

Adjustment of International Graduate Students of Eastern Cultures to the American Popular and Educational Culture : A Qualitative Research

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Adjustment of International Graduate Students of Eastern Cultures to the American Popular and Educational Culture: A Qualitative Research

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The number of international students coming into the U.S. for higher education is steadily rising. The ability of these students to perform well in their educational endeavors is related to their degree of success in adjusting to American popular and educational culture. This study uses a naturalistic perspective to understand the factors involved in the adjustment of international graduate students from India and Japan to American popular and educational culture. Implications of these results for international student services are discussed.

Keywords: International students, Indian, Japanese, Adjustment, American Higher Education

I. Introduction

Since the beginning of the century, the number of international students studying in the United States has gradually increased (Crano & Crano, 1993). By 1976, developing countries employed the United States as a training place for more than 200,000 students (Pruitt, 1978). Scully (1981) projected an increase in the number of international students at U.S. colleges to more than a million in early 1990s.

Given the importance of international students to the U.S. educational system, it is necessary to understand the factors that affect the quality of their adjustment. Considerable evidence suggests the necessity for such knowledge. In a comprehensive review of sojourner adjustment, Church (1982) estimated that the functioning of 15% to 25% of all international students might be in some ways impaired. Consistent with this observation, Alexander, Workney, Klein, and Miller (1976) categorized foreign students as a high-risk group.

There is as yet little agreement on the factors that matter in international students' adjustment and there are few results that lead to a workable adjustment model. This corresponds to a lack of qualitative studies in this area. This study is thus a beginning attempt to fill existing knowledge gap in this area. This study looks at the adjustment process that international graduate students from India and Japan attending as graduate students at the University of Denver, Denver, Colorado. The study uses naturalistic inquiry as the philosophy and methodology of research in analyzing the various factors that affect international student adjustment to the popular and educational culture in the U.S.

II. Review of Literature

Most of the studies conducted in this area are quantitative and tend to view adjustment from the standpoint of stress and psychopathology. In part, this is because of a failure to develop objective instruments with which to evaluate adjustment strains that international students experience. Proxy measures of adjustment strain, coping, and adjustment have been put to use; for example, measures of self-concept, discrepancy between actual and ideal self, and the stressful life events inventory have been employed. Other approaches have borrowed from the clinical arena, making use of instruments that are designed to tap psychopathological symptoms of depression, alienation, and so forth.

Studies have been conducted on the process of acculturation, offering some benefit for the study of adjustment process of international students. Two studies by Barry (1980) and Olmedo (1979) have focused on the attempts of international students to maintain identity as a group, to identify more fully with the majority culture and on the tension between these two possibilities. Dyal and Chang (1985) and Dyal and Dyal (1981) in their study on international students suggest that an international student, however, typically operates at first as an individual rather than as a member of an autonomous group. Familial supports and other intact social support networks are less likely to exist for sojourners (as opposed to permanent immigrants), and considerable research has demonstrated that such support systems offer a positive prognosis for a healthy acculturation (Dyal, Rybensky, and Sommers, 1988; Kuo and Tsai, 1986). However, most acculturation research does not address the particular problems that are encountered by the international students.

Another potential difficulty in such studies arises due to a tendency of acculturation research to emphasize psychopathology. Nicassio (1983,1985), for example, has presented some extremely interesting research on the acculturation of South East Asian refugees. The focus of this research, however, is on the psychopathologies associated with the stress that accompany the status of refugee life. Although considerable evidence shows that international students are indeed stressed by culture change (Barry, 1980; Birslin, 1981; Church, 1982; Dyal and Chang, 1985), they typically are not refugees, and as such, are not likely to suffer from the long term, debilitating stresses, and consequent hopelessness, that such status can induce (Seligman, 1975).

Although there is much to be said for studies of this type, there are two potential difficulties that they share. The first is that there is a presumption that immigration (long or short term) is always experienced as a crisis (Nann, 1983; Naidoo, 1985). Social psychological research on the self-fulfilling prophecy suggests that a focus on negative expectation, which is difficult to avoid when measures of psychopathology are employed to assess the immigrant experience, is almost certain to result in findings that emphasizes the negative, rather than positive, outcomes of such changes (Miller & Turnbull, 1986; Neuberger, 1989; Snyder, 1984). The second potential problem with the use of measures of psychopathology to assess adaptation and adjustment of immigrants is that such measures were not specifically designed with such applications in mind. Westermeyer, Vang, and Neider (1983) have suggested that such use maybe beyond the proper realm of application of these instruments.

The current study looks at the factors that are important toward successful adjustment of graduate students from India and Japan to life as a student in the United States. The study uses a naturalistic perspective to address the issue.

III. Research Question

The research question that this study attempted to answer was:

What are the factors that affect the adjustment of international graduate students from Eastern cultures to American popular and educational culture?

In the study, the key concepts of the research question and the study topic are defined as follows:

Culture: Baker (1999) defines culture as the customs, habits, skills, technology, arts, values, ideology, science, and religious and political behavior of a group of people in a specific time period. The study uses the term “culture” in this sense.

Acculturation: This is defined as the adoption by one cultural group or individual of the culture of another; also, the process of conditioning and individual or group to the social patterns, behaviors, values, and mores of others (Baker, 1999).

Eastern cultures: For the purposes of this study, we define students of Eastern cultures to mean students from India and Japan.

Adjustment: An individual’s activities to satisfy a need or overcome an obstacle to return to a harmonious fit with the environment (Baker, 1999).

IV. Methodology

The subject population for this study included international graduate students from India and Japan attending graduate schools at the University of Denver. Subjects were recruited through the use of posters and flyers and through contact by telephone as well as employing snowball sampling (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

Fifteen subjects expressed desire to participate in the study. Eight were from India and seven were from Japan and seven of the respondents were male and eight were female. The age of the respondents ranged from 25 to 36. All the students in the sample were either from the Business School, School of International Studies, or School of Computer Science. All respondents had no prior experience of visiting or living in the U.S. before coming here as graduate students.

The method used for data gathering was the interview method. All interviews took place between March 1 and August 31, 2009. The interviews were one to one and in-depth and lasted for about an hour on the average. Interviews were arranged at locations convenient to the subjects and ranged from the cafeteria, to the researcher’s home. The general interview guide approach (Patton, 1990)

was employed in the interviews.

Data collection was done using both field notes and tape-recording of the interviews. Informed consent for audio-taping was obtained prior to the interviews and appropriate forms were signed by the informants. All the respondents agreed to audio-taping of the interviews. This helped immensely as it gave the researcher the luxury of sacrificing some descriptiveness in field notes to concentrating more on the interview process.

The interview guide that was used in this study consisted of the following questions.

1. What has been your experience of life as a student in the U.S.?
2. Did you have trouble in adjusting to life as a student in the U.S.?
3. What factors were obstacles in your adjustment?
4. What factors helped you in your adjustment?
5. What suggestions do you have that would help Indian/Japanese students in their adjustment to American educational and popular culture?

Additional questions were added as needed for purposes of clarification. Upon completion of the interview, subjects were thanked and encouraged to contact the researcher if they felt they had additional information to offer at any time. Some of the participants were contacted by phone for certain clarifications and to check the validity of certain inferences made from the data by the researchers.

Analysis of data was done utilizing a naturalistic perspective (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The emphasis during analysis was on categorization and abstraction (Spiggle, 1994). Emphasis was placed on the drawing of themes and concepts. The audio-tapes were used to confirm that the inferences made were based on statements actually made by the respondents. The results of this study are presented in terms of themes and concepts. The analysis of data in this study attempts to portray those themes, and the constructs that these themes fall into, that are important in the adjustment of Indian and Japanese graduate students to American popular and educational culture.

V. Findings

Data gathered from Asian Indian and Japanese graduate students fell naturally into three major categories, or constructs: pre-knowledge about America, transitional issues, and a collective cultural background versus individualistic cultural background. Each of these constructs had various themes underlying them.

1. Pre-Knowledge

The construct of pre-knowledge gathered together data that indicated access to information about American culture and the educational system at the University of Denver as an important issue in adjustment upon arriving at D.U. from the countries of India and Japan. Concepts, or issues, such

as the existing common exchange of cultures between the countries, understanding of the American media, the level of technical and mechanistic knowledge in the culture from the country of origin, and language skills were cited by these students (“You know how little we know about computers and typing as students in India” - Respondent 1; “I had not operated a washing machine before I came here” - Respondent 3).

Language skills are not a problem for the Indian student, as a common exchange between cultures has existed for hundreds of years between Britain and India (“In fact I can speak and write better English than the American students in my class!” - Respondent 1). However, very little exchange takes place between Indian and American cultures. Indian cultures is not as mechanistic as American. Computers, and some appliances are not owned individually or used on a daily basis. The Indian educational system accepts all assignments except important papers, such as the dissertation, in handwritten form. Some Indian subjects felt their adjustment to American academia would have been easier had they know before they came that using a computer was a necessary skill for survival (“If I had known that it is so important to know typing, I would have learned it in India before I came here” - Respondent 1). Evidently, secretarial-type schools in India offer courses teaching these skills for a minimal and affordable fee and having this knowledge before arrival would eliminate one source of stress for the Indian student.

Japan is a mechanistic and technical society and so, Japanese subjects appeared to experience stress in adjusting to American culture only when American culture did not have as many technical or mechanistic options available as did the Japanese (“They do not have enough public phones here” - Respondent 4; “There is no card (calling card) to use for local calls” - Respondent 5). Communications in Japan are free and liberal and much knowledge is available and accessible. Therefore, the Japanese student is able to prepare him/herself for the transition to American through this free exchange of information. Because of this exposure to American culture, the Japanese student feels little stress about adjusting to most aspects of American culture. One deficiency noted by subjects was the need for better language skills and the support services, such as translation services, to assist the student in acquiring these skills (“There is so little help available for help in translation and in writing papers in English” - Respondent 4). Unlike the fusion of British and Indian cultures affecting the acquisition of language, Japanese students are exposed to American English, but not immersed in it. However, coming from a technical, mechanistic society, Japanese students are prepared to make use of language services in whatever expedient manner they may be presented—computer programs, audio equipment, library networks etc.

Because there is only isolated exchange of culture between American and India, the exposure of Indians to American media has led many to believe that America is a very dangerous place to live (“I knew from the news and other programs on T.V here, how dangerous it is” - Respondent 2). Subjects reported feeling that they should not become emotionally, romantically, or sexually involved with American members of the opposite sex for fear they would become infected with the AIDS virus (“There is always the fear of getting AIDS” - Respondent 1). Some subjects related that they began

relationships, but terminated them in fear without substantial proof that they were in danger of becoming exposed to AIDS. This anxiety was apparently perpetuated by the types of information presented in the American media to which the students were exposed. Information of this type is not readily available in India and these students are often unaware that AIDS is as great, if not greater, a problem in India than it is in America. Due to the differences in “cultures of communications,” Indian students seem to confuse what they ingest from the American media with their life in Denver. The expanded boundaries of freedom of speech and freedom of the press are not completely understood before the student arrives and therefore, the new Indian student has trouble discriminating between what is true in general, what is true for others, and what is true for him/her.

2. Transitional Issues

This construct was basically comprised of concepts believed by the students to make their transition to the American academic setting and culture easier and less stressful. The subjects who did not arrive for the autumn quarter believed that their late arrival in the academic year made it harder to get oriented and to adjust. These subjects therefore believed that the timing of their arrival was important and should coincide with the start of the academic year (“It would have been so much easier if I had come when they (International Students Office) had the orientation program”-Respondent 2). Indian students coming later in the academic year felt it was difficult to access their informal Indian support network, which seemed to form stronger alliances at the beginning of the academic year. Some Indian subjects were contacted before they came by the informal network, but in some cases, subjects did not receive an advance contact because they did not come directly from India, but another country.

Japanese subjects were also concerned with timing, but in a more formal sense. One subject stated that s/he regretted coming later in the academic year because s/he missed orientation. Japanese subjects appeared to be aware of a resource in the form of an American couple who were willing to host foreign students in their home for the first year of their study. This resource fast became a valued part of the Japanese networking system among students. As a result, Japanese subjects felt that finding a host residence, or having one provided, helped the foreign student adjust better.

In comparison to the Indian culture, much exchange exists between the Japanese and American cultures. As a result, subjects reported less anxiety and an increased ability to come to America even when uncertain of future plans. Some subjects planned to come to America to finish their education and then if they could find a job, stay and set up residence. However, if employment could not be found, they would plan to return to Japan. Either option seemed acceptable and the Japanese student appears to move with some ease between the two.

Indian subjects felt it was a problem to try to locate housing on their own, as they did not have transportation, did not know how to use the public transportation system, and did not know how to go about finding a residence in Denver.

One particularly interesting concept expressed by both Japanese and Indian subjects was the pref-

erence to relate upon arriving with a student or person from the country of origin that was not already acculturated, and certainly not assimilated. These subjects felt it less stressful and more helpful to relate to others who were acclimated to the new culture, having learned how to accomplish certain tasks and where to go for certain needs, but still living in the culture of the country of origin.

3. Collective Culture versus Individualistic Culture

Differences in the style of adjustment and levels of success in adjustment between the Indian and Japanese students were noted in subjects' sensitivity to American individualistic culture as compared with the collective nature of the culture from the country of origin. These differences grouped themselves within the concepts of verbal assertiveness, anxiety about fitting in to the new culture, anxiety about appearance as a group from a particular country, and skill in networking and advocacy.

Indian students reported experiencing a great deal of stress and anxiety when confronted with situations requiring them to ask for help, request a service, or assert their opinion or rights when a service is in question ("You have to ask for everything here"-Respondent 3). Coming from a culture that values and encourages collaboration and collective lifestyle, Indian students find it very difficult to adjust to the individualistic nature of American life and academics. Indian students find it stressful to navigate the public service companies, which require a certain degree of assertiveness at times, in order to receive service. Subjects reported feeling reluctant to ask others for help in using appliances, finding resources, using public transportation and the telephone system, and even in matters involving safety and academic performance. For instance, one subject indicated that the Indian student will leave the library while it is still light, so that it is safe to walk home, limiting the time the student can study utilizing the library's resources. When asked if they would utilize the school's escort service, provided for these purposes, Indian subjects responded that they would not, even if they needed to use the library and could not because of their fear of going out after dark.

What is important to understand from the Indian perspective is the reason the Indian student finds it stressful to be assertive, American-style. This is not the same as an American woman without personal confidence skills who may respond nicely to assertiveness training by moving from a passive, dependent style of coping to a more active, assertive style of taking care of herself as an individual. Although personal differences certainly exist in coping styles among Indian students, as elsewhere, this issue is part of a larger cultural context. Indian society is organized in a collective, collaborative environment. People look to the group to meet all their needs, instead of relying on individual effort. This is expected and nonconformity threatens the cohesion of the group, thereby threatening its function. Therefore, conformity to the group is encouraged.

In keeping with this societal and cultural structure, the Indian student expects the group to inform him/her on a continuing basis about his environment and help him/her cope with and adjust to it. However, those he expects to inform him/her and act as a cultural group is living in a new culture that discourages group dependence and expects individual assertiveness. Because they are aware that the American system requires the Indian student to move from a group, collaborative culture into

an assertive, individualistic system, the informal Indian group becomes inconsistent in the support provided to the new student. Suddenly, the new Indian student finds he/she not only is expected to obtain his/her own housing, transportation, and other services, by the American, he/she also encounters this attitude in the Indian group might have expected to act more collaboratively by providing assistance on all these matters. Needless to say, this becomes quite a stressful situation for the student, which continues at some level for months.

Indian subjects expressed anxiety about fitting into American social culture, not understanding the meaning of certain social gestures. Subjects felt anxiety when greeted by Americans with physical hugs, especially from members of opposite sex ("I used to freeze when a girl hugged me in front of others"-Respondent 1). Coming from a more formal social structure where the opposite sexes do not display familiarity in public, these gestures are sometimes misunderstood, causing embarrassment to the Indian student. One subject reported mistaking a hug from a member of the opposite sex as a sexual invitation and then "getting into trouble" socially for his response. Indian subjects explain that Indian men do not even shake hands with women in public. Indian students are also uncomfortable learning to address their professors by first name, coming from a more formal educational setting.

When embarrassed or uncomfortable, Indian students tend to cope with these feelings by withdrawing from American social interaction and seeking out their Indian cultural group. One subject described a scenario wherein the subject could not keep up his/her grade in class due to a lack of skill in writing well and subsequently developed a lack of confidence in relating to the Americans in the class. The subject reported that people seemed impatient with his/her lack of ability and would cut his/her off in conversation, directing less and less conversation toward the subject as the quarter progressed. The subject coped by increasingly withdrawing from this interaction to the perceived safety of the cultural group.

While Japanese subjects were on the whole more familiar with American social customs, they reported also feeling uncomfortable with what is perceived to be assumed familiarity by Americans. One subject reported feeling depressed because American friends seemed verbally so concerned about his/her, but never took the time to listen, sit and talk about the actual problems experienced. This discomfort extended to the academic setting. As in India, Japanese professors are distanced from the students in a more formal setting and are not addressed by first names.

Japanese students experienced little dissonance in situations requiring networking and advocacy skills. Subjects were able to obtain needed services by themselves and were accustomed to doing so on an individual basis. This cultural group was utilized as a networking resource rather than a source for collaboration, as in the case of Indian students.

Differences between Japanese and American cultures definitely exist, however, and were the source of some level of anxiety for Japanese students. Generally Japanese culture has more unspoken nuances and implicit meanings, while American culture is explicit and very verbal. Japanese subjects

reported experiencing anxiety about relating and understanding the explicit communications in American culture. This explicit style was perceived to exhibit a lack of modesty on the part of the speaker and produced discomfort for the Japanese student, who did not want to appear immodest in response. The Japanese student also perceives American culture as adversarial in nature, rather than cooperative, again requiring the Japanese student to become more verbally explicit in social, business, and professional interactions, producing discomfort and difficulty in adjustment. However, unlike the Indian student who is likely to withdraw from the interaction, the Japanese student nurtures a concept that facilitates his/her acquisition of American social skills. That is, the Japanese student believes s/he must maintain contact with Japanese culture for survival purposes, but feels it is necessary and essential to his/her personal success to be able to function adequately in both cultures.

Summary of Findings

Issues of adjustment for Asian Indian and Japanese graduate students at the University of Denver gravitated toward three major constructs. The construct of pre-knowledge included issues pertaining to the subjects' exposure to American culture before arriving in America. Responses seemed to indicate that knowledge of the culture was generally helpful in adjusting after the move, but may be connected or even subjugated to a different level of construct based also on the collective identity transmitted in some cultures to the group as a unit, rather than the individual.

The construct of collective societal structures versus individualistic then becomes important. Differences between Indian and Japanese cultures were noted in relation to this construct and while it remained a source of adjustment difficulty for all, different levels of sensitivity were noted between the groups and between individuals.

Finally, transitional issues described the processes of adjustment experienced by the subjects and the natural solutions to adjustment problems employed by students within the coping framework of the individual, the group, and culture. In an effort to adjust, students selected certain options which appeared to make the adjustment process easier, and suggestions for further exploration of these options are certainly indicated.

VI. Suggestions and Future Directions

Given the results of this study, the following suggestions, which would help in the adjustment of international students to life in America, were made.

- The provision of prior information about the need and importance of typing skills and computer literacy in the American educational system, is necessary. Students coming from countries where these skills are not necessary for academic life have to be given priority in this matter.
- More accessible translation and English assistance should be provided to students having difficulty in the language.
- International students seem to prefer to be greeted on arrival by a student from their own

country who is not already acculturated and certainly not assimilated.

- Help in developing networking and advocacy skills seem to be an important factor which aids the adjustment process, especially for students from cultures where the collective is more important than individual.
- Pairing students up with host-American families will provide the international students an opportunity to understand the different cultural mores of American life. Such host families can also help serve as support systems for information, networking and social skills training.
- A comprehensive package of information describing the pattern of life in America, expected standards of behavior, details about the local transportation system, university assistance programs etc. will be a useful tool for the international students.

The major limitation of this study is that it is based on data collected only from 15 interviews. This was primarily due to the limited time available for the researchers to go through the whole process of research beginning with formulation of the research question, gaining IRB approval, and ending with the preparation of this report. This means that although a number of themes and a few constructs were elicited from the data, it is most likely that all possibilities were not exhausted. The limited sample size also put constraints on the generalizability of the results of this study, even to Indian and Japanese graduate students at DU. This is a limitation of the study.

Another limitation of the study is that it involved only one data collection method, that of individual interviews. This limits the variety and depth in information that could have been obtained using a combination of different qualitative data gathering methods. Given more time, with the use of a greater variety of data gathering methods such as employing triangulation (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Patton, 1990), it would have been possible to obtain a more complete and detailed presentation of the factors that influence international student adjustment.

This study can be viewed as a preliminary study in the field of international student adjustment. It uses a qualitative methodology with the aim of achieving a greater depth to the knowledge available in the field. The findings of the study could be used as the preliminary basis for appropriate intervention strategies by the international students office. This study has identified constructs like pre-knowledge, transitional issues and collective vs. individual issues as important factors in the adjustment of the international student. Future research in this field should then concentrate on the issues that have been raised as a result of our studies.

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