

## Psychosocial Adjustment of International Students

Daniela K. Cigularova

### Abstract

The psychosocial adjustment of international students is a complex process. This paper discusses the importance of background variables (e.g., age, gender, and cultural distance), personality characteristics (e.g., locus of control and neuroticism), and situational factors (e.g., social support) that impact international students' psychosocial adjustment. Based on a review of literature, a case is made for the need to study these factors in order for higher education institutions to provide a successful and rewarding experience for international students. Student affairs professionals can ease the psychosocial adjustment of international students by being proactive in their efforts to address and meet the needs of this particular student population.

## Psychosocial Adjustment of International Students

International students are viewed as an important population in United States' (U.S.) colleges and universities (El-Khawas, 2003). They bring intellectual, cultural, as well as economic benefits to the U.S. International students spend nearly 12 billion dollars annually on tuition, fees, living expenses, and other related costs (Institute of International Education, 2003). In Fall 2002, a record 586,000 international students (4.6 % of total enrollment in higher education) attended U.S. institutions. Although the U.S. remains the number one destination for international students, data from the Institute of International Education suggests the number of new international students drastically decreased since 2002. Several factors have attributed to this decline, including economic instability in many countries, safety concerns of international students and their families, problems with obtaining student visas, and an increased competition for foreign students from other countries (Institute of International Education).

In order for the U.S. to retain its attractiveness as a host country and to better accommodate the significant number of international students studying in the U.S., it is crucial to identify and understand the factors that affect the satisfaction and retention of these students. In particular, college administrators need to be more aware of the factors that affect the quality of international students' psychosocial adjustment to university life in the U.S. Such awareness will help institutions identify the adjustment needs of international students; will reduce the frustration, disappointment, and challenge for

student affairs administrators when dealing with the transitional problems of international students; and will also provide professionals with guidelines for creating culturally appropriate services and programs. This paper focuses on the concept of international students' psychosocial adjustment, the factors determining that adjustment, and the implications for the work of student affairs professionals.

### The Concept of Psychosocial Adjustment

International students face many academic and cultural challenges when beginning their studies in the U.S. Early research from the 1960s and 1970s conceptualized adjustment in terms of academic performance (Halamandaris & Power, 1999). From this research, the primary goal of many international students was academic success, achieved by expected existence of a relationship between academic performance and adjustment. Further research suggests a more comprehensive definition of adjustment. This definition includes psychosocial aspects, such as satisfaction with social and academic life, lack of loneliness, psychological well-being, and depression (Halamandaris & Power).

Tseng (2002) differentiates four major categories of adjustment problems faced by international students: general living, academic, socio-cultural, and personal psychological adjustment. General living adjustment includes adaptation to U.S. food, living environment, transportation, climate, and financial and health care systems. Low proficiency in the English language, ignorance of the U.S. educational system, and lack of effective learning skills to achieve academic success are all examples of academic adjustment issues. This paper focuses on Tseng's latter two categories, socio-cultural adjustment (e.g., culture shock, culture fatigue, discrimination, new social/cultural

customs, norms, regulations, and roles) and personal psychological adjustment (e.g., homesickness, loneliness, depression, isolation, frustration, and loss of identity or status). Researchers often collapse, socio-cultural adjustment and personal psychological adjustment under the label of “psychosocial adjustment” (Halamandaris & Power, 1999; Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson, & Pisecco, 2002).

### *Psychosocial Adjustment*

Psychosocial adjustment of international students is considered to be important because of its positive relationship with academic performance (Pedersen, 1995; Stoyhoff, 1997). Many researchers and educators are interested in the psychosocial adjustment of international students in order to find ways to reduce their stress and increase the positive aspects of their experience abroad. The unspoken assumption is that those students who are satisfied with their study abroad experience will serve as spokespeople for the country and the institution where they obtained their education. Positive word of mouth is vital in successful marketing, especially considering the recent increased competition from other host countries (e.g., Great Britain, Australia) and the decline in new international students coming to the U.S. (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001).

Several stage theories exist to describe the process of cultural adjustment (Adler, 1975; Garza-Guerrero, 1974; Torbiorn, 1982). The most well-known is Oberg’s (1960) four stages of emotional reactions related to cross-cultural adjustment. The first stage is the *honeymoon stage*, characterized by the initial excitement, curiosity, and enthusiasm of the newly arrived individual. Some time after the initial contact, the individual is overwhelmed by the difficulties with and requirements of the new culture. Oberg calls

this experience the *crisis stage*, which is likely to result in feelings of inadequacy, frustration, anger, anxiety, and depression. In the *recovery stage*, crisis resolution and culture learning take place, and the individual is better able to function in the new culture. Finally, the individual achieves *adjustment* and is able to enjoy and function competently in the new environment or culture (Oberg).

Oberg's (1960) theory describes a U-curve of adjustment, characterized by initial positive experience, crisis, and then recovery. Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) further expanded this model and proposed a W-curve, arguing that the adjustment curve is repeated on re-entry to the home culture. Although the U-curve hypothesis of adjustment is popular and intuitively appealing, it is not supported by empirical research. In fact, longitudinal studies have found that, in contrast to the euphoria state in the beginning of the transition as proposed by Oberg (1960), the early period is most stressful, and after the first 4 to 6 months, the adjustment difficulties drop and then vary over time (Ward & Kennedy, 1996; Ward, Okura, Kennedy, & Kojima, 1998). These findings suggest that immediate assistance and attention to the needs of international students upon arrival are crucial for their psychosocial adjustment.

#### Determinants of Psychosocial Adjustment and Student Affairs

Those who work with international students at colleges and universities may observe some students adjust more easily to the U.S. culture than others. According to Kagan and Cohen (1990), psychosocial adjustment of international students is the result of the interaction of multiple factors. A number of background variables have been related to international students' psychosocial adjustment, such as age and gender (Hull, 1978; Manese, Sedlacek, & Leong, 1988; Pruitt, 1978), marital status (Surdam & Collins,

1984), nationality (Chataway & Berry, 1989), and previous traveling experience (Basu & Ames, 1970; Bochner, 1972).

### *Cultural Distance*

Cultural distance (i.e., the perceived discrepancy between culture of origin and culture of contact) has also been associated with psychosocial adjustment (Babiker, Cox, & Miller, 1980; Ward & Searle, 1991). Babiker et al. (1980) argued that the degree of psychological adjustment difficulties is a function of the dissimilarities between culture of origin and culture of contact. One possible interpretation is that those who experience more significant cultural distance are likely to experience greater life changes during the cross-cultural transition and consequently, more stress and problems with psychosocial adjustment. Furnham and Bochner (1982) reported that international students in the United Kingdom who came from culturally similar regions, experienced less social difficulties than students from culturally distant regions.

Another route by which cultural distance may influence psychosocial adjustment is through its affect on the ability and willingness of international students to interact with host culture peers (Furnham & Alibhai, 1985). This affect is evident in the study by Redmond and Bunyi (1993), who found that British, other European, and South American students were more able to initiate interactions and maintain interpersonal relations with U.S. host students than Korean, Taiwanese, and Southeast Asian students. Additionally, communication and time spent with host students have been positively related to international students' psychosocial adjustment (Pruitt, 1978; Rohrlich & Martin, 1991; Searle & Ward, 1990, Zimmerman, 1995).

Based on the above research on cultural distance, student affairs professionals in the U.S. should be especially sensitive and proactive in their support of students from regions that are culturally different, such as Asia and Africa. Creating a campus environment conducive to multicultural diversity and amicable relationships between international students and U.S. host counterparts should be a priority. Student affairs professionals can also effectively increase international-host student interactions by organizing peer-pairing programs (Abe, Talbot, & Geelhoed, 1998; Westwood & Barker, 1990), providing pre-arrival information about the target culture and creating opportunities for contact with the U.S. culture before arrival (Pruitt, 1978).

### *Social Support*

Services and activities, such as the ones mentioned above, may increase international students' perceptions of social support, which has been associated with better psychosocial adjustment. Studies have consistently shown that relationships with compatriots (i.e., international students from the same country), other international students, and host nationals help international students adjust to the new culture (Ward et al., 2001; Barratt & Huba, 1994). In order to assist international students with finding much needed social support, institutions can encourage campus involvement of international students by organizing cultural activities and engaging international students as volunteers for different events and programs. Universities can also establish formal and informal networks to meet with and address the needs of students, offer orientation and social programs to facilitate interpersonal relationships, and provide living arrangements that foster positive cross-cultural contact.

Findsen (1987) revealed that international students tended to seek most support from compatriots, less from other international students, and least from host national students. Nevertheless, a significant body of evidence exists in support of the positive effect of relationships with host nationals on the psychosocial adjustment of international students (Kamal, 1990; Pruitt, 1978; Ward et al., 2001). However, international students may experience problems establishing and maintaining quality relationships with host nationals. Colleges and universities should seek ways to create opportunities for international students to interact and develop close relationships with host national students. Host national students, on the other hand, should be encouraged to seek interaction with international students, perhaps as peer advisors, conversation partners, or study partners. Cultural training may also prove helpful to international students and host national students for understanding the nature and dynamics of international student relationships.

### *Language Fluency*

A factor which has been found to relate strongly to both social contact with host national students and psychosocial adjustment of international students in general, is fluency in the host country language (Barratt & Huba, 1994; Kagan & Cohen, 1990). Language skills are crucial not only for academic performance, but also for cultural adjustment. For that reason, educational institutions should continuously provide and support opportunities for students to improve their language skills beyond merely setting requirements for language proficiency prior to admission.

### *Personality*

Several personality characteristics have also been associated with the psychosocial adjustment of international students. Positive psychosocial adjustment has been positively related to internal locus of control (Kennedy, 1994; Ward & Kennedy, 1993), extraversion (Halamandaris & Power, 1999; Searle & Ward, 1990), flexibility (Ruben & Kealey, 1979), tolerance of ambiguity (Cort & King, 1979), mastery (Sam, 1998), achievement motivation (Halamandaris & Power, 1999), self-efficacy and self-monitoring (Harrison, Chadwick, & Scales, 1996; Poyrazli et al., 2002). Negative psychosocial adjustment has been positively related to neuroticism (Furukawa & Shibayama, 1993; Halamandaris & Power, 1999; Jou & Fukada, 1996; Leong, Ward, & Low, 2000), authoritarianism (Basu & Ames, 1970; Chang, 1973), and shyness (Joiner, 1997). Although it appears that certain personality characteristics of international students may affect the way they adjust psychologically and socially to cross-cultural transitions, student affairs professionals should consider that most of these characteristics are relatively stable and difficult to change.

Personal assertiveness is highly valued in both U.S. society and in U.S. classrooms. Studies have found that international students from certain countries are significantly less assertive than U.S. students (Thompson, Ishii, & Klopf, 1990; Thompson & Klopf, 1995). As a result of such differences, some international students may have problems adapting to a relatively more assertive culture. Athen (1991) stated that lack of assertiveness is a problem that affects many international students, especially Asian females. According to Chen (1992), assertiveness may help international students handle their adjustment difficulties. Poyrazli et al. (2002) found that more assertive

international graduate students were better adjusted psychosocially. Therefore, a training workshop designed by Student Affairs professionals to teach students how to be assertive in the U.S. culture may prove helpful. Poyrazli et al. also revealed that academic self-efficacy is positively related to psychosocial adjustment of international graduate students. This finding suggests that training programs related to academic life and the U.S. educational system may help students clarify expectations about academic life and thus increase their academic self-efficacy. For example, student affairs professionals can organize informational orientations and seminars through their university's international office or graduate school.

### Conclusion

In this paper, the psychosocial adjustment of international students was examined in terms of conceptualization and factors that were found to relate to the adjustment experience. International students encounter many problems as they adjust to campus life and life in the U.S. in general. This paper reveals that the process of adjustment is complex and affected by a host of factors, including background characteristics, personality traits, and situational issues. Higher education institutions should encourage further study of the adjustment of international students and apply the relevant knowledge in their efforts to provide a successful and rewarding experience for their international students.

### References

- Abe, J., Talbot, D. M., & Geelhoed, R. J. (1998). Effects of a peer program on international student adjustment. *Journal of College Student Development, 39*, 539-547.

- Adler, P. S. (1975). The transitional experience: An alternative view of culture shock. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 4*, 13-23.
- Athen, G. (1991). Some help and some myths. *The Counseling Psychologist, 19*, 62-65.
- Babiker, I. E., Cox, J. L., & Miller, P. (1980). The measurement of cultural distance and its relationship to medical consultations, symptomatology, and examination performance of overseas students at Edinburgh University. *Social Psychiatry, 15*, 109-116.
- Barratt, M. F., & Huba, M. E. (1994). Factors related to international undergraduate student adjustment in an American community. *College Student Journal, 28*, 422-435.
- Basu, A. K., & Ames, R. G. (1970). Cross-cultural contact and attitude formation. *Sociology and Social Research, 55*, 5-16.
- Bochner, S. (1972). Problems in culture learning. In S. Bochner & P. P. Wicks (Eds.), *Overseas students in Australia* (pp. 65-81). Sydney: The New South Wales University Press.
- Chang, H. B. (1973). Attitudes of Chinese students in the United States. *Sociology and Social Research, 58*, 66-77.
- Chataway, C. J., & Berry, J. W. (1989). Acculturation experiences, appraisal, coping, and adaptation: A comparison of Hong Kong Chinese, French, and English students in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 21*(3), 295-309.
- Chen, G. M. (1992). Communication adaptability and interaction involvement as predictors of cross-cultural adjustment. *Communication Reports, 9*, 33-41.

- Cort, D. A., & King, M. (1979). Some correlates of culture shock among American tourists in Africa. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 3, 211-225.
- El-Khawas, E. (2003). The many dimensions of student diversity. In S. R. Komives & D. B. Woodard Jr. (Eds.), *Student services: A handbook for the profession* (4<sup>th</sup> ed., pp. 45-52). San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.
- Findsen, B. C. (1987). The process of international graduate student adjustment. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 48(11), 247. (UMI No. AAC 8800aa5)
- Furnham, A., & Alibhai, N. (1985). The friendship networks of foreign students: A replication and extension of the functional model. *International Journal of Psychology*, 20, 709-722.
- Furnham, A., & Bochner, S. (1982). Social difficulty in a foreign culture: An empirical analysis of culture shock. In S. Bochner (Ed.), *Cultures in contact: Studies in cross-cultural interactions* (pp. 161-198). Oxford: Pergamon.
- Furukawa, T., & Shibayama, T. (1993). Predicting maladjustment of exchange students in different cultures: A prospective study. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 28, 142-146.
- Garza-Guerrero, A. (1974). Culture shock: Its mourning and the vicissitudes of identity. *Journal of American Psychoanalytic Association*, 22, 408-429.
- Gullahorn, J. T., & Gullahorn, J. E. (1963). An extension of the U-curve hypothesis. *Journal of Social Issues*, 19, 33-47.
- Halamandaris, K. F., & Power, K. G. (1999). Individual differences, social support, and coping with the examination stress: A study of the psychosocial and academic

- adjustment of first year home students. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 26, 665-685.
- Harrison, J. K., Chadwick, M., & Scales, M. (1996). The relationship between cross-cultural adjustment and the personality variables of self-efficacy and self-monitoring. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 20, 167-188.
- Hull, F. (1978). *Foreign students in the United States of America: Coping behavior within the educational environment*. New York: Praeger.
- Institute of International Education. (2003, November 3). *Open Doors 2003: International Students in the U.S.* Retrieved September 10, 2004, from <http://opendoors.iienetwork.org/?p=36523>
- Joiner, T. E., Jr. (1997). Shyness and low social support as interactive diatheses with loneliness as mediator: Testing and interpersonal personality view of vulnerability to depressive symptoms. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 106(3), 386-394.
- Jou, Y. H., & Fukada, H. (1996). Influences of social support and personality on adjustment of Chinese students in Japan. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 26(20), 1795-1802.
- Kagan, H., & Cohen, J. (1990). Cultural adjustment of international students. *Psychological Science*, 2, 133-137.
- Kamal, A. (1990). Cross-cultural contact and attitudes of Qatari students in the United States. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 14, 123-134.
- Kennedy, A. (1994). *Personality and psychological adjustment during cross-cultural transitions: A study of the cultural fit proposition*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Centerbury, New Zealand.

- Leong, C.-H., Ward, C., & Low, M.-L. (2000, July). *Revisiting the “cultural fit” proposition: Personality and adjustment in two cultures*. Paper presented at the XVth International Congress of the International Association for Cross-cultural Psychology, Pultusk, Poland.
- Manese, J. E., Sedlacek, W. E., & Leong, F. T. L. (1988). Needs and perceptions of female and male international students. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 16*(1), 24-29.
- Oberg, K. (1960). Cultural shock: Adjustment to new cultural environments. *Practical Anthropology, 7*, 177-182.
- Pedersen, P. (1995). *The five stages of culture shock*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Poyrazli, S., Arbona, C., Nora, A., McPherson, R., & Pisecco, S. (2002). Relation between assertiveness, academic self-efficacy, and psychosocial adjustment among international graduate students. *Journal of College Student Development, 5*, 632-642.
- Pruitt, F. J. (1978). The adaptation of African students to American society. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 2*(1), 90-118.
- Redmond, M. V., & Bunyi, J. M. (1993). The relationship of intercultural communication competence with stress and the handling of stress as reported by international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 24*, 151-159.
- Rohrlich, B. F., & Martin, J. N. (1991). Host country and re-entry adjustment of student sojourners. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 15*, 163-182.

- Ruben, B. D., & Kealey, D. J. (1979). Behavioral assessment of communication competency and the prediction of cross-cultural adaptation. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 3, 15-47.
- Sam, D. L. (1998). Predicting life satisfaction among adolescents from immigrant families in Norway. *Ethnicity and Health*, 3, 5-18.
- Searle, W., & Ward, C. (1990). The prediction of psychological and sociocultural adjustment during cross-cultural transitions. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 14, 449-464.
- Stoyhoff, S. (1997). Factors associated with international students' academic achievements. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 24, 56-68.
- Surdam, J. C., & Collins, J. R. (1984). Adaptation of international students: A cause for concern. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 25(3), 240-245.
- Thompson, C. A., Ishii, S., & Klopf, D. (1990). Japanese and Americans compared on assertiveness/responsiveness. *Psychological Reports*, 66, 829-830.
- Thompson, C. A., & Klopf, D. (1995). Social style among North American, Finnish, Japanese, and Korean university students. *Psychological Reports*, 77, 60-62.
- Torbiorn, I. (1982). *Leaving abroad: Personal adjustment and personnel policy in the overseas setting*. Chichester, England: John Wiley & Sons.
- Tseng, W. (2002). International students' strategies for well-being. *College Student Journal*, 4, 591-597.
- Ward, C., Bochner, S., & Furnham, A. (2001). *The psychology of cultural shock*. Philadelphia: Routledge.

- Ward, C., & Kennedy, A. (1993). Where's the culture in cross-cultural transition? Comparative studies of sojourner adjustment. *Journal of Cross-cultural Psychology, 24*, 221-249.
- Ward, C., & Kennedy, A. (1996). Crossing cultures: The relationship between psychological and sociocultural dimensions of cross-cultural adjustment. In J. Pandey, D. Sinha, & D. P. S. Bhawuk (Eds.), *Asians contributions to cross-cultural psychology* (pp. 289-306). New Delhi, India: Sage.
- Ward, C., Okura, Y., Kennedy, A., & Kojima, T. (1998). The U-curve on trial: A longitudinal study of psychological and sociological adjustment during cross-cultural transition. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 22*, 277-291.
- Ward, C., & Searle, W. (1991). The impact of value discrepancies and cultural identity on psychological and sociocultural adjustment of sojourners. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 15*, 209-225.
- Westwood, M. J., & Barker, M. (1990). Academic achievement and social adaptation among international students: A comparison groups study of the peer-pairing program. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 14*, 251-263.
- Zimmerman, S. (1995). Perceptions of intercultural communication competence and international student adaptation to an American campus. *Communication Education, 44*, 321-335.