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behavioristic, and cognitivist frameworks:  
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# Examining culture shock from anthropological, psychoanalytic, behavioristic, and cognitivist frameworks: Acculturative stress of international students at college in the United States

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## Abstract

Adapting to a new culture entails a range of psychological responses that can be classified as acculturative stress—more commonly known as “culture shock”. The conceptualization and theoretical classification of acculturative stress presented in this paper draws on anthropological, psychoanalytic, behavioristic, and cognitivist frameworks. Typical symptoms of acculturative stress are feelings of deprivation/alienation, loneliness, sense of hate and fear, stress due to change, the sense of guilt, the experiences of discriminatory, and academic struggles. The purpose of this paper was to examine several types of culture shock and to investigate the possible support mechanisms available for students (e.g., supportive social networks, counseling services) that experience this form of cultural maladjustment.

*Key words* : culture shock, management of acculturative stress, international student, college student, college counseling

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## Introduction

Student populations at universities are becoming increasingly more diverse, with over one million international students enrolled in universities around the world (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1998). In the United States, the number of international students studying at universities reached 1.09 million in the 2018 academic year (The Institute of International Education, 2018). Because of this increased diversity, counselors can expect to see clients of student from diverse cultural backgrounds (Fuertes & Brobst, 2002). Students studying outside of their home countries often have

to adapt to new cultural systems and social practices. Adjustment to a different culture is referred to as acculturation (Berry, 2003), a process which may entail adjustment challenges that are physical, social, and psychological in nature (e.g., homesickness, language difficulties, academic struggles, anxiety, and disorientation). Collectively, these problems have been labeled as acculturative stress, more commonly known as culture shock (Gonzales, 2003).

The purpose of this paper is twofold. The first is to examine the concept of culture shock using multidisciplinary perspectives. The second is to investigate possible means of support for students

who experience this form of cultural maladjustment. Anchored in Watanabe’s theoretical framework (Watanabe, 2003), the paper is organized as follows: (1) description of acculturation frameworks; (2) definition of culture shock; (3) overview of symptoms and types of culture shock; and (4) review of possible support mechanisms for international students experiencing culture shock. It will be argued that capturing the multiple angles of this phenomenon is best done by classifying it using anthropological, psychoanalytic, behavioristic, and cognitivist perspectives.

**Acculturation framework**

Acculturation is a phenomenon that emerges when individuals of different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact and experience subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups

(Redfield et al., 1936). The changes of individuals, and not the group as a whole, can be grouped under the term psychological acculturation (Graves, 1967). Berry (1980) described four ways two cultures can relate to each other (see Figure 1). Integration occurs when each group maintains their original culture while valuing and maintaining contact with the other culture. Assimilation occurs when a group does not maintain its original culture but values and maintains contact with the other culture. Separation occurs when the group maintains its original culture but does not value or maintain contact with the other culture. Marginalization occurs when neither maintenance of the group’s own culture nor contact with the other culture is kept. As this model shows, acculturation can be classified according to how people view and value their original culture and the foreign culture.

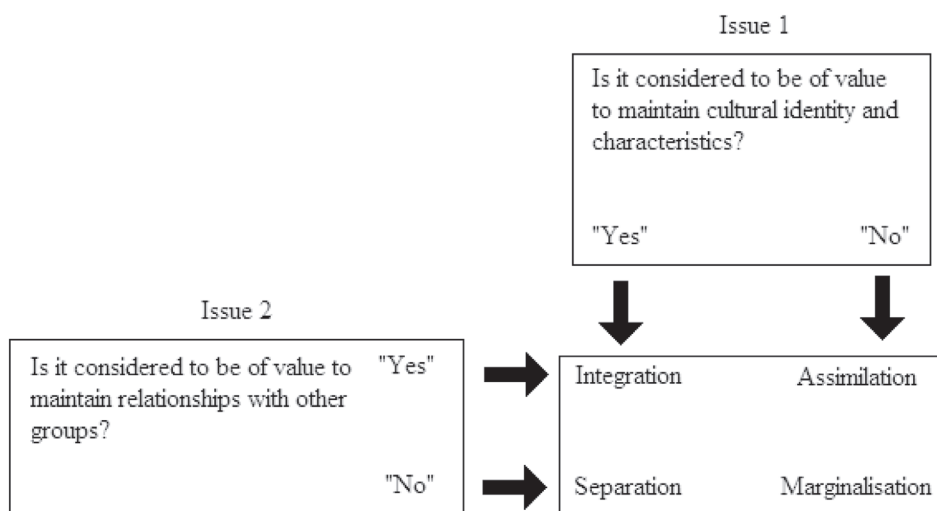


Figure 1 Berry’s (1980) acculturation framework

**Traditional definitions of culture shock**

**The original use of “culture shock” from Anthropology**

The term “culture shock” was first used by Oberg (1960), and is “precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse”. Oberg (1960) explains that these signs

and cues include the ways in which we orient ourselves to the situations of daily life, for example: when to shake hands and what to say when meeting people; how to make purchases; when to accept and refuse invitations; and when to speak formally or informally. Oberg argues that these cues may be words, gestures, facial expressions, customs, or norms acquired in while

growing up, and are as much a part of our culture as the language we speak or the beliefs we accept. From this perspective, then, culture shock is the sense of loss, confusion, anxiety, and tension experienced when someone does not know what something means because of their inability to recognize signs and symbols in a new society.

**Psychological definition (1): Psychoanalytic approach to culture shock**

In order to conceptualize culture shock more deeply, I first touch upon a theoretical framework that specifically examines the internal dynamics of psychology, namely psychoanalysis. As described previously, acculturation broadly refers to the adaptation of individuals and/or groups to new cultural norms (Rudmin, 2003). Acculturation is accompanied by multiple challenges which can be categorized twofold: (a) the creation of a new psychosocial infrastructure which includes a source of income, personal attachments, societal memberships, and the negotiation of new norms; and (b) mourning the loss of the life experienced prior to transition to the new culture, such as immigration (Choudhry, 2001). The latter challenge is critical to consider during the acculturation process.

**Psychological definition (2): The behaviorist approach to culture shock**

Another psychological definition of culture shock comes from behavioral psychology. According to this perspective, “culture shock is a stress reaction where salient psychological and physical rewards are generally uncertain and hence difficult to control or predict” (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Therefore, a person in a foreign country is viewed as anxious, confused and apparently apathetic until he or she has had time to develop a new set of cognitive constructs to understand and enact the appropriate behavior (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). The word “reward” used here is a key term borrowed from behaviorism. When

people do not obtain familiar rewards as a result of engaging in familiar behaviors, they are thought to experience culture shock.

**Psychological definition (3): A cognitivist approach to culture shock**

According to Triandis (1994), culture shock occurs when people who interact with members of a different culture experience a loss of control, especially when they cannot understand the behavior of the people from the host culture. Conversely, Triandis pointed out that if someone can make judgments about the causes of another’s behavior that are similar to the judgments made by members of the other’s culture (Triandis, 1975), they can understand the intentions behind the behavior. The process of inferring the reasons for another’s behavior is called “Isomorphic Attribution (Triandis, 1975)”, and is thought to lessen culture shock. Therefore, a cognitivist definition of culture shock holds that it occurs when individuals are not able to realize isomorphic attribution. The degree of perceived cultural similarity is thought to be affected by the following variables:

- (1) The greater the actor’s language competence in the other person’s language, the greater the perceived similarity. Those who speak the same language appear more similar than those who do not speak the language.
- (2) The greater the network overlap with the other person, the greater the perceived similarity. In other words, the more things two people have in common, including friends and acquaintances, the more they will see each other as similar.
- (3) The more equal-status contact between the two, the greater the perceived similarity.
- (4) The more superordinate goals exist, the greater the perceived similarity. Of course, any element (e.g., age and gender) that people have in common will increase their perceived similarity, but goals are especially important.
- (5) Perceived similarity plus opportunities for

contact results in interpersonal situations that are rewarding. The greater the reward, the more likely it is that people will seek interactions with those who rewarded them. More interactions between individuals will lead to a greater network overlap (common friends). Network overlap and frequent interactions result in more isomorphic attributions, which will ultimately result in less culture shock.

Accordingly, culture shock is also called schema shock in the sense that there are different schemata of behavior.

**Symptoms and types of acculturative stress**

**Predictors of acculturative stress**

There are some studies that have reported on the predictors of acculturative stress of international students in the United States. Duru and Poyrazli (2007) showed that marital status, English competency, social connectedness, adjustment difficulties, neuroticism, and openness to experience were significant predictors of the acculturative stress of Turkish international

students. More specifically, the authors showed that: (a) social support, social support satisfaction, and social connectedness were related to lower levels of acculturative stress; (b) there was a significant negative relationship between neuroticism and adjustment outcomes; (c) the English competency of the students was shown to help student’s general adjustment to the new culture and academic environment; and (d) acculturative stress did not significantly differ according to gender or age.

Yeh and Inose (2003) found that self-reported English language fluency, social support satisfaction, and social connectedness were significant negative predictors of acculturative stress (i.e., reduced levels of acculturative stress). They noted that the positive influence of interdependence and close connections on acculturative stress is related to the cultural values of collectivism, which many Asian, African, and Latino students share. Similarly, Poyrazli et al. (2004) demonstrated that students with higher levels of English proficiency and social support tended to experience lower levels of acculturative stress (see Figure 2).

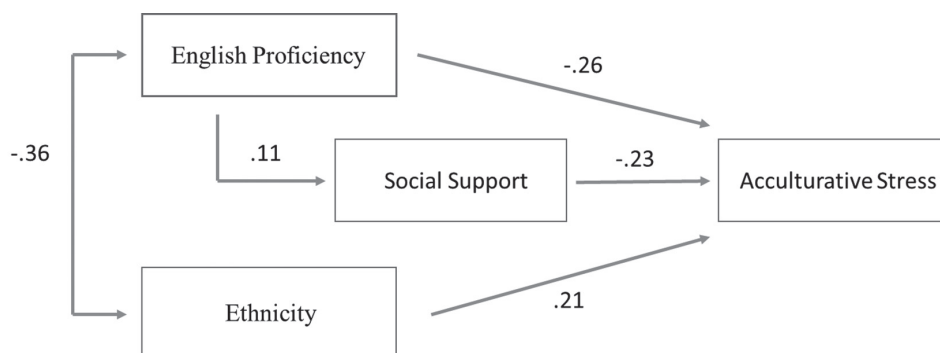


Figure2 Predicting Acculturative Stress (from Poyrazli et al.[2004])

**Symptoms of acculturative stress**

According to Kim (1995), acculturative stress is associated with temporary personality disintegration in the form of emotional uncertainty, confusion, and anxiety. Excessive exposure to stress can lead

to health problems such as lack of appetite and sleep, low energy levels, and headaches. Sandhu and Asrabadi (1991) conducted a survey of 128 international students to provide an in-depth description of the phenomenon of acculturative stress. Six main symptoms emerged from the analysis: (1)

perceived deprivation/alienation, which refers to a sense of powerlessness, meaninglessness, and social estrangement; (2) loneliness caused by homesickness, missing one's significant others in the native country, the sense of being lost in the unfamiliar surroundings, and the loss of emotional and social support; (3) strong negative feelings toward host nationals in response to their culturally biased verbal and nonverbal communications; (4) a sense of fear related to the sense of insecurity in unfamiliar surroundings, perceived sense of racial discrimination, sense of inferiority, and off and on hostile relations between foreign students and those from the host country; (5) stress due to change; and (6) a sense of guilt stemming from the belief that attunement to the host culture is a betrayal to the native culture. These findings can be considered to be more precise than a general categorization of symptoms of acculturative stress (e.g., loneliness, homesickness, severe depression, confusion, and disorientation) (Sandhu and Asrabadi, 1991). Chavajay and Skowronek (2008) similarly reported three main symptoms of acculturative stress: (1) stress from discrimination, i.e., feelings of being racially rejected, alienated, or discriminated against by members of the host culture; (2) loneliness, or feelings of loneliness stemming from a lack of physical interaction with friends and loved ones; and (3) academic struggles and challenges associated with them (though not typically considered to be a direct symptoms).

#### **Possible support for international students**

Several studies have discussed the possible support systems in place for managing acculturative stress. Poyrazli et al. (2004) suggest using prevention and treatment measures based on the two main factors shown to attenuate acculturative stress (English proficiency and social support). These suggestions overlap with Triandis' (1994) findings that language competency and similar experiences/networking may be effective for reducing culture shock. Based on these studies, the following can be considered to be options

to manage this phenomenon.

First, counseling interventions should be aimed at helping students to build social networks with Americans and thus increase their social support systems. Counselors can offer workshops such as "Living in the US" which aim to develop social and intercultural communication skills that may help international students easily interact with their American peers. Second, ongoing support systems can be offered through the international student offices such as support groups and stress-coping skills. Ye (2006) showed that online support networks (e.g., websites developed by Chinese student associations at several American universities; bbs.mit.edu, <http://huaren.us>) are helpful for reducing the negative effects of acculturative stress on Chinese international students. A key feature of these systems is the ability for members who share similar experiences of living in a foreign country (such as adapting to the new academic system, dealing with ethnic stereotypes) to offer and/or receive support to/from each other. Ye (2006) suggested that it would be beneficial for the future research to compare the efficacy of the types of support which students receive (i.e., face-to-face vs online).

As stated earlier, students who feel socially connected and satisfied with their social networks are less likely to experience acculturative stress. Based on this, Yeh and Inose (2003) suggested that counselors should develop programs that build communities and connections among international students. They especially emphasize that counseling efforts should focus on developing alternative, group-oriented ways of helping international students that emphasize their interdependence and social connectedness. Counselors may collaborate with various student organizations, clubs, dormitories, international student offices, and ESL (English as a second language) teachers to help international students build communities and create informal networks of support (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Additionally, international students may benefit

from cultural exchange programs that pair them with graduate student counselors enrolled in practicum courses, allowing them to receive a less formal manner of services. These sorts of programs may be beneficial for those who are reluctant to seek help for their acculturative distress. Finally, Tavakoli et al. (2009) elaborated on an assertiveness training program for reducing acculturative stress. The treatment in their study involved educating students about making and declining requests, disagreeing, and sharing personal information, and practicing these situations via modeling, role-playing, feedback, and application. The results showed that the training was rated positively by the students, suggesting that the design, content, and culturally sensitive manner of its presentation were highly valued (Tavakoli et al., 2009).

### Conclusion

This paper has shown how anthropological, psychoanalytic, behavioristic, and cognitivist perspectives can be helpful in defining and interpreting culture shock. As shown in the results of several empirical studies, English competence, social networks, and support systems are factors that can prevent acculturative stress among international students in the United States. College-level clinicians can take these issues into account to help students to deal with cultural issues in a new environment.

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