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International Journal of Intercultural Relations

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijintrel

Meaning of life as a protective factor of positive affect in acculturation: A resilience framework and a cross-cultural comparison[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Acculturation
Positive affect
Meaning of life
Chinese international student

ABSTRACT

Although research has demonstrated a strong linkage between meaning of life and positive emotion, few studies have examined this association in the context of acculturation. The purpose of this study was to investigate the predictive effects of meaning of life and acculturative stressor on positive affect in a sample of Chinese international students in Australia and Hong Kong, and to compare these effects between the two groups. Four hundred mainland Chinese postgraduate students at six universities in Hong Kong and 227 Chinese international students at the University of Melbourne in Australia completed a questionnaire that included measures of acculturative stressor, meaning of life, positive affect, and demographic information. The analyses revealed that (1) meaning of life had a strong positive contribution to predict positive affect in acculturation, and acculturative stress had a negative impact on positive affect within both samples; (2) social interaction had a significant negative predictive effect on positive affect in both samples, and academic work served as a significant negative predictor of positive affect in the Hong Kong sample; and (3) meaning of life was found to mediate the relationship between acculturative stress and positive affect in both samples. The theoretical and practical implications of the study are discussed.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Acculturative stressors experienced by Chinese international students and their impact on mental health

International students, as one group of sojourners, are commonly regarded as a population at high risk for psychopathology or poor mental health due to the various risk factors that they experience in the process of cross-cultural adaptation (Sandu & Asrabadi, 1991). One major set of risk factors faced by international students is acculturative stressor, which has been defined as the conflicts and difficulties that arise from the process of acculturation (Joiner & Walker, 2002). For Chinese international students, acculturative stressors can be divided into five major domains: (1) language-related issues, such as difficulties in listening to and speaking English (Xu, 2002), difficulties in understanding slang, jokes, idioms, and common vocabulary and topics of conversation (Sheh, 1994), and a lack of confidence in using English in daily life (Swager & Ellis, 2003); (2) academic issues, such as difficulties related to coursework, research, and teaching assistantship duties (Lu, 1998); (3) psycho-social-cultural issues, such as social contact, discrimination, homesickness and loneliness,

[☆] This study was supported by a 2006 Endeavour Australia Cheung Kong Award.

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cultural difference, and lack of independence; (4) financial issues (Lu, 1998); and (5) other issues, such as political concerns (Sun & Chen, 1997).

The majority of the studies of acculturation and mental health have exclusively focused on negative adaptation outcomes. Berry, Kim, Minde, and Mok (1987) proposed a model of acculturative stress to illustrate how acculturative stressors that arise from the acculturation experience can result in varying levels of acculturative stress. A high level of acculturative stress was found to be related to various negative emotions, such as depression and suicide ideation (Hovey & King, 1997; Shen & Takeuchi, 2001), loneliness (Leung, 2001), and anxiety (Barrett, Sonderegger, & Xenos, 2003), and to be associated with the erosion of positive affect (Noh, Kaspar & Wickrama, 2007).

1.2. A resilience framework

However, resilience research in the past three decades has demonstrated that a subgroup of a high-risk population can develop and maintain normal and healthy psychological functioning with no sign of psychopathology. Resilience is widely defined as a personal trait or process of bouncing back from, overcoming, surviving, or successfully adapting to a variety of adverse conditions or life stresses (e.g., Grotberg, 2003; Luthar & Ziegler, 1991; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). The resilience research represents a significant paradigm shift in health-related fields from focusing on risk factors or problems to emphasizing the strengths, recourses, and competencies of individuals from a positive perspective (Michaud, 2006). This paradigm shift has led to a number of studies that have concentrated on the protective factors and positive adaptation outcomes in various adverse situations.

The literature has documented the existence of positive emotion among international students. Gao and Liu (1998) demonstrated that although students from China had considerable difficulties and emotional troubles in Australia, the majority of them had settled successfully. Similarly, Rosenthal, Russell, and Thomson (2006) found that a vast majority of the international students at the University of Melbourne in Australia had a sound sense of social, physical, and psychological well-being, and experienced positive affect and satisfaction in relation to their study and life in Melbourne. Arthur, Doverspike, and Fuentes (1992) compared positive affect between international and local students in an American university and found that international students reported positive affect more often than did the locals. In Hong Kong, it was found that immigrant youth from mainland China had better mental health than had local youth (Wong, Yan, Lo, & Hung, 2003). Other studies, although few in number, have also reported various types of positive emotion, such as happiness (Parr, Bradley, & Bingi, 1992) and satisfaction (Abadi, 2000), that are experienced by international students in other countries. Therefore, it seems that international students are not as vulnerable as the reporting of most traditional studies of acculturation would suggest. As argued by Berry et al. (1987), acculturation experience sometimes may enhance one's life chances and mental health, and the adaptation outcomes depend on various environmental and individual characteristics in the acculturation process. However, few studies in acculturation research have focused on positive emotion and its predictors.

1.3. Meaning of life and psychological well-being

Resilience research has identified a number of protective factors that facilitate positive adaptation outcomes in diverse adverse situations. Meaning of life is one of the protective factors that have been identified by resilience researchers (Grotberg, 2003; Masten & Reed, 2002; Norman, 2000). Meaning of life has been defined as "the cognizance of order, coherence, and purpose in one's existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfillment" (Recker & Wong, 1988, p. 221). Meaning comes from various sources in people's life (Vogler-Ebersole & Ebersole, 1985). Different sources of life meaning have been identified by different researchers by both quantitative and qualitative approaches. For example, Wong (1998a) developed the Personal Meaning Profile (PMP) to measure the sources of a meaningful life, which included achievement, religion, relationship, self-transcendence, self-acceptance, intimacy, and fair treatment. An individual's concepts of meaning of life contain both culturally specific and universal elements (Baessler & Oerter, 2003). A cross-cultural comparative study (Prager, 1996) showed that the most important sources of meaning in life for Australians were participation in personal relationships and leisure activities, personal growth, and meeting basic needs, findings that were consistent with those of a study of Canadians. Nevertheless, some studies of Asian populations have reported culturally specific factors that are related to meaning of life. Lin (2001) found that besides the seven factors that are assessed in Wong's PMP, Chinese people also try to seek personal meaning from family, self-development, and being close to nature and authentic. It appears that meaning is framed in relation to others, society, and nature in the Chinese context.

There appears to be a clear linkage between meaning of life and positive dimensions of psychological well-being (Chamberlain & Zika, 1992). Empirical research, although scarce, supports the conclusion that the attainment of life meaning is associated with positive mental health outcomes, such as positive affect (Zika & Chamberlain, 1992) and life satisfaction (Lin, 2001; Shek, 1993; Zika & Chamberlain, 1987, 1992). Zika and Chamberlain (1987) examined three personal variables (locus of control, assertiveness, and meaning in life) in relation to psychological well-being and found that meaning in life was the most consistent predictor of positive affect among college students. They also found that three measures of meaning in life – the Life Regard Scale, the Purpose in Life Test, and the Sense of Coherence Scale – had consistent positive correlations with positive affect (Chamberlain & Zika, 1988). The significant positive predictive power of meaning in life on positive affect

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