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Asian international students' socio-cultural adaptation: Influence of multicultural personality, assertiveness, academic self-efficacy, and social support

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ABSTRACT

In this study examining the influence of multicultural personality, assertiveness, social support, and academic self-efficacy on Asian international students' (ISs) socio-cultural adjustment in the U.S., 330 Asian ISs completed a web-survey. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis revealed that both Multicultural Personality and Assertiveness were associated with Socio-cultural Adaptation, which was mediated by Academic Self-efficacy. Although Multicultural Personality was associated with Social Support, bootstrapping results indicated that there was no indirect effect from Social Support to Socio-cultural Adaptation, therefore mediation paths between Multicultural Personality to Social Support and Social Support to Socio-cultural Adaptation were not supported. Implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The number of international students (ISs) enrolled in higher education in the U.S. is increasing each year (Lee & Rice, 2007), and Asian ISs account for 62% of the total number of ISs in the U.S. (Institute of International Education, 2011). Previous research has shown that there are common difficulties among Asian ISs, such as a lack of social support and issues related to different academic environments (Ying & Liese, 1994).

Unlike immigrants who plan to live in the U.S. permanently, ISs may consider their stay in the U.S. to be temporary, and thus they may try to balance maintaining their traditional roles and adjusting to the new culture (Bochner, 1972). Asian ISs, in particular, come from cultures that have different values from highly individualistic societies like the U.S., and they may experience more conflict when compromising their traditional roles vs. a new cultural norm (Sam & Eide, 1991). When an individual's environment is not matched with their personality, there is cultural distance. Ward and Chang (1997) proposed the cultural fit hypothesis of the acculturation process, which emphasizes the fit between the host culture's norm and the person who is acculturating such as the person's values, personality traits, and behavior. Empirical study supports the theory by showing that fit between the individual and the cultural context in terms of values, beliefs, and personality characteristics is associated with individuals' well-being (Juang, Nguyen, & Lin, 2006).

Multicultural personality is defined as traits that "effectively negotiates and copes within multiple roles and cultural contexts (Leone, Van der Zee, Oudenhoven, Perugini, & Ercolani, 2005, p. 717)." Individual characteristics such as multicultural personality and assertiveness could help ISs make up the cultural distance between their home country and the host culture

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by helping them acquire needed social support and confidence in their academic skills in the U.S. without losing their own cultural identity. In this study, based on the literature, we used multicultural personality and multicultural effectiveness interchangeably.

1.1. Multicultural personality

The multicultural personality can be described as one having multicultural effectiveness that helps individuals to perform work and adjust to the new cultural environment, and personality characteristics that would enhance multicultural effectiveness include cultural empathy, open-mindedness, emotional stability, social initiative, and flexibility (Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2002). Van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee (2002) reported that the multicultural personality could predict an IS's adjustment to new intercultural situations. Ponterotto (2010) stated that individuals having a multicultural personality consisting of characteristics like racial/ethnic security, emotional stability, active learning of other cultures, and social activism along with personal qualities such as a desire to interact with people are better able to adapt to different world-views. As the acculturation process involves changes in social economic status, education, friendship patterns, and language use, multicultural effectiveness in dealing with these changes would affect ISS' socio-cultural adjustment.

1.2. Assertiveness

One cultural distance Asian ISSs may experience is the conflict between individualistic values vs. collectivistic values. In a collectivistic society, people determine what constitutes appropriate behavior by examining what other people consider to be normative in the situation (Cialdini, Wosinska, Barrett, Butner, & Gornik-Durose, 1999). Because of the importance of conformity, obedience, and reliability (Ho, Si-qing, Alice Cheng, & Chan, 2001), being assertive is less appreciated than in individualistic societies. Personality can be considered a culturally acquired way of behaving and thinking (Triandis, 2001) and what behavior considers as assertive also can be different depending on cultural context because being assertive requires another person in a response. Therefore, assertiveness can be thought of as an important variable affecting the unique adjustment of an individual who relocates to a new country on a time-limited basis (Berry, 2006), and ISSs' ability to express their own opinion would be helpful in their academic adjustment in U.S.

1.3. Academic self-efficacy

ISSs are actually more "student" than "foreigner," and academic problems are one of the biggest concerns for ISSs (Furnham & Bochner, 1982; Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Academic self-efficacy refers to a student's beliefs about his or her ability to successfully complete academic tasks (Zimmerman, 1995); self-efficacy helps individuals deal with challenges in reaching their goals (Bandura, 1986). Empirical research supports the theory by showing that both domestic (Lent, Brown, & Larkin, 1984) and international students (Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson, & Pisecco, 2002) with higher levels of academic self-efficacy achieved higher grades and persisted in their academic major longer than those with lower perceived academic self-efficacy.

In the U.S. classroom setting, assertiveness may be more valued than in the Asian ISSs' home country. Parr, Bradley, and Bingi (1992) reported that one of the cultural differences that affect many ISSs is assertiveness. The U.S. education system places greater emphasis on discussion than do Asian systems, and often students are asked to express their own opinions, rather than sitting quietly. Usually, Asian ISSs are considered to be less engaged in active and collaborative learning (Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005) which may impede their academic adjustment to the U.S.

In order to bridge the cultural distance between their home country's education system and the host country's educational setting, both assertiveness and multicultural effectiveness would be needed. Because cultural context shapes optimal functioning, assertiveness, which is considered positive functioning in U.S., might not be valued to the same degree in other cultures (Constantine & Sue, 2006; Maddi, 2006). Multicultural personality characteristics such as open-mindedness, emotional stability, social initiative, and flexibility would help ISSs to explore different strategies that work in the U.S. classroom. Also, ISSs are more likely to be in a position where they need to seek help or consultation as a way of learning new cultural academic norms, a position which requires both assertiveness and multicultural effectiveness such as social initiative. Therefore, ISSs who have more assertiveness and more multicultural effectiveness would have higher academic self-efficacy. Considering the importance of academic performance to ISSs, Asian ISSs' academic self-efficacy would lead to better adaptation to the U.S.

1.4. Social support

Social support is a critical factor in the adjustment of ISSs in the U.S. (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002; Yeh & Inose, 2003; Ying & Liese, 1991), and relationships with both co-national and American students might be important. The acquisition of culturally appropriate skills and behaviors happens through contact with host students. Host friends can assist in social skills learning and encourage increased participation within the host culture. ISSs tend to gain social support from their ethnic community (Yang & Clum, 1995), and these social networks are beneficial to ISSs' adjustment because they provide a sense of security and facilitate the transition to the new environment (Kang, 1972; Ying & Liese, 1991). Social support is also thought

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