

Traditional Theories For Cross-Cultural Adaptation: Revisiting Their Current Applicability On The Transition Of Mexican Postgraduate Students To Life In The UK

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ABSTRACT

Employing traditional approaches for cross-cultural adjustment, this paper presents findings from a qualitative case study about the early adaptation of Mexican international students pursuing a postgraduate degree at a British university during the 2016-2017 academic calendars. Data was collected from 15 participants using focus groups and interviews during their third and fourth week of stay. In consonance with empirical evidence (Brown 2008; Schartner 2014), findings revealed that the participants' feelings within the initial stage of their arrival were not associated with those of "the honeymoon", but were associated with those of "the crisis" stage (Oberg 1960). Nonetheless, evidence suggests the students, particularly those without previous experience abroad, did go through a "honeymoon" period, which took place prior to the sojourners departure. The implications of these findings for a holistic understanding of the international experience are discussed.

Keywords: early adaptation, Mexican international students, pre-departure stage

INTRODUCTION

Despite their cultural uniqueness, international students have been regularly studied as a whole or research specifically focused on the largest subsets of the international student population, like East Asian students (Brunsting et al., 2018). Either approach has encapsulated minority groups, such as Latin American students, under a wide categorization of "other", which makes it difficult to construct a useful understanding

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of what their international experience is (Urban et al., 2010), and what their specific adjustment needs are (Brunsting et al., 2018). Furthermore, despite the US being the leading destination of Latin American international students (UIS, 2016), little research has been addressed to explore the studying abroad experience of this group of students (Foley 2013; Tanner 2013). Hence, it is no surprise that in settings like the UK, research focused on the experience of international students from this region is even more sparse. Nonetheless, Mexican students in the UK represent the primary intake of Latin American Higher Education international students in the UK (UIS, 2016). Such was the rationale for focusing on this particular group of students in a setting, where they have been equally understudied. Additionally, referring to Latin American-trained International Medical Graduates in the US, Hausmann-Stabile et al. (2011) concluded “lost time and money” (p.10) could have been saved, would the graduates have been better equipped with knowledge prior to departure. This conclusion calls for a research focus that goes beyond an under-researched group of students and setting, but for one that also considers the participants’ departure stage.

Initial work examining the cross-cultural adaptation of different groups of sojourners was conceptualised in stages. This first group of sequential models posited by Lysgaard (1955), Oberg (1960), and Adler (1975), although widely criticized in the literature, still impact research that employs the curvilinear sequence to explain the adjustment of international students (Ahmad et al. 2015; An and Chiang 2015; Chien 2016 for recent examples). According to these paradigms, there are three phases to consider for early adaptation (the honeymoon, the crisis, and the recovery). However, most of the scholarly criticisms have focused on revealing a rejection to the first stage, which claims a period of fascination to be experienced by travelers upon arrival into the host country. Instead, empirical evidence argues on arrival: stress is at peak (Ward, Bochner, and Furnham 2001; Brown 2008; Schartner 2014), greatest adjustment and difficulties are faced (Ward, Okura, Kennedy, and Kojima 1998; Sherry, Thomas, and Chui 2010) and the beginning is not precisely an enjoyable experience (Ahmad et al. 2015). The latter findings emphasize the absence upon arrival of a “honeymoon” phase, leaving room to question whether the fascination period occurs at some other time of the participants’ encounter with the new culture and if the other posited cross-cultural stages for early adaptation are actually experienced.

In light of this, and bearing in mind that a better understanding of the full trajectory of the international student’s sojourn can be grasped by including the prior to departure stage (Schartner, 2014) and the first weeks of the participants’ stay abroad, this study set out to explore if the traditional cross-cultural adjustment stages are experienced in the postulated sequential order, by a group of Mexican postgraduate international students in their early adaptation to the UK.

Given the time focus of this research on the first weeks, it is out of its scope to delve into the fourth, the complete adjustment phase, which may require a different research design with a longer period of data collection. However, by scrutinizing the participants’ prior experience abroad, this study is concerned with the fifth stage, the independence (Adler 1975), in which self-awareness and understanding of other cultures is expected to lead to better management of skills in further transitions. On this note, participants with previous living and studying abroad experience were taken into account for the purpose of this study.

After Six Decades: Traditional Approaches Of Cross-Cultural Adaptation

The guiding literature for this study reviews traditional approaches of cross-cultural adaptation and the early period of the transitional experience of international students. It also addresses recent research that has been conducted in the field employing these classic theories.

Despite the vast criticisms, international students mobility has been commonly addressed in the literature by using traditional models coined more than five decades ago by Lysgaard (1955), Oberg (1960), or Adler (1975). Lysgaard (1955), a pioneer in the development of international academic mobility research, has been prominently recognized due to his proposition of adjustment as a process over time. Based on his evidence, there was a relationship between duration and adjustment, understood as a ‘U-shaped curve’, where a series of stages were to happen before reaching “good adjustment”. A few years later, Oberg (1960) supporting Lysgaard’s view, claimed the existence of an initial stage of fascination; defined as a “honeymoon”, marked by feelings of easiness and excitement for being abroad. The former on arrival phase lasting from a few days up to a longer period, was supplanted by a “crisis” period, where the “real conditions of life” were experienced and the sojourner sought “refuge” by establishing contact with fellow nationals (Oberg 1960, 178). By the third, the recovery stage, the traveller had grasped some cultural and linguistic understanding of the host culture enabling them to better find their way around. Finally, complete adjustment occurred when acceptance and enjoyment of the new customs were reached, and negative feelings like anxiety had vanished.

Similarly, Adler in 1975 proposed five stages for the understanding of the transitional experience of cross-cultural sojourners. The first four stages he proposed (contact, disintegration, reintegration, autonomy, in that order) show substantial similarity with the conceptualizations and the adjustment trajectory presented by Lysgaard (1955) and Oberg (1960). However, Adler (1975) did not regard the transitional experience as a negative happening; instead, he conceived it as an opportunity for "culture learning, self-development, and personal growth" (Adler 1975, p.14). Thus, the process would not finish when adjusting to the host environment in the “autonomy” stage, but rather followed an “independence” phase, in which the sojourner had a deeper self- awareness and a more grounded understanding of cultures not being better or worse, but different (Adler 1975). This discovery was expected to lead the sojourner to more skilled management of "further transitions" as well as to trigger the interest to undergo other cross-cultural experiences. Thus, the purpose of this study is two-fold: (1) to identify the first three stages (the honeymoon, the crisis, and the recovery) as coined by Oberg (1960), during the early adaptation of a group of Mexican postgraduate international students to life in the UK, and (2) to scrutinize elements of skillful strategies employed by participants with prior experience abroad.

The above classic theories of sojourners’ cross-cultural adjustment (stages, curves, and types) are still dominant in the field (Rhein 2018), but have equally been widely criticized on the decades to follow. For instance, through a comprehensive review of literature, Church (1982, 542) mainly rooted on the lack of support for a “honeymoon stage” at the beginning of the sojourn, concluded the U-curve hypothesis was “weak”, “inconclusive”, and “overgeneralised”. Supporting this claim, Furnham and Bochner (1986) acknowledged the early stage as the most stressful period, assertion (e.g., Brown & Holloway 2008; Healy & Bourne 2013; Mann et al. 2013; Schartner 2014; Ward et al. 1998). Furthermore, research by Hirai et al. (2015), in their longitudinal study to identify multiple trajectories of first-year international students’ adjustment in U.S. universities, concluded the U-curve theory (initial excitement, followed by distress, and then recovery) did not occur among their participants. Nonetheless, the authors acknowledged the lack of assessment of the pre-arrival stage as a limitation of their study. Similarly, Geeraert and Demoulin (2013, p.1242) claimed though stress is known to be part of the adjustment process, it has not been clear what its “exact temporal occurrence” is. Therefore, the latter researchers used as post-entry measure of the stress their Belgian adolescents participants faced, six weeks into the sojourn. Likewise, Brown (2008), based on

her postgraduate international students in the UK's findings, stated four to five weeks post-arrival when stress was at its highest. This seems to indicate that former scholarly work has focused on two specific ele-

Table 1: Traditional Theories of Cross-Cultural Adaptation

	Stages, curves, and types:	Cross-cultural contact perceived as:	Criticisms:
Lysgaard (1955)	“U-shaped curve”	Adjustment as a process over time.	Church (1982): “Weak”, “inconclusive” and “overgeneralized”
Oberg (1960)	“Honeymoon, crisis, recovery”	A shock on behalf of the sojourner.	Furnham and Bochner (1986):
Adler (1975)	“Contact, disintegration, reintegration, autonomy, independence”	Learning experience.	The beginning of the sojourn not depicted as a “honeymoon” stage with an impressionistic behaviour.

ments to explain the cross-cultural adjustment of international students: the beginning identified as the arrival to the host country and culture, and the (in)experience of a stage of fascination. Thus, this research aims to explore other venues within the stages of adaptation model proposed by Lysgaard (1955), Oberg (1960), and Adler (1975), which might bring relevant insights for the understanding of the early adaptation of international students, in this case of Mexican origin, relevant to this recent era. Consequently, the research question that drives this study is: Do the Mexican postgraduate participants prior to departure and within their first four weeks go through the stages as posited by traditional frameworks of cross-cultural adaptation?

METHODS

Data for this study derived from a doctoral research on the adaptation experience of Mexican postgraduate students in the UK. A qualitative case study was chosen as its research design given the distinctiveness of its context on an understudied group of international students and in a setting where they have also been little explored (Stake, 1995). This in addition to the flexibility to combine different methods for data collection, which lends the opportunity to gather extensive and rich information to deeply understand the stages the participants had gone through to adapt during their first month overseas (Punch 2014). In this view, 15 students volunteered to participate in three focus groups and in four individual interviews during their third and fourth week, respectively, of their arrival to the host culture.

The rationale for implementing focus groups and interviews on the third and fourth week respectively was grounded on several accounts. First, focus groups were chosen because group interaction could prompt and facilitate data that could not be otherwise obtained (Punch, 2014). Furthermore, individual interviews were conducted to explore the participants' perceptions (Thomas, 2016) and redress any possible superficiality resulting from the focus groups. Second, individual interviews were pondered

as a suitable alternative method for those participants who might not feel comfortable sharing their views and opinions in a group and preferred an individual face-to-face exchange. Finally, focus groups were scheduled for third week, and interviews were scheduled for the fourth week. The data collection phase took place in Spanish, as that was the participants' preference; the researcher, therefore, translated the study's direct quotes.

The timeframe for this research on the first weeks has been informed by the review of literature, which acknowledges this transitional stage as the most difficult (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Though little specificity for the length of this period has been described in research in the field, Brown (2008) in her study of postgraduate students in the UK recognised the first four or five weeks as the most difficult period. Moreover, Schartner's (2014) empirical findings urged for more research that contemplated the pre-departure stage of the international sojourn if aiming to get a rounded understanding of it. With that in mind, this study set out to collect data concerning the participants' prior to departure stage. Though these insights were gathered retrospectively, during the focus groups or the interviews, the data reported was still fresh as it corresponds to a maximum of four weeks from the participants' arrival to the UK, and arose as spontaneous and deep reflections on how the situations had unfolded upon arrival based on pre-arrival own circumstances.

The inclusion criteria for selecting the participants were that they were of Mexican origin to undertake postgraduate studies commencing on the 2016-2017 academic calendar and had not been in the UK for more than a month at the time data was collected. With the assistance of an institutional gatekeeper, I approached the potential participants in an official gathering for Latin American students 10 days after their arrival to the host university. Fifteen students volunteered to participate in the form of a focus group or an interview to take place on their third or fourth week, respectively, of their stay in the UK. Thus, except for one student, the focus group's participants were all on their third week whilst the interview's participants were on their fourth week. More males than females participated in the study and according to Richardson (1994), most of the students belonged to the mature-aged group of students since they were 25 years or older at the start of their postgraduate studies. Equally, most of the participants were to pursue a Master's Degree while a few others were enrolled in a PhD. They were registered in different subject areas, being the STEM disciplines their main interest due to the financial support granted by Mexican government bodies (Rushworth, 2017). Nearly half of the students lived in private accommodation whilst the others lived in university lodging. Moreover, it was the first experience abroad for half of the students while, as posited by Klineberg and Hull (1979), the other half had previous experience abroad since they had spent more than 30 consecutive days in a foreign country, in this case in countries like: Brazil, Guatemala, Japan, Spain, United States, and the UK.

Complying with the ethical regulations stipulated by the Ethics and Research Governance Online (ERGO) system of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University under study, the participants were advised in written form about the aims of the research and what their contribution entailed (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011). They were also asked for written consent and their names were anonymized, taking into account their cultural context, when reporting the findings (Creswell 2014; Guenther 2009).

Given the aim of this research to identify patterns of information that would fall within the stages for adaptation suggested by traditional cross-cultural theories, and possibly experienced by the participants, data was analyzed thematically (Bloomberg and Volper 2012; Boyatzis 1998). A framework using deductive coding categories as informed by the literature (Berg and Lune 2002), was implemented to

analyze the data. For instance, Oberg's (1960) three first stages: "the honeymoon", "the crisis", and "the recovery" stages, as well as Adler's (1975) "the independence", served as the pre-determined themes to explore and identify the participants' insights. Given this study's specific focus on the first four weeks, it was out of its scope to consider "the complete adjustment" phase. Likewise, although it was not possible to follow up the participants until their postgraduate studies' end and gather whether they acquired management skills for further transitions; given the selection of participants with and without previous abroad experience, it was feasible to identify differences between the adaptation of these two groups of participants.

FINDINGS

The findings reflect a chronological order, unveiling the students' insights prior to departure, on arrival, and on their current (third and fourth) week at the time of data collection. To analyze the skillfulness of those participants with previous experience abroad, a subsequent section presents their reflections indicating the tactics they implemented and where they had previously been. Each section encapsulates a different time and length period. The "on arrival" comments range as of the participants' arrival to the host city and until the end of their second week of stay given that their insights reflected consistency on the circumstances and feelings involved during that period. Thus, the selection of direct quotes contemplates the identification of time pointers (e.g. before coming here, the first night, the first days, the first two weeks, etc.) to guide the reader through the narrative and follow the sequence of the participants' experience as it happened during the first month. Furthermore, though data is reported retrospectively, the comments elucidated were still fresh as they only refer to a maximum of four weeks from the time they were collected.

Prior To Departure

Data on this section refers to the pre-arrival stage and the recollections came from students without previous experience abroad. These findings indicate that prior to the departure the participants were looking forward to their experience overseas and what it entailed could not be crystallised until arrival to host city: "(...) you don't visualise it until you're here, it doesn't dawn on you (...)" (Armando, Focus Group 2). With that in mind, before departure, the possibility of studying abroad was seen as "something unreal". This conception clouded the possibility to foresee real challenges, apart from linguistic ones, likely to emerge when adjusting to the host environment:

(...) I didn't really think (...) it'd be a reality (...) so, before coming here, (...) the only thing that distressed me was the language and I didn't even think about life, I mean, that kind of things.
(Natalia, FG 2)

On that note, prior to travelling, infatuated by the idea of going abroad, the participants did not realize about the actual implications of their decision to study and live overseas. These surfaced as a shock and bewilderment upon arrival:

You let yourself be carried away a little by the emotion (...) suddenly you forget all that it implies (...) You come here with all the excitement, so you arrive, and OW! You have so many things to do that you say 'what do I do here?' (Mateo, FG 1)

Consequently, the determining element from a dreamlike situation to a real-life one was time. Thus, prior to departure, studying and living abroad felt imaginary while upon arrival reality struck the participants:

The first time you have the idea to come, well, it's like, 'Well, I'm going to send the papers to see what happens' (...) honestly, I did not dawn on me almost until I was on the plane (...) And the

moment comes, (...) I found an empty cupboard, I had not brought my towel, I was missing a lot of things (...) So, it was like reality hit me when I arrived (...) (Gustavo, FG 2)

On Arrival

Right upon arrival, insights of a stormy beginning came from students with and without experience abroad. For instance, even when the University's airport service had been used and had saved the worry of transport, accommodation had been previously arranged and this was not the first time travelling abroad for studies; the arrival due to emotional exhaustion and triggered by the lack of some unmet "elementary necessities" (Maslow, 1954), was acknowledged as the most difficult task dealt with:

(...) the first night it was emotionally tiring, arriving at 10:00p.m to a place that you don't know, freezing, very hungry, after I've flown like 15 hours, that was the most difficult part. (Ariana, FG 2)

In that sense, the experience of being emotionally taxed on arrival was not different from a student who had not taken the University pick-up service, but had been accompanied by her father, and whose first experience abroad was this. Lacking culture-specific knowledge such as being unaware of public transport's cost in the host city, prevented her from taking a taxi on arrival and making her start be perceived as "horrible":

I arrived with many suitcases, my bike box (...) one thinks that taxis are super expensive, so I said 'let's walk and there we were at midnight carrying the bloody suitcases (...) it was horrible (...)' (Natalia, FG 2)

Despite a stressful beginning, dealing with homesickness and depression was smoothed by finding refuge with conational fellows. Thus, the establishment of relationships with people from the same culture allowed for a sense of connection and camaraderie for the challenges to endure:

I thought (...) the first days I was going to be super depressed (...) homesick to its fullest, but (...) it helped me a lot to meet (...) Fernando who lives close by (...) we go running and things like that (...) (Sergio, FG 3).

In addition to the previous upon arrival concerns, financial hardship equally contributed to feeling vulnerable. Over-reliance on scholarship led to feeling financially and emotionally unstable due to lacking own funds:

I didn't come with a lot of money (...) and I said to myself 'this has to be enough' until [sponsor's name] deposits (...) So, I was a bit (...), too apprehensive the first two weeks; I couldn't enjoy all of it (Armando, FG 2).

Third And Fourth Week

By the third week, the participants recognized that the academic component of their journey also required an adaptation and there was hope that in a week's time, they will have come to grips with their scholarly demands: "I'm still adapting (...) I think next week I'll be more oriented to the academic, but I'm still struggling" (Jorge, interview).

Likewise, the quality of transport and the availability of public places appeared as contributing elements to adjust to the host city: "It's small, but, it has a good quality of travel, (...) public transport, I do give that a good point about living here" (Fernando, FG 3). Bound to money concerns, the availability of "wide and quite clean" public places featured as a suitable free leisure activity to enjoy during the first three weeks:

(...) the city has many public spaces, and that there are many places by which you can walk, you can stay for a while, without having to be locked up all day in the house, and you don't really have to pay anything for the parks(...)(Roberto, FG 3)

Pleasant communication with English academics had helped to adjust to the host environment:

(...)I've been quite happy with my teachers, who are mostly English, and with whom I've had very good conversations, and (...), who have welcomed me very well, who have made it very easy for me to adapt. (Alberto, FG 2)

By the fourth week, the students were more familiarized with culture-specific procedures, and some of the daily-related challenges started to fade away. Thus, although expenses on food seemed excessive, by the beginning of the fourth week, the participants had built an estimated budget for it. Having an estimate of living costs at this point allowed them to have more control over their finances and hence, felt safer about their expenditures.

I spent seventy pounds [on the first week] and I didn't buy anything (...) next week I spent fifty-something. Now, what I'm spending is twenty pounds, and I even have extra food (...) with twenty pounds (...) a week you have enough. (Pablo, interview)

In addition to the previous view, having a more precise budgeting of expenses by the end of the fourth week heightened the participants' confidence in their own finances. However, there was awareness the first month required a larger budget to settle in. "For money, (...) I was making like a recount, and with the scholarship; really, money is well enough, as long as you don't pay tuition" (Enrique, interview).

Likewise, in the fourth week, to get acquainted with daily habits, such as food, there was openness and curiosity to observe, to learn the British way of doing it:

At least, this week I have tried, to be much more observant in the habits of other people around me (...) for example, food, and it has been working for me, I think, (...) quite well, (...) because it is a relatively drastic change (Julia, interview)

Previous Experience Abroad

Quotes for this theme came from participants with previous abroad experience and such featured as an element that boosted the participants' creative approaches implemented to adapt, which in turn enabled them to be better prepared for the challenges to face. For instance, based on a prior lived experience, it was learned that finding their way around, including food for the first days is difficult. Therefore, such recollection animated the participants to have food at close reach: "Since it had already happened to me [in Guatemala], the first two, three days, you arrived and you don't know what's going on, right? So, I brought food just in case (...)" (Enrique, interview). Similarly, having a clearer understanding of how first world countries are organized and making use of technology, finding supplies during the first days was easily sufficed:

Well, (...) since I already had the experience (...) from the United States, (...) I just investigated, for example, where is such supermarket in google, IKEA and I just go to the directions (...) so that part, of having already lived alone and cooking myself, (...) was not a great...(Jorge, interview)

Likewise, because of a previous international experience, there was awareness the difference in the weather between home and host country was something to look out: "I was in Japan on an exchange programme (...). So, I was already aware about the weather, about how extreme it can be (...)" (Daniel, FG 1). Furthermore, students who had previously studied abroad, perceived the interaction with local fellows as positive. This was compared with a former and first experience in England: "(...) I don't know if I am

lucky, but now I found more friendly people (...) this time, there were more people who came to me, and did talk to me” (Eduardo, FG 3).

DISCUSSIONS

In relation to Oberg’s conception of the beginning of the sojourn as a honeymoon, the present study found little evidence to support such claim. The participants’ feelings in their first stage upon arrival did not correspond with those of the honeymoon phase. Rather they likened with those of the crisis stage, where the sojourners were actually experiencing “the real conditions of life” (Oberg 1960, p. 178), and undergoing a significant amount of stress, in consonance with former empirical research (Brown, 2008; Schartner, 2014). Nonetheless, as suggested by Oberg (1960), it was in this crisis stage in which the participants looked for succor from their conational colleagues as they were striving to settle into the UK. This moral support emanating from fellow nationals was equally reported by Urban et al. (2010) in their research of Dominican international students in the USA. The existence of a bond with people from similar social and cultural backgrounds granted a space for mutual support, feelings of ease and understanding in times of social vulnerability, which can lead to “social isolation, identity crises, and anxiety” as reported by Hausmann-Stabile et al. (2011, p. 35). In this sense, interactions with other co-nationals acted as a buffer in this crisis stage.

Despite the lack of support for the on arrival stage as a fascination period, evidence from this research suggests participants, particularly those with no previous experience abroad, did go through a honeymoon stage, however it took place prior to the sojourners departure. It was in this pre-departure phase that the latter participants appeared, in accordance with elements of the honeymoon stage, captivated about the culture and the idea of going abroad, without being fully aware about what the experience entailed. Based on this, the participants, especially those without previous experience abroad, followed the sequence of the first two stages (the honeymoon and the crisis) for the adjustment cycle as proposed by Oberg (1960), but they did not obey the timeframe offered as the honeymoon phase took place prior to departure. Consequently, the beginning of the sojourn did not seem to be marked by the arrival to the host culture instead it was aligned with the conception of the experience abroad as an integrative event which takes into account the prior to departure stage and practices, as postulated by Furnham and Bochner (1986).

With respect to how far into Oberg’s (1960) adjustment cycle the participants progressed within their first four weeks, it seemed that they were in the recovery stage by the fourth week. At that point, stress started to decrease as more culture-specific knowledge was acquired inside and outside the University context. Consequently, by week 4, the students were grasping a better understanding of the English culture and such had helped to build more confidence with matters of concern in earlier weeks. For example, the financial hardship the participants had initially faced due to the high living costs in the UK and their lack of financial preparedness, and the inherent emotional insecurity it conveyed, had all started to decrease by the fourth week, once a budget for their expenditures was built.

Additionally, Oberg’s complete adjustment phase was not reached within the timeframe of this study. However, the first three stages of the adjustment process proposed by Oberg were followed to some extent, if it is taken into account that students with no previous abroad skills appeared to have experienced the honeymoon stage prior to departure.

Concerning Adler’s (1975) “independence” phase, although within the timeframe of this study, it was not possible to document whether the participants at the end of their adjustment cycle had increased

their self-awareness and deeper understanding of other cultures; findings supported the notion that students with previous experience were more self-aware of what the experience entailed and showed a better management of the challenges faced. Thus, this finding resonates with Klineberg and Hull (1979) in their first cross-sectional study on adaptation and coping strategies' proposition, which claims previous experience abroad accounts as a preparation strategy that positively influences the individual's transition to the host culture. Knowing how things can be helped the participants be better prepared for the change to face. Thus, students with prior experience abroad were more skilled in developing relationships with local students, for example, than those who were on their first sojourn.

Although findings from this study seemed to demonstrate that some participants better adapted as time passed by, in agreement with Lysgaard's (1955) proposition of a relationship between duration and adjustment, evidence also suggested that the students felt more at ease when they had come to terms with the appropriate cultural skills. Thus, adjustment might not solely relate to a time condition, as Lysgaard (1955) proclaimed, but to a combination of acquiring the necessary skills to perform in the new context (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). For instance, when a more solid management of finances through the building of a budget was achieved by the third and fourth weeks, less stress and more satisfaction was perceived. Therefore, how adjusted the participants felt by weeks three and four, did not exclusively respond to have been in the UK for a month (or nearly), but to have acquired or not the skills needed to properly function in the host context. Thus, although this study observed an improvement in the participants' adjustment as time passed, as theorized by Lysgaard (1955), findings support a relationship between adjustment and the acquisition of skills that is not uniquely linked to a time condition.

IMPLICATIONS

After six decades, these traditional theories appear to bring relevant insights for understanding the early adaptation of this group of Mexican postgraduate international students. First, it offers a new perspective about these approaches for cross-cultural adjustment, which suggests "the honeymoon" stage might take place for first-time international students prior to departure. Second, the participants with previous international experience showed more skillful management of their transition. Thus, the results of this study add to the literature on the transition and adaptation of understudied groups of international students, in this case of Mexican origin, and their rite of passage during their first month overseas. Although the results do not aim to be generalized, this research offers some cultural-specific hints that could be relevant to students of similar cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, this study's findings call for raising awareness about the pre-arrival stage's importance and considering it as part of the international experience. The scrutiny of the pre-departure phase has proved to be an area that warrants further investigation to tackle some of the possible challenges the international participants are to face upon arrival. In addition to more scholarly efforts on the study of the pre-arrival stage, assistance on behalf of the host institution and the corresponding sponsor with pre-arrival planning that goes beyond administrative assistance with procedural tasks is encouraged. In this vein, providing students with timely pre-departure assistance and information about areas of known difficulty and uncertainty could be of aid to increase their awareness and chances of preparation about what they will encounter in the host environment. Thus, this paper claims efforts to understand that the cross-cultural adaptation of international students should be rerouted towards a more comprehensive methodology; one that includes the pre-arrival stage and considers the participants' previous experience abroad (or lack thereof), to appreciate a more holistic understanding of their adaptation

experience. In this sense, the identification of two groups of students, those with prior overseas experience and those travelling to a foreign country for educational purposes for the first time, has important implications for policy and practice. Opposite to what might have been considered, the overseas experience of these two groups of individuals starts and unfolds in different ways depending on their previous international experience or not. As per this study's findings, it is recommended that institutional support is arranged and provided for students with and for students without previous experience abroad as their degree of conscientiousness about what the experience entails appears to be different. Consequently, both groups of participants are likely to face a different scenario depending on their previous international experience upon arrival.

Concerning the Mexican origin of the participants, international students come from very diverse backgrounds, which include different socio-emotional and academic models, behaviors, and expectations (Brunsting et al. 2018); it is therefore critical to develop research that is inclusive and diverse, and focuses not only on the largest groups of students and regions, but also contemplates minority groups in order to understand and as institutions, serve their culture-specific needs.

Even though this research focused on Mexican international students, findings on arrival seem to be in consonance with empirical evidence from other groups of international students, which support the notion that upon arrival and during their first weeks, students undergo an extensive array of challenges leading to a stressful period (Brown, 2008; Schartner, 2014; Ward et al., 2001). However, how different or similar their experience prior to arrival may be, compared to other subsets of the international students' population, is yet to be known, as there is not much research that has focused on the pre-departure stage of the sojourn.

LIMITATIONS

Related to individual variations in the participants' early experiences, mature-aged students have been recognized as a group of students prone to actively engage with their learning process (Devlin, 1996; McCune et al., 2010; Richardson, 1994); thus, a similar level of engagement could be expected as to their process to adapt. In this regard, it was observed that non-mature aged students responded similarly to their mature-aged fellows. The main difference between these two groups of participants rested on having had or not previous experience abroad. Likewise, there were no differences identified in the participants' perception based on their gender or discipline. However, it is acknowledged that the group of participants was rather homogeneous as they were mainly matured-aged men to pursue a Master's Degree in a STEM discipline area. Hence, exploring a more varied group of students in terms of their demographics may contribute to identify more heterogeneous conclusions.

CONCLUSION

Findings from this study do not seem to support traditional views of culture shock (Lysgaard 1955; Oberg 1960), in which feelings of excitement mark the early stage of the experience. Instead, this research identified the first four weeks as a period where stress and uncertainty were at peak. Nonetheless, it shows some consonance with Lysgaard's (1955) proposition of adjustment as a process since taxing feelings appeared to decrease in some cases, as time passed, over the lapse of 4 weeks, and as more confidence and culture-specific knowledge were built on (Ward, Bochner, and Furnham 2001).

Having previous experience was identified in this study as a preparation strategy for the students' transition (Klineber & Hull 1979; Kim 2001; Liu & Winder 2014). Students with prior cross-cultural experience showed to be better equipped than those who did not have any prior cross-cultural experience. Upon arrival, the students with experience navigated easier in the environment with aspects such as daily life. They found it easier to integrate with the host community and perceived host nationals friendlier. Equally, the participants who claimed having lacked preparation and reported to have been "hit" by reality were those who had never been abroad before. Thus, the adaptation process for those without prior experience appeared to be steeper.

An essential contribution of this study is the methodological consideration it gave to the beginning of the experience. For instance, this study did not ponder the arrival of the sojourners to the host city and institution as the beginning of the experience. Instead, it conceived the pre-departure stage as the start of the continuum. Therefore, this research scrutinized the under-explored pre-arrival aspect of the sojourn in an effort to better understand how the participants bridge between home and host context. This allows for a critical consideration, which is that research on international students' mobility has been largely based on data collected upon the students' arrival, and it has mainly examined the participants' experience from that point onwards. Whereas this study allowed realizing the sojourn started well before the participants' traveled, and the extent of pre-departure preparations had important ramifications for the challenges each group of participants, with and without previous experience abroad, faced.

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