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CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Lost In Transitions: A Review of Stressors and Mental Health Among International Students in the United States

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to provide insight into and in-depth knowledge of the unique mental health challenges and stressors that international students experience while studying at U.S. higher education institutions. This chapter will provide a complex and nuanced picture of the mental health and related experiences of these students that can guide practice and provide direction for future research. It will include a systematic review of research and practice on international students' mental health and its implications for researchers, faculty, administrators, counselors, and anyone working with international students in U.S. higher education.

Keywords: International Students, Mental Health, U.S. Higher Education, Acculturative Stress

International Student Mental Health

While international students strive to thrive in the United States, studying in a foreign country can lead to unexpected challenges. Unlike domestic students, they can experience acculturative stress (i.e., stress caused by changes while living in different cultures) and adjustment problems (Koo, Baker, et al., 2021; Berry, 2006) as they adjust to a new educational system with different academic norms and social customs in the United States. Research has found that international students struggle with these adjustments, as well as having limited English proficiency, financial issues, and isolation and loneliness (Koo, Kim, et al., 2021;Koo, Nyunt, et al., 2021; Gold, 2016; Ma, 2020; Mukminin, 2019; Tang et al., 2018; Xing & Bolden, 2019). Furthermore, they encounter these struggles while separated from their main support system, family, friends, and home, which further exacerbates their distress. Consequently, these difficulties negatively impact international students' mental health (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Koo, Kim, et al., 2021).

Researchers estimate that approximately 20% of international students are at risk of experiencing mental health problems due to acculturative stress and acculturation-related problems (Zhang & Goodson, 2011), and studies have found that large numbers of international students struggle with mental health issues. For example, Han and colleagues (2013) found that 45% of international students reported being depressed, and 29% reported symptoms of severe anxiety. International students have also been found to be more likely to experience severe mental health issues than their domestic peers (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Han et al., 2013).

International students' mental health issues are more concerning because they are less likely to seek help from professional mental health services due to stigmatization and stereotypes regarding mental health, as well as negative experiences with culturally insensitive mental health services from counselors in the United States (Hwang et al., 2014; Koo, Tan, et al., In Press). Although research has begun to address the mental health needs of international students (e.g., Han et al., 2012; Koo & Nyunt, 2020), much of this research has focused on the state of mental illness. Little is known about what specific collegiate experiences and environments influence their mental health, and research on support for international student mental health is also still underdeveloped. And while researchers argue that culturally sensitive and responsive support and programs are necessary for international students (Koo & Nyunt, 2020, Koo, 2021a), few resources are available for faculty and practitioners to learn about international students' mental health needs. Further study and better resources to provide culturally sensitive services for international students are therefore needed across various functional areas of student affairs divisions and academic affairs on campus.

Acculturative Stress

Acculturation is the process of transitioning from one culture to another and the experiences of this change (Amason et al., 1999; Berry, 2005; Koo, Baker, et al., 2021). Acculturative stress is a specific type of stress resulting from the experiences of the acculturation process (Berry et al., 1987), and can be accompanied by symptoms such as depression, anxiety, anger, identity confusion, and social conflict (Berry, 2005; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994). Berry (2006) indicated that the degree of coping with the stress introduced via the acculturation process

influences the severity of the acculturative stress experienced. For international students, acculturative stress is significantly associated with their adjustment, academic performance, social connectedness, and mental health (Koo, Baker, et al., 2021; Luo et al., 2019), and Berry (2006) found that those with appropriate resources to overcome acculturative stress have better outcomes in this respect than those who lack adequate coping mechanisms.

There are multiple factors and experiences that are strongly associated with acculturative stress for international students. For example, those with better social support and social connectedness report fewer difficulties adjusting to U.S. culture, and have better academic outcomes (Luo et al., 2019; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). Conversely, those lacking social connectedness face academic problems and higher dropout rates (Li & Duanmu, 2010). Social connectedness is therefore important for the successful acculturation of first-year international students.

Self-concept is another factor related to acculturative stress among international students. Positive self-esteem has been found to predict better academic performance (Telbis et al., 2014), less acculturative stress (Koo, Baker, et al., 2021), and better psychological adjustment for these students (Jackson et al., 2013). English proficiency is also a significant factor impacting their acculturative stress. International students who report better English proficiency have reported more positive psychological and sociocultural adjustment (Luo et al., 2019; Ma, 2020) and lower rates of acculturative stress (Koo, Baker, et al., 2021; Poulakis et al., 2017), and their self-perceived English proficiency has also been found to impact their social connectedness and academic success (Wang et al., 2018; Xing & Bolden, 2019). In sum, acculturative stress is a critical factor affecting

the mental health and well-being of international students. In the next sections, mental health stressors that they commonly experience in American higher education will be discussed.

Common Stressors among International Students

In addition to acculturative stress and cultural adjustment, academic adjustment, social adjustment, and perceived discrimination are common sources of stress for international students (Mori, 2000; Olivias & Li, 2006; Prieto-Welc, 2016; Wu et al., 2015).

Academic Stress

As international students transition into American higher education, they are presented with adapting to both a new educational system and a new cultural setting simultaneously. In one of the earlier studies on this population, Thomas and Althen (1989) highlighted unfamiliarity with the U.S. education system as a major source of academic stress for them. There are two layers to academic stress that international students experience: how stressful they perceive their role demands to be, and how capable of coping with these demands they see themselves to be (Wan et al., 1992). Within this framework, language barriers, academic skills, social skills, problem-solving skills, and prior knowledge of subjects accounted for a substantial amount of academic stress evaluated by participants (Wan et al., 1992). Some Asian, Middle Eastern, and African students have found the discussion and presentation-based instruction style in U.S. schools to be confusing because it differs from what they are accustomed to (Thomas & Althen, 1989). Adjustment to these differences, compounded with language barriers and acculturative stress, has led to additional stress for international students that challenges their academic success and mental

health (Abel, 2002; Aubrey, 1991; Liberman, 1994). There are also academic stressors outside of the classroom, including lack of resources, high expectations, a sense of competition, feeling socially outcast, and the additional responsibilities of becoming an independent adult in a foreign country (Misra et al., 2003; Mori, 2000).

A 2009 study provided additional context for international students' academic stress related to ineffective interactions with U.S. faculty, such as having trouble bringing up problems with advisors (Yan & Berliner, 2009). Liu (2011) illustrated these challenges in detail by narrating the experiences of a Chinese international student adjusting to a Canadian University. Although the paper focused on English language learning, it entailed a student's experience with acculturation, adjustment, and accommodation to a foreign experience just to learn and to live (Liu, 2011). Experiencing high levels of academic stress not only burdens international students' mental health, but also influences their adaptation to a new environment. Since "student" is a primary identity of international students, feeling more academic stress leads to feeling less confident and more anxious when living in a new environment (Chen, 1999).

Social Networks

As a part of their acculturation to education in the United States, international students have to rebuild their social networks (Mori, 2000; Yan & Berliner, 2009; Wan et al., 1992). There were two types of social adjustments they must adapt to: navigating intra-group dynamics and establishing a new social network. According to earlier studies, some carry high expectations with limited empathy or shared understanding from their families (Thomas & Althen, 1989).

Institutions tend to use "international student" as an umbrella term to generalize their experiences, assuming that they would build bonds out of similar experiences. However, research has revealed that international friendships can be superficial or politically conflicted (Mori, 2000; Thomas & Althen, 1989), resulting in a lack of social belonging among international students from different regions. Research has identified nuanced social interactions as sources of stress for international students, as it can lead to misinterpretation of social cues and relationships with U.S. peers (Mori, 2000; Pedersen, 1991). Accordingly, international students have described their connection with domestic students as superficial (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013).

Although technologies, globalization, and increasing cultural awareness have improved the initial social shock that international students experienced in the 1990s, social adjustment still impacts them in significant ways. A recent study showed that international students' usage of social media corresponded to their perceived social adjustment, but not true social support (Seo et al., 2017). In other words, although they might have adapted to new social norms, it doesn't mean that they have the social support one may assume. With increased awareness and understanding of acculturation (Berry et al., 2006), many studies since 2000 have focused on ways that social support improves or negates international students' adjustment to studying in the United States. Several studies have shown that social networks can reduce stress, improve well-being, and enhance cross-cultural adaptation, and that lacking it can predict depression (Araujo & Andre, 2011; Atri et al., 2007; Poyrazli et al., 2004; Sümer et al., 2008). In Liu's (2011) narrative, social support had a direct impact on coping with stress, further illustrating the reality of the challenges these students face.

Discrimination

Discrimination stemming from xenophobia and racism has always been a significant stressor impairing the mental health and educational adjustment of international students (Jung et al., 2007; Karuppan & Barari, 2011; Schmitt et al., 2003; Tan, 2021; Wadsworth et al., 2008). *Neo-racism* justifies discrimination by citing cultural differences or national origins as sources of different interactions rather than ethnicity per se, thus promoting marginalization and assimilation into a globalized world (Lee & Rice, 2007). Lee and Rice (2007) conducted both an extensive literature review and interviews on the role of neo-racism in discriminating against international students and found that verbal harassments, insults, exclusionary policies, and marginalization from fellow students and faculty were all examples of discrimination they had experienced. Another qualitative study with a sample of Japanese students illustrated how they encountered prejudice, Asian stereotypes, and discrimination in the form of avoidant behaviours from classmates and faculty (Bonazzo & Wong, 2007). Similarly, Xie et al. (2019) found that Chinese students had encountered the stereotypes of the "model minority" and "crazy rich Asians" in the United States, resulting in stress, marginalization, and depressive symptoms. When female scientists from African regions were interviewed about their experiences studying in Western universities, they reported feeling discriminated against by professors who questioned their academic abilities and criticized their accents (Beoku-Betts, 2004). And a study on threat perception and authoritarian tendencies among American college students found that prejudice and xenophobia towards international students was predicted by perceptions that they represented either a symbolic or actual threat to U.S. welfare (Charles-Toussaint & Crowson, 2010).

Even within international student groups, xenophobic and racist views continue to persist in the form of a hierarchy. In Lee and Rice's study (2007), student participants from European and English-speaking regions experienced minimal discrimination compared to students from other regions. Meanwhile, a prior study found that students from the Middle East and Africa experienced more discrimination than peers from other regions (Hanassab, 2006), and another later showed that students from European regions encountered less discrimination than their peers from predominantly non-White regions, who had more negative experiences (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2010; Lee, 2010).

It is important to note that recent violence and discrimination against people of colour in the United States, such as anti-Asian sentiment related to the COVID-19 pandemic, police brutality against Black people, travel bans on people from majority-Muslim countries, and anti-immigration policies at the southern border, have not only induced logistical chaos and emotional distress for international students in U.S. universities, but have further reinforced fears related to rising xenophobia and neo-racism. This has been demonstrated by declines in international students' enrollments and concern over their safety in the United States (VOA News, 2020; Downs, 2017; Redden, 2020; Sanger & Baer, 2019).

Region-Specific Mental Health Challenges

In this section, international students across different racial groups and different regions of their home countries and their unique characteristics and background related to mental health are discussed by sub-sections on each group.

African International Students

African international students come from predominantly collectivist cultures, which plays an important role in how they process mental health challenges. African-centric cultures value community, unity, and collectivism, viewing community members as important sources of support. When experiencing mental health difficulties, people from these cultures would rely on community members while feeling embarrassed to seek professional help from strangers (Wallace & Constantine, 2005). Constantine and colleagues (1997) illustrated attitudes among African American college similar to this Afrocentric perspective, finding that students tended to seek counseling for academic issues instead of personal concerns, as they are likely to avoid sharing mental health stress with strangers outside of their immediate social circle. African Americans might also be unable to trust the mental health system as a whole due to trauma related to racism and systematic oppression and inadequate cultural awareness from White-centric counseling services (Whaley, 2001). There is also a tendency among African Americans to withhold personal and sensitive information out of a need to protect oneself and others, a phenomenon known as self-concealment (Wallace & Constantine, 2005). They might worry that their disclosed problems would be generalized into racial stereotypes for their community as a whole, while fearing that counseling services themselves could be oppressive (Thompson et al., 2004; Wallace & Constantine, 2005). This further exemplifies a value of placing community before self. These factors have resulted in avoidance of professional counseling and the formation of a mental health stigma (Thompson et al. 2004; Wallace & Constantine, 2005).

For African international students, studies have identified social networks, racialization and discrimination as some of the main barriers to cultural adjustment (Constantine et al., 2005). In a study interviewing students from Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana, Constantine et al. (2005) found that they had experienced discriminatory stress associated with racialization and racial prejudice. The participants also confirmed that they tended to rely on the self when dealing with problems so as to not burden others, and that they would not seek counseling for acculturative stress, which further illustrated the role of collectivism in this student group. In recent studies on Black and Black-African international students, experiences with discrimination once again emerged as a main challenge and stressor. This prejudice and discrimination also occurs within the international student community itself, where other international students have demonstrated anti-Black microaggressions (Boafo-Arthur, 2013; Caldwell & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2016)

Asian International Students

Because of their large presence in Western universities, a lot of attention has been dedicated to studies on Asian international students' mental health challenges. In a focus group study, they reported experiencing stress from a variety of cultural and familial factors, such as handling external pressures from family, balancing traditional Confucian values with American higher education, and adjusting to new communication styles in the United States (Heggins & Jackson, 2003). The differences between collectivist Eastern cultures and individualistic Western cultures have required Asian international students to negotiate between conflicting norms and values while attending U.S. institutions (Abel, 2002; Morris, 2000; Thomas & Althen; 1989). Aside from

unfamiliar educational systems, they have also had to manage different expectations of them as students in the U.S. than in their home countries, leading to greater mental health stress (Ma et al., 2020).

For Asian international students, there are cognitive and cultural factors involved in determining help-seeking behaviours. Yakunia and Weigold (2011) described one cognitive factor, that their attitudes and stigma towards mental health can either promote or inhibit their access to mental health interventions, and the cultural factor that their acculturation process and social concerns can also lead to diverging willingness to discuss mental health challenges.

In a recent study on how Asian international students conceptualize well-being, Chinese, Indian, and South Asian participants described their well-being as contextualized by achievements and social relationships—disruptions of which could lead to serious distress (Raj et al., 2021). This study, along with other recent research (Ivanov & Masterson, 2015; Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, 2013; Tan, 2019), also highlighted the broad diversity within Asian international students in the United States.

In a study focused on international students from South Asia (India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka), Atri and Sharma (2006) reported that social efficacy and religion were two important predictors of mental health not as prominent in other Asian groups. A literature review on Asian American students further illustrated the different realities faced by Southeast Asian students, finding that Southeast Asians were more likely to experience economic hardship than other Asian students, and less likely to receive educational support (Tan, 2019), which could worsen acculturative stress and their mental health. And according to a report published by the

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) in 2003, Southeast Asians had higher rates of depression and PTSD (NAMI Multicultural & International Outreach Center, 2003), which illustrated disparities in access to mental health care and rates of mental illness within Asian communities in the United States.

Latin American International Students

Compared to other regions, there have been limited studies done with international students from Latin America (i.e., the vast majority of South America, Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean that speak Spanish, Portuguese, or French). There have also been limited studies, resources, education, and practices dedicated to mental health in Latin America generally (Alarcon, 2003; Razzouk et al., 2007). In a 2001 report on mental health in Latin America, Arboleda-Flórez discussed how family responsibilities, religion, gender roles, and socio-political unrest set the backdrop for mental health stigma in Latin American communities. Because of this stigma, many people rely on alternative folklore and religious explanations for mental health challenges or seek two separate treatments from both Western physicians and holistic healers at the same time (Arboleda-Flórez, 2001). As a result, international students from Latin America could face two struggles when seeking mental health care: backlash from the community at home due to stigma, and a lack of culturally responsive resources in the United States.

In an expansive and multilingual literature review, Mascayano et al. (2016) further illustrated this reality, identifying four types of mental health stigma that are prevalent in Latin American communities. The first is public stigma, wherein the general public stereotype mental

illness as involving violence and disabilities, thereby discouraging people from seeking help or participating in mental health education and popularizing discrimination against people with mental illness. Second, there is also family stigma wherein family members of those with mental illness view them as dangerous and unhealthy, resulting in a lack of support and acceptance from close ones. This is a significant deterrence to help-seeking behaviours: because Latin American communities are collectivist, they value family as both a support system and a source of responsibilities, which makes people from these communities unlikely to seek mental health services out of concern for family perceptions. In addition, because of gender role expectations, women are seen as more likely to develop a mental illness, while men are shamed for expressing emotion or vulnerability.

In study on English-speaking Caribbean communities, Youssef et al. (2014) found that there was limited education and knowledge about mental illness, and a tendency to stigmatize or have negative attitudes about mental health. These findings echo those from Latin American and African regions, potentially due to some shared diasporic migration paths and cultural frames.

Middle Eastern International Students

Overall, the literature indicates that religious and cultural views on mental illness have led to an underutilization of mental health services by people from the Middle East or of Arab Muslim backgrounds (Al-Krenawi et al., 2008; Aloud & Rathur, 2009; Haque, 2004). Because some Arab Muslims have tended to attribute mental illness to spiritual or religious causes (e.g., as a punishment from God), they could reject mental health services or feel ashamed when

experiencing mental distress and be reluctant to seek support or professional help (Al-Adawi et al., 2002; Aloud & Rathur, 2009; Haque, 2004; Rassool, 2000). And in interviews with Kuwaiti participants, Scull et al. (2014) found that concerns over maintaining confidentiality deterred them from seeking mental health treatment, for fear of this religious and cultural stigma.

In the case of international students from the Middle East, they may suffer additional acculturative stress with limited cultural support when studying in the United States. In an extensive review on the Middle East and psychology, Halaj and Huppert (2017) detailed an extensive list of trends and practices from different regions within the Middle East. Notably, this study discussed ways that Middle Eastern countries appeared to be "traditional" when compared to other regions of the world due to cultural and religious practices, advocating for culturally sensitive and relevant counseling services for Middle Eastern patients and clients.

Aside from stigma, students who are practising Muslims may also encounter stress from limited access to religious practices or community. A 2004 review by Haque found that common stressors for Muslim communities included barriers to observing religious rituals, experiencing identity crisis, discrimination, and a lack of Muslim counseling professionals. Because Muslims are a small religious minority in the United States—and often vilified and marginalized—practising Muslims can encounter logistical challenges such as the inability to participate in daily prayers or periods of fasting that American institutions were not designed to accommodate (Haque, 2004). International students from the Middle East or of Arab Muslim backgrounds are also faced with balancing religious identity with adapting to an American culture often characterized by

Islamophobic tendencies (Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2021), which compounds the stress associated with social adjustment and acculturation.

COVID-19 Specific Stressors

American higher education institutions were deeply impacted by the unprecedented global uncertainty associated with the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and this influence has continued to loom large through 2021. While the pandemic has negatively affected all college students' lives on campus (Strauss, 2020), international students may experience unique difficulties as they face this uncertain time in a foreign country, away from their support network back home (Koo, 2021a; Koo, Tan, et al., In Press). In addition to the challenges that all college students in the United States have experienced during the pandemic, there have been reports of unique challenges confronting international students, including multiple incidents of racism, travel restrictions and bans to and from students' countries of origin, legal status issues, mental health issues, and social isolation (Koo, 2021a; Koo, Yao, et al., 2021; Son et al., 2020).

More recently, scholars and practitioners in higher education have actively discussed how colleges and universities will be changed by the pandemic in the long term, and how these changes will affect students. There has been a huge shift of student learning and teaching toward blended and online approaches that limit opportunities for co-curricular engagement, and changes in policies regarding admission, access, and completion (Strauss, 2020). Some of these changes have increased concerns about marginalization of international students in the United States, such as

issues regarding visas, college admission, and scholarship/assistantship opportunities, in addition to more prevalent racist attitudes (Sanfins, 2020; Strauss, 2020).

During the pandemic in 2020, college students experienced unexpected crises and enormous disruptions of their lives, including upheavals in their learning experiences with the change to virtual or online classes (e.g., Dhawan, 2020), increased financial burdens (e.g., Flaherty, 2020), and onset of psychological disorders (Son et al., 2020). Research about this time is still fledgling, but some early studies have confirmed what many suspected about the pandemic's affect on college students' experiences. According to Cao et al. (2020), the pandemic has not only increased the risk of death from infection, but also of developing psychological issues such as anxiety. The researchers also found that social support was negatively associated with the anxiety levels of college students. Similarly, Koo (2021a) and Wang et al. (2020) reported that college students have suffered significantly from depression and anxiety symptoms related to the pandemic. Research from both before the pandemic and since has indicated a negative impact of public health emergencies on college students' mental health, including psychological conditions such as anxiety, fear, and worry (Betancourt et al., 2016).

Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, and international students from Asian countries have suffered additional, unique stressors during the pandemic including racial/ethnic discrimination, and even physical attacks. Chinese people in particular, or other Asians inaccurately perceived to be Chinese, have endured racially unpleasant experiences (e.g., Gover et al., 2020; Koo, 2021b). A recent study conducted by Karalis Noel (2020) found that xenophobia prompted by the pandemic and its relationship to sensationalized media discourse in the United States, in turn

influenced tremendous worldwide xenophobia. For example, as racial/ethnic hatred toward Asians began to increase, news media, fueled the fire with xenophobic terminology such as "China Virus" and "Kung Flu," spreading fear and panic and thereby stoking prejudice, xenophobia, and discrimination among the populace (Karalis Noel, 2020). Similarly, a Polish survey study by Rzymski and Nowicki (2020), found that students from Asia experienced xenophobic reactions in public places. Several other recent studies have also revealed trends of racial discrimination against both international students of colour and domestic students of colour (Croucher et al., 2020; Tessler et al., 2020; Zhai & Du, 2020). Since the outbreak of COVID-19, multiple stressors for international students have increased alarmingly in U.S. higher education institutions, including racial discrimination, frequent and abrupt changes to U.S. immigration law, social isolation, and mental health problems.

Despite the challenges faced by international students in higher education during this pandemic, research into understanding their experience is extremely underdeveloped. Thus, in order to provide timely and relevant information and resources for faculty, staff, international student office professionals, counselors, and policy makers to better support these marginalized students, further studies must examine their experiences, challenges, well-being, and mental health during this time.

As education leaders, policy makers, faculty, and student affairs professionals strive to overcome negative impacts of COVID-19 on their students, it is important to pay attention to and support international students who lack the support system that domestic students tend to have, with no homes or families to turn to while living in a foreign country.

CONCLUSION

While college students in general struggle with psychological well-being and mental distress globally as they go through developmental stage of young adults and adjust to higher education , college experiences and campus lives can be particularly overwhelming for international students surviving and navigating in a foreign country. Although there are efforts to provide a positive campus climate and support for international students, international students in the United States encounter continued issues of limited resources, social isolation, racism, discrimination, and mental illness, and this has only worsened during the pandemic.

It is time for this marginalized group of students to have their voices heard, and to support them and to help them feel welcome and safe. We hope that this article sheds some light on the unique experiences and mental health issues faced by international students in the United States. We also hope that it will contribute to the literature in student affairs and higher education, as well as in counseling and international education, and that it offers insight into establishing an appropriate support system for this group.

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