

Effect of External and Internal Factors on the Inclination of Depression among Chinese International Students

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ABSTRACT

As studying in America becomes a popular choice for Chinese students, their psychological health should not be ignored. The variables related to the possibility of Chinese international students having depression are analyzed in this article. Four main elements are acculturative stress, maladaptive perfectionism, length of stay in America and perceived social support and they influence the likelihood of having depression both negatively and positively. Acculturative stress and maladaptive perfectionism will make Chinese international students more likely to have depression and perceived social support can buffer these negative effects. The definite result and more evidence for the influence of the length of time in America are still in need now. By researching Chinese international students, universities can realize the significance of their mental health and create precautionary measures to protect their psychological well-being.

Keywords: *Depression, International Students, Acculturative Stress, Maladaptive Perfectionism, Perceived Social Support.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2015, a Yale student called Wang was reported to commit suicide in California and she was only 20. In 2017, Tian, a 21 year-old Chinese international student from Cornell University, was found dead in her apartment and the death seemed to be suicide. She is a talented and excellent student in an elite university. Tang, a Chinese graduate student in University of Utah was reported to have committed suicide at the Golden Gate Bridge in 2017. The reports for their suicide cases mentioned depression for a few times. Even though it is unreasonable to say that their tragedies are totally driven by depression, a negative mental state was surely involved in their death.

In recent years, the number of international students is all-time high in the United States. Among these students, China "remained the largest source...in the United States in 2018/19 with 369,548 students"[1]. As an increasing number of international students choose to study abroad, it seems that many of them have been encumbered with mental diseases, such as depression. Depression, whose formal name is major depressive disorder, has severe symptoms to influence patients negatively. Patients may have a persistently depressed mood or loss of interest in activities. They may also have negative changes in sleep, appetite and so on[2]. The excitement decreases gradually for many international students when they begin to adapt to their new environments. Also, they may face language and knowledge limits in their studies. Multiple elements make them less resistant to depression. Various elements which directly or indirectly increase the possibility of

having depression among international students have been enumerated. There are four elements---acculturative stress, maladaptive perfectionism, length of stay and perceived social support---had been analyzed most frequently. The main elements and how each of them affects the mental state of Chinese international students will be studied and examined in the following paper by literature analysis. Also, the effective suggestions and strategies will be discussed as well.

2. ACCULTURATIVE STRESS

Acculturative stress, which can be defined as a negative health of people who are undergoing acculturation[3], or the difficulties when adapting to the new cultural environments. Depression and acculturative stress are related positively among Asian international students in the research[4]. For international students, acculturative stress may come from various aspects, such as the diffidence of their spoken English, events about their future, loneliness and isolation.

Acculturate stress makes international students more susceptible to depression. According to cultural background, it is common for Chinese students to use inner self-control abilities to solve the external problems they encounter[4]. Because their culture encourages them to restrain their emotions and value the difficulties[5], they are more likely to use self-control as strategies to solve the problems. They believe that real-life problems can be solved by their inner power, such as a strong-willed mind[4]. For instance, when an international students are treated unfairly in America, they tend to avoid direct

confrontation with others and use emotional self-control abilities to appease their emotional disturbance. They are more likely to attribute unfairness to their own deficiencies and decide to behave better to prevent the unfairness from happening again. However, this problem which may be unrelated to themselves can hardly be solved in this way. The reason behind is that some external factors may also influence the situation, such as unfriendliness from others. After always living with cautiousness and restraint, they may realize that behaving better cannot solve the problem. These students may feel helpless, anxious and even despair. Even worse, self-regulation and emotional suppression may cause depressive problems more severe. According to a study, in America, Asian international students had greater acculturative stress than European international students and the reason may be the similarity of cultural values between America and Europe[6]. The different cultural norms can be an important indication of different levels of acculturative stress among all international students.

3. MALADAPTIVE PERFECTIONISM AND ACCULTURATIVE STRESS

Maladaptive perfectionism is another factor that affects the likelihood of Chinese international students having depression. Perfectionism is defined as designing barely achievable goals and have excessively high expectations and strict evaluations of performance[7]. Also, individuals with maladaptive perfectionism incline to consider their disadvantages, such as faults, failures or possible criticism from the outside[8]. Students with maladaptive perfectionism incline to concentrate more on their negative parts of their performance and are more vulnerable to depression[4]. Many Chinese international students may have outstanding academic behaviors in their country and they have high academic expectations when they attend university in America. When they fail to achieve their expected goal, they may not be immune to depression[4]. Also, many other studies support this claim. Maladaptive Perfectionism and acculturative stress and depression can be proved to have a three-way interaction[4]. Maladaptive perfectionism tightens the relationship between acculturative stress and depression, making Chinese international students more susceptible to depression[4]. Another study revealed that maladaptive perfectionism has a positive association with depression and a negative association with life satisfaction[9]. Similar results appeared in the study about the relationship between maladaptive perfectionism and depression among students from Taiwan, China[4]. A novel way of explanation can be utilized to prove the connection between maladaptive perfectionism and depression. In the study about the Big Five model of personality, maladaptive perfectionism was negatively related to extraversion[10]. Because the Eastern culture is relatively introverted[5], maladaptive perfectionism among some Chinese international students may exacerbate the acculturative stress. Stimulated by

acculturative stress, students with maladaptive perfectionism are more likely to have depression.

4. LENGTH OF TIME

In addition, length of time in America is an element that predicts the possibility of depression among Chinese international students. The Length of time staying in America can affect the possibility of having depression, but maladaptive perfectionism and acculturative stress also involve the result. For those students who have stayed in a short period of time, the connection between maladaptive perfectionism and acculturative stress is not obvious[4]. However, among students who have stayed in America for a longer period of time, the interaction is more clear and those students with high maladaptive perfectionism are more likely to have a tighter connection between acculturative stress and depression[4]. In the research from Wei et al. (2007), for the short period of time, both students with high and low maladaptive perfectionism have relatively higher acculturative stress. The supposition is low maladaptive perfectionism may be a buffer and they need time to adjust themselves and adapt to the new environment[4]. The positive relationship between acculturative stress and length of residence among international students is also revealed by the study from Wang and Mallinckrodt (2006). From the study, students who have stayed in America for a longer time are easier to cope with acculturative stress and they have less adjustment difficulties[11]. A previous research from Lysgaard has different views about the relationship between depression and depression levels. Lysgaard reckoned that the relationship is changing as time goes on and utilized a U-shape to describe it. At first, the international students feel fresh and excited about the new world, but the satisfaction is decreasing as they lack close contacts with others. Then after tackling loneliness in this stage, they may become extroverted again. The U-shape hypothesis has been tested and approved by another literature and showed that international students who stayed in a foreign country for within a year are less depressed than native students[12]. And international students who have stayed for more than 4 years have less pressure than those who have been to America for 2 to 4 years[12]. However, the lack of the general acknowledged and strong evidence for the U-shape hypothesis still exists. The details about the length of stages of the U-shape hypothesis are not clear now. And how each stage influences international students' mental state can be expected in the future. Consequently, it is hard to indicate the clear and direct connection between Chinese international students' depression levels and their length of residence in America from the U-shape hypothesis. The process of adapting to the new environment is complex and changeable. Each student's situation varies greatly and U-shaped seems fails to indicate a general conclusions for Chinese international students. However, it can still provides a hint for those students. The reason why Chinese international students feel depressive in a short period of

time (within 1 year) may be the lack of enough time to adapt to the environment. Or it is a warning that they need extra support from counsellors, psychologists or psychiatrists. If a Chinese international student cannot have a better state of mind, maybe other solutions, such as applying for a gap year, should be thought about.

5. PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT

Social support may alleviate the stress that international students receive. Social support is resources that are achievable and can be definitely received by individuals[6]. Students with more social support are more likely to “experience higher adjustment levels and lower levels of depression and acculturative stress” and the support may be a buffer to assist students with grappling with challenges[12].

There are two models to address the relationship between perceived social support and depression. The main effect hypothesis model suggests that with more social support, students have higher life satisfaction and lower possibility of having depression[6]. Also, another study shows that social support networks are significant for Chinese international students[13]. After entering the university, international students have less connection with their families, friends and people they are familiar with and they have limited external resources[6]. According to the study, the external social support can decrease their likelihood of having depression. However, in another study from Chen, Mallickrodt and Mobley revealed an opposite result, demonstrating among general international students, the effects of social support for their mental health are not obvious to draw a conclusion[14]. Another model for perceived social support is a stress buffering hypothesis and it demonstrates that under high pressure, social support can mitigate the stress related to depression[6]. Similar result can be observed in another study and international students with more perceived social support are less likely to have high acculturative stress[15], causing students more invulnerable to depression. Also, in this article, the author explored the online social support and found that it can enlarge students’ social networks and further decrease their pressure[16]. The result of the research from Zhang and Goodson also confirms the positive effects of social interaction with Americans for depression among Chinese international students[17], because the social support mediates the host culture.

One difficulty for Chinese international students in the real life is that they are less likely to seek social support to solve their problems on their own initiatives. As being indicated previously, they incline to utilize internization which is not useful actually to solve the problems[18]. Even though these students may not appeal for help, the research indicated that Chinese international students will value and accept the social support from their professors and peers in US[19].

6. SUGGESTION

According to the study results, universities should pay more attention to international students who need support since they study abroad in a new place. With respect to racial divergence, the students’ refusal to seek help is related to the public’s understanding of psychological states in their home countries[20]. In China, people always tend to express depression in a negative way and a public stigma is closely connected with mental illness like depression[21]. Chinese people tend to feel ashamed of having depression and refuse to see psychiatrists or psychologists. To enhance international students’ willingness to seek help for depression, biological education can be indisputable[22]. The educational speeches available are necessary for international students to learn more about depression. Also, Chinese international students can understand more about depression by informational brochures about depression from colleges. Patience is the key variable targeting the problem of depression caused by acculturative stress or maladaptive perfectionism[23]. With more patience, Chinese international students will be less likely to blame themselves for the failures. The multicultural outreach projects can be offered to Chinese international students. This kind of intervention can focus on guiding students not to attribute the failures to themselves[23]. The projects can also help them to learn more about new places and adapt to the new environment. By having contacts with university institutions, students can receive personalized services aiming at their demand. Counseling services for students are indispensable for Chinese international students. Universities should inform students about available resources and make them familiarize with the support they can receive on campus[24]. When these students enter the college, the orientation should introduce freshmen with these resources related to their psychological health, such as the address of the counselling center. What is more, the significance of social networks with local people should be considered. Some workshops about American culture can be upheld to attract more international students to participate and interact with native students[24]. The host family programs can prepare international students for a new culture[24]. These activities can provide opportunities for Chinese international students to enlarge their social networks and create relationships with local students. After mastering more about depression among Chinese international students, universities can have a hint of their common troubles like acculturative stress or perfectionism. It seems that what universities have done for their psychological health is not enough now. When they may face more difficulties than local students, their reliable support resources, such as families or friends in China, are distant. They have to make new connections with local people to require social support. In the process of transition, the role of universities is important and influential. In the future, universities should consider more about their role as guiders.

7. CONCLUSION

Various elements are responsible for the higher possibility of having depression among Chinese international students. Acculturative stress from many aspects makes these students' life harder. Their cultural norms make them more likely to use self-control abilities to deal with problems. Maladaptive perfectionism is also associated with depression among Chinese international students. Maladaptive perfectionism also involves in a three-way connection with depression and acculturative stress. Perceived social support can be a buffer to decrease the depression levels of Chinese international students. The likelihood of having depression is also related to personalities, self-regulation abilities and so on. Admittedly, studying abroad have various advantages, such as higher self-supporting abilities and English proficiency. However, shortcomings should be considered as well. Before making decisions, a student should concern for the family's economic situation and the costs and benefits of studying abroad and personalities. Students should also choose appropriate time to study abroad. For international students in America now, paying more attention to their psychological health is necessary. They are encouraged to seek support from outside as soon as possible if they need help.

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