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Acculturation and Its Implications for the Academic Achievement and Subjective Well-Being of East Asian International Students

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Abstract

The U.S. higher education system hosts a wide range of international students with the majority from East Asian countries. East Asian international students may have particular difficulty with acculturating into a novel environment given their predominant interdependent self-construal, which contrasts with the largely independent cultural imperative of the West. The present study investigates the potential associations between international students' acculturation, self-construal (SC), and their academic and psychological adjustment (e.g., achievement goals, academic achievement, subjective well-being) to shed light on how East Asian international students can best adapt to a new culture. Participants included a total of 48 East Asian international students (25 male, 23 female; age range: 18 to 23). Results from a series of correlation analyses indicated that there were no significant correlations between acculturation strategy and self-construal. However, there was a significant correlation between performance-avoidance goals and GPA. Additionally, the separation strategy was negatively associated with negative affect and positively associated with life satisfaction, and the marginalization strategy was positively associated with negative affect and negatively associated with life satisfaction. The findings suggest that acculturation strategy is not directly linked to academic achievement; instead, it has a more prominent influence on well-being among East Asian international students. Further longitudinal research may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the association between acculturation and achievement goals in this unique student population.

KEYWORDS: acculturation, self-construal, academic achievement, achievement goals, well-being

Introduction

According to the Open Doors Report of 2020, the United States hosts approximately 1,075,496 international students, indicating a 48.7% increase in foreign student enrollment over the most recent decade (Institute of International Students, 2020). The largest share of students originates from East Asian countries (i.e., China, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, and Mongolia), which accounts for 26.7% of all international students and 62.1% of all Asian students. The influx of East Asian students that participate in foreign study programs gives rise to concerns regarding their well-being and their academic achievement when faced with a new culture, given that they are accustomed to highly collectivist societies. Oftentimes, it is uncertain whether East Asian students would be able to successfully adapt to the host culture for the facilitation of proper academic behaviors and desirable social interactions. The present study focuses on how East Asian international students respond to cultural challenges and the positive (and negative) outcomes that occur as a result. The study's goal is to contribute to an understanding of the areas of the abroad experience that are impacted the most by cultural differences so that they could be focused on in counseling meetings, school workshops, and administrative policies in order to enact a greater sensitivity towards the needs of international students and create positive change.

International students can be categorized as sojourners, or individuals who stay in the host country for a short period of time to attain a particular goal and then return to their home country (Li, Wang, & Xiao, 2019). They are immersed in an educational environment where they have a unique set of experiences within a specialized population. International students of East Asian descent, among other ethnic backgrounds, may experience particular difficulty in a Western university because of the stark cultural differences that they are not accustomed to. For

instance, many international students are trained to listen to instructors rather than speak in class (Selvadurai, 1990). When exposed to the Western learning environment, their reluctance to participate in class may prove inhibiting in achieving a higher grade or expanding their network. It has been found that the norms, values, and beliefs of a culture can affect an individuals' self-construal, or their views of the self in relation to others. Individuals accustomed to Asian cultures (e.g., China, Japan), which are highly collectivist, tend to view the self as an *interdependent* entity, in which one's behavior is determined, and contingent on, the perceived thoughts of *others* in a situation (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). On the contrary, individuals in Western countries are predisposed towards an *independent* self-construal, where they view themselves as bounded, integrated wholes that are separate from others and have a unique configuration of internal attributes. Western society underscores the independent self-construal, such that individuals generally act with the intent to satisfy internal needs—enhancement of self-esteem, self-actualization, motive to achieve—and attain a level of autonomy and separateness. Students from Asian cultures who maintain an interdependent self-construal may feel that their inclination to restrain their inner attributes and demands may not be beneficial, and in fact detrimental, in meeting the Western culture imperative (Murray, 1938).

Acculturation

Acculturation occurs when groups or individuals from one culture make contact with groups or individuals from another culture, and it results in cultural and psychological change in both the group acting and the group being acted upon. Through acculturation, individuals can adopt a variety of strategies in order to adapt to a new culture successfully. Berry's (1980) model of acculturation proposed four different kinds of acculturation strategies: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. The strategy utilized largely depends on two key

issues: 1) the preference to maintain one's heritage culture and identity and 2) the preference to participate in the larger society. When one wishes to maintain their cultural beliefs and values and participate in the larger society, then the integration strategy is defined. The assimilation, separation, and marginalization strategies are adopted when an individual prefers solely the host culture, solely the home culture, or neither culture, respectively. The strategy used can influence whether an individual or group becomes well-adapted or maladapted to a novel environment.

Achievement Goals

The acculturation strategy chosen may influence academic achievement through the type of achievement goals that international students set for themselves as they study abroad. An achievement goal can be defined as "the purpose for engaging in competence-related behavior" (Elliot & Hulleman, 2017). According to the 2 x 2 achievement goal framework proposed by Elliot and McGregor (2001), individuals who adopt mastery-approach goals strive for competence, performance-approach goals strive to outperform others, mastery-avoidance goals avoid incompetence, and performance-avoidance goals avoid underperforming relative to others.

Research on which achievement goals lead to the highest academic performance has resulted in mixed findings. Generally, it was found that approach goals were associated with higher academic achievement and avoidance goals with lower academic achievement (Huang, 2012; Elliot & McGregor, 2001). However, a recent study by Brockbank and colleagues (2020) found that both approach and avoidance goals positively predicted academic performance, though approach goals did so more than avoidance goals. Students who strive to avoid incompetence and underperforming may perceive these goals as the ultimate desired outcome; thus, mitigating negative behaviors that may inhibit successful academic performance.

Subjective Well-Being

Subjective well-being (SWB) is synonymous with the hedonic view of well-being, which is attained through experiences of pleasure and enjoyment (Henderson, Knight, & Richardson, 2013). It can be measured by level of positive affect (PA), level of negative affect (NA), and satisfaction with life (Diener & Emmons, 1984; Diener et al., 1985). A study by Zheng, Sang, & Wang (2004) found that the SWB of Chinese international students in Australia significantly differed across adoption of acculturation strategies. In particular, students who were integrated into the host society had significantly higher SWB than their peers who were assimilated, separated, or marginalized. Furthermore, Berry & Hou (2016) found that immigrants who used the integration and assimilation acculturation strategies had the highest scores of life satisfaction, while those who used the separation and marginalization strategies had significantly lower scores.

The Present Study

The first goal of the present study was to explore the associations between self-construal and acculturation strategy. The present study hypothesized that students who utilize the following strategies will maintain the corresponding self-construals: integration → high independent and interdependent SC; assimilation → high independent, low interdependent SC; separation → low independent, high interdependent SC; marginalization → low independent and interdependent SC. It was also predicted that the longer a student stayed in the US, the greater the prevalence of the integration and assimilation acculturation strategies.

The second goal was to explore the associations between acculturation strategies, achievement goals, and academic achievement of East Asian international students. With the integration strategy being the most beneficial to academic and well-being adaptations (Cemalcilar & Falbo, 2008), it was hypothesized that students who utilize integration, followed

by assimilation, will have a greater degree of approach goals than avoidance goals. Students who utilize separation and marginalization strategies, on the other hand, will have more avoidance goals than approach goals, and less goals overall than assimilation or integration strategies. It was also predicted that approach-oriented goals will positively correlate with student GPA more than avoidance-oriented goals.

The final goal of the present study was to determine which acculturation strategies lead to higher positive affect, lower negative affect, and higher satisfaction with life in East Asian international students. It was hypothesized that the integration strategy will lead to higher subjective well-being, followed by the assimilation and separation strategies. The marginalization strategy will result in the lowest well-being scores.

Method

Participants

The sample for the present study consisted of 48 (52.1% male, 47.9% female) undergraduate students from an accredited, postsecondary, and minority-serving institution in southern California. Participants ranged from 18 to 23 years of age, with a mean age of 20.02. The targeted sample consisted of students who were of East Asian ethnicity and nationality (home country is an East Asian country), and who were studying abroad in the United States for the Fall and Winter quarters. East Asian countries and regions included China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Macau, and Mongolia. Data collected showed that 34 participants (70.8%) of the sample identified as Chinese, 2 participants identified as Japanese (4.2%), 3 participants identified as South Korean (6.3%), 5 participants identified as Taiwanese (10.4%), 3 participants identified as Cantonese (6.3%), and 1 participant identified as Macanese (2.0%).

None of the participants were from Hong Kong or Mongolia. The average time these students spent in the U.S. was 4.19 years. All participants were able to speak and read English.

Procedure

With approval from the UCR IRB-SB, participants were recruited with the assistance of the International Affairs office, the UCR extension center, and a number of student organizations. Two recruitment groups were formed: students who signed up through the Psychology Research Participation System (SONA Systems) and students who were directly administered the survey following completion of an interest form (non-SONA). SONA participants were compensated with one unit of course credit, and non-SONA participants were compensated with a raffle entry to potentially win 1 of 3 $25 gift cards. Participants from both groups were administered a single, online survey that was prefaced with the informed consent form. Participants' emails were collected in order to debrief them and provide them with a summary of the study's results; however, names were not collected to protect the participants' privacy. Reminders were sent to participants who signed up for the study through SONA systems or who completed the interest form but had not yet completed the survey a week thereafter. Student identifiers were deleted following completion of the study report.

Materials

An online survey was developed and administered using Qualtrics software. There were 118 items on the survey that included demographic questions, seven scales, and GPA and TOEFL information. Several scales were divided into sub-scales, and two of the scales—the reasons for learning scale and the flourishing scale—have been omitted to allow for a closer examination of the other research variables. All measures except GPA and TOEFL score were

answered on a five-point Likert-type scale with a '1' indicating 'strongly disagree/never' and a '5' indicating 'strongly agree/always.' An average across all items was taken for each scale.

Demographics. Items include indication of nationality, home country, years lived in home country, post-graduate plans, gender, age, current academic year, and major.

Self-Construal Scale. The latest version of the Self-Construal Scale (SCS) developed by Singelis (1994) was used. There were fifteen questions that address an independent self-view (e.g., 'I do my own thing, regardless of what people think') and 15 questions that address an interdependent self-view (e.g., 'I feel good when I cooperate with others'). The independent and interdependent subscales were shown to be two separate factors rather than opposite poles of a single construct; thus, each subscale was calculated and considered independently.

The East Asian Acculturation Measure. The East Asian Acculturation Measure (EAAM) is a scale developed by Barry (2001) that measures the four different acculturation strategies as it pertains to East Asian immigrants. The 29-item scale is comprised of 8 *assimilation* (e.g., 'I get along better with Americans than Asians'), 7 *separation* (e.g., 'I prefer going to social gatherings where most of the people are Asian'), 5 *integration* (e.g., I feel very comfortable around both Americans and Asians'), and 9 *marginalization* (e.g., 'Generally, I find it difficult to socialize with anybody, Asian or American') items. Attitudinal and behavioral aspects of social interaction and communication styles are addressed.

Achievement Goals Questionnaire-Revised. The achievement goal questionnaire-revised (AGQ-R) consists of 12 items which represent the four goals in the 2 x 2 model of goal achievement. In the present study, the AGQ-R was used to determine which types of goals East Asian international students tend to adopt. Each item was scored and averaged to form four different indexes: performance-approach (e.g., 'It is important for me to do better than other

students'), mastery-approach (e.g., 'I want to learn as much as possible from this class'), mastery-avoidance (e.g., 'I worry that I may not learn all that I possibly could in this class'), and performance-avoidance (e.g., 'My goal in this class is to avoid performing poorly'). Additionally, both approach profiles and both avoidance profiles were combined to create two general approach and avoidance profiles for analysis.

The International Positive and Negative Affect Schedule Short Form. The I-PANAS-SF is composed of two five-item affect scales: one to measure positive affect (e.g., inspired, determined) and the other to measure negative affect (e.g., upset, ashamed). The present study uses the scale to ask to what extent students generally feel 1 of 10 affective states.

The Satisfaction with Life Scale. The SWLS is a five-item scale that was developed by Diener et al. (1985) in order to measure the global cognitive judgements of one's satisfaction with life. The scale was adjusted to a five-point Likert scale to maintain compatibility with the rest of the survey measures and to minimize the cognitive load for respondents completing the survey. Sample questions include "In most ways my life is close to ideal" and "So far I have gotten the important things I want in life."

GPA. Participant GPA was an indicator of their level of academic achievement.

TOEFL. Participant TOEFL score was an indicator of their English writing, reading, and comprehension ability. It was not directly used in any analyses, as it was just a marker of general language competence.

Results

In general, there were only weak associations between acculturation profiles and self-construals, and these associations did not reach statistical significance (see Table 1). Three acculturation profiles were positively associated with each other: assimilation, separation, and

integration. That is, individuals who used one of these strategies tended to use at least one of the other two strategies as well. Marginalization, on the other hand, was found to not be associated with the first three strategies, meaning individuals who avoided both the home and host culture tended to not adopt other strategies during their stay. In addition, time in the US was not associated with students' use of acculturation strategies.

Results for the second hypotheses show that there were no correlations between acculturation strategies and achievement goals. That is, students who used a particular acculturation strategy, or set of strategies, did not tend towards adopting any particular achievement goals. Mastery-avoidance goals were related to student GPA, such that students with a stronger tendency to avoid poor performance had better GPAs. In addition, there was a positive correlation between independent SC and approach goals, and interdependent SC and all goals except mastery avoidance goals.

The separation strategy was negatively associated whereas marginalization strategies were positively associated with negative affect. Perhaps surprisingly, separation was associated with heightened life satisfaction, whereas marginalization was negatively associated with life satisfaction. Independent SC was positively correlated with positive affect and life satisfaction, whereas interdependent SC was positively correlated with only satisfaction with life. Interestingly, positive affect was associated with negative affect, meaning those who experienced generally positive emotions also experienced generally negative emotions.

Discussion

Findings show that acculturation strategies and self-construal patterns, though sharing similar conceptualizations, are not directly related to each other. To reiterate, the type of acculturation strategy utilized is contingent on the preference to maintain one's culture and the

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preference to adopt the culture of the host society. Yamada and Singelis (1994) have proposed that because different individuals vary in their acculturation experience, they might portray distinct self-construal patterns. The bicultural self-construal pattern, for instance, exhibits a high interdependent and independent score, which parallels the integration acculturation strategy. However, the present study found that each acculturation strategy was not correlated with either the independent or interdependent self-construals. As the adopted self-construal pattern has been found to correlate with the acculturation strategy utilized (Shim et al., 2013), it is likely that the sample size in the present study was not large enough to indicate similar results. Given that there were no general trends towards significance, a substantial increase in the sample size may be necessary to begin seeing correlations. It may also be the case that moderating factors unaccounted for could have further limited the development of significant associations. If that is the case, significance may not be reached even with a larger sample size, and a different set of measures may need to be used to see results that align with past research. Furthermore, the acculturation strategies adopted were not influenced by length of stay in America. This contrasts with Barry's (2001) finding that individuals who stay longer in America tend to utilize the integration strategy. It may be the case that the self-construal type and acculturation strategies espoused when an international student first arrives in America remain relatively constant throughout the duration of their sojourn.

The hypotheses regarding the associations between acculturation strategies, achievement goals, and academic achievement received limited support as well. All four acculturation strategies were not correlated with either approach or avoidance goals. Given that the 2 x 2 achievement goal theory emphasizes competence along two dimensions, it may be the case that one's cultural preference does not directly influence how competent an individual is in adhering

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to such preferences. It is also possible that the attitudes and behaviors that derive acculturative strategies are more so utilized in intercultural encounters rather than in goal-setting behavior. Thus, the acculturation strategy may have a greater influence on whether individuals set goals at all, as opposed to their mastery/performance or approach/avoidance tendencies in goal pursuit.

The finding that mastery-avoidance goals correlated with student GPA was particularly interesting, as mastery-avoidance goals were the only type of goal to not have a correlation with interdependent SC—of which is the dominant SC for East Asian culture. Juxtaposing this finding with the pattern that other achievement goals did not correlate with GPA, it is possible that student GPA may be more an indicator of the effort put towards a goal rather than the type of goal maintained. For instance, if a student who primarily maintained performance-avoidance goals invested more effort into reaching such goals, he or she may academically succeed more than an individual putting less effort in fulfilling performance-approach goals, and vice versa.

The last set of hypotheses regarding acculturation and well-being were somewhat supported. Separation was correlated with dampened negative affect and heightened life satisfaction. This suggests that individuals who utilize the separation strategy are still able to pull resources from one culture in order to cope with demands from the new environment. Because of international students' sojourner status, they may feel that using resources from their home culture is the most comforting or convenient when experiencing a new culture. Contrastingly, marginalization was associated with higher self-reported negative affect and lower life satisfaction. Consistent with prior research, individuals who use the marginalization strategy may have the least access to resources, most acculturative stress, and worse psychological and sociocultural adaptation outcomes (Berry, 2005; Berry et al., 2006). Interestingly enough, the integration strategy did not have a relationship with positive affect at all. This contrasts with

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Zhang, Sang, and Wang's (2004) finding that the integration strategy was associated with the highest subjective well-being versus the other acculturation strategies. Lastly, the finding that positive affect is correlated with negative affect is consistent with past literature that shows that individuals who predominantly exhibit an interdependent SC are likely to view both positive and negative emotions as integral to an overall positive experience, as long as the emotions shown are socially engaging (Kitayama, Markus, & Kurokawa, 2010). Though the sample in the present study, on average, exhibited elevated independent SC, the sample also maintained a rather high interdependent SC; thus, the study's sample aligns with this finding.

Limitations and Future Directions

There were several limitations to the study that may have impeded a more comprehensive analysis. Regarding methodological limitations, there was a relatively small sample of East Asian international students assessed. This could reduce the statistical power for detecting meaningful associations among the variables. In addition, the relatively small sample may not be representative of the general East Asian student population in Southern California. The study was also self-report, which means that social desirability could have played a role in the responses inputted. Additionally, recruitment did not include random sampling; instead, interested students who may share similar qualities (such as proactiveness and competency) may have influenced the results. Thus, the sample may have not been fully representative of the East Asian international student body.

Albeit providing weak support to the study hypotheses, the current endeavor represented an important first step into understanding the interplay between acculturation, self-construal, academic achievement, and well-being. Future research could employ a moderation approach to understand if the associations between acculturation and student academic and wellbeing

outcomes depended on their achievement goals. One could also dive a little deeper and examine if there are any mediators of acculturation and achievement goals, or they can attain a more macro-perspective and investigate other connections between acculturation and academic achievement. Moreover, a longitudinal design could be applied to the constructs presented in the study in order to determine if the relationship between particular variables such as achievement goals with acculturation strategy can change over time.

Conclusion and Implications

Though findings from the present study were limited, evidence was found of relationships between achievement goals and academic achievement, and acculturation strategy and well-being. The influence of acculturation on achievement goals is a unique aspect that warrants further attention, as the type of acculturation strategy utilized could potentially have profound effects—both positive and negative—on the academic achievement of international students. Increased understanding of goal achievement and well-being in school counseling, administration, and public policy could help orient students towards the optimal acculturation strategies and self-construal patterns. Students could then develop adaptation behaviors that reinforce the adoption of achievement goals that increase academic success and lessen problems in a collegiate environment. Adjusting to support East Asian international students and their unique set of difficulties, whether they be through their perceived construals or not, can result in a meaningful impact on students from collectivist societies in general.

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Table 1

Correlations for Acculturation Strategies, Self-Construal, Achievement Goals, Subjective Well-Being, and Time in the U.S.

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1	TIME IN THE US	-																
2	INDEPENDENT SC	-.24	-															
3	INTERDEPENDENT SC	-.05	.08	-														
4	ASSIMILATION	-.02	.02	.23	-													
5	SEPARATION	-.03	.19	.08	-.61**	-												
6	INTEGRATION	.07	.05	.08	.43**	-.51**	-											
7	MARGINALIZATION	.19	-.25	-.25	.28	-.22	-.26	-										
8	MASTERY APPROACH	-.28	.27	.38**	.14	-.09	-.12	-.06	-									
9	MASTERY AVOIDANCE	-.03	.13	.14	.12	-.12	.14	.12	.40**	-								
10	PERFORMANCE APPROACH	-.10	.22	.53**	.05	.19	-.02	-.27	.33*	.13	-							
11	PERFORMANCE AVOIDANCE	.01	-.10	.43**	.05	.08	-.09	-.09	.35*	.35*	.72**	-						
12	APPROACH	-.22	.29*	.57**	.11	.09	-.07	-.22	.75**	.30*	.87**	.68**	-					
13	AVOIDANCE	-.04	.05	.40**	.08	.04	.02	-.06	.50**	.69**	.63**	.90**	.70**	-				
14	GPA	-.18	.11	.10	.11	-.13	.21	-.19	.14	.30*	.12	.16	.16	.26	-			
15	POSITIVE AFFECT	-.42**	.39**	.10	.08	-.16	.15	-.18	.40**	.30*	.17	.02	.33*	.18	.45**	-		
16	NEGATIVE AFFECT	.08	-.09	-.14	.00	-.34*	.03	.44**	.11	.30*	-.22	-.06	-.10	.07	.14	.30*	-	
17	SATISFACTION WITH LIFE	-.18	.31*	.30*	.01	.31*	-.13	-.33*	.12	.15	.17	.05	.18	.12	.13	.20	-.41**	-

Note. *p < .05. **p < .01, two-tailed.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Acculturation Strategies, Self-Construal, Achievement Goals, Subjective Well-Being, and Time in the U.S.

	Mean	Std. Deviation
TIME IN THE US	4.19	2.39
INDEPENDENT SC	3.51	0.50
INTERDEPENDENT SC	3.57	0.47
ASSIMILATION	2.15	0.79
SEPARATION	3.56	0.63
INTEGRATION	3.65	0.89
MARGINALIZATION	2.48	0.99
MASTERY APPROACH	3.61	0.60
MASTERY AVOIDANCE	3.47	0.75
PERFORMANCE APPROACH	3.42	0.82
PERFORMANCE AVOIDANCE	3.56	0.77
APPROACH	3.52	0.58
AVOIDANCE	3.56	0.61
GPA	3.36	0.41
POSITIVE AFFECT	3.11	0.60
NEGATIVE AFFECT	2.65	0.73
SATISACTION WITH LIFE	3.10	0.86