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**EXPLORING THE COMPONENTS OF ACCULTURATIVE
STRESS: A CASE STUDY OF IRANIAN STUDENTS
IN POLAND**

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A CASE STUDY OF IRANIAN STUDENTS IN POLAND

Keywords: acculturation stress, phenomenological analysis, culture, Iranian students, Poland.

This article presents a qualitative study aimed at identifying and describing the components of acculturation stress experienced by Iranian students

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studying in Poland. Educational mobility, one of the consequences of globalization processes, involves a variety of cross-cultural experiences. Today, many Iranian students are studying in other countries. Adapting to a new environment can be challenging for individuals, with acculturation stress posing a significant threat to their physical and mental health. Acculturation stress is a complex socio-psychological phenomenon that people experience when adjusting to a new culture and environment. The way of coping with this stress is one of the factors determining the quality of social interactions. The study presents the results of an interpretative phenomenological analysis of semi-structured in-depth interviews with 10 Iranian students who are studying in Poland. The findings reveal that the students have diverse experiences of acculturation stress, which is attributed to the differences between Polish and Iranian cultures, as well as the overall experience of studying abroad, learning challenges, and daily life problems. The study highlights the importance of understanding the experiences of international students, learning challenges and daily life problems.

BADANIE KOMPONENTÓW STRESU AKULTURACYJNEGO: KAZUS IRAŃSKICH STUDENTÓW W POLSCE

Słowa kluczowe: stres akulturacyjny, analiza fenomenologiczna, kultura, irańscy studenci, Polska.

W artykule przedstawiono badanie jakościowe, którego celem była identyfikacja i opis składników stresu akulturacyjnego doświadczanego przez irańskich studentów studiujących w Polsce. Mobilność edukacyjna, będąca jedną z konsekwencji procesów globalizacyjnych, wiąże się z różnorodnymi doświadczeniami międzykulturowymi. Obecnie wielu irańskich studentów studiuje w innych krajach niż ich ojczysty. Jedną z kluczowych przeszkód w adaptacji tych osób do nowego środowiska jest stres związany z akulturacją, który może zagrozić ich zdrowiu fizycznemu i psychicznemu. Stres akulturacyjny to złożone zjawisko społeczno-psychologiczne, którego doświadczają ludzie podczas adaptacji do nowej kultury i środowiska. Sposoby radzenia sobie z tym stresem są jednym z czynników determinujących jakość interakcji społecznych. Wyniki interpretacyjnej analizy fenomenologicznej, częściowo ustrukturyzowanych wywiadów pogłębionych z 10 irańskimi studentami studiującymi w Polsce, ujawniają różnorodne doświadczenia stresu akulturacyjnego – zarówno te wynikające z różnic między kulturą polską i irańską, ale także te, które związane są z ogólnym doświadczeniem stu-

diowania za granicą, wyzwaniami o charakterze edukacyjnym i problemami codzienności.

Introduction

People have traveled to ‘far off lands’, various nations, continents, and perhaps even planets, and they will continue to do so for a variety of reasons. They travel to convert, to dominate, to explore, to do business, to educate, to have fun, and to settle down. Human migrations around the world have increased dramatically over the past century thanks to the decreased cost and improved convenience of short- and long-distance travel. This suggests that culture shock is a reality for an increasing number of people, even if they do not expect it (Furnham 2019). Many immigrants or people who move from one place or one point to other places, near or far, sometimes face many problems, the most important of which are cultural differences and conflicts (Knipscheer, Kleber 2000).

The richness and diversity of cultures, ethnicities, and races in industrialized countries have been influenced by migration. The loss of social support networks, religious traditions, and cultural standards, as well as the transition to a new culture and changes in identity and self-concept, are among the many difficulties faced by migrants (Bhugra, Becker 2005).

Acculturation stress is the result of migrations or transfers. A person can move from one city to another, from one country to another, or even a student from one place of study to another and experience psychological stress disorder. This condition causes a situation in which a person experiences various stresses in order to adapt to the culture, the values of that society, place of study, country or people, which is called acculturation stress. This stress, which was first proposed by Dyal and Dyal (1981), is caused by cultural differences (both external and internal) between individuals, between different groups of society and even between different organizations from one point to another and can indicate the similarity of differences and sometimes perhaps unbalanced cultural values between two cultures.

According to existing studies, bicultural people experience major stressors such as discrimination, stereotyping, and juggling multiple identities at the same time, all of which can be detrimental to their mental health (Wu et al. 2023). Importantly, they examine acculturation strategies to predict possible stress and psychological distress caused by different types of transfer or migration, which gives rise to several approaches in the field of acculturation stress. In the functionalist approach, social needs are achieved within the framework of a social system, and since the actors are not

limited and are dynamic over time, they cause psychological disharmony in individuals or between groups that intend to move and migrate. This inconsistency increases the pressure and turns into stress caused by the difference in feeling cultural values (Gonzalez-Guarda et al. 2021). As students enter new academic and social situations, the college years are often characterized by a whirlwind of different experiences, numerous changes, and rapid growth (Castillo et al. 2020).

Students may experience difficulties due to their recent relocation and cultural differences between their home and host cultures, one of which is acculturative stress, or stress caused on by the process of acculturation (Schwartz, Zamboanga 2008).

Literature Review

Definition of acculturation stress

Acculturation stress is common among migrant groups. According to one definition, acculturation stress is the tension that results from conflicts when people have to adapt to a new culture in the host society (Ren, Jiang 2021).

Immigration is a process that affects all people who are forced to leave their homeland to live in a place where they are not sure they are going to be well-off. Doubt, anxieties, fear of rejection or adaptation difficulties make immigrants anxious about the success of their immigration project. People may feel that entering a new country or a new city or even a new region is a new opportunity, otherwise it is a great risk. This psychological phenomenon is called acculturation stress, i.e. a feeling that although it is a normal immigration experience at some point, but if prolonged, it can cause serious problems for their mental health (Park 2019).

Stress is defined as “a special relationship between a person and the environment that exceeds their resources and endangers their well-being” (Chun, Poole 2009). As stated in the fit theory, the relationship between the person and the environment can determine and influence the stress the person experiences in the new environment. This environment plays an important role in people’s stress, especially for those living abroad and immigrants who face a new set of stressors in a new environment. Among the many causes of stress are increased change, long-term pressure, frustration and conflict. Long-term stress can cause many mental and physical problems for different people in different ways (Hashim, Zhiliang 2003).

Components of Acculturative Stress

International students experiencing acculturative stress struggle with integration and, as a result, experience more distress (Liu et al. 2016). As the need to adapt to a new language, culture, and social norms increases

for international students, it can place a significant demand on people, increasing their anxiety or stress levels (Mustaffa, Illias 2013). Monetary challenges, psychosocial stressors caused by unfamiliarity with new cultural and social norms, changes in one's support network, and intrapersonal and interpersonal problems caused by the process of acculturation and adjustment are just some of the issues that are specific to or exacerbated in international students (Lin, Yi 1997; Lee et al. 2004). Acculturative stress is caused by a variety of complex situations, as acculturation is a very difficult process (Gebregergis 2018).

Research Methodology

Given that this research seeks to better understand the participants' experience of acculturation stress, it uses the phenomenological approach. According to its ontological principles, this approach focuses as much as possible on first-hand experience or lived experience and refrains from dealing with secondary experience, because it is not possible to enter the semantic layers of second-hand experience and, if used, it leads to distorted and biased knowledge production (Mohammadpour 2018). Obtaining lived experience is only possible through interviews with people who have had this experience themselves. Therefore, the statistical population studied in this research is Iranian students studying in Poland.

In order to collect information, in-depth and semi-structured interviews with an exploratory approach were used. The interviews were carried out until theoretical saturation was reached, and as a result 10 people and they were interviewed in depth.

Participants

Participants included ten Iranian international students including (male = 6) and (female = 4) who are studying in different parts of Poland. The age ranged were from 23 to 40 years old. All participants reported that they had been in Poland between 3 and 36 months prior to participating in the study (Table 1).

Table 1

Information table of interview participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Education	Fund situation	Time spent in Poland
Zahra	27	F	BA	Self-fund	3 months
Nasim	24	F	MA	Self-fund	9 months
Maryam	29	F	PhD	Uni-fund	11 months
Sara	31	F	PhD	Uni-fund	16 months
Ali	40	M	PhD	Uni-fund	2 years
Amir	23	M	MA	Self-fund	1 year
Kian	27	M	MA	Self-fund	18 monthhs
Pouya	31	M	PhD	Uni-fund	10 months
Reza	37	M	PhD	Uni-fund	3 years
Mehran	26	M	PhD	Uni-fund	1 year

Results and Analysis

The present study explored the lived experiences of Iranian students facing acculturative stress. Eight thematic concepts were identified, including: language, social isolation, perceived discrimination, academic pressure, attachment to family and homesickness, previous experience of being independent, feeling foreign, work stress and religious difference.

Language

In the case of migrants, these changes are often profound and result in a complete reconfiguration of their lives; in addition to learning a new language, adopting new traditions new social norms, migrants must also form new social relationships and create new identities (Sam, Berry 2010). In the reports, one of the participants (Sara) explained that:

“the issue of language is very important. Using English in the university environment requires sufficient mastery and is challenging, but not being familiar with the Polish language and not using the common English language outside the university brings more problems, because most of the conferences and administrative situations are in Polish and Polish people are not very willing to speak English, which causes many problems in the mentioned situation.”

For immigrants, the ability to communicate in their native language may enhance various facets of social identification. The mother tongue can act as a social glue, binding together members of immigrant or minority groups and fostering closer in-group ties. It can also have

a positive effect on minority identity and integrity, as cultural beliefs and practices are communicated through the language. Finally, speaking in one's native language increases the visibility and accessibility of one's ethnic identity. As a result, their immigrant identity may become more important. In the context of immigrant groups with individuals who have different levels of native language proficiency, the importance of language in identity formation and reducing acculturation stress can be explored (Bilewicz et al. 2021).

Social isolation

Cross-cultural living can be difficult for international students, as they experience stress due to constant changes and problems adapting in the host country (Pinamang et al. 2021). Due to difficulties in adapting to the host university, local community, and host country, international students, especially at the university level, often experience loneliness and social isolation (Girmay, Singh 2019).

To illustrate, this experience was an example of the feeling of social isolation experienced by one of the interviewees (Ali):

"It is challenging for many foreign students to be away from their family and to lose their circle of friends, while at the same time changing the country and entering a different culture with different social and communication behaviors. When I first arrived in Poland, I felt very lonely and distant from society for a while. I had a very limited circle of communication and I had to try again to find new friends, and according to the country and the type of culture, communication was different and experiencing different encounters from my own culture made it take longer to cope with this problem. This is because Iran has a relatively collectivist culture, whereas Poland has a more individualistic communication culture".

For the majority of students, however, studying abroad is more difficult. Not only do international students have to cope with academic work that is more difficult than in the previous stage of their education, but they also have to adapt to a new environment and even a new culture that is very different from their home country. It can be difficult to adapt to academic and social contexts if you have difficulty communicating in English, making friends, or if you don't know much about the culture of the country where you're studying (Johnson et al. 2007).

Perceived discrimination

International students often experience perceived discrimination, which may influence their opinion of studying in a particular place. The definition of perceived discrimination is "the result of the subjective perception that one experiences discrimination in daily life" (Schmitt et al. 2014).

When the Iranian foreign students' experiences of perceived discrimination were examined, most of them admitted that Poles treated them very well and that they did not feel discriminated against. However, in some specific cases they had experienced feelings such as the difference between foreign and Polish students and discriminatory behavior due to Islamic dress, and also in the smaller cities of Poland they had experienced the feeling of racism and being treated differently because of their skin color and face.

Because of racial or ethnic prejudice, students from other countries may feel like that they receive unfair advantages from the host country government, professors, or classmates (Gossett et al. 1998).

Academic pressure

The majority of anxieties experienced by international students studying in a different educational environment are related to the different types of pressures that international students experience when studying abroad. In addition, they encounter the unfamiliar demands of the school system (Cadieux, Wehrly 1986).

Studying in a new country brings with it enough pressure and stress, and studying in new conditions with new people and a new university can have its own emotional responsibility for a foreign student. In this regard, one of the Iranian students (Mehran) living in Poznań reports that:

"I came to Poland to study for a PhD and I had done my previous degrees in Iran. For me, the study conditions were very different in terms of the environment, the professors, and the language of instruction. At the same time, I had to do research projects and adapt to the new conditions earlier, I was studying in a language other than my own, it was difficult for me to communicate with the professors, and all these things took extra energy from me, and made me more academically tired. It even affected my academic performance".

Guilt toward family and homesickness

Geographical distance, which can lead to a loss of bond or physical proximity to parents and grandparents, adds to the complexity of feelings of guilt and the reasons for them. These can further increase feelings of guilt. If a person has a higher quality of life than their relatives and friends in their home country, they may feel guilty about their move (Ward, Styles 2012). People of all ages who are away from home for an extended period of time experience homesickness, which can lead to severe depression and a strong desire to leave their current situation (Rathakrishnan et al. 2021).

The ageing of parents and being away from them is one of the problems and worries of foreign students. One of the Iranian students (Pouya) said:

“My father and mother are old and they have no other children except me and my brother, who is also a student outside Iran. We are always worried about their health and living conditions”.

Another student (Reza) in his final year in Warsaw explains:

“Iran does not have good economic and social conditions at the moment. Considering the better living conditions in Poland compared to Iran, I always feel sad for my family and friends who live in Iran. I try to look less happy on social media and in the photos I share so that I don’t feel so guilty”.

Independence before studying abroad

One of the factors that emerged from the interviews with different people was the impact of having or not having an independent life experience or not before starting a new life in a new country. People who lived independently or were employed before immigrating were better able to cope with the changes they had to make in the new country, as opposed to those who only had the experience of living with family members and did not have the experience of living independently to cope with the culture and the new country presented more challenges.

For example, Pouya reported that:

“Before immigrating to Poland, I had the experience of independent living, I worked and lived alone, and these experiences made me better control the feelings of loneliness and coping with new conditions. I believe that those who want to immigrate must practice living independently for a while, otherwise it will be more difficult to cope with life in completely different conditions and in a different country”.

On the other hand, Nasim said:

“Before immigrating to Poland, I had no experience of living independently or even traveling to a foreign country, and my family always supported me. When I came to Poland, it was very difficult for me to control my daily living conditions, besides the issues related to university and studying, and I had to balance these things for a long time”.

Employment stress

One of the biggest challenges facing many countries today is how to successfully implement policies that help immigrants integrate into the cultural, social, and economic life of their communities. This is particularly true for young immigrants who have not yet been able to complete their schooling or obtain the necessary qualifications to become part of the labour market (Reinke, Goller 2022). One of the stresses that all the interviewed students admitted to was the difficulty of the process of finding a job in

Poland and the preference of Polish employers to employ locals and Poles, and that these preferences had led the students not to think about living in Poland after graduation and to plan to move to a country with better working conditions. Zahra reports one of the experiences related to this concept:

“I am a self-funded bachelor’s student. Accommodation, living expenses and university fees are very high and I am seriously looking for a job, but the city where I live is small, so the conditions for working, especially in English, are few for me”.

Sarah reports:

“I am a PhD student, but I realized that there is no program for international students after graduation in terms of career in Poland, so I decided to think about other countries after finishing my studie”.

Religious difference

Significant difficulties are also brought about by the diversity of cultural origins in the education sector, recognizing that culture is a way of life that belongs to a particular group of people (Griswold 2012). International students are exposed to a wide range of religiousspiritual orientations, contributing to diversity on university campuses (Andrade, Evans 2009).

Considering the religious differences between Iran as a Muslim country and Poland as a Christian country, and the level of importance of each, this can present different challenges, such as the type of food consumed by a Muslim, finding the right store, different types of clothing and wearing a hijab. For example, Nasim says that:

“I was wearing a hijab when I came to Poland, and because of this covering, people would stare at me in the street or whisper to me, and all these behaviors make me feel uncomfortable”.

In relation to this issue, Ali reports:

“when I first came to Poland, it was difficult for me to access halal food, and there are limited stores for halal products, and the stores are almost too far from my place of residence.”

Discussion and Implementation

This study delves into the multifaceted landscape of acculturation stress experienced by Iranian students in Poland, shedding light on the nuanced components that shape their adaptation process. Acculturation, especially in a foreign academic setting, is often a complex interplay of cultural, social, and psychological factors. By focusing on Iranian students, this research aims to unravel the unique challenges they face while navigating the Polish

cultural and educational milieu. It seeks to dissect the various elements that contribute to acculturation stress, including issues such as language barriers, cultural clashes, identity negotiations, and the influence of social networks. Through an in-depth examination of these components, this study aims to provide valuable insights into the complex experiences of Iranian students in Poland, thereby facilitating more targeted support systems and interventions to enhance their overall well-being and successful integration into the host society.

An examination of individual experiences revealed that many international students believed that they were treated unfairly in a variety of social contexts compared to individuals from the host country, and that they were hurt when others did not seem to fully understand their cultural values (Akhtar, Kröner-Herwig 2015). In order to ensure students' successful academic performance and, consequently, to improve the global reputation of their universities, it is essential to understand the cross-cultural adaptation of students studying abroad by exploring acculturation stressors (Liu et al. 2023). Based on the results of a recent study of Iranian students studying in Poland, it can be understood that the most important components of acculturation stress are factors such as language, social isolation, perceived discrimination, academic pressure, family guilt and homesickness, independence before studying abroad, employment stress and religious differences.

While studying abroad and even after returning home, international students often experienced significant levels of acculturation stress (Ra, Trusty 2015). Findings from the recent study of Iranian students studying in Poland highlight the multifaceted nature of acculturation stress and underscore several critical components that significantly influence their adaptation process. Language emerged as a paramount factor, reflecting the challenges associated with effective communication and academic performance in a foreign language environment. Social isolation, often linked to language barriers and cultural differences, contributes to a sense of loneliness and alienation among Iranian students. Perceived discrimination, a concerning element, highlights the importance of fostering an inclusive and culturally sensitive environment within host institutions. Academic pressure, stemming from rigorous coursework and unfamiliar educational systems, exacerbates stress levels, potentially affecting students' mental well-being. The study also found that feelings of guilt toward family and homesickness were prominent components, reflecting the emotional toll of being away home and support network. Pre-study independence is another noteworthy aspect, suggesting that students with little previous experience

of independence may experience additional stress when confronted with the responsibilities of independent living in a foreign country. Employment stress, often tied to financial concerns and work-life balance, also contributes to the overall stress burden. Finally, religious differences were identified as a factor, highlighting the importance of accommodating diverse religious beliefs and practices within host societies to minimize potential sources of stress.

Understanding these diverse components of acculturation stress is crucial for educational institutions, policymakers, and support organizations in Poland and beyond. By recognizing these factors, targeted interventions can be developed to alleviate the stressors faced by Iranian students and, more broadly, students from other cultural backgrounds. Such measures may include language support programs, culturally sensitive counseling services, anti-discrimination initiatives, and strategies to address academic pressures. Ultimately, the aim is to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for international students, enhancing their overall well-being and fostering positive cross-cultural interactions.

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