Relationships Between Self-Concept and Life Difficulty Among International College Students: An Exploratory Study

Glenda Phillips Reynolds, Ed. D., NCC, NCSC
Auburn University - Montgomery

Suhyun Suh, Ed. D., NCC
Auburn University

Abstract
The purpose of this research was to explore the relationship between life difficulties of international students at a Southeastern university in the USA and the self-concept of these students. The findings indicate that international students experience minor to moderate difficulty in studying in the United States. The current study also indicates that, overall, international students at the University returned significantly greater scores than the norm group on dimensions of self-concept for three of the five self-concept scales: Aspiration, Academic Interest and Satisfaction, and Leadership and Initiative. There was no significant difference on the other two dimensions: Identification vs. Alienation and Anxiety. Only one self-concept scale was correlated to the difficulty variables. The Leadership and Initiative self-concept scale appeared to be negatively related to Academic Hardship and Relationship Difficulty.

Introduction

Most of the research concerning international students is based on the assumption that international students have greater difficulty than students from the host culture. Articles generally focus on identifying difficulties and problems such as language, discrimination, academics, and socialization (Cheng, Leong, & Geist, 1993; Kagan & Cohen, 1990; Kuo, 2004; Luzip-Lockett, 1998; Rahman & Rollock, 2004; Selvadurai, 1998), improving existing services or creating new services to meet their needs (Bradley, 2000; Kilinc & Granello, 2003). Much has been written about specific areas

of stress for international students, impact of demographics on difficulties, and how international students seek help. Other studies, such as Kilnic and Cohen (1990) and Tseng and Newton (2000), identify coping strategies used by international students.

Few studies focus on the impact on the self-concept. For example, Luzio-Lockett (1998) studied the impact of transitioning to the host culture on self-concept, academic performance and the general academic experience and Schmitt, Spears and Branscombe (2003) studied the impact of minority group identity on self-esteem of international students. Yet some studies include the self-concept when examining some other aspect of international student life. For example, when researching the use of counseling services by international students at a university in the United States, Yi, Lin and Kishimoto (2003) found that 70.1% of students who used counseling services were worried or extremely worried about self-esteem.

Low self-concept has been linked to student perceptions of various factors of international student life that increase stress and depression. Perceptions of lower competence in work, perceived prejudice, personal/ social efficacy, and gender are some of the factors identified by Rahman and Rollock (2004) as predictors of depressive symptoms. Yeh and Inose (2003) found that social connectedness and social support satisfaction were predictors of stress. Cross-culture differences could also increase stress. Stress was particularly emphasized by international students in a study of students' learning environments and perceptions in Australia (Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000).

Similarity and differences between the culture of origin and the host culture has been cited as contributing to perceived anxieties (Bradley, 2000), especially concerning interpersonal relationships. Bradley (2000) reported that "relationship problems, feelings of isolation, academic pressures, finance and accommodation were likely to contribute to difficulties" (p. 425). Luzio-Lockett (1998) postulated that the pressures of temporarily transitioning from one cultural environment to a different one could create stresses associated with changes in self-concept. The results of the interviews she conducted with international students supported her hypothesis. The interviews also revealed self-help strategies of the students.

More often than self-concept, life satisfaction has been researched to find links to socio-cultural concerns, psychological distress, relationship

difficulties, academic difficulties, logistic difficulties, language and physical illness. Kilinc and Granello (2003) found that unmarried respondents had higher degrees of difficulty while young students and those with previous therapy had more favorable help-seeking attitudes.

Recent literature suggests that students may not experience difficulties in the way we expect. International students provided positive descriptive words more often than negative words when asked to describe their experiences in studying at a university in the Southern part of the USA (Kuo, 2004). Also, some studies have found that international students have resiliency factors such as group identification, motivation, and financial support help mediate the problems international students are expected to experience (Kagan & Cohen, 1990; Kuo, 2004; Schmitt et al., 2003; Tseng & Newton, 2002). While the above studies indicate that life as an international student impacts some students negatively, other studies found that international students adjust well and have strategies that mitigate stress, thus protecting self-concept. In Tseng and Newton's (2002) qualitative study, international students described two categories of tactics for gaining general well being, overall satisfaction in life and positive affect. Students who experienced fewer difficulties found ways to make their experience meaningful and set goals for achievement that enhanced feelings of competence – such as completing schoolwork and planning for the future. In addition they engaged in exercise, introspection and thought monitoring, and sought help from others.

Schmitt et al. (2003) found that involvement with other international students mediated the overall negative effect of perceived discrimination on self-concept. Kagan and Cohen (1990) postulated that student cultural adjustment levels increased when interpersonal relationships were strong. Less resistance to cultural shift was distinguished by behavioral, cognitive, affective, and demographic attributes.

Underlying most past studies is the assumption that international students experience a negative impact on the way they see themselves as a result of their inability to cope with difficulties of studying abroad. While research explored life satisfaction and difficulties (Cheng, Leong, & Geist, 1993; Robertson et al., 2000; Selvadurai, 1998; Yeh & Inose, 2003), links to self-concept (Luzio-Lockett, 1998), and resiliency factors (Kagan & Cohen, 1990; Schmitt et al., 2003; Tseng & Newton, 2002), no study looked for a correlation between self-concept and perceived difficulties of international students. Because

some evidence exists that students are generally satisfied with their life, this study postulated that self-concept is not necessarily negatively impacted by international student life.

The current study grouped the areas identified as problematic in the literature and in the pilot study of the needs assessment performed by these researchers on the university campus into seven areas of concern. Language difficulty was defined as having limited language skills that lead to fear of making mistakes when speaking English. Socio-cultural concerns were defined as difficulties related to discrimination and prejudice and American students' lack of understanding of the international student's culture. Psychological distress included feelings of inadequacy and mental health concerns such as stress, depression, anxiety, and loneliness. Relationship difficulties were seen as resulting from difficulty speaking with major professors as well as difficulty developing friendships with American students. Academic difficulties were defined as arising from written assignments, working in groups, and adapting to the difference in methods of teaching in America as compared to the way they were accustomed to being taught. Difficulties in meeting needs for shopping, accessing utilities and other community services, and transportation were considered logistic difficulties. Physical illness difficulties resulted from lack of insurance and understanding of the process of obtaining medical help when needed.

To see if these difficulties related to low self-concept the following questions were asked: (a) To what extent and in what areas do international students perceive difficulties in pursuing their education? (b) Are there any group differences between international students and the norm group for the Dimensions of Self-Concept (DOSC)? (c) How are international students' self-concepts related to their perception of life difficulties while studying in the Untied States?

Method

Procedures

Based on the needs identified by international students in a preliminary study at the smaller campus of a university in the Southeastern part of the USA, the researchers developed a needs assessment instrument for the current study. The preliminary study included interviews and a questionnaire. The

researchers worked in collaboration with the Office of International Student Life and the Office of International Education in the large university in the Southeastern part of the USA to develop the questionnaire for the current study. Ten international students were recruited for a pilot study to answer the questionnaire and give feedback for the purpose of testing the appropriateness of the survey questions and obtaining additional feedback for necessary revisions. All students expressed that the instrument was clear and easy to read, so no revision was made to the pilot instrument.

The aforementioned two offices serving international students provided the researchers with student address labels and the costs for mailing questionnaires. All international students ($N = 920$) attending the University received the questionnaire by mail during the fall semester. The Office of International Students sent an e-mail to all the students encouraging them to respond to the survey. Fifty-nine (6.3%) students responded. Of those, 38 responses were complete and therefore were used for this study.

Participants

Of the 38 respondents, 53% ($n = 20$) were male and 47% ($n = 18$) were female. Thirty-four (89%) students were under the age of 35. Thirteen of the students (34%) were under 25 years of age. More unmarried students ($n = 24$, 63%) participated in this study than married students ($n = 14$, 37%). Thirty-four of the students (89%) were in graduate programs and over one half (58%) of the total respondents were doctoral students. The majority of the respondents ($n = 32$, 84%) had lived in the USA for more than a year with 42% of the total respondents ($n = 16$) in residency in the United States for three or more years. Three students did not respond to this question. Fifty-two percent of the students ($n = 20$) were from Asian countries and the remainder of the students came from western countries such as Canada, Europe, South or Central America and the Caribbean islands. Eighty-two percent of the students ($n = 31$) indicated that the University financially supported their education while others depended on other sources such as their home government ($n = 2$, 3%) or family ($n = 4$, 11%).

Instruments

Two instruments were used for this study. The Needs Assessment of International Students (NAIS) (see Appendix) was developed by the researchers

for this study. The second instrument that was used was the Dimensions of Self-Concept Form H-College (DOSC Form H; Michael, Smith, & Michael, 1989). One of the three categories surveyed on the NAIS was designed to measure international students' perceived difficulty on a 5-point Likert scale, 5 being extremely difficult and 1 being not at all difficult. The perceived difficulties were investigated in seven domains: (a) Language Difficulty, (b) Socio-cultural Concerns, (c) Psychological Distress, (d) Relationship Difficulty, (e) Academic Difficulty, (f) Limited Access to Resources, and (g) Physical Illness. The questionnaire also contained demographic questions for gender, age, marital status, education level, length of residence in United States, country of citizenship, and source of financial support. The reliability estimates for the instrument (Cronbach's alpha) for the instrument using this sample was .87. Concurrent validity was obtained by testing the relationship between subscale scores on the NAIS scale and subscale scores on the DOSC Form H scales. Content validity was also obtained through ratings by expert judges (directors of international student offices) and pilot studies with international students (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998).

The Dimensions of Self-Concept Form H-College (Michael et al. 1998) was originally developed as a diagnostic tool to measure non-cognitive factors related to self-esteem or self-concept in higher educational settings. The DOSC Form H is used to identify students who might experience difficulty academically due to their low self-concept with a premise that low self-concept or self-esteem often correlated to low academic success. The DOSC Form H consists of 80 statements, 16 statements for each of five dimensions of self-concept: (a) Level of Aspiration, (b) Anxiety, (c) Academic Interest and Satisfaction, (d) Leadership and Initiative, and (e) Identification vs. Alienation. The reliability estimates (Cronbach's alpha) for the instrument was .92. The reliability estimates for the instrument ranges between .86 and .88 for the five factor scales. Concurrent validity was obtained by testing the correlation between scores on DOSC Form H scales and anticipated overall grade point average to be earned. Construct validity was obtained by using factor analytic techniques of inter-correlations of items. Norms were updated in 1999 using a sample of 499 college students (EdITS, 1999).

Analysis and Results

Correlation coefficient and t-test analyses were performed to answer the research questions using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). Power analysis was also conducted to test the small size sample effect on this study. Statistical powers between-subject effects turned out to be low except the sub category scale of Academy Difficulty.

Mean scores on the NAIS for the perceived difficulty domains ranged between the maximum score of 2.70 for Limited Access to Resources and the minimum score of 2.08 for Academic Difficulty, indicating that overall international students experience minor to moderate difficulty in studying and living in the United States (see Table 1).

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Five Self-Concepts Variables and Seven Difficulty Variables (N = 38)

Variables	M	SD
Seven Difficulty Variables		
Language Difficulty	2.11	.95
Sociocultural Concerns	2.46	.82
Psychological Distress	2.42	.88
Relationship Difficulty	2.21	.82
Academic Difficulty	2.09	.82
Limited Access to Resources	2.70	.86
Language Difficulty	2.11	.95
Five Self-concept Variables		
Level of Aspiration	65.58	10.52
Anxiety	43.74	9.52
Academic Interest and Satisfaction	52.21	9.94
Leadership and Initiative	47.60	9.80
Identification vs. Alienation	55.68	7.68

The scores of Dimensions of Self-Concept (DOSC Form H) inventory ranged from a minimum of 16 to a maximum of 80. International students' self-concept mean scores and standard deviations for each of the five factor scales were: Level of Aspiration, $M = 65.58$, $SD = 10.52$; Anxiety, $M = 43.74$, $SD = 9.53$; Academic Interest and Satisfaction, $M = 52.21$, $SD = 9.94$; Leadership

30

and Initiative, $M = 47.60$, $SD = 9.80$; and Identification vs. Alienation, $M = 55.68$, $SD = 7.68$. When these scores were compared to the mean scores of the norm group, international students' Level of Aspiration ($t = 1.69$, $df = 535$), Academic Interest and Satisfaction ($t = 2.82$, $df = 535$), and Leadership and Initiative ($t = 2.86$, $df = 535$) were significantly higher than the norm group at the level of .05. The mean scores of the norm group for each of the three scales were 62.61 ($SD = 9.58$) for Aspiration, 47.55 ($SD = 9.75$) for Academic Interest and Satisfaction and 42.90 ($SD = 9.34$) for Leadership and Initiative. No statistically significant group differences were found for the two other scales of Anxiety and Identification vs. Alienation.

Figure 1. Proportion of Rural Population by Grade

Discussion

More than 80% of the students in this study had been in the USA for a year or more, were graduate students under 35 years of age and received financial support. Fifty-two percent were Asian. Also 63% were single and the genders were about equal. Overall, international students participated in this study experienced minor to moderate difficulty in studying in the United States. This study supports Kuo's (2004) dissertation study that was conducted at the same university with the same student population in which students described their experiences in positive terms. In her study, when participants were asked to provide three words that they would use to describe their general experience as an international student at the University, 402 words were provided. Eight of the 10 most frequently presented words were positive: good, interesting, busy, fun, excited, nice, great, and friendly.

The current study indicated that overall international students at the University felt better about themselves than the norm group on three of the self-concept scales: (a) Aspiration, (b) Leadership and Initiative and (c) Academic Interest and Satisfaction. The Leadership and Initiative self-concept scale was negatively related to the life difficulty domains of Academic Hardship and Relationship Difficulty. The correlation analysis indicated that stronger leadership and initiative characteristics relate to less academic hardship and relationship difficulty.

This study supports the finding of previous studies that international students have resiliency factors (Kagan & Cohen, 1990; Schmitt et al., 2003; Tseng & Newton, 2002) that contribute to their adjustment and overall life satisfaction in the host country. The fact that these students chose to go to a different country to study indicates a sense of adventure and confidence. Motivation to succeed and financial support may also contribute to adjustment. The significantly high scores on aspiration, academics and leadership and initiative indicate that these students are highly motivated and goal directed.

Implication for Counseling

Counselors should not automatically assume that international students are negatively affected by perceived difficulties in living and studying abroad. More assistance may be needed when the student first arrives but the amount

and type of assistance needed may decrease over time. Although perceptions of difficulty differ somewhat across cultures and with degree of support, international students generally have resiliency factors that mediate the impact of adjusting to academic, interpersonal relationships, social, personal, and financial difficulties.

Perhaps international students are risk-takers and have strong personalities. Considering the finding that leadership and initiative is significantly related to academic hardship and relationship difficulty, counselors may want to develop or increase opportunities in which international students can take initiative and have leadership roles in social situations. Counselors may also be a resource for teachers by advocating for greater opportunities for international students to demonstrate their initiative and leadership abilities.

Counselors can use a self-concept inventory to help international students better understand how they perceive themselves. Counselors can help them see areas of strength and also help them identify the areas that would improve their quality of life. For example, the areas of weaknesses and possible faulty perceptions they are imposing onto themselves due to situational hardships can be addressed.

Implications for Research

Due to the small sample size of this study, these findings should be understood as preliminary and further studies on international student self-concept need to be performed. The DOSC Form H was developed based on a norm group of college students in the USA without specifying the nationality of the students. Therefore, the group comparison made in this study between the norm group and the current study group of international students in the USA would have limited validity. Development of a self-concept inventory using norm groups with international students seems to be in great need. More studies on the strengths of international students are needed.

References

Bradley, G. (2000). Responding effectively to the mental health needs of international students. *Higher Education, 39,* 417-433.

Cheng, D., Leong, F., & Geist, R. (1993). Cultural differences in psychological distress between Asian and Caucasian American college students. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 21*(3)*,* 182-189. Retrieved April 11, 2006 from Academic Search Elite.

EdlTS. (1999, Spring). Dimensions of Self-Concept (DOSC) renormed. EdITS Resource and Development, 3-4.

Hair, J. F., Jr., Anderson, R. E., Tatham, R. L., & Black, W. C. (1998). *Multivariate data analysis* (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Kagan**,** H., & Cohen, J. (1990). Cultural adjustment of international students. *Psychological Science, 1,* 133-137.

Kilinc, A., & Granello, P. F. (2003). Overall life satisfaction and help-seeking attitudes of Turkish college students in the United States: Implications for college counselors. *Journal of College Counseling, 6,* 56-69. Retrieved April 11, 2006 from Academic Search Elite.

Kuo, Y-H. (2004). *Understanding international graduate students' experiences at Auburn University.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Auburn University, Auburn.

Luzio-Lockett, A. (1998). The squeezing effect: The cross-cultural experience of international students. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling. 26,* 209-224. Retrieved April 10, 2005 from Academic Search Elite.

Michael, W. B., Smith, R. A., & Michael, J. J. (1998). *Dimensions of self-concept (DOSC): Form H.* San Diego, CA: EdITS. Available at http://www.edits.net

Rahman, O., & Rollock, D. (2004). Acculturation, competence, and mental health among South Asian students in the United States. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling & Development, 32,* 130-143.

Robertson**,** M., Line, M., Jones, S., & Thomas, S. (2000). International students, learning environments and perceptions: A case study using the Delphi technique. *Higher Education Research & Development, 19,* 89-102.

Schmitt, J. T., Spears, R., & Branscombe, N. R. (2003). Constructing a minority group identity out of shared rejection: The case of international students. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 33,* 1-12.

Selvadurai, R. (1998). Problems faced by international students in American colleges and universities. *Community Review, 16,* 153-158. Retrieved March 18, 2006 from Academic Search Premier.

Tseng, W., & Newton. F. B. (2002). International students' strategies for well-being. *College Student Journal, 36,* 591-598.

Yeh, C. J., & Inose, M. (2003). International students' reported English fluency, social support satisfaction, and social connectedness as predictors of acculturative stress. *Counseling Psychology Quarterly, 30,* 15-28.

Yi, J. K., Lin, J. G., & Kishimoto, Y. (2003). Utilization of counseling services by international students. *Journal of Instructional Psychology, 30,* 333-343.

Appendix

Needs Assessment of International Students

 NOTE: We appreciate your help and cooperation in completing this survey. To protect your confidentiality, do not put your name or any other identifying information on the document. Please answer every question.

_____

Part I: Demographic information

Check the box(es) most applicable to you and/or fill in the blanks.

1. Gender: Male ____,   Female ____

2. Age: under 25____,   26-35 ____, above 36 ____

3. Marital status: Married____ , Single____

      If married, how many children ____ , Ages_____

      If married, spouse's status: Student_____,   Non-student_____

4. Education Level: Undergraduate ____ , Graduate: Masters'____, Doctorate____

5. Length of residence in United States:

      Less than 6 months_____, 6 months-less than 1 year ____, 1 year - less than

      2 years _____, 2 years - less than 3 years ____, 3 or more years ____

6. Length of residence in Auburn:

      Less than 6 months_____, 6 months-less than 1 year ____, 1 year - less than

2 years _____, 2 years - less than 3 years _____, 3 or more years _____

7. Country of Citizenship: _____

8. Financial Support: Institutions_____, Family_____

9. Transportation Availability: Own car_____, Public transportation_____, Car pool___

_____

Part II: Needs Assessment

For each of the following questions, please circle the number that best corresponds with your reply. (*5 means "completely satisfied" - 1 means "not at all"*).

1. **How would you rate your overall satisfaction with your life and experience at the university?**   1 2 3 4 5

2. **How would you rate your satisfaction with the each of the following areas of your life at the university?** (*5 means "completely satisfied" - 1 means "not at all"*).**

Academic life	1 2 3 4 5
Social life	1 2 3 4 5
Financial support	1 2 3 4 5
Scholarships	1 2 3 4 5
Assistantships	1 2 3 4 5
Work Study	1 2 3 4 5
Administrative support	1 2 3 4 5
International specific	1 2 3 4 5
Campus-wide	1 2 3 4 5
Meeting health concerns	1 2 3 4 5
Healthcare facilities (doctors, dentists, clinics)	1 2 3 4 5
Health Insurance	1 2 3 4 5
Mental Health Services	1 2 3 4 5
Adjustment support	1 2 3 4 5
Living conditions	1 2 3 4 5

Public Transportation	1 2 3 4 5
Community Resources	1 2 3 4 5

3. What are the areas in which you find, or have found, difficulties in promoting your well being at the university? *(5 means "extremely difficult" - 1 means "not at all difficult").* If item does not apply to you, please circle "N/A".

Limited language skills	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Fear of making mistakes when speaking English	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Cultural conflicts	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Understanding the host culture	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
American students' lack of understanding your culture	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Students' of other cultures lack of understanding of your culture	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Loneliness	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Isolation from host culture	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Feeling left out in classes	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Feeling left out at own department	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Feeling left out of extracurricular activities	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Difficulty speaking with major professors in department	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Difficulty speaking with professors outside of department	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Opportunities to develop friendships with students from other cultures	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Opportunities to develop friendships with students from your own culture	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Opportunities to develop friendships with American students	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Difficulty of working on group projects in major classes	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Difficulty of working on group project in classes outside of own department	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Support in meeting shopping needs	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Support in finding place to worship	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Support in finding utilities and other community services	1 2 3 4 5 N/A

Support in finding health related facilities	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Orientation to university community	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Family oriented campus activities	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Feelings of insecurity	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Feelings of inadequacy	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Academic performance/achievement expectations	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Feeling guilt if not meeting academic goals	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Racial discrimination and prejudice	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Mental health concerns (such as stress, depression and anxiety)	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Physical illness	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Understanding of lectures	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
In-class discussions and presentations	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Group work	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Amount of reading materials	1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Amount of written assignments	1 2 3 4 5 N/A

4. **What services or programs would do you want to see in place at the university?** *(5 means "extremely important" - 1 means "not at all important").*

Group activities among the students with same nationality	1 2 3 4 5
Group activities with students from diverse national backgrounds	1 2 3 4 5
Family oriented campus activities	1 2 3 4 5
Off-campus job opportunities (Co-op, etc)	1 2 3 4 5
Temporary work permit (Internship/Research)	1 2 3 4 5
Practical means for dealing with possible racial discrimination	1 2 3 4 5
Counseling for international students	1 2 3 4 5
Workshops	1 2 3 4 5
Support groups	1 2 3 4 5

Peer-pairing programs (with a host culture peer)	1 2 3 4 5
English learning center	1 2 3 4 5
Culturally sensitive services from administrative personnel	1 2 3 4 5
Culturally sensitive teaching and guidance by professors	1 2 3 4 5
Translation services and resources	1 2 3 4 5

Other services: (List)_____

Part III. Comments and Experiences

Please feel free to offer any additional thoughts and ideas that you think might help improve the lives and adjustment of international students attending Auburn University.

Please describe any personal experiences you might want to share concerning positive or negative issues confronting you on campus. **Please be specific**.

 Thank you for your participation in this survey.