

International Students' Adjustment Problems and Behaviors

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Abstract

This article focuses on the kinds of adjustment problems that international students had while they studied at a university in the United States, as well as the adjustment behaviors they used when faced with these problems. Qualitative data was collected and analyzed for over a decade through on-going interviews with 85 international students, as well as through observation field notes and student-written narratives about their adaptation experiences. Findings show that students were challenged by academics, social interaction, and emotional reactions to their new life. To manage their problems, students made use of behaviors that can facilitate adapting to the new culture, as well as behaviors that can obstruct them from adapting. Facilitative behaviors include coping strategies, use of supportive people, observation and imitation, and reflection. Behaviors interpreted as impeding adaptation include expecting others to adapt, complaining, and withdrawing.

Key Words: International Students, Adjustment Issues, Adaptation Experiences, Qualitative Research

International students face a variety of adaptation challenges while studying in the United States, and one of the goals of this qualitative study was to identify the kinds of problems that students at a mid-sized university faced. A second goal was to discover the kinds of behaviors they used when faced with these problems.

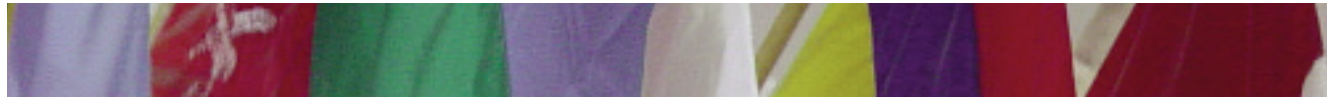
Researchers have provided an understanding of the kinds of problems international students have while adapting to university life, and one of the most discussed is problems with academic language. They have reported that students often have trouble understanding professors' expectations and grading style (Zhou, Freg & Bang, 2006), taking lecture notes (Huang, 2006), articulating their knowledge on essay exams and reading textbooks in a timely fashion (Lin & Yi, 1997), comprehending professors (Kuo, 2011), and giving oral presentations, asking the professor questions and interacting in seminar discussions (Coward, 2003; Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Gebhard, 2010; Han, 2007; Kao & Gansneder, 1995; Liu, 2001).

Han (2007), for example, discovered that international students across an American university's graduate programs had trouble participating in whole class seminar discussions because of anxiety and insufficient content knowledge. Similarly, Coward (2003) studied interaction between Americans and students from China, Korea, and Taiwan during graduate seminar discussions and concludes that these

students were continuously trying to understand what was going on in class, when they could talk, and what role they should employ. In another kind of study, Lee & Carrasquillo (2006) analyzed the perceptions of professors on the linguistic/cultural characteristics that contribute to academic difficulties of Korean college students in the United States. These include: Being uncomfortable with speaking in class; viewing professors as having absolute authority, having trouble expressing critical thoughts; having difficulty answering negative questions.

Another challenge for many students is a lack of familiarity with American intricate social rules for interacting (Barratt & Huba, 1994; Ingman, 2003; Lee, Kang, & Yum, 2005; Rose-Redwood, 2010; Swagler & Ellis, 2003; Zhou, Frey & Bang, 2011). For example, many Americans tend to use direct communication to turn down invitations, complain, or ask for clarification. However, some Asians, depending on the cultural context, will use more indirect ways to do these things (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2004), such as some Chinese students turning down an invitation to a party by accepting the invitation with hesitancy, indicating that they likely won't be able to attend (Gebhard, 2010; Wang, Brislin, Wang, Williams & Chao, 2000; Yum, 2000).

Much of the research on international student university adjustment focuses on students' psychological stress and challenges, including dealing



with high levels of anxiety, depression, and other emotional problems (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006; Chen, 1999; Constantine, Kindaichi, Okazaki, Gainor & Baden, 2005; Dao, Lee & Chang, 2007; Heggins & Jackson, 2003; Lin & Yi, 1997; Nilsson, Butler, Shouse & Joshi, 2008). For example, Zhou, Frey & Bang (2011) point out that students from individualistic cultural backgrounds, such as students from many European countries, felt serious adjustment stress and mental problems due to being treated as a foreigner, while students from both individualistic and collectivist cultures (many countries throughout Asia and Latin America) felt stress and mental difficulty due to gender discrimination, racial stereotyping, and language discrimination.

However, the mental anguish that people, including students, feel when they live in a new culture often comes from a barrage of small cultural differences that can have a powerful emotional impact on students. As Adler (1975) and Storti (2001) discuss, doing everyday things that were easy for students to do in their home countries are no longer easy, and due to academic, social, and sometimes financial problems, students can start feeling a variety of emotions, including loneliness, confusion, frustration, anger, and depression. When this happens, students sometimes view the host culture with suspicion and reject cultural differences. However, most students gradually adapt, and as they do, they gain confidence and become more emotionally stable. Of course, not all students move through the process in the same way. Some may adapt quickly while others never fully adapt at all. Others feel well adapted, and then regress back to feeling culture shock after having had a series of new problems (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2004; Gebhard, 2010; Purnell, 2000).

During this process of cultural adjustment, international students are faced with managing these academic, social, and emotional problems, and researchers have ascertained that international students establish a support network of friends, usually consisting of co-nationals or friends from similar cultural backgrounds (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006; Choe, 1996; Furnham & Alibhai, 1985; Hayes & Lin, 1994). Studies also show that students reach out to the university and larger community to help them solve problems. For example, students use the international office, trusted academic advisors, international student clubs, and academic services, such as the writing center, computer labs, and tutoring services (Al-Mubarak, 2000; Zhou, Frey & Bang, 2011). Choe (1996) points out that some Korean students use the

Korean church as a way to cope with adaptation problems, while Alazzi & Chiodo (2006) reveal that many Middle Eastern students get involved in religious activities to help counter stress.

When international students have limited English proficiency and lack experience and familiarity with American interactive behaviors, some students find it difficult to make friends and establish a social network with Americans (Constantine, et al, 2005). Often these students withdraw into the expatriate community, and this action appears to hinder adaptation when the purpose is to avoid interaction (Storti, 2001). Such withdrawal, as well as the benefits of international student interaction with Americans, has been discussed by a variety of researchers (Gebhard, 2010; Surdam & Collins, 1984; Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002; Yang, Teraoka, Eichenfield, & Audas, 1994; Rose-Redwood, 2010). For example, Toyokawa & Toyokawa (2002) researched the association between Japanese students' engagement in extracurricular activities and their adaptation. They discovered that when students engage in activities with Americans, they have more satisfaction with life and are more involved with academics. Japanese students who did not engage in such activities were less satisfied with their lives and academics.

Research Design & Methodology: Qualitative Inquiry

This study was guided by principles found in qualitative inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2005; Lincoln, 1995; Richards, 2003, and Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). Verbal descriptions were collected through ongoing interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2004; Spradely, 1979) many which were audio taped and transcribed. Observation field notes (Emmerson, Fritz & Shaw, 1995) were also collected and used to generate descriptions of the students' lives relative to problems and behaviors they used to address these problems, and written narratives were collected from some students. Further, all data were collected within the participants' natural settings. Interviews and observations were done in places students went inside and outside the university, such as classrooms, dormitories, cafeterias, supermarkets, and parks.

The goal of collecting and analyzing data was to gain an emic understanding – in other words, understanding meaning from the participants' perspective (Agar, 1996; Spradely, 1979; Watson-Gegeo, 1988), and relative to this study, the goal was to understand what it means to be an international student

at an American university from the international students' perspective. To reach this goal, international student research assistants worked on this project (from China, Ghana, Grenada, Kenya, Korea, Nigeria, Poland, Senegal, Taiwan, Thailand), and some of these assistants worked on the project for years and were invaluable. They were able to elicit deeply moving narratives from classmates, friends, and themselves about their cultural adjustment experiences. Although I also developed close trusting relationships with some of the students and gained privileged access to stories about their lives, as insiders, some of the international student researchers were able to gain deeper access to their lives.

The research assistants and I tried to give students chances to express themselves as wholly and truthfully as possible. We attempted to approach on-going interviews by taking on what Agar (1996) calls a one-down position, in which we accepted each student we interviewed as having unique knowledge and experience. We also approached each interview by first asking grand-tour questions (Spradely, 1979), such as "What kinds academic problems have you had?" or "Tell me a story about experiences in the United States". We then listened to the recorded interviews and jotted down follow up mini-tour questions (Spradely, 1979), such as "What is it like to have an American roommate?" or descriptive questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2004), such as "What do you do when you participate in in-class discussions with Americans?" and clarification questions such as, "You told me you had trouble talking to your American roommate. I'm not sure I fully understand. Would you mind telling me again?"

We also discussed issues about interview data collection. One issue was the reliability of what a student-interviewee said in response to a question. When unsure, we designed follow-up questions to check reliability by asking the participant to answer the same question but worded in a different way, such as, "What kinds of problems do you have with listening in the classroom?" after the interviewee had previously expressed problems understanding a professor. Another issue that consistently came up was the inability of some student-participants to express themselves clearly in English, especially for students who only recently had arrived at the university. As the student-participant and interviewer often spoke different native languages, we talked about the need for interviewers to paraphrase what student-interviewees said to check understanding, as well as the need to create follow-up questions to ask the student during another interview. Also, when the

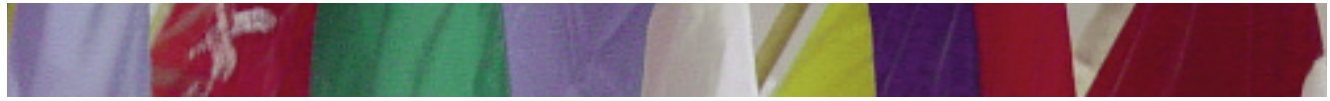
interviewer spoke the same native language, the interviews sometimes were done in that language and then translated into English. A third issue was about bias (Agar, 1980) since the international students who were interviewing other international students might unconsciously infer their own personal adjustment problems onto the questions they ask or their interpretation of what an answer to a question means. In addition to on-going verbal interviews, I also requested some students to write narratives about their experiences. I emphasized that I was only interested in factual accounts of their lives related to adjustment to the US and their university lives. I also told them they could write about any aspect of cultural adjustment, such as problems, successes, interesting or awful experiences, and accomplishments, as well as tell their true story in their own way. After reading the narratives, I often talked with the students individually about what they wrote, not only to check my understanding but also to check the reliability of the story.

I carried on-going analysis of the descriptive data (spoken & written narratives, observations, field notes) and let findings emerge from this analysis, and interpretations were made about what these findings mean. To facilitate this process, I listened to the recorded interviews many times, as well as studied transcripts. I placed written narratives in sight so I could easily read and reread them, and wrote notes on them as I read. As more and more interviews were conducted and narratives written, I gradually was able to categorize the kinds of challenges students had and strategies that both created and impeded opportunities for students to prevail over these challenges.

Findings

Kinds of Adaptation Challenges

Much like other researchers have discovered, as discussed in the review of literature, there were three overlapping kinds of problems that the international students in this study faced, including difficulties with academics, social interaction, and handling emotions. Not surprisingly, many students emphasized challenges with academics, but a language problem that surprised some students was academic reading. As a graduate student expressed, "In Korea in a course the professor only uses one book. Here I have to read many books, and content is difficult. I can't finish all my homework reading. It is a big problem" (Interview #28). In addition, some students found professors' lectures and



seminars challenging. Students reported that some professors were organized and easy to follow, but others talked impulsively and digressively which was problematic for some of them. A student from Taiwan expressed such a problem during her first few General Psychology lectures: "I tried to take notes in English and Chinese, but I couldn't follow the professor's ideas. Later a classmate told me (that) this professor -- He likes to tell stories about his family and life in the middle of a lecture" (Interview #19).

Seminars, where students were expected to ask questions, answer the professor's questions and discuss topics, challenged many of the students in this study. For example, an enthusiastic British student reported that he was frustrated to find himself with his hand "permanently up" during professor led discussions and being "ignored even when it is my turn to speak". His problem was, as he later realized, cultural. In Britain "teachers are obligated to remember who is next so that everyone has a chance to contribute to the discussion. But, here, the teacher seems to randomly acknowledge a student to answer or ask a question" (Interview #21). However, students from Asian countries, especially students from Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand, had the most difficulty. For example, a student from Taiwan pointed out, "There was one class which made me extremely nervous. I guess that is because it only had 15 students, we were expected to talk, and all my classmates were native speakers." She goes on to say that she prepared for each class, and she wanted to answer the teacher's questions, but she never got a chance. As she put this, "Every time I got some ideas, I tended to rehearse my lines in my mind first to make sure I used the correct words and sentence structures. Whenever I was ready and brave enough to raise my hand, I found the cruel fact that the subject of discussion had moved to the next one" (Written narrative #21).

In addition to academic language problems, some Asian students were disappointed and anxious about their inability to socially interact with Americans when they first arrived. For example, a student from China articulated, "My new American roommate started talking really fast. I couldn't understand anything she said after, 'Hi. I'm Nancy.' It was like I have never heard English before!" (Interview #26). Another example shows the social realities of sharing a room with a young American. A Thai student's roommate and her friends came into the room to play music, talk, and eat, and she was surprised by their behavior: "One girl sits on my bed with her shoes on. In Thailand, you know, we take shoes off in our room. I know that in

America this is not the custom. But, it makes me feel uncomfortable. My bed feels dirty." She added: "I also get so embarrassed! My roommate, she takes off all her clothes in front of me. Thai people, we don't do like that. We are shy" (Interview #8).

In addition to academic and social adjustment challenges, students expressed how emotionally challenging adapting to another culture can be. They said that everyday things, such as registering for classes, paying bills, using the telephone, installing cable television, finding a cell phone plan, and even crossing the street were no longer easy. This was partly due to using English, rather than their native language, but it was also because the rules about how to do such things were no longer the same. As Storti (2001) puts this, "You expect to have to learn how to do new things overseas and even new ways of doing familiar things, but you may be surprised to discover that you have to learn to do things you normally do without thinking" (pp. 12-13).

Constant effort to do everyday things became emotionally exhausting for some students. This often resulted in feelings of depression and homesickness. Thinking about her initial university experiences, a student from Taiwan expressed her emotional turmoil in this way: "I don't know how I can deal with my problems. I feel angry one minute, sad few minutes later, and sleepy few minutes later! I can't sleep at night, and I now criticize everything and everyone, especially professors" (Written narrative #32). A student from Kenya showed her personal emotional turmoil with outbursts of complaining about Americans: "To me, being 'Americanized' is being rude. It's being arrogant. It's being self-centered. It's being selfish. It's being overbearing, controlling, ignorant. To be honest, it's being ignorant" (Interview #61).

It is important to point out that not all students had severe emotional reactions to the cultural differences and new challenges, and most students who become emotionally overwhelmed were able to adjust. However, how successful students were at getting beyond emotional problems and overcoming challenging adaptation problems depended on how they approached their problems, as I discuss in the next section.

Students Facing Challenges: Behaviors That Seem to Work

The students in this study used a variety of coping strategies. All coped by using reminders of their

home culture. They put photos of family and friends on their wall or computer screen saver, listened to their favorite CDs in their native language, or used Facebook, Skype, email, and other technology to connect to family and friends. Some students coped by praying at a mosque, synagogue or church, and some students met with other students with similar cultural backgrounds to have meals, celebrate holidays, and take short trips. Such familiarity provided a temporary solitude from the ambiguity and disorientation they felt when faced with the complexity of American culture. In addition, some students used humor to help them cope by laughing at their own cultural blunders. For example, after miscommunication with an American, a Japanese student whispered in an amusing voice to her friend in Japanese, "Toki doki watashi wa baka desu ne! (Sometimes I'm an idiot!) (Field Note 15). Her friend laughed in agreement. As Kohls (1996, p. 107) explains, they had "the ability to laugh things off (as) the ultimate weapon against despair."

Humor was also used in some contexts as an adaptation behavior that goes beyond coping. A student from Syria showed such humor while waiting in line at Walmart. A young boy had wandered away from his parents and approached him and his wife and asked the Islamic woman, "Why is your face covered?" He then looked at her husband and asked, "Is she ugly?" The husband chuckled and replied, "No. She is my beautiful wife." The boy looked at the wife intently and asked, "Is she hiding?" The husband replied, "No, she's not hiding, although it would be a great way to hide!" The boy giggled and asked, "Is she in a Halloween costume?" Having captured the little boy's attention and curiosity, the husband then went on to explain that her dress was called a hijab and that they were from Syria where many women dress this way (Field Note 18).

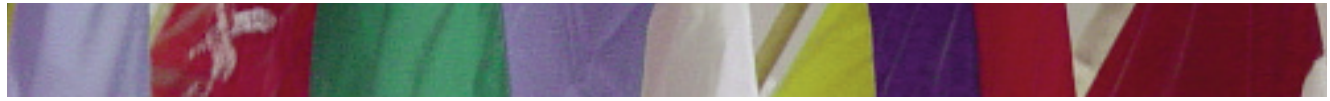
Another type of behavior that seemed to have positive consequences was the use of supportive people. Students found support through international student organizations, at writing and learning centers, and with professors, foreign student advisors, classmates in study groups, home stay families, and other international students. For example, a student from Taiwan explains the unexpected support she got from her home stay mother: "The mother who 'adopted' me is very thoughtful and supportive. I feel free to tell her about my feelings, and I think she understands me from both what I say and what I don't say, which is really beyond my expectations. We watch movies, cook, do gardening, go shopping, and

celebrate holidays together. Because of time, experience, and support from my host family, I have become very happy" (Written narrative #53).

Another student from Taiwan shows how she worked through her academic problems with the help of a study group. There were a mixture of American and international students in her MBA program and classes were small. During the first few weeks she could hardly speak at all. She highlighted, "Most students spoke a lot. But, I just sat looking down at my notebook... I felt so upset." She also explained her problems with reading: "Each professor assigned several chapters from several different books for us to read before each class. I struggled to complete all reading before each class." Likewise, she struggled with writing assignments: "We had to write bi-weekly papers in my basic introduction to business course. I spent many hours writing the first paper. But, I got my paper back from the professor with (a) low grade...It made me very upset. I even cried on my way to my apartment." But, she didn't give up. Instead she asked an empathetic American student in the MBA program to help her. The American told her that she had a study group with two other American students, and she invited the student from Taiwan and another international student to join them.

They met three times a week, read in silence, and talked about what they read. The student from Taiwan discovered much through this experience: "I realized that American students don't always understand the reading, and I was partly shocked and partly happy when I could explain meaning of complex reading to (the) American students." She also learned that she needed to read differently: "I stopped trying to understand every word. Instead, I paid attention to main idea(s) and how the author support(ed) or defend(ed) these ideas. I soon discovered I can read faster and understand more this way." In addition she got help with her writing: "I gave my (writing) assignments to two members of the study group. The American helped a lot to fix my poor grammar, but, I got some very useful suggestions from the international student, and I learned I can give thoughtful suggestions, too." At the end of the semester, she concluded: "I discovered when I need to be strong, I can be strong. I also learned that (a) study group can be valuable, especially when members are cooperative and understanding" (Written narrative #33).

A further example is about a Kenyan student who found support from his professor. This student was having problems with his College Writing class. He



was asked to analyze a movie about a guy pursuing a girl, and there were some provocative passionate scenes with partial nudity. He received a poor grade on the paper and was upset because he had spent a lot of time writing it. So, he went to the professor's office to talk about it. The professor explained that she had expected students to write about the theme of romance, but the Kenyan student never addressed this theme in the paper. The student explained, "But, I didn't see a romantic movie. I only saw a lot of public display of sex and it offended me." After explaining why he had trouble completing the assignment, the professor gave him a chance to rewrite the paper: "We talked about the paper and how I can explain my point of view more clearly by adding more about my Kenyan background. I really like that teacher. I respect her because she cares about students and who we are" (Interview #39).

Another behavioral strategy some students used to help them to adjust is observation and imitation. Students reported using this strategy to understand how Americans greet each other, enter a classroom late, sit in class, take a turn in a group discussion, give a classroom presentation, walk in a crowd, cross the street, eat, and open a conversation with a total stranger. Some students took their observations further by imitating the behaviors they observed. For example, a student from Argentina became aware of her nonverbal behavior, especially the interpersonal distance and touch behaviors she used when interacting with North Americans. She reported that the first time she met a group of Americans she kissed everyone in the group. She said, "They were surprised, and I was so embarrassed because I knew I was doing something wrong." She added that she also experienced strange reactions from American classmates when she talked to them. "I am a friendly person and like to laugh, smile, and touch. When I talk to (North American) guys, they start to, what's the expression, come on to me. I can feel a kind of sexual tension." Realizing her problem had to do with her cultural background, she decided to observe North Americans interacting "to stay out of trouble," as she put it. She sat in coffee shops, on benches in parks, in the university cafeteria, and other places. She then changed her behavior by imitating how people around her behaved. For instance, she said, "When I said hello to a friend, not a close friend, I usually touched their arm and stood close. I decided to stop doing that, except with close friends" (Interview #16).

In addition to using coping strategies, finding supportive people, and observing and imitating, many students in this study used reflection as a way to help

them adapt. After experiencing interaction with Americans, such as with classmates during a group discussion, a meeting with a professor, an encounter with a stranger in the street, or an awkward conversation with a roommate, they would take the time to reflect on what happened, how they felt about the interactive experience, and what they might do differently next time. This is what an overwhelmed Japanese student did when she was "amazed that students asked the professor questions and gave their own opinions so freely." She was overwhelmed, nervous, and all she could do was "sit in silence, listening and watching". But, she decided to reflect on her fears and the kinds of classroom interaction that was expected. Then, she designed a plan:

I thought about my problem. I recalled my experience in class in Japan. I could not remember ever asking a question to the teacher in class. But, this place is not the same. So, I decided to solve my problem... I pushed myself to raise my hand. This was very very hard for me to do. When I did raise my hand the first time, I was so nervous that I don't even know what I said! The professor pointed at me, and I started to talk. After I finished, I was extremely tired even though it took less than 10 seconds. My feelings were mixed. I felt nervous, shy, embarrassed, and anxious. Then, after class I thought about what I did, and I felt happy. After talking in class several times, I realized that the more I spoke, the more confidence I would gain (Written narrative #12).

Students Facing Challenges: Behaviors That Don't Seem to Work

Although many students in this study used facilitating behaviors, others used behaviors that did not seem to help them to adjust. Three of these behaviors were expecting others to adapt, excessive complaining, and withdrawing. Some students used ethnocentric impulses (Storti, 2001) during interactions, expecting Americans to be like them and to behave as they do. Such an attitude was evident in the behavior of a Nigerian student who expected a dining hall supervisor to change her behavior toward him based on the rules within his culture. He was working in a student cafeteria to earn extra money, and he had a conflict with his supervisor who told him to clean the tables without giving clear instructions. The student used the wrong detergent, and as a result, the supervisor shouted, "Never use this liquid again!" The student-worker asked her, "What am I supposed to use?" But, according to the student, instead of answering his

question, she raised her voice: “Don’t be smart with me!” The student reacted with, “Hey lady. Stop yelling at me. In my culture, we don’t do that. I’m older than you – So stop yelling at me.” He later explained: “Even if you tell them about your culture, they do not take it seriously. They do not understand that you are from a different culture. They will never try to understand you. If they don’t want to learn about my culture and me, that is their problem.” (Interview #68).

Another behavior that does not seem to help students adjust is complaining. Some complaining is expected, as it is a way to cope with ambiguity, uncertainty, and confusion of living in a new culture (Storti, 2001). But, long term excessive complaining is not a productive way to adapt. The next narrative shows how a student from Germany complained excessively. He had been in the US for almost a year, and he said, “I am ready to go back to Germany, mostly because I think American students are boring.” He pointed out that he has interesting seminars in Sociology with stimulating discussions. But, when he tried to talk to Americans outside class, the conversations were boring. As he explained: “I like to debate – world affairs, war, or other politics. But, when I start to discuss such topics with an American, the conversation always ends quickly or the American changes the topic – Look at that hot chick over there. Did you see the (Pittsburgh) Steelers game? Boring, you know.” (Field notes 23 & 33).

Another behavior that doesn’t seem to contribute to successful adjustment is withdrawal, and quite a number of international students withdraw, possibly to avoid interaction with Americans. A Thai student who was having a bad experience living in a dorm, for example, made her purposeful withdrawal clear with these words: “Next semester I will live with my Thai friends off campus. We will speak Thai, I know, and (my conversational) English will not get very good. I had a dream to have American friends. But, I don’t want to have American friend now. I just want to study hard, get my degree, and go back to Thailand” (Interview #8).

The next illustration is based on observations and conversations with a lonely student from Benin. He was happy to be in the United States when he first arrived, but gradually he became more and more withdrawn and avoided interaction with Americans and other international students. As his professor, I became more and more aware of this student’s isolation. He had noticeably lost weight, and he no longer grinned when he talked. When asked how he was doing, he would always say, “Fine!” However, something in his eyes

told me that behind the façade he was having a difficult time.

Worried, I decided to visit him, and he was quite surprised to see me at his apartment door. We went to a coffee shop to talk, and this student opened up. He talked for two hours about his “miserable life”, to use his words. He told me about his high levels of anxiety and inhibitions about talking to Americans. So, he kept to himself, studied alone and stayed in his small apartment most of the time. He either slept a lot or didn’t sleep at all depending on his mood and classroom assignments. I could easily see that he felt disheartened, and as he talked and tears came to his eyes, he told me that his mother had died two weeks earlier and that he could not attend her funeral. His scholarship only gave him enough money to pay his rent and meet his personal needs. I asked him why he didn’t reach out to the International Affairs office for support, and he replied that he didn’t feel comfortable doing that. We said goodbye, and he smiled. I sensed he felt less alone in this foreign land (Field note 22).

Conclusion and Implications

This study shows that international students who move to the United States to study are faced with a number of challenges related to academics, social interaction, and emotions. It also shows that these students use behaviors that seem to help them meet their challenges, including coping behaviors, such as using reminders of home culture, talking with friends, and using humor, as well as observing and imitating behavior, such as observing and emulating the way Americans eat, greet, walk, and take turns in a discussion, and reflecting, for example, thinking about American classroom behavior, then trying to do something new, such as asking the professor a question during class. However, some students use behaviors that seem to deter or even obstruct adjustment to the new culture, including expecting others to adapt, constant complaining, and withdrawing from the American community.

Although certainly international student needs to make efforts to adjust, I do not want to place all the responsibility for cultural adjustment on the international student. The university community needs to sincerely welcome all international students, as well as help build a positive helpful community. Many universities and colleges build such a community through the international affairs office orientation and on-going support programs, foreign student advisors, international student associations, intramural sports programs, language institute programs, culturally



sensitive professors, and college and department clubs and activities that involve international students. However, some students do not understand the value of engaging themselves in the larger university community, nor reaching out for the support they need, and some do not necessarily recognize that they need help. As such, I highly recommend that scholars take the initiative to do, as I have done, an on-going research project that focuses on the lives of international students. Although most international student affairs offices do pay much attention to international students' problems and needs, such additional research efforts could help them and others to gain a deeper emic understanding of the international students. If such research is shared with the international affairs office, university administrators, professors, and university students, it could have a positive contribution toward a more internationally sensitive and aware university.

This study also has implications for researchers who are interested in providing opportunities for international graduate students to gain hands-on experience with doing research. Although this graduate assistant teaching-research aspect of the this study took much time and effort, as well as certain risks (bias, inexperience) related to the collection of reliable data, the experience of doing this study together was mutually rewarding. Graduate assistants gained constructive experience that they could apply to their own future research, not to mention the benefits of self-reflection on their own cultural adjustment. The researcher can also gain something. For example, I gained a deeper appreciation for qualitative inquiry, especially with concerns about the reliability of data and the complexity of data collection and analysis, and for the language and communication talents of some of the international research assistants. In short, I highly recommend that professors/teachers/administrators in EFL research degree programs design their own unique on-going research projects that include their students.

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Author's Note:

I tried to use the students' exact wording and sentence structure in the example transcripts. However, I corrected the English if the meaning was not clear. I added parenthesis around words as needed.

About the Author:

Jerry Gebhard earned an MA in ESL at the University of Hawaii and an EdD in TESOL at Teachers College, Columbia University. He taught as an EFL teacher & teacher educator in Thailand, Japan, China, and Korea. He also taught in and directed the Graduate Program in Composition & TESOL at Indiana University of Pennsylvania and has published extensively in the areas of Second Language Teacher Education, Cross-Cultural Communication, and EFL/ESL Teaching.

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