploring emotional intelligence (e.g., Montes-Berges & Augusto, 2007), and understanding coping processes (e.g., Torres & Rollock, 2004) that can mitigate the negative impact of acculturative stress. In the light of these research directions, the present study sought to determine the relationship of acculturative stress with emotional intelligence, coping responses, and length of stay in host country among international university students in Thailand, and to identify the best predictors of acculturative stress.

Specifically, the following research hypotheses were tested: Low level of acculturative stress is associated with (a) length of stay in host country; (b) high level of emotional intelligence; (c) approach coping responses such as logical analysis, positive reappraisal, seeking guidance, and problem solving; and (d) avoidance coping responses such as cognitive avoidance, acceptance or resignation, seeking rewards, and emotional discharge. Length of stay in host country, emotional intelligence, approach and avoidance coping responses are significant predictors of acculturative stress.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were 216 foreign students with the majority attending undergraduate courses from seven universities in Thailand. The age of students ranged from 19 to 29 years ($M=21.69$, $SD=2.37$). Of the participants, 66.20% (143) were females whereas 33.80% (73) were males. In terms of ethnicity, 58.33% (126) were Asians (e.g., Burma, China, Japan, Korea, Nepal, India, Philippines, Vietnam), 23.61% (51) were Americans, and 18.05% (39) were Europeans (e.g., France, Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, United Kingdom). In terms of level of education, 95% (205) were undergraduate students from business, arts and sciences, computer applications, and media whereas 5% (11) were graduate students in business and international relations. The participants had been residing in Thailand for over three months ($M=3.70$, $SD=1.59$). International students who are Thai nationals were not included in the participants.

2.2 Measures

The instruments were Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students, Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory, Coping Responses Inventory, and a questionnaire that inquired into demographic information, length of stay in Thailand, and nature of acculturative stressors experienced.

The Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994) is a 36-item measure of acculturative stress of international students which consists of seven factors: Perceived Discrimination, Homesickness, Perceived Hate, Fear, Stress Due to Change/Culture Shock, Guilt, and Nonspecific Concerns. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The total score ranges from 36 to 180, with higher scores indicating higher levels of acculturative stress. Construct validity was supported by negative association with adaptation and positive association with depression. Evidence of reliability was provided by Cronbach’s coefficient alpha ($r=.95$) and Guttman’s split-half coefficient ($r=.94$).

The Emotional Quotient Inventory (Bar-On, 2004) is a 51-item measure distributed across 8 scales namely intrapersonal, interpersonal, stress management, adaptability, general mood, total emotional intelligence, positive impression, and inconsistency. It uses a 5-point Likert-style response format (i.e., from “very seldom or not true of me” to “often or true of me”) in which respondents are asked to rate each statement with respect to their own experiences. The scales were developed such that higher scores indicate higher emotionally intelligent behavior. The
The Coping Resources Inventory – Adult Form (Moos, 1993) is a 48 – item measure of eight different types of coping responses to stressful life circumstances. The first set of four scales measures approach avoidance which are logical analysis, positive reappraisal, seeking guidance and support, and problem-solving. The second set of four scales measures avoidance coping such as cognitive avoidance, acceptance or resignation, seeking alternative rewards, and emotional discharge. Raw scores are converted to T scores ($M=50, SD=10$) with scores of 45 and below are interpreted as below average and 55 and above as above average. The eight indices of coping responses are moderately and positively correlated (average $r_s=.29$ for men and .25 for women) and are stable over time among both men and women (average $r_s=.45$, and .43, respectively for the eight indices).

2.3 Procedure

Seven universities in Thailand that offer international undergraduate and graduate programs (with English as medium of instruction) agreed to participate in the study. Coordinators of international programs were asked to distribute and collect completed forms which consisted of a cover letter that served as introduction and consent form, and measures of variables in the study. Of 600 forms distributed, 216 forms (35%) were usable. Hypotheses on relationship of acculturative stress with length of stay in home country, emotional intelligence, and coping responses were tested using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient whereas hypotheses on prediction were tested using Stepwise Regression. All hypotheses were tested at .05 level of confidence.

3. Results

This study sought to determine the relationship of acculturative stress with length of stay in host country, emotional intelligence, and coping responses, and to determine significant predictors of acculturative stress. The results showed that participants experienced a number of acculturative stressors that were classified into (a) daily living, (b) academics, (c) interpersonal, (d) language, (e) family, (f) culture, (g) finance, and (h) loneliness. As shown in Table 1, daily living, academics, and interpersonal stressors were among the top three most frequently experienced by more than half of participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acculturative Stressors</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily Living</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>64.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academics</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>56.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>51.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>46.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>40.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture/Environment</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>40.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finances</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The findings likewise revealed that participants who had been staying in the host country (Thailand) for over three months reported low levels of acculturative stress \((M= 82.5, SD=12.6)\) and average levels of emotional intelligence \((M= 35.0, SD=2.0)\) as shown in Table 2. Moreover, participants used both approach and avoidance coping in managing acculturative stress. However, acculturative stress was shown to be significantly correlated with length of stay in host country \((r= -.14, p < .05)\), emotional intelligence \((r= -.47, p < .05)\), use of approach coping such as logical analysis \((r= 0.19, p < .05)\), and seeking guidance \((r= .29, p < .05)\), and use of avoidance coping such as cognitive avoidance \((r= .25, p < .05)\), acceptance/resignation \((r= .35, p < .05)\), and emotional discharge \((r= .35, p < .05)\).

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Pearson r Values between Acculturative Stress, Length of Stay, Emotional Intelligence, and Coping Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Acculturative Stress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acculturative Stress</td>
<td>82.5</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of Stay (in months)</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>-0.142*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Intelligence</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>-0.477*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach Coping</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logical Analysis</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>0.190*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Reappraisal</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>0.123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking Guidance</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>0.290*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Solving</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>0.103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance Coping</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive Avoidance</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>0.254*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance/Resignation</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>0.358*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking Rewards</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>0.128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Discharge</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>0.358*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05.

Table 3 showed that emotional intelligence and acceptance contributed significantly to the prediction of acculturative stress. In the stepwise multiple regression, emotional intelligence was entered first and explained 22% of the variance in acculturative stress \(F_{1, 214} = 62.9, p < .05\). Acceptance was entered second and explained a further 7% \(F_{1, 213} = 22.2, p < .05\). Lower acculturative stress was associated with higher emotional intelligence and lower frequency of use of acceptance as coping.

Table 3. Stepwise Multiple Regression of Significant Predictors of Acculturative Stress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Multiple R</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SEb</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Intelligence</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>-4.439</td>
<td>.613</td>
<td>-.423</td>
<td>-7.242*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>1.401</td>
<td>.297</td>
<td>.276</td>
<td>4.720*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05.
4. Discussion

The findings of this study confirmed the hypotheses concerning correlation of acculturative stress with and its prediction from variables namely length of stay in host country, emotional intelligence, and coping responses. The results showed that students of varied ethnicity who had been attending international universities in Thailand for at least three months experienced acculturation-related stressors such as daily living (e.g., drastic changes in lifestyle), academics (e.g., level of difficulty and volume of requirements of courses compared to home country), finances (e.g., budgeting allowances), language (e.g., feeling alienated and misunderstood by local people), culture/environment (e.g., feeling estranged from values and beliefs of local people), interpersonal (e.g., feeling exploited with overpriced goods sold to foreigners), family (e.g., need to communicate for emotional support), and loneliness (e.g., missing family and friends). According to Sandhu and Asbaradi (1994), stressors related with daily living, academics, finances, language, and culture/environment can be categorized under stress due to change or culture shock whereas stressors associated with interpersonal relations with local people may be described as perceived discrimination. Moreover, stressors about family and loneliness can be defined by homesickness. These stressors are commonly experienced by foreign students and can affect their academic achievement and satisfaction in living and studying in their host country.

Despite the presence of such acculturative stressors, international university students in Thailand experienced low levels of acculturative stress. Length of stay in the host country is associated with low levels of acculturative stress. Several months of living and studying in Thailand may have enabled foreign students to gain some acculturative advantages such as increased familiarity with the surroundings, people, language, and culture (Wei et al. 2007). Moreover, the average levels of emotional intelligence acted as a buffer against acculturative stress alongside approach and avoidance coping. Being in touch with their own and other people’s emotions, optimistic and self-motivated, calm under pressure, and flexible in managing change helped international students deal successfully with the challenges of acculturation. Approach coping such as cognitive attempts to understand and prepare mentally for a stressor and its consequences coupled with behavioral attempts to seek information, guidance, and support likewise facilitated adequate adjustment of international students. However, avoidance coping also helped international students perhaps when facing seemingly difficult challenges such that cognitive attempts to avoid thinking realistically about the problem and to accept the problem, and behavioral attempts to reduce tension by expressing negative feelings enabled them to cope with the situation.

Finally, of all the variables that were found associated with acculturative stress in this study, emotional intelligence and acceptance were significant predictors. Thus, international university students who are equipped with adequate emotional and social skills and who are open to accepting difficult situations associated with acculturation are likely to experience successful adjustment to their host country.

Although the findings of this study contributed to valuable insights into the experience of acculturative stress of international university students from Asia, America, and Europe, a number of limitations need to be addressed in future research. The small sample size did not provide an accurate representation of the experience of international university students in Thailand. Moreover, other variables could present competing hypotheses to account for the low levels of acculturative stress such as living arrangements (living alone or with roommate or family), frequency of communication or visit with family, experience of living in other countries (apart from home country and Thailand), dimensions of culture (both heritage culture and host culture) that facilitate openness to uncertainty, and personality factors such as resiliency and frustration tolerance. Addressing these variables in future research can potentially contribute to the field of cross-cultural and international psychology through enriching the literature on acculturative stress experience of international students, and strengthening counseling approaches to include programs for enhancing emotional intelligence and coping responses for this special client population.

References


