

## **Dealing with Acculturative Stress: How International Students' personality traits help?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Studies on international students have gained popularity over the past decades, especially; international students' experience on acculturative stress has been a significant research topic for researchers in different countries. However, there remains a gap in how personality traits influence the ways that international students deal with acculturative stress. This study aims to investigate acculturative stress-related experiences of five international students from five countries studying in Canada. Applying a collective case study as a qualitative research method and collecting data from semi-structured in-depth interviews, this study expects to describe levels of stress that these students encounter and explore how their personality traits shaped by social, cultural, and political contexts influence their acculturative stress levels and their ability to get over these experiences.*

**Keywords:** acculturative stress, international students, sociocultural theory, personality traits

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### **Introduction and Literature Review**

Studies on international students' (I.S.s) acculturative stress-related experiences show that studying in a foreign environment brings about psychological and contextual stressors such as isolation and disconnectedness (Bertram et al., 2014; Ma et al., 2020), lack of social support (Franco et al., 2019; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015), language barriers (Bertram et al., 2014), financial difficulties (Cayetano-Penman et al., 2021), and academic challenges (Li & Li, 2017; Ozer, 2015). However, the levels of stress that I.S.s encounter depends on their demographic, social, personal, and psychological characteristics (Berry et al., 1987; Ra, 2016). In other words, different I.S.s significantly experience different types and levels of acculturative stress. Many studies have been previously conducted to examine acculturative stress from a particular group of I.S.s such as Japan (Mori, 2000), China (Bertram et al., 2014; Ge & Durst, 2022; J. Zhang & Sustarsic, 2022), Korea (Cao & Meng, 2019; Ra, 2016), Iran (Falavarjani et al., 2020), Philippines (Pinamang et al., 2021), and Vietnam (Nguyen & Le, 2021; Tran et al., 2021). Several studies (Kim et al., 2022; S. Zhang et al., 2022)

discussed the experience of a multi-international group of students in general but without a comparison among them. Subgroup differences among I.S.s should be emphasized since they cannot be treated as a homogeneous group (Bhattacharya, 1998). In addition, most research in the field was quantitatively studied, so they only “provide a general picture of trends and relationships, they do not tell us about the processes that people experience...and their deeper thoughts and behaviors that governed their responses” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 84).

Therefore, drawing upon these two above-identified gaps, by applying a qualitative design, the current study aims at exploring and comparing how five I.S.s deal with acculturative stress based on an analysis of their personality traits. By analyzing the influence of I.S.s’ personality traits, the researcher discusses the underlying factors that attribute to their experiences, interpreting and achieving an understanding of how I.S.s buffer the stress differently (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Acculturative stress was conceptualized by Berry et al. (1987) as “one kind of stress, that in which the stressors are identified as having their source in the process of acculturation” (p. 492). It also refers to responses or changes that individuals make to life events that stem from intercultural contact or during cross-cultural adjustment (Sam & Berry, 2006). Therefore, I.S.s who leave their home countries in pursuit of international education always suffer from a particular amount of acculturative stress.

Literature indicates that there is certainly a close relation between personality and acculturative stress. First, some evidence shows that personality is one of the two factors responsible for I.S.s’ psychological problems (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994). Supporting this evidence, Duru and Poyrazli (2007) and Poyrazli et al. (2010) found that adaptive personality dimensions were predictor factors for acculturative stress. Second, research reveals that personality is a positive force in the cross-cultural adjustment process (Pentón Herrera et al., 2021). Especially, Bertram (2014) concluded that Chinese students tend to withdraw and internalize difficulties when they experience emotional distress and anxiety due to their collectivistic nature in an individualized society. Similarly, Cao and Meng (2019) stated that I.S.s from collectivist cultures usually suffer from a magnification of academic stressors in western countries where individualism is valued.

Based on these cultural-based findings, this study adopts sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and critical aspects of collectivism and individualism (Hofstede, 1985) as a theoretical framework to analyze the data. Through the argument that social and cultural aspects, including values, morals, and beliefs of the communities where I.S.s come from model and control their behaviors, the researcher discusses how I.S.s from different cultures deal with acculturative stress differently.

## **Methodology**

This study employs a collective case study approach since it focuses on a single issue of how I.S.s’ personality traits impact their acculturative stress experience. Interview data come from multiple cases to show different perspectives on the issue for the inclusion of qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Particularly, the analysis from multiple cases is for the purpose of comparison, which is often considered as more compelling and robust (Bryman & Bell, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). By examining similar and dissimilar results across cases, this study is more generalizable and powerful (Bryman & Bell, 2019; Yin, 2013), significantly contributing to the existing literature of I.S.s’ stress-related experience.

The researcher applies a purposeful sampling method to recruit full-time international graduate students from China, India, Vietnam, France, and Korea. Students from these five countries account for the highest number of I.S.s in Canada in 2021 (Erudera, 2022), so the selection of these representatives guarantees the diversity, reliability, and trustworthiness of the study. Five one-on-one semi-structured in-depth interviews, which aim to “elicit and ascertain participants’ perspectives to confirm, correct, or discover new knowledge pertaining to the focus of inquiry” (McIntosh & Morse, 2015) will be conducted online via the Zoom platform. The use of Zoom considered as I.S.s’ social window and outlet during the pandemic (Collins & Callaghan, 2022) as a medium for collecting data is to ensure participants’ privacy when it comes to sensitive questions that they prefer the anonymity and confidentiality of the computer, and to make it

convenient for both the researcher and participants when they live in different places across Canada. During a 60-minute interview, each student is asked to describe their acculturative stress experience, then re-story a situation in which they manage to buffer the stress. Semi-structured interviews allow follow-up questions to focus and emphasize how personality traits influence the ways students overcome stress (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data will then be analyzed by applying the thematic approach in addition to a section for a cross-case analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The overarching goal of this analysis is to identify the similar and different issues embedded within the data set among different I.S.s and then purposefully examine the themes that commonly transcend the cases (Yin, 2018).

### Expected Findings

This study offers a deeper understanding of I.S.s' acculturative stress-related experience. First, it is expected to find out that I.S.s suffer from different extents of acculturative stress. Second, their personality traits significantly impact I.S.s' levels of acculturative stress and their ways of overcoming them. However, since personal characteristics are socially and culturally constructed, the researcher hopes to find out that I.S.s who originally come from the same social and cultural contexts witness the same levels and types of stress. For example, Asian students such as Vietnamese, Korean, and Chinese are prone to feelings of disconnectedness, isolation, and academic difficulties since they are used to a collectivist society that emphasize on interdependence, harmony, conformity, and reciprocity. This finding is in alignment with results from (Agostinelli, 2021; Bertram et al., 2014; J. Zhang & Sustarsic, 2022). The research is also predicted to reveal that acculturative stress experience changes in the time since I.S.s express a belief that it is their mindset, willpower, inner strength, and readiness skills that determine how they acculturate and adjust to the new learning foreign environment. This echoes (Lysgaard, 1955) theory of adjustment in a foreign society (Dailey-Strand et al., 2021).

The study suggests a potential implication that there should be a personality test, consultation service, psychoeducational workshops, social support groups, and training programs preparing I.S.s with essential coping skills to successfully deal with acculturative stress. By emphasizing cultural awareness and international diversity, this study advances previously published studies by providing a deeper understanding of the influence of social, cultural, educational, and political aspects on I.S.s' acculturation. Eventually, it asks both education practitioners and researchers to consider equity, diversity, and inclusion in developing internationalization policies and designing intercultural educational programs to promote and strengthen comparative and international higher education in terms of equal global education.

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