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Asian International college students' cultural fit and well-being

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**Abstract**

The study investigated how both personal (i.e., gender, class standing, and mentor status) and contextual (i.e., awareness of race, perception of mentorship, cultural fit, and different aspects of academic nonpersistence decisions) factors influence educational experiences of Asian International college students and their psychological well-being. Examining 135 Asian International students from a Midwestern Research I university, both personal and contextual factors predicted a substantial amount of variance (36%) in psychological well-being for Asian International students. In particular, mentor status as a personal factor shapes and impacts contextual factors. That is, Asian International students with mentors had a significantly stronger relationship of perception of the university environment and well-being than students without mentors. Asian International students with mentors also demonstrated higher level of cultural congruity than those without. Implications, limitations, and directions for further research are discussed.

**International Students**

- Part of U.S. educational system for last 5 decades (American Immigration Law Foundation, 2003)
- Come from cultural, racial, and ethnic contexts different than university
- Challenged to navigate environments that are culturally incongruent with their values (Gloria & Kurpius-Robinson, 1996) and behaviors (Pedersen, 1991; Spradley & Phillips, 1972)
  - Incongruity is the mismatch of personal and environmental values within the academic environment
- Environmental factors are salient issues for International students (Yoon & Portman, 2004)
  - Most research focuses on personal factors (e.g., age, acculturative stress, social skills)
  - Contexts that Asian International students traverse are salient to their well-being
- Gender differences equivocal for International students
  - Male International students more satisfied and confident in their new setting, having fewer adjustment difficulties than their female counterparts (Senyshyn, Warford, & Zhan, 2000)
  - No significant differences in adjustment to American life and culture by gender and class standing (i.e., undergraduates and graduates) (Zimmerman, 1995)
- Establishment of meaningful relationships contributes to adjustment and well-being

- Primary relationships for International students occur in classrooms (Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998)
- Classroom culture unfamiliar for International students (Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998)
- Difficult for students to approach instructors for individualized assistance which often segues into mentoring or informal advising relationships
- Research calls for examination of mentorship and psychological well-being for International students
- International students subsequently contend with
  - Disconnection from natural support systems (Senyshyn et al., 2000)
  - Disenchantment and cultural shock with host country (Huntley, 1993)
  - Language concerns and related self confidence (Tillman, 1999; Ying, 2002)
  - Negative perceptions and discrimination (Pedersen, 1991)
    - Denied opportunities despite qualification (Misra & Castillo, 2004)
  - Academic stressors
    - Frustration due to unmet unrealistic goals
    - Feelings of being a social outcast (Misra & Castillo, 2004)
  - Subsequent psychological distress (Tseng & Newton, 2002)

#### **Asian International Students**

- Account for less than 2% of all nonimmigrant visitors (American Immigration Law Foundation, 2003)
- Comprise 56% of International student population
  - Majority come from China (10.8%) and India (14%) (Open Doors, 2004)
  - Approximately 572,509 enrolled in different universities across countries
- Given their high representation on college campuses, this study focuses on Asian International students
  - Share few cultural similarities with Americans
  - Encounter more adjustment difficulties to the university environment than International students from Europe (Sodowsky & Plake, 1992)

#### **Purpose**

- Study investigated both personal (i.e., gender, class standing, and mentor status) and contextual (i.e., awareness of race, perception of mentorship, cultural fit, and different aspects of academic nonpersistence decisions) factors related to educational experiences of Asian International students and psychological well-being
  - Examined differences by gender, class standing (i.e., graduate, undergraduate), and mentor status
  - Investigated degree to which being mentored, cultural congruity, perception of the university environment, and academic nonpersistence decisions predict well-being
  - Assessed differences of coefficients for the study's variables in relation to well-being by gender, class standing, and mentor status

### Student Participants

- 135 of 147 met study criteria
  - Asian International students
- Gender
  - 56 males (43.4%)
  - 73 females (56.6%)
  - 6 missing
- Class standing
  - 43 undergraduate (33.3%)
  - 86 graduate (66.7%)
  - 6 missing
- Mentor Status
  - 55 with mentor (41%)
  - 80 without mentor (59%)
- Age = 30.00 ( $SD = 1.0$ )
  - range = 18 to 40
- Major:
  - 51 Engineering (37.8%)
  - 33 Letter and Science (24.4%)
  - 16 Life sciences (11.9%)
  - 14 Business (11.9%)
  - 7 Education (5.2%)
  - 7 Law (5.2%)
  - 7 missing
- G.P.A. = 3.90 ( $SD = 1.0$ )
  - range = 3.75 to 4.00
- Country of Origin
  - 41 Taiwan (30.4%)
  - 40 China (29.6%)
  - 18 Singapore (13.7%)
  - 13 Hong Kong (9.6%)
  - Remaining 23 from Japan, India, Korea, Vietnam, Malaysia, Macau, and Thailand

### Procedure

- IRB approved study
- Non parametric sampling method
- Students recruited from International student organizations (e.g., Taiwanese Student Association) and events (e.g., pizza party)
- Study overview provided in both Mandarin Chinese and English
- 30 minutes to complete survey
- No incentive or remuneration provided
- Majority of surveys completed during student meeting time
  - Remaining surveys returned via campus mail
- 61.3% response rate (147 of 240 surveys)

### Instrumentation

- *Awareness of Race/ethnicity in the University Environment* (ARUE, researcher-developed)
  - 7 items measure degree to which students are aware of their race/ethnicity in university environment ( $\alpha = .87$ )
  - High scores indicate one's increased awareness of race and ethnicity in different university contexts
  - 1 (*Never*) to 4 (*Always*)
- *Mentoring Scale* (MS; Gloria, Robinson Kurpius, Hamilton, & Willson, 1999)
  - 6 items assess students' perception of being mentored ( $\alpha = .77$ )
  - High scores indicate increased perception of being mentored
  - 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*)

- **University Environment Scale** (UES; Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996)
  - 14 items measure students' perception of the university environment ( $\alpha = .78$ )
  - High scores reflect a more positive perception of the university environment.
  - 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*Very true*)
- **Cultural Congruity Scale** (CCS; Gloria and Robinson Kurpius, 1996)
  - 13 items examine degree of fit of personal values and those of university ( $\alpha = .80$ )
  - High scores reflect an increased sense of cultural congruity
  - 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*)
- **Persistence/Voluntary Dropout Decisions Scale** (PVDD, Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980)
  - Assesses students' academic nonpersistence decisions for peer group interactions ( $n = 7$ ), interactions with faculty ( $n = 5$ ), faculty concerns for student development and teaching ( $n = 5$ ), academic and intellectual development ( $n = 7$ ), and institutional and goal commitments ( $n = 6$ ) ( $\alpha = .86$ ; range = .66 to .77 for subscales)
  - High scores indicative of fewer nonpersistence decisions (more likely to stay in school)
  - 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*)
- **Scales for Psychological Well-Being** (SPWB; Ryff, 1989)
  - 18 items measure self-reported psychological well-being ( $\alpha = .81$ )
  - Six subscales address self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth (total scale score used)
  - High scores reflect increased well-being
  - 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly agree*)

## Results

Differences by gender, class standing, and mentor status

- *2x2x2 MANOVA*
  - Significant main effect for mentor status
  - [ $\lambda = .596, F(6, 116) = 13.12, p \leq .001, \eta^2 = .40$ ].
    - Students with mentors had significantly higher MS, UES, CCS, PVDD, and SPWB than students without mentors
  - Non significant main effects for gender and class standing
  - Non significant interactions

Prediction of psychological well-being

- *Four-step hierarchical regression*
  - $F(12, 127) = 5.32, p \leq .001$
  - 35.7% variance accounted for SPW

Variable	$\beta$	$t$	$R^2$	$R^2_{adj.}$	$\Delta R^2$	$\Delta F$
Step 1			0.11	0.09	0.11	5.19**
Class	0.06	0.74				
Gender	0.05	0.61				
Mentor	0.34	3.92***				
Step 2			0.18	0.2	0.07	5.20**
ARUE	-0.14	-1.6				
MS	0.27	2.55*				
Step 3			0.24	0.2	0.06	4.73**
UES	0.07	0.67				
CCS	0.25	2.32*				
Step 4			0.36	0.29	0.12	4.15**
COMMIT	0.16	1.75				
TEACH	0.01	0.13				
DEV	0.09	0.88				
PEER	0.3	3.08**				
FAC	-0.01	-0.04				

#### Relationships of the study variables

- All variables significantly and positively ( $p \leq .01$ ) related to SPWB; one variable negatively related ( $p \leq .05$ ) to SPWB
  - MS ( $r = .38$ )
  - UES ( $r = .37$ )
  - CCS ( $r = .40$ )
  - PEER ( $r = .48$ )
  - FAC ( $r = .37$ )
  - TEACH ( $r = .30$ )
  - DEV ( $r = .38$ )
  - COMMIT ( $r = .37$ )
  - ARUE ( $r = -.21$ )

#### Differences of Coefficients

- By gender
  - Males ( $r = .56$ ;  $p < .001$ ) had significantly stronger relationship between UES and SPWB ( $z = 2.10$ ,  $p \leq .05$ ) than females ( $r = .25$ ;  $p < .05$ )
- By class standing
  - Undergraduates ( $r = .60$ ;  $p < .001$ ) had stronger relationship between COMMIT to SPWB ( $z = 2.20$ ,  $p \leq .05$ ) than graduate students ( $r = .27$ ;  $p \leq .05$ )
- By mentor status
  - Students with mentors had significantly stronger relationship ( $p \leq .05$ ) of variables than students without mentors

With Mentors	Relationship	Without Mentors
$r = .47, p \leq .001$	UES & SPWB ( $z = 2.01$ )	$r = .15, p > .05$
$r = .47, p \leq .001$	FAC & SPWB ( $z = 2.01$ )	$r = .15, p > .05$
$r = .42, p \leq .001$	TEACH & SPWB ( $z = 2.26$ )	$r = .04, p > .05$
$r = .41, p \leq .01$	MS & CCS ( $z = 2.24$ )	$r = .03, p > .05$
$r = .41, p \leq .01$	MS & DEV ( $z = 1.97$ )	$r = .08, p > .05$

### Discussion

- Both personal and contextual factors predicted a substantial portion of the variance in psychological well-being for Asian International students
- Mentor status (i.e., personal factors) shapes and impacts contextual factors
  - Having a mentor was the strongest predictor of Asian International students psychological well-being
  - Asian International students with mentors had a significantly stronger relationship of perception of the environment and well-being than students without mentors
  - Higher cultural congruity for students with mentors than those without
    - Findings consistent with importance of social support network within university, increasing comfort (Griffin, 1991) and well-being (Pedersen, 1991)
- Faculty members can be mentors, yet mentors may not always be faculty
  - Faculty subscale did not significantly predict psychological well-being
    - Emphasis of the subscale is on classroom interaction and satisfaction with faculty activities rather than interpersonal connections
  - Peer subscale which emphasizes interpersonal relationships was second strongest predictor of psychological well-being
    - Findings showed that close meaningful relationships central to positive International student experiences (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004)
  - Assess context in which mentors are sought for (e.g., academic advisors, student organization leaders, community members) to understand formation of relationships
- Interpersonal connections and meaningful relationships are salient to Asian International students well-being
  - Mentoring relationships should
    - Attend to personal and socioemotional aspects of well-being
    - Connect beyond academic interactions

### Limitations

- Limited generalizability
- Aggregation of Asian International students
  - Delineate different Asian nationalities
- Students might have participated in the research as a function of identifying with researcher
- Psychological well-being scale originally developed and normed on White Americans
  - Construct may not have fully captured psychological well-being for Asian International students
- Scope of the mentoring relationship not fully addressed

- Unclear who mentors were
- Future research needed to delineate how having a mentor relationship sustains cultural congruity

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