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Taking Initiative and Constructing Identity: International Graduate Student Spouses' Adjustment and Social Integration in a University Town

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Abstract: This paper uses qualitative data to explore the social integration and adjustment of 13 international graduate student spouses (IGSSs) who attended an ESL class in a university town. We examine how IGSSs adjusted to their new community and roles, the strategies used to navigate social spaces, and the factors that shaped their integration.

Introduction

This paper focuses on a growing yet overlooked population of adult learners: international graduate student spouses (IGSSs) who enroll in English as a Second Language (ESL) courses. Since these spouses are not university students, their presence and needs are poorly documented by universities (Martens & Grant, 2008). Moreover, their temporary status and high educational attainment set them apart from more typical ESL learners such as immigrants who have limited schooling and plan to settle permanently in the U.S. The experience of IGSSs also differ by geographic setting, since cosmopolitan cities offer opportunities and resources that rural university towns may lack, including ethnic restaurants and stores, native language media, conational groups, and cultural activities.

As the IGSS population grows, we need to understand how they gain entrée into a new community and navigate its social spaces. A few studies have documented IGSSs' experiences as "invisible sojourners" (De Verthelyi, 1995; Yellig 2010) and their psychosocial and emotional adjustment to the surrounding community (Chen, 2009; Martens & Grant, 2008). Research suggests that IGSSs transform their primary roles to accompany the spouse (Chen, 2009; Ostler, 1990) and are faced with rebuilding life while their spouse studies, often with little support by universities or the community (Chen, 2009; Martens & Grant, 2008). However, we still know little about how IGSSs with limited English fluency adjust and attempt to gain entrée to a new university town.

This paper uses data from a qualitative study to explore the social integration and adjustment of 13 IGSSs who attended an ESL class. A deeper understanding of IGSS adjustment experiences, how they navigate their new landscape, and the strategies and factors that shape their adjustment can assist educators in developing meaningful programs for this population.

Theoretical Framework

The study is situated in research on international student spouses, international graduate student wives, and spouses of international professionals (Bigler, 2010; Chen, 2009; De Verthelyi, 1990). Whether or not they enroll in adult education classes, these groups must all adjust to a new university and/or community environment. Current research shows that IGSSs are typically women who have prior professional experience (Chen, 2009; De Verthelyi, 1995),

who are not employed, and who fulfill primarily support roles in their families. Due to these circumstances, IGSSs experience levels of hardship and invisibility that are different but less understood than those of their spouses who are graduate students. In addition, IGSS experiences differ by country. For instance, the United States has more restrictive visa regulations than does Canada (Chen, 2009; Martens & Grant, 2008), which affects IGSSs' ability to work and enroll in for-credit academic programs, among other factors.

Across these national settings, certain themes remain constant, including reduced income and socioeconomic status, restricted ability to work and further education, role transition from professional to caregiver, and limited support structures in the host country and community, all of which create a sense of invisibility (Bigler, 2010; Chen, 2009; De Verthelyi 1995; Furnham, 2005). Acculturative stress and psychological distress also occur as consequence of inadequate support systems, despite IGSSs' desire to learn English and culture and to participate in their host community (Bigler, 2007). In short, previous research indicates that despite growth in the male and female IGSS population, their experiences remain largely unseen and insufficiently explained, which further complicates the provision of services and resources to meet their needs.

Research Methods

This paper addresses the following research questions: (1) How do international graduate student spouses who are enrolled in ESL classes describe their adjustment to life in a U.S. university town, in particular, their social integration and changes in their roles and identities? (2) How do IGSSs seek to gain entrée to, and navigate social spaces within, their new community? (3) What do IGSSs believe enabled and hindered their social integration?

Our sample included 13 adults (11 women, two men) who were married to international graduate or professional students at The Pennsylvania State University, a large, public research university located three hours from the nearest large city. Centre County has nearly 10,000 foreign-born residents, comprising 6.7% of the county population. In fall 2010, there were 2,453 international graduate and professional students at Penn State (PSU, 2012), an unknown number of whom had an accompanying spouse. All participants were enrolled in an ESL course focusing on cultural and current events, offered jointly by a community-based organization and a graduate student organization. Participants were from China (n=4) and South Korea (n=6), the two largest sending countries of international students at PSU, as well as Turkey, Colombia, and Russia.

Interviews explored topics such as the experience of relocating, comparison of previous and current roles and activities, and typical weekly activities (drawn on a map), including places participants felt most welcome or unwelcome. In addition, nine participants completed a total of 13 journal entries and six learners participated in a focus group. We coded data by (1) using interview question topics to create a tentative coding scheme (e.g., description of the adjustment experience, what helped or hindered integration) and (2) identifying, analyzing, and categorizing patterns within the data to form themes in line with the thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first author served as a facilitator for the ESL course, which strengthened her rapport with participants but may have also introduced social response bias. Triangulation of data sources and member checks (e.g., participant review of interviews, follow-up questions about interview content) were used to enhance data quality (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Findings

Adjusting to New Community and New Roles

Although most IGSSs experienced isolation and loneliness, their attempts to overcome these feelings suggest that they enacted agency in adapting to their new community. Twelve of 13 IGSSs reported initiating activities to help mitigate these feelings of loneliness, learn about their new communities, learn English, and adapt to their new environment. IGSSs reported that actions such as going on field trips with various community organizations, traveling, initiating friendships, and participating with community groups all helped diminish isolation. For instance, Jay explained why she went on weekend trips organized by the local Chinese (Christian) church to locations such as Six Flags, national parks, Pittsburgh, and New York: “If you stay at home, you will feel very lonely. Yeah, very isolated, disconnected.”

IGSS social integration skills went beyond outings and trips with conationals; they also had to navigate the surrounding community, even while they had some trouble feeling completely integrated. Their adjustment experiences also changed over time. For example, at first EE “didn’t want to study English...because my heart was hurt from my husband,” who studied all day and only came home to eat. However, she changed her outlook about her position in the community. She indicated that it was “not good enough” to live her life this way—alone and without community. Consequently, she adjusted by making friends, leaving her home, and joining community classes. EE thought it best for spouses to “have a chance to know each other...so they can see...this American life [and] they can have an open mind.” Nothing that “every IGSS student have a same problem with me,” she stated that it was important for IGSSs to make community while here.

The data show that moving to a university town and adopting new roles also reconfigured student-spouse relationships. Respondents described how they sacrificed, for example, by giving up previous high-paying jobs or moving away from parents, so their husband could pursue his academic goals. However, not all IGSSs deemed these changes a sacrifice. Some IGSSs also reported reciprocal sacrifice: they moved to accommodate the spouse and then the spouse accommodated them while in the U.S. by making sure they were happy. In two cases, the husband or wife had sacrificed previously for the IGSSs’ educational or professional goals.

Ten participants had held professional positions, many of them managerial, before moving to the U.S. and becoming primary caregivers. (Two IGSSs were students in their home country who were able to take time off or study in the U.S., and one was a housewife in her home country.) This transition from full-time professional to primary support spouse changed how IGSSs identified themselves to the surrounding community, their social network (professional versus non-professional circles), and how they viewed themselves in the new space. Language and culture barriers compounded this transition. This is seen in Jamie’s description of how her life has changed before and after State College: “[Before] I really love my job...and I have a good relationship with...co-workers and my bosses...[Now] It’s like a different style of life, because...right now he’s a student. I only do a volunteer job.”

The data indicate that the IGSSs’ support role is complicated and not primarily a burden or hardship, as suggested in some of the literature (Bigler, 2010; Anderson, 2008; Chen 2009). Although visa restrictions prohibited most IGSSs from working, some welcomed the break from previous 10- to 14-hour workdays in their home country. For example, Jay felt “relaxed” in State College: “When I worked at Korea, I wake up at 5:20 [a.m.], and I go out and I go to my house, 6:20, and I arrive at Company before 8. And I work from 8 to 10 or 11.” Moving also made it

possible for two Chinese women to entertain the possibility of having multiple children, since under certain conditions Chinese students may have a second child overseas (Refugee Review Tribunal, 2007).

Although women routinely follow their husbands to North American universities so the men can pursue their educational and professional goals, the reverse is relatively rare. Since the adjustment experiences of male IGSSs are not well researched, we wanted to include men in our study. Data from our two male participants complicate the assumption that the accompanying spouse passively follows and sacrifices for the graduate student. For instance, Joshua reported that *he decided* his wife should study abroad: “From our perspective we want to challenge ourselves and do something different and so we decided—actually this was my initiation, that was not my wife’s initiation—to come to the United States.” This statement elucidates how IGSSs make meaning of their choices, decisions, and roles as accompanying spouses—in short, how they enact agency even though they are not graduate students or postdoctoral scholars.

Gaining Entrée and Navigating Social Spaces

IGSSs sought to become part of the community by finding social and nonformal education support, chiefly through English language courses, cooking courses, women’s book clubs, and other groups. Nine participants reported joining between two and four classes or community groups, including a downtown or school district literacy center, a university-affiliated book club, and religious groups at the Chinese, Korean, and other local churches. The four other were less specific, but indicated membership in at least one program or class. Membership in these groups shaped their adjustment by allowing them to practice English, make friends, and learn how to prepare local foods. Jay explained, “Actually in [ESL] class I feel I am welcomed...I feel welcome when I speak naturally and freely about issue or the topic, as adult people...[because in other spaces] sometimes I just feel I become [just] another ESL person.” Data from the two male participants reveal that as they adjusted and made meaning of their new experiences in the host community, they began to enter highly feminized social spaces such as ESL classes, community groups, and church groups, among others. Future research should examine gender relations in these spaces.

Participants asserted that becoming part of the community required learning and speaking English. Sam explained: “But if you decided to come...you have to study English a lot, reason a lot, and you have to have that open mind.” Thus, IGSSs’ efforts to engage in community life focused on finding and taking advantage of opportunities to learn a new culture and language.

IGSSs reported receiving varying degrees of personal support from *conationals* (people who shared their nationality, their primary source of support), *host nationals* (Americans who housed them upon arrival), and *other nationals* (other Americans or long-time residents; Martens & Grant, 2008). Social networks were built primarily through churches, adult education courses, and their spouses’ university network. Prior research suggests that participation in such organizations provides access to informational, emotional, and material support (Small, 2009).

IGSSs wanted more interaction with Americans, but had few such opportunities. For instance, Jamie commented on her lack of experience and opportunity in meeting and interacting with Americans: “Students interested in the whole local community, in campus, so they have a lot of options to make American friends...but also international friends. But culture, in case of culture, we [IGSSs] are not actually, not belong to local community.” For Jamie, students had

more access to the types of activities and resources that would help them *belong* to the campus and local communities, opportunities that were not necessarily readily available to IGSSs.

Finally, the maps of the places IGSSs spent time and felt welcome or unwelcome signaled their spatial mobility and their perceptions of the host community's receptivity. IGSSs spent the most time at home, on campus, in places close to campus, in adult education courses around the community, and in other public places, mainly shopping malls, grocery stores, and the library. They felt most places were welcoming, with the exception of the state drivers' license center. These sites are linked to their efforts to learn English and U.S. culture and to the unpaid labor required by their support role, including childrearing and maintaining the household.

Factors Hindering and Enabling Social Integration

Noting the university's lack of support services for IGSSs (although IGSSs spent time at the campus library and other accessible area), participants believed more organized support would enhance their adjustment. Though some services were available through the university, most opportunities and support came from outside of the university. Consequently, Joyce recommended that the university plan and publicize sightseeing trips, since "a lot of people don't know what they're offering." Because newcomers "don't know a lot of rules," she advised offering an orientation for spouses.

U.S. dependent spouse visa regulations also hindered social integration by prohibiting (F-2 visa) or restricting (J-2 visa) paid work and enrollment in university classes. Despite such constraints, IGSSs found ways of making their stay meaningful, primarily by enrolling in noncredit adult education courses, attending conational community groups and churches, and socializing with conationals. Drawing upon skills honed as professionals, some IGSSs used campus and community resources to structure weekly schedules that involved spending 20 or more hours in the community. The two participants with J-2 visas enrolled in courses they could afford or sought part-time work; however, they had some difficulty obtaining employment.

IGSSs who could not work or enroll in formal courses underscored the importance of taking initiative to create meaningful experiences despite hardship, loneliness, or depression, a stance that highlights their active role in constructing a new life in a foreign locale. For example, Jay explained how she first planned her activities to resemble her former professional life:

I don't get up at 5:20 [to go to work] anymore, but I don't want to be lazy, so actually last semester, I take only 48 class hour time, class [per week]...So it's very tight sometime...

Yeah at that time...when I am lazy I just feel guilty and it just made me uncomfortable, so I just try to keep my faith.

Based her former professional routine, Jay first over-extended herself by taking 48 hours of adult education classes. Constructing her schedule in her new role as housewife became easier as she met new friends and expanded her activities outside of ESL courses. However, each of the IGSSs initiated enrollment in ESL and other community courses, and cited these as vital to gaining entrée to the community, finding appropriate activities, and making meaning of their time there.

Conclusion

This study is one of few to investigate the circumstances of international graduate student spouses who are enrolled in nonformal adult education courses and the strategies employed to recreate life in a foreign community. Depending on their adjustment experiences, IGSSs may or may not define their supportive role as a sacrifice. Contrary to some studies (Chen, 2009), our

participants did not describe their transition from working professional to supporting spouse as a hardship involving psychological duress, but rather emphasized their agency in making the most of their circumstances. Second, the findings reveal that visa restrictions structured IGSS experiences and integration. Despite visa restrictions and limited university support services, IGSSs found positive support and assistance from different sectors in the community. In particular, the study suggests that adult education classes, international groups in the community, and interaction with U.S. citizens can aid IGSSs' social integration. Overall, IGSSs portrayed themselves as initiators who created meaningful experiences by searching for, and taking advantage of, available opportunities and resources with which to structure their lives, including language and culture classes.

These findings can help adult educators and university personnel understand how IGSS adult learners—a group comprised mainly of highly educated, professional women—wish to interact with, learn about, and become part of a new community. This information can inform the design of ESL and culture classes and support services for IGSSs, especially in non-urban areas.

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