

# The Reasons That Lead International Students in American Universities to Facing Mental Health Problems

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## Abstract

A great amount of students with outstanding academic achievement and strong personal capacity would choose to further their study in a foreign country to polish their own profile. As a strong power with high-level technique and institutions of higher education, America is seen as the dream country by large amount of international students. The input of foreign students could bring frequent exchanges among countries in many aspects, while the personal condition of those international students attract less attention. Part of the international students are living with heavy pressure. In this paper, several important concepts related to this area is explained. Background information and the main explored issue is demonstrated. Findings of this paper are presented by four sub-points proved by numbers of general literature which focus on research of international students' living and studying condition in America. Critical analysis is also discussed. Conclusion of this paper is given on reasons that lead to international students in American universities facing to heavy psychological pressure. Implications are provided for policy, research and practice.

## Keywords

International students; Foreign students; Mental health; America.

## 1. Introduction

With the dream of acquiring higher level education, feeling different educational pattern and reaching outstanding achievement in the major field, students who finish their periodical study would choose to further their study as international students in foreign countries. Internationals students is a group of students who leave their home countries to chase for chances and opportunities to acquire education and degree in a totally different country (Jung et al., 2007). While, although is closer to achieve their targets, a great amount of international students would struggle with acculturation when they try to acclimatize themselves to a new cultural environment. Acculturation could be defined as behavioral and psychological changes of individuals when they begin to accept new cultures and have connection with people from various cultural groups (Arti et al., 2007). During the struggling process, students would feel with various challenges during the overseas journey, which affect their mental health condition and wellbeing. Unstable mental condition is the signal of mental health problems. Mental health problems are widely defined, which include stress and emotional problems and severe psychiatric conditions (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016).

With great numbers of famous institutes and universities, America is considered as one of the mainstream countries for international students to choose to study in. It is well known that America holds great number of international students. Although international students bring positive effect to American educational system and society, they have received less care and attention on mental health condition (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Additionally, 130 Chinese international students who study in Yale University complete a survey online, forty-five percent

of them have the symptoms of depression, twenty-nine percent of them have the symptoms of anxiety (Han, Han, Luo, Jacobs, & Jean-Baptiste, 2013). Moreover, a survey is conducted online for exploring international graduate students' mental health needs in America. According to the collected data, forty-four percent of the 551 graduate students who complete the investigation response that they have emotional and stressful problems that have effect on their psychological condition, wellbeing and academic achievement (Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2007). Meanwhile, according to a national study from America, ninety-five percent of manager of college counselling services express that there is a obvious increase in serious mental health problem in their students (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). Therefore, this study would focus on the international students' mental health problem who study in America. In this context, much studies demonstrate that international students are at great risk for mental health problems (Andrade, 2006; Mori, 2000). Unhealthy psychological condition of international students would have great effect on their fitness, learning experience and academic achievement (Jung et al., 2007). In order to figure out the root of stresses and better understand international students' inner state who further study in America, it's necessary to explore the question: What are the factors that cause international students in American universities facing to mental health problem? In this essay, I will argue that general living adjustment, academic pressure, feelings of isolation, loneliness and homesickness and the influence of discrimination lead international students in American universities to face mental health problem. The outcome of this study would facilitate international students' self adjusting. Also, the knowledge and resources of this study are available for parents, teachers and counselling services in universities to better understand the difficulties faced by students who study abroad. Moreover, the outcomes of this study would make government leaders and educators pay more attention on international students' performance and condition. Meanwhile, this study might provide a possible direction of international students' psychological treatment.

This article is consist of four main parts. Firstly, the instruction to demonstrate overall information of important concept, background information, problem statement, investigation question, thesis statement and significance of this research. Then, the main body which is also the necessary part of this essay provides with the major arguments and deep level discussion. Furthermore, this essay would conclude the factors that cause international students in American universities facing to mental health problem. Eventually, the implications providing for policy, research and practice.

## 2. General Living Adjustment

General living adjustment causes international students in American universities facing to mental health problem. International students indicate that transition always encountered by stresses and adjustments (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016). Mental health problems are always aggravated by the pressure connected with living far away from home countries in a totally different overseas environment (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016). International students need to adapt to the basic life in the extremely new foreign environment for period of struggling time (Tesng and Newton, 2002). Here are the instances to illustrate the above. Forbes-Mewett and Sawyer (2016) indicate that for the basic life, some of the international students never cook for themselves before. In such cases, it is the first time for them to be in charge of their own budget, seek for food, cook meals and finish the cleaning, as well as organizing accommodation and transportation (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016). Tseng and Newton (2002) also holds the same position that international students would adapt to the life in America, and its housing, transportation, environment and American style food. At the same time, cooking by students themselves could not be avoided. Additionally, giving up the stereotype of wealthy international students, Forbes-Mewett and Sawyer (2016) figure out that overseas students

have pressures on finance. For some examples their parents have to borrow money for supporting students' study (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016). In such cases, students would be employed for earning living expenses, which lead to less sleeping hours and unhealthy physical and mental condition. Meanwhile, Bradley (2000) underpin that finance are possible to lead to difficulties. For example, some international students from South East Asia are told by their government that they need to go home if exchange rate get to a specific level (Bradley, 2000). Thus, it can be seen that several aspects of general living which include basic life and finance concern would cause international students facing to mental health problems.

Nevertheless, as discussed above, whether international students' would face to mental health problems caused by adjusting new living environment should be critically considered (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016). People's personal characteristics have effect on how people feel and deal with unfamiliar condition (Alharbi & Smith, 2018). Every single individual comes with different characteristics, influenced by living experience and shaped by family background. For those students who have outgoing and optimistic characteristics, they would feel easier for themselves to integrate and fell less fear with a new start (Alharbi & Smith, 2018). Additionally, students with better skills for everyday living could manage their time rationally and complete basic cooking, cleaning, housing and transportation successfully. Furthermore, international students who are provided with sufficient money by their family would have less concern on finance.

While, research studies illustrate that part of international students do challenged by mental health problems caused by general living adjustment. Tseng and Newton (2002) indicate that the basic but also important question faced by international students is the general living adjustment, which include adapt to housing, transportation, American food, climate and financial problems. Also, Alharbi and Smith (2018) support that international students would encounter various problems, for example, financial concerns, keeping balance between work, study and common life. There are many stages in the process of studying aboard. The start part of preparing for adjusting transition life in foreign environment lay the foundation of students' further study life. Psychological problem would happen if things go wrong in this stage (Alhargi & Smith, 2018). Therefore, except for those small parts students with positive nature and better financial support, it could be concluded that mental health problems would be caused by the necessary adjustment on general living.

### 3. Academic Pressure

Secondly, I would like to argue that academic pressure causes international students in American universities facing to mental health problem. Most of the students have the target and dream to achieve higher achievement so they decide to further their study aboard. While, academic stresses always come to the first mention when talking about factors that leading to psychological problems (Han et al., 2012). Following are the instances to illustrate the above. International students those who feel that their academic tasks are lower than they expected are highly possible to have score on anxiety and depression (Rosenthal, Russell & Thomson, 2008). Additionally, Tseng and Newton (2002) support that academic achievement and adjustment are the mainly serious concern of international students. For example, students who have less proficiency and fluency on language would feel struggling during learning process (Han et al., 2012). Students who are unfamiliar with American educational systems or teaching mode would feel hard to integrate into classes (Han et al., 2012). In such cases, lower engagement in class would lead to students lower academic score and useless learning experiences. Lack of effective learning skills would have less chances to reach high scores (Han et al., 2012). What's more, parents and family always place great expectations on their child (Han et al., 2012). Students would feel upset and anxious if they do not perform well on

academy. For example, because of the severe family planning policy in late 1970s in China, most of the students are the only one in their family (Han et al., 2012). This would cause higher family expectation on students' academic achievement and success (Han et al., 2012). Meanwhile, Hamamura and Laird (2014) also underpin that students always feel the academic expectation comes from family and others. Thus, it is clearly discussed that academic pressure would cause international students facing with mental health problems.

Nevertheless, this argument should be considered critically. Part of international students would not regard academic pressure as a cause of mental health problem. It is well known that international students groups are consist of different countries people. Alharbi and Smith (2018) support that international students are a huge and diverse group, their views and feelings could be different. Han et al. (2012) indicate that compared with European overseas students, it is harder for Asian overseas students and especially Chinese students to engage actively and perform academically well in American universities. That is caused by the different cultures and educational system they have experienced in their home countries. While, According to Fritz, Chin and DeMarinis (2008), European students think that leaving away from their home and family is the most unbearable stressor. Also, study shows that overseas students from Africa have the highest levels of acculturative pressure (Poyrazli, Thukral, & Duru, 2010; as cited in Shadowen, 2019). From the findings of this two research studies, different areas share various cultures and care for different cautions. Similarly, it is reasonable for students who attach importance to academic achievement to feel upset and anxious when they have not done well in their learning process. Meanwhile, interesting findings in the study of Rice, Suh, Yang, Choe and Davis (2016) shows that there is no obvious differences of academic pressure felt by international students and host students in both Australia and America. Surprisingly, a research study conducted by Misra and Castillo (2004) indicates that compared with international students, host students in America express a higher level of academic pressure. While, the host students in this study express that they are more willing to feel academic stress than Asian international students, which pushes them make great progress. To sum up, there are European groups of students who do not regard academy as pressure. There also host groups of students who prefer to accept stress on academy and deal with it normally. While, it is undeniable that there do exist international students who see academic achievement as heavy stress which cause mental health problems.

#### **4. Inadequate Social Support**

Inadequate social support would cause international students facing to psychological problems. Social support plays a significant role in keeping students away from the isolated feeling and psychological stress of integrating into new culture and foreign environment (Shadowen, Williamson, Guerra, Ammigan, & Drexler, 2019). Less social support would cause the gathering feelings of isolation, loneliness and homesickness. Following are instances to illustrate above. Lack of social support from friendships and relationships could have a bad effect on students' mental wellbeing (Bhochhibhoya, Dong, & Branscum, 2017). Also, Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker and Al-Timimi (2004) support that international students who hold poor and less social support would be more sensitive to pressure and experience greater levels depression. Furthermore, better quality of social support would directly relieve the psychological stress of international students (Liu, 2009; as cited in Prieto-Welch, 2016). Furthermore, according to Zhang and Goodson (2010), international students who engage frequently with American host students and American culture would feel less sense of social isolation. Moreover, Mori (2000) indicate that because international students are far away from their parents, friends and acquaintances in home country, students would form essential but unfamiliar social support networks. This could lead to stages of homesickness, during which they would have feelings of

loneliness and isolation. Meanwhile, Iwamoto and Liu (2010) indicate that international students who have less social connect with students from one's home culture would also feel loneliness. To sum up, it is essential for students who study aboard to make social relationship with host foreign students or others international student. Or they would be attacked by feelings of loneliness, isolation and homesickness.

However, what has talked above should be considered critically. Another way of thinking about the point is that the gathering feelings of loneliness and isolation would be weakened during their learning journey (Alharbi & Smith, 2018). Firstly, for instances, many international students from China express that they would feel homesick and lonely when they start their first semester in the host country (Barron, Baum, & Conway, 2007). Additionally, in the research study of Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland and Ramia (2008), two hundred international students are interviewed and 130 of them express the strong isolation and loneliness during the following several months when they first arrive in the target country. Sense of isolation would be overcome after those struggling inner construct time. While, back to what discussed above. People are born with different characteristics and influenced by various experience. Supported by Alharbi and Smith (2018), if people who find themselves hard to make new relationship in home, it would be more difficult for them to get rid of loneliness when they live and learn aboard. Therefore, although feelings of loneliness caused by inadequate social support could be conquered, international students still possible to live with lasting isolation and loneliness.

## 5. The Influence of Perceived Discrimination

International students express that they could feel the sense of being discriminated. Sam (2001) indicates that the difference of culture and racism and the proficiency on language would make international students be the object of discrimination. Following are evidence to illustrate above. Forty-eight percent of 130 international students come from 33 countries say that they feel like being rejected and discriminated by people of the host country (Chavajay & Skowronek, 2008). The participants in their study metaphor that just like items are not allowed being sold in supermarkets (Chavajay & Skowronek, 2008). Besides, Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) illustrate that international students experience higher levels discrimination than the host, American students. Helplessly, students have the tendency to experiencing heavier discrimination and prejudice with longer time they spend in America (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Meanwhile, Asian students and African students encounter higher levels of discrimination than the European students because of the distinguishing appearance and culture (Yeh & Inose, 2003).

Seriously, as discussed above, the influence of perceived discrimination would cause international students in America facing to mental health problem. Excluded by the students and people in host country is regarded as a kind of psychological stress for international student (Alharbi & Smith, 2018). Also, the study of Nilsson, Butler, Shouse and Joshi (2008) aims to investigate how are international students think and feel about encountering discrimination in America. The findings of their research study show that stress and prejudice have a bad influence on mental condition and wellbeing, which lead to international students' learning journey more difficult (Nilsson et al., 2008). Moreover, Jasinskaha-Lahti, Liebkind, Jaakkola and Reuter (2006) indicate that perceived discrimination is considered as one of the main pressure connected with unwell mental health consequences and vulnerable psychological condition. What's more, the study of Wei, Ku, Russell, Mallinckrodt and Liao (2008) shows that the increase tendency of discrimination is connected tightly with high levels of depression among the group of Asian students. Except that, research studies illustrate that the feeling of being discriminated would make students less satisfies on learning in American universities

(Wadsworth, Hecht & Jung, 2008) and would lead to unwell learning journey (Karuppan & Barari, 2011).

While, study of Nilsson et al. (2008) shows that students learning in foreign country would prepare perfectly for diverse difficulties. Nevertheless, international students would have less possibility to perform bravely when facing with discrimination and prejudice and might discover they are not prepare sufficiently to deal with this condition with mental preparation (Alharbi & Smith, 2018). Naturally, Chen (1999) indicate it is important for international students to learn and use the ways to deal with discrimination and prejudice in a host country and culture. Therefore, although international students expect to meet challenges in host country, the difficulties of discrimination are still hard to avoid and mental health problems caused by discrimination need being handled severely.

## 6. Conclusion

Because of the high level technology and knowledge source holds by America, the American Universities has attracted a great amount of international students to further their study (Han et al., 2012). With the demand of adjusting cultural difference and dealing with diverse stresses, international students are facing with psychological problems seriously (Hyun et al., 2007). In such cases, this study focuses on the factors that cause international students in American universities facing to mental health problems. In this essay, I argue that the stresses from general living adjustment, academic pressure, feelings of isolation and the influence of discrimination lead international students in American universities to facing to mental health problem. Firstly, international students would be struggled with general living adjustment. Individuals who have never living by themselves would feel hard to deal with basic life, which include dealing with budget, seeking for food, cooking for meals, cleaning and transportation. While, people born with different traits and influenced by different living experience. Those who have personal living skills would not regard general living as a serious problem. Additionally, stress of academy always lead to heavy psychological problems when students study aboard. While, international students are consist of different countries of students, there do have students who do not think learning is tough. Another interesting finding is that American host students perceived higher pressure on academy than international students. However, host students consider academic stress as power to make progress. Although this should be critically analyzed, it could be concluded that international students who pay important attention on academy and learning with different language, such as Asian students, would feel severe mental health stresses. Furthermore, inadequate social support brings feelings of isolation and loneliness. While, studies figure out that the sense of loneliness would be weakened after international students make well connection with the host students. However, studies also show that students who are not good at setting up and maintaining social network in home country would also feel the same in foreign country. Lastly, discrimination is a severe factor that lead international students in America universities to facing with psychological health problems. Although international students would well prepared to deal with challenges they might meet, the mental harm of discrimination could not be avoided yet.

## 7. Implication

The implication for policymakers is that, firstly, policies which allow more opportunities and time be given to international students' parents and friends to come and stay in America for accompanying students would be established. Secondly, policies for covering part of international students' psychological treatment fee would be established to reduce additional budget. Thirdly, clear punishment policy would establish for punishing those people shows strongly discrimination actions to others.

The implication for researchers is that more research studies would be conducted on discovering the reasons of discrimination and the way of against discrimination.

The implication for counselling services is that, firstly, more interesting communicative activities would be provided for international students. Secondly, much more lectures would be held to help reduce psychological stress. Thirdly, one to one conversation would be held frequently which could warming international students who have mental health problems or heavy psychological stresses.

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