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Transitional Adjustment Intervention for International Students in U.S. Colleges

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Abstract

As international students make up an increasing body of students on U.S. college campuses, how to effectively assist their transition becomes an emerging task for staff in this educational setting. This intervention is designed to inform educational administrators as a protocol to help international students transition to U.S. college campuses. The intervention aims to target international students' psychological adaptation by addressing social support and adaptive emotion regulation through increasing social self-efficacy, level of assertiveness and mindfulness. Proposed interventions include peer mentoring, assertiveness training and mindfulness exercises. Details on implementation and evaluation of this program are provided. The intervention proposed incorporates the social support as well as emotion-focused coping component, which has not been proposed nor tested in the literature.

Keywords: international students, acculturation, perceived social support, social self-efficacy, mindfulness

As the number of international students is increasing on U.S. college campuses, how to work with and assist this population effectively has become more important for educators, especially during the transition period. In light of this phenomenon, considerable research has been conducted on factors which influence acculturation and adjustment among international students in the U.S. (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). However, little is known about effective interventions regarding this concern. Thus, this intervention is proposed to inform educators about how to assist international students based on theoretical and empirical findings related to their transitional adjustment process. Core psychological concepts are reviewed and targeted interventions with detailed descriptions are proposed. In addition, how the interventions work to achieve the goal and evaluation are discussed thereafter.

Introduction

According to *Open Doors* (Institute of International Education, 2015), 974,926 international students studied during the 2014-2015 academic year in U.S. colleges and universities. This number has grown steadily in the past few decades. However, the cultural exploration journey usually accompanies with excitements as well as challenges. While excited about the new environment, international students also face the difficulties resulted from unfamiliarity with the new education system and social norms, and most likely from limited language proficiency. In addition, unlike immigrants, international students typically settle in the host country by themselves without social networks and resources that they used to have in their home countries. The difficulties may be attenuated by contextual factors like discrimination and result in homesickness and social isolation (Akhtar, 2011; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994; Wedding, McCartney & Currey 2009).

The accumulation of challenges could result in *acculturative stress*, which is individuals' psychological and physiological adaptation in reaction to the new culture (Berry, 2005) and highly associated with mental health concerns for international students (Constantine, Okazaki, & Utsey, 2004; Misra, Crist, & Burant, 2003; Wei et al., 2007; Wilton & Constantine, 2003). A variety of factors have been examined contributing to acculturative stress. Perceived social support, defined as perceptions of

available psychological and material resources when needed to cope with stress, is one of the most important factors (Meng, Huang, Hou and Fan, 2014; Misra et al., 2003; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Social support is identified as a variable in several acculturation models (e.g. Arends-Toth & van de Vijver, 2006; Berry, 2006; Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001) that can decrease acculturative stress and assist adaptation. Partially due to limited language proficiency, lacking social support and social connectedness can cast a negative impact on international students' psychological well-being (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Indirect evidence on the moderation effect of social support between acculturative stress and mental health symptoms asserts the potential effectiveness of broadening international students' social network and support in the new environment on alleviating acculturative stress (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Relevant behavioral interventions involving pairing international students with domestic students have shown evidence to enhance social support and other positive influences (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

In Mallinckrodt (2000) interpersonal process model, social self-efficacy is related to perceived social support as a part of social competencies. Generated from Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, Smith and Betz (2000) defined social self-efficacy as "an individual's confidence in her/his ability to engage in the social interactional tasks necessary to initiate and maintain interpersonal relationships" (Lin, 2006, pp.4-5). Also, higher social self-efficacy is associated with more assertive behaviors in a new social environment (Smith & Betz, 2000). However, international students exhibit lower social self-efficacy and lack the necessary assertiveness skills desired in American culture to build connections in the new environment (Lin, 2006; Tavakoli, Lumley, Hijazi, Slavin-Spenny, & Parris, 2009). Tavakoli et al. (2009) developed an assertiveness training specifically targeting international students and has shown positive results in alleviating acculturative stress.

In Smith and Khawaja (2011), future interventions for international students can address more on social support and effective coping skills. The importance of coping strategies is addressed by Khawaja and Dempsey (2007, 2008), as they found that, while the level of psychological distress is similar between international and domestic students, the coping strategies make differences. International students tend to apply maladaptive coping strategies (including denial, self-blame, venting, behavioral disengagement and substance use) when psychological distress

presented comparing to the domestic students (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2007, 2008). Even though the research on adaptive coping strategies adopted by international students are limited, some has shown that acceptance and self-compassion have positive effect on acculturative stress (Lin & Betz, 2009, as cited in Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Mindfulness, is a concept closely related to acceptance and self-compassion, involving an attitude of openness, curiosity and acceptance in the present moment with intentional regulation of attention (Hayes & Feldman, 2004). Mindfulness varied in forms from Yoga and meditation, to walking and eating, which can be easily learned and incorporated in daily life with fewer stigmas. Thus, mindfulness can be viewed as a less stigmatized alternative to equip international students with effective emotion-coping skills other than formal counseling services, which the international population tends to underutilize.

Limited empirically tested interventions for international students' adjustment are available. Interventions have been developed focusing on practical and academic matters from a behavioral approach, like Excellence in Experiential Learning and Leadership (Mak, Westwood, Barker, & Ishiyama, 1999, as cited in Smith & Khawaja, 2011) and cross-cultural relationship bonding (Abe, Talbot, & Geelhoed, 1998; Shigaki & Smith, 1997, as cited in Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Even some positive effect of these interventions were found, those directly addressing psychological adaptation through social support and coping strategies are still in need (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). In light of what was mentioned above, the objectives of this intervention include: 1) overcoming communication barriers through increasing international students' assertiveness, 2) increasing international students' perceived social support and social self-efficacy through peer mentoring, and 3) teaching international students mindfulness exercises as resources and skills to cope with emotions.

Method

Participants

Students whose first language are not English but have adequate level of English proficiency for admission to the university can be recruited to the program. Both undergraduate and graduate students can be included.

Demographic information of international students needs to be collected, including gender, age, education (undergraduate, master's or doctoral students), marital status, country of origin and length of stay in the host country.

Procedure

Recruitment and consent. The program will be advocated as a program in assisting international students' transition and success in the U.S. colleges. Recruitment will occur at the beginning of Fall and Spring semester through orientation events for international students and International Student Office. Participants will sign the consent forms approved by institutional review board and complete the demographic questionnaire as well as the baseline of outcome measures. When the interventions are completed by the end of the semester, the outcome measures will be provided again for the participants to complete.

Peer Mentoring. Laughrin (1999) found that, when facing stressful situations, a personally known (low authority figure) and cultural helper is perceived to be most helpful. Pairing up international students with domestic students has shown to facilitate social adjustment, social support, increased utilization of university services and academic performance (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). In this intervention, both domestic and international upperclassmen who are interested in pairing up with incoming international students will be recruited for the proposed study. The peer mentor relationship lasts for a whole semester. The peer mentor is supposed to hold accepting and helping attitude rather than being culturally insensitive. Peer mentors also serve a role as cultural consultants for international students on how the interpersonal exchanges and other cultural rules work in the American culture. Through Peer Mentoring, the freshmen will be able to foster interpersonal networks and learn about the host culture faster in the new environment. The peer mentor will be assisting incoming international students in locating campus and community resources according to their needs. Especially at the beginning of the school year, this would be tremendously helpful for incoming international students. Upperclassmen who are also international students will also share their experiences on both challenges and excitement of their journey in the U.S. It is expected that international students would get experiences in

forming interpersonal relationship in the new environment, getting familiar with resources on campus, learning personal experiences from other peers, and perceiving more social support after paired with a mentor.

Assertiveness Trainings. According to Tavakoli et al. (2009), appropriate communication in the U.S. context is an important concern of international students. Assertiveness training in a group format is shown to have a positive effect on emotional adjustment (Tavakoli et al., 2009). Based on the research findings of Tavakoli et al. (2009), the training sessions will provide international students culturally sensitive materials on assertive communication in daily interpersonal exchanges bi-weekly. Scenarios includes setting appropriate boundary, knowing the boundary of self-disclosure and express personal ideas properly. The training also emphasize practice inside (e.g. role play) and outside the classroom and assist students with feedback. A peer mentor would be a good partner to practice with at the beginning. Level of assertiveness will be assessed so that researchers can explore whether increased level of assertiveness is associated with other outcome variables.

Mindfulness Exercises. Among existed programs, no empirical evidence has shown to effectively address the emotional distress and psychological adjustment among international students (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). The current proposal draws on the research evidence that mindfulness meditation helps facilitate emotion regulation process (Chambers, Gullone & Allen, 2009; Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program, for example, has shown to be effective on a range of clinical and stressed non-clinical populations with medical or psychological symptoms, which are also among international students who experience acculturative stress (Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004; Nyklíček, & Kuijpers, 2008). Specifically, level of mindfulness has been shown to have an effect on mood and perceived stress as well as to predict academic performance among college students (Caldwell, Harrison, Adams, Quin, & Greeson, 2010; Shao & Skarlicki, 2009). Further, international students who present more acceptance and self-compassion reported less acculturative stress or less depressive symptoms (Lin & Betz, 2009, as cited in Smith & Khawaja, 2011). International students will be invited to join psychoeducation groups to learn and practice mindfulness. The mindfulness group needs to be advocated

in a way less stigmatized to the participants and lasts for eight weeks. During each week, a mindfulness-related topic will be discussed in the context of life experiences in the new environment. Topics include basic concepts of mindfulness, understanding acceptance; practicing informal exercises like mindful walking and mindful eating as group activities; raising awareness of inner critic and common humanities (e.g., we all experience up-and-downs); practicing defusion exercises like Leaves on a Stream (a defusion exercise involves observing and visualizing internal thoughts and feelings without judgements). International students will be encouraged to practice outside the group by raising inner awareness of the present moment, observing non-judgmentally, and gaining a sense of acceptance in their life. Participants will be invited to share their reflections on how they apply the techniques in daily life and supported without judgement.

Measures

Scale of Perceived Social Self-Efficacy (PSSE, Smith & Betz, 2000) will be used to measure social self-efficacy in this program. PSSE consists of 25 items using a 5-point Likert scale measuring the level of confidence in a range of social situations, ranging from 1 (*no confidence at all*) to 5 (*complete confidence*). Smith & Betz (2000) found high internal consistency reliability (Cronbach alpha = .94) and good test-retest reliability results ($r=0.82$ with a three-week interval). Social self-efficacy also showed strong construct and discriminant validity.

In addition, emotion regulation is measured by Difficulty in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS; Gratz & Roemer, 2004). Six dimensions of emotion regulation were assessed including lack of awareness, clarity and acceptance of emotional responses, limited emotion regulation strategy repertoire, and difficulties controlling impulses and engaging in goal-directed behavior when negative emotions emerge (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). High internal consistency was reported by Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = .93$). Item-to-total correlations ranged from $r = .16$ to $r = .69$ (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). Good construct validity and predictive validity were also reported (Gratz & Roemer, 2004).

The Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (Rathus, 1973) will be used to measure change in assertiveness level. This 30-item schedule measures how individuals present themselves in specific situations when assertive

behavior could benefit them. The schedule has moderate to high test-retest reliability ($r = .78$; $p < .01$) and good validity (Rathus, 1973).

Social Support Questionnaire Short Form-Revised (SSQSR, Sarason, Sarason, Shearin & Pierce, 1987) is a 12 item, 6-point Likert scale. It measures the perceived network and satisfaction in social support. The network subscale assesses how many people the reporter could gain help from and the satisfaction subscale measures the satisfaction regarding the social support received.

Also, the purpose of the program is to help international students with acculturative stress and thus Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (ASSIS, Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1998) will be applied to examine the overall effectiveness of this intervention. ASSIS was designed to measure perceived acculturative stress of international students using a 36-item 7-point Likert scale. The scale consists of seven subscales including Perceived discrimination, Homesickness, Perceived hate, Fear, Stress due to change, Guilt and Miscellaneous (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1998).

Design and Analysis

Participants in the program will be randomly assigned to the control group (waiting list) and experiment group. The control group will be given the program in the following semester after the study begins. Descriptive statistics and F statistic will be conducted to compare demographic information. It is expected that there are no significant differences in the two groups at the baseline.

Only participants who complete the whole program will be included in the data analysis. Attrition and adherence analysis should be provided. To test the first hypothesis, one factor ANOVA analysis should be applied to compare the differences in changes in acculturative stress/perceived social support in two groups. It is expected that the differences in changes in acculturative stress/perceived social support between the two groups will be statistically significant. The decrease in acculturative stress for participants in the experiment group is expected to be greater than for participants in the control group and the increase in perceived social support for participants in the experiment group is also expected to be significantly more comparing to the control group. Further, to test the second hypothesis, the relationship between increased social self-efficacy/level of assertiveness/adaptive emotion regulation and acculturative stress/perceived

social support in the experiment group should be explored separately. It is expected that social self-efficacy/assertiveness level and adaptive emotion regulation will be positively associated with perceived social support and negatively associated with acculturative stress.

Conclusion

As international students become more and more visible on college campuses in the United States, concerns related to international students' cross-cultural adjustment process personally and academically grasp educators' attention. International students have been reported to underutilize counseling services on campus and therefore an alternative format of intervention is needed (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Earlier programs designed for international students have focused on important skills in the new environment through workshops (Mak, Westwood, Barker, & Ishiyama, 1999, as cited in Smith & Khawaja, 2011) or supporting group environment (Carr, Miki Koyama and Thiagarajan, 2003). Differentiating from former programs, the current program especially addresses socio-emotional adjustment of international students by facilitating building social support and coping strategies, especially emotional adaptive strategies. This current study proposes mindfulness as an intervention targeting the emotion regulation process, which has not been emphasized in the existed programs for international students, but has shown to be very helpful for many populations. Even though the intervention components are proposed based on evidence, cautious decisions should be made regarding the effectiveness of this program. Program evaluation should be conducted in the future based on the information provided in this article.

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