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Acculturative stress among international postgraduate students at UKM

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Abstract

The self-administered questionnaire contained the short version of the Social, Attitudinal, Familial and Environmental Acculturative Stress Scale (SAFE), was used to determine the acculturative stress among international postgraduate university students. The instrument measures four aspects of acculturative stress, including social, attitudinal, family and environment. It contained 21 items in Likert 5-point response format. The sample consisted of 24 (16 males and 8 females) postgraduate students studying in School of Psychology and Human Development, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). The stress level among different gender and age groups were measured using t-test. Results indicated that the top two sources of acculturative stress were: environment and attitude. However, there was no significant different of acculturative stress between genders and different age groups. The findings from this study provided some knowledge and understanding of the sources of stress among international postgraduate university students which are crucial for implementing stress reduction strategies, because stress may reduce motivation and decrease in academic performance.

Keywords: Acculturative stress; international students; postgraduate students; stress level; sources of stress

1. Introduction

Adjusting to life in college can be stressful for any students but for international students, this stress is often multiplied (Nilsson, Butler, Shouse & Joshi, 2008). It is because moving to a new country involves acculturative stress (Berry & Annis, 1974). Acculturative stress is stress due to the acculturation process between two cultures. Psychocultural stress due to cultural differences found between a host culture and an incoming culture marked by reduction in the physical and mental health status of individuals or groups undergoing acculturation. It is also marked by physical and psychological changes due to the adaptation required in diet, climate, housing, interactional styles, norms and values to a new culture.

Acculturative stress is the phenomenon individuals or groups experience in their adjustment to a new culture (Berry, Kim, Minde & Mok, 1987). It is manifested as a reduction in the psychological, somatic and social balance...
of individuals or groups. The variation in intensity of this stress rests heavily on the similarities or dissimilarities between the host culture and that of the new entrants. This include personal characteristics, amount of exposure, level of education and skills, sex, age, language, race and psychological and spiritual strengths, as well as the host culture's political and social attitudes, especially toward the newcomers. The more radical and different the host culture is in comparison to the newcomer’s native cultures, the more acculturative stress will be experienced (Cox, 1987).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Acculturation Process

Acculturation is defined as a process of cultural change that results from repeated, direct contact between two distinct cultural groups (Berry et al. 1987). Berry (1990) lists several changes that are likely to occur. First, physical changes in housing, increased population density, and pollution; and second, biological changes, due to differences in types of food. However, the most crucial changes are cultural: political, economic, technical, linguistic, religious, and social institutions become altered as new ones take effect; interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships become established. Such psychological and behavioral changes always occur as individuals adapt to their new milieu.

This process of acculturation is not uniform for all immigrants (Berry, 1984). It depends on the characteristics of both cultures and the hopes and aspirations of the individual members. For example, if the host is a pluralistic society, acceptance of the incoming cultures is valued. Without pressure from the dominant group for change, many customs are maintained.

Underlying these modes of acculturation are three main processes:

1. Contact Period: This is the initial phase wherein the two distinct cultures meet.
2. Conflict Period: This is the time when pressure to change is placed by the dominant group, which may result in a crisis of confusion of identity.
3. Resolution Period: Conflict may be resolved through the four types of acculturation mentioned (Berry et al.1987).

A possible result accompanying the process of acculturation is the manifestation of acculturative stress. Acculturative stress is defined as a marked deterioration of the general health status of an individual; it encompasses physiological, psychological, and social aspects that are explicitly linked to the acculturation process. The degree of acculturative stress experienced by an individual can range from mild stress, which gradually improves as the individual adapts, to a debilitating stress that worsens over time (Berry et al., 1987). Most notably, individuals experiencing acculturative stress typically display symptoms of anxiety and depression, which may increase if the individual lacks an effective social support system (Hovey & Magana, 2002).

2.2 Acculturative Stress and International College Students

Although acculturative stress is typically most severe among refugee immigrants, it is surprising that the acculturative stress levels experienced by student sojourners can approach that of refugees (Berry & Kim, 1988). International students are likely to have limited personal resources when they enter the host country and, as a result, are likely to experience considerably greater difficulty acculturating than established ethnic groups (Berry & Kim 1988; Hayes & Lin 1994). This is due in part to the fact that, in addition to confronting general acculturation issues, student must confront traditional academic stresses but without the resources available to domestic students (Sandhu & Asrabadi 1998). The combined effect of these stressors, coupled with the lack of resources available to assist international students in the transition to the host society, renders the students highly susceptible to the deleterious effects of acculturative stress. Moreover, in addition to experiencing a greater proportion of illnesses related to stress, international students may not seek proper psychological help for fear of stigma (Ebbin & Blankenship, 1988).
Of the numerous variables associated with the acculturation process, one that has been most prominently addressed in the literature is the issue of social support. One of the biggest challenges faced by international students is experiencing a loss or lack of social support (Hayes & Lin, 1994; Pedersen, 1991). Moving to a different country suddenly deprives individuals of their previously established support system (Pedersen, 1991) and makes them feel less confident, increasingly tense, and confused (Hayes & Lin 1994).

2.2.1 Academic Experiences
When international students first start taking academic classes, they experience several concerns related to understanding classroom instruction, participating in classroom discussions, or figuring out the lecturer's expectations. Students also tend to worry about achieving their academic goals in order to graduate. To help students reach greater academic achievement and attain their goals, encouraging students to interact with faculty members (i.e., talking with the faculty member after class) has been suggested (Anaya & Cole, 2001). An extended orientation program during the first few months of the students' academic life might also help them to find successful ways of dealing with these concerns. In addition, helping students increase their English proficiency will likely lead to higher levels of academic self-efficacy (Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson, & Pisecco, 2002) and higher academic achievement.

2.2.2 Social Experiences
International students may display various reactions to the host country and culture. Some become very involved in their new community, while others may feel distant. The similarity between the students' home culture and the host culture, perceived discrimination, being extraverted, high communication skills and a positive approach to forming relationships with other students are noted as variables affecting this attitude (Ying, 2002).

Usually students from more traditional cultures (i.e., Asian cultures) may feel distant to the American culture and experience more adjustment difficulties (Poyrazli et al., 2004). Furthermore, as the level of perceived prejudice increases, so does the likelihood that international students will identify with other international students rather than host nationals (Schmitt, Spears, & Branscombe, 2003). Once students start building relationships with Americans, however, their experiences may be more positive, and they may experience an increased level of social support.

2.2.3 Psychological Experiences
During their initial transition, international students may feel lost, confused, overwhelmed, helpless, and isolated. As they try to settle into their new environment with the start of the semester, they may also feel academic stress similar to their domestic counterparts. However, unlike the other students, international students usually do not have similar resources to combat this stress (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1998). This lack of resources coupled with the previous stated psychological experiences could lead to homesickness, depression, or anxiety. There is some evidence that the culture of international students determines the amount and type of psychological reactions they show. In America, European students, for example, report experiencing less acculturative stress than students from Asia, Central/South America, and Africa (Poyrazli et al., 2004; Yeh & Inose, 2003).

Studying in a foreign country can create additional adjustment problems (Ishiyama, 1989; Pedersen, 1991). According to Schram and Lauver (1988), international students often experience (a) alienation (feelings of powerlessness to achieve desired outcomes), (b) meaninglessness (inability to make sense of what is happening to them), and (c) social estrangement (feelings of loneliness).

The present study investigated the type of acculturative stress to which most international students experience and the different of stress level among students of different gender and age groups.

3. Methodology
A total of 24 international students (16 males and 8 females) enrolled in School of Psychology and Human Development in the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia participated in this study. They are between 20-41 years old. Majority of the participants are doctoral students and they are from Indonesia.

A brief demographic questionnaire was used to obtain background characteristic of the participants. Items in this questionnaire requested information on gender and age. The self-administered short version of the Social, Attitudinal, Familial and Environmental Acculturative Stress Scale (SAFE) (Fuertes & Westbrook, 1996), was used
to determine the acculturative stress among international university students. The instrument measures four aspects of acculturative stress, including social, attitudinal, family and environment. It contained 21 items in Likert 5-point response format ranging from not stressful (1) to extremely stressful (5). An example of the item: It bothers me that I have an accent. Scores range from 21 to 105, with higher scores indicating higher levels of acculturative stress. The stress levels were compared between male and female students, and between different age groups (20-40 years old and 41 and above) using t-test. Data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) Version 16 software.

4. Findings and Discussion

Results indicated that the top sources of acculturative stress were environment and attitude. However, there was no significant different of acculturative stress between genders (t= 0.775, p>0.05) and different age groups (t=0.846, p>0/05).

4.1 Sources of stress

This study represents a first step in understanding sources of acculturative stress for university students and was able to identify which sources of stress occur in the lives of these students. For example, in our sample, environment and attitude were the most common sources of stress. Many research report that international students face many challenges in adjusting to their new environment. The environment as a source of acculturative stress among international students may indicate that they are deprived of their traditional sources of support and familiar means of communication and cultural adjustment as reported by Leong and Mallinckrodt (1992). Furthermore, international students have difficulties adapting to a new educational system in a short period of time.

Environment can also tend to be related to finding a place to live, learning where and how to shop for groceries, finding transportation or figuring out how to use a public transportation system, registering for classes, and setting up a communication medium (i.e., phone, e-mail) to reach loved ones back home. For example, Berry, Kim, Minde and Mok (1987) found that climatic, geographical, nutritional, and other psychocultural dissimilarities between the original culture of the immigrants and that of the host country create acculturative stress. The students in this study may have problems adjusting to the new environment such as suggested by one construct of acculturation theory that is the enculturation model that all immigrants experience adjustment problems, but that over time, they become socialized to and identify with the norms, symbols, and behaviors of the host society.

Students' level of proficiency in the host country language might help or hurt their effort to deal with these challenges. Students with good language skills might have an easier time during their transition to the new setting, while those with lower levels might find it more difficult (Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timimi, 2004; Poyrazli et.al. 2002).

Another source of acculturative stress is attitude among these international students. If they showed more negative attitude towards the host country of course they will feel stressful. Usually attitude will be related with perception. Negative attitude will lead to negative perception, which is a very strong source of stress. As suggested by Ying (2002), the similarity between the students’ home culture and the host culture, perceived discrimination, being extraverted, high communication skills and a positive approach to forming relationships with other students are noted as variables affecting attitude. Without some initiative showing a willingness to understand what it feels like to belong to another community it is doubtful that members of that other community will be disposed to reciprocate-especially if they belong to a minority group.

Lazarus et al. (1978; 1984) believe that one's view of a situation determines whether an event is experienced as stressful or not, making stress the consequence of appraisal and not the antecedent of stress. According to this theory, the way an individual appraises an event plays a fundamental role in determining, not only the magnitude of the stress response, but also the kind of coping strategies that the individual may employ in efforts to deal with the stress.
4.2 Acculturative stress between gender and age groups

However, there was no significant difference of acculturative stress between gender and different age groups. Research by Misra, Crist and Burant (2003) also showed that no significant difference in academic and life stressors by gender. This is because adjusting to a new culture, including the behavioural and other internal changes that take place during this process will give the same impact regardless of their gender or age group. This result showed that since the students were experiencing similar life conditions they were affected in the same manner. Hatcher and Prus (1991) referred to these stress factors as academic situational constraints which affected all students regardless their age or gender.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that two major variables impact upon levels of acculturation: environment and attitude. Based on these results, emphasis in program development should be geared to improvement in these areas. A number of interventions can be set up to help international students with their psychosocial and academic adjustment. This is because these challenges may have an impact on their academic success, psychological well-being, and the educational institution's effectiveness in retaining these students (Pedersen 1991; Poyrazli et al. 2002).

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References


