RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CROSS-CULTURAL INTERACTION AND ACCULTURATION: A CASE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN A UNIVERSITY IN NORTHEAST CHINA

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Abstract:

International students encounter a new and in most cases different culture in the host country. Thus, it becomes imperative to engage in interactions with both domestic and other international students in order to adjust to the new culture. This paper examines the relationship between cross-cultural interaction and acculturation. A random sample of 97 international students from a public university in Northeast China participated in the study, filling a 51-item questionnaire. The major finding reveals that interaction between cultures has a significant positive relationship with acculturation. Findings were discussed with recommendations put forward.

Keywords: cross-cultural interaction, acculturation, international students

1. Introduction

Internationalization of higher education has today become a global phenomenon. A growing number of students from developing and middle-income countries are moving to more advanced countries to study. This is largely as a result of 'massification' and a rising middle-class in many countries which has led to a rapidly growing demand for access to higher education (Oladipo & Rao, 2018). According to the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), foreign students are 'those who are not citizens of the country in which they are enrolled' (OECD, 2017, p. 296) and defines international students as *"students who are not permanent or usual residents of their country of study"* (OECD, 2017, p. 297). The total number of tertiary students enrolled outside

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their country of citizenship has risen from "*0.8 million in the late 1970s to 4.6 million 45 years later*" (OECD, 2017, p. 287).

Today, China with its rapidly growing economy has taken a recognizable position among other major host countries such as the US, UK, and Australia, to receive an increasingly high number of international students. Statistics show that in 2014, a total of 377,054 international students from 203 countries and regions came to study in China; showing a 20,555 increase from 2013. This represents a growth rate of 5.77% - data does not include Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan regions (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2015). By 2017, the number of internationals students in China had risen to 489,200 – an increase of over 10% for the second consecutive year (MOE, 2018).

For most destination countries, attracting international students is appealing for a number of reasons, including the tuition students pay, and the bolstering of bilateral ties with students' origin countries as in the case of scholarships and grants. Additionally, OECD (2016) indicators assert that international students particularly at the masters or doctoral level can contribute to research and development in the host country, initially as students and later on as researchers or highly qualified professionals.

Nevertheless, for many students studying in a foreign country, adjusting to life can be quite challenging. Cultural orientation and political settings differ between countries; hence, Poyrazli & Grahame (2007) stress the need to develop bicultural competence in order to acculturate in a new socio-cultural space. It is therefore necessary to adapt to the culture so as to live satisfactorily while maintaining one's personal values.

In the present study, cross-cultural interaction is the conversational exchange between at least two racially/ethically different persons (Rona, Anu, Jennifer & Patrick, 2004). Interactions such as these could serve as a vital catalyst in acculturation. According to Graves (1967), acculturation describes the process of bi-directional change that takes place when two ethno-cultural groups come in sustained contact with one another. Similarly, Berry (2005) defines acculturation as the change process that occurs in individuals as a result of two or more cultures coming into contact with each other. Existing literature shows that acculturation is synonymously used with similar terms such as adaptation assimilation, adjustment and integration. Hence we considered these terms in our search criteria.

The objective of this study is to examine the degree of relationship between international students' cross-cultural interaction and acculturation in a public university in Northeast China. Our first hypothesis is that there exists a significant relationship between cross-cultural interaction and acculturation of international students. Second, a significant relationship exists between international students' length of stay and their acculturation to the host culture. The third hypothesis is that the language of instruction would have an impact on the acculturation of international students:

H1: There is a relationship between cross-cultural interaction and acculturation.

H_2: There is a relationship between international students' length of stay and their acculturation to the host culture.

H_3: Language of instruction has an impact on acculturation.

According to Shafaei, Razak & Nejati (2016), although studying in a foreign country improves intercultural adaptation of international students, difficulty in acculturating can lead to disappointments. Given the homogenous composition of the Chinese population (92% Han Chinese), the 'sociocultural structure' generally differs to that of the West and other Asian countries (Ran & Shiao-Yun, 2015). In a study by Ran and Shiao-Yun (2015) on international students' cultural adaption in China, they found that while intercultural sensitivity and language proficiency improved over time, 'cognitive and behavioural adaptation might be halted'.

Nonetheless, there remains a scarcity of studies that focus on acculturation and cross-cultural interaction of international students in China. Akhtar, Pratt & Bo (2015) also opined that because China is a relatively emerging player in international circles, there is a dearth of research in international education. This study aims at contributing to the growing body of knowledge in this field.

2. Method

2.1 Respondents
The sample comprised international students in a public university in Northeast China. Respondents (N = 97) included 54.6% males and 45.6% females, aged 18 - 42 (M = 26.46; SD = 4.73) of which 14% were bachelor students, 41% masters, 25% PhD, and 18% others. Demographic information showed the highest number of respondents identified themselves as Asians 52.6%; Africans 24.7%; Europeans 14.4%, South Americans 3.1%, and Oceanians 2.1%. Out of 115 questionnaires distributed, 97 completed questionnaires were returned, hence a return rate of 84.3%.

2.2 Sampling
Respondents were randomly sampled from a population of international students. They were requested to participate in the study through a recruitment blurb and consent form stating all ethical considerations of the study.

2.3 Instrument
In this study, we adapted questionnaires from four different scales, making modifications to suit the research purpose and sample characteristics. Respondents were asked to fill a 51-item questionnaire on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Demographic data such as gender, nationality, age, current program, language of instruction (English or Chinese), and length of stay in the host university were also gathered from respondents. The adapted scales include: Socio-cultural Adjustment Scale (SCAS) (Ward & Kennedy, 1999); Social Provision Scale (Cutrona & Russell, 1987);

Adopt and Keep Scale Items (Swaidan, Vitell, Rose & Gilbert, 2006); and The Brief Socio-cultural Adaptation Scale (BSAS)/the Brief Perceived Cultural Distance Scale (BPCDS), the Brief Psychological Adaptation Scale (BPAS), and the Brief Acculturation Orientation Scale (BAOS) (Demes & Geeraert, 2014). These scales were selected for their reliability in measuring various constructs on acculturation and have also been used by numerous studies in existing literatures.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristic of Respondents

Demographic Information (N = 97)	Categories	n (%)
Gender	Male	53 (54.6)
	Female	44 (45.4)
Age (years)	18 – 22	17 (17.5)
	23 – 27	45 (46.4)
	28 – 32	24 (24.7)
	33 – 37	6 (6.2)
	38 – 42	3 (3.1)
	**	2 (2.1)
Current Program	Bachelor	14 (14.4)
	Masters	40 (41.2)
	PhD	25 (25.8)
	Other	18 (18.6)
Geographical Region	Asia	51 (52.6)
	Africa	24 (24.7)
	Europe	14 (14.4)
	South America	3 (3.1)
	Oceania	2 (2.1)

** missing

3. Measures

3.1 Demographic information
Demographic information consists of respondents' gender, age, nationality, current program, major, language of instruction, and length of stay in the host university.

3.2 Cross-cultural interaction
Cross-cultural interaction was measured using the Social Provision Scale (Cutrona & Russell, 1987). The items describe respondents' relationship and interaction with individuals who share same culture and also individuals from a different culture. Items include *'I find it easy communicating with people of a different ethnic group'* and *'I should interact (socialize) with members of my original ethnic group'*.

3.3 Acculturation
Acculturation variable was measured using the 'Adopt and Keep' Scale (Swaidan et al., 2006). The scale is divided into two different sections. Under the 'Adopt' section, items measure respondents' desire to adopt the Chinese culture, while the 'Keep' section

measures willingness to maintain their home culture. Each section consists of 5 questions on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The items were modified to fit the current population. The scale contained items such as *'I feel I should adopt Chinese culture'* and *'I feel I should pay attention to maintaining my home culture'*.

Additionally, acculturation was measured using the Brief Socio-cultural Adaptation Scale (BSAS)/Brief Perceived Cultural Distance Scale (BPCDS), the Brief Psychological Adaptation Scale (BPAS), and the Brief Acculturation Orientation Scale (BAOS) (Demes & Geeraert, 2014). Built on previous efforts to address limitations in the measurement of acculturation (Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2007; Celenk & Van de Vijver, 2011), these 'Brief Scales' were designed to measure a series of acculturation concepts.

They address the shortcomings in previous scales which include variation in levels of context specificity, lengthy items, and difficulty in generalizing to different populations (Demes & Geeraert, 2014). Items were also modified in line the current research. The scale contained items such as *'I feel a sense of freedom being away from my home country'* and *'I'm frustrated by difficulties adapting to China'*.

Lastly, to measure acculturation, the Socio-cultural Adjustment Scale (SCAS) (Ward & Kennedy, 1999) was used. This scale has proven to be a reliable instrument having been used across a broad range of culturally diverse temporarily resident groups including both students and adults.

In all these scales, the present study used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) in measuring the variables involved.

4. Findings

The scatter-plot of the two main variables (cross-cultural interaction and acculturation) in this study showed linearity of data; which establishes that a relationship exists between both variables. The overall pattern of dots on the plot showed a positive relationship. According to Healey (2013, p. 336), "*checking for linearity is perhaps the most important reason for examining the scatter-plot before proceeding with statistical analysis*".

The correlation between cross-cultural interaction and acculturation in this study showed a strong positive relationship ($r = 0.723$, $p < 0.01$). International students who engage in interactions with individuals from other cultures are more likely to acculturate to the Chinese culture. It is important to note that this is not a causal relationship, but rather shows the strength of the bivariate association. Hence, we fail to reject the first hypothesis (H_1: there is a relationship between cross-cultural interaction and acculturation).

Surprisingly, no significant correlation was found between length of stay in host university and acculturation ($r = 0.072$, $p = 0.485$) based on the data gathered in the study. Thus, leading to a rejection of the second hypothesis (H_2: there is a relationship

between international students' length of stay and their acculturation to the host culture).

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Coefficient for Cross-cultural Interaction and Length of Stay with Acculturation for International Students (N = 97)

Acculturation	
Cross-Cultural Interaction	0.723**
Length of Stay (months)	0.72
** Significant at 0.01 significant level (2-tailed)	

Table 3: Language of Instruction & Length of Stay

	Category	n (%)
Language of Instruction	**English**	52 (53.6)
	Chinese	45 (46.4)
Length of Stay (months)	**18 – 22**	17 (17.5)
	23 – 27	45 (46.4)
	28 – 32	24 (24.7)
	33 and above	9 (9.3)

In order to investigate the third hypothesis (H_3: language of instruction has an impact on acculturation), independent sample t-test showed no significant difference in means between having English or Chinese as language of instruction on acculturation. Therefore based on the research data, instructional language has no impact on acculturation [t (95) = 0.853, p > 0.05], two-tailed with English as language of instruction (M = 3.51, SD = 0.41) and Chinese as language of instruction (M = 3.57, SD = 0.38). However according to respondents' university policy, international students in English-taught programs are required to take a Chinese language course in the first semester of their academic program. Hence, respondents possess some knowledge of Chinese language regardless of an English-taught or Chinese-taught major.

5. Discussion

It is a known phenomenon that international students encounter a myriad of challenges as they maneuver life in their host countries. This phenomenon is not strange to international students studying in China who also experience challenges which can inhibit acculturating to the Chinese culture. The objective of this study was to examine the relationship between cross-cultural interaction and acculturation of international students. Respondents were sampled from a public university in Northeast China.

Research findings reveal that a strong positive association exists between interacting with different cultures and acculturation. International students who engage in activities with students from different cultures have a higher tendency to adapt to life in China. This finding is consistent with a previous study by Akhtar, et al (2015) on cross-cultural adaptation of African students in China, which found that international students with cross-cultural experience were more likely to adjust to the host culture.

Their research further revealed that having prior cross-cultural experience and a broad social circle had a positive correlation to adaptation and satisfaction level of international students. In a study by Quintrell and Westwood (1994), first-year international students were paired with local students and instructed to maintain bi-monthly contact with their partners. International student participants were more likely than non-participants to report positive academic experience. In Australia, international students with greater number of local and international ties experienced better psychological adjustment. Having fewer local ties was associated with lower psychological adjustment – an acculturation index. Interestingly, local ties contributed significantly to cultural knowledge of host country over and above language background and length of stay (Kashima & Loh, 2006).

The findings of the present study show that length of stay has no correlation with international students' ability to acculturate. The researchers had expected that length of stay in the host university would be strongly associated to acculturation.

Results show that language of instruction has no impact on acculturation. International students in the host university are taught in English and/or Chinese. Therefore, students' ability to adjust to Chinese culture was not significantly influenced by the instructional language. However, it is expected that respondents in Chinese-taught majors should be more proficient in Chinese language. Existing literatures however show that proficiency in the local language significantly impacts acculturation attitudes of international students. (Kashima & Loh, 2006; Shafaei et al., 2016)

Clearly, intercultural contact can enhance intercultural competence and promote favorable views about different cultures. Existing schemes which provide rich involvement between international and host students should be encouraged.

6. Conclusion

This present study has shown that interacting with individuals from a different culture has a strong positive association to adjusting to life in China. The findings of this study are useful for policy planning in institutions with culturally diverse student population. The understanding gained from this study can help inform the actions of students and faculties in organizing programs that allow for mutual engagement not just among international students themselves, but also between international and domestic students.

Having examined the relationship between cross-cultural interaction and acculturation, it is also necessary to study the association between other variables and acculturation. This may lead to a more robust recommendation than those found in this study. Interaction and mutual respect among cultures not only presents numerous benefits to students and faculties, but certainly remains a universal need in today's world.

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