CULTURAL STRESS AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT AN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

A representative sample of undergraduate and postgraduate international students at a large Australian university (n=979, 64% females) completed a mail-back survey examining their perceptions of cultural stress and the relationships between cultural stress and social connectedness, mental health, and lifestyle balance. Most students reported at least some degree of cultural stress especially for items relating to family and a familiar way of life. Issues of discrimination, discomfort and feelings of lack of safety were less commonly reported as stressful. Cultural stress is related to students’ cultural background, their communication skills in the new culture and their evaluation of their perceived academic progress. Cultural stress is negatively related to social connectedness and lifestyle balance but positively related to depression, anxiety and stress. Our findings suggest that there are several entry points for programs designed to assist international students adapt to their new cultural setting.
Cultural stress among international students at an Australian university

There are many complex challenges facing students travelling to other countries to undertake university or other educational courses, particularly if their home country culture is strikingly different from the host country culture. It is not surprising that the physical and psychological well-being of students, as well as their academic performance, can be affected by these adjustment challenges (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001). These relatively short-term visitors to a new culture (or sojourners), who come for purposes other than permanent settlement, are likely to experience ‘culture shock’ (Oberg, 1960) resulting from the sudden loss of all familiar signs and symbols of everyday life, with consequent psychological stress and use of coping strategies to deal with the stresses encountered.

Factors that influence sojourners’ adjustment to the host culture include background variables such as the difference between the culture of origin and host culture, language proficiency, gender, age, education level, status, self-esteem, and prior cross-cultural experience. In addition, there are situational variables such as length of stay, the information and support provided, social interaction with host nationals, networking with co-culturals, academic or professional performance and physical health. Length of stay is an important dimension in the process of adjustment for sojourners such as international students, with discomfort usually reducing as the new culture becomes more familiar (Adler, 1975; Ward, Okura, Kennedy & Kojima, 1998; Ward & Rana-Dueba, 1999).

Another variable held to be of particular importance to the process of adjustment is the cultural distance between the sojourner's culture of origin and the host culture (Ward et al., 2001), with greater distance implying more difficulty in adjustment. Several cultural classification systems have been proposed, with component categories being based on perceived underlying characteristics of cultural values, beliefs and behaviours. The best known of these is the set of dimensions delineated by Hofstede (1997). Australian and Asian cultures tend to fall at opposite ends of each of these dimensions, with particularly strong differentiation being found on an individualism/collectivism dimension. This cultural dimension has been used to explain some of the difficulties Asian international students have experienced in their approaches to learning in Australia (Faculty of Education and Asialink, 2004). Ward (1997; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999) argues that cultural distance, together with language competence, length of stay in the new culture, and the amount of contact with host nationals, typically influences sociocultural adaptation.

The degree of social interaction that the sojourner establishes within the host country is also considered an important variable in adjustment, with stronger social interaction being seen as conducive to a more positive process of adaptation (Church, 1982). While achieving a satisfying level of social interaction with host nationals is undoubtedly a challenging process, it does provide international students with the opportunity for developing an understanding of and adaptation to the new culture (Li & Gasser, 2005). The level of social interaction between sojourners and host nationals has generally been found to be low, with sojourners wanting to have more interaction with locals than they experience (Church, 1982; James & Devlin, 2001; Daroesman, Looi, & Butler, 2005; Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2006). Berry (1997) argues that sojourners who adopt an integrative acculturation strategy, valuing both the original and the new cultures and maintaining relations with both groups, will experience a low level of adjustment stress. On the other hand, those who maintain a relationship with their own culture only - who do not value or relate to the new, keeping themselves separate from it - will experience high levels of acculturation stress.
In the present study, we investigate perceptions of cultural stress among international students at a large Australian university, the impact of demographic and situational variables such as length of stay and cultural distance between home and host country, and the relationships between stress and connectedness to the host culture.

METHOD

Sample

The sample was drawn from international students with confirmed enrolments in undergraduate or postgraduate courses at an Australian university in early March 2005. Study Abroad students and students without an Australian address were excluded from the prospective sample, leaving a pool of 6,828 students. Every third student was selected from an alphabetical listing resulting in a sample size of 2,276. An achieved sample of 979 was obtained, representing a response rate of 43.9 percent, taking return-to-sender items into account.

The achieved sample characteristics were closely aligned with those of the university's international student population, with the exception of gender. Two-thirds (64 percent) of the sample were female compared with 57.3 percent in the population of international students. The majority (57 percent) of students in the sample were 20 to 24 years and 70.8 percent were engaged in coursework or research postgraduate study. The number of years of enrolment in the sample ranged from 1 to 9, with 82.6 per cent having been enrolled between 1 and 3 years and 99.2 per cent between 1 and 6 years. All faculties were represented, with the greatest number of students enrolled in Economics/Commerce (26 percent) and Engineering (16 percent). Countries of origin covered a wide range of, with Asian countries the most commonly reported. Of these, China and Malaysia had the highest number of students (both 23 percent of the sample).

Survey questionnaire

Measures of cultural stress and connectedness were drawn from relevant literature concerning sojourners, especially international students, cultural stress, and social connectedness (e.g., Church, 1982; McInnes, Griffin, James & Coates, 2001; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Recommendations from an Advisory Group were used to refine the questionnaire and some additional modifications were made as a result of piloting the questionnaire with a small number (n=13) of international students, both male and female, ranging in age, faculty and course type. The questionnaire also covered demographic information and health and well-being.

Cultural stress was assessed by eight items measuring students' perceptions of difficulties associated with living away from home (see Table 1 for a list of items). Experiences of cultural stress were rated on a 4-point scale from 0 (not at all) to 3 (very much).

The short form of Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scales (DASS), developed by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995) was included in the questionnaire. For each scale, respondents rated how each of seven statements applied to them over the past week on a four-point scale from 0 (not at all) to 3 (very much or most of the time). Lovibond and Lovibond reported satisfactory alpha values for a normal (i.e. non-clinical) Australian sample (Depression: 0.81, Anxiety: 0.73; Stress: 0.81).
Students’ perceived *Lifestyle balance* was assessed by the following questions: ‘I think the balance between studying and other activities in my life is about right’ (study balance); ‘I think the balance between the time I spend with others and the time I spend alone is about right’ (social balance). In addition, we assessed students’ perceptions of social connectedness in Melbourne (Rosenthal et al., 2006). The *Connectedness in Melbourne* scale comprised three items relating to participants’ belief that personal and emotional support was available to them in Melbourne: ‘There are people here in Melbourne I can ask for help if I needed it’; ‘There are people here in Melbourne who care about me’; ‘There are people here in Melbourne I can talk to about my problems’. Responses to all these questions were rated on a 4-point scale from 0 (not at all) to 3 (very much).

*Demographic and situational information* was obtained about the following: age, gender, marital status, course type, faculty, year of course, perceived academic progress, length of enrolment, studies in Australia prior to enrolment, country of origin, and English language use and use of a language other than English (LOTE).

**PROCEDURE**

Following approval of the research project by the university's Human Research Ethics Committee, the questionnaire was mailed to the student sample and 705 completed questionnaires were returned. A second mailing of the questionnaire resulted in an additional 274 completed responses. Because questionnaire responses were anonymous the second mailing was sent to all students in the sample. A warning slip was included in the second mailing, to indicate that the questionnaire was intended only for students who had not replied to the first mailing.

**RESULTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Some degree</th>
<th>Considerable degree</th>
<th>Very much</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I miss the familiar way of life in my own country.</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>39.7</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s hard being away from the people I love.</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is lonely for me here in Melbourne.</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel less important here than at home.</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People treat me differently because of my cultural background.</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel uncomfortable in the Australian culture.</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t feel safe here in Melbourne.</td>
<td>52.7</td>
<td>37.2</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel I really belong here at the university.*</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td>42.0</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* reversed item

Table 1: Students’ experience of cultural stress in Melbourne (responses in percentages)
Responses to the eight items assessing students’ feelings of dislocation, strangeness and discomfort living within the Australian culture in Melbourne are shown in Table 1. Most students reported at least some degree of stress for all items. Not unexpectedly, two of the items indicating highest levels of stress describe missing a familiar way of life and loved ones. The cultural stress items that produce the least concern in students are ones that might be thought more typical of culture shock – discrimination, discomfort and feelings of lack of safety. Safety, in particular, is not seen as an issue. Almost all students indicate that they have little or no concern at all about safety in Melbourne.

The eight items were combined to form a Cultural Stress scale. The scale had satisfactory internal reliability (alpha = .75). There were few significant demographic and situational variable effects. Students who feel their academic progress is not as strong as expected experience a significantly higher level of cultural stress than those who believe they are doing better or as well as expected ($F[2, 944] = 13.10, p<.001$). There is a significant main effect for country. Students from English-speaking countries (UK, USA and Canada) and from Europe are significantly less culturally stressed than students from Asian and African countries ($F[13,925] = 3.11, p<.001$). Cultural stress is greater for students who did not speak any English when growing up ($t = 2.74, p<.01$) and students who speak a LOTE when off the campus ($t = 5.99, p<.001$). No significant differences were found on the basis of age, gender, partnered status, faculty, course type, or number of years enrolled at the university.

There was a strong, significant negative relationship between the Connectedness in Melbourne and Cultural Stress scales ($r = -.39, p<.001$). The stronger the students’ perception that they have care and support in Melbourne, the lower the level of cultural stress they experience. Lifestyle balance, regarding both study and social activities, was negatively related to Cultural Stress ($r = -.15$ and $-.23$ respectively, $p<.001$ for both items).

Strong, significant positive correlations were found between the Cultural Stress and the three DASS scales, indicating that the stronger the student’s experience of cultural stress in Melbourne, the higher the level of depression, anxiety and stress ($r = .46; r = .40; r = .44$ for Depression, Anxiety and Stress respectively, $p<.001$ for all correlations).

**DISCUSSION**

Cultural stress is an obvious challenge to the well-being of international students, particularly where the home and host countries are culturally distant. These international students provide evidence of feelings of discomfort, dislocation and distress but their responses are, for the most part, not at an extreme level. It is also important to distinguish between aspects that are inherent in living away from home in a foreign country and those aspects where cultural stress might reasonably be ameliorated by local action. The distress and homesickness that is experienced through missing family, friends and the familiar things of home when in another country is to be expected. This was a key aspect of cultural stress experienced by about half the students.

In most other areas, students’ perceptions are more positive, particularly in areas usually associated with discrimination and prejudice, including threats to their safety. Nevertheless a substantial minority of students experience distress in these areas and, as well, are concerned about their loneliness and feelings of relative unimportance here. These perceptions are strongly related to students’ feelings of lack of connectedness in Melbourne, further reinforcing the value of helping to develop stronger coping strategies that result in networking, friendship and support for international students.
Apart from homesickness, the aspect of cultural stress that provokes the strongest reaction from students in the present study concerns the feeling of belonging at the university. About half the students report feeling they do not belong, to a considerable or great degree. Students from Asian countries report these feelings significantly more often than other students. This suggests, again, the need for universities and other educational institutions targeting international students to act to increase feelings of connectedness to those institutions.

There were few demographic and situational variables that significantly predicted cultural stress. Using a LOTE off campus, poorer than expected academic performance and coming from an Asian or African country were each associated with higher levels of cultural stress. The first of these may well be an indicator of cultural difference, something that would be expected to be linked with cultural stress. It is not surprising that cultural stress is related to perceived academic progress, although we cannot establish a causal relationship in this cross-sectional study.

Cultural stress is a dimension of well-being that is fundamental to the experience of relating to others in society and is likely to be associated with students’ well-being in a number of domains. This is, in fact, the case. The relationships between cultural stress and measures of mental health (depression, anxiety and stress) and study and social lifestyle balance suggests that there is a constellation of negative psychosocial consequences for international students which may seriously interfere with their adaptation to the host country and to their capacity to achieve optimally in the university setting. Not unexpectedly, there was a strong negative correlation between cultural stress and connectedness in Melbourne indicating a close inverse relationship between these two aspects of adaptation. The more connected students feel in Melbourne, the less cultural stress they experience.

While we cannot determine causal pathways from this cross-sectional study, our findings suggest that there are several entry points for programs designed to assist international students adapt to their new cultural setting. Reducing cultural stress and enhancing connectedness to the home country are good places to start.

REFERENCES


