Acculturation and Psychological Adjustment of Foreign Students (the experience of Elabuga Institute of Kazan Federal University)

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Abstract

The whole world is experiencing the process of globalization which major tendency is intercultural mixing and student exchange. A great number of students from Central Asia come to attend Russian universities. They subsequently face the problem of cultural shock in their new environments. The current study presents a research on acculturation experiences of foreign students in Elabuga Institute of Kazan Federal University. The study aims at defining the environmental stressors in their first year of study and elaboration of effective techniques of managing acculturative stress. The results of the paper show that the majority of students have to cope with cultural shock to this or that extent during their first year of study. It is concluded that University on the whole and teachers in particular come first among the factors soothing acculturative stress in foreign students, by providing constant significant support and guidance over their culturally different students. Properly organized learning and teaching and as well inclusion of foreign students into social activities of the Institute enhance their psychological adjustment. The research contributes to theoretical understanding of acculturative stress and practical implications for teachers who work with foreign students.

1. Introduction

Recently the number of international students coming to Russia in their pursuit to get higher education, more skills, and experience has considerably grown. As a result, admittance of students with a different cultural background

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Peer-review under responsibility of the organizing committee of EDUHEM 2016.
(citizenship, social class, religion, and ethnicity) made Russian universities diverse and multicultural. Such diversity demands that foreign students should adapt to a new cultural environment and new lifestyle of the host country. Such adaptation which is known as acculturation has social (Berry, 1997; Mui and Kang, 2006; Reynolds and Constantine, 2007) and academic outcomes, as international students encounter distinctive challenges in adjusting to a new cross-cultural environment that might influence their academic achievements and psychological well-being (Andrea, 2014). Research shows that in the conditions of a new cultural environment that presupposes having its own social norms, customs, and traditions, the majority of international students have to face such a problem as cultural shock (Nilsson, Buttler, Shouse and Joshi, 2008; Desa, Yusoff, Kadir, 2012), psychological difficulties, barriers and conflicts (Lin and Yi, 1997) derived from cross-cultural adjustment. Accordingly, the abovementioned phenomena provoke acculturative stress. Acculturative stress is defined by Berry as the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members and as emotional and physiological reaction to a new environment that has unfamiliar cultural values, customs, and expectations (Berry, 2005). According to Mui and Kang, acculturative stress is a multidimensional phenomenon – encompassing physical, psychological, financial, spiritual, social, and language dimensions (Mui and Kang, 2006). According to scientist, such factors as a language barrier, academic difficulties, financial problems, psychological and cultural diversity, poor social support and integration, racial discrimination, and problems in daily life tasks (Mori 2000, Sandhu 1995) have a great impact on acculturation process (Pan, Wong, Chan and Joubert, 2008).

International students often have to struggle with a plenty of challenging stressors, namely language barriers, difficulties in adjustment (Poyrazli and Grahame 2007), homesickness (Poyrazli and Lopez 2007), loneliness (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert Nyland and Ramia, 2008), difficulties adjusting due to cultural differences (Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, and Utsey, 2005; Reynolds and Constantine, 2007), financial problems (Poyrazli et al., 2001, Yang and Clun, 1995), perceived prejudice and discrimination (Beoku-Betts, 2004); Karuppan and Barari, 2011;Lee and Rice, 2007), loss of social support (Pedersen, 1991) and feelings of hatred, guilt and fear (Sandhu and Asrabadi, 1994).

Many researchers underline a close connection of acculturative stress with mental health of a person. Individuals with a high level of acculturative stress are in the risk group in experiencing not only depression (Mui and Kang, 20064 Rahman and Rollrock, 2004), but also suicidal ideation (Hovey and King, 1996). Further research has shown that acculturative stress correlates with a high degree of anxiety and symptoms of depression in international students (Crockett et. al. 2007).

In accordance with the increase in the number of studies devoted to investigation of the nature of acculturation stress there appeared scientific works aiming at elaboration of individual means and strategies of coping with acculturative stress, especially in young migrants (Pheko et. al. 2014).

As today’s society is getting immensely multicultural and multilingual and the number of international students enrolled in higher education in Russia is increasing every year the body of research on the process of acculturation done by Russian researchers is constantly growing. Researches on acculturation experiences of foreign students are being intensively studied in Russia. Researchers consider the social and cultural aspects of acculturation, ways of soothing acculturative stress in foreign students, methods of successful psychological support over them, etc. The research that has been done by Russian researchers (Tatarko, Maslova, Stefanenko, A.A. Nalchadjan, E.Y. Chebotareva, B. Mikhailova) has resulted in identification of various individual and group characteristics of adaptedness of an individual (Stefanenko, 2008; Tatarko, Lebedeva, 2011; Nalchajyan, 2009). The main directions of analysis of foreign students’ adaptation are the study of the formation of their individual adaptation strategies in overcoming stress (Melnikova, 2008; Chebotareva, 2012); social interactions of migrants with their host society (Mikhailova, 2010); correlation of value orientations and successful adaptation (Chkhikvadze 2010), etc.

The study by E.U. Chebotareva, for instance, discusses the strategies of struggling acculturative stress in students from different regions and the connection of using certain strategies with successful cross-cultural adaptation. According to the author, constructive coping strategies contribute to successful adaptation; help to overcome adaptation problems and negative emotional states (Chebotareva, 2012). We absolutely agree with the author and developing her idea that individuals facing acculturative stress have to cope with it to different extents. Thus, its degree may vary from the lowest to the highest one. Some students perceive acculturative experience as something negative, namely as a source of stress and depression whereas others take it as something positive, a challenge and new opportunities for self-development and self-perfection. That is why it becomes important to work out individual strategies in addition to general ones.
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