

Article

Culture Shock and Coping Mechanisms of International Korean Students: A Qualitative Study

Kent D. McLeod

Earth University, Costa Rica

Zohreh R. Eslami*

Texas A&M University, USA

Keith M. Graham

National Taiwan Normal University, Taiwan

Abstract

International students bring academic, cultural, and economic value to universities around the world. However, adjustments for these students can be difficult as a result of culture shock, resulting in early exit from the university. In order to help inform university personnel on how to better assist international students, this study examines the interpersonal, psychological, and physiological symptoms of culture shock of three Korean international graduate students at a large public university in the southwest United States. Data were collected through three interviews and seven weekly online journals. The findings uncovered the existence of culture shock for each of the three participants to differing degrees at various times throughout the semester. In particular, a comparatively higher incidence of interpersonal and psychological culture shock symptoms compared with physiological ones was displayed, thus showing strong support for theories that conceptualize culture shock as individualized in nature. In addition, the data revealed that personal characteristics, family, religion, and exercise all played a role in the participants' abilities to cope with culture shock. The results of this study could help universities better understand and support international students, ensuring that the university can benefit from the unique value these students bring to campus.

Keywords

Culture shock, international graduate students, higher education, coping mechanisms, Korean students, acculturation

1 Introduction

According to the Institute of International Education (2019), 1,095,299 international students were

***Corresponding Author**

Address: 610 Harrington Office Building, College Station, TX 77843, USA

Email: zeslami@tamu.edu

studying in the United States during the 2018/2019 school year. While international students bring unique cultural knowledge, they also are exposed to the often contrasting cultural norms of the United States, and in particular, the culture of universities. Culture is an essential variable that must be considered in the education process for international students in the United States. The “multiple demands for adjustment that individuals experience at the cognitive, behavioral, emotional, social, and physiological levels, when they relocate to another culture” (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004, p. 168) are undeniably critical for the adjustment of international students and often elicit initial debilitating intrapersonal and interpersonal issues.

International students from South Korea, in particular, made up 5% of the international student population in the United States in 2018/2019, making it the third-largest group behind China and India. South Korean students are an important part of the international student population, bringing academic, cultural, and economic value to the universities they attend. However, the transition from home in South Korea to universities in the United States is not always easy, with many of these students experiencing culture shock upon arrival. While a substantial amount of literature exists regarding culture shock in general, more empirical research is needed on the factors affecting newly arrived Korean students at colleges and universities in the United States. As international students from Korea constitute a large group studying in the United States, there is an urgent need for a better understanding of the variables associated with culture shock to help ease Korean students’ transition to academic life in a foreign country.

1.1 Theoretical framework

Scholars typically define the phenomenon of culture shock using four conceptual models. The first, and by far the most prominent, is the recuperation model. This model incorporates both recovery from physical symptoms associated with this condition as well as psychological ones triggered by identity crises. Lysgaard’s (1954) famous U-shaped curve is illustrative of the process, representing the transition from initial positive feelings about the host culture, to negative ones sparked by cultural dissonance and language problems, and finally a return to a “high” of cultural acceptance and adaptation.

Similar to Lysgaard’s (1954) U-shaped model is Gullahorn and Gullahorn’s (1963) W-shaped model. In essence, Gullahorn and Gullahorn’s model is a double U reflecting the stages of excitement at the prospect of returning home, followed by the re-entry shock of encountering family and friends who may not understand or appreciate the sojourner’s changed identity, and finally re-integration with family, friends, and the culture as a whole, signifying a realization of the positive and negative aspects of both countries.

Another model, the learning model, is based on the conception of culture shock as a learning process (Anderson, 1994). Initially, international students are held to be ignorant of their unconscious assumptions about life as well as the norms of the host culture. In response to this, they must learn the sociocultural skills necessary for adjustment and integration by increasing their cultural awareness. As such, the U-shaped curve is eschewed in favor of a gradually upward sloping learning curve.

The third model, the journey model, treads a middle ground between the first two models as it conceives of culture shock in linear terms as a transitional experience that is symptomatic of both recovery and learning (Adler, 1975; Anderson, 1994; Ito, 2003). This phenomenological journey conceptualization portrays the psychological adjustments that international students engage with over time. It follows a methodical progression from the periphery of the host culture to the center as well as from rejection and unawareness to acceptance and understanding. By resolving their feelings of cognitive dissonance, these individuals develop cultural sensitivity as they move from early “ethnocentrism” to full “ethnorelativism” (Bennett, 1986).

The equilibrium model is the final model and a dynamic, mechanical, and cyclical one based on the contention that individuals suffering culture shock are in disequilibrium, and their reactions to the

host culture show a desire to return to balance (Anderson, 1994). To achieve homeostasis, international students must adequately adjust to the new cultural demands by achieving a satisfying level of functioning in terms of their behavior, environment, and frame of reference (Grove & Torbiorn, 1985).

As Anderson (1994) points out, each of these models has its shortcomings as they present only a partial conceptualization of culture shock. While individually each may provide one or more pieces to the puzzle, their theoretical isolation from other equally valid models prevents the construction of a cohesive impression of this phenomenon that examines the social, behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and physiological aspects jointly. This disconnection reveals a need for either a conceptualization of culture shock that embodies the many features of the existing models and fully actualizes the multi-faceted nature of this phenomenon or, more likely, a recognition of the individualized nature of culture shock, such as the one called for by Fitzpatrick (2017), that is unable to be supported by a strict model.

1.2 Literature review

International students, as opposed to expatriates who move for family or work, present a unique side to culture shock in that they not only have to acculturate to the host country but also, and perhaps more importantly, adapt to academic life on a foreign campus (Alsaifi & Shin, 2017; Choi, 2006; Hwang, Martitosyan, & Moore, 2016; Mesidor & Sly, 2016; Sato & Hodge, 2009; Zhang, 2016). Inspired by her own experience as an international student, Choi (2006) found six major difficulties faced by international students: insufficient language proficiency, different cultural knowledge, mismatch between needs and the program, lack of faculty support, stress, and institutional inflexibility. Other researchers have reported similar findings, such as Sato and Hodge's (2009) four categories: language differences, academic plight, positive/negative relationships, and emerging self-awareness.

Language proficiency has been found to be one of the top difficulties for international students in university settings. De Araujo's (2011) literature review found English as the top issue for international student adjustment. While universities often require language proficiency tests for admissions, Kuo (2011) found that these tests may not adequately measure international students' preparedness and that students still struggle with listening comprehension and oral expression.

However, there is not full consensus that English proficiency is the largest obstacle for international student adjustment. Zhang and Goodson (2011) conducted a systematic literature review on 64 quantitative studies focused on predictive factors of cultural adjustment for international students. The review revealed that stress and social support were stronger predictors than English proficiency. Andrade's (2009) study also challenges English proficiency as a major issue affecting the academic and social adjustment of international students. The study reported that neither international students nor their professors felt English language proficiency presented major difficulties with studies, though it should be noted that the university in the study had an international population of about 50% and may have catered their instruction to accommodate this large population group.

Recent studies on culture shock have continued to examine the unique challenges faced by international students but have also expanded to include the coping mechanisms employed to help overcome the challenges. Park, Lee, Choi, and Zepernick (2016) found that successful adjustment was associated with coping strategies such as changes in personal problem solving, social support, mentoring relationships, religious beliefs, and the use of campus services. The researchers also suggested that a difference may exist between married and non-married sojourners facing culture shock. Alsaifi and Shin (2017) added improving language proficiency, time management, and mixing with others to the list of coping strategies. While some universities may be taking action to help international students with culture shock, Presbitero (2016) noted that many students do not engage with campus or medical services and suggested that universities be more proactive in encouraging the participation in services for reducing the effects of culture shock.

While progress has been made on understanding the coping mechanisms of culture shock, adjustment to a new culture is not guaranteed, and not all international students succeed in coping with university life. While the cultural distance between the home and host cultures may be a factor (see, for example, Mumford, 2000), Fitzpatrick (2017) suggests success in overcoming culture shock may be tied more to the individual and the context rather than to culture. Newsome and Cooper (2016) documented the cultural and social experiences of eighteen international graduate students studying in Britain. By the end of the study, five participants had a positive adjustment, ten had a partial adjustment, and three were unable to adjust and dropped out. Studies such as Newsome and Cooper's present an argument that universities need to better understand both the symptoms of culture shock and the coping mechanisms utilized to successfully overcome them.

Despite the large number of Korean students studying abroad, only a few studies have specifically examined the cultural adjustment issues these students face in American universities. Chun and Poole (2009) found that Koreans studying in a graduate social work program in the United States experienced difficulties in five areas: academic problems, financial difficulties, cultural barriers, psychological problems, and family concerns. They further found that several physiological, psychological, and social coping strategies aided the students in managing the difficulties they faced. Lee and Carrasquillo (2006) noted gaps between the perceptions of professors in the United States and their international Korean students regarding the role of the professor, sources of knowledge, and preferred classroom strategies. Though these studies begin to illuminate both the difficulties that Korean students face as well as point to effective coping strategies for managing these difficulties, additional work is needed to understand how these factors contribute to individual experiences of culture shock. To address this gap, the current study will provide an overview and insight into the following research questions:

1. What interpersonal, psychological, and physiological symptoms of culture shock are experienced by newly arrived Korean graduate students?
2. How do newly arrived Korean graduate students cope with these symptoms of culture shock?

2 Method

2.1 Context and participants

This study was conducted at a large public university in the southwest United States. As of the 2017 academic year, the student population was over 66,000 with about 68% of students identifying as white. Approximately 9% of the student population were international students.

The sampling strategy used in this study was non-random and purposeful. Other than the requirement that the participants be first-semester Korean students at the university, no other restrictions were placed upon involvement in the study. The three international students from Korea selected for this study were all newly enrolled students. They were all male, master's degree students of roughly the same age (27, 30, and 32). Table 1 below provides a snapshot of several demographic factors related to the three participants.

2.2 Research design

The research design was a basic or generic qualitative study, which according to Merriam (1998) "seek[s] to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved" (p. 11). The rationale for this decision stemmed from the individual nature of the questions as well as from the belief in the existence of the social construction of multiple realities. Through individual interviews in a secure location and a systematic review of the journal entries of the three participants over a 15-week semester, the stories of these individuals were able to be told in a more comprehensive

and meaning-sensitive fashion than a survey alone. The experiences of these international students with culture shock were brought to life by embracing the participants' power to speak for themselves. This in-depth exploration of a select few university students rather than a surface level rendering of many international students provided a more complete picture of the phenomenon for these individuals, which in turn helped to uncover "concrete universals", that is, the presence of the general in the particular (Erickson, 1986).

Second, the flexibility inherent in qualitative research allowed for openness to emerging problems and/or ideas in the study. The ability to modify (or change completely) questions in interviews as well as L1 journals, for example, reflected the evolving nature of the research. By translating and transcribing the data collected from these two instruments regularly as well as consistently checking with the bilingual interviewer, I was able to constantly compare the findings with my assumptions and make changes accordingly. Without this freedom to explore, valuable insights would potentially have been missed.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

| | Sang | Kwang | Hong |
|---|---|--|--|
| Gender | Male | Male | Male |
| Age | 32 | 30 | 27 |
| Marital Status (including family) | Married (living with wife, daughter [age 5], and son [age 3]) | Married (living apart from expectant wife and son [age 2]) | Single (living with mother from August to September and Korean roommate thereafter) |
| Profession | Military Officer | Full-time Student | Full-time Student |
| Academic Classification | Master's Level | Master's Level | Master's Level |
| Major | Industrial Engineering | Transportation | Industrial Engineering |
| Previous International Experience | United States (2 weeks) | Thailand (5 days) China (4 days) Japan (4 days) | Canada (10 months) |
| TOEFL Score | 68 (Internet) | 250 (Computer) | 270 (Computer) |

2.3 Data collection

Three interviews (approximately one hour each) at selected intervals during the 15-week fall semester (mid-August, mid-October, and mid-December) were conducted primarily by the first author in English with assistance from a bilingual transcriptionist/translator. The individual and informal format involved the use of a semi-structured, open- and closed-ended set of questions and probes. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and translated (when necessary).

The participants were also asked to keep a weekly electronic journal in Korean over the 15-week semester that was open-ended but guided by the provision of questions and statements that asked them to reflect on their experiences in the host culture. The questions and statements, however, evolved throughout the semester to capture any emerging trends or unanticipated events or experiences, such as incidents that directly or indirectly involved the participants and their adjustment to the host culture. Consequently, the culture shock-related findings gathered from the L1 journals provided the basis for

questions in subsequent interviews in which the participants were asked about their perceptions of these events or instances.

2.4 Data analysis

The data collected from the interviews and L1 journal entries were input into computer files with language inaccuracies left intact and analyzed using the software program NVivo 7. The constant comparative method of data analysis was used to keep the focal point simultaneously on description, explanation, and evaluation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data were coded based on the study's definition of culture shock as the "multiple demands for adjustment that individuals experience at the cognitive, behavioral, emotional, social, and physiological levels when they relocate to another culture" (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004, p. 168). Given the inherent connections among several of these categories, however, three subcategories were created from these five reference points to provide a broad accounting of the interpersonal (including social and behavioral), psychological (including cognitive and emotional), and physiological symptoms of the participants' cross-cultural adjustments. The simultaneous and continuous reflection upon the data collected as well as the researchers' perceptions created a thick description (Geertz, 1973), thereby allowing for a thorough elucidation of the cases at hand.

2.5 Positionality

Given the first author's role in conducting interviews and analyzing data, his positionality is a critical component in interpreting the results. As an English instructor in South Korea for eight years, he had the opportunity to immerse himself in Korean culture and learn the language to an advanced proficiency level. He developed a deep appreciation for the culture of both Korea and the United States. His firsthand knowledge of both cultures acted as a resource that enabled him to be empathetic while remaining sensitive to epistemological concerns, hierarchical language power differentials, and the inherent dangers involved in speaking for the *other*. With the help of a translator, he strove to provide an equal exchange between Korean and US culture. He made every effort to avoid overgeneralizations and the creation or perpetuation of stereotypes by remaining aware of his own biases and clearly delineating his etic perspective from the participants' emic ones.

3 Results

3.1 What interpersonal, psychological, and physiological symptoms of culture shock are experienced by the newly arrived Korean graduate students?

All three participants exhibited a much higher incidence of interpersonal and psychological symptoms compared to physiological symptoms of culture shock. Interpersonal symptoms resulted from the participants' confusion regarding the behavioral and social norms in the United States, and reflected their comparatively limited interaction with Americans. Psychological symptoms manifested through a wide range of feelings such as feelings of stress and loneliness. Physiological symptoms, primarily of fatigue, were infrequently mentioned throughout the study. In most cases across the three categories, the stress surrounding the three participants' adjustments to the use of English and university life provided the impetus for many of their interpersonal, psychological, and physiological symptoms.

3.1.1 Interpersonal symptoms

Interpersonal symptoms largely resulted from the confusion and curiosity on the part of all three of the

participants regarding the behavior and social norms in the United States. In terms of behavior, Sang noticed behavior around campus that conflicted with behaviors he learned as a child in Korea.

I was surprised to see people sleeping anywhere, lying down, and so on. In Korea, from childhood, we are educated to look right in front of others and act properly. When I see people reading outside on a beautiful day, it looks good. But people sitting down anywhere, lying everywhere, eating during a lecture while making noise, putting their feet up on chairs in front of professors, or leaving classes early very loudly, don't seem to be considerate for others and they look selfish.

However, Sang reasoned later in the interview that this may be a cultural difference.

It's not an individual problem. It's the culture. I can't say it's good or bad. For a person who is educated not to act that way, I can see it's bad, but for people who never thought or learned that way, it's okay.

A social norm both Sang and Kwang seemed to struggle with was the differences between the two societies in terms of hierarchical structure. Kwang explains the difference in the following way:

Korea is the country dominated by Confucian ideas considerably even than China from which the ideas originated. Therefore, that younger pay elder respect is considered natural things. ... In the US, there's no such situation, such as Confucianism, so I am surprised at the relationship between professors and students; they talk freely about whatever—textbooks, problems, and so on. It seems very free.

In commenting on how language and hierarchy are related, Sang shared:

It is strange that they call their father or professor as just "you" It is the same between children and adult. On the contrary, the Korean language has many term of respect. We think much of propriety. In fact, it's unfamiliar with me to call the kent as "kent." In Korea, if younger people call older people's name, it is very bad manner.

Both Kwang and Sang struggled with the lack of hierarchy in US society, yet both found ways to eventually appreciate the difference in culture, although to different degrees. In general agreement with the society, Kwang stated: "I think this is good merits in that they make an equal social culture having no a formal atmosphere as hierarchy." Sang took a relatively more neutral stance: "In my opinion, it is sometimes good and sometimes bad. ... They meet equally each other so older person do not order to someone who younger people. They looks respect each other."

Another topic that arose from the interviews and journals was cultural indifference. In other words, the lack of "noticing" international students on the part of Americans. Sang explained his feelings about the cultural indifference as follows:

No one seems to really care. They seem more indifferent about it. Of course, scholars or other tourists might be interested in Korean and oriental culture, but common Americans don't seem to want to know about Korea. Maybe they think Korea is just a country with no importance...If people are interested in Korea or the Korean language, they would probably ask, "Are you Korean?" when I pass by. However, due to their lack of interest, even if I say I'm a Korean, I don't think people are attracted to it. That doesn't make me too happy.

While Sang took this negatively, Kwang reasoned that perhaps it is a result of the demographics of the United States: "In the States, there are so many kinds of races and people from different countries. Thus, people don't care about where they are from."

For Sang and Kwang, questions regarding the behavioral and social norms in the United States

frequently arose from the beginning of the semester until the end, reflecting both confusion and a desire to learn. For Hong, however, there was a relative silence in terms of interpersonal challenges, perhaps revealing little difficulty in adjusting to the customs of the host culture but more likely a sign of his comparatively limited interaction with Americans.

3.1.2 Psychological symptoms

Psychologically based symptoms of culture shock were described by all three of the participants in their interviews and journal entries. Throughout the journal entries, words such as confused, anxiety, frustration, embarrassment, nervousness, surprise, and worry provided evidence that Sang, Kwang, and Hong were all experiencing psychological discomfort.

While in several cases unique to the individual, the anxiety surrounding the three participants' adjustments to the university provided the impetus for many of their feelings of cognitive and emotional dissonance. Some of the strain experienced was the result of differences in the administration of classes at the university. Sang, in his fourth journal entry, asserted that he felt surprised, dumbstruck, and gloomy because he misunderstood the grading system in one of his classes. Unlike in Korea, where in general the education system deals in absolutes rather than in hypothetical situations, in this class, his instructor had asked the pupils to estimate their confidence level next to each of their responses. Hong, like Sang, described challenges in dealing with the academic culture of the university. In his fourth journal, he related how he felt nervous because of his unfamiliarity with the format and level that he should expect on the first exam he was to take.

While some strain was a result of class administration, a large part was a result of the struggles the participants had in using English as the medium of instruction. In a journal entry, Sang related how unhappy he was about the time required to study for his classes because of his English ability. Like Sang, Kwang, in his first journal entry, also described feeling psychological (and physiological) symptoms of culture shock due to his English ability, yet he had the conviction that things would improve: "I feel a lack of energy and enthusiasm due to only English. ... I hope to return my mind from discouragement to the mind that I can do everything." In addition, Hong, in his first and fifth journal entries related his apprehension of the role of English in his classes: "I am really worried about that...That is my big concern nowadays." Hong's writing expressed symptoms of psychological stress which were directly related to his concerns about the English language. In his midterm interview, Hong had reached a low point in his psychological adjustment to US culture. He related feeling frustrated, nervous, and pathetic because of the difficulties he was having with the English- and time-related demands under which the university had placed him.

Another factor in the participants' psychological discord was a result of loneliness. In his first interview, Sang related he "would have been very lonely" if his family were not with him; instead, their presence had been a source of comfort and inspiration. Because Kwang was living apart from his wife and child for the first semester, he also wrote about having to endure feelings of loneliness in his journal. One of the biggest psychological adjustments to life in the United States was being without his family. In the first interview, for example, he related how this separation made him feel:

At first, after I arrived here, I was very alone and very sad because I was with my family for the whole time and I became alone all of a sudden. Plus, there was nothing in the house, so it made me feel worse.

In the third interview, Kwang did not directly relate his psychological state in regard to his separation from his family other than to say that had this unit been with him, "that would have helped me a lot. ... I know that her presence would be great for me."

3.1.3 Physiological symptoms

Physiological symptoms of culture shock were surprisingly absent in most of the interviews and journal entries, though when mentioned, the physiological symptoms were all in the form of exhaustion due to the rigors of their respective academic programs. In one of his journal entries, Sang explained his exhaustion: “Nowadays, I feel so tired because of my classes. I had been had homework and quiz which hard and complicated problems every week.” Sang reiterated this line of thought during one of his interviews: “I try really hard to study, so I get physically tired and I am chased by time.” Similarly, in his midterm interview, Kwang lamented the lack of rest he was able to get while studying for a master’s degree: “Even the weekend is not a weekend here. Every day is the same; every day is busy. I can’t rest my body, my mind. ... Sometimes, I felt emotions such as angry and physically tired.” Hong echoed a similar sentiment to the other two in his second interview: “I’m so tired right now because of the exam today.”

Sang’s, Kwang’s, and Hong’s statements all show how the academic requirements of the university had become a source of their exhaustion. Yet despite the similarities in feelings, the perceptions of the physical challenges were viewed differently by each individual. Sang and Kwang believed their respective physical symptoms were merely temporary features of their lives and viewed their physiological difficulties as obstacles that could be overcome. In contrast, Hong’s journal entries and interviews revealed that he seemed overwhelmed by the exhaustion caused by the university’s demands. In discussing his study exhaustion, Hong divulged: “There’s break time from studying. However, I don’t want to spend even that small break for those things. ... I have to study.” Unlike the other two, Hong seemed far less able to cope with his exhaustion in fear that allowing himself free time could adversely affect his academics.

In summary, the data revealed that the culture shock symptoms for each participant were individualized. For Sang, interpersonal and psychological examples of his stress in adjusting to US culture were expressed in all of his interviews and found in many of his journal entries, with the social and behavioral factors being the most common. In Kwang’s case, the analysis of what he had written and said revealed numerous instances of cognitive and emotional strain. Finally, for Hong, the psychological demands of academic work in an American university were the most commonly mentioned symptoms.

3.2 How do the newly arrived Korean graduate students cope with these symptoms of culture shock?

Sang, Kwang, and Hong coped with culture shock in unique and varied ways. While many of the coping strategies came from their personal outlook, acceptance of the challenges, and resolve to push through, other outside factors such as family, religion, and exercise also played a role.

All three participants revealed through their journal and interviews that they were able to come around to understanding cultural differences by the end of the semester simply through their outlook of resolve and acceptance. Sang, for example, relied on his strength of character: “Anyway I have to face difficulties resolutely also I do not mistake again. ...Yet, this makes me livelier...I actively respond to my situation right now.” In addition, Sang’s words in his fourteenth journal entry and final interview, respectively, showed that he had not given up on his ability to adjust to US culture; if anything, his journal reflections exhibited his resolve to learn from his experiences: “Problems originate from me, from my lack of English ability, so I have hopes for changes in my thoughts if time passes.” In Kwang’s thirteenth journal entry, he remained positive about his ability to adjust despite feeling “heavy”: “However, I do not frustrate even though the English problem leads me to stress.” Consequently, Kwang’s words revealed his capacity to cope with any future shocks he would face in the host culture. By the last interview, Hong had overcome his initial psychological discomfort with the culture in the United States.

He confidently asserted at that time:

I'm already all adjusted, so there is nothing surprising anymore. ... There have been surprising issues during the 4 months, but I don't find them anymore. ... I think people need to have confidence because it's not too difficult to live here and anyone can do it. There should be no worries. I worried a lot in the beginning. ... People live here, so there shouldn't be any problem, so no worries, take it easy. I don't even see the need for advice. ... My advice is not to worry.

This utterance provided evidence of an individual who felt assured that he had emerged on the other side of his adaptation to the host culture and believed that he was cognitively and emotionally capable of surviving any future challenges.

Family also emerged as an important factor in the participants' ability to cope with culture shock. In discussing some of his difficulties, Sang shared: "[My family] helped me not to be so lonely in this environment. When I realize that I am my children's dad, I am motivated to persevere through the difficulties." Sang's wife and children were important factors for helping him continue to cope with the cognitive and emotional stress of adapting to US culture. While Kwang did not have his family present, he realized the benefit it would have been to him: "[My wife] would have helped me a lot. ... I know that her presence would be great for me." Hong did not specifically mention family, but the absence of interpersonal symptoms in his interviews and journal entries may have been a result of living with his mother during the first part of the semester.

Finally, Kwang offered two additional strategies for coping with the psychological and physiological symptoms of culture shock: religion and exercise. Kwang's words evidenced his willingness to admit that he could not resolve his cultural struggles on his own or through recourse to his own value system. In terms of religion's role in coping with some of the psychological symptoms, particularly stress, Kwang said: "I need to overcome the stress through my faith." As for dealing with the physiological symptoms of culture shock, Kwang offered exercise as a coping mechanism: "Running is a good way to relieve my stress. Sometimes, when I run around park close to my apartment or on running machine in fitness room, I feel I can do whatever."

While much of the adjustment to academic culture in the United States came from their outlook of acceptance and resolve from within, the participants all had outside factors that aided in the acceptance and resolve. For Sang, and possibly Hong, family played a role. For Kwang, religion and exercise aided him in the absence of his family.

4 Discussion

The findings revealed the existence of some degree of culture shock for each of the three participants at different times throughout the semester. While there were similarities among Sang, Kwang, and Hong, there were also important differences in the quantity and quality of the symptoms, implying that this phenomenon was neither a preordained nor an entirely shared experience. In effect, this variation provided strong support for the individual nature of culture shock. For Sang, interpersonal and psychological examples of his stress in adjusting to US culture were found in many of his journal entries and expressed in all of his interviews, with the social and behavioral factors being the most common. In Kwang's case, the analysis of what he had written and said revealed numerous instances of cognitive and emotional strain. Finally, for Hong, the psychological demands of adjustment to US culture were the most commonly mentioned symptoms.

The present study did not confirm the appropriateness of using models to represent culture shock. Instead, support for the idea that issues related to this phenomenon are individualized and thus not uniform in terms of severity or timing was provided. In addition, the comparatively different experiences

of the three participants with culture shock as well as their use of sources of stress as opportunities for change and growth were in agreement with Choi (2006) and Park et al. (2016).

This study supports findings, such as those found by the literature review done by de Araujo (2011), that English language proficiency is one of the major difficulties faced by international students. The influence of English on the respective adjustments of the three participants to US culture was noteworthy and constant throughout the study. The self-professed difficulties that Sang, Kwang, and Hong faced in using this language in all spheres of their lives proved to be the most daunting of the challenges they faced. Their relative lack of proficiency with English affected them both inside and outside of the university classroom and severely curtailed their opportunities for establishing any real sense of connection with the host culture. Based on the number of comments throughout the study devoted to the role of English in the participants' respective adjustments to the culture in the United States, this factor was an instrumental variable in all facets of their lives.

In particular, as this language was the sole means by which content was delivered in all of the classrooms on campus and this environment was where the three participants spent the majority of their time, concerns about their English proficiency in this arena were the most often mentioned. For international students such as Sang, Kwang, and Hong, the university's general lack of any provision or accommodation for the needs of second language learners placed them at a disadvantage in relation to native speakers and thereby engendered culture shock-related symptoms. The anxiety produced by their English proficiency level increased throughout the study, implying that their ability to adjust to US culture had been impeded by their language ability, thus perpetuating feelings of culture shock.

The participants shared some of the same coping strategies as those in Park et al. (2016) and Alshafi and Shin (2017). The impact of the participants' personal outlooks on lessening the effects of culture shock was substantial. The attitudes and personalities of Sang, Hong, and Kwang, to varying degrees, evidenced a strong sense of resiliency in the face of cultural challenges as well as the optimism that things would improve over time. In addition, the willingness to not only understand cultural differences but to learn from them characterized many of the participants' interview responses and journal entries.

The marital status of two of the participants was shown to be an influential coping mechanism. Sang's wife and children were both a resource and the source of motivation driving his desire to succeed. For Kwang, despite the anxiety he felt because of the semester-long separation from his wife and child, the future reunion with his family was a source of strength for him when coping with culture shock. This finding supports the suggestion made by Park et al. (2016) that marital status may contribute to the coping mechanisms utilized to handle culture shock.

The influential connection between religiosity and coping with culture shock was supported by the collected data from Kwang. The influence of this factor was evident when viewed from a spiritual perspective. The sense of connection to a higher power instilled in Kwang the confidence and faith that the adjustment to life in the United States would be accomplished.

Strategies that appeared to be absent included campus services and opportunities to improve language proficiency. Presbitero's (2016) assertion that international students do not engage in campus services possibly held true for the participants in this study. There was near silence throughout the study on the side of the participants regarding the use of campus services for support. As for improving language proficiency, the participants found that the overwhelming nature of their studies and the subsequent psychological stress prevented them from engaging in experiences that would improve their English.

One additional strategy that appeared in this study but is not included in Park et al.'s (2016) and Alshafi and Shin's (2017) is exercise. This strategy helped Kwang release psychological and physiological stress that resulted from culture shock. Although only mentioned by one participant in this study, exercise has the potential to be a viable strategy for international students overwhelmed by the stress of studying in a foreign country.

5 Limitations and Implications

There are several limitations to this study. First, generalizations that can be made from the data are limited due to the qualitative nature of the study and the small number of participants. An expansion of the participant pool in terms of number, demographics, and location could help to provide a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon of culture shock. Second, the duration of this study was only one semester. By tracking individuals over several semesters, a study could offer greater insight into the effect, if any, of the length of stay on participants' abilities to cope with culture shock.

Based on the findings of this study, the practical implications for university administrators, in particular, are several. The stress associated with the English language, while present for most international students, is perhaps most acute for those beginning their academic programs. Accordingly, the following accommodations could help to alleviate this strain. While most universities have a proficiency examination, the somewhat haphazard method in which it is administered as well as the oftentimes lax enforcement of the results needs to be remediated. Greater concern for the reliability and validity of the testing instrument and environment as well as the training of the test administrators should be enforced.

Furthermore, if a student is identified as needing English remediation, he or she should be strongly encouraged to take classes in the community or through the university's intensive English program, request help from on-campus facilities that provide tutoring or aid in study skills, or hire a private tutor during the same semester. Though this may increase the student's workload in the short term, the increase in English proficiency may help to reduce future academic stress as the student enrolls in higher-level courses. In addition, assigning an American partner to international students during both students' first semesters could prove to be a mutually beneficial arrangement. For the American, this system would give them valuable exposure to individuals from outside of the United States; for international students, this partnership could provide valuable linguistic and cultural assistance.

Also, the entire faculty of the university, but particularly the native speakers, could be reminded of the necessity of consideration of the linguistic needs of international students as well as of the different educational systems from which they have emerged. Lecture, group work, and frequent testing, for example, may be unfamiliar approaches to learning. As a consequence, training on how to facilitate the interaction of international students with American students in classroom activities, validate different linguistic and cultural backgrounds in classes, and do group work, for example, could be provided to faculty members. Additionally, international students could be strongly encouraged by the faculty to ask questions and seek out the instructor for clarification on content that they do not understand.

It is hoped that future studies further examine the individualized nature of culture shock (Fitzpatrick, 2017). While this study focused specifically on Korean international students, many other demographic groups comprise the international student community in the United States and are in need of study. Beyond the United States, universities around the world are attracting international students to their campuses, each with their unique contextual factors. Future research on the culture shock of international students in non-Western universities would help further contribute to our understanding of culture shock's individualized nature.

6 Conclusion

This study uncovered the individual nature of the culture shock phenomenon. All of the participants were found to exhibit certain interpersonal, psychological, and physiological symptoms at various times throughout the semester that were indicative of the stress brought on by their respective adjustments to the demands of the university studies in the host culture.

In conclusion, the participants in this study for the most part proved to be strong individuals who were capable of coping with the shocks of adjusting to US culture. While tested at various times and in different ways throughout the study, their respective voices made it clear that the challenges they had faced would not likely dim the pursuit of their academic, personal, and professional goals.

References

- Adler, P. S. (1975). The transitional experience: An alternative view of culture shock. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 15*, 13–23.
- Alsahafi, N., & Shin, S. (2017). Factors affecting the academic and cultural adjustment of Saudi international students in Australian universities. *Journal of International Students, 7*(1), 53–72.
- Anderson, L. E. (1994). A new look at an old construct: Cross-cultural adaptation. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 18*, 293–328.
- Andrade, M. S. (2009). The effects of English language proficiency on adjustment to university life. *International Multilingual Research Journal, 3*(1), 16–34.
- Bennett, M. J. (1986). A developmental approach to training for intercultural sensitivity. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 10*, 179–196.
- Chapdelaine, R. F., & Alexitch, L. R. (2004). Social skills difficulty: Model of culture shock for international graduate students. *Journal of College Student Development, 45*, 167–184.
- Choi, T. (2006). Asian international students' academic adjustment in a U.S. Graduate school and Stanton-Salazar's framework. *Pacific Asian Education, 18*(2), 51–68.
- Chun, J., & Poole, D. L. (2009). Conceptualizing stress and coping strategies of Korean social work students in the United States: A concept mapping application. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 29*, 1–17.
- De Araujo, A. A. (2011). Adjustment issues of international students enrolled in American colleges and universities: A review of the literature. *Higher Education Studies, 1*(1), 2–8.
- Erickson, F. (1986). Qualitative methods in research on teaching. In M. C. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (3rd ed.) (pp. 119–161). Old Tappan, NJ: Macmillan.
- Fitzpatrick, J. (2017). Taking the “culture” out of “culture shock”. *Critical Perspectives on International Business, 13*, 278–298.
- Geertz, C. (1973). Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture. In C. Geertz (Ed.), *The interpretation of cultures* (pp. 3–30). Basic Books.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Aldine.
- Grove, C. L., & Torbiorn, I. (1985). A new conceptualization of intercultural adjustment and the goals of training. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 9*, 205–233.
- Gullahorn, J., & Gullahorn, J. (1963). An extension of the u-curve hypothesis. *Journal of Social Issues, 19*, 33–47.
- Hwang, E., Martirosyan, N. M., & Moore, G. W. (2016). A review of literature on adjustment issues of international students: Recommendations for future practices and research. In K. Bista, & C. Foster (Eds.), *Global perspectives and local challenges surrounding international student mobility* (pp. 223–242). IGI Global.
- Institute of International Education. (2019). *Open doors 2019: Report on international educational exchange*. Institute of International Education.
- Ito, K. (2003). *Cross-cultural adjustment of Japanese students in the United States: A qualitative study* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Alliant International University.

- Kuo, Y. (2011). Language challenges faced by international graduate students in the United States. *Journal of International Students, 1*(2), 38–42.
- Lee, K. S., & Carrasquillo, A. (2006). Korean college students in the United States: Perceptions of professors and students. *College Student Journal, 40*(2), 442–456.
- Lysgaard, S. (1954). *A study of intercultural contact: Norwegian Fulbright grantees visiting the United States*. Institute for Social Research.
- Mesidor, J. K., & Sly, K. F. (2016). Factors that contribute to the adjustment of international students. *Journal of International Students, 6*(1), 262–282.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Mumford, D. B. (2000). Culture shock among young British volunteers working abroad: Predictors, risk factors and outcome. *Transcultural Psychiatry, 37*(1), 73–87.
- Newsome, L. K., & Cooper, P. (2016). International students' cultural and social experiences in a British university: 'Such a hard life [it] is here'. *Journal of International Students, 6*(1), 195–215.
- Park, H., Lee, M., Choi, G., & Zepernick, J. S. (2016). Challenges and coping strategies of East Asian graduate students in the United States. *International Social Work, 60*(3), 733–749.
- Presbitero, A. (2016). Culture shock and reverse culture shock: The moderating role of cultural intelligence in international students' adaptation. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 53*, 28–38.
- Sato, T., & Hodge, S. R. (2009). Asian international doctoral students' experiences at two American universities: Assimilation, accommodation, and resistance. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 2*(3), 136–148.
- Zhang, Y. (2016). International students in transition: Voices of Chinese doctoral students in a U.S. research university. *Journal of International Students, 6*(1), 175–194.
- Zhang, J., & Goodson, P. (2011). Predictors of international students' psychosocial adjustment to life in the United States: A systematic review. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 35*, 139–162.

Kent D. McLeod is a professor at Earth University. He holds a Ph.D. in English as a second language and multicultural education from Texas A&M University as well as a master's degree in teaching English to speakers of other languages from Columbia University and another in teaching from Rice University.

Zohreh R. Eslami is a professor at Texas A&M University. She has published more than 100 journal articles in journals such as *Intercultural Pragmatics*, *System*, *ELT Journal*, and the *Modern Language Journal*. Her research interests include intercultural communication and pragmatics, L2 literacy development, task-based language teaching, and technology.

Keith M. Graham is a postdoctoral fellow in the College of Teacher Education at National Taiwan Normal University. He holds a Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction, emphasis in ESL education, from Texas A&M University and a master's degree in education, emphasis in international literacy, from Sam Houston State University.