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Cross-Cultural Adjustment of Asian International Graduate Students in the United States: Theorizing from the Literature

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Abstract: The flow of graduate students from Asia to the U.S. has become a fundamental phenomenon; however, understanding their adjustment difficulties to the host culture and academic system is limited. Drawing from the literature, this paper seeks to increase understanding of these students' needs through theorizing about their cross-cultural adjustments.

The current globalization has increasingly urged students, especially from Asia, to study in English-speaking nations, namely the United States. As more of these students come to USA for their education, the more attention to their cross-cultural adjustment issues is needed. As the world's largest group of international student body, their enrollments benefit the U.S. economy, politic and academy significantly. However, the understanding of these students' complex cross-cultural adjustment process is still limited. Despite facing language and cultural barriers, they are required to perform within the same standard as American students and student from regions. This situation often leads to a stressful learning process that may affect their psychological well-being. A number of theories explaining cross-cultural adjustment issues although are developed extensively they fail to offer the relevant framework for analyzing the cross-cultural adjustment experiences of Asian international graduate students systematically. Thus, theorizing about these students' cross-cultural adjustment experiences is important as it offer a framework that can be used to develop necessary means to increase their successful adjustment.

Statement of the Problem and Significance

Over the last decade, the number of international graduate students, especially those from Asia, in the U.S. has increased steadily. This increasing trend of their preference for American education has been further accelerated when students from countries, such as Vietnam and Laos, joined the U.S. institutions in the early 1990s. With a population of 224, 820 people, international graduate students' enrollments accounted for approximately 12% of the total graduate student number in 2004 (Heiser, 2005). This is because of the significant contribution of Asian students. For example, students from China, India and South Korea, accounted for as much as 53% of the total international graduate student population studying in 2007 (Redd, 2007). Their enrollments in U.S. universities have greatly contributed to the U.S.' prosperity, research and development base (Albacht, 2004). However, their special academic, cultural, and financial needs are seldom addressed. To succeed, Asian international students must make significant adjustment to their new roles and environment. As they are seen as the best and brightest students in their home countries, these students tend to believe that academic dismissal means significantly more than money and/or time concerns. Thus, they often suffer significantly from stressful cross-cultural adjustment experiences. As noted in the October 2004 Cornell University's Asian and Asian-American Campus Climate Task Force Report, Asian international students who represent over 55% of the total international student population, although often maintain high academic performance, they are the group of students with highest number of suicides in the university. Many theories have offered frameworks for explaining cross-cultural

adjustment experiences of sojourners, yet, they lack consistency. Hence, theorizing about cross-cultural adjustment patterns is significant. It can offer a useful framework for analyzing Asian graduate students' cross-cultural adjustment experiences in a more systematic manner.

Analysis of the Literature

Three investigative questions: (1) what are the dynamic factors that inhibit their cross-cultural adjustment process? (2) how do they cope with adjustment difficulties, and (3) what, could the universities do to help them cope with their adjustment stress better? are used to analyze theories on the cross-cultural adjustments. Literature informs us that many theories could be used to view cross-cultural adjustments of individuals who more or less temporarily and/or permanently live in a new culture. However, different scholars from different disciplinary investigated these issues from different perspectives. They cannot offer a framework for understanding experiences of Asian international graduate students in a systematic manner. Kim (2001) who looks at the role of intercultural communication in cross-cultural adaptation, for example, develops model of cross-cultural adaptation following open system perspective. This model highlights both the role of the individuals' characteristic and the receiving society on cross-cultural adaptation patterns of sojourners. On the other hand, Berry (1984) who looks at the role of ethnicity as a vital predictor of acculturation focuses on the role of environment as important component for cross-cultural adjustment success. He "conceptualize[s] acculturation as a bi-dimensional or multidimensional construct, with separate dimensions describing the individual's relationship with the original heritage culture and with the new, mainstream or host culture" (cited in Swagler & Jome, 2005, p. 1).

Similarly, the terms pertaining to cross-cultural adjustment and the individuals encountering this phenomenon are also used differently by different theorists. Interestingly, Kim (2001) does not explicitly distinguish the terms *adaptation* and *adjustment*. To Kim, adjustment as well as coping are referred to "psychological responses to cross-cultural challenges" (p. 31), while adaptation is defined "as *the dynamic process by which individuals, upon relocating to new, unfamiliar, or changed cultural environments, establish (or reestablish) and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationships with those environments*" (p. 32). Nonetheless, Ward (2001) cited in Matsumoto, Leroux, and Robles (2007), views these two terms as two distinctive concepts. He refers *adaptation* "to the process of altering one's behavior to fit in with a changed environment or circumstances, or as response to social pressure" (cited in Matsumoto, p. 748). *Adjustment*, on the other hand, "refers to the subjective experiences that are associated with and resulted from attempts at adaptation, and that motivate further adaptation" (p. 748). Fortunately, most theorists tend to agree that adaptation and adjustment are both results and processes of intercultural interaction/contact of individuals who encounter cross-cultural challenges. Their theories be categorized based on two foundations as follows.

A Typology of Cross-Cultural Adjustment Based on Functional Qualification

According to Wiseman (1995) who utilizes the studies of Frey, Botan, Friedman, and Kreps (1991), theories have one or more among five functions: explanation, prediction, control of social behavior, heuristic, and inspirational. However, this paper finds most theories on cross-cultural adjustment serve two functions: explaining and predicting.

Explaining. The following major theories explain that challenges encountered during cross-cultural adjustment process are multi-faceted and acculturation is a process of cross-cultural adjustment, which consists of many sequences. They also view 'culture shock' as a critical component or even as the pre-condition for the occurrence of transitional experiences for the sojourners. Adler (1975), for example, explains that it is a process consisting of five stages:

[(a)] The contact stage, characterized by initial excitement and euphoria similar to the experience of tourists; [(b)] the disintegration stage, characterized by confusion and disorientation and a sense of being overwhelmed by new cultural requirements; [(c)] the reintegration stage, characterized by increased social functional skills in the new culture; [(d)] the autonomy stage, characterized by re-establishment of the sense of balance which allows an individual to see both good and bad sides of both cultures; and [(e)] the independence stage, characterized by reciprocal interdependence in the achievement of biculturalism (Ito, 2003, p. 16).

Similar to Kim's (2001), this model argues that as the individual progresses through these stages, s/he will initially feel stress, but later s/he will experience growth.

Slightly different Andy's (1995) 'differential demand model of sojourner adjustment' explains that experiencing "cross-cultural sojourns [often makes ones] notice themselves undergoing a process of being accustomed, to varying degrees, to the new environment in which they find themselves" (p. 92). Thus, "sojourn adjustment is both a task and a process faced by sojourners, [including international students]" (p. 92). Based on these notions, sojourner individuals may adjust well to the new environment in some aspects, but may not in others. This makes it especially difficult, if not possible at all, for them to completely meet the new environment's requirements. By emphasizing the term 'sojourn', Ady (1995) clearly distinguishes the framework explaining the experiences of those who study or perform their jobs abroad from that of those who seek to stay permanently in the host countries. Thus, unlike others, he does not use the terms "cultural or ethnic assimilation, adaptation, and intercultural communicative competence" (p. 93). Similar to Church (1982), he argues that the latter terms "are ambiguous or suggest a more permanent assimilation to the host culture" (p. 93), thus they are not relevant to explaining sojourners' experiences.

More recently, Ito (2003), a psychologist, develops a model of cross-cultural adjustment of international students from Japan in California. She views acculturation as a cross-cultural adjustment process. Slightly different from other acculturation theories, her model suggests that the acculturation process starts even before one contact with the new culture. Her five cross-cultural processes are:

(a) Building the Dream[--] involves exploring the possibility of studying abroad by actively thinking about it, researching alternatives, and examining motivations; (b) Discovering[--] involves the initial reactions to the new environment upon arrival; (c) Surviving[--] involves facing the realities and demands of the new life after the initial reactions, and experiencing difficulties, including adjustments to stress and academic demands; (d) Overcoming Obstacles[--] includes making friends in the new environment, utilizing support systems and reflecting on the journey; (e) Reflecting on the journey [--] involves view of self in society [which includes] changes in perception of the homeland and the new culture, as well as the self between two cultures, and future.

Based on Wiseman (1995), the above mentioned theories provide an *explanation* of the complexity of cross-cultural adjustment phenomenon. Thus, they are relevant frameworks for analyzing the cross-cultural adjustment challenges experienced by Asian international students.

Predicting. According to Wiseman (1995), theories that provide us with "antecedent causal variables for [a] phenomenon" (p. 4), provide a "*prediction*" (p. 4) the occurrence of that phenomenon. Major theories serving this function often are found in "cultural and psychological [studies]" (p. 4). Taft's (1997) theory, for example, suggests four predictors: (a) size of the gap between the host and original culture; (b) abruptness of discontinuity; (c) changes in functioning;

and (d) the degree to which one encompasses the new culture (cited in Ito, 2003, p. 6) as a crucial lens to look at cross-cultural challenges of sojourners. In addition, Searle and Ward (1990), psychologists, offer a stress and coping framework as important components of the acculturation process. The individual's adaptation happens when psychological adjustment and sociocultural adaptation occur (Ito, 2003). For Ward (1996), cited in Ward and Kennedy (2001), the acculturation process often affects "psychological well-being sojourners, immigrants and refugees" (p. 636). Thus, an individual who successfully copes with stress during the acculturation process is the person who has both a good psychological adaptation, which is involved with "cultural identity and a sense of well-being, [and a sound] sociocultural adaptation, [which includes], problem solving skills" (Ito, 2003, p. 12) and other external issues.

Recently Kagan and Cohens (1990), who uses Mendoza and Martinez's model of acculturation provides a framework directly explains experiences of international students. His model suggests that demographic factors, such as "gender, marital status, and social factors, [including] the frequency of direct contacts with host culture members, and the second language used in the socialization in daily life, have important roles in predicting acculturation" (p. 137). Thus, challenges facing international students, who are married, from non-English speaking countries, and non-English speaking at home, are greater than those of others. Challenges facing international students, who are married and from non-English speaking countries and non-English speaking at home, are greater than those of others. Thus, they experience more cross-cultural adjustment stress.

A Typology of Cross-Cultural Adjustment Based on Theories' Orientation

Theories explaining cross-cultural adjustment phenomena could also be categorized into two orientations. According to Kim (2001), who integrates a theory of communication to cross-cultural adaptation, observes that theories developed earlier, such as Berry's (1970), Bennett's (1977), and Taff's (1977), view 'culture shock' as problematic rather than positive component. They view 'culture shock' which is described as a psychological fluctuation process, as a phenomenon impeding cross-cultural adjustment process of sojourners. On the other hand, Kim and Adler, as mentioned above, view it as a pre-condition of personal growth. When one meets stress s/he will be entailed to change to regain equilibrium. An individual who has contact with his/her new cultural environment often goes through a spiral-like process-- stress, adaptation, and growth (Kim, 2001). This means that the individual who is in the new environment will experience stress as she/he finds that s/he lacks knowledge of the new cultural patterns. However, after some time of living with confusion and making some efforts, s/he will be able to cope with the stressful situation by deculturating/or changing some features of his/her old culture and adopting new behaviors and norms. By doing so, that individual will gradually adapt to the new environment and experience personal growth.

Conclusion

As the world is changing, more students from Asia come to study in the United States. As the largest group of international students, Asian students have become significant contributors to U.S. higher educational institutions' prosperity and students' cultural enrichment. Despite of their complex adjustment stress, their unique socio-cultural, academic, and financial needs are seldom addressed. Theories pertaining to cross-cultural adjustment often serve two functions: "explanation" and "prediction" of this social phenomenon. They also follow two approaches, adaptation as problem and as learning/growth. These theories, although offer slightly different explanations, they can be used to systematically address my research questions regarding the cross-cultural adjustment of Asian international graduate students in the U.S.: (1) what are the

dynamic factors or areas of difficulties that inhibit their cross-cultural adjustment process? (2) how do they cope with adjustment difficulties? In addition, based on Wiseman (1995), the above mentioned theories have “organiz[ed] and summarize[ed] knowledge into a system” (p. 3), thus, they are powerful framework for analyzing various aspects of cross-cultural adjustment experiences of Asian international graduate students.

Implications for Adult Education

Addressing special needs of diverse student body, such as Asian international students, are both ethical and politically important as it will show that universities are committed to providing multicultural student body with quality and relevant education. It also will contribute to the development of adult and higher education in the twenty first century. Thus, understanding the cross-cultural adjustment experiences of Asian international graduate student is significant. By addressing the question “what could the universities do to help Asian international graduate students to adjust better to their new environment?”, it offers a new direction for adult and higher education educators to more effectively respond to these students’ needs. They can do so by carefully developing the curricula, creating learning environment, and designing teaching approach that support their adjustment process, which is consistent with Knowles’ (1980) andragogical model. As ‘culture shock’ is found to be a critical component of cross-cultural adjustment that could make stress to become ‘distress’ as found in the Cornell university report, it is important for adult educators and administrators to develop measures that help Asian students to cope with this situation. The universities and educators may not be able to help them to avoid this phenomenon, yet, by following the student-centered teaching approach, which suggests that teaching and learning should be centered on students’ needs, they could provide support to these students in many other ways. One of those ways could be providing them with support through creating the learning environment that encourage them to put in perspectives that their “prior knowledge, belie[fs], [thoughts], and experiences are all “essential elements of negotiating new knowledge [so] they can’ become confident, [and] autonomous learners” (p. 4, Dawson and Cont-Bekkers, 2002). Once gaining confidence and feeling empowered, these students would be able to manage their stress and go through this stage of adjustment with more positive experiences. Doing so, it would make their learning process become more meaningful.

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