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Facilitating Recovery Through Building an Interconnected Community: From Awareness to Action

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ABSTRACT

This article describes stress that many Asian international students experience during their adjustment to U.S. universities. Reflecting on personal experiences that contributed to deeper self-understanding, I explain cultural incompatibilities that cause this stress, the negative impact that the stress has on mental health, and the lack of support systems that exacerbate mental health complications. In highlighting the prioritization of the mental health in Asian international students and initiating community outreach programs, I demonstrate that when Asian international students participate in creating an interconnected community, they have the potential to thrive despite the stressful adjustment period.

Keywords: adjustment challenges, Asian international students, interconnected community, mental health, recovery

FIRST IN MY FAMILY

After completing college in South Korea in 1995, I moved to Portland, Oregon, to pursue my childhood dream of becoming an English teacher. The affordability of the urban university appealed to me as a first-generation college student. Like most first-generation college students, limited financial resources and tight environmental constraints, such as inadequate access to information and services, caused me to (re)adjust my personal goals to meet family needs (Covarrubias

et al., 2019). My goals were not simply developed in response to my own needs, but rather a reflection of my family's shared needs—to contribute to family integrity by fulfilling expected roles and achieving through collective effort (Triandis, 1995). Not wanting to increase a financial burden on my family, I chose a university in a city that offered an excellent public transportation system so that I did not have to spend money on a car. I also watched my budget closely, reducing food costs and buying clothes at thrift stores to keep my living expenses low.

When I matriculated at the university in 1995, the number of international students enrolled in U.S. higher education had reached 438,337, only comprising 3% of the entire student population (Institute of International Education, 2020). Asian students constituted over half (57.3%) of the international student population (Davis, 1997). At that time, U.S. universities were not pursuing campus internalization endeavors in full force (Thelin, 2011); the number of international students had not yet begun to burgeon. Though student demographic data are unavailable, my small university had few Asian students. I considered the low number of Asian international students a positive thing, thinking I could more easily immerse myself in American culture and learn English quickly. This was somewhat true because I was forced to communicate with host nationals. With few opportunities to communicate with fellow Asian students and communication barriers with host nationals who practiced differing values and attitudes from my own, the lack of personal human connection soon became isolating and put my mental health at risk.

Y. Kim (2012) proposed acculturation as the interaction between the stranger and a new cultural environment. In this framework, communication competence—the ability to decode and encode information in congruence with the host culture communication practices—is key to a successful adjustment. Kim recognized that acculturation entails going through changes as both an individual and a member of groups. This process is multifaceted, involving a dynamic process of developing a new social identity in an unfamiliar cultural milieu through internalization and negotiation of cultural differences. Similarly, Berry (2005) suggested that stress is unavoidable during the cross-cultural transition and finding a balance between the two cultures through negotiating different values will lead to successful adjustment and improved mental health. With my move to the United States being my first time in a foreign country, I oversimplified the complex nature of the cross-cultural adjustment. I was trying to add new pieces of cultural information to existing collectivist cultural knowledge without internal transformation, which caused me to maladapt to my new environment. Eventually, my joy and excitement of being a graduate student evaporated, and I was left drowning in feelings of frustration and confusion.

CULTURAL CLASHES: INDIVIDUALISM VERSUS COLLECTIVISM

Attending graduate school in Oregon left me overwhelmingly unsettled. In retrospect, much of it came from cultural incompatibilities. Regarding these incompatibilities, I understand that resorting to generalizations to describe different cultural variations runs a risk of oversimplifying the complexity of social

behaviors and interactions within a particular culture. Readers should take caution not to use a reductionist approach (Voronov & Singer, 2002). However, as a broad generalization for the purpose of this article, several Asian cultures tend to see individuals embedded within their group identity as collectivist (Triandis, 1995). I will use this framework to guide my writing in this section.

U.S. universities typically reflect middle-class European American norms and values (Fryberg et al., 2013), which differ from my Asian collectivist cultural norms and values. For most of my American peers, transitioning into the university meant embarking on a journey toward independence, separating from their parents to pursue personal and academic goals. I, however, was motivated by collectivist cultural values, including maintaining close relationships through fulfilling familial duties with academic success and expanding my ability to bear family financial burdens in the future. Out of good intentions, American friends advised me to live my life to the fullest by focusing on my needs (i.e., "this is your life," "be unapologetically yourself," "you are too close to your family," and "growing up requires separation from your family"), but this advice violated my cultural values and beliefs and left me unsettled. While I had great difficulty grasping the meaning of "striking out on your own," my American friends could not understand these concepts of interdependence and interconnectedness that molded my world. As Robinson et al. (2020) described, as I spent more time with my American friends, I felt as if I hit a nonpenetrable wall that emanated from these rigid cultural boundaries. Because of the absence of meaningful interactions based upon genuine curiosity about me and my culture, I decided to settle for superficial forms of friendships with Americans.

ADJUSTMENT CHALLENGES: INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL FACTORS

Living alone in the United States presented many challenges. Without a solid support system from close friends and family, I was emotionally fragile and vulnerable, like the corners of soft tofu that even a gentle touch could easily break apart. Somehow, I convinced myself that I did an excellent job of hiding my frailty and vulnerability, but one day, another Asian international student noticed just how "struggling" and "slightly withdrawn" I was during an interview with me for an ethnography assignment. I was upset that she saw my struggles, but more upsetting was that her words exposed my quietly crumbling world of which I was in denial. Consequently, I decided to guardedly suppress words and emotions that might hint at my vulnerable inner state. Brown (2012) stated that vulnerability is not weakness; it is a birthplace of human connection and change. If I had embraced my vulnerability and opened up to my friend for support, my life in the United States would have been much different. Greater social support would have acted as a buffer against my stress of adjusting to life at an American university (Berry et al., 1987).

Individual traits and personality also play an important role in the acculturation process (Y. Kim, 2012). This finding resonates with me, as while studying in the United States, my introversion was often assumed to be attributed

to my Asian-ness rather than a personal characteristic. Being an introvert in the United States was difficult because American culture and education systems promote and reward extroverted over introverted traits (Cain, 2012). I often felt underappreciated and misunderstood in classroom settings that encouraged active participation in class discussions and I was even considered "noncommittal." Some professors had low expectations of me based on Asian stereotypes as quiet and nonexpressive (Yamamoto & Li, 2012). These expectations squandered my desire to participate when I had relevant things to share. Contrary to faculty presumptions, I was fully engaged through active listening and my silence was indicative of internalizing new knowledge and showing respect to my classmates. I learned differently from the way normally expected in the United States. I wished American professors could recognize how cultural differences affected classrooms and would seek to avoid any biases they held to enrich student learning.

Intergroup attitudes are another significant factor that impacts acculturation (Berry, 2005). America, a country that views individual freedom and rights as of utmost importance, was not kind to foreigners like me. I read many books about American life before coming to the United States, but, as someone from a relatively homogenous society, I could not conceptualize the harsh reality of racial stereotypes and prejudices. In Oregon where residents were predominately White, I witnessed and experienced discrimination toward other non-White international students as well as myself because of their skin colors and English accents. Some discrimination was deliberate and overt, but some was subtle and nebulous in the form of micro-aggressions delivered outside of conscious awareness (Sue et al., 2007).

I recall a time when a White student during a group project said to me, "You are not a person of color because your skin is not dark enough." To her, race was only a matter of Black and White. This indicated she failed not only to see her White power and privilege but also to understand my lack of privilege and power as a person of color. In another incident, a classmate equated my English language skills with my intellectual capacity, insinuating that having an international person in the group would increase their workload because I could not articulate my ideas and thus could not contribute as much. Her comments insulted me, but I could not respond, partly because I believed what she said might be true. These racial attacks and denigrating comments continued until I finished school. My limited English language proficiency, coupled with self-doubt, prevented me from standing up against them and I felt helpless.

CRACK IN THE WALL

While examining how sojourners, including international students, have adjusted to the new culture, Gudykunst (2005) identified four needs that must be met to make a successful transition: predictability, inclusion, sustained self-concept, and avoidance of extensive anxiety. When these needs are unmet, sojourners will experience increased levels of uncertainty and anxiety, which may decrease their mental well-being. Navigating U.S. education systems with these unmet needs left

me feeling anxious, fatigued, chronically worried, and sad during my study in Oregon. Coming from a country where the word "depression" did not exist ("feeling black" is frequently used as a metaphor of depression; M. T. Kim, 2002), I was unaware of what those feelings indicated until I returned to school to study mental health in 2011. I had wanted to honor my family through academic success. To accomplish this goal, I had to exercise self-control repeatedly and, without a proper outlet, internalized the negative experiences and emotions. Being unfamiliar with university resources, I did not know how to seek help from the university, whom to contact, or where to begin—I just "sucked it up."

I paid a high price for this internalization. As mental health symptoms began to interfere with my daily life, I looked for available resources on campus to help me improve. I remember my first visit to the counselor's office. Fearful that my friends would judge me, I ran to the office as fast as possible. After completing the seemingly endless self-evaluation, I walked into the assigned counselor's office without even a vague idea of what was expected of me or the counselor's role. Remembering what I saw in Hollywood movies, I tried to lie down on a couch. As it was small, I struggled to squeeze myself onto it until the counselor corrected my misconception. I was one of many Asian international students who underutilized counseling services because of the stigma associated with mental illness (Ma et al., 2020), often described as losing face and shame that damage self-image and social sense of self (Bedford & Hwang, 2003). I experienced the pressing need for community outreach programs and mental health communication on campus for Asian students. In collaboration with Asian student community leaders, I hoped to be part of efforts aimed to reduce stigma and improve access to mental health services for Asian students.

RECOVERY: FROM AWARENESS TO ACTION

Stressful events pushed me to (re)evaluate my life and engage in efforts to amalgamate new experiences with old ones with the hope of understanding who I really was. In this process, my desire to live a healthier life by making myself whole and complete meant having courage to confront unresolved issues in life. In retrospect, I was experiencing depressive symptoms caused by prolonged exposure to acculturation stress, known as psychological distress, which originates from cross-cultural adjustment (Berry, 2005). Naming it was powerful, reading related literature was liberating, and sharing experiences with other Asian international students was empowering. Furthermore, knowing that I was not alone was extremely comforting. Increased self-awareness compelled me to examine my life critically. Dissecting my life piece by piece, I began to see connections between my struggles and privilege, my power and powerlessness. I saw everyday privileges, such as enormous family support and access to education. Upon acknowledging my privileges, I was able to refocus my attention away from my pain to growth, deficits to personal and cultural strengths, and see social issues that perpetuate structural inequality. My experiences in the United States finally made sense. Breaking from my own shell slowly, I saw myself in other Asian international students and knew that I needed to do something for this

student community. Recovery became possible with the restoration of a sense of community that I had lost.

My loving concern for Asian international students has influenced my education and advocacy for culturally responsive mental health services. After completing my master's degree in social work, I pursued a doctoral degree to deepen my knowledge of mental health. Since the beginning of the doctoral program, my research has sought to improve the mental health of Asian international students by inviting these students to my studies, disseminating findings to them, and creating formal and informal mental health dialogue with them, an endeavor I will continue. Through my studies, I aspire to create space for Asian international students to voice their perspectives regarding their mental health through accurate needs assessment, development of culturally relevant mental health programs, and normalization of their cross-cultural experiences. Like Y.S. Kim and Kim (2016) suggested, I hope my studies also inform university authorities so they can provide a welcoming and accessible environment that fosters inclusiveness and meaningful social interactions between Asian international students and host nationals. This will help Asian students more successfully transition by developing stable, reciprocal, and functional relationships with their new environment (Y. Kim, 2012). My individual endeavor may seem like a small step. Yet, reality confirms that we are interconnected and therefore able to hold each other accountable through mutual care and a shared sense of belonging. In doing so, Asian international students and their domestic counterparts could come together to show the beauty of beneficial community.

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