ACCULTURATION AND STRESS AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT. The possibility of young people to study abroad is attractive but also challenging. The phenomenon of migration due to the desire of study abroad started to interest from the sociological point of view, but also it is a psychological and educational topic. Nowadays, universities are trying to convince teenagers from all over the world to continue their education into the institution, but not many of them are prepared to assure a qualitative integration for people coming from different cultures. The present paper approaches the stress of acculturation among university students. The aim of the study is to the point the theoretic issues related to this phenomenon and to present the used instruments that evaluate its score. Variables that influence the level of stress of acculturation, like sex, depression, family support, social network, language knowledge are discussed. Also, important results from international studies lead in several countries are detailed.

Keywords: international students, acculturation, stress, language barriers, depression, social support

REZUMAT. Adaptarea la stres a studenților străini. Posibilitatea ca tinerii să își poată continua educația într-o țară străină este atractivă dar și provocatoare. Fenomenul migrației datorat studiilor este interesant din punct de vedere sociologic dar a devenit și un subiect de natură psihologică și educațională. În ziua de astăzi, universitățile încearcă să convingă tinerii de pretutindeni să le treacă pragul, dar nu multe dintre ele sunt pregătite să asigure o integrare calitativă a celor care vin din culturi atât de diferite. Prezenta lucrare abordează

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tematica stresului legat de studenții internaționali – aculturația și stresul aculturativ. Scopul studiului este de a puncta aspectele teoretice legate de fenomenul aculturației și de a prezenta unele instrumente psihologice utilizate pentru măsurarea lui și variabilele care influențează stresul legat de aculturație precum genul. Depresia, suportul familial, relațiile sociale, sau nivelul cunoașterii limbii sunt prezentate în lucrare. De asemenea, rezultate importante din studii realizate în țări diverse sunt detaliate.

Cuvinte cheie: studenți străini, adaptare, stres, bariere de limbaj, depresie, suport social

Introduction

The phenomena of immigration has grown in these past few years proportionally to the rate of globalization brought on by social media, accessible and fast transportation vehicles and, most importantly, the advantages brought on by the world wide web. Such a raise can be especially observed in the ranks of younger age groups, such as students travelling to foreign countries in order to further their education.

The stress related to acculturation is defined as the phenomenon experienced by individuals or groups, on a psychological and cultural level, during the adjustment to a foreign culture (Berry, 2005). Although it is an ancient concept, the term itself has first been used in 1880 (Rudmin, 2003) in order to primarily study, through letters and diaries, the deterioration of mental health arising from loss of traditional mental schemas.

Berry, who conducted the most thorough research into the matters of acculturation, elaborated a framework presenting 4 coping strategies in the case of such individuals, which is commonly known as the Fourfold Model (Berry, 2005, 2006):

- *integration (*maintaining one's cultural identity while successfully engaging with the new society),
- *assimilation* (relinquishing one's culture and adopting the habits of the new society),
- *separation* (maintaining one's cultural identity while choosing to have a minimal interaction with the new customs),
- *marginalization* (minimally interacting with the host culture while relinquishing many of the individual's culture's customs).

While studying individuals adopting one of these 4 strategies, he further discovered that integration is associated with the best psychological state, while

marginalization has the lowest scores. These patterns have been supported by other researches, one example being a study conducted on Turkish immigrants relocated to Netherlands (Ince et al., 2014).

The adaptation process, regardless of the strategy chosen, has been found to present 3 mains steps (Berry et al, 1987):

1. contact period: the first contact between the original and the adoptive culture;

2. conflict period: the time in which the main group presses for change, sometimes leading to an identity crisis.

3. resolution period: in this final step, one of the 4 strategies has been chosen, leading to a relative psychological balance.

Immigrants, however, start preparing for the transition long before moving to the new country, the outcome of which is heavily influenced by expectations, social support and stress in a process defined as pre-acculturation (Jasinskaja-Lahti and Yijälä 2011).

The internet in particular, has a strong effect on the process of pre-acculturation, reducing geographic distances and enhancing the worldwide exchange of cultural information while, at the same time, offering new means of communication for students with their families and friends back home.

Difficulties of international students

Among the subcategory of international students, the most common issues are: cultural shock (Nilsson, Buttler, Shouse and Joshi, 2008), psychological hardships, conflicts and barriers (Lin and Yi, 1997) that result from the adjustment process.

Specifically, problems such as language barrier, financial problems, academic difficulties, poor social support and racial discriminations have been shown to have a significant impact on the adjustment of such students (Mori 2000, Sandhu 1995).

Some studies have also shown the length of stay to be a significant variable, longer periods of time being associated with acculturative advantages - the study group used being Chinese international students in Canada (Kuo and Roysircar, 2004), while others, conducted, for example, on Hispanics in America, have shown it to be unrelated to the development of acculturative stress. (Torres and Rollock, 2004).

Social support in particular has been found to have a great impact on acculturative stress, indicated through lacking parental social support (Thomas & Baek Choi, 2006), lack of social interpersonal support or from online social groups (Ye, 2005; Ye 2006).

Among international students, some perceive acculturation stress as a negative concept, leading to various mental problems, while others only focus on the positive opportunities for self-development and perfecting (Nailevna, 2017).

Separation and individuation seem to facilitate adjustment, through the context of proper cohesive familial support (Yard, 2008), being positively related to reduced levels of stress and better self-confidence and psychological status (Harvey & Bray, 1991).

Researchers, considering the importance of such a field of study, have steered the future directions of focus towards identifying the demographic variables (Kuo & Roysircar, 2004), exploring emotional intelligence (Montes-Berges & Augusto, 2007) and further analyzing effective coping strategies (Torres & Rollock, 2004).

Instruments used to evaluate the stress of acculturation

There are multiple measurement scales for acculturative stress, adapted for different subcategories of immigrants in different countries. Most of the first scales used after 1940 were bipolar, with fourfold scales appearing since 1970 and used to uncover the immigrants' attitudes as a one-by-one case study. The ones recommended nowadays, however, are bilinear scales (an example of which has been presented above, as the Fourfold model (Berry, 1992).

Another common and thorough scale commonly employed is Kramer's theory of *Dimensional Accrual and Dissociation* (DAD). This theory suggests the existence of 3 communication strategies that explain the differences between native and adoptive cultures: idolic, simbolic and signalic; for example, from a religious point of view, idolic is seen as emotional connectiveness to symbols, up to the point where those symbols become idols themselves (for example, the statues of Ganesh in India), as opposed to simbolic, where the items used represent a higher concept (such as christian rosarios). As opposed to the 4 coping strategies of the fourfold model, none of these paths has been found to be superior to another, and Kramer doesn't present solutions for the intercultural conflict (Kramer, 2005; Kramer, 2010).

Stress of acculturation around the world

The post-World War 2 research primarily focuses on minorities in the US, partly due to their scholars' dominance over the social studies field. According to the *Institute of International Education* (I.I.E) 4.2% of the students of the US higher educational system are of international origin. In this context,

PsycINFO shows 1/3 of the acculturation research to be focused on Hispanics, and 1/4 on the subcategory of Asian-Americans. Among international students, the 5 main countries of origin are all of the last category: India, China, Korea, Japan and Taiwan (Taiwan being the smallest in size and yet having more than 28.000 students studying in the US alone (Institute of International education, 2008). As such, the cultural differences result in a significant number of acculturative stressors, leading to mental issues such as depression: Korean students seem to experience particularly pronounced depressive symptoms on the CES-D scale (14.37), compared to Chinese (6.93), Japanese (7.30) and Filipino (9.72). (I.I.E, 2014; Park and Rubin, 2012), Studies have tried to indirectly link such results to acculturation, but the researchers have varied from socioeconomic status (Golding and Burnam, 1990), age (Kaplan and Marks, 1990) and social support (Ayers et al, 2009), proving to be too inconsistent for a definite answer.

Among Chinese students, the high levels of mental well-being are firmly tied to the level of interaction and support from families back home. A study discovered that the levels of stress among students can be predicted by factors such as gender and media, as well as frequency of interaction with the individual's relatives: low levels of stress have been predicted by communication via email, while phone calls have been associated with higher stress factors (Kline and Liu, 2005).

The level of acculturative stressors, as proven by a study of Taiwanese students, shows a linear decrease over time, during the first year of study with no significant variations afterwards, and, as expected, the most challenging factor was Academics. This, however only suggests that an equilibrium may be reached after a year of study, as some challenges with Homesickness and Academics persisted up to the fall of the 3rd academic year. (Ying et al, 2006).

European students in the US, however, report feeling less acculturative stress than those from Asia, Central/South America and Africa (Oyrazli et al. 2004; Yeh and Inose, 2003).

In Malaysia, the main stress factors discovered are attitude and environment, with no significant inter-gender variation. Environment, as a factor, may refer to the depravation from familiar sources of support, communication or cultural adjustment, but also to the challenge of finding a place to live, learning how to use new transportation methods or new communication methods with family. Attitude, on the other hand, refers to the general approach to the new culture and provocations it arises; if the initial attitude towards the change is negative, the impact of acculturative stress is significantly increased and the coping mechanisms chosen by the students may have a less efficient effect (Desa et al, 2012).

In Thailand, the main factors influencing acculturative stress are length of stay, emotional intelligence as well as coping strategies. After 3 months, students living in Thailand also experienced stressors such as language, daily living, academics, financing, environment/culture, family and loneliness. These can be catalogued into 2 main fields: culture shock and perceived discrimination (Sandhu & Asbaradi, 1994). Despite that, the overall level of acculturative stress among students in Thailand is low, proving the existence of efficient coping mechanisms: approach coping (understanding and preparing oneself for an upcoming challenge), as well as avoidance coping (refusing to think realistically of the problem ahead) and the employment of means for expressing negative feelings. Here, the most significant predictors among all the variables are acceptance as well as emotional intelligence (Vergara, 2010).

Among nursing students in Australia, Salamonson reported a positive association between academic performance and the English Acculturation Scale (ELAS) in all 4 main fields of study. The main difference in stress level was found to be between years 1, 2 and year 3, the final category possibly having higher scores due to the challenges of graduation, competition for places in the new graduate program and having to decide on their future plans. Furthermore, the Sense of Coherence (SOC) proved to be an important predictor of high stress levels, as well as being negatively correlated to issues such as anxiety and depression (Eriksson & Lindstorm, 2005). This is because a student with a high level of SOC is less likely to perceive challenges as being threatening, thus coping better in said situations (He, Lopez, Leigh, 2012).

In the Elabunga Institute of the Republic of Tartastan, Russia, international students originate almost exclusively in Central Asian countries and thus, experience only moderate acculturative stress related to hate, perceived discrimination and culture shock. This result may be explained by the former Soviet Union origin of all these countries (Turkmenistan, Tadzhikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan as well as Russia), leading to similar cultural backgrounds. At the same time, the languages of these central Asian countries all have Turkic origins, and thus, the foreign students can be understood by the large population of natives speaking Tatar. The only perceivable stress factor is Homesickness, explained by the short time of habitation in Elabunga and by the strong family connections usually met in these countries of origin. (Nailevna, 2017).

Factors influencing the level of stress of acculturation

Overall, the factors identified vary according to the country of origin as well as adoptive country. In many of the cases studied, there has been no significant difference among genders (Desa et al, 2011; Yeh and Inose, 2003;

Ying, 1996), while in others, some stress differences have been reported, especially among asian immigrants (usually, due to the difference in gender position between the 2 cultures) (Furnham and Shiekh, 1993) yet the vast majority of research papers choose to ignore the possibility or discrepancies in the results between male and female participants as insignificant.

It has been discovered that, among Korean immigrants, the level of depression is significantly prevalent per general (Park and Rubin, 2012; Portes and Rumbaut, 2006) and especially among female students (Felsten, 1998). Other factors identified in this category that lead to high depression levels, as suggested by Kuo (1984), are a shorter period spent in the US, higher rates of unemployment or poor language skills.

Another relevant factor is perceived discrimination, as shown by numerous researches (Beiser and Hou, 2006; Borrell, Kiefe, Williams, Diez-Roux and Gordon-Larsen, 2006; Geeet et al, 2006; Harcourt et al. 2005). In a large study of immigrant teenagers from 13 different nations, this stressor was the main predictor for poor adaptation, exceeding any acculturation measures (Vedder,van de Vijver & Phinney, 2006).

The social-economic factor alongside discrimination, is one of the most influential stressors that leads to acculturative stress, predicting low health among minorities. Moyerman and Forman (1992) discovered, after an analysis of 49 cases that social-economic factor is the top study characteristic, adding that "Lower social-economic factor samples had sharper increases in symptomatology and conflict as they acculturated". However, this factor is largely ignored in the studies published, as underlined by Hunt et al. (2004, p. 980) "*the studies we reviewed routinely fail to seriously explore the role of socio-economic, educational and related factors*".

The period of adjustment to the new culture is another relevant factor, the stress resulting from a new environment steadily decreasing with time.

Finally, Academics is especially among international students, one of the most stressful aspects of living abroad, persisting throughout the stay along with homesickness (Ying, 2005). This includes level of language knowledge, which directly influences the academic scores as well as the level of stress among international students (He, Lopez and Leigh, 2012). Thus, students who are good at their new countries' language transition more easily to the new environment and vice versa. (Poyrazli et al, 2004)

Some researches mentioned the importance of strategies in order to cope with acculturation stress. Individual or group involvement is crucial, but institutional strategies are also important. It seems that task-oriented strategies, emotion-oriented strategies and avoidance are involved into the acculturative stress and the process of acculturation (Ra and Trusty, 2015). Social strategies

must focus in interactive activities between students from different countries, to share information and difficulties and to encourage students to ask for professional help and academic support (language, educational, curricular, etc). Good knowledge of host country language is empowering the student and knowledge of country's history and culture is also helping.

Conclusion

The more research is being made, the more we discover that acculturation stress is a complex phenomenon, with many factors that can influence the evolution of such processes. Gender, depression, socio-economic factors, time of adjustment, the ability to speak foreign languages, the family cohesion and social support are important factors in developing stress of acculturation among international students. Identifying as many variables as possible, exploring emotional intelligence and ultimately, coping strategies will, hopefully, help us in better understanding international students, as well as facilitating the adaptation process and reducing the stress levels for our future generations.

Acknowledgments

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