

Challenges Faced by Indian International Students in US Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Transiting from a home country to a host country in pursuit of higher studies involves various psychological and sociocultural challenges. Accordingly, this phenomenological qualitative study explores the challenges faced by six Indian international graduate students in a US university. The study further integrates an interdisciplinary approach by including participants from different disciplines to generate an understanding of their collective experiences. The data analysis generated five themes related to the challenges encountered: (1) living away from family and friends, (2) difficulty in expressing, (3) multitasking, (4) difficulty in fitting in, and (5) lack of positive attitude. Findings have implications for US universities. Higher educational institutions can play an essential role in addressing the challenges to facilitate a positive academic experience for international students.

Keywords: Challenges, cultural adjustment, Indian international students, language barriers, phenomenology

INTRODUCTION

Over the past six years between 2014 and 2019, international student enrollment in the U.S. universities increased from 974, 926 to 1,095,299 (Open Doors, 2019). Of these, nearly 70.1% of the students were from Asian countries, with India ranking second (26.3%) after China (48.1%). International students significantly impact the economy of the host country

by contributing financially. For instance, in 2019, they contributed approximately 41 billion dollars to the U.S. economy (NAFSA, 2019). They also enrich the university culture by bringing in diversity (Burbules, 2002). However, international students encounter various challenges upon their transition to the host countries (Rabia & Hazza, 2017; Gautam et al., 2016; Young & Gutierrez, 2019). The challenges include written and oral communication, feelings of alienation, homesickness, and a need to adapt to the new culture. The language barrier is reported to be one of the major hurdles in impeding international student adjustment in the United States (e.g., Poulakis, Dike & Massa, 2017). Smith and Khawaja (2011) noted that lack of confidence in language competency causes anxiety and stress, thus hindering the psychological and sociocultural adjustment. Further, language deficiency hinders classroom participation, understanding assignment requirements, performance in written and oral assignments and academic achievement, leading to higher levels of stress (Ching et al., 2017; Mori, 2000). Concurring with this finding, Zhou et al. (2017) reported that students with lower language competency doubt their abilities to succeed academically and therefore experience academic stress. Using the comparative case studies method, Trice (2003) conducted a study to explore the perceptions of fifty-four faculty members on international graduate students. Most of the faculty noted that students with lower levels of English competency had significant difficulties with academics, which also impacted their overall academic success.

Language barrier was found to cause anxiety in social settings, leading to social alienation in the host country (Karuppan & Barari, 2011; Mori, 2000). For instance, Ching et al. (2017), in their review, found that English deficiency is a constant stress causing factor, preventing international students from engaging socially, thus alienating them from social gatherings. Zhou et al., (2017) presented students' views, who believed that social gatherings with the host nationals are crucial for successful student adjustment in the U.S. Supporting these findings, more recent literature reported a strong correlation between students' inability to communicate in English and higher levels of acculturative anxiety (Hansen et al., 2018; Mahmood & Burke, 2018). While English deficiency caused challenges for international students, Barratt and Huba (1994) found that English proficiency increased their confidence, helping them have successful relations with the host nationals. This finding was confirmed by previous studies (Sumer et al., 2008; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Further, reporting a correlation between English proficiency and depression, Sumer et al. (2008) noted that higher levels of English efficiency caused lower levels of depression among international students.

Additionally, international students often face sociocultural challenges. Comparable studies indicated international students to experience

less social support, causing them to feel lonelier and more homesick (Heng, 2017; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002). Rudd (1990) noted that when individuals transit to a new environment, they seek social support by cultivating new friendships. The absence of social support increases feelings of hopelessness and stress (e.g., Leong, 2015). Acculturative literature reported that students' personality, such as extroversion, introversion, self-esteem, positive or negative thoughts, all impact their ability to establish new friendships and predict the sociocultural adjustment (Chennamsetti, 2020; Chennamsetti & Bista, 2019; Jackson et al., 2013). Also, students' ability to communicate effectively in the host language predicts their ability to make friends in the host country (e.g., Mahmood & Burke, 2018). For example, Zhou et al. (2017) examined acculturative stressors experienced by fifteen Chinese students using qualitative methods. They found that being ignorant of the American societal conventions hinders socializing. This was compounded by an absence of both, a general familiarity and avenues for social gatherings between American and Chinese students. Participants observed that a general ignorance of Chinese culture resulted in an unintentional barrier between Chinese and American students. Another qualitative study, Sumer et al. (2008) found that a low level of social support among four hundred and forty international students in the U.S. heightened their anxiety levels. In contrast, increased social support resulted in more interactions, reducing both depression and anxiety among students.

Transitional challenges are overarchingly significant among Indian international students who come from collectivistic and cooperative societies to individualistic societies. Individualistic societies emphasize self-reliance, individual goal settings and independence. Individualistic behavior focusses on personal goals. In contrast, collectivistic behavior emphasizes harmonious social groups where people think beyond personal lives and benefit the respective groups (Mori, 2000). Further, the consequences of these challenges are manifested in the form of anguish, self-doubt, and instability among Indian international students (Chennamsetti, 2010).

Prior research that exists on the challenges encountered by Asian Indian international students is not as exhaustive and comprehensive as the literature on the general Asian international student population. The absence of extensive research on the acculturation experiences of the Indian international student population is a notable limitation in literature, though they are the second largest student population after China in the U.S. (Open Doors, 2019). Hence, it is imperative to acquire more in-depth knowledge about the challenges that Indian international students encounter in the host country and the resulting negative consequences. Such information can aid the U.S. universities in assisting students in their adjustment, thus ensuring their positive academic experience and retention. The present study explores

the challenges encountered by six Indian international students enrolled in a public university in the southern United States.

RESEARCH METHOD

Participants

Six graduate student participants (three male and three female students) took part in the study. Of these, five were doctoral students, and one was a master's level student. All the participants were international students from India and are undergraduate degree holders in diverse disciplines before enrolling as graduate students in the U.S. At the time of the study, the participants had resided in the U.S. for 2-9 years. They all were enrolled in varied disciplines, including engineering, chemistry, economics, biophysics, physics, and business. The age of the participants ranged between 24-45 years.

Procedure

This study is part of a larger study (Chennamsetti, 2010) that was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at a public university located in the southern United States. Email invitations were sent to Indian international students enrolled in the same university requesting them to participate in the study. Of the eighteen students who responded to the email, six were selected using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a process where participants are chosen based on their capability to provide in-depth data regarding the phenomenon being researched (Patton, 1990). Participants who agreed to be interviewed were asked probes related to the challenges they encountered in the U.S. The interviews were conducted at the places convenient for the interviewees, such as their labs, cafeteria, and the university library. The interviews ranged for 1-2 hours. The consent was obtained from the participants to record the interviews, which were later transcribed in their entirety. The data thus obtained was analyzed using a phenomenological methodology (Moustakas, 1994).

Data Analysis

Phenomenological methodology (Moustakas, 1994) was utilized to analyze the data. Biases and preconceived notions were bracketed when analyzing the data. The statements that lacked clarity during the interview were removed to preserve the identified invariant constituents. The identified constituents were then classified into themes that evolved into individual textural and structural descriptions explaining the challenges encountered by the participants.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data analysis, Epoche (Moustakas, 1994) was utilized to remove the researcher's preconceived notions. This was combined with member checks wherein the participants were approached the second time after the main interview. This second follow up was to go over the transcribed interviews and make the necessary changes to ensure the accuracy of all the responses. Participants were informed of the confidentiality procedures in advance. Their permission was obtained for both the recording and transcription processes along with the option to withdraw from the interview if desired.

RESULTS

The data analysis resulted in the following five themes that hindered the adjustment of Indian international students in the U.S.: (1) living away from family and friends, (2) difficulty in expressing, (3) multitasking, (4) difficulty in fitting in, and (5) lack of positive attitude. The findings of this study intend to make future international students aware of the potential hardships they might encounter upon their transition to the U.S. Such advanced awareness might aid them in devising coping strategies that can be applied to overcome the challenges, thus ensuring their effective adjustment to the host country.

Living Away from Family and Friends

Participant 1 stated that the time he was away from his home country made him feel sad, especially when performing household chores, such as preparing breakfast. Listening to Indian songs on the radio made him nostalgic and miss home. Feelings of loneliness were instilled in him after talking to his parents and relatives over the phone. For participant 2, it was a completely new experience to lead a life on her own in a new place that triggered feelings of anxiety and loneliness. The absence of her mother, with whom she shared a close relationship, made her feel homesick. Telephonic conversations with her parents disturbed her as they reminded her of their absence. The absence of the family members and their emotional support, especially during the examination times, further led to unwanted stress. Illustrating specific aspects, she stated:

When I get frustrated with the lab work, when I don't get the results, yes, you want someone with you who can talk to you immediately. Since I am more close to my mother than my sister, you lack that person's presence in life. Sometimes you do not tell the bad things happening to you because they are so far off, and you don't want them to suffer; but if you are with them, they immediately know about what's happening in my life. Again, though my fiancé is here, he is a

Ph.D. student also, so you think twice before talking to him because he has his own stress level.

Feelings of homesickness and loneliness proved detrimental to participant 3's adjustment to the host country. Homesickness led her to feel sick and miss the comfort her family provided during stressful situations. Though she had no complaints about her stay in the U.S. and was thankful for the opportunity, she could never consider it her home. During the periods of loneliness, she strongly felt like going back home. Participant 4 missed his student life in his home country. He missed working with his friends in the lab as a team and also participating in leisurely activities such as visiting a 'chai dukan' (a tea snack shop) where they discussed their research problems over a cup of tea and 'samosas' (an Indian snack). He longed for the togetherness, familial atmosphere, ambiance, and the personal bonds he established with his friends. He did like many aspects of his academic life in the U.S., but still missed both the student and the personal life of his home country. Similarly, participant 5 missed his job and the comforts of his home country. Specifically, he missed the cordial relations that he shared with his colleagues at work, where he never had to worry about being misunderstood.

Difficulty in Expressing Oneself

One of the participants had difficulty expressing herself as she did not know whom to trust. Further, she also feared that her feelings might be misinterpreted and spread as rumors. The constant suppression of her emotions led her to feel isolated and 'miserable.' Elaborating on her challenges of not being able to express herself, she stated:

One doesn't know whom to trust initially. Can I trust an American? Can I trust an Indian? Can I talk about this? It is still difficult; I don't trust anybody here the way I trust people back home. So, having to suppress my feelings and not being able to talk about certain things certainly makes me feel lonely.

Another participant had difficulty in expressing himself, mainly because of feelings of self-consciousness. He had specific doubts in his abilities to make himself understandable, communicate with clarity and following the rules of pronunciation and vocabulary. This self-conscious nature proved to be a challenge when communicating with his American peers. Explaining, he said:

When I am speaking with someone who is non-Indian, I have questions like, 'Will they understand me'? 'Do they understand me'? 'Am I communicating properly'? or 'Am I pronouncing the words

properly'? So, this is always in the back of my mind. So, sometimes I try to overcorrect it, when they give a blank face; it happens. But it was not much of a problem.

Multitasking

One of the participants felt stressed by the academic load that he had to carry along with his job. He stated:

Often, you have to rush from your job to classes and vice versa. Then many times you have to stay up the whole night to finish assignments or prepare for exams. There are deadlines to catch in a part-time job too. Multiple assignments being handed over or approaching exams would trigger stress.

For two of the participants, the need to do household chores along with studying was a challenge. Back home, they had helpers to do all the household chores because of which they had no practice in the household tasks. Consequently, the need to do the household chores along with studying tired them and became a challenge in adjusting in the US. Explaining, one participant said:

In India, you are not working when you are studying. So, when you are studying, you are concentrating a lot on your studies, your parents are very supportive, and you have helpers to do the chores. So, it's just studying and you are not expected to do much else. I think it's very nice. Here I think it's very difficult, like when you are just 18, and you have to adjust to cooking, cleaning and living on your own, navigating through classes and deciding what you want to take. It's difficult.

Additionally, one of the participants who had time for extracurricular activities such as sports and dance in India found that graduate student life in the U.S. left no time for leisurely activities. She felt that having more time for leisure activities would have reduced her stress. On the contrary, she had to juggle work, academic activities, including exams, meetings with professors, seminars, research assignments, health and personal life, all of which increased her stress levels. Overall, the participant stated that her life became more stressful in the U.S. when compared to India.

Difficulty Fitting in

One of the participants struggled with a feeling of not being able to integrate into U.S. society despite having excellent communication skills in English and cultivating friends. She attributes this to her being different in many aspects such as ethnic background, food habits and the country of origin.

Related to the aspect of feeling different in the host country, another participant opined that the differences in language and culture contribute to the feeling of being an alien. Elaborating, he stated:

Whenever I go and talk to Americans, I know I am an outsider. I never considered myself to be a part of this society, be in terms of language or culture or anything. Usually, I talk with a sense of gratitude. I ask myself this question - suppose the same situation was reversed; let's say, this is India, you are an Indian and they are Americans, it's like role reversal, will you be so acceptable? Will you be so welcoming to other cultures? Will you be so forthcoming to help others? If you see everything in that 117 light, then what you see is definitely a service to you. So, in that sense, I don't have any questions.

The same participant felt that loneliness was mainly due to not making any conscious efforts in socializing and cultivating friendships. This, in turn, developed a chain reaction of him feeling increasingly isolated. Another participant conveyed similar opinions. Though he found the U.S. to be a wonderful place, he could not easily fit in due to the unique differences in culture, language, communication, perceptions, and food habits.

Lack of Positive Attitude

One of the participants mentioned that she was less positive about her life as an international student in the U.S. A specific instance, such as the possibility of underperforming in academic tests and failing, triggered unwarranted fears of being sent back to her home country. She further feared that she might be perceived as a failed student. This resulted in reduced self-confidence that hindered her effective adjustment. The academic stress also hampered her interactions with the professors. Explaining, she stated:

Initially, when I had to interact with an American professor, maybe I got a little stressed because I did not know what they would expect and what they want, what they would ask and whether my answers would be satisfactory.

Another participant expressed having constant fears of her academic work being dismissed by her professors, research committee or her co-researchers. Explaining, she stated:

Sometimes I am unhappy here. I question why I should put myself through this? But yes, it's a great education, it brings you name, fame, sets your career in an amazing path, hopefully. I hope that this Ph.D. is worth all that I am missing out on.

Participant 4 mentioned about how he left a settled job in his home country to devote valuable years to earn his Ph.D. This move placed him in a constant worry about the worth of risking his career to complete his doctoral studies. He harbored worries about not passing his mandated qualifying exams and courses.

Another participant worried about the possibility of offending his American peers during his conversations with them. Therefore, he felt the need to constantly correct his language, which in turn increased his nervousness and self-consciousness. Consequently, his self-confidence reduced to a great extent. Further, his constant fear of rejection resulted in underperformance even at the job interviews, negatively impacting his psychological well-being. Detailing more specifically, he stated:

As international students, we are very insecure about our assistantships, visa status. So, if you change your chair, and lots of time the person with whom you work is your chair also, so if you change him, he will probably take you off of your assistantship. So, you know those kinds of worries. So, insecurity in the education system is a huge thing in the United States.

DISCUSSION

The present qualitative study explored the challenges that hindered the adjustment of six Indian international students studying in the U.S. Five specific themes were identified: living away from family and friends, difficulty in expressing oneself, multitasking, difficulty in fitting in and lack of positive attitude. The participants reported that living away from family and friends made them constantly miss their families. Not understanding who to trust and self-doubts about English language proficiency made it difficult for the participants to express themselves, which in turn made them feel alienated. Maintaining a balance between academic work, household chores, and assistantships was a challenge for the participants. Fitting in a new culture and academic system different from what the participants are used to made their everyday living difficult. Finally, a lack of positive attitude led to constant worrying, a fear of rejection, and nervousness all of which hindered their adjustment in the host country.

Consistent with previous literature (Rabia & Hazza, 2017), this study found that living away from family and friends in a foreign country made the participants feel homesick and lonely. The absence of emotional support, togetherness, familial atmosphere, ambiance and the personal bonds that the participants established with their families and friends increased their feelings of anxiety and stress. Besides, the absence of trusted individuals to share their problems with increased their confusion and frustration. Further, not having

their loved ones to comfort them when sick made them feel low. This confirms previous findings from Lértora and Croffie (2020).

Like English language proficiency and self-doubt, identified in Perry et al. (2017) research, this study demonstrated that lack of English proficiency led to self-doubt and low self-confidence, that in turn led to difficulty in expressing oneself. Also, a unique finding of the present study was that of participants not being able to express their feelings with their peers, as they did not know whom to trust. This aspect of an unintentional suppression of emotions led to feelings of isolation and sadness. Currently, the literature does not show any comprehensive studies exploring the aspect of the absence of trustworthiness leading to feelings of isolation. Future studies may be needed to examine these aspects comprehensively.

Participants in this study experienced the need to multitask in the U.S., for which they were completely unprepared. Multitasking was in the form of juggling the academic workload with assistantships and doing multiple household chores on their own. The additional challenge was having no training in performing these chores, which included cooking, cleaning, and laundry. This confirms with previous findings of Kaur (2006) and Garimella (2008), who found that international students from India generally belonged to elite backgrounds and had assistants at home to do routine chores. The help they received provided them an exclusive time to focus on academic life. However, multitasking in the U.S. led to high levels of anxiety among them, as concurred by a previous study (Fritz et al., 2008).

As reported by Zhou et al. (2017), participants in the present study also expressed difficulty fitting in. They experienced the difficulty of not being able to mingle with their American peers to cultivate new friendships. This led to the development of a sense of non-belonging, where the students consider themselves misfits in a foreign country (Baker & Siryk 1999). Further, the sense of non-belonging was seen to negatively affect active class participation and a willingness to seek help when needed (Ostrove & Long, 2007). In contrast, related studies clearly showed that students who made sincere efforts in cultivating a sense of belonging had positive effects on their self-perception; they had higher self-confidence and distinctive scholarly achievements (Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Future research on developing ways to cultivate a sense of belonging would be beneficial.

Finally, some of the participants in this study lacked a positive attitude. They showed a tendency to harbor feelings of rejection when they underperformed in academics. This further led to a fear of not being able to complete their academic program, which further evolved into feelings of anxiety. In addition, they carried fears of being misinterpreted by their American peers and professors, which increased their nervousness and decreased their self-confidence. A lack of understanding related to the expectations of the program requirements resulted in fears of failing the

assignments. Concurring with these findings, an earlier study found that students with higher self-esteem and confidence in their inherent abilities reported effective adjustment and less stress in the host country (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002). Providing the reason for fears regarding underperformance, the researchers noted that the lack of knowledge regarding various aspects of the new academic environment sometimes makes the international students develop negative thoughts and fears. However, with time and experience, the students gain a better understanding of their surroundings and develop the skill sets to adapt well in their new environment.

CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS

The present phenomenological qualitative study integrated an interdisciplinary approach to explore the challenges encountered by six Indian international graduate students from diverse fields of study. The challenges identified were: 1) living away from family and friends, (2) difficulty in expressing, (3) multitasking, (4) difficulty in fitting in, and (5) lack of positive attitude. A direct consequence of these challenges was acculturative stress that is defined as “a marked deterioration of the general health status of an individual; it encompasses physiological, psychological, and social aspects that are explicitly linked to the acculturation process” (Poyrazli et al., 2004, p. 74). Manifestations of acculturative stress in this study were in the form of academic difficulties, limited social life, lack of clarity and feelings of sadness, alienation, and depression. This finding concurred with the earlier studies (Leong 2015; Myers-Walls et al., 2011). Further, the literature on acculturative stress indicated that student populations encountering psychological and sociological challenges tend to show negative academic results such as non-completion of academic programs and in general, are at a high risk of attrition (O’Keeffe, 2013). However, a more optimistic finding of a prior study (Alsaahfi & Shin, 2017) indicated that initial cultural stress experienced by international students serves as a learning experience that enables them to devise ideal coping strategies to adapt to the new culture in a short period.

To aid successful adjustment of international students, university counseling services and international offices could promote awareness among incoming international students about the challenges identified in this study. Such understanding would help students understand that encountering such challenges is a common phenomenon and are experienced by most of the international students. Such understanding will further help them device coping strategies to overcome the challenges as opposed to developing feelings of depression (Walter & Cohen, 2011).

LIMITATIONS

The present study has a small sample size that might be considered to limit the significance of the data analysis. However, the sample size falls within the prescribed limits of 5-25 participants for phenomenological studies (Creswell, 1998). Additionally, the small sample size aided in conducting a thorough data analysis (Sandelowski, 1996). Also, prior research suggests that to achieve an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study, qualitative researchers are suggested to focus on the selection procedures of the sample size instead of on the sample size itself (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Accordingly, the sample was selected using purposive sampling to acquire rich data related to the challenges encountered in the U.S.

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