

UTILIZING THE FINDINGS OF INTERCULTURAL ADAPTION RESEARCH IN THE COUNSELLING OF MALAYSIAN STUDENTS IN JAPAN

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ABSTRACT

Adaptation supports the performance and functioning of international students. Failure to adapt to the changes in the new environment would tax on the psychological wellbeing, exhaust the students and strain their academic performance. Counseling is one of the sources for students to seek assistance. Orientation and intervention programs are suitable dispensation means for information on coping mechanism and healthy adaptation. Generalization and stereotyping in dealing with adaptation problems would reduce the accomplishment of the intervention programs and the counselling (Slodzinski 1994). Evidence also shows that the effectiveness of counseling can be affected by a client's level or degree of acculturation into the dominant society (Cuellar, Harris & Jasso 1980.) The programs and counseling should be addressed with consideration to different cultural sensitivity and needs. The significance of this paper is to point out the importance of understanding the intercultural adaptation issues in the counseling of Malaysian students in Japan by putting forward the conflicting findings from various socio-cultural adaptation studies. The main objective of this paper is to highlight the dire need for counselors to inculcate the findings of specific study on international adaptation into their counseling services. The paper is aimed to extend the understanding on intercultural adaptation among Malaysian students abroad, exclusively in Japan by highlighting the conflicting findings in the western and the Japan research scenario in terms of time factor, cultural distance factor and host language proficiency factor. Generalization and stereotyping of western cases in dealing with adaptation problems among Malaysian students in Japan would reduce the accomplishment of the intervention programs and the counseling.

INTRODUCTION

In 1983 the Japanese government ran a "Hundred Thousand Project" which was aimed to bring in 100,000 international students to Japan. The numbers of the international students in Japan grew bigger until; in 1998 it showed a drop in volume mostly attained to the contraction in the global economy (Maruyama 1998). One of Japan initial moves is the Japanese educational assistance to ASEAN nations which is know as Kyoiku Kyoryoku (educational cooperation). It involves the flow of educational resources between or among nations with equal partnership, mutual responsibility, and common interests (Tanaka 1985). The number of Malaysian students is small compared to the Chinese, Korean and Taiwanese students. These students are expected to return home with academic achievement and then contribute to the mother nation.

There are many inevitable changes in life that international students have to face. As Handojo (2000) summons up from Berry and Kim (1988) "the many dimensions of changes need to be faced are namely: physical, biological, social, cultural, and psychological." Failure to adapt to these changes would collapse the students' daily performance and functioning and could lead to negative outcomes in the students' health, psychological wellbeing and academic performance in the long run.

Being uprooted from the common ground, support, intervention and counselling by counsellors or support group are crucial especially when studies have shown the acute effects on psychological health when adaptation problem is failed to be addressed. A person with high acculturative stress is susceptible to various psychiatric symptoms (Takebayashi 2004). Imperatively the students must be capable to dole out the stress and recognize activities that can help them make progress in adaptation. The presence of counsellors is highly important in assisting the adaptation of these international students.

Adaptation supports the performance and functioning of international students. Failure to adapt to the changes in the new environment would tax on the psychological wellbeing, exhaust the students and strain their academic performance. Counselling is one of the sources for students to seek assistance. Orientation and intervention programs are suitable dispensation means for information on coping mechanism and healthy adaptation.

The problem being highlighted in this paper is the dire practice of using the western theories onto the counseling of Malaysian students in Japan. The theory of intercultural adaptation which is derived from the west is highly popular and most referred to by counsellors mostly because it is accessible, up to date and commonly discussed in the academia. However, researchers (Tsai,1995; Maruyama,2004; Tanaka,1994) have warned that most western theories and findings on adaptation for international sojourners could not capture the phenomenon happening in Japan due to the unique nature of the Japanese host and sojourners.

The complexity and multifaceted nature of acculturation is best described by a composite profile rather than by a single score (Sodowosky 1991). The acculturation process is very intricate and involves a combination of many cultural, cognitive and behavior dimensions, factors, and constructs, not all of which have been clearly specified or identified (Cuellar et al.1980). For example, a Malaysian student may change his way of dressing following the Japanese host but his taste in food may remain unchanged. He may opt for integration in communication but remain separated for music this year and change his ways again the following month. Such multifaceted nature calls for a more specific study on each case of host and sojourns group. Tailoring the counseling by taking the studies on Japanese host and Malaysian students as consideration would be more justifiable and relevant.

Generalization and stereotyping in dealing with adaptation problems would reduce the accomplishment of the intervention programs and the counselling (Slodzinski 1994). Evidence also shows that the effectiveness of counseling can be affected by the client's level or degree of acculturation into the dominant society (Cuellar, Harris & Jasso 1980.) The programs and counselling should be addressed with consideration to different cultural sensitivities and needs.

OBJECTIVES

The significance of this paper is to point out the importance of understanding the intercultural adaptation issues in the counseling of Malaysian students in Japan by putting forward the conflicting findings from various socio-cultural adaptation studies. The general objective of this paper is to highlight the dire need for counselors to reflect accordingly to the findings of international adaptation studies in their counseling services. Each case of host and sojourners is unique and needs to be taken into specific consideration in counseling.

The paper is specifically aimed to extend the understanding on intercultural adaptation among Malaysian students abroad, exclusively in Japan by highlighting the conflicting findings in the Western and the Japan research scenario in terms of time, cultural distance and host language proficiency factors. It is hoped that the insight would lead to effective intervention programs and the counseling.

THEORIES AND APPROACHES

Counsellors are kept informed about the recent development in adaptation by intercultural adaptation studies which are particularly advance in the western context. Most of the studies on cultural adaptation among international students are mainly conducted in the UK, the US and Australia making the gap in the area of acculturation research for international students in Japan more obvious. Many researchers have also examined on the area of Malaysians studying abroad, particularly in the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) (Jamaluddin 1987; Othman 1997; Yaakub 1989; Sprotte 1988; Mohaiadin 1995; Ninggal 1998; Noriah 1999; Mohd.Yasin 1998; Chettheakanok 1991; Sarudin 1994; Tin 2002), however very little has been done on Malaysian students in Japan.

Snyder, Hill and Derksen (1972) reported that when facing problems, most students prefer to consult other people than the counselors. When faced with personal and social problems, their first choice for advice would be friends and then they will go to their families or relatives. Seeing a counselor is usually the last alternative. Kuan (1985) in his study on students' perception on counseling services in Malaysian high school found that most of the students are not confident of their school counselor. Most of them do not understand the service offered and they are scared of being labeled as problematic students if they consult the counselor. They were also reported to be insecure and difficult when it comes to discussing their problem with the counselor. They are unsure on the kind of problem which can be discussed with the counselor. Mohd. Seni Hussin (1982) in his study on Malaysian school students' attitude towards the counseling services found that the students have negative perception on counseling services in school. Just like the study by Snyder et al (1972) the students prefer to consult their friends in solving their personal problems.

Given that the Malaysian students have just left school for about one or two years before departing to Japan, there is a possibility that the same perception on counseling services may apply to some of them. Counselors may help by setting up group counseling to reach out further into the population of Malaysian students in Japan. Understanding the difference of intercultural adaptation processes undergone by the Malaysian students in Japan will add up to the relevance of the services and in turn could further gain the students' confidence.

The studies of intercultural adaptation in Japan can be identified into 3 focus areas which are studies on adaptation of Japanese abroad, exploring the Japanese returnees and investigating Japanese community as host (Murayama 1998). Most of the studies conducted in Japan are reported in Japanese language making it inaccessible to many international students' counselors. On top of the scarce number of report available, no specific study conducted specifically on Malaysian students in Japan has been identified. Most of the researchers define Asians as Chinese, Koreans, and Taiwanese. Compared to Malaysians, these nationalities share more similar culturally significant symbols for example food, belief and the usage of the same writing system with the Japanese Characters in "Kanji". It is important not to generalized the findings to the Malaysian ethnics which have much more dissimilarity with the Japanese host compared to the Asian subjects in the studies.

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Time factor

The studies in Japan (Tsai 1995; Maruyama 2004; Tanaka 1994) suggest a different pattern from the Lysgaard (1955) U-Curve model which has been the tenets of many intercultural adaptation studies in the west (Handojo 2000; Ninggal 1998; Takebayashi 2004; Michailidis 1996). The theory suggested that adjustment difficulties change upon the length of stay. Jamaluddin (1987) suggested that as time goes by, familiarity with the culture, greater mastery of language and social skills, and higher level of adjustment is acquired. Ninggal (1998) also suggested that "faced with recently arrived and unhappy students, counsellors could help make clear to the students that nearly all international students confront feelings of unhappiness and frustration that will probably pass with time." In short, an optimistic view in the relation to adjustment and length of stay is a common belief when dealing with international students

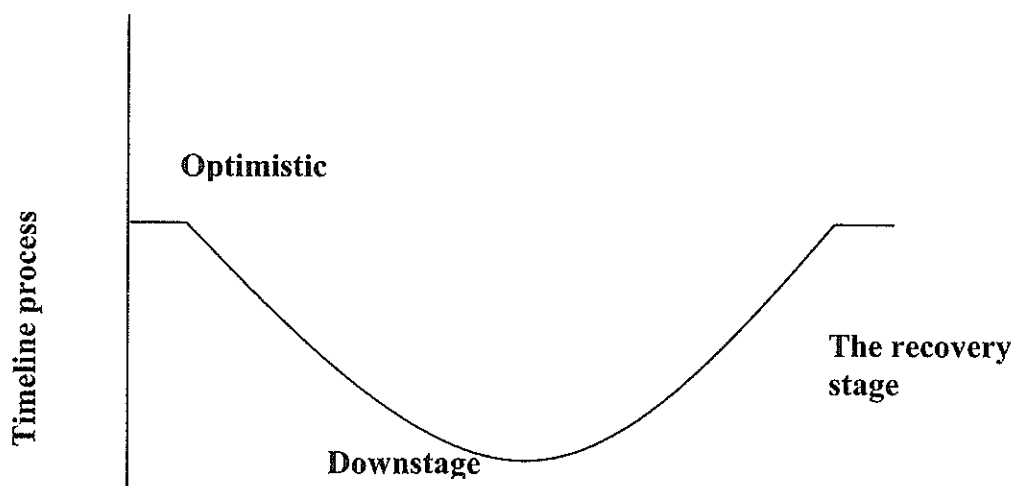


Figure 1: Lysgaard (1955) U- Curve model diagram

However, it is alarming that this is not the case for Japan. Moyers (as cited in Maruyama 2004) suggested that time does not play a factor in assisting adaptation among international students in Japan. Tanaka (1994) found that majority of the international students in Japan shows a differing experience from Lysgaard (1955) U curve theory. Tsai (1995) reported that length of stay for Asian students did not have significant and positive changes in their attitudes toward the host. His study further uncovered that students in Japan tend to have cultural shock in their third year of stay and do not significantly recover from this stage afterwards. It was also found that the international students who stay longer in Japan show more dissatisfaction instead of more understanding on the host culture (Maruyama 1998).

Cultural Distance factor

Apart from time, cultural distance has been identified as a common factor influencing the rate of adaptation. For example, it was found that most American students would rather strike up conversation with someone who looks similar to them culturally and ethnically. This is especially true when research has shown that the European students naturally adapt faster to the American college life compared to the Japanese or Arab students (McClelland 1996).

It is startling that research has found that cultural similarities do not assure higher acculturation in Japan (Hagiwara, 1991; Iwao & Hagiwara, 1987 as cited in Maruyama, 1998). These studies also shown that Asians tend to be less psychologically adapted then did westerners. Asian did not improve their psychological health across time while Westerners tended to conform to the Lysgaard U-curve over length of residence (Tanaka 1994). Tanaka (1994) further cautioned that Asian students were less adjusted then other international students despite sharing some similarities in culture. International students in Japan do not improve their psychological adaptation over the length of residence especially for the Asians (Maruyama 1998). Increase scores were reported on the perception on the Japanese host as being honest, diligent but unfriendly and cold (Maruyama 1998).

Among the given explanation is that, Japanese people were found to favor westerners especially Americans more than Asians (Hagiwara 1991, Iwao & Hagiwara 1987 as cited in Maruyama 1998). Going back to the Western Perspective , it has been expressed that the international Asian students usually see themselves more as members of groups, families or tribes then as separated individuals which is explained by their collective culture whereas the Americans are more individualistic, identifying as separated person and operating on their own and responsible for themselves (Ninggal 1998). The Asians has the tendency to be in their own group to reduce stress, to feel safe and accepted (Ozaki 1988). These could also contribute to the different rate of adaptation between the two groups.

Language factor

Western studies (Gholamrazaei 1996; Poyrazli et.all 2001; McClelland 1996) show that mastery of the host language assist adaptation. For example, in the Western case, English language would assist in understanding lectures and academic discussions, carrying out day to day task and other social activities.

However, researchers in Japan found mastery of the Japanese host language does not guarantee psychological wellbeing (Moyer 1989; Okazaki1992; Araki 1989; Tanaka & Fujihara 1992; as cited in Maruyama, 2004). As summoned up by Maruyama (1998)

contradictory to the western studies, the communication problem does not seem to decrease with better language acquisition as the root of the problem lies deeper than words. Those who make attempts to learn about Japanese language, people and custom experience are more stressed due to rejection by the host than did less motivated students (Tsai 1995). One study even found 'regardless of the students' nationality, as the length of residence and Japanese language ability increased, individuals experienced more disappointment and dissatisfaction in their relationship with Japanese people' (Hagiwara 1991, Iwao & Hagiwara 1988 as cited in Maruyama 1998).

Social communication with Japanese host has been identified as the most common stressor (Tsai 1995). Some of the problems pointed out are ambiguity of expression by Japanese people, attitude of Japanese people towards foreigners, indirect expression and suppressed expression (Moyer 1989; Okazaki 1992; Araki 1989; Tanaka & Fujihara 1992; as cited in Maruyama 2004). Yokata (1991, as summoned up from Maruyama 1998) pointed out one of the student-host relation hindrance factor as perceived by the students is the "superficial arguments" He explained further that, Japanese people are closed and do not talk about something essential, significant and important to insignificant others. Apart from language proficiency, there are also certain cultural rules that need to be observed. The unique nature of Japanese culture need to be taken into consideration, for example when inviting, it is natural to refuse twice and then accept the third invitation.

Researchers have pointed out that most western theories and findings on adaptation for international sojourners could not capture the phenomenon happening in Japan due to the unique nature of the Japanese host and sojourners.

ANALYSIS ON THE FINDINGS

The differences in the western and Japanese research findings bring on inconclusive understanding on the relation of acculturation and psychological wellbeing. Studies are being conducted continuously hence counsellors for Malaysian students in Japan and the international student counsellors in Japan should keep abreast with the research development. The counselling of Malaysian students in Japan should adhere to the phenomenon in Japan and comparison to the western adaptation should be minimized. The elaborated discussion on the concepts above brings on a few measures that can be taken to add to the goodness of counseling for Malaysian students in Japan.

One of it is to run collaborations between the counselors and intercultural researchers. Counselors and intercultural researchers can work alongside each other and work together to cover a few aspects. The most common aspect is to study adaptation in the perspective of the sojourners, specifically, to study on the adaptation process of Malaysian students in Japan in relation to the stress and coping strategy, cultural learning strategy or psychoanalysis study. Another aspect is to study the experience from the perspective of Japan as host. Studies on the host are less published compared to the study on the sojourners and this is obvious in the scarce existence for reference in this area. The scarcity on English written material is obvious as most of the research are conducted by the natives and published in Japanese. Such condition imposes further limitation for counselors who do not read Japanese academic journals due to its highly complex 'kanji'.

Counselors can create more relevant modules by getting the reality facts from the intercultural researchers. Such collaboration would also add more merits to the intercultural research as the counselors could assist in pointing out the critical research

area to be focused hence add on to the intercultural research value. The research findings can be incorporated into modules for preparatory programs, intervention programs and counseling approaches.

Given that students are mostly reluctant to go and see counselors personally, it is important to consider alternative ways to disseminate the modules. The findings from intercultural researchers reflected in the counseling modules would add on the counseling relevance and service value. The modules can be translated into forms of fliers, online articles and charts which can be further disseminated by E-counseling forums and e-mail groups. Such varieties would add on to the relevance and range of students' access for counseling help.

Another alternative is to set up group counseling services. Such moves will not only assist the students but also build students inventory which could be a guide to future counselors should the present counselor moves on (Huzili 1999).

CONCLUSION

Adaptation is inevitable for the students to function normally. The demand to learn a wide range of culturally defined and unfamiliar roles under pressure of time and expectations poses stress. Adaptation failure would collapse the students' daily performance and functioning which could lead to negative outcomes in health and academic performance in the long run. It is believed that the faster the international students adapt to the new culture, the better they will do academically (Charles & Steward 1991)

Generalization and stereotyping of western cases in the counselling, orientation and intervention programs for Malaysian students in Japan could lead to acute effects on the students' psychological health as the actual adaptation problem is failed to be addressed. Generalization and stereotyping in dealing with adaptation problems would also reduce the accomplishment of the programs and the counselling (Slodzinski 1994). Cuellar, Haris & Jasso (1980) has shown that the effectiveness of counselling can be affected by the client's level or degree of adaptation into the dominant society. They further suggested that the programs and counselling should be addressed with consideration to different cultural sensitivities and needs.

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