

## **Unsilencing Migratory Loss in International Education: A Conversation Starter to Support Asian International Students Through Family Loss**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This reflection explores the previously unvoiced intersection between migratory loss and international education. In particular, it aims to promote interculturally informed approaches to support Asian international students through a family loss. Using personal experience as a point of entry, I synthesize existing literature on the impacts of loss and grief on college students. Next, I describe the challenges for Asian international students to gain equal access and benefits from the Western campus counseling services by analyzing Asian cultural values, the role of family, and students' transnational way of life. Lastly, I share some suggestions for the campus community to proactively support this population.

**Keywords:** Asian international students, counseling, family, grief, loss, mental health

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This article addresses the research gap at the intersection of migratory loss and international education. While there is a lack of literature concerning international students' loss, the concept of migratory loss is not new. In immigration studies, a migratory loss encompasses a wide range of losses that can span from something tangible to intangible, such as the connection to one's homeland, language, family, social status, and identity (Nesteruk, 2018). Such experiences are relevant for international students, who may be the first ones in their families to live abroad

for many years. Among various kinds of migratory losses, this article focuses on the kind that tends to be most silenced—the experience of family loss and grief.

*In my second year at a Canadian university, my father was diagnosed with a terminal illness. My Japanese father didn't want anyone outside the immediate family to know. For years, I kept my grief hidden—I wanted to respect his will, and I didn't want to be treated differently at school and work out of some sympathy. I suppose we were alike in that both of us didn't want to be someone else's burden. When I finally decided to seek counseling on campus, I was finishing the final semester in my fourth year. The experience, however, turned out to be more exhausting than healing. My counselor-in-training listened to me in a state of confusion as I shared my story as an international student. I didn't mind explaining because she seemed new to work with international students. I tried to tell her how my grief was tied to the guilt of being away from my family across the ocean, and the cultural values that I grew up with. But the distance between us kept growing every session, to the point I began to believe that counseling was not for me. Since then, I have continued to question some practices in counseling and I turned to research to understand my experience in a larger context.*

The purpose of this article is to contextualize family loss in a college environment, and to describe how intercultural understanding matters to build rapport with Asian international students. I begin by describing the academic and personal impacts of loss and grief on college students. Next, I use the existing literature to explore the interconnected roles of Asian cultural values, family, and transnational way of life, which complicate the processes for international students to seek help, and to benefit equally from the Western counseling services. Lastly, I share some suggestions for the campus community to proactively support this population.

This reflection is not intended to be a comprehensive guide to support bereaved Asian international students. I acknowledge there is a diversity among international students, and also within Asia. While I base my arguments on the previously studied commonalities among East Asian cultural values, I would recommend practitioners see each student as a unique individual with intersectional identities.

## **ACADEMIC AND PERSONAL IMPACTS OF LOSS AND GRIEF ON COLLEGE STUDENTS**

A loss of a family member or its anticipation is usually unassociated with the experiences of traditional college-age students (18–25 years old). However, research demonstrates the multidimensional effects of loss and grief on this population. In this section, I describe the impacts of loss and grief to raise awareness among higher education institutions (HEIs) to support students' academic and personal well-being.

First, bereaved students tend to face academic challenges compared with their counterparts (Balk, 2001; Battle et al., 2013; Cousins et al., 2017; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). Research shows emotional distress from the loss could

compromise students' level of concentration (Battle et al., 2013). Furthermore, these students may face pressing choices in their education. For example, if they decide to delay the coursework to attend seriously ill family members or the funeral, it could compound the costs and time to obtain their degrees (Battle et al., 2013). This aspect is particularly problematic for international students who usually incur higher tuition and travel time and fees to go home compared with their domestic counterparts.

Second, grief could disrupt students' personal development. College students are usually in their life stage to form their own identity, autonomy, and a sense of direction by distancing themselves from their parents or guardians (Balk, 2001; Battle et al., 2013). A loss of someone central to their upbringing could abruptly change this progression. For instance, it could challenge their path to independence by generating a sense of guilt for being away from home, and from the inability to reconnect with that person later in life (Battle et al., 2013).

Third, grieving students can experience loneliness. Bereaved students often feel isolated on campus, where most of their peers seem to lead their lives without a shadow of death. They are likely to perceive their experiences to be abnormal and incomprehensible by others (Battle et al., 2013). Such disconnect from their peers could pose a problem because research shows that support from friends is associated with positive coping strategies for bereaved students (Cousins et al., 2017).

### **ASIAN CULTURAL VALUES, STIGMA AGAINST HELP-SEEKING, AND PRIVACY OF FAMILY ISSUES**

International students—especially those with Asian roots—tend to avoid help-seeking and underutilize counseling services on campus (Carr et al., 2003; Johnson & Sandhu, 2007; Mori, 2000; Sheu & Fukuyama, 2007). Even when they begin therapy, international students tend to opt out at an early stage (Mori, 2000). Alarming, research shows that therapists' lack of cultural awareness could lead to “misdiagnosis” and “inappropriate treatment” of international students (Johnson & Sandhu, 2007, p. 27). According to the Open Doors Report, the leading East Asian countries comprise 44% of more than 1 million international students in the United States (Institute of International Education, 2020). Recognizing the need to create culturally sensitive support for this population, I describe how the well-being of Asian international students can be influenced by some of the tendencies in East Asian cultural values that emerge from the literature (Sheu & Fukuyama, 2007).

There are multiple factors for international students to underutilize counseling services: language barriers, cultural discrepancies, and lack of familiarity or knowledge about mental health (Johnson & Sandhu, 2007; Mori, 2000). Among these factors, Asian cultural values are closely associated with stigma toward mental health problems, suppression of help-seeking behavior, and a tendency to protect privacy around family issues. Thus, the cultural factor relates to the twofold problem of Asian international students accessing and receiving effective treatment from Western college counseling services.

Asian countries tend to share a collectivistic culture, where family needs oftentimes preside over personal ones (Sheu & Fukuyama, 2007). To save the honor of one's family, Asian international students may keep their problems private (Carr et al., 2003; Sheu & Fukuyama, 2007). Their hesitation to seek support could be also tied to their perception of help-seeking as something shameful, for it could mean that they are not mature enough to handle problems on their own (Carr et al., 2003). In the case of a family loss, its communal nature may compel the students to conceal their grief and related mental health issues from nonfamily members, and even from their family, because one's "mental illness represents family failure and makes the entire family lose face" (Sheu & Fukuyama, 2007, p. 179).

While keeping in mind the diversity of international students' families, it would help to discuss the first-generation experience in relation to student well-being. A recent study noted that 43% of Chinese international students are first-generation students, or the first ones in their families to seek postsecondary education (Gesing & Glass, 2018). First-generation students could face generational, cultural, and educational gaps in communicating their campus experiences with their parents or guardians. In this context, the definition of first generation could be broadened for international students. Even for those who may not strictly identify with the term, some may undergo similar challenges to translate their Western college experiences to their families, and to come to a mutual understanding when making academic and personal choices.

For many Asian international students, the choices they make for their well-being are often at the interplay of personal, interpersonal, and cultural values. Practitioners are encouraged not only to understand the students' internal conflicts to seek help, but also to observe their relationships with their families and their sense of filial piety despite the distance.

### **UNDERSTANDING TRANSNATIONALITY: THE GLOBALLY MOBILE LIFE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS**

Many international students have limited opportunities to see their families. Therefore, to support them through a family loss, HEIs need to be aware of their global mobility, which shapes their reality, in addition to their cross-cultural experiences *within* their host country. This is why I suggest practitioners working with international students need to cultivate intercultural competence, or the capacity to connect with others from diverse backgrounds with cultural sensitivity for local *and* global contexts.

In welcoming international students, most HEIs tend to focus on their acculturative challenges. In this mindset, schools supply international students with resources with an expectation that they will learn to settle down over time. While I recognize our responsibility to learn the host country's history and local practices, I caution HEIs on a single-minded view of international students as one group to be oriented as foreigners. Such a deficit-based or parochial interpretation of intercultural awareness could undermine HEIs' ability to fully understand the

experience of each international student who lives in between the cultures and countries.

Transnationality, or the physical and mental “movement between” (Phelps, 2016, p. 2) the countries, brings fluidity to international students’ identity and life experiences. Because of the continuity of their social connections, values, and roles from where they consider home, international students live in constant interactions with their evolving environments. As much as they may need some resources to adapt to their new environment, international students are also individuals with diverse knowledge, rights, and agency to co-create their environment as campus community members (Castiello-Gutiérrez & Li, 2020).

### **PREVENTATIVE SUPPORT FOR ASIAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS TO COPE WITH FAMILY LOSS**

If we can build a mindful community on campus, we can prevent someone from bearing grief alone. Since further research is needed to develop a comprehensive guideline, there are limitations to my suggestions. Nevertheless, the following are some recommendations for HEIs to proactively support Asian international students who might have to cope with family loss. All of them are preventative to counteract the barriers of international students accessing and benefiting from campus mental health services.

#### **Include Family Loss into Campus-Wide Mental Health Literacy Workshop**

I suggest the inclusion of a family loss and grief section into a campus-wide mental health literacy workshop, which can be integrated into an annual orientation with follow-up sessions throughout the year. The workshop would aim to destigmatize mental health issues including loss and grief so that both domestic and international students can learn about the importance of seeking support for themselves, or how to be supportive for their peers.

#### **Involve International Students’ Parents and Guardians in the Campus Community**

Given the gravity of family’s influence over some Asian international students, I suggest campus communities engage international students’ parents and guardians to share information on mental health and the Western academic culture. In event of a family loss or of its anticipation, the mutual knowledge could help international students and their families to make informed decisions in collaboration with confidential campus services.

#### **Cultivate Intercultural Competence of Faculty, Staff, and Therapists**

I suggest HEIs include the voices of international students to develop student services that are more reflective of their backgrounds and needs. One idea is to have student-driven training on intercultural competency for faculty, staff, and therapists. Willing international students can create the workshop voluntarily, and

I suggest the audience be mindful not to obligate these students to represent certain countries' perspectives holistically, for they need to be seen as individuals.

For the above preventative programs to be accessible, a hybrid or virtual model available across several time zones would be helpful (provided that all parties have the necessary technology). I am aware that conversations on matters such as a loss may bring discomfort for some people. Also, intercultural competence is not something that can be cultivated overnight. As such, it would be vital to have an informed facilitator to create a safe space and to sustain opportunities for learning and exchange. Finally, the above recommendations are designed for multiparty engagement to improve the transparency and coordination of campus resources and referrals.

### CONCLUSION

Family loss is one of the most life-changing adversities for a student studying abroad. Nevertheless, mutual silence between a student and the campus community can bury the need for support. Much more work is needed to develop interculturally informed services for bereaved international students. In particular, practitioners who work with Asian international students are recommended to proactively reach out for support. In an inclusive campus community, international students can strengthen their resilience “to cope with discontinuities in life” (Nesteruk, 2018, p. 1026) that are inherent in their migratory way of life. I hope this reflection can be an invitation for campus communities to start a conversation.

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