

Adjustment Issues of International Students Enrolled in American Colleges and Universities: A Review of the Literature

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Received: February 23, 2011 Accepted: March 1, 2011 doi:10.5539/hes.v1n1p2

Abstract

This article is a review of the literature concerning the adjustment issues experienced by international students enrolled in American colleges and universities. Convergent findings indicated that English fluency, social support, length of stay in the U.S., perceived discrimination or prejudice, establishing relationships with Americans, and homesickness were the most significant variables related to the adjustment of international students. Limitations in the literature and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Adjustment issues, International students, Higher education

1. Introduction

Over the past 20 years, the world has become interconnected in different areas, such as trade and commerce, research and development, information technology, and education. Concurrently, the international student population enrolled in American institutions of higher education has grown considerably. More internationals are studying in the United States than ever before. According to the Institute of International Education (2010), 690,923 student sojourners were enrolled in American colleges and universities in 2009/2010—an increase of 30.45% over the period 2000/2001.

In this context, Andrade and Evans (2009) have pointed out that, “The approximately \$14.5 billion contributed annually by international students and their dependents for living expenses [in the United States] is significant. . . . This is one of the key reasons for global competition for international students” (p. 7). Not less importantly, because these students come from different geographic backgrounds, they significantly contribute to the promotion of cultural diversity in the classroom and on campus, enriching the academic environment and adding educational value to it.

Nevertheless, given their culturally diverse backgrounds, international students may experience adjustment strains within their host environment that are unique to them, such as cultural differences, language constraints, and social behaviors. Even though research on the adjustment issues of this student body is extensive (Olivas & Lee, 2006; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2008), there seems to be a dearth of efforts in the literature to integrate findings (Sodowsky & Plake, 1992; Yoon & Portman, 2004; Andrade & Evans, 2009). Despite numerous studies, there is a need to examine what has been investigated in order to further understand the research being done on this subject. Thus, the purpose of this article is to review literature related to the adjustment issues of international students enrolled in American colleges and universities. The key research question guiding the review of the literature was: What are the major adjustment issues experienced by international students enrolled in colleges and universities in the U.S.?

2. Context

According to Al-Sharideh and Goe (1998), adjustment can be “viewed as representing a transitional process that unfolds over time as students learn to cope with the exigencies of the university environment” (p. 701). As used here, adjustment refers to the specific problems international students experience in the academic setting and the coping

strategies they use to deal with acculturative-related stress. Whereas sociocultural adjustment refers to the extent to which international students can fit within the new culture, psychological adjustment can be regarded in terms of emotional well-being.

Despite the fact that international students on American campuses may experience problems that are common to U.S. students, they also face unique challenges emerging from cultural differences, language limitations, and potential prejudice and discrimination, to name a few. Therefore, research on the adjustment issues of this student body will contribute to our understanding of factors that can facilitate their acculturation to the United States. The reason the U.S. was chosen as the study place is that it currently hosts that largest number of student sojourners globally—22% of all international mobile students (Andrade & Evans, 2009, p. 2). Additionally, as a graduate student sojourner enrolled in an American university, the author is interested in further understanding the adjustment issues of this student body in the country.

Systematic research on student sojourners has been conducted ever since the 1950s, when an increasing number of students began pursuing degrees abroad. Ward et al. (2008) have pointed out that “As foreign exchange programs gained momentum in the 1950s, research activities were directed towards the description and analysis of the social and psychological problems experienced by overseas students” (p. 35). In general, this research attempted to evaluate student sojourners’ adjustments from a pathological perspective, measuring the relationship between different variables and sojourners’ adaptation to the host environment.

Starting in the 1980s, research began focusing on acculturation and acculturative-related stress, examining the coping strategies used by student sojourners and viewing their adjustment experiences from a social perspective (Berry, 1980; Furnham & Bochner, 1986). More recently, research has looked into the adjustment issues of international students “from the perspective of how to reduce their stress and enhance the positive aspects of their sojourn experience” (Ward et al., 2008, p. 146). In other words, what has changed essentially is the lens through which researchers have viewed international students—from a clinical to a developmental perspective. Despite the growing literature on the subject, there appears to be a need to synthesize and integrate findings in order to illuminate the knowledge base.

3. The Literature Review

A systematic search of empirical articles was conducted in three online databases—PsycINFO, ProQuest Education Journals, and ProQuest Psychology Journals. Searches were made using the following key terms: international student* plus adjustment issue* or adjustment* plus United States plus college* or universit*. The Search limiters used were *date range (1991-2010)*, *full text documents only*, and *peer-reviewed journals*. Notwithstanding the large number of articles initially identified in the above databases, only 21 studies reporting original research and including the way in which data were collected were found to relate specifically to the scope of this article and were thus reviewed. In addition to the aforementioned research-based articles, a number of books and literature reviews regarding the topic under investigation were used to complement the study. Even though the search may not have identified all of the articles relevant to the topic, the studies encountered are likely to be representative of the current knowledge base.

4. Findings from the Literature Review

Table 1 summarizes six convergent findings that emerged in this review associated with the adjustment issues experienced by international students across U.S. campuses. Each of these issues will be discussed in turn with illustrations from the literature. Within each issue, the studies are presented in chronological order to provide a view of how research has evolved.

4.1 English Language Proficiency

As shown in Table 1, findings from nine studies revealed that English fluency seems to be a significant variable related to the adjustment of international college and university students in the United States. In an investigation of the influence of reported English proficiency in predicting acculturative stress among international students, Yeh and Inose (2003) found that self-reported English language fluency was a significant predictor of acculturative distress. Swagler and Ellis’s (2003) study, in turn, revealed that apprehension about speaking English affected the adjustment of Taiwanese students. Similarly, Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, and Al-Timimi’s (2004) findings indicated that students with higher levels of English proficiency experienced lower levels of acculturative stress. Subsequently, Poyrazli and Kavanaugh’s (2006) study showed that English proficiency significantly affected the level of student sojourners’ academic adjustment. In another study, Mittal and Wieling (2006) qualitatively

examined the experiences of doctoral-level international students studying marriage and family therapy. Results suggested that fluency in English affected participants' experiences. Likewise, Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) found in their qualitative study that English language competency was an ongoing concern for internationals. In turn, Dao, Lee, and Chang's (2007) study showed that Taiwanese international students who had lower perceived English fluency were at risk of depressive feelings. In a subsequent study, Sümer, Poyrazli, and Grahame (2008) reported that students with lower levels of English proficiency had higher levels of depression and anxiety. Lastly, Kwon's (2009) study indicated that "international students who attended English as second language programs were more likely to feel intimidated or isolated in English speaking classes" (p. 1032).

These findings are very consistent with those from other studies, most of which show that mastery of the English language appears to be an important component of acculturation (Rogler, Cortes, & Malgady, 1991; Olivas & Lee, 2006; Andrade & Evans, 2009).

4.2 Social Support

Social support has been viewed as a critical resource in the stress and coping literature and as a major contributor to buffering stress. It may arise from various sources, including family, peers, and faculty. With regard to student sojourners, Ward et al., (2008) have claimed that "the social support hypothesis places greater emphasis on the quality and quantity of support than the actual support network, and research has demonstrated that both hosts and co-nationals can provide assistance and contribute to the enhancement of psychological well-being" (p. 150). According to the authors, research findings in the broader stress and coping literature and those on social support for international students are convergent.

Consistently, nine articles in this review reported convergent findings associated with social support regarding the adjustment issues experienced by international students across U.S. campuses. In a study that explored the relationship among four constructs with respect to international students—namely, life stress, academic stressors, reactions to stressors, and perceived social support—, Misra, Crist, and Burant's (2003) findings indicated that higher levels of academic stressors for international students were predicted by higher levels of life stress and by lower levels of social support. Yeh and Inose (2003), in turn, found in their research that social support network satisfaction was a significant predictor of acculturative distress. Similarly, Poyrazli et al. (2004) reported that students with higher levels of social support experienced lower levels of acculturative stress. With regard to Asian students' use of support networks, Ye (2006) investigated the relationship between sociocultural and psychological aspects of cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese international students in the U.S. and the support they perceived from traditional support networks and online ethnic social groups. Findings indicated that perceived support from interpersonal networks in the host country and from online ethnic social groups was negatively related to social difficulties.

Additionally, Mittal and Wieling (2006) reported that greater familial and graduate social support reduced international students' stress level. Atri, Sharma, and Cottrell (2007) found in their study that one type of social support, namely, emotional support, was significantly related to sojourners' mental health. Relatedly, findings from Dao et al. (2007) indicated that "Taiwanese international students who were at risk of depressive feelings were more likely to be those who had the perception of limited social support" (p. 287). Johnson, Batia, and Haun's (2008) investigation showed that changes in international graduate students' levels of social support upon entering graduate school prevented them from using it as a means to cope with stress. Finally, Sümer et al. (2008) found in their study that social support had a significant contribution in predicting depression.

4.3 Length of Stay in the U.S.

Six of the articles examined in this study revealed that length of residence in the U.S. was significantly related to the adjustment issues of college and university student sojourners. In this regard, Sodowsky and Plake (1992) found in their study that internationals who lived for more than six years in the U.S. were significantly more acculturated than those who had lived three to five years and zero to two years. In an attempt to determine whether students from non-Asian countries had higher scores on adjustment scales than students from Asian countries, Abe, Talbot, and Geelhoed (1998) found that students who had lived in the U.S. previously scored significantly higher on the Social Adjustment and Institutional Attachment subscales than those who had not.

In turn, Wilton and Constantine (2003) reported that for international students, greater length of stay in the U.S. was associated with lower levels of psychological distress. Relatedly, findings in Trice's (2004) study indicated that "the longer student sojourners had lived in the U.S., the more frequently they socialized with American students" (p. 683). In Mittal and Wieling's (2006) qualitative research, findings indicated that length of stay in the U.S. affected

the experiences of internationals. Ye (2006), for his part, found that compared to those who had lived in the United States for a longer period of time, new arrivals reported higher perceived support from online ethnic social groups.

4.4 Perceived Discrimination or Prejudice

As shown in Table 1, findings from four articles indicated that perceived discrimination or prejudice affected the adjustment of international students enrolled in the American higher education system. Perceived discrimination refers to one's interpretation of being subject to prejudicial treatment. With regard to student sojourners, it is often associated with ethnicity and regions of origin.

In an attempt to better understand acculturation among student sojourners, Sodowsky and Plake (1992) studied both the overriding culture effect and effects of specific sociocultural variables among international students, scholars, and new immigrants in America. Findings indicated that Africans, Asians, and South Americans perceived more prejudice than Europeans. In addition, international students tended to perceive prejudice significantly more than did the permanent residents and visiting international scholars (pp. 56-58). In another exploratory study, Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Cadwell, and Utsey (2005) qualitatively examined the cultural adjustment experiences of Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international college students in the United States. According to their findings, all of the interviewees reported prejudicial or discriminatory treatment.

Also employing a qualitative general mode of inquiry, Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) found that student sojourners experienced different forms of discrimination primarily outside of campus. In another study, Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) found that international students reported higher levels of discrimination than American students. Internationals who had lived in the U.S. longer also reported higher levels of perceived discrimination. Additionally, race or ethnicity predicted international students' level of perceived discrimination (p. 275).

4.5 Establishing Relationships with Americans

Results from three studies in this review indicated that international students' adjustment issues were associated with their establishing relationships with American students, which is consistent with other findings in the literature (Olivas & Lee, 2006; Ward et al., 2008; Andrade & Evans, 2009). In this respect, Al-Sharideh and Goe (1998) found in their investigation that participation in an ethnic community via the establishment of strong ties with other coculturals was the most important factor influencing the personal adjustment of international students. Furthermore, the size of a student's personal network of coculturals should be moderate and should be increased by the establishment of strong ties with Americans. Becoming too extensively integrated into an ethnic community appeared to create problems that negatively affect the self-esteem of international students. Results also indicated that the addition of Americans to an international student's personal network of strong ties was likely to facilitate personal adjustment (pp. 720-722).

In an effort to determine the extent to which social interaction is useful for predicting international graduate students' socialization patterns with Americans, Trice (2004) found that internationals' frequency of interaction with U.S. students varied tremendously by world region. Moreover, interacting with Americans concerned some students more than others. Findings also indicated that coming from Western Europe and communicating well in English were positively related to the amount of social contact students had with Americans (pp. 682-683). In a subsequent study, findings from Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) indicated that international students' social interaction, mainly with American students, was lacking.

4.6 Homesickness

Two studies among the articles examined reported findings in which homesickness correlated with the adjustment issues of student sojourners. In a study regarding levels of homesickness among sojourners and domestic students, Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) found that international students reported higher levels of homesickness than American students. Moreover, levels of discrimination among international students predicted their level of homesickness. Similarly, Tochkov, Levine, and Sanaka (2010) examined the incidence and determinants of homesickness experienced by international students using two samples: a sample of international college students from India and one of students from the United States. Findings indicated that international students from India experienced significantly higher levels of homesickness than American freshmen. All the international participants in the study indicated at least minimal amounts of homesickness. A notable relationship of homesickness between the time spent within the U.S. and number of accumulated credit hours was found. Indian students who had accumulated more credit hours experienced considerably less homesickness than those who had less credit hours (pp. 685-686).

5. Synthesis: Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The review above has identified six factors that have been reported fairly consistently as associated with the adjustment issues of student sojourners in the United States. However, there are limitations in the literature. As a result, suggestions for future research seem warranted. Initially, as outlined previously, several studies have pointed to the importance of English language proficiency with regard to internationals' sociocultural adaptation to the United States. Nevertheless, language proficiency involves mastery of different skills—namely, reading, writing, speaking, and listening, each of which may affect acculturation differently. In order to address this issue, future research should attempt to determine how significantly each of these four language skills correlates with the adjustment issues of international students.

Secondly, among the studies examined, eight articles (Abe et al., 1998; Wilton & Constantine, 2003; Swagler & Ellis, 2003; Constantine et al., 2005; Ye, 2006; Atri et al., 2007; Dao et al., 2007; Tochkov et al., 2010) assessed international students from specific world regions, mirroring trends in the psychological research on acculturation (Yoon & Portman, 2004). Consistently, Sodowsky and Plake (1992) have argued that there has been an increased emphasis in the literature on studying student sojourners from particular geographic regions.

However, of the eight studies, seven focused on international Asian students and only one (Constantine et al., 2005) investigated internationals from a different region of origin, that is, Africa. In accordance with the Institute of International Education (2010), there are seven top places of origin of international students enrolled on U.S. campuses. In descending order, the regions are Asia, North America, Western Europe, Latin America, Eastern Europe, The Middle East, and Africa. Given the dearth of studies of student sojourners from regions other than Asia, future research ought to examine alternative samples, that is, samples from other geographic regions, continuing to emphasize within-culture group patterns.

Thirdly, clearly scarce in the literature was the examination of samples comprised only of international undergraduates. Just one study (Constantine et al., 2005) among those examined assessed samples of undergraduate sojourners. The remaining 20 investigations either assessed samples of both undergraduates and graduates or graduates alone. Nonetheless, even though the majority of international students study at the graduate level, the number of undergraduate sojourners in America rose from 254, 429 in 2000/2001 to 274, 431 in 2009/2010 (Institute of International Education, 2010). Consequently, future research should narrow the focus to international undergraduates, in order to further understand their adjustment problems and illuminate areas of convergence.

Finally, regarding the general mode of inquiry of the 21 articles examined, four of them (Constantine et al., 2005; Mittal & Wieling, 2006; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Johnson et al., 2008) employed qualitative research methods and only one (Swagler & Ellis, 2003) used a mixed-method approach. The remaining articles were all quantitative. Thus, future qualitative research seems warranted for further in-depth understanding of the adjustment needs of international students in their host environment.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to review literature related to the adjustment issues of international students enrolled in American institutions of higher education. As a result, six convergent findings were identified in an effort to answer the research question. These findings can be used in an integrated form to guide the implementation of support programs designed to contribute to a successful academic experience for student sojourners. For example, with regard to English language proficiency—a significant academic stressor for sojourners—interdisciplinary courses could be developed to address the specific language skills with which international students contend. Similarly, social support programs could be implemented in colleges and universities to ameliorate student sojourners' academic, cultural, and social adjustments. Finally, other initiatives directed to helping internationals cope with discrimination, develop relationships with Americans, and successfully deal with homesickness could be undertaken by higher education institutions in an effort to facilitate these students' adjustments and promote cultural diversity on campus.

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Table 1. Adjustment Issues Experienced by International Students

Adjustment Issues	Literature
English language proficiency	(Yeh & Inose, 2003; Swagler & Ellis, 2003; Poyrazli et al., 2004; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006; Mittal & Wieling, 2006; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Dao et al., 2007; Sümer et al., 2008; Kwon, 2009)
Social support	(Yeh & Inose, 2003; Misra et al., 2003; Poyrazli et al., 2004; Ye, 2006; Mittal & Wieling, 2006; Atri, et al., 2007; Dao et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2008; Sümer et al., 2008)
Length of stay in the U.S.	(Sodowsky & Plake, 1992; Abe et al., 1998; Wilton & Constantine, 2003; Trice, 2004; Mittal & Wieling, 2006; Ye, 2006)
Perceived discrimination or prejudice	(Sodowsky & Plake, 1992; Constantine et al., 2005; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007)
Establishing relationships with Americans	(Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Trice, 2004; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007)
Homesickness	(Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Tochkov et al, 2010)

Six major findings in the literature concerning the adjustment issues experienced by international students enrolled in the American higher education system.