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Perfectionism, Stress & Social Support Amongst International Students

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**Introduction**

Acculturate stress is a unique set of cultural and social stressors associated with a transition or adjustment to a new culture (Berry, 2006). This period of identity formation where an individual seeks to gain understanding and knowledge of the host culture can be marked with difficulties; language competency may prevent understanding, there may be less social support due to the individual moving away from their family and friends, a lack of information on how to navigate in a new country may prevent assimilation, and perceived discrimination due to stereotypes all may contribute to stress in immigrants. International students may be especially at risk for stress as psychological, behavioral and emotional problems are common amongst international students (Yu, Chen & Li, 2013). Additionally, having to quickly 'pick up' the language, culture and societal norms to academically succeed may exacerbate stress in international students. The United States having the largest body of international students, indicates a need to better understand this population and how individuals from different cultures may react to acculturative stress. Maladaptive perfectionism may act as a salient factor in maintaining stress amongst international students; as a high likelihood to achieve is commonly associated with psychological problems (Rice, Leever, Christopher, & Porter, 2006). This study aims to address acculturative stress amongst diverse international students at University of Houston, and whether maladaptive perfectionism acts as a facilitator for stress amongst students. Additionally, Houston being one of the most diverse cities in America may moderate stress amongst students by presenting a strong social support network to individuals. For example, an international student from Vietnam may not feel entirely 'out of place' due to the strong presence of Vietnamese language, food and culture in Houston, as well as other international Vietnamese students at UH. Perceived social support has been known to buffer the effects of stress and depression, as well as to promote well-being and health (Steese, et al., 2006).

## Literature Review

The United States is growing diverse culturally, linguistically and racially in an ever increasing pace with about 39.9 million immigrants as of 2014 (Migration Policy Institute 2014). Although most immigrants move to the United States with the dream of success and hope; the period of transition to a new culture can be marked with unique stressors (Berry, 2006). This *acculturative stress* which may accrue can be due to language competency, less social support, unfamiliarity and lack of information about the host culture and perceived discrimination. Both acute and chronic stressors have been associated with a number of negative health consequences, including heart disease, hypertension, cancer, diabetes, neurodegenerative diseases, depression, substance use, eating disorders, suicide, and other health problems (Arnetz & Eckman, 2006). Berry (2002) makes the point that transition to a new culture as being a complex array of identity formation in which family, community, language, cultural, and individual factors all intertwine. Rather than a unilateral assimilation model, why this period of adjustment may be marked with stress is the various sociocultural factors which impact the individual. Thus, to better understand mental health amongst immigrants, it is vital to understand the salient stressors they are faced with through this period of adjustment and identity forming. An example may be expectations on living in the U.S. and the reality of doing so; many immigrants end up living in poverty struggling with the transition of adopting to a new culture, and financial burden or economic stress (Organista, 2007). Although some immigrant families transition well into the United States, acculturative stress is a commonly researched phenomenon amongst individuals who move across borders.

International students, who are studying abroad provide a unique look into the nuance of acculturative stress. Research indicates that due to difficulties in adapting to a new social and

cultural environment (i.e., acculturative stress), psychological, behavioral, emotional and other problems are common amongst international students (Yu, Chen & Li, 2013). The United States, has the largest body of international students in the world (Institute of International Education [IIE] Network, 2011), although many of these students are excited and hopeful on fulfilling their individual career goals, the period of adjustment to a different society can be marked with stress. Leaving behind family, friends and their home can lead to depression, anxiety or general unhappiness. Also, a period of significant demand may be put on international students by their faculty and programs to succeed which may exacerbate stress. International students may feel the need to assimilate and learn the language and culture of the United States quicker as it is fundamental to their success in the context of their education. All of this can adversely impact one's psychological well-being (Lin & Yi, 1997). International students are also generally younger, come on their own without a network of family, are more inclined to be interested in U.S. culture, and generally have greater access to U.S. nationals by virtue of being on a university campus (Johnson & Sandhu, 2007). Ethnicity may also moderate or mitigate acculturative stress as according to Lin (1998), international students who come from non-European backgrounds, and Eastern countries with different social and political ideology tend to suffer more stress in adjusting to American campus life. Although a study has never been conducted which looked at the interplay of differing ethnicities and the impact of acculturative stress, it can be surmised that European countries are more similar in value and culture to the United States than 'Eastern' countries, hence making the transition relatively easier for Europeans as compared to non-Europeans.

It can also be surmised that international students wanting to achieve at a high level, but failing to do so may exacerbate stress. Previous research primarily on White U.S. college

students found that maladaptive perfectionism has been consistently associated with stress and depression (Rice, Leever, Christopher, & Porter, 2006), indicating the saliency of perfectionism on a university population. Because those with maladaptive perfectionism tend to equate perfect performance with self-worth, and view imperfect performance as a personal failure, and focus on the negative aspects of their performance (Hewitt, Flett, & Ediger, 1996), they are likely to increase their vulnerability to stress and depression. The bulk of this research has focused on the Asian international student population, as perfectionism tends to be a concept that is venerated in Eastern cultures. Being a graduate student in of itself may require perfect academic achievement, which may prove to be an impossible task, leading to stress. In the paradigm of international students; perfectionism on achieving well may exacerbate acculturative stress as students may be depressed or anxious due to the transition between new cultures, which may affect their academic goals.

Social support may control for stress amongst academically involved international students. Social support refers to the experience of being valued, respected, cared about, and loved by others who are present in one's life; it can come from family, friends, teachers, community or any other social groups with which one feels familiarity and kinship with (Gurung, Belmont & Thomas-Wadsworth, 2006). Previous research shows that low social support is one of the predictors of psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, attention problems, social problems, and low self-esteem (Teoh & Rose, 2001). Conversely, a person who has social support may be less vulnerable against life stressors, as research implicates social support in promoting health and wellness (Steese, et al., 2006). Few studies have linked the association between perceived social support and stress amongst ethnic populations, let alone international students who may be especially vulnerable to stress.

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