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## *Article 7*

# **Homesickness in International College Students**

Paper based on a program presented at the 2009 American Counseling Association Annual Conference and Exposition, March 19-23, Charlotte, North Carolina.

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## **Overview**

Homesickness is among the most frequently reported concerns of international college students in the United States (Yi, Giseala Lin, & Kishimoto, 2003). Leaving family, friends, and a home culture in pursuit of an academic opportunity abroad, international students frequently find themselves simultaneously grieving for missed persons and places, building new social networks, and adjusting to new cultural and environmental demands (Chen, 1999; Mori, 2000; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994). It is therefore not surprising that upwards of 30% of international college students report frequent feelings of homesickness (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002/2003).

Yet the nature of homesickness remains elusive. The research community still has not reached consensus on an exact definition (Stroebe, van Vliet, Hewstone, & Willis, 2002; Nijhof & Engels, 2007). Many conceptualizations include a missed home environment in addition to missed significant persons (Willis, Stroebe, & Hewstone, 2003). Problems assimilating new experiences and maladaptation to a new environment also feed homesickness (Bell

& Bromnick, 1998; Willis et al., 2003). Some researchers have encapsulated homesickness in five factors: missing family, missing friends, feeling lonely, adjustment problems, and home ruminations (Willis et al., 2003). Homesickness can also be considered a “mini-grief” whereby relocation and adjustment to college life may turn into significant stressors when resources and coping strategies are lacking (Stroebe et al., 2002).

Recently, homesickness has begun to be studied as one of several acculturative stressors impacting individuals who experience cross-cultural transitions (Wei et al., 2007). According to Duru and Poyrazli (2007), acculturative stress consists of mental and physical discomfort that ensues from experiencing a new culture. As with homesickness, loss of social support and important persons is regarded as integral to the experience of acculturative stress (Yeh & Inose, 2003). As a contributing factor, homesickness has been woven into scales developed to measure acculturative stress, such as the Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (ASSIS; Yeh & Inose, 2003).

### **Intrapersonal Factors**

That age and gender affect homesickness in international students has been inconsistently supported (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Ye, 2005; Yeh & Inose, 2003). However, English fluency appears to be a critical factor. Self-reported English fluency was negatively related to acculturative stress in a diverse sample of international students in the United States (Yeh & Inose, 2003). English proficiency also significantly predicts international student homesickness (Duru & Poyrazli, 2007; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Greenland and Brown (2005) suggest students’ expectations of their language abilities may contribute to experienced acculturative stress. Furthermore, English skills were not a mediator between social support and acculturative stress in a study by Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, and Al-Timimi (2004), indicating its effect is independent and direct.

Few studies have examined how personality variables

influence homesickness in international students. In one study, higher neuroticism and higher openness to experience were related to significantly greater acculturative stress among Turkish students in the United States (Duru & Poyrazli, 2007). Maladaptive perfectionism also positively correlated with acculturative stress in a study of Chinese international students (Wei et al., 2007). Finally, Ward and Kennedy (1993) demonstrated an external locus of control was positively related to homesickness among New Zealander students studying abroad in 23 different countries.

There is evidence that emotional intelligence may play into the experience of homesickness. Yoo, Matsumoto, and LeRoux (2006) found that recognition of contempt in a laboratory exercise predicted increased homesickness—and that international students' emotion regulation abilities predicted homesickness after approximately 1.5 academic years. Using emotion regulation to control negative emotions from acculturative stress could help students better maintain cognitive skills needed in the new environment (Yoo et al., 2006).

### **Interpersonal Factors**

Quality of interpersonal connections appears to matter more than quantity when it comes to international student homesickness. In contrast to previous research cited by Chen (1999), Rajapaksa and Dundes (2002/2003) discovered that aside from international students who reported having zero close friends, total number of friends does correlate with adjustment. Furthermore, number of total close friends was a poor predictor of international students' satisfaction with their social networks (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002/2003). On the other hand, social connectedness negatively correlates with both acculturative stress and homesickness among international students (Yeh & Inose, 2003; Duru & Poyrazli, 2007). Additionally, a moderate negative correlation has been established between acculturative stress and social support (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Mori (2000) avers that creating a support system of co-nationals is

crucial for international students' well-being, but that often low numbers of home country students limits interaction.

Other evidence suggests it is interactions with host country nationals that truly make the difference in international students' experiences. In a study of New Zealander international students, a greater amount of host national interaction was associated with significantly less homesickness (Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Moreover, greater co-national interaction translated to significantly more experiences of homesickness (Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Along those lines, Poyrazli et al. (2004) found that international students in the United States who principally socialized with other international students had greater acculturative stress. Such students reported less social support overall as well as higher acculturative stress than students who interacted with Americans and non-Americans in a more balanced fashion (Poyrazli et al., 2004).

Though objective social circumstances have some predictive power for homesickness, expectations and interpretations of these circumstances may be more directly tied to homesickness. Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, and Utsey (2005) reported greater perceived social acceptance is associated with lower adjustment problems among international students. Another study revealed international students who were not satisfied with their social network were more likely to report feelings of homesickness (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002/2003). Furthermore, international students whose actual lived experiences measure short of their expectations report significantly more homesickness (McKinlay, Pattison, & Gross, 1996).

### **Environmental Effects**

Successful or unsuccessful adjustment to a new university environment can help or hinder coping with homesickness (Willis et al., 2003). Lu (1990) contended that academic demands can endanger international students' resources, increasing vulnerability to stress. The hypothesis was supported by a study of Chinese international

students in Britain, as perceived academic demands were associated with increased homesickness 2 months into their stay (Lu, 1990).

Studies have been split on how increased time in the United States affects acculturative stress in international students (Wilton & Constantine, 2003; Ying, 2005; Greenland & Brown, 2005; Ye, 2005; Wei et al., 2007). Longer residence was associated with significantly decreased levels of acculturative distress in two studies (Wilton & Constantine, 2003; Ying, 2005). However, a longitudinal study of Japanese international students at British universities showed acculturative stress increased significantly between 2 weeks and 8 months and plateaued thereafter (Greenland & Brown, 2005). Two other studies showed no correlation between length of United States residence and homesickness or acculturative stress (Ye, 2005; Wei et al., 2007). It thus appears that simple exposure to a host environment does not lessen the experience of homesickness.

### **Cultural Differences**

In one study, region of home country accounted for 11.4% of the variance in acculturative stress scores of students from Asia, Central and Latin America, Africa, and Europe (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Data suggest too that the more differences between international students' home and host cultures, the more homesickness and acculturative stress experienced (Ye, 2005). Accordingly, Asian international students consistently report greater acculturative stress than European international students in the United States (Yeh & Inose, 2003; Poyrazli et al., 2004; Wei et al., 2007). One study of Chinese international students in Britain revealed a 94.9% rate of homesickness (Lu, 1990). The researcher maintains that stronger family connections in the Chinese culture may have contributed to this widespread homesickness (1990). Meanwhile, Ying (2005) found that of the factors impacting acculturative stress among Taiwanese students in America, homesickness accounted for most of the variance.

Despite those statistics, Asian international students may not be the regional group most at risk for homesickness. In a study of



more than 320 international students at American universities, African students reported significantly more acculturative stress than either Asian or Latin American students (Constantine, Okazaki, & Utsey, 2004). African students also reported more depression and more self-concealment behaviors than the other groups (Constantine et al., 2004). Based on a qualitative study, Constantine et al. (2005) concluded that African international students' cultural backgrounds may place more value and emphasis on close interpersonal relationships than does American culture—and that possession of communal and interdependent self-concepts may engender homesickness.

Although Latin American international students reported less acculturative stress than their African peers in the study by Constantine et al. (2004), this group still reported significantly more acculturative stress than Asian international students. Latin American students also demonstrated higher levels of psychological distress compared with Asian students in a separate study (Wilton & Constantine, 2003). Yet Latin American international students have reported greater social self-efficacy than either their African or Asian international peers (Constantine et al., 2004). Underrepresentation on campus may help explain the relatively high rates of homesickness among African international students and the disparity between homesickness and social self-efficacy in Latin American international students (Constantine et al., 2004; Wilton & Constantine, 2003).

### **Homesickness and Distress**

The negative effects of homesickness on psychological well-being have been well documented. Homesickness negatively impacts the academic performance of college students (Willis et al., 2003; Stroebe et al., 2002), and excessive acculturative stress can contribute to eating and sleeping problems, low energy, and headaches (Ye, 2005). Moreover, numerous studies have demonstrated a link between homesickness or acculturative stress and depression. Ying (2005), Constantine et al. (2004), and Wei et al. (2007) cite moderate

to strong positive correlations between homesickness or acculturative stress and depression among Asian, African, and Latin American international students in the United States. In one study, acculturative stress was significantly related to depression scores even after accounting for English fluency, sex, and home region (Constantine et al., 2004). Alarming, extreme consequences of homesickness-fueled depression in college students have been documented, including suicide (Willis et al., 2003).

### **Interventions and Future Directions**

Helping international students establish friendships in their host country has been a mainstay of acculturation interventions on college campuses (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002/2003). Rajapaksa and Dundes (2002/2003) advocate initiatives to improve the quality of social networks rather than boost the number of close friends. In so doing, counselors should assess the level of social support students have—and whether support is limited due to personal characteristics (e.g., shyness or language barriers) or environmental constraints (e.g., prejudice; Carr, Koyama, & Thiagarajan, 2003).

Many international students remain in groups of fellow nationals even though greater interaction with host country students is predictive of better cultural adjustment (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Therefore, peer programs connecting international students with host nation peers could be an effective strategy for countering homesickness (Yeh & Inose, 2003). In fact, informal peer-pairing programs that connect international students with host country students may be more productive than formal counseling interventions (Chen, 1999).

Tailoring acculturative interventions for different subgroups of international students may be of substantial benefit. For instance, because African international students use forbearance as a coping strategy, it is wise to offer informal outreach workshops providing education on the importance of seeking professional help when acculturative stress runs high (Constantine et al., 2005). In light of



cultural collectivist traditions, counseling staff should tap the existing social supports of Asian and Latin American international students through peer counseling programs (Wilton & Constantine, 2003).

Given the prevalence of homesickness among international students and its demonstrated relationship with depression, it is essential that university counseling centers initiate alternative, culturally sensitive services for this population. Perhaps the biggest lead for researchers and counselors alike is the critical gap between students' interpersonal expectations for studying abroad and actual experiences. Establishing the precise influence of social expectations versus social reality might bring much-needed clarity to the true nature of homesickness among international students.

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