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"Out of the Circle": international students and the use of university counselling services

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In this paper, we attempt to gain a greater understanding of the adjustment experiences of international students from Mainland China in their first year at university. Three themes emerge from our data: lack of confidence in speaking English; the preference for using family, partners and close friends as their support networks to deal with problems; and the lack of knowledge of university counselling services. The participants did not view the university counselling services as a support service they would use to assist them with their personal difficulties.

Introduction

University counselling services, like most university support services, constantly review how they can deliver a more efficient service to their clients. In the last ten years, increased numbers of international students have been a significant feature of tertiary education institutions. Understanding the adjustment experiences of international students in a tertiary environment will allow university counselling services to develop policies and practices that better meet the needs of this cohort. The focus of this paper is to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of international students during their first year at university and their views regarding the use of the university counselling service as a support service during that time.

Increased challenges for international students

International students as a cohort experience greater changes during the initial transitional period than domestic students (Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen & Van Horn 2002, Leong & Chou 1996, Suen 1998, Ward, Bochner & Furnham 2001). They are required to deal with the differences between their own cultural values, norms and customs and those of their hosts. They experience problems with verbal and non-verbal communication, dealing with interpersonal relationships, as well as learning to deal with the issue of becoming an adult away from their families and communities (Hechanova-Alampay *et al.* 2002). Cultural differences related to the educational environment, as well as language issues, will be discussed in more depth later in this introduction. However, Hechanova-Alampay *et al.* (2002) and Bailey and Dua (1999) argue that collectively, these challenges, together with generally having a more limited social resource structure and network, lead to a higher level of stress for these students. Brein and David (1971, cited in Bailey & Dua 1999) found that the period of greatest stress relating to the adjustment of

dealing with a new cultural environment occurred within the first six months of the student's stay in a new country.

The first year of university, for most students, has a number of difficulties and challenges. International students, as a sub-group of the first year student population, are universally required to deal with additional challenges during their transition phase. Universities in Australia are becoming more reliant on the income from international students to remain viable, which makes it imperative that these students' experiences are better understood, and that every opportunity is made to assist them to have a positive experience during their time at university. The experiences in the first few months for a new international student, dealing with a new educational environment and settling in a new country, could be characterised by interactions that are filled with misunderstandings due to the complexities of the differences between cultures. These experiences are likely to have resulted in some distress and frustration being experienced and possibly self-doubt about having made the correct decision to study in another country.

Methodology

We utilised in-depth interviews to collect information from participants. In-depth interviewing is one method that is frequently used by qualitative researchers to gather data about the experiences of a research participant from his or her perspective (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005). It allows a fuller, contextual picture to be gathered of an individual's experience (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005) than can be gained by using quantitative methods such as questionnaires. It opens up the possibility of gaining insight into the feelings and thoughts of the participants (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander 1995).

The use of qualitative methodology has become increasingly prevalent in contemporary research as it provides rich, informative and complex data that give insights into the experiences of others

(Babour 2007, Denzin & Lincoln 2005, Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005). Qualitative research is interested in the uniqueness of the interpretive process that occurs for an individual around a particular experience. It is our interest in the experiences of a specific cohort of students that make a qualitative methodology suitable for this study.

Eight participants were interviewed for this study. From this group, only seven interviews could be used, as one interview could not be transcribed due to poor sound quality. The following information refers to these seven participants. All participants are students of one of the major universities in Melbourne, Australia. Three males and four females participated. They ranged in age from 20 to 28 years old. One female did not disclose her year of birth, even after two attempts to elicit this information, although she provided a birth date and month.

Three participants had completed their undergraduate degrees in China, one had completed a diploma in Singapore and one had completed secondary schooling in New Zealand. The remaining two had completed their secondary schooling in China. Of the three participants who had already completed a degree, one was enrolled in another undergraduate degree, in a different field to his first degree, one was enrolled in a postgraduate course related to his degree and the third was enrolled in a master's program. Only two of the participants were completing their first year of tertiary study when interviewed. Of the remaining two participants, one had just completed her second year and the other was in her last year of study. Four of the participants had been living in Australia under eighteen months, two had been living in Australia between two and four years, and the other participant had been in the country for over four years.

All the interviews were conducted within the grounds of the students' home university. Participants were assured that their identity would remain confidential and that anonymity would be maintained by the use of pseudonyms and by the collated form of the data.

In the analysis, the initial data were broken down into open codes. The main aim of coding was to generate alternative meanings to the data. This process is identified as the pivotal link between the data and the theory (Charmaz 2006). In the coding processes, initial categories and sub categories were identified and noted. Whilst this was occurring, comparisons were made with new data, between categories and with existing theories. From this process, the identification of a major direction of the study emerged which allowed a more focused analytical processing of the data to occur. Re-coding occurred and the data were re-examined with a more focused viewpoint.

Verbatim examples are used to illustrate the main aspects of the themes and participants are identified by their pseudonyms to preserve their anonymity.

Results

Three major themes emerged from the narratives of the research participants.

Difficulties in speaking English

For international students interviewed from Mainland China, English was not their first language and one of the main reasons for a number of the participants to choose to study in Australia was to develop their English language skill. Even though the participants had previous lessons in English, their experiences of Australian spoken English were different from what they had expected. Their experience of communicating in English in a new educational environment was difficult:

English is most hard point for me ... sometimes my tutors, my lecturer, I can't understand what they said (Bo).

Bo spoke about the difficulty he had listening to English being spoken and then elaborated on his difficulty with individual words:

When I got some new words, I don't understand what they mean, I don't know the Chinese meaning. I can't find this word even using the dictionary. I don't know the precisely the words and what the meaning is.

Difficulties with the language also affected participants' interactions with local students. Not having a common background or culture made it difficult for participants to place interactions in the correct context. This was reflected by a number of participants. Bo said:

I think the main problem is language because I can't speak fluently so they [local students] don't wait. They are not wanting to make friends to me, I think.

Cheng, who had already completed a biomedical degree in China, was confident to engage with local students about topics related to his subjects but found it difficult when the conversation changed to a social focus:

I seldom talk with the local students so my experience just a little bit I discuss with them about the contents of (my) course. I can handle it, but after the class maybe we have casual chats, so I always keep silence.

Mei expressed anger at being seen to be inferior to local students due to her lack of spoken English skills. Her negative experiences led her to be hesitant about trying to make friends with local students:

I don't want to make friends with them because I feel my country is modern than here, Fashion is modern than here. Don't look down me right, but you're just English better than me.

Language difficulties with local students appeared to be common, but participants' experiences with local people in the community in general tended to be different and more positive. Mei elaborated her belief about why local people may be friendlier:

They are more understanding (of) international students.

Cheng, recalling his interactions with people on the street, supported Mei's view about how helpful they were:

... and the people here are quite polite and they're quite pleasant to help other people. That's what I often see in the streets or somewhere.

Unfortunately, not all interactions were positive. Mei also spoke about an incident where she felt the response by a real estate agent was rude.

An outcome of negative interactions with local students is that international students are more likely to seek interactions with others who have similar values, language and cultural history (Ward *et al.*, 2001). Relationships are formed with other international students who have shared experiences and similar cultural backgrounds. Gaining friends who have similar experiences and backgrounds made interactions more comfortable and participants felt they were able to articulate what they wanted to say more easily:

I choose Malaysia, Indonesia, Chinese or Japanese international students, not local people. They face same situation. They will more understand what you think (Mei).

Apart from the benefit of having their social needs met, interactions with other international students also increased the participants' academic resources, which participants did not find in their interaction with local students. Mei spoke about the willingness of other international students to share information on assessment tasks:

They [other international students] will help you to find some information or maybe help you studying, lecture notes, textbook, everything. It's more comfortable I feel, more than local people.

This academic network was important for participants, as they tended not to use academic lecturers as a resource.

The lack of confidence in their English was a major problem in their studies. Bo spoke about the extra amount of time he spent to compensate for his language weakness:

I have to spend more time in home to read the lecture notes and to tell the answers.

Daiyu spoke about the number of times she had to read to gain an understanding of what was required for her assignments:

You know, I couldn't understand or when I read once and I need to read a second time, third time and then I can understand.

Mei told how her lack of English required her to spend more time with her studies:

I need to use dictionary many, many times because I don't know ... I told you my English is not very good so I need to translate using dictionary. More time consuming, yeah.

To assist her with her grammar in her essays, she used the language centre. This required her to submit a draft to them in time for it to be corrected prior to the due date. This process required further time. Mei was required to submit her draft sometimes prior to the lecturer completing lectures related to the assessment task. For Mei, this was frustrating:

In fact, we haven't enough time to do our essay, but, you know, I need to do our essay earlier and then submit to the English department and then submit to our subject lecturer.

When participants did seek assistance from their teaching staff, they were more likely to seek support from tutors. They thought that lecturers would be too busy. When participants interacted with academic staff, the preferred way was through the use of the electronic medium. By using this method, participants gave themselves more time to formulate their questions and answers in English. Cheng said that this was partly due to his higher confidence in his written skills than his speaking skills. By using the written word, he was more confident in the correctness of what he was trying

to communicate. Cheng believed that this was an outcome of his prior education:

[Chinese students have a] lack of opportunity to speak and listen ... so the written skills and the reading is better than their speaking skills and listening.

Daiyu highlighted a key feature of developing confidence in speaking a new language. She said it was important to develop a positive attitude towards change as speaking in a new language will change who you are.

Not only something about practice, want to embrace something (language) if you want to really know something.

The essential element of this theme was that confidence in the participants' spoken English language was critical for their persistence in communicating in English. Increasing interactions allowed a greater understanding of the culture and norms of the new environment, but more importantly, for developing opportunities where they believed they were being understood. As counselling is primarily a talk therapy, having difficulty speaking English may have been a major factor that inhibited them from using the university counselling service.

Using family and close friends for support

In the more traditional Chinese family, the family is generally the main support for the child (Lee 1996, Soo-Hoo 1999). Prior studies showed that family and friends are the main support for international students (Mori 2000, Robbins & Tanck 1995, Rosenthal, Russell & Thomson 2006, Suen 1998). In a number of one-child families in China, the parents' sole focus has been on the child:

When I was in China, my mother and father did a lot of things for me, so I did not have to worry about a lot of things (Bo).

The parents usually became the primary source of support for the student. With the use of low cost telephone cards, ease of connections to emails and with Internet web-cams, participants negated the

problem of distance when they wished to communicate with their parents:

[I] communicate with the family in the telephone so I make a call every week. I talk for several hours of something with my parents so I overcome it [feeling homesick] in a few weeks (Cheng).

Parents provided financial as well as emotional and practical support for their child. But not all the participants felt that their parents understood their situation here in Australia, or provided the emotional support that they required. Mei felt that her parents did not understand the difficulties she faced studying in Australia:

Maybe I tell them I'm very unhappy, I'm very boring and they said oh you prepared, you expect it like that. You don't say unhappy you say you come to here. Oh, I hurt. I don't know what to say.

Bo articulated the financial pressure he feels with respect to the amount of money his parents spend on his study:

If I was to fail, I have to pay another, like a thousand Australian dollars, I think it is very expensive to me and my parents because I am an overseas student.

Later in the interview, Bo spoke about the sense of obligation he felt towards them due to the financial debt:

I feel shame when I use my parents' money and I cannot be like other Australian students... My parents pay a lot of money to send me to Australia and to give me a good opportunity to study in Australia, so I have to reward them, I think. Pay back money or helping with them when they get old. To stay with them in effect.

At times, parents made decisions involving the child without the child's input into the decision. Wei was in this situation. She was sent to New Zealand for the final year of her secondary schooling and she found it very difficult to adjust to her new educational and cultural environment. Another participant, who was in her mid-twenties,

spoke about the strong influence her family has on her here in Australia:

In China, you do everything according to your parents, ... always have to talk to parents (Jia).

Interestingly, even though most participants contacted their parents to speak with them about their difficulties, for two of the male participants there was a strong belief in having to be self-reliant. Both Cheng and Bo articulated this view differently:

For Chinese students, they always solve their problems or something themselves (Cheng).

I'm diligent ... though if others can do it, I can do it also (Bo).

It appears that the key element of this theme was the strong level of connectedness that participants had with their families. There was a sense of the strong commitment parents made towards the development of their children's educational future. There was a strong acceptance that parents would be involved in the participant's life in Australia and they usually became the main source of support in the everyday life of the participant. For these students, the ease of access to their families may have lessened their need to speak to others, such as counsellors, who are outside of their primary support network.

Views towards using the university counselling services to assist during difficult periods

None of the participants indicated that had used the University's counselling service during their first or subsequent years of their study. One of the participants did not know of the existence of the university counselling service, even though she was completing the second year of her degree:

Until now, I don't know [about the university having a counselling service] (Mei).

Wei was aware that the university offered a counselling service but did not know the location or how to access appointments:

I didn't know exactly [where the counselling service is located on campus], but I know every institution has one.

Daiyu articulated the common view held by the participants who were aware that the university had a counselling service:

I don't think a lot of Chinese people use it [counselling service].

Huan spoke about his confusion and uncertainty with counselling:

Before I go to counsellor, I decide to go to counsellor, what is counsellor? What will happen if I go use a – what will happen?

Participants held a belief that university counsellors would not understand their cultural background and would not be able to help them. Bo spoke about his belief that a lack of the cultural history by counsellors would limit their ability to assist him:

I think they can't help me. I think they cannot solve it... They [counselling service staff] don't know me.

Cheng identified counsellors as people who were outside the circle of support people in his network:

Because these people [parents, friends, teachers] are a family with them [Chinese students], for ourselves a psychological counsellor is a stranger.

Huan further defined Cheng's view about the importance of a participant's group. He made a clear distinction between being a friend of his, but not being part of his group:

... think Chinese divide their relationship into very simple way, my friend! not my friend; my group! not my group; very strong bond (Huan).

You're a friend, but not my group (Huan)

Huan tried to articulate the importance of being in the group, and made an important distinction between someone who was a friend and someone who was considered in the group:

This group is special meaning... group first and I find there will be source from the group, from the group.

Daiyu articulated the crux of the importance of being part of the group:

In China, students belong to circle, belong to people's relationship.

The essential element of this theme is that university counsellors are not within the primary group or circle of people that participants view as part of their support. Unless counsellors are able to be part of the circle of individuals who have a relationship with the participants, international students are unlikely to seek counselling support during periods of difficulties.

Discussion

Literature has suggested that the first year of university for the majority of students is a time when they face a number of challenges and deal with change. For many international students, they face additional challenges as a result of having to deal with the complexities of living in a different country. The three key themes identified in this study relate to the participants' difficulties in their spoken English language, continued utilisation of traditional support networks and a lack of knowledge of the university counselling service, leading to the conclusion that participants did not view it as a support service they would use for personal difficulties.

Confidence in speaking English

The participants' level of spoken English was an important theme that influenced every major academic and social interaction. The participants' perception of their ability to communicate effectively with local students was very dependent on their ability to speak English. This is supported by Henderson and others (1993, cited in Ward *et al.* 2001) in their research study on Asian students in the USA. They found that the absence of adequate language skills, which was apparent in 97% of their sample, was the most serious and frequently identified difficulty. Kono (1999), Li and Kaye (1998)

and Mori (2000), through their studies, also support the finding that language competency is a significant issue for international students.

The perceived greater opportunity to develop English language skills was an influencing factor for participants to choose Australia as the country to further their studies. All of them, in the initial stage of study, had a strong desire to make friends with local students, but this appeared to be an expectation that did not eventuate. Unfortunately, this unmet expectation is also found in studies conducted in North America which showed international students are keen to experience more interaction with local students (Arthur 2004). Ward *et al.* (2001) argue that the occurrence of interactions is largely dependent on the cultural distance between the host culture and the culture of the international student, with the greater the distance the lower the frequency of interaction. Pedersen and colleagues (1996) argue that the greater the cultural distance, the greater the adjustment demands placed on the international student. Using Hofstede's dimensions (1980) to gauge cultural distance, Mainland Chinese students and Australian students are almost at opposite ends of the dimensions. Therefore, the participants in this study are faced with the double hurdle of having a low frequency of interactions and higher adjustment demands in their quest to develop positive relationships with host students.

For students from Mainland China who are developing their English language proficiency, one likely outcome of these experiences would be a changed view of themselves. They may initially have a self-view that they are competent students, reinforced by strong academic grades. If their grades in Australia are lower than expected, Arthur (2004) and Ward and colleagues (2001) argue that a student's view of self may change negatively. If this changed view was unexpected or resulted in confusion in the individual, the individual may find it very difficult to try to explain their situation and emotions using English.

From a language point of view, one of the possible reasons for the low number of these students presenting to a counselling service is that they may have difficulty trying to articulate adequately the emotional state they are experiencing when they do not have the English words to describe their internal world. Sue and Sue (1990) argue that university support services are limited for students who do not possess the language skills or confidence in the host language. This difficulty of developing competency in English is also found in other groups in the Australian community. In her recent study, Liamputtong (2006a) found that developing adequate English language skills was a major difficulty for the study's participants. For them, English language was essential, as it gave them access to information and resources in the community (Liamputtong 2006a). Similarly, for this study's participants, confidence in their spoken English is required to allow them to be comfortable to access and use the counselling service.

For students who can overcome this language problem, increased positive interaction with local students results in an increased identification with the host culture (Tseng & Newton 2002) but, as one of the participants noted, lack of practice in speaking English eroded her confidence in maintaining contact with her local friends. Ward *et al.* (2001) cite a number of studies that show the increase in interaction has a positive flow-on effect on academic studies, social interactions, language competency and general adaptation of international students. For international students, obtaining competency in English was essential to understand what was happening around them, but more importantly, gave participants the sense that others understood them.

Support networks

Participants in this study predominantly spoke with their family as their main source of support. Cost, time difference or geographical location did not appear to be an issue for the students. Oliver, Reed,

Katz and Haugh (1999) also found in their study that living in a separate country from their immediate family did not preclude them as a source of support.

One of the main advantages of speaking with family for the participants was that language no longer became an issue. For the participants, this allowed a greater amount of discussion to occur and a number of strategies could be developed to deal with the difficulties. Another advantage of speaking with their families was that they helped to reinforce the high value of education for the student. In Asian cultures, education is seen to bring an increase in opportunities in economic, social and moral areas (Stevenson & Lee 1996). For international students raised in a collective society, speaking with their families and having families involved in decision making may be more comfortable to them than seeking out a counsellor (Snider 2003, Sue & Sue 1990).

Consistent with the study of Oliver *et al.* (1999) was one of the participant's views of the importance of a romantic partner with whom to talk. The single participant in this study who advocated having a boyfriend or girlfriend as a support person felt that her parents were not able to understand her difficulties in studying in Australia. This participant felt her boyfriend, who was an international student, was able to provide better support, as he had similar experiences to her. A similar belief was held by a number of the other participants in that other international students who had similar experiences would be more understanding of the difficulties faced by them.

Use of university counselling services

General information about the university counselling service is available through a number of different media, such as pamphlets, websites, orientation talks and handbooks, yet participants in this study still appeared to lack basic general knowledge about the service.

In the recently published study by Rosenthal *et al.* (2006), they found that 65.5% of their sample population of international students did not know where to go for counselling assistance.

Prior studies have shown that international students from Asia are generally infrequent users of a university counselling service (Hechanova-Alampay *et al.* 2002, Pedersen *et al.* 2002) and, in this study, none of the participants reported having used the university counselling service. The view of this study's participants was that counsellors would not understand the cultural context of the individual and so would not be able to help with the problem. This view is supported by the results of Rosenthal *et al.*, where 46.9% of that study's sample indicated that counsellors would not understand them and 47.6% thought that counsellors would not be able to help them.

Liamputtong (2006b) argues that concepts do not always exist between cultures and languages, and if the counsellor has a different contextual understanding of the words used by the international student, then misunderstandings are likely to occur. This may be one of the main factors for the participants' belief that counsellors would not understand the cultural context of their issue (Suen 1998).

The participants' negative view that counselling services are for individuals with a mental illness, with the associated social stigma that holds, is consistent with a number of others studies conducted by Kinoshita and Bowman (1998), Mori (2000), Sue and Sundberg (1996) and Suen (1998). It is not inconceivable that students do not see the counselling service as a resource centre for developing personal coping skills. In Mori's (2000) study, he found that the social stigma of being seen to use a counselling service was especially prevalent for Chinese students.

Individuals of Asian cultures who have used counselling services tend to be more comfortable with a solution-focused and task-

orientated counselling service (Hart 2002, Lee 1996, Soo-Hoo 1999). Asian students who require the support of university counselling services tend to require academic procedure support, such as special consideration. For these students, counsellors hold specific expertise that family or friends are unable to provide. Rosenthal, Russell and Thomson (2006) found that international students who had positive prior experience of the counselling service are the main source of encouragement for other students to seek assistance from the counselling service.

In their study, Oliver and colleagues (1999) explored the variable of language, differentiating between English as a first or second language for the participant. They found that language was not a significant factor for their participants to seek assistance from any potential help source. In this study, however, the lack of Mandarin-speaking counsellors is seen as a deterrent for Mainland Chinese students to attend the university counselling services. It is unclear from the study by Oliver *et al.* (1999) whether the potential help sources included people who spoke the international students' first language or only those who spoke the host language.

The participants' use of family as their primary source of support during difficult periods is consistent with other findings that showed international students prefer more informal sources of support (Robbins & Tanck 1995) and have help-seeking behaviour different from native-born students (Oliver *et al.* 1999).

Implications for counselling services

The development of a group-based program, where the university counselling service is presented to international students as a resource or skill development centre to assist them with their academic progress, could be used to start to change the way the counselling service is seen by international students from Asia. The group program could consist of a number of sessions held in

consecutive weeks. For the first few sessions, facilitation of the group would be co-run with staff from another service such as finance, housing, language support and careers. The remaining sessions would be used to further develop the group and to include any aspect of adjustment that the group would find valuable. Eventually, the aim would be to have international students and counsellors facilitate the groups.

We know from the study of Rosenthal, Russell and Thomson (2006) that international students who have had positive experiences of counselling influence other international students to seek counselling support. To strengthen this informal network, one counsellor's role could be developed to become community-development focused, working more with international associations and groups. This may provide a human face and name for the university counselling service that would be recognised by international students.

Conclusion

In this study, we have shown how international students from Mainland China expressed their views and experiences of their life in Australia. For these students, counsellors are seen to be outside the circle of people that they would use for support to assist with personal difficulties during their time at university. We identify some of the factors that may influence international Asian students' reluctance to use university counselling services. One of the factors was participants' misconception that clients of the counselling service have a mental illness. Another factor was the participants' lack of knowledge of the university counselling service.

Participants' willingness to interact with university counsellors may be stifled by their lack of English vocabulary to express their emotions and thoughts. Having to converse in a second language continues to play a major role in participants' interactions with others. Participants did not see geographic distance as a problem, and

the family continues to provide the main support for participants. Friends were also used to provide both social and academic support and it appears that counsellors are primarily used for their expertise in academic procedures and not to assist with personal difficulties.

It is anticipated that the outcome of this study will be used to further develop programs and policies that will assist international students to more easily access university counselling services during period of personal difficulties. Although this study was carried out with international students from mainland China, we contend that our results may be applicable also to other international students who study in Australia. As such, our findings can be used as a basic understanding for further investigation on the experiences of international students in Australia and elsewhere.

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