Life being an International Student in the United States: Acculturation, Culture Shock, and Identity Transformation

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University of San Francisco

Life being an International Student in the United States: Acculturation, Culture Shock, and Identity Transformation

A Thesis Proposal Presented to
The Faculty of the School of Education
International and Multicultural Education Department

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in International & Multicultural Education

by
Lai Yan Vivyan Lam
December 2017
Life being an International Student in the United States:
Acculturation, Culture Shock, and Identity Transformation

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

in

INTERNATIONAL AND MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

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UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approval by all the members, this thesis has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

Approved:

Dr. Melissa Ann Canlas                             Date
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ABSTRACT

The population of international students at community colleges in the United States has increased significantly over the past decade. International students play a big role in building the cultural diversity on campus by bringing over different cultures and sharing their global perspective to the local community. However, they often face challenges adapting into American culture due to cultural differences in education system, language, lifestyle, etc. By looking into the acculturation process of international students to analyze the culture shock and cultural identity changes they experienced, this paper intends to seek ways to help this group of students to ease their acculturative stress and to maximize their study abroad experience. Two focus groups with a total of eight international students were held at a community college in California to gather ideas, opinions, and stories about their college life in the United States surrounding the topic of acculturation, culture shock, and self-identity. Results from our participants indicated that international students experience significant changes in everyday life and various level of culture shock. The results are greatly depending on the students’ personality and social support network. At the same time, results also suggested that the acculturation experience would strengthen international students’ cultural identities provided with a supportive multicultural learning environment. The acculturation experience is both bitter and sweet giving students acculturative stress yet an eye-opening global adventure.
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

During the final year at high school in Hong Kong, I considered many options to continue higher education. With an average academic score, it was nearly impossible for me to pursue my ideal major at top local universities so I sought to study abroad in the United Kingdom, Australia, or the United States where English is the primary language of instruction. For months, I conducted research on the Internet about colleges, universities, and institutions in different countries. The decision-making process was influenced by a desire to be close to family members and affordability. Therefore, I chose to pursue higher education beginning at a community college in the United States. I arrived in San Francisco with a desire to have transformative experiences while I pursued my education dreams. However, there were challenges I encountered I had not anticipated as I found myself lost in the foreign environment. Later, I became privy to other experiences as I worked with international students at community college and university level. I learned that I was not the only international student who had experienced challenges acclimating when I arrived in the United States, especially those who enroll in a transfer program at community colleges. I began to ruminate about stories of overseas experience and personal development of international students at community colleges as they study in this country.

Statement of Problem

“International students” are foreign-born students who are attending college with a student visa, and intending to return to their country of origin (Teranishi, Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2011, p.155). Their concerns and needs are both academic and social in nature and are often influenced by academic adaptation, language ability, cultural differences, and pre-conceived expectations of student life in the United States (Brauss, Lin, & Baker, 2015; Özturgut
First, many international students have difficulties in adapting to the academic system and classroom style in the United States. The unique American education system and classroom style is usually different from the education they received in their home country (Bista & Foster, 2011). For example, the grading system in China is based on percentage and rank while the grading system in the United States is based on grade point average (GPA) with a specific calculation and grade scale. Many international students do not even know how to calculate and read their GPA when they get their grades in the first semester. In American classrooms, it is generally less strict with an open space for students to share opinions compared to that of other countries. The unfamiliarity as a result created confusion and uncertainty in students regarding how to achieve academically in this foreign country. Understanding the difficulties international students would have, most colleges provide an orientation, special learning space, and other supporting services for this group of students, but many international students would still go through the panic moments when culture shock hits.

Second, languages become a barrier for international students as English is not the first language for most of them (Bista & Foster, 2011). Looking at general college admission requirements in the United States, college level admission requires international students to meet a minimum English language proficiency requirement to grant college admission and an issue of a Form I-20, the Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant Student Status. TOEFL (Test Of English as a Foreign Language) and IELTS (The International English Language Testing System) are the most commonly accepted criteria that prove a student’s English proficiency. This admission requirement set an extra gate to ensure international students are prepared for learning in English. However, language proficiency does not always correlate to a student's academic performance because of the different required TOEFL/IELTS score between different institutions.
and the different demand for language proficiency between different majors and courses (Lowinger, He, Lin & Chang, 2014). Since English is a second language for most international students, academic language in English is another problem for them while they are adapting a new American life. Especially in the first semester, they may have difficulties understanding the professors in class, participating in discussions, finishing all the required readings in time, and writing academic essays (Zhou, Freg & Bang; Huang; Lin & Yi; Kuo as cited in Gebhard, 2012).

Third, several researchers have determined international students often have the feeling of isolation and lack a sense of belonging (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui; Pan & Wong; Yan & Berliner as cited in Yao, 2016). Starting a new life in a new environment, most international students do not have any social connections in this new place. Making new friends and building new relationships with people from diverse cultural background can be a challenge to them (Yan & Sendall, 2016). The United States has unique social culture in greetings, building relationships, and communication which is distinct from other countries. International students easily identify themselves as outsiders among the local groups because of the sociocultural differences. Racial stereotypes also exist between international and domestic students and often create misunderstanding amongst them (Ritter, 2016). The differences between international and domestic students create pressure for international students to fit into the campus life and make friends with local students (Brauss, Lin, & Baker, 2015).

Fourth, the difference between students’ expectations before arrival and their actual experience upon arrival often results in problems adapting for international students (Bista & Foster, 2011). There are many reasons students from other countries choose to study in the United States. Some of those reasons are to pursue academic goals; to access education and training that is unavailable in their countries; to acquire a degree from an institution of higher
learning in the United States because it is viewed with a certain amount of prestige; or to escape unstable economic and political conditions (Özturgut & Murphy, 2009). The 2016 International Student Buyer Behavior Research focuses on international students’ perception of the major five English-speaking destination countries: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States (IDP Education, 2016). The results of the research revealed many international students thought the United States has the highest quality in education programs and the best graduate employment opportunities. Study abroad is a big decision for international students. Once they arrive, they are prepared to spend the next four years and the costly tuition and living expenses in this foreign country away from their family, friends, and everything they were familiar with. With the determination of achieving their educational goals, international students often expect the study abroad journey to be a positive life-changing experience and would not consider any difficulties they may encounter until they do. Unfortunately, starting a college life in a foreign place is not as easy as it seems especially for international students in the United States with the restrictions of maintaining their F-1 student immigration status. International students must attend a mandatory orientation required by the Department of Homeland Security to ensure all international students understand the Student and Visitor Program regulations and sign an agreement with the institution. Many students find this session overwhelming when they learn the importance of maintaining their visa status and find out that the rules are different from their expectations before they arrived in the United States. Many times students find it is not easy to digest so much information in a short period of time upon arrival. One common motivation to study in the United States is the opportunity to gain work experience outside home country (Roy, Lu & Loo, 2016), yet international students are not allowed to work off-campus without work authorization under the rules of the Department of
Homeland Security (Bista & Foster, 2011). Having a life far from their home country by themselves, students often develop homesickness and learn the difficulties to live their own life for the first time (Özturgut & Murphy, 2009). Lack of local support would make them feel vulnerable since they are not familiar with life in the United States. These unfamiliar experience in a foreign place is generally referred to the term “culture shock” (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping & Todman, 2008).

In addition, identity formation and role confusion occurs between the age of 13-19 when adolescents form through identity management (Erikson 1994). First year international students arrive in the United States between the age of 16 to 19 are more likely to experience identity crisis due to culture shock. Because of the study abroad experience, international students have become more aware of their own and the others’ ethnic and cultural identities (San Antonio & Ofori-Dwumfu, 2015). Coming from countries around the world, many international students have not experienced a life with diverse culture like the United States has, especially in California with a colorful immigrant history that built up the diversity of gender, race and ethnicity. However, ignorance about race and ethnicity can bring international students difficulties in recognizing their own cultural identity and adapting their role as an international student in this country.

All of the above factors add onto the dramatic culture shock that international students often experience, especially in their first year of arrival, that creates difficulties in adapting the foreign environment and affects their learning and academic performance.

**Background and Need for the Study**

The population of international students in the United States has steadily increased in the past 10 years (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2016). The United States has been
the destination of choice for international students since the mid-20th century. In 2013, the country hosted more international students than any other countries. The United Kingdom and Australia hosted the second and third most international students, 10% and 6% respectively (Zong & Batalova, 2016). From 2015-2016, 1,043,839 international students studied at various colleges and universities in the United States. (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2016a). The top five countries of origin are China (328,547), India (165,918), Saudi Arabia (61,287), South Korea (61,007), and Canada (26,973) (IIE, 2016b). Out of the total number of international students studying in the United States, 1 out of 3 studied at institutions in California, New York, or Texas.

The presence of international students contributes to the economic and cultural vitality of institutions of higher education in the United States. First, international students contribute to the country’s economy through expenditures on tuition and living expenses. From 2014-2015, they contributed $35.8 billion dollars to the economy (IIE, 2016c). This contribution allows institutions to hire additional instructors as well as provide more facilities and other resources that benefit all students. Second, they focus attention on the need to develop programs to provide domestic students with a more international perspective and support them to develop crucial cross-cultural skills. International students are also an integral part of the workforce of colleges and universities, serving in a variety of positions like teaching assistants and creating a more diverse campus.

In 2017, the Department of Homeland Security under the administration of President Trump implemented a number of immigration policies, including the travel ban from seven countries to restrict nationals with potential risk to enter the country (Executive Order No. 13769, 2017), visa sanctions implemented on four countries (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary,
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2017, Sep 13), and the reform of the current H-1B working visa application to protect job opportunities for citizens and local residents (U.S. Office of the Press Secretary, 2017, April 17). All international students who are legally staying and studying in the United States are closely being tracked and monitored under SEVIS, the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System that maintains information on international students’ immigration status (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2017). Under the SEVIS regulations, international students are limited to studying at the school they affiliated to and do not enjoy many rights that American citizens have. For example, they do not have the privilege as local students with financial aid or work opportunities other than on-campus jobs (Bista & Foster, 2011). Although the new immigration policies and rules did not apply directly to F-1 international students, the political tension between the United States and other countries and the rapid changes in immigration policies imperceptibly brought pressure to bear on international students. Many international students travel back to their home country during recess. They become more concerned about traveling and returning to the United States after recess due to rapidly changing immigration policies. In a project done by the University of California Student Association in 2017, some international students shared that they felt the changes after the election which has been scary (University of California Student Association, 2017). This intense political situation may deepen the culture shock they experience.

This study will be conducted at a community college in California. The enrollment of international students in community college has increased significantly in the past five years. The increase of international students indicates a greater need of international student services as they have become an important part of the campus.

**Purpose of the Study**
The purpose of this study is to understand the needs of international students in order to provide suggestions to help them to cope with culture shock and emerge into the American lifestyle and education in the most efficient and effective way. Looking into how culture shock would possibly change, transform, and reform international students’ cultural identity, this study provides a better understanding of international students' identities and roles in the new cultural environment. The study also gives useful advice for college staff and faculty in the international education field who interact with international students on a daily basis to enhance their service and provide the best support system for the students. The research paper is providing an in-depth case study of international students’ life in the United States focusing on two acculturative stress themes: culture shock and threat to cultural identity (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994). The case study helps researchers gain an insight into the life being an international student in the United States from their perspective.

**Research Questions**

This study suggests that the culture shock international students experience in their college life upon arrival in the United States will create a shift in their cultural identity and easily trigger identity crisis. This research aims to explore the following major question. Looking at the two acculturative stress themes: culture shock and threat to cultural identity, at what degree have international student experienced culture shock and cultural identity loss? Sub-questions include:

1. In what way do international students experience acculturation and recognize culture shock?
2. How does culture shock affect international students in their personal and academic life?
3. What role does culture shock play in the change of international students’ cultural identity?

**Theoretical Framework**

This study will examine the concept of culture shock as an acculturative stress looking into the definition of terms and the development of culture shock models. Acculturation is the process of adaptation to a second culture that one does not belong (Zhou et al., 2008). In an acculturative stress research study, Berry, Kim, Minde & Mok (1987) suggested that the acculturative process is often stressful for immigrants who moved to a new culture or sojourners who temporarily reside in a new culture.

The term culture shock became widely used after it was used by a Canadian anthropologist, Kalervo Oberg in 1960 in his published journal “Cultural Shock: Adjustment to New Cultural Environments”. Oberg later on defined culture shock with four stages: honeymoon, crisis, recovery, and adjustment (Kim, 2003). The honeymoon stage indicates an individual’s first arrival to the host country with excitement, fascination, and optimism. This is followed by the crisis stage, the individual starts to gain interactions and association with the others in the host country, and may have increased feeling of homesickness and starts to reject the new environment. The individual will eventually enter the recovery stage with increased skills and knowledge to adapt the new environment. The individual acquires a new culture, gains new perspectives and begins to accept the new worldviews. The last stage is adjustment stage where integration or assimilation will occur. The individual will be fully adapted into the new environment with their original culture retained or rejected. This four-stage model is the first culture shock model that is widely adopted for study and has been used as a baseline for research over the past 5 decades.
In a later research study of acculturative stress, Berry, Kim, Minde & Mok (1987) linked the relationship between acculturation and stress and indicated that acculturative stress is a reduction in individual’s health. They introduced the behavioral change of internal characteristics of individuals adopting a new culture and classified the changes as a result of acculturations into 6 categories: physical, biological, political, economical, cultural, and social changes (Berry, 1992). Furthermore, Berry (1988) proposed an acculturation framework and suggested four types of acculturative strategies: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization (Sam & Berry, 2010). This framework approached acculturation from a new perspective of breaking down the factors and elements during the acculturation process.

In the book Psychology of Culture Shock (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001), the authors introduce the ABC model of culture shock which is an active process describing how individuals feel, react, behave, and think when they are exposed to a new culture. Many critics have argued that Oberg’s culture shock model tends to view culture shock in a negative and passive way. The ABC model provided a positive view on culture shock instead of only viewing it as an unhealthy, negative, and passive phenomenon. The ABC model of culture shock has more comprehensive and dynamic features in measuring culture shock as an active and on-going process. The ABC model consists three components: affect, behavior and cognitions. The affective element identifies the feelings and emotions of how individuals cope with the acculturative stress. The behavioral element looks at how individual acquire new skills and learn to adapt the new environment. The cognitive element studies how individuals develop, change and maintain their social identities. Identity can be defined as “the stable inner sense of who a person is, which is formed by the successful integration of various experiences of the self into a coherent self-image” (Moule, 2012, p.151). In other words, we are not born with identity, but identity forms in
our consciousness along with our experience and established from the society norm. The ABC theory indicates that social identity plays an important role in the acculturation process.

**Methodology**

In order to provide an explicit case study that reflects the academic and cultural experience of international students at community college in the United States, exploratory research (Edwards, 1998) was conducted using qualitative research method and case-based strategies. Referencing the three major phases of a research project (Eckstein, 1975; Giorgi, 1986 as cited in Edwards, 1998), this study applied focused-descriptive work to conduct the research. Descriptive work “calls for detailed observation of the phenomenon and the identification of basic concepts and distinctions which will enable what has been observed to be described accurately” (Edwards, 1998, p.7). Focused-descriptive work provided in-depth analysis by examining details and asking specific questions of the phenomenon to the respondents (p.8). It was applied to examine the existing culture shock models and identity-related theory framework and analyze the nature of culture shock and identity change for international students.

Two focus groups consisting of 3 to 5 international students were held to gather ideas, opinions, and personal experience of international students. Individual interviews were conducted in addition to the focus group having a comprehensive conversation with each interviewee and provide further clarifications of personal experience, opinions, and ideas. A flyer was created to invite participants, and a total of 8 international students voluntarily joined the research study. Criteria of the participants included being an international student at a community college in California, currently enrolling in a transfer program or planning to transfer to a 4-year university, first time living overseas away from home, speaking languages other than English as their first language, and experiencing culture shock.
Limitations of the Study

The small sample size is the major limitation of the study. The results with this small sample size of eight international students are limited to the viewpoints and perspectives from these few participants while there is a population of over 7,000 international students studying at the 114 community colleges in California (CCC Chancellor’s Office, 2017). The study is carried out only within one community college. Since the larger population of community college international students may have various experience studying and living in different parts of the United States, it is difficult to generalize the results on a larger scale. While the population illustrates why results from this study cannot be entirely representative for all community college international students in the United States, it nonetheless captures substantive themes that contribute to an incremental understanding of the issues.

Furthermore, the results may also tend to be more positive and may not show all scenarios of the culture shock problem. Students joined and participated in this focus group initiatively and voluntarily. They were not selected or chosen. Therefore, the participants in this study tended to be more out-going, active and willing to speak out loud in public. Students with lower self-esteem may not participate in this kind of events initiatively because of their fear of sharing or being challenged, yet those students may possibly be the group who experience a higher level of culture shock with a low-confident personality and smaller social network. Similarly, no first-year students who had been in the United States for less than a year participated. One hypothesis is that they may be at an earlier stage in the culture shock model that will be discussed in details in the following chapter. As a result, all participants in this study were second-year students who had already been living in the United States for more than one year. The results were based on how well the participants remembered their experience in the
past one to two years and how well they told their stories. They might not be able to tell the stories in details as the memory faded, but the findings would be able to show a more complete process because second-year students had experienced more than new students.

**Significance of the Project**

This study is aim to help the local community to gain understanding of the life being an international student in the United States. International students play a significant role in building a diverse campus. They are living within the American culture and learning about it, but for the local community, it is not easy to understand the native culture of international students without experiencing it themselves. Building a harmonious multicultural campus requires the local community to learn, understand, and accept diverse cultures. In addition, the United States is a country developed from a diversity of race and ethnicity, and the American history brought up tremendous awareness on racism which most international students do not understand. It is important for staff and faculty to help both international and domestic students to raise awareness of identity recognition and cultural enrichment. Although the differences between international and domestic students cannot be changed, stereotypes and prejudice toward non-domestic students can be adjusted through cultural learning in education.

The study is also aim to help all stakeholders who work with or interact with international students to better understand the needs of international students. International student service staff is often tasked with processing international student admission applications and cultivating academic success and personal development for international students. With the growing population of international students at community colleges in California, there is the need of the international student service on campus to support this group of students who have unique concerns and needs. To provide the best service that fit international students’ needs and help
them thrive in higher education, it is important to bring different groups together, and all members within the school should have the knowledge of cultural shock phenomenon and understand the importance of multiculturalism. It is essential for staff and faculty to understand, embrace the diversity, and act as role model to the rest of the school community.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The problems discussed in the previous section come from the initial encounter of international students meeting the new American culture, at the same time, they are going through a change of stage in life from adolescent to becoming an adult. In this review of the literature, we first explore the theoretical framework of acculturation from previous educational and psychological research to define the terms and explain the phenomenon. This section introduces the process of acculturation from intercultural contact, cross-cultural transition to cultural shock/acculturative stress and recovery. Secondly, it looks specifically into cultural shock/acculturative stress and examines the relationship between cultural shock/acculturative stress, cross-cultural learning, and identity transformation.

Acculturation Theory

Acculturation theory has become more significant than ever. One reason is because of the development of advanced transportation and communication technology which has led to increased movements of people across borders and the rapid growth of globalization (Ward, et al., 2001, p.4). Traveling around the world is no longer only fantasy. New advanced transportation allows us to travel around the world with a much lower cost in a much shorter time. The development of communication technology like Wi-Fi and the innovation of wireless device like the smartphone dramatically increased the information flow and build us a more closely connected world. At the same time, the world wide web (www) provides an unprecedented platform to share information, knowledge, and any kind of media. Providing a better channel to collaborate, the ease of communication across the globe boosts the growth of international business and globalization. Besides technology, the increased number of immigration due to wars, political unsettles, and economic hardship around the world has also
expedited the emergence of different cultures and individuals’ experience of acculturation (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006). In his acculturation paper, Berry (2010) suggested that almost everyone lives in or moves to a “culturally plural society” would experience some degree of acculturation (p.473). Although acculturation happens to almost everyone, researchers usually focused on refugees, asylum seekers, sojourners, immigrants, expatriates, indigenous people, and ethnic minority (Sam & Berry, 2010) because these groups experience obvious and higher degree of culture shock and culture change during the acculturation process while experiencing a new life that is entirely different and separated from their original culture.

Acculturation can be seen in multiple aspects. Some see acculturation as an individual development while some see it as a group phenomenon. The acculturation theory developed by Redfield, Linton and Herskovits (1936) is the most commonly used definition of acculturation in research:

Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous firsthand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups... under this definition, acculturation is to be distinguished from culture change, of which it is but one aspect, and assimilation, which is at times a phase of acculturation...

(Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936, p. 149-152)

In the broader concept of intercultural contact, acculturation is the process of adapting into a second culture that one does not belong (Zhou et al., 2008), then results in culture change due to continuous contact and cross-cultural interactions between two distinct cultures (Berry et al., 1987). The process involves cross-cultural communication, cultural learning, changes, and adaptation.
According to the acculturation framework proposed by Berry (1984), there are four different acculturation strategies: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization (Sam & Berry, 2010). The adoption of strategy depends mainly on two factors: the acculturating group or individual’s interest in maintaining their original culture and their willingness to interact or even emerge into the new culture of the dominant group. First, assimilation strategy is used when the acculturating group has no interest in maintaining the original culture but is willing to adopt the new culture and living style of the majority group. Looking at the definition of acculturation by Redfield, Linton and Herskovits (1936), acculturation is distinguished from assimilation. Acculturation provide a multidimensional perspective while assimilation is one of the acculturation strategies used in cross-cultural interactions to adopt the new environment (Liu, 2000). Second, integration strategy is used when the acculturating group is maintaining their original society and adopting the majority culture at the same time. Third, separation occurs when the acculturating group decide to maintain their original culture but not adopting the majority culture. Fourth, marginalization occurs when the acculturating group is not maintaining their original culture but also rejecting the new culture of the majority group. From the perspective of a larger society, the four acculturative strategies also represent four different social phenomena, including the melting pot (assimilation), multiculturalism (integration), segregation (separation), and exclusion (marginalization) (Sam & Berry, 2010, p.477). Sam and Berry (2010) pointed out that acculturating groups do not always have the freedom to choose what adaptation strategy they use to participate in cross-cultural relations due to the restrictions by settlement policies or the attitudes local community has towards them (p.477).

The variable elements in the process of acculturation can result in multiple possible outcomes. One significant element is the changes experienced by the individual. Berry (1992)
revisited the behavioral change of internal characteristics of individuals adopting a new culture that he introduced with Kim, Minde and Mok (1987). He suggested six types of changes at a group level may be resulted from acculturation, including physical, biological, political, economical, cultural, and social changes (Berry, 1992). Physical changes are changes of the external environment such as housing, transportation, population and density. Biological changes include differences in nutritional intakes and geographical diseases. Political changes indicate a change in dominance patterns and dominant power. Economical changes depend on the shift of financial support or the individual’s pursuits in career. Cultural changes involve changes in languages, beliefs, education. Social changes are the altered social network, relationships, and in-group/out-group identity. On the other hand, researchers linked the relationship between acculturation and stress and suggested that the acculturation process is often stressful. Individuals and groups are often forced by external environment to unwillingly participate in the process of acculturation; hence the individual’s resistance to acculturation leads to acculturative stress (Berry et al., 1987). Culture shock/acculturative stress plays an important role in the process of acculturation, and it will be discussed further in the next session.

**Culture Shock/ Acculturative Stress**

**Oberg’s Culture Shock Model**

Researchers claimed that the term culture shock was first introduced by a Canadian anthropologist Kalervo Oberg in 1960 (Ward, et al., 2001, p.270; Berry, 2006, p.287) in his published journal “Cultural Shock: Adjustment to New Cultural Environments”. With further research on the origin of the term “culture shock”, Dutton (2012) claimed it is a misconception because the term had been used multiple times in conferences and publications before 1960 since its first appearance in an article regarding Mexican immigrants in *Pacific Affairs* in 1929 (p.63-
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Although Oberg did not coin the term “culture shock”, he was the first to study the subject in depth and develop the first culture shock model (Dutton, 2012, p.64).

Oberg (1960) defined that culture shock occurs when individual loses all familiar signs and goes onto the panic stage in the acculturation process when anxiety of adapting the culture change from the original culture to the new environment starts to build. He introduced and developed the concept of culture shock with four stages: honeymoon, crisis, recovery, and adjustment (Kim, 2003; Ward, et al., 2001, p.81). Oberg (1960) pointed out there is difference between individuals in the ability to adjust and adapt into a new environment even though they would commonly go through these culture shock process (p.143). At first, in the honeymoon stage, most individuals start their discovery upon arrival in the new place where everything is fresh and new. The honeymoon stage is an exciting period for the individuals that they are fascinated and are eager to learn about things that they have never seen before. They have positive expectations and looking forward to starting a new life. However, the excitement do not last forever, in about a week up to six months, the individual will enter the crisis stage because of the overwhelming challenges they face in the real conditions of life. They may encounter more troubles than they expected, such as the difficulties in languages, communications, transportation, housing, food, employment, education, etc. The increasing feeling of homesickness and difficulties in emerging into the new culture build a sense of rejecting and being rejected. The crisis stage is a critical part of the acculturation process because how the individual response to the regression will decide which acculturation strategy to be adopted and will lead to very different results - “if you overcome it, you stay; if not, you leave before you reach the stage of a nervous breakdown” (Oberg, 1960, P.143). In order to overcome the crisis, the individual will enter the recovery stage. The individual starts to open up his/her mind to
acquire new knowledge and gain ability to adapt the new culture and new environment. At last, the individual will eventually move on to the adjustment stage. The individual gains new perspectives, builds tolerance to a more diverse culture, and accepts the new lifestyle.

Throughout the years, Oberg’s culture shock model has provided a cornerstone for the academic field in acculturation and culture shock, his research has been further studied, and more complex models of culture shock are developed, yet it has also been criticized by other researchers. Many critics pointed out that Oberg’s culture shock model tended to assume culture shock is negative and unhealthy (Ward, et al., 2001). As a result, researchers have started to study acculturation from different perspectives and develop a more comprehensive theoretical framework, such as the ABC model of culture shock that was explicitly examined in the book *The Psychology of Culture Shock* by Ward, Bochner and Furnham (2001).

**Berry’s Study of Acculturative Stress**

In a study of acculturation soon after Oberg’s publication of the culture shock model, John W. Berry introduced the term “acculturative stress” as an alternative to the term “culture shock” (Berry, 2006, p.287) to emphasize the process of acculturation from intercultural contact to psychological conflict and social problems (Li, 2012). Coining the term “acculturative stress” as an alternative of “culture shock” is to recognize both positive and negative stress instead of shock with only negative connotation, and also to highlight the interaction with more than two cultures involved instead of only a single culture implied in culture shock (Berry, 2006, p.294). Berry (2006) identify the distinctiveness of two levels in the study of acculturation. The first level is “the acculturation of an individual’s group” (p.288) that view acculturative behaviors through interactions within a cultural context. The second level is “the psychological acculturation of that individual” (p.288) that look into acculturation from a psychological
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perspective. The two levels indicate two different elements in the acculturation process and they are equally important.

Berry, Kim, Minde and Mok (1987) linked the relationship between acculturation and stress and suggested that acculturative stress is a reduction of individual’s health due to a set of stress behaviours that affect mental health during acculturation, such as identity confusion, feeling of alienation, and depression (p.492). Nevertheless, the researchers also suggested that the reduction of mental health is not inevitable (p.493). The degree of acculturative stress depends on the level of acculturation experience and the number of stressors that are moderated by a few factors. The first factor is the nature of the larger society in the host country (p.494), in another word, the multicultural interaction approach adopted by the dominant population. A more multicultural population that tolerate a diversity of culture may lead to less mental problems than living in a melting pot. The second factor is the nature of the acculturating group (p.494). The researchers identified five different groups: immigrants, refugees, native peoples, ethnic groups, sojourners. There are variations in nature of each group, such as voluntariness and permanent status. Acculturating group who are voluntarily involved may have a smoother transition than those who are forced to, and those with a temporarily status without long-term social supports may face more mental problems than those settled permanently. The third factor is the mode of acculturation (p.494) which refers to the strategies adopted by the acculturating individuals that is mentioned previously, including assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. It is based on the maintenance of original culture and the participation in the larger society that can be analyzed at three levels: cultural group relations, national policies, and attitudes towards acculturating groups. The last factor is demographic, social and psychological characteristics. Demographic characteristics include place of origins, age, gender, education
level, cultural background, etc. while social and psychological characteristics determine the acculturating individual's coping strategies to control stress.

Berry, Kim, Minde and Mok (1987) studied a sample of over a thousand individuals from all five identified acculturating groups: immigrants, refugees, native peoples, ethnic groups, sojourners and carried out an explicitly comparative study of acculturative stress (p.495-496). They attempted to look for predictors of acculturative stress and found some general patterns to establish a relationship between acculturative stress and social and psychological characteristics, including patterns in education, acculturating individual’s attitudes towards the modes of acculturation, in-group out-group contact experience, and social support (p.504-508). Despite a great number of studies in acculturative stress done by numerous researchers in the past few decades, John W. Berry had contributed tremendous time, resource and effort in looking at acculturative stress and develop more comprehensive frameworks in the field.

The ABC Model

Ward (2001) utilized a broader framework of culture shock to develop a model of the acculturation process (Ward, et al., 2001) and categorize the changes and our responses to acculturation into three main areas of human life: the ABCs (Sam & Berry, 2006, p.474). The three components of the ABCs are stress, coping and adjustment (Affect), culture learning (Behavior) and social identification theories (Cognitions) (Ward, et al., 2001, p.267). The framework adopted the ‘stress and coping’ and ‘culture learning’ models developed by Furnham and Bochner (1986) and combined them with a number of ‘social identification’ theories (Zhou et al., 2008, p.65). It explicitly examined the process of acculturation from cross-cultural transition to acculturative stress, individual’s responses, and outcomes looking into both societal and individual level variables (Ward, et al., 2001, p.44). It brought a more comprehensive model
to explain what happen during acculturation that can be applied to the general phenomenon of acculturation. The acculturation model developed by Ward (1996) showed in Figure 1 (reprinted from Zhou et al., 2008) presented the inclusive process including the ABC components and the relationships between each component.


Affect: Stress, Coping and Adjustment
Ward, Bochner and Furnham (2001) applied a stress and coping model from the acculturation research (Berry, 1997) into the intercultural communication and adjustment process. The affective component of intercultural contact identifies the psychological characteristics including the feelings and emotions of how the acculturating individual or group cope with acculturative stress, and these include both positive and negative feelings and emotions. Influenced by previous studies of culture shock that emphasized negative emotions and shock, the stress and coping approach also focused on the mental health of the acculturating group (Eitinger & Grunfeld as cited in Ward, et al., 2001, p.70) and looked specifically into three significant parts within the cross-cultural transitions: life changes, appraisal of the changes, and coping strategies (p.71).

First, the process of acculturation results in the changes of the everyday life while these changes significantly influence the stress level of an acculturating individual or group. The six areas of changes, including physical, biological, political, economical, cultural, and social changes suggested by Berry (1992) provided a general view of the possible changes happen when an individual moved and adopted into a new culture. Numerous researches had been done to attempt to indicate or measure the level of life change and adjustment by different instruments. Some significant researches included Holmes and Rahe’s (1967) Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS) that provided standardized Life Change Units (LCU) for 43 life events (Ward, et al., 2001, p.73).

Second, the cognitive appraisal of the changes is significant in predicting the possible variance in psychological outcomes. The changes in life are also the stressors that trigger the feelings and emotions during acculturation and they can be threatening or challenging under different circumstances. Expectations are one source for cognitive appraisals of stressful life
changes (Ward, et al., 2001, p.76). Expectation-experience matches and mismatches affect the acculturating individuals in different ways. Researchers suggested that expectation-experience matches facilitate adjustments (Averill as cited in Ward, et al., 2001, p.76) because the expectation was realistic enough that allowed the individual to sufficiently prepared for possible stress. On the other hand, expectation-experience mismatches are distinguished between overmet and undermet expectations (Ward, et al., 2001, p.76). The individual had a more positive experience than expected with overmet expectations while he/she had a more negative experience than expected with undermet expectations. The results also depend on how much the expectations are met.

Third, different coping style and strategies adopted by acculturating individuals in response to stress would lead to different affective response and psychological outcomes. Ward, Bochner and Furnham (2001) suggested that personality and social support play a part in facilitating the changes. Various researches had shown relationships between specific personality factors and psychological adjustment in acculturation, for example, Leong, Ward and Low’s (2000) research in the Big Five Personality dimensions suggested that neuroticism has a strong association with adjustment problems including depression and anxiety (Ward, et al., 2001, p.84). Besides, social support is an important resource in coping stress and maintaining mental health. Social support can be provided by family, friend, or through interactions with local community. In the study of acculturative stress (Berry et al., 1987), it had showed the relationship between the level of social contact with host nationals and satisfaction of the acculturating individual.

**Behavior: Culture Learning**
The acculturation process starts with the intercultural contact and cross-cultural transition, through cultural learning to adapt the new sociocultural environment. The behavior component looks at how individual acquire new social skills and learn to adapt the new environment through the lens of cross-cultural communication and intercultural communication theories. In cross-cultural communication, cultural differences in languages and non-verbal communication may cause confusions and miscommunication without mutual understandings between two parties.

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) (Gallois et al., 1995) provided a relevant framework in explaining the dynamic cross-cultural interactions. The theory argued that “a person’s identity influences their use of language, paralanguage and non-verbal behavior to accommodate others through either convergence, divergence or maintenance” (Hebrok, 2011, p.55). CAT explains the process of how identity influences communication behaviors to reach to the desired level of social distance between the communicators (Abrams, O’Connor, & Giles, 2003, p.213). It believes that individuals are driven to accommodate in two ways: convergence and divergence. Individuals with a negative group identity tends to converge into the dominant group by adapting communication behavior, for example, acquiring the outgroup’s language. In contrast, individuals with a positive group identity tends to diverge and being distinct from outgroups by accentuating communicative differences, for example, protesting and physical confrontation against outgroups.

Cognitions: Social Identification Theories

The cognitive component complements the stress and coping frameworks and the cultural learning component and provide the third approach in the study of acculturation. First, this part studies the acculturative change in cultural identity looking into how individuals’ cultural
identities are developed, changed, maintained, and transformed (Ward, et al., 2001, p.98).

Second, this part looks into the intergroup relations between the acculturating individuals and the others by studying the ingroup-outgroup membership, stereotypes, prejudice, and bias towards them.

One significant framework in this field is the social identity theory (SIT) proposed by Tajfel (1978, 1981 as cited in Ward, et al., 2001). SIT claims that individual self-concept consists of personal and social identity, and personal identity such as age, gender, profession, nationality, region, and religion determine social identity while social comparison refuses and reinforces the self-concept at the same time (Abrams, O’Connor, & Giles, 2003, p.209). It highlighted the importance of group membership in the development of individual identity and studied the relationship between social categorization, comparison and self-esteem (Ward, et al., 2001).

**The Studies of International Students**

In a research study of acculturative stress, Sanhu and Asrabadi (1994) suggested that international students were more likely to experience problems because of language barrier, break from family support system, and culture shock (p.436). They conducted a research with a sample of 128 international students in the United States studying the psychological problems of international students using an Acculturative Stress Scale they created (p.438). The results were organized into six principal factors (p.444-445). First, perceived discrimination: students felt that they were denied opportunities and had received unequal treatments due to their race and ethnicity. Second, homesickness: the loss of emotional and social supports increased their loneliness and thoughts about home country and family. Third, perceived hate and rejection: people showed hatred towards the students and disrespected their cultural values. Fourth, fear: students were fear for their personal safety and felt insure because of the unfamiliar
surroundings. Fifth, culture shock and stress due to change: students were uncomfortable of adjusting to the new culture. Sixth, guilt: adopting a new culture gave the students a sense of guilt as they felt they were abandoning their original culture. This study focused on factors that influenced and caused the acculturative stress that was only part of the acculturation process. Therefore, it may not provide the big picture of how present life of an international student is like, but it shows us the possible causes of their stress so that we can work towards a recommendation to ease their culture shock based on these factors.

**Summary**

With growing globalization and increasing connections between nations, acculturation occurs almost every corner in the world where two cultures collide. Oberg’s culture shock model created the first framework that is easy to understand. It raised our awareness on the matter of acculturative stress and the acculturation process in the field. Berry’s research on acculturation examined the phenomenon at a more detailed level within the acculturation process. The ABC model of culture shock provided a more explicit framework using the combination of psychological and sociological theory and showed how acculturation, culture shock, and self-identity are closely related. Applying the acculturative stress research into the study of international students, it showed that international students had their unique characteristics and needs.
CHAPTER III
RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this research study is to help international students to seek ways in coping with their acculturative stress and thrive in their academic life. Endeavoring to search for ways in helping this group of students, we first need to understand what their acculturation experience as an international student in the United States is like and how their experience has influenced their personal and academic life. In this study, a total of 8 international students participated in two focus group discussions. The discussions followed a chronological order of the acculturation experience and was divided into three main parts: Reasons and Expectations of Study Abroad, Life Changes, and Identity Transformation and Racial Stereotypes.

Background of Participants

Two focus groups were held at a community college in California, the state with one of the most diverse population in the nation with 38.9% Hispanic or Latino, 37.7% white, and 14.8% Asian (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Two focus groups were consisted of 5 and 3 students respectively. Both groups were held in the same location with the same setting during school session, and the same set of questions were asked. All participants were international students with an F-1 student visa status at the time of interview. Among the total of 8 participants, there were 3 male students and 5 female students, age between 18 to 23 with an average age of 20. All of the participants completed high school in their home country before coming to the United States to attend this community college. At the time of the interview, all of them were in Year 2 of their program and were planning to transfer to a 4-year university in the next one or two years depending on their major program. Unlike domestic students, international students are required to decide a major upon admission application in order for the school officers to issue the I-20
immigration form for their F-1 visa, and if they change their major, a change has to be made by a
school officer on their SEVIS record. Therefore, most international students are determined
about their major. In this group of participants, their majors included computer science,
photography, mathematics, graphic design, broadcasting, and film.

The participants were originated from 6 different regions/countries around the world,
including China, El Salvador, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Macau, and Nepal. In an attempt of
creating a more multicultural environment as of the actual classroom, each focus group was
consisted of student from at least 3 different ethnic groups. The participants from both focus
groups identified themselves in a total of 6 different self-reported ethnic groups: Uyghur,
Hispanic, Chinese, East Asian, Malay, and Nepalese. All of them are non-native English
speakers whose first language/mother tongue is not English. Their first language/mother tongues
included Uyghur, Spanish, Mandarin, Cantonese, Malay, and Nepali. For non-native English
speakers, one major admission requirement of the community college is the proof of English
language proficiency. All of the participants got admitted to this college by demonstrating their
English language proficiency by taking standardized English language examination: one of them
took the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) Academic and the rest of them
took the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Meanwhile, one participant chose to
attend an English language school in California before transferring to this college to strengthen
his language ability in college level coursework even though he had already been accepted to the
college at the time. In the following content, pseudonyms were given to our participants to
protect their identities. With the requests given by the participants, the pseudonyms used are
either chosen by themselves or named in respect and according to their ethnic identities.

Reasons and Expectations of Study Abroad
It took a lot of effort to make the decision to study abroad and prepare the journey. The acculturation process started even before their journey to the United States. This session examined the decision making process of choosing their destination and the school for higher education. Then the discussion led the students to share their expectations before arriving in the United States and the preparation they did prior to their arrival.

**Why the United States?**

From the perspective of an international student, the United States was only one of the many options that students might consider to study abroad. The discussion revealed that half of the participants did not choose the United States as their first choice to continue their higher education. Coming from the western part of China, Masari first applied to a university in Canada where his older brother was attending. However, blaming on the complicated student visa application to Canada, his visa had been denied due to insufficient documents. He then got admitted to a local university in China, yet it did not pause his desire of studying abroad, so he started to seek destinations other than Canada. Learning that one of his family friends was studying in California, he decided to go for the United States with the supports of his father and it worked out well. Another case from the southern part of China, Therese got admitted to one of the top universities in China, yet she was also seeking for study abroad opportunities elsewhere, so she applied for two universities in Hong Kong. Unfortunately, she could not get into the top one that she was aiming for. Therese’s mother suggested her to take a year off to take the SAT for university admission in the United States, yet Therese felt it would be a waste of her one year and she found out about the university transfer program at community colleges that do not require SAT scores. As a result, she applied for a community college in California looking at the best transfer opportunities although she never planned to study in the United States before.
Likewise, Ming from Macau considered the universities in Hong Kong and Taiwan at first. Considering thoroughly, he thought the lifestyle in Hong Kong would be too stressful for him; meanwhile, he “flopped” the entrance exam for university admission in Taiwan. With the two first choices eliminated, he then considered the United States. “Then I realize there's always USA, right? And then it's kind of my dream already,” Ming said during the discussion and revealed his reasons of coming to the United States for its convenience. In another case, Cassie from El Salvador shared her experience of being persuaded by her father to study in California. After she graduated from high school in El Salvador, she did not know what to do next while her father recommended her to try out the United States to study abroad with help of her relatives who lived in California. “I don’t wanna go to the States, I wanna go somewhere else, Europe or Canada,” she told her father at the beginning. Cassie’s father suggested her to visit California for the summer after high school graduation to see if she would like it or not. She did and she fell in love with California. Although the United States might not be the first choice for them, it became their destination for higher education at the end.

Nevertheless, the other half of the participants chose specifically the United States as their study abroad destination while three of them had not even considered other countries. To begin with, Alim and Sunya both had a family story behind their decision of studying in the United States. Sunya from Malaysia picked the United States with no doubt because of her parents’ romantic story. Sunya’s parents met in the United States when they were studying here as international students years ago and they named Sunya after the name of the city of where they first met. “It felt really special and personal and I felt like a deeper connection with the United States per se,” said Sunya. On the other hand, from the western part of China, Alim also shared his story:
My story, why am I here, it started thirteen years ago because at that time, my father worked with three Americans who is from California. They opened a huge farm in my province, and my father worked with them for ten years. So they brought my father to the United States thirteen years ago, and that’s the time he came he saw the two different countries, two different environments. He decided to send his sons, me and my younger brother, he just wants us to study outside, so since that time he started to find a way and encourage me to go outside to study. When I went to high school, I studied at an international high school and then I took exam like TOEFL, the language exam, so actually I am aiming here coz my father came here before. It’s also one of his dreams and so he let that becomes my dream too, so that’s why I’m here.

Alim’s father opened up his global mind through business opportunities and inspired Alim to chase after the American path since childhood. Alim mentioned that it was only his father’s dream at first. Yet after meeting new friends and classmates from elsewhere of China at the international high school who shared their experience of traveling to the United States to him, Alim wanted to visit the United States himself to explore the world outside his home country, and that is how it also became his own dream.

Moreover, although Amita and Tiffany did not have a personal story that led them to the United States, they considered thoroughly before applying for the schools here. Amita came from Nepal with a computer science major, she explained the primary reason of studying in the United States was because there was not much higher education in computer science she could get in her country. Meanwhile, Tiffany from Hong Kong thought about all different options of study abroad before she made her final decision to the United States. She shared the primary reason was the financial consideration at the time during her college application, the tuition and living cost to attend college in the United States was generally cheaper than universities in United Kingdom, countries in Europe, and Australia. Secondly, she had been admired by the American life she learned from Hollywood movies and television shows that she would like to experience herself. One more point she mentioned was that the United States would have more fun than United Kingdom or Australia with the chance to travel around the country and go to
Disneyland while she was studying here.

All of the participants had different reasons choosing the United States for their higher education, yet there were a few common factors that they all mentioned. First, the major program. Considering her major of computer science, Ami believed that the United States had a higher recognition of education than any other places, so she did not even consider studying abroad in other countries. With the major of film, Ming chose the United States for its Hollywood fame and the opportunities he might get in this country. Sunya had a major of digital media and she would like to study in a more multicultural environment like the United States instead of “focusing one culture one race” like the media in Malaysia. Second, the community college. The admission process was easy and efficient according to the participants and they all agreed that their community college provided them a better learning environment and opportunities to grow with a smaller class size, closer teacher-student relationships, and more interactions in class. They suggested that it was easier for international students academically and socially while adapting the new environment. Third, the transfer opportunities to top universities in the United States provided by the community college. All of the participants were in their second year and were preparing to transfer within one or two year while a few of them had already got accepted as a junior transfer student to 4-year universities. It provided an easier path to top universities for them who could not get in or did not want to spend an extra year to take SAT since it was not part of their high school curriculum. It also provided a cheaper option for students who wanted to go to top universities but could barely afford it.

**Preparation and Expectations**

After they have made the decision of coming to the United States, most of them claimed that there was not much preparation needed before arrival, yet they shared a list of things they
have done. First, all of them took an English language test for college admission, most of them took TOEFL and one of them took IELTS. All of the participants had a background of learning English at high school or even earlier, so they did not have much difficulties in getting a good score for admission. Second, they submitted the admission application to the community college. The application process was online and communication with staff was mostly through emails. Admission was smooth, easy and took not much effort according to the participants. Third, they needed to apply for the F-1 student visa. They needed to gathered the admission letter and the immigration document (SEVIS I-20 form) from the college, proof of financial support, and other documents required by the USCIS and bring them to the U.S. Consulate in their home country for an interview to gain approval for the visa. Because of the visa denial from the Canadian Consulate, Masari expressed that the application for U.S. visa was easy and fast while other participants agreed. Ming also mentioned the preparations he had for the consulate interview was way more than it was needed, he described, “it was really fast. Yea surprisingly because I prepared like this much as many documents, and then that person only looked at one paper which is my financial statement.” Lastly, they had to prepared for the journey and settlement upon arrival. Some of the participants said this was the toughest part of the preparation: booking the flight ticket, packing the luggage, looking for apartment, etc., yet their families were supportive and helped them through the process.

Among the eight participants, only two of them visited the United States prior their college life here, and we found that their expectations of the American college life were still similar between students who visited before and those who did not. They all expected the United States to be a well-developed country with excellent public transportation and infrastructure, in a way that would at least be better than their home country. Besides, participants were greatly
influenced by Hollywood movies and American television shows. Tiffany visited New York City once before studying in California without knowing the differences between the east coast and the west coast and she imagined her college life would be like the American life she learned from Hollywood movies, she said, “I think everyone is having party, bars everywhere, just easy, and when you looked at those movies, Hollywood movies or dramas, they always make life so easy, you know you just hang out with friends and great.” Ming mentioned his expectation of the American life would be somewhat similar to what he watched on movies and television shows that everything looks good, relaxing and friendly with the scene he described as “people riding their bike and seeing their friends on the road.” On the other hand, Masari expected to be in the city with tall buildings like what he saw in the movies. Overall all participants agreed that they were not expecting too much for the college life in a foreign country, instead they were more nervous of whatever challenge would come, yet excited at the same time of the adventure to the United States.

**Life Changes**

Students had spent months to prepare the journey and days to pack their luggage. They had their student visa ready and most students would have transportation and accommodation arranged. Even so, the moment when they finally arrived, walked out from the plane, and stepped on the American soil would be emotional and challenging for many of the international students. In the second part of the focus group discussion, students discussed about their first cross-cultural experience in the United States and the life changes they experienced and recognized that are different from where they came from.

**First Cross-Cultural Experience**

The experience at the airport upon arrival was one of the most memorable moments the
participants had. Sunya shared the feeling she had standing in the long line at the “visa checkpoint.” For F-1 student visa holders, there are a few documents needed at the border coming into the United States, including a valid F-1 visa, a passport that is valid for at least six months, and the SEVIS I-20 form issued by a Designated School Official (DSO). The officer of the U.S. Customs and Border Protection at the counter would ask random questions that sometimes may or may not be related to the student’s education program. Sunya learned that how her friends got hold at the airport before, and she expressed her nervousness with the questions in her mind asking “what if I am not going to get in? What if I don't pass immigration?” She said she was terrified. Fortunately, she passed through the custom with no problem yet she described the feeling during the process of getting in was like “butterflies.” In addition, Masari shared his difficulty in communicating with the officer that nearly got him into trouble and the panic moment he had at the airport:

The first time when I came here when I arrived at the airport, I thought my English was really good. You know, like I could understand everything, okay? Then I went to the check place, the guy who check the passport and visa, and then he just spoke so fast. I was like wait a minute, “what did you say? I’m sorry.” He’s repeated three times and asked, “alright you can’t understand English?” I said “I’m sorry, I got it right now.” Then I was really excited and I was waiting for the guy who are there to pick me up. Then I was really nervous because I didn’t see no one. Because I was like… I remember I was 19 and I never traveled to other countries, so I was really nervous and I kept calling my dad. You know, “where is the guy who pick me up?” He was like, “here, what can I do? Calm down he will be there.” And so the guy came, I finally met that guy, we talked in English, I was like okay not bad.

Dealing with his nervousness and anxiety from travelling out of country for the first time in life all by himself, Masari managed to enter the United States and arrived at the apartment he arranged beforehand. Each of the participant had their own story of adventure coming into this country, and all of them agreed with the anxiety and nervousness they felt and the difficulties they had in communication upon arrival.

Changes in Everyday Life
Since all of the participants in this study were year two students who had been studying and living in the United States for more than one year, there were significant changes in their life from their home country to the United States during this period of time.

**Lifestyle and Living Environment.** Our participants were originated from countries with a very different lifestyle and living environment comparing to the United States. Masari mentioned his first impression when he arrived his apartment from the airport was “too quiet like the countryside.” It was very hard for him at the beginning to live in the quiet environment because he used to live in a car honking city-like environment back home. Most of the participants in this discussion shared an apartment with other international students, some had roommates from their home country and some from other countries. With a special bond of being a foreigner in a foreign country together, some students built a close relationship with their roommates and a routine to take care of the housework together. For example, Sunya lived with five other international students from Malaysia in a house and they took turn to cook for each other every day. Despite sharing apartment, other housing options for international students included host family, living with relatives, or renting their own space. For example, Cassie lived with a host family, her relatives, while she needed to fit into the family’s living style including their schedule and living habits. All participants had experienced a significant change in their lifestyle and living environment.

**Transportation.** Getting to places was a big challenge for the participants upon arrival. Back in their home country, the participants were either living in the city with excellent public transit system or being taken care by their parents. Upon arrival, they no longer had this privilege. At the beginning of their college life in California, most of the participants depended on the local bus or mobile apps to look for a driver (Uber) to school while sometimes they might
get a ride from friends or host family. Cassie shared her experience waiting for her host family to pick her up from the college when she first started school since she had not learned how to get around yet. Back in El Salvador, Cassie’s father used to pick her up from school every day and she would go straight home right after school, but in California, she complained that she would have to wait for an hour to have someone come pick her up from school after class and she felt that her host was uncaring about her. Eventually, she learned to take the local bus which became her routine to school. Since the local bus was the only public transit option for students, Tiffany claimed that the public transportation in California, including buses and trains were not good because the transit schedule was not frequent enough as it was needed while Uber was too expensive for daily use. As a result, many international students found that a driver license and a car was necessary. Tiffany said passing the driving test was the greatest achievement she had in the United States as she pushed herself to try something new. Back in Hong Kong, public transportation could bring her to almost everywhere, yet in California, she said it was difficult to go around without a car. “I never wanted to get one (driver license) actually. I don't want to risk my life but after I came here, oh no, I have to get one, it’s so hard,” Tiffany felt the public transit here cost her too much time and stressed her out. Therese also said she never realized how important driving was until she came to California. However, not all participants passed the driving test. Marsari did not have any driving experience before studying in the United States, so he started to practice his driving in California. He so far had failed the driving test three times because of driving too slow and he said in the discussion, “I don't know why I failed so many times.” On the other hand, Cassie did not want to visit DMV at all; therefore, she used an international driver license she got from El Salvador that was valid for one year and could be renewed every year. Transportation is an essential part of daily life. Our participants showed that
it took some time to sort out ways to go around places and it was not easy at the beginning.

**Daily Meals.** Food is essential to survive and also something we enjoy in our daily life, yet daily meals could become a big issue for new international students upon arrival in the United States. Back home, our participants were always taken care of by parents and families. Upon arrival, students needed to take care of themselves, and food could become a primary concern. Ming shared his experience in the first year in California when he was living by himself, he started to cook a lot more while he would never really cook back home. He described the experience, “I cooked for myself like I was on top of my game.” However, cooking a meal required a lot of effort from getting grocery to preparing the ingredients. In his second year, he did not have time for cooking because of his intense night class schedule so he started to order Panda Express delivery instead. Besides, some of our participants had special meal preference because of their religion and beliefs. For example, Sunya ate only halal food as a Muslim and Amita did not eat beef as a Nepali, so they preferred cooking at home and started to share household responsibilities with their housemates, including take turns to prepare meals and cook for each other every day. Amita used to cook back in Nepal, yet here without her mother’s support, she said sometimes housework became a difficult task, especially cooking meals. For example, during finals or semester ends, she never had enough time to prepare food while her mother would prepare for her back then. In another case, Sunya also shared her experience of cooking for the first time:

> At home in my country, my grandmother cooks for like five of us: my mom, my dad, and my brother. I never like going to the kitchen and start cooking. Maybe when I want some snacks and I would go to the kitchen, but like for really heavy meals, mostly my grandmother does that. But here when I live with Malaysians and there’re six of us in the house and we take turns to cook for each other like all six of us together. And I I don't know how to cook. Chicken, I never touch like… like raw chicken or fish, or meat. I never peel… you know I never peel like a chicken skin so at first it was really gross. I remember I have a knife and also scissors just so I wouldn't touch the skin. That's how
crazy it was.

It had been a tough lesson for Sunya to learn how to cook, yet she became such a good cooker now and she would explore her own Malaysian dish. Back in Malaysia, she would go to street stores to eat the cheap street food, yet here she could only expect fast food like Panda Express or McDonald’s which was Americanized and “not quite decent.” Her homesickness reminded her of the food back home, but it was hard to find authentic traditional Malaysian food in the United States, so she searched on the internet for recipe and made it herself. Ming mentioned although there were more Chinese restaurants here, but they were nothing like the dish he could have at home, so he would also ask his parents for recipe and made it himself. It took a while for our participants to explore for restaurants, food, and grocery, fortunately they were all able to find their own way.

Medical Care. Healthcare in the United States is very different from our participants’ home countries. F-1 student visa holders are required to purchase health insurance as part of the SEVIS regulations to maintain their status in the United States. Therefore, all the participants were insured with either the student health plan provided by the school or their own coverage. Tiffany shared her experience in medical care in the United States:

Before when you are home, everyone is gonna take care of you. You are younger so you are protected. But right now, when I came here for the medical… if you go to a hospital when you are sick, it’s gonna be so expensive, and one time I did go because I was really sick. You know when you go in, people asked you so much stuff and they used professional terms. Even I think my English is good but I couldn't understand that, none of that, like they just speak super fast, and all the professional terms they used, and you are asking “What’s that?” and you feel embarrassed and you don't know what to do, you are panic and you are sick and that feeling is really terrible. So right now that kind of changed me that I learned to take care of myself better. During the day, in my normal life, I try to keep myself healthy, eating more healthy, doing more exercise.

Tiffany’s experience pinpointed a few problems that international students had in using the medical system. First, medical care in the United States was way more expensive than other
countries even with health insurance. Second, they found it hard to communicate with the medical staff in professional medical terms in English. Third, not mentioned by Tiffany but many international students could not understand how health insurance works. At the end, she still could not find a better solution if she needed to seek medical assistance, and all she could do was to avoid going to the doctors.

**Changes in Social Support**

The prior part of this discussion showed how our participants took care of themselves while the following part will discuss how they became independent and built their own social support network as they no longer had their parents or guardians around. Knowing the importance of social support to live in a foreign country, many international students chose a destination where they already knew someone or had family members living there so they could have a social support network just in case of any emergency happened. Yet most international students did not have this privilege and they came across the ocean to the United States all by themselves. Everyone in the focus group claimed that they had become more independent in the way that they take care of everything for themselves in the United States. Ming said, “the first year was my highlight of my independence. I was practically on my own, living on my own, and every day every week I would do all the chores which never happened in my life.” Tiffany also claimed that she was improving and still trying to figure out a way to take better care of herself as she explained everyone had to become independent at some point in life. Amita shared her first time of handling bills and bank account herself as a highlight of her independent life:

Back home I don't used to do all this stuff, like paying rent, paying bills, and that, and we don't use much of the credit cards and debit cards so all these things… generally if you go shopping in Nepal, cash. It's cash only, like cash on door delivery, normally they prefer only cash. So all these things you know my father and mother used to handle so I was not known to anything like that. When I first got my debit card, I took a picture and show to my father. There's a lot of difficult things.
Regarding social life, our participants showed that they were able to expand their social network with both local and other international students, yet it was hard to make close friends. One reason was due to their temporary status, which dictates they would be in this country for only a temporary period of time to complete their education program. Ming expressed his difficulties in building close relationships with his classmates or other friends here:

Everybody changes their classes every semester. In most Asian countries, most of my friends studies in Taiwan, they always have the same people in the class, so they make a lot of friends like a lot of ‘good’ friends. But here is just, one semester you have four months and you’re done like even you guys are friends on Instagram, you don't even talk anymore. I just… I just feel like it's so hard to make friends like this is different than what I expected. So you know people but it turns out you just know him for four months and there you go. It's easy to start a conversation because people are more outgoing here, but it's hard to maintain it for a long time.

Ming said his social network was way smaller than that he had in his home country because he was not able to build long-term friendship here. Although it might be hard to build close friendship with local students, the upside was the opportunities to make friends with other international students from other countries. Therese said it opened up her mind to become a globalist by meeting new friends from Europe, South America, and Africa. She also learned more about minority ethnic groups and people from other province in her home country, “before I came here, even when I'm from China, I have never met any Uyghur people.” There were different ways to meet new friends at college, but our participants indicated that the common way for new international students would be meeting new classmates in class through collaboration in classwork and group projects, etc.

Cultural Differences

The home countries of our participants had unique cultures that were significantly different from the American culture, yet the acculturation had changed their cultural perspective to some degree. Some participants felt the urge to learn the American culture to adopt into the
local life while some thought it was more important to share their own culture to the Americans. However, neither way was easy like Ming said in the discussion, “I am not in the (American) culture yet. I know what it is but I can't relate to it.” Our participants mentioned a few examples of cultural differences and changes they recognized, including languages, greetings, and religious practice.

Languages. English was the language of instruction at the community college and the common language used in the neighborhood while our participants spoke languages other than English as their first language. Their English proficiency was shown during the conversation within the focus group. But many of them mentioned that they were scared of speaking English with foreigners at first and their English skills had been significantly improved since they first arrived in California. Cassie shared her experience at a convenience store when she first arrived:

The first month I came here before start studying, I went to a shop, the guy asked me, when I think about it now, it was so obvious that he asked me if I want the receipt. But I didn’t get it and asked, “What?” and he started laughing and told me, “you should have seen you face was [funny],” and no one know what I said. It was so embarrassing. Most of the time they talked really fast.

Other than that, a few participants recognized the differences between American English and British English. Tiffany from Hong Kong, a former British colony, grew up learning and using English in a British way, and she quickly realized the differences upon arrival:

Sometimes the terms are different, and when I first came here, no one understand what I was talking about, and I don’t understand them as well. Like maybe we were talking about the same thing but we just don’t know what we were talking about that we were meaning the same thing.

Some examples that Tiffany mentioned were rubber in British vs. eraser in American or lift in British vs. elevator in American. Masari also practiced his English in British accent while he was preparing for the TOEFL test for college admission, and he realized his accent was different from the local Americans even though it was the same language. In the discussion, the
participants were asked if they recognized a change in their own English accent after studying in the United States, most of them could not tell by themselves, but some recognized the change in other participants.

Greetings. Different countries have different ways to greet and interact with others while our participants had learned the ‘new’ ways to greet in the United States. Greeting is a significant part of our social life as a basic expression to show presence and goodwill to meet or connect with people. Tiffany shared one of her awkward moments when she was greeted by someone:

Something surprised me was going to the cashier in grocery stores. They are all asking you… greetings, “how are you doing?” And I was like what should I answer? I don’t want to chit-chat too much because in my country, people at the back will be like “hey, just move, just do it quick.” It’s totally different.

Most participants agreed that there were many awkward moments at first upon arrival. Sunya suggested that the local people in the United States were a lot more sensitive in their greeting culture than people in her home country, “they would get upset if you do not do it properly,” she said. Ming said he still could not do a handshake properly because every time when he tried, he would be called out by his friends saying it was not the right way. He thought that he absolutely needed to learn the right way because it was the basic cultural communication and he wanted to be polite and not to be awkward. In general, our participants agreed that people in California used more greetings than people from their country, and some of them suggested that it was a better way to make good connection with people. Amita realized the way people greets here changed her own behavior in using more greeting words and she started to feel how it matters to the others. Sunya also agreed:

By just saying thank you, it affects everything. Like going into the bus by saying thank you to the bus driver that makes a whole lot of differences. It made his day, like you see people just walk by, putting their money in, and just walk away, you can tell. I guess just little things, there's a lot more affection. It makes you to be more polite.

Religion and Beliefs. Some of our participants expressed their feeling on practicing their
religion and beliefs in the United States and how it was different back home. From the discussion, I learned that three of our participants were Muslim and they practiced their religion differently. Some of them stick strictly with the prayer schedule while some of them would adjust their practice to fit into the American culture. Sunya was the one who brought up in the discussion that she had religious difficulties here as a Muslim in wearing hijab and doing the prayers. She did not always wear hijab and she felt a difference when she was public by herself without hijab compare to when she was with friends who wore hijab; she felt like she was being spied and divided from her friends. When she wore hijab to attend prayers outside, she would have “a sense of danger” and a scary feeling of someone spying on her. She was also worried about the stereotype people had with Muslims. One time she was praying on the street with her friends because they were late to the prayer schedule, some people walked by with surprise and some asked them what they were doing. She noticed people here did not know much about Muslim while the stereotypes towards them were heavily influenced by the extremists, yet she explained to those who asked and she found that they would be curious to learn about her religion. On the other hand, Masari was also a Muslim and felt he had become more open-minded than he used to. Learning about the freedom and people’s rights in the United States, now he would accept behaviors that would be unacceptable in a Muslim living community. He said he learned to respect people who had different beliefs and religions. At the end, Sanya also pointed out that “it's up to everyone's beliefs and you just do what you want.”

**Educational Differences**

The education system in the United States reflected the mainstream culture of the country that was unique and different from the rest of the world. Since all of our participants completed their high school back in their home country, they did not have any study abroad experience
prior. Therefore, this community college had become their first experience studying in an education system that was different from the one they grew up with from preschool to high school. According to our participants, the college life here provided them more freedom in choice, speech, thoughts, and expression. They also appreciated the cultural diversity in the college community.

**Student-centered Teaching Method.** Most of our participants studied at schools in Asia with a more strict school environment and teacher-centered classrooms. According to them, the college education in the United States was more open to students. In Nepal, Amita described her school life was stressful with long school days, strict class schedule, and eight subjects to study at the same time. She said, “when I came the first semester, I was worried I didn't know how the education works here.” Now at her community college, she could arrange her own class schedule and choose the classes according to her interest. As a result, she felt more related to the studies, and the classes had become easier for her. Besides, Amita and Sunya both mentioned the smaller class size at this community college was one of the reasons they chose to study here. Amita said it allowed her to develop closer teacher-student relations. Other than that, examination and testing were different than how they experienced back home. Ming remembered a professor once told his class, “if you can look it up, don't remember it.” In his history classes back in Macau, Ming was “forced to remember” for the exams, yet here “it's about how [he] understand but not only knowing what happened.” Sunya also had the similar experience from Malaysia to be “more like remember, remember, remember” and here encouraged “understanding, giving, opening and putting in your own thoughts.” In addition, Alim said the classes here were not as strict as the classes back in China where they had cameras installed at the back of the classrooms to monitor and avoid cheating during examinations. Our participants appreciated the way how the college
promoted critical thinking over memorizing facts, and the instructors were more open-minded that would welcome opinions from students.

**Cultural Diversity.** Our participants pointed out the importance of the diverse school experience they were having here in contrast to their school experience back home. Sunya said the cultural diversity in the community college was not only racial and ethnical, but also people from different age with different social status, such as veterans, immigrants, and single mothers. Our participants learned the stories from classmates who came from all different backgrounds, such as those who never had a change to continue their higher education before, yet the community college provided them a chance. They all agreed that it gave them inspiration and motivation to work harder to achieve their educational goals.

**Identity Transformation and Racial Stereotypes**

Being an international student in the United States, many of them had developed a new perspective on their ethnic and national identity. The F-1 student visa and SEVIS I-20 provided them a temporary legal status to stay and study in the United States. Although they were considered only visitors to this country, it would take them years here to complete their program. They were not only studying here, but also living here. Their lifestyle had been partly adopted into the American way that provided them new insight of their self-identity. The last part of our findings focused on our participants’ identity transformation and discussed about racial stereotypes.

**Self-Identity in Ethnicity and Nationality**

Our participants were provided an open space to introduce their ethnic and national identities they recognized themselves as, then to describe how they felt towards their self-identities. To begin with, Cassie identified herself as a Salvadorian or Latina. She found herself
being proud as a Salvadorian and a Latina. She said people in California usually would be surprised learning she was a Salvadorian because they thought that people from El Salvador were all supposed to be a gang member, but she loved people asking her where she was from because that gave her the opportunity to break their stereotypes and prejudice on her country, El Salvador. She also mentioned how people in California always mistaken her as a local resident and how she had a different concept of ‘America’ than the people in the United States. She said:

People think I'm from here. And NO. I'll begin with we are all Americans because we're in the same continent. At the beginning, I hate it when people say America only for this country, I'll say America is not a freaking country, it's a whole continent. I'm American but I'm from Central America, I'm not from North America.

Originated from Nepal, Amita identified herself as Nepalese, and she also explained how people always mistaken Nepalese as other ethnic groups:

There are several caste or variations but as a whole we’re Nepalese. In Nepal, all of them are Nepalese unlike other countries with different ethnicities. Our countries is divided into three parts: the lower part, they look like Indians and the one living in mountains, they look like Chinese because the lower part is connected to India and upper part to China, and people in the middle, they look like people from Thailand or Southeast Asians. My friends are always being mistaken for this, but we are all Nepalese.

When people asked about her home country, she needed to explain how her country was connected with China, India and so, and she sometimes felt uncomfortable that it was hard for the others to understand because she found that not many people in the United States knew about her country, such as where Nepal is. Yet she also mentioned that she felt good when she met someone here who knew about Nepal, had travelled to Nepal, or wanted to visit Nepal.

On the other hand, Sunya from Malaysia identified herself as Malay. She said the experience in the United States provided her an opportunity to research and learn more about her country in order to be able to answer what people asked her while it was something she would not do back in Malaysia where everyone shared the same knowledge of her country:

I feel like I'm an asset to my country. I am bringing something from my country to the
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states. I'm a representative, an ambassador. I have to take care of my own identity properly like a professional you know because you're bringing your country's name to a foreign country, you're representing them. And then that impacts you and your country and also the United States as well. So I feel like I'm also putting myself in the market promoting myself including my culture and I want to share more to them and I also learn more about my own country than before.

Coming from Hong Kong and Macau, two former European colonies and now the Special Administrative Regions belonging to China, Tiffany and Ming shared similar views on their ethnic and national identities. Tiffany identified her ethnic identity as Chinese but if she was asked about her home country, she would tell them she was from Hong Kong. Same as Ming who identified his ethnicity as Chinese, but recognized himself as a Macauese and he would say he was from Macau if people asked him where he was from. Ming admitted that he was conflicted about his nationality. They emphasized the differences between Hong Kong, Macau, and mainland China although they accepted the fact that Hong Kong and Macau were now belonged to the People’s Republic of China. They would explain the differences and distinguish the uniqueness of Hong Kong and Macau from mainland China, including the autonomic governments, different spoken and written languages, and different culture.

Moreover, Masari and Alim were both from the Western part of China and identified themselves as Uyghur, a Turkic nation, but they had different opinions on their nationality. Masari recognized himself as a Chinese national because he was holding a Chinese passport while Alim saw his nationality as Uyghur because he saw himself different from the dominant Han Chinese which most foreigners considered Chinese as. Other than that, Alim also did a DNA test of his ethnic origins earlier that it discovered he was 68% middle Asian with a combination of Chinese, English and Indian. He found it interesting since he always thought he was completely Uyghur. As Uyghur, they did not share the dominant appearance of Chinese and were often mistaken as Latinos or other ethnic groups. He said, “We came from where Uyghur
was the dominant group. But in California, I became the minority where here had not many Uyghur people.” Therefore, Alim joined clubs and events at the college to promote his Uyghur culture. He hoped people know there was a group called Uyghur although it was part of China.

Last but not least, Therese from the southern part of China was proud of her identity as a Chinese. She said, “there’s no reason not to be proud of it. But it's really hard to explain because I'm not proud of the communist thing, but I'm proud of its amazing culture and history.” However, she was not always comfortable in talking about her country. Therese said that sometimes it was really hard to talk to her American friends in this topic because they gave her a feeling of a closed mind to learn about her culture yet they did not know well about her country. She explained:

You know us as international students, we have curiosity about the world like we want to know differences between different cultures. But Americans seem to have this kind of ego. You know they have the best everything. People don’t know about it can’t even distinguish different Asian people, why would I bother to explain?

There were a few similarities amongst the participants when they described their identities and origins. First, they were clear about about how they identify themselves ethnically and nationally. Second, they were proud of their self-identity. Third, they had been asked about their home countries many times while studying in the United States. From the perspective of our participants, it showed there were lots of misconceptions of other countries held by the local population. Sunya thought the American culture was “whitewashed” with everyone assimilated into the dominant western culture and built their American identity while Therese suggested this American pride created stereotypes towards other nations and closed their mind to learn about other culture. Yet our participants claimed that these misconceptions would not affect their feelings towards their self-identities. At the same time, Ming suggested that “it's important to assimilate to the local culture but that doesn't mean you need to lose your original culture.” He
believed in multiculturalism that he would adopt the American culture yet maintain the original culture from his home country.

**Racism, Discrimination, and Stereotypes**

When our participants discussed about their ethnic and racial identities, a few mentioned the incidents they had in public with local Americans including hateful speech and unpleasant encounters targeting a specific racial or ethnic group. As a Latino, Cassie criticized the presidential campaign led by Trump in 2016 for the stereotypes it had promoted on the Latino population as lazy and worthless. She believed that the Latinos here were hard workers to fulfill their American dream because they came to the United States to go beyond what they could do in where they came from. Masari had experienced himself being discriminated as a Latino. Although he was not Latino, he was often being mistaken as one because of his Uyghur appearance. He mentioned there was a time a few white people tried to make fun of the Latino culture with him and greeted in Spanish in a way teasing him not speaking English without knowing he was not Latino. Masari said he responded politely in English and explained his ethnicity, and those people were shocked and embarrassed themselves.

On the other hand, Tiffany said she was uncertain about other states, but in general, people in California respected her nationality and ethnic identity because of the large population of Asians with the established Chinatown, Koreatown, and Japantown. However, she still had experienced an unpleasant response targeting her ethnicity at a theatre in California earlier this year soon after the 2016 presidential election:

We bought the tickets that were reserved and we were on time for the movie, but there’s already someone sitting at our seats. We double checked our tickets, the time, the room is the same so we asked them very politely. The two Americans speaking really good native English just shouted, “No. Those are my seats. I wanna be here.” So I had to ask the staff to help, then they were leaving and started shouting super loud in the theatre, “fuck you Chinese, go back to your country” and those stuff.
In addition, Therese went onto a road trip with her friends in Nevada during spring break this year. Among her friends, there was a Uyghur, a Chinese, and a Swiss. She had an unpleasant encounter with local Americans that did not even make sense to her:

I was driving in the parking lot trying to find a space to park, and I was just driving and we're rolling down the window because it was so hot. Then there's a white guy driving a truck drove toward me and he saw us. It was a car with three Asians and a white guy and he probably didn’t see the Swiss guy, and then he was shouting out to us, "fucking Asians." We were all shocked.

Among our participants, three out of eight experienced discrimination and hateful speech toward a specific race or ethnicity. Masari said the incident taught him how to respond to racial discrimination and bullying in a positive way, but in some cases, there was no time for our participants to respond. Yet they all understood that stereotypes were not true facts, and they claimed that it won’t lower the confidence in their self-identities. Learning from his DNA test results, Alim believed that “if we all can do that (learn about our biological origins), there will be no racism because no one has pure blood. We're all came from different parts of somewhere.”

Summary

The focus group discussions provided an open space for the participants to share their experience and learn from each other. The participants said they enjoyed the discussion and it helped them to understand better about their acculturation and self-identities. Sharing their study abroad stories of being an international student in the United States has provided them an opportunity to revisit their journey in the past one to two years, from choosing the destination, applying schools, preparing their journey to starting a school life in this foreign country. During the process of acculturation, they experienced significant changes in life and they recognized the cultural differences between Americans and their home countries. The acculturative experience was stressful yet amazing at the same time. It opened up the world to our participants that taught them to be more open-minded and also strengthened their cultural identities.
CHAPTER IV
DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion

I created the model to illustrate the study abroad journey of an international student in Figure 2 in a chronological order according to the results we achieved from our participants. The acculturation process of international college students started before they arrived in the host country when they started to plan and prepared their study abroad journey, and the bitter sweet feelings started to build. They were excited about the new experience in a foreign country yet nervous of the unknown future at the same time. They made up their mind on a country of destination and selected a school, then went through the process of college admission and visa application in their home country. The pre-arrival preparation gave them a glimpse of the cross-cultural experience with college staff and foreign consulate. International students were usually well-prepared as they had already been through the first screening from the college admission and the visa application process meeting all the requirements to study at a college or university. For example, they had acquired the minimum level of the language for classes and basic communication, but improving their English language skills was still a major challenge (Teranishi, Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2011, p.155).

Upon arrival in the host country, they went into the stage with a combination of honeymoon and crisis according to Oberg's culture shock model (1960). Exploring the new place, experiencing a new culture, and connecting with new people was amazing and exciting, but the unfamiliar surroundings and the break from local family support system would bring them scary and lonely feelings. In this stage, student went through significant changes in life that greatly impacted their lifestyle, social network, cultural values, and academic success. The experience of life changes would be taken with the students for life. Students might develop their
own unique lifestyle with a mixture of American and their native culture. The social network in the host country might not be as big as that back home during the study abroad period, yet it would be grown in a global scale after they returned home. The study abroad experience presented the students with new cultural values, and many of them eventually developed a new worldview as stated in a quote by the author of *Lean Forward into Your Life*, “I am not the same having seen the moon shine on the other side of the world” (Radmacher, 2013). Academically, the openness and collaborative educational style in the United States provided students a different educational experience with more opportunities to develop their own thoughts and opinions.

However, the life changes also brought students culture shock/acculturative stress at different level depending on the student’s personality and social support network. Researchers pointed out that acculturative stress is not unavoidable that it can be moderated according to several factors (Berry et al., 1987, p.493) as mentioned previously in Chapter II. The first factor is the nature of the dominant society in the host country. In our case, California has one of the most diverse population in the nation that developed a more inclusive attitude to the diversity of people and provided a welcoming environment for foreigners to study and live here. Therefore, it was easier for international students to be part of the community. The second factor is the nature of the acculturating group. International students belong to the group of sojourners who travel with a temporary purpose and do not plan to stay in the host country permanently. They came to the host country voluntarily by freewill so they may have a smoother transition, but they may also face more mental problems because of the temporary status and lack of long-term local support. The third factor is the mode of acculturation. Our participants tended to choose integration over the other three modes: assimilation, separation, and marginalization. The four
modes show the results of the student’s maintenance of their native culture and identity and their relationships sought among group (Berry, 2008). Our participants had strong will in maintain their native culture as they were proud of their cultural identities and were planned to return back to home country. At the same time, they were also adopting the host country’s culture as they came with an open mind to learn and gain foreign experience. The fourth factor is demographic, social and psychological characteristics. Some common demographic variables are age, family status, and socio-economic status (Eustace, 2007). Our participants were at common college age between 18 to 23 coming from different countries, and they were well-supported by their family both morally and financially. Their out-going personality also encouraged them to engage in student activities that helped coping their acculturative stress.

Living in the host country over time, international students started to enter the stage of recovery and adjustment. They have acquired the knowledge of the host country’s culture and developed cross-cultural communication skills to fit into the living environment and local community here. This in turn has helped them to ease the acculturative stress and recover from culture shock, and the above four factors directly impacted the students’ recovery. The acculturation process of international students does not end here and will continue while they return back to their home country after lived in the host country with a different culture. The phenomenon of “stresses and challenges associated with moving back to one’s own home culture after one has sojourned or lived in another cultural environment” is called reverse culture shock (Presbitero, 2016) which is not covered in this paper, but should not be omitted from the acculturation process in the study of international students.
Furthermore, applying the ABC Model of Culture Shock into our study helped us to break down the acculturation process and learn the details of each part. In the affective part, we look for the possible psychological outcomes, including acculturative stress, from learning about the life changes experienced by international students and comparing them with their expectations before arriving in the host country. Before arrival, our participants imagined the United States as the most advanced country in the world as it was promoted in Hollywood movies. Unfortunately, imagination from Hollywood movies could be very unrealistic and romanticized comparing to the real ordinary life in California. Upon arrival, the life changes and adjustment had brought both positive and negative influence to our participants. Most experience by our participants did not match with their expectation, yet the determination of whether the expectations were overmet or undermet depended on how the students preferred and interpreted the changes. For example, most of our participants expected for a city-like living environment...
with tall buildings, yet the neighborhoods in California were usually quiet with mostly houses or small buildings. Some participants complained that it was too quiet, but some enjoyed the quietness. Therefore, different preference of students would also show different ways of how the students cope with their acculturative stress.

In the behavior part, we look for the sociocultural outcomes from learning how students’ identity influence communication behaviors and accommodate the cross-cultural interactions to reach a desired level of social distance applying the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). In the United States, the identity of being an ‘international student’ identified our participants as foreigners, outsiders, and non-Americans who were from a different country, had a different culture, and spoke a different language. Some participants disliked these assumptions because they claimed it was harder for them to communicate with the local Americans. The CAT suggested that students were driven to accommodate in two ways: convergence and divergence. Our participants showed that they were tend to converge into the dominant culture rather than diverge from it, but there were both convergence and divergence from what they shared. For example, no participants who experienced racial hatred speech in public confronted the perpetrator. There might not be enough time or knowledge for them to react at that moment, but the major reason was because all the participants recognized that as the dominant culture of this country and they did not wish to accentuate the cultural differences. Other examples of convergence from our participants including learning English and adopting American ways in greetings. However, there were also divergence behavior, for example, distinguish their religion and beliefs and maintaining their religious practice strictly. The level of affirmation in their identity would affect the degree in either converge or diverge communication behavior.
In the cognitive part, we look for the overall outcomes from the acculturation process, including the identity transformation and the intergroup relations from both psychological and sociological perspective by applying the social identity theory (SIT). The SIT suggested that “identity guides social comparison at the same time that social comparison refuses and reinforces one’s self-concept” (Abrams, O’Connor, & Giles, 2003, p.209). The acculturative experience had influenced the identity development of our participants in several ways. The experience of transforming from a national in home country to becoming a foreigner in host country indirectly strengthen their national identity. They developed a stronger sense of belonging to their home country from recognizing themselves as a representative from their nation. The multicultural environment in California also embraced their cultural identity by learning from the others with different culture backgrounds and sharing their own culture. Overall our participants showed positive image in both national and cultural identities. With strong sense of self-identity, our participants saw themselves in groups that would support and respect them. However, individual cases of racial discrimination and stereotypes also affected how the students categorized themselves from different social groups, and our participants would separate themselves from people with that attitude.

Conclusions

The results were overall more positive than expected. Our participants could easily name the differences between the United States and their home country, and it showed that they were aware of the life changes as part of the acculturation. Coming to the United States as an international student at a community college, their purpose in achieving their educational goals was clear. They were all transferring to a 4-year university to complete a bachelor degree. In their personal life without families’ physical support, the acculturative experience helped them to
become more independent, gain foreign experience, and learn different cultural values.

Academically, they were pleased by the American education system that provided them a more open-minded learning environment. Besides, they recognized culture shock through the challenges and the unpleasant experience they had living in the United States, yet they were all able to recover and adjust into the American college life. The confidence they had in their self-identity showed us how acculturation would strengthen one’s national and cultural identity. The results were greatly depended on the participants’ personality and social support network. From the participants’ experience at the community college, we also recognized the importance of multicultural learning environment and support service system provided by the college.

**Recommendations**

Further research in various groups of international students and the international education programs at community colleges is suggested. Second year students generally have more college experience and have acquired more cross-cultural skills than first year students. Since all participants in this research were second year students, the same research utilizing the same methodology on first year students may reveal a different result regarding culture shock and identity crisis. Our participants mentioned that they were uncertain about states other than California regarding racism, discrimination, and stereotype. It indicates that international students living in other states may have a different experience. As a result, further research with various groups of international students in different parts of the United States may reveal valuable insights that can be applied to the continued research and discussion in this area. Also, follow up research on the same group of participants after they complete their program in the United States or return to their home country may lead us into another study in acculturation regarding reverse culture shock.
The study abroad journey of international student is often lonely and difficult at the beginning. Traveling and living in a foreign country alone is not easy. Without physical support from family or a local social network, the college often becomes the primary source for international students to seek help. For many international students, their classmates, staff and faculty at the college could be the only people they know in this country. The service of the international education programs at colleges directly impacts international students’ acculturation experience and their impression of this country. Therefore, it seems essential for colleges to provide a great support system for international students.

Opportunities for international students to engage in student life and activities on campus seems to be necessary. International students are usually less engaged than domestic students at school activities because of the unfamiliar culture and the lack of social network. One opportunity would be the International Education Week (IEW) that is held once a year in November and has been promoted by the U.S. Department of Education for years (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Many colleges have already joined this celebration of international education and exchange in the United States by holding events, activities, performance, and galas. It provides a great opportunity for international students to participate at school events that would help them to be part of the student life and expand their social network on campus.

The college environment is suggested to be inclusive, welcoming, and friendly to all students. International students are required to be full-time students and are only allowed to work on campus according to SEVIS regulations. Most of the time, the college is the primary place for the international students to be since it may also be the only familiar place they know at the beginning. It would be especially hard for international students without a welcoming and
friendly environment to hang out and study. We recommend staff and faculty to provide assistance and an open office for international students to seek help. Most of the colleges have staff who are specialized in providing services and answering immigration-related questions for international students, yet lack of access to this information of college service is still a common problem for international students in their first year while the information provided at orientation is often overwhelming for new arrivals. We recommend the college to provide a drop-in space that would welcome international students all the time. Staff and faculty may not be able to solve all the problems, yet they can help to refer the students to the right department or person accordingly.

With cultural diversity growing on campus, training that incorporates multicultural related nuances for staff and faculty is highly recommended. It would benefit not only international students, but all students from all cultural backgrounds. Learning from the focus groups with our participants, I understand the important of learning about stereotypes and prejudice. Our participants were often mistaken as another race or ethnicity because of their skin color or appearance. Skin color does not equal to ethnicity, and ethnicity cannot be determined by only skin color or appearance. We often put cultural assumptions on the others but forget that they are only assumptions. To promote a more cultural inclusive environment, staff and faculty need to know how to avoid stereotypes and prejudice, and provide an equal learning platform for students. One practice can be provided in the training would be cross-cultural communication skills. Having conversations or lectures with students of a diversity all the time, it is important to ensure all staff and faculty have obtained the basic knowledge of intercultural interactions, including cultural sensitivity. The training would also help staff and faculty to understand the specific needs of different groups of students.
REFERENCES


Yan, Z., & Sendall, P. s. (2016). First year experience: how we can better assist first-year international students in higher education. Journal of International Students, 6(1), 35-51.


APPENDIX

Life being an International Student in the United States:
Acculturation, Culture Shock, and Identity Transformation
APPENDIX A

Flyer

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH STUDY

Life as an International Student in the United States: Acculturation and Identity Transformation

This study aims to learn how international students in the United States adopt into the new American culture upon arrival, and seek ways to help them to cope with the culture shock they may experience.

Please join me if you are:
- F-1 international student visa holders
- Currently studying at a community college in California
- 18 years or older
- English is not your first language

Location

Date

Time

If you have any questions or are interested in participating, please contact:
Vivyan Lam
Graduate Student in the Department of International & Multicultural Education
llam9@usfca.edu

During the study, you will:
→ Fill out a short questionnaire
→ Participate in an 1-hour focus group discussion
→ Follow-up interview if needed

Any information you provided during the study will be kept confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

The study has been reviewed and approved by the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board.
APPENDIX B

Focus Group Discussion Questions

Part I  Before Arrival

Why did you choose to study in the US?
What was your expectation of the US life?
What preparations did you do prior to your arrival?

Part II  First Arrival

What was the first impression you had with the new college life?
What are some changes you experienced and recognized that is different from where you come from?

Part III  Now

How do you identify yourself ethnically, racially, and nationally?
How will you describe your relationship with the local community?
How do you feel about the overall experience so far? Positive or negative?
APPENDIX C

Short Survey

Life as an International Student in the United States: Acculturation and Identity

This study aims to learn how international students in the United States adopt into the new American culture upon arrival, and seek ways to help them to cope with the culture shock they may experience. This survey asks about your visa status and student educational plan. It can be completed in about 10 minutes or less. You do not need to write your name on this survey. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

* Required

Your Age: *
Your answer

Gender *
○ Female
○ Male
○ Prefer not to say

Ethnicity *
Your answer
LIFE BEING AN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT IN THE U.S.

**Visa Information**

Are you currently an F-1 student visa holder? *

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

**Nationality:** *

Your answer

**Where did you reside before arriving in the US?** *

Your answer

**Date of Arrival in the US** *

Date

mm/dd/yyyy

[BACK] [NEXT]
Language Background

First Language/ Mother tongue: *

Your answer

How did you meet the minimum English language proficiency requirement at admission? *

- TOEFL
- IELTS
- Language School Completion
- Other: _______________________

What level of ESL/English course were you placed to at the first semester? *

- ESL 827
- ESL 828
- ESL 400
- ENGL 100
- ENGL 105
- Other: _______________________

BACK  NEXT
Student Educational Plan

Have you attended other educational institutions in the US? *

☐ No
☐ High School
☐ English Language School
☐ Other Community College
☐ 4-Year College/University
☐ Other: ____________

What is your major program? *

Your answer

What year are you currently at? *

☐ Year 1
☐ Year 2
☐ Other: ____________

What is your education goal? *

☐ Associate degree
☐ Transfer to 4-year university with an AA
☐ Transfer to 4-year university without an AA
☐ Certificate Program
☐ Other: ____________
When is the expected transfer term or completion of your current program? *

Your answer

Thank you for your participation!