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International Students' Transition Experiences in Rural Texas: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

Due to the growth in the number of international students attending universities in Texas and the need to provide appropriate counseling services to them, nine international students were interviewed about their experiences of transitioning from their home country to college in rural Texas. The authors employed the transcendental phenomenological approach to qualitative research (Moustakas, 1994) which allowed for the following seven emergent themes were identified that described the participants' experiences: American TV; Knowing Someone; Like a Movie; Everybody Saying Hi; Transportation is Inconvenient; I Miss Noodles; and Being Optimistic. The emergent themes provided the basis for implications and recommendations for counseling services with the international student populations. Implications and recommendations for counselors on college campuses include, but are not limited to: actively collaborating with international student services, participating in new international student orientation services, and developing preemptive approaches to assisting international student during their transitions. The authors make recommendations for further qualitative research and focus groups inquiries should be conducted by college counselors to better inform outreach services, for campus counseling and career service center, directed at assisting international students during their numerous transitions (Lértora et al., 2017).

Keywords

International Students, Phenomenology, Transition, Social Integration

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Due to the growth in the number of international students attending universities in Texas and the need to provide appropriate counseling services to them, nine international students were interviewed about their experiences of transitioning from their home country to college in rural Texas. The authors employed the transcendental phenomenological approach to qualitative research (Moustakas, 1994) which allowed for the following seven emergent themes were identified that described the participants' experiences: American TV; Knowing Someone; Like a Movie; Everybody Saying Hi; Transportation is Inconvenient; I Miss Noodles; and Being Optimistic. The emergent themes provided the basis for implications and recommendations for counseling services with the international student populations. Implications and recommendations for counselors on college campuses include, but are not limited to: actively collaborating with international student services, participating in new international student orientation services, and developing preemptive approaches to assisting international student during their transitions The authors make recommendations for further qualitative research and focus groups inquiries should be conducted by college counselors to better inform outreach services, for campus counseling and career service center, directed at assisting international students during their numerous transitions (Lértora et al., 2017). Keywords: International Students, Phenomenology, Transition, Social Integration

Since the 2005-2006 academic calendar year, the number of international students studying in the United States has steadily increased. Open Doors (2016) reports that 5.2%, or 1,043,839, of the college and university student population are international. Currently, 33% of the international student population can be found in California, New York, and Texas. Many international students come to the United States with hopes of studying at a major university (e.g., University of Texas) or an Ivy League university (e.g., Harvard). However, due to the fact that 65% of international students come to the U.S. using only familial resources and backing, there are increasingly larger numbers of international students in community colleges, smaller colleges, and universities. As a result, mental health professionals, including professional counselors, at community colleges and smaller sized colleges (i.e., 5,000-10,000), mid-sized colleges/universities (i.e., 10,000-20,000), and large universities are starting to realize that more outreach and inviting counseling services need to be in place to provide international students support during the numerous transitions they encounter (Crockett & Hayes, 2011; Lértora et al., 2015; Lértora, Sullivan, & Croffie, 2017; Mitchell, Greenwood, & Guglielmi, 2007).

When researching the phenomenon of the transition experiences of international students as they adjust to their surroundings in a new environment, many labels for this experience are found. Acculturation is a term frequently used in the descriptions of transition

experiences. The classical definition was described by Redfield, Linton, and Hersovits (1936) as the “phenomena which results when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with the subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups” (p. 149). Berry (1997) added that acculturation generally indicates that a greater change has taken place for one of the involved groups, or individuals, over the others. Other concepts associated with transition that have been described by researchers include acculturative stress (Wang et al., 2012; Yakunina, Weigold, & Weigold, 2013), culture shock (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Lin, 2006), and transition shock (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). Transitioning international students who experience acculturation-related issues might benefit from specialized counseling services that help them manage these or other challenges. Following a thorough review of the literature, we found little qualitative research that allowed international students the opportunity to describe their transitional experiences, as well as the challenges they faced (Bertram, Poulakis, Elsasser, & Kumar, 2014; McLachlan & Justice, 2009), and their need for counselor assistance. As a result, programs that provide support for international students during their transitions are historically underutilized by international students because they were developed using ideas and concepts that may not be germane to, or in the language of, international students (Hwang, Bennett, & Beauchemin, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2007). In efforts to make student services, such as student counseling services and career counseling, more inviting to international students who underutilize those services, it is necessary to promote those services using terminology, concepts, and ideas that are relevant to the international student population. To aid in understanding the needs of transitioning international students and to guide the development of appropriate counseling services, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of international students transitioning to college life in Texas and their stated needs for assistance.

Transition

Some researchers consider the idea of culture shock to be a subcategory of the transition experience (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). Bennett (1998) mentioned when the term culture shock is used to describe transition it produces a “tendency to treat it as an exotic ailment with origins rooted in faraway places” (p. 216). Bennett (1998) stated that transition is a process that people encounter on a daily basis when they are faced with any changes that could disrupt their usual routine. Hence, the term *transition shock* has been used to describe the occasion where someone encounters a different culture, environment, or situation in their own country or beyond. Bennett elaborated on the concept of transition shock by declaring it “a state of loss and disorientation precipitated by a change in one’s familiar environment that requires adjustment” (p. 216).

In the literature concerning international students’ transition, researchers have uncovered both positive and negative aspects of the transition process, both during and after the transition. For international students, the experience of navigating transition shock can have profound mental health ramifications (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Irizarry & Marlowe, 2010; Lin, 2006; Mitchell et al., 2007), while greatly influencing their subsequent personal and professional directions (Moore & Popadiuk, 2011; Norris & Gillespie, 2008; Reynolds & Constantine, 2007).

Positive Effects

Researchers have supported the assertion that studying abroad has a positive influence on the future career development of college students by increasing students’ desire to attain marketable skills, elevate career aspirations, and increase the probability of working

internationally post-graduation (Norris & Gillespie, 2008; Reynolds & Constantine, 2007). Moores and Popadiuk (2011) conducted qualitative research about the positive aspects related to the transition experiences of international students. They used the critical incident technique and positive psychology as a framework to explore the resources and experiences used by international students to navigate their transition. One important finding in the study was that “the experiences shared [by the students] ...defy the conceptualization that culture shock is harmful and maladaptive...these participants depict such experiences as an integral part of their transition and development” (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011, p. 302).

Negative Effects

The negative ramifications of studying abroad are well documented throughout the literature (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Irizarry & Marlowe, 2010; Lin, 2006). There are many transition challenges for students studying abroad such as: academic and social differences; pressure to perform academically; feelings of homesickness; communication challenges; and increased feelings of loneliness and separation (Berry, 1997; Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Lin, 2006; McLachlan & Justice, 2009). If these challenges are ignored, or go unnoticed, international students could be negatively impacted, physically and mentally, during their study abroad experiences (McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2007).

Based on Bennett’s (1998) concept of transition shock, McLachlan and Justice (2009) conducted a grounded theory study that explored international student’s ability to survive and succeed while living in the United States. Specifically, they wanted to find out how the “international students survived the human cost of transition shock” (McLachlan & Justice, 2009, p. 27). Interview questions ranged from asking for descriptions of contextual experiences, feelings, and successful moments, to conversational discussions of their time in the country.

Implications of the study by McLachlan and Justice (2009) for counseling included: the importance of addressing the impact of transition shock on international students in their first six-12 months stateside; utilizing nontraditional approaches to mental health; and the need for colleges to have services in place that are welcoming to international students. McLachlan and Justice (2009) also highlighted an important often overlooked aspect of cultural sensitivity counseling—some cultures may not view counseling services as socially acceptable, and campus based mental health professionals need to be creative in finding methods in which international students will feel comfortable in expressing themselves.

There have been a number of studies about international students’ perceptions of student services (Crockett & Hayes, 2011; Mitchell et al., 2007; Owens & Loomes, 2010) and use of westernized counseling services in relation to transition difficulties (Li, Wong, & Toth, 2013; Lin, 2006; McLachlan & Justice, 2009). Some authors have supported the need for proactive services to mitigate the effects associated with transition so students may have increased opportunities to experience positive growth during their international journey (Irizarry & Marlowe, 2010; Lértora et al., 2015; Lértora et al., 2017; Lin, 2006; Owens & Loomes, 2010).

However, there is minimal qualitative research literature in mental health, college, and educational counseling journals that reflects the lived experiences of the individuals who travel to New York, California, and Texas, to study at institutions of higher education, from the perspectives of the students themselves (Bertram et al., 2014). Furthermore, the studies that have been conducted relating to international students’ perspective have primarily been from the quantitative approach and have not been viewed through the lens of mental health professional working on university campuses. Our study provides perspectives and implications that reflect the views of mental health professionals on university campuses thus

adding to the dearth of existing literature on the topic of international student support. More qualitative studies focusing on describing the international student experience, by using their own dialogue, need to be conducted so that appropriate counseling services can be developed. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of international students transitioning to college life in Texas and their stated needs for assistance.

Methodology

Much of the research conducted concerning international students' experiences in the U.S. is quantitative in nature, which fails to capture what international students experience from their own perception. Moustakas (1994) stated that "perception is regarded as the primary source of knowledge, the source that cannot be doubted" (p. 52). With that in mind, the phenomenological design outlined by Moustakas (1994) was used to describe international students' experience transitioning to college life in rural Texas.

Role of the Researcher

The impetus for the study came from the extensive interactions that the authors have had in working with people from multicultural backgrounds. Three of authors have study abroad experience while two also developed social integration programs to assist international students during various points of transition. Also, three of the authors are professional mental health counselors with the first author having worked primarily in college settings supporting and serving international students. One author also served as an advisor to the university in developing comprehensive study abroad programs with universities in China. He also originally came to the United States as an international student, thus experiencing the international student transition firsthand. The second author is widely considered to be an expert and active advocate on the topic of multicultural issues in mental health counseling and research. Our collective experiences of transition, and working with those who are in transition, have helped us to identify that international students on college campuses are not using the available services because they are developed using ideas and concepts that may not be germane to international students, an idea supported by many researchers (Arambewela & Maringe, 2012; Hwang et al., 2014; Irizarry & Marlowe, 2010; Lin, 2006; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Mitchell et al. 2007; Owens & Loomes, 2010).

Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to obtain the participants needed to complete the study (Patton, 2001). A sample size of 5-25 participants has been deemed adequate for phenomenological inquiry (Polkinghorne, 1989) and the number of participants for this study fall into that range. There were nine participants involved in the study, five women and four men, enrolled at a mid-sized university in Texas. The participants' ages ranged from 18-33 years of age with the average age being 22.4 years. The amount of time the participants had lived in the U.S. ranged from one month to three years.

Of the nine participants, four were from the People's Republic of China and one each from Germany, Spain, Costa Rica, Saudi Arabia, and the Republic of Congo. Four participants were exchange students who were on campus from one to two semesters and five participants were degree-seeking students who are here until they complete their degree requirements. All of the students were in undergraduate courses with the exception of one student who was enrolled in doctoral level classes. Using a scale of 1-5 for English language proficiency five

participants self-reported their proficiency at a level four and the other four participants rated themselves at a level three. Of the nine participants, four had relatives who lived in Texas and another participant had relatives who lived in the U.S.

Data Collection Procedures

Upon receiving approval from the institutional review board participants were recruited through email invitations that were sent out by the international student services office staff via their international student listserv and through person-to-person contact with the researchers. Participants selected for the study were informed of the potential risks of being involved in the study and asked to sign a document giving their informed consent for participation.

There were four methods of data collection used in this study: a demographic questionnaire, a written open-ended question, a semi-structured interview, and field observations. The open-ended question at the end of the demographic questionnaire was designed to help the participants focus on their experiences before interviews were conducted (Moustakas, 1994).

The first author conducted interviews that ranged from 30-60 minutes at a private campus location that allowed for confidentiality. The use of field notes was incorporated by the first author to record nonverbal reactions that participants had before, during, and after the interview process. At times when incongruences were observed between the participants responses and their nonverbal cues the first author asked participants to explain the observed discrepancies, which further enriched our understanding of the studied phenomena. Upon completion of the data analysis member checking was used to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the results. Participants were sent the results via email to validate the accuracy of the initial interview; they were also provided an opportunity to add any extra details about their experiences. All of the interviews were audio recorded, transcribed by the researchers, and stored on a password protected computer to ensure the safety of the collected data. Only pseudonyms were used and all identifying information was de-identified to protect participant anonymity.

Instrumentation

The authors constructed a semi-structured interview consisting of four open ended questions. Two questions were based on the existing research literature, one pertaining to preparation (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011) and another relating to experiences in the first few months (McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Owens & Loomes, 2010). Questions concerning participants' initial arrival experiences were not found in the review of the qualitative literature, which reinforces the need for these questions to be asked.

After consultation with the fourth author, who was not directly involved in the data collection, the two additional questions were written and revised to ensure validity based on the fourth author's extensive interactions with international students, and given his background as an international student. The questions were designed to help participants talk about their transition experiences from the beginning until the point of the interview. The questions used by the researchers were: (a) Describe the process of preparing to come to the United States (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011) (b) Describe what it was like arriving in the United States (c) Describe what it was like for you when you arrived on campus, and (d) Describe what your first months were like on campus (McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Owens & Loomes, 2010). These questions were designed by the researcher to allow the participants to describe their transition experience in their own words. Follow up questions were asked on an as needed basis to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences.

Data Analysis

Our aim of using a phenomenological approach to qualitative research is to depict the lived experiences of individuals, from the viewpoint of those individuals, in relation to a phenomenon or singular concept (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). We focused on permitting the international students' experiences to emerge from their own words instead of assuming that their experiences are understood solely through observation or written questionnaire. To accomplish this task, we bracketed their beliefs by engaging in a self-reflection activity of journaling about the experience of serving the international student population at a university campus (Moustakas, 1994).

We selected the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method as modified by Moustakas (1994) to use for data analysis purposes. The investigation was implemented in the following steps. First, we entered epoché, a position where our judgment was deferred through constant inspection and journaling about the biased ideas related to the phenomenon. Second, the participant interviews were analyzed to categorize significant statements into lists that had no repetition or overlap, also known as horizontalization of data (Creswell, 2013). Third, the first author accumulated themes from the constructed lists, which Moustakas (1994) referred to as textural descriptions of the experiences. Fourth, the first author took verbatim excerpts and included them in the textural description of the transition experiences of international students. Fifth, the first author constructed a structural description of the international students' experiences of transition in their current setting. The aim of the data analysis procedure was to describe not only the participants' experiences, a textural description, but how the experience came to be, which constitutes the structural description (Creswell, 2013). The process of combining these two descriptive elements to accurately represent the international students' transition experience comprises the final step of the data analysis to encapsulate the phenomenological perspectives of international students' transition to college life in rural Texas.

Moustakas' (1994) data analysis method was followed to discover the emerging themes presented in the interview data. This method was comprised of grouping participants' statements with similar meanings together and reviewing the statements further to uncover a name for each theme. Only themes supported by five participants or more were selected for further analysis. Those themes and supporting statements were collected in a separate document and reviewed by an auditor not directly involved in the development or the data collection process of the study to ensure that each emergent theme was valid. The auditor then reviewed interview transcripts to allow another opportunity for themes to emerge. The auditor selected themes, also supported by five or more participants, and supporting statements were recorded on a separate document and was used in comparison to the first author's selected themes and statements. The auditor and first author then discussed the similarities and differences present in the themes and statements to further narrow down the themes. The ensuing themes are included in the results section.

Trustworthiness

Multiple methods were incorporated at different stages in the research process to ensure the trustworthiness of the current study. Due to the prolonged engagement and persistent observation of the population being studied the lead researcher had to engage in constant self-reflection about their experiences studying abroad and interacting with international students (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). By actively bracketing, the first author was able to enter into the interview process without judgment about the phenomenon of international student transition. Some sources of biases that have already been identified by the authors include: using terms associated with transition that have been described in previous research; previous

experiences working closely with students in transition; and personal experiences related to international travel.

During the data collection, methodological triangulation was accomplished through the use of various data collection methods such as a demographic questionnaire, interview data, and field observation notes. Also, we engaged in numerous debriefing sessions with an unbiased faculty member, who has not worked with the international student population, but is well versed in the methods of qualitative research. These processes took place throughout the duration of the study (Creswell, 2013).

During the data analysis process the authors used rich thick description to accurately depict the transition experiences of international students in Texas by using verbatim excerpts from the participants' responses (Creswell, 2013). After the data analysis process was finished, the completed results sections were emailed to participants to complete the member checking process. The feedback received from the participants was incorporated into the final draft of the results section to ensure that the themes and quotes were truly representative of international students' transition experiences in rural Texas.

Results

The data analysis process, outlined by Moustakas (1994), resulted in the emergence of seven independent themes that were supported by a minimum of six out of nine participants. The average number of participants who supported a theme was seven, with one theme receiving unanimous support. The themes that emerged are: (a) American TV; (b) knowing someone; (c) everybody saying hi; (d) like a movie; (e) I miss noodles; (f) no public transportation; and (g) being optimistic.

American TV

When the participants were asked about how they prepared for their trip to the United States, six mentioned statements that were in agreement with what Tom stated, "I saw a lot of American TV shows and you know movies" and Madeline concurred, "I watched a lot of movies." The responses about using American TV and movies were made in reference to two aspects of preparation for the adjustments that participants were anticipating in their travels to the United States and adjustment to language and atmosphere.

Language. Three of the six participants who responded about watching American TV to prepare, mentioned benefits related to gaining a better understanding of using the English language. Madeline referenced her use of TV when she said, "In my house the TV was in English...so I watched a lot to start to get used to people speaking in English all the time." When John was asked about his preparations he laughed as he mentioned "the main thing I did is just listen...or watch American shows. It helps a lot." Another participant, Sam, supported the theme; "I mean, nobody doesn't watch movies." When he was asked what type of movies he watched he responded as if obvious "oh, yeah, all American movies!"

Atmosphere. International students also made use of American TV and movies for the reason Hulan stated "it is more for the atmosphere it prepared me for." She elaborated on the theme further when she described what she learned from American TV,

It's just like what I have seen in some American TV and movies. Like you can lie on the lawn on the grass, sing on the road and dance on the road and you can dance and play music loudly on campus and dance and people won't feel "oh you so weird."

David also mentioned, “I watch some TV series” to learn about some American customs before arriving stateside. A Chinese exchange student, Tom, recalled not being surprised by American culture because “I think um...I have already imagined that, you know, I've seen many American TV shows.”

Three participants did not make any statements that were in support this theme. Pam stated that “all of the TV shows are specifically translated to English in [my country] like all the jokes and everything only make sense to those of us from [our country]”. Isamara referenced her previous travels to the U.S. as being part of her preparation “I have traveled here many times so I knew what to expect coming here.”

Knowing Someone

All nine participants contributed statements or experiences that agreed with the idea that “it would be really helpful if you knew someone,” which John mentioned. The arrival experiences varied greatly for the participants. Three participants were picked up at the airport by immediate or extended family members who had already been in the U.S. for prolonged periods of time. John expounded on his arrival experience “I came with my aunt and uncle and my two cousins... our luggage wasn't here w-when we got here... if by myself and I lost my luggage, I-I don't know what to do!” Madeline mirrored his statement when she replied,

I knew at least...I would see one familiar face so that helped too so then we go outside and wait for my sister to pick us up. It was a huge help it really helped a lot because when I came here I think if I didn't have my sister there's a lot of things I would not have been able to do.

Hulan, who was picked up at the airport by friends, supported the theme when she explained that,

When I got off the plane I actually already have some American friends who went to China this June ...from the university so two of them... picked us up in the airport so as soon as I get out of the airport they greeted me ... and then just took us to the mall.

Later on in the interview when she was asked about which factor Hulan felt was most helpful during her arrival Hulan said, “I think it might be essential for us students to be welcomed by somebody you already know or somebody you have already contacted with before you come.”

Four participants were picked up from the airport by a university representative. Tom, a Chinese student who arrived in the same cohort as David, had “someone pick us up from the college because we have a program.” Being part of a large program allowed Tom and David to have living arrangements already in place upon arrival. Isamara arrived to a similar situation and mentioned that,

A professor picked me up, she was really helpful...since the beginning they have been treating me so nice and they already arranged where I was going to stay so I am staying with a family that is awesome I mean like they are so hospitable and generous and great I can't complain at all so they arranged it before I arrived.

Unfortunately, Penelope's experience being picked up by a university representative was less than what she had expected,

One girl she told about someone who picked her up at the airport and it was someone that...helped her to get furniture, to get a phone, somewhere to live, and um, I mean this all kind of stuff, and that's what I expected too. But when I came here the pickup service, that person just dropped me to the hotel and he didn't have any time for me to do anything because he had so many other students that he had to pick up at the airport and so that's why I was kind of disappointed because it was not like the person who was here before described.

Sam was not picked up by anyone at all and said, "I took my stuff and I got onto a bus." Not only did Sam have to navigate a new country and language, but he had to do so alone without any guidance.

Like a Movie

Another theme that emerged and was supported by seven of the nine participants was in response to a question that asked about what the participants' first impression of campus was like. The seven participants all mentioned that the experience was like a movie, TV show, or something surreal "*like a mirage*". Madeline energetically discussed her first experience:

Really exciting it was like... I remember thinking like my life is a movie now ... it is like you see other people because schools in other countries are very different they have a different feel so you see like in American movies people like walking the university and then you find yourself walking in the same line because all universities are different but all-American universities have the same feel...so I remember that oh this is like living in a movie or something like that it was just really really cool.

Pam excitedly described her first walk through campus, "I love the spirit of the school. Everybody's wearing school colors! It's just like going to a movie!" When Tom was asked about what he noticed on campus he said, "I saw many...uh many things that has appeared in American TV show, I think um...it's much more full reality." Sam was much more succinct in his description "It seems like uh the movies. I felt like I was in a movie."

Everybody's Saying Hi

Six of the nine participants all made mention of something similar to Sam's statement that "everybody was very nice. That's one thing I noticed. Everybody's nice. Everybody's helpful." Hulan supported this statement when she said, "In the beginning I feel people are nicer and more friendly than people in China." When David was explaining a time when he was lost on the way to a football game he said, "I don't know the road, but some guys told me how to get to the place."

An additional concept emerged from within the theme that related to the culture of participants' home countries. When it comes to outward friendliness of strangers on campus two participants were initially shocked. Hulan laughed in disbelief when she stated that in China "people don't say hi to strangers, people don't smile to strangers on the road or they will think you need to go to hospital." Sam also had a similar reaction when he mentioned,

Everybody's saying, "hi" in Saudi, if you say "Hi" to somebody that you don't know, he either wants to fight or like he's weird. If I am walking down the street

and you are walking, here, you say, “hi” It's alright. In Saudi, it's like, “what is... What's wrong with this guy? Why's he saying hi?” So, it's weird for someone else to say, “Hi.”

All six participants registered reactions that indicated they were surprised by the outward show of kindness from strangers they encountered on campus and in town. Penelope even found that someone was willing to take her to get something to eat after she was dropped off at a hotel by a university representative who was unable to take her somewhere to eat,

So, um...yeah, and there I met a person, he was really nice, but he was at the reception too, and he told me that he could drive me there. He was really nice, but when I think now it's actually really crazy of me, and I didn't know him, and he drove me to a restaurant that I could buy something to eat.

Penelope's story highlights that there are students who arrive in country and go to towns without public transportation who are in need of something as simple and necessary as a meal after a full day of traveling. At times, international students must rely on the kindness of strangers to meet the most basic of needs until they can get their bearings.

One of the participants who did not make statements in support of this theme, Madeline, mentioned with a surprised look “I really didn't expect that nobody would talk to me,” which was the only statement made in opposition to the theme.

Transportation Is Inconvenient

Lack of transportation can be problematic for international students who do not study in a metropolis. The process of getting a driver's license, procuring a vehicle, and completing the rest of the paperwork involved is a lengthy, time-consuming process that many of the exchange students do not have the time or resources to undergo. Many of the students under the age of 25, like Sam, are faced with the problem of “I don't have a car, I can't rent a car...when I arrived there was no public transportation in the whole city, no shuttles to the university, nothing.”

One of the Chinese exchange students, Tom, mentioned that people who had been to the university before him said “if you don't have a car in America...you don't have legs!” Tom's cohort member David also agreed, “it's not very convenient because we don't have a car...American friends have to take us to the supermarket and bank.” Penelope also commented on the difficulty of in town travel,

Yeah, what I don't like is that everything is so far away. On the first few days I had to walk a lot really a lot... I've got to know a few people and if I need something I ask whether they can drive me there.

John, who has been at the university for two years and has a car, offered a helpful suggestion when he talked about his early transportation difficulties.

Most people here, t-they all have cars. And, it's kind of... of hard to-to have a grocery store. I mean, there is one store that is pretty-is convenient. It's not that far from campus. Yeah, I guess if-if we can have a shuttle to...you know to those places ...I-I had to go to a bank and have to ask for a ride to there 'cause it's not really-really close from here. So, if we can have a shuttle, like, taking us to somewhere close to that area that would be great!

Two of the six students who supported the theme of transportation being inconvenient also mentioned that it further contributed to feelings of being different. John laughed uncomfortably when he talked about acquiring another mode of transportation “I got a bike I rode a bike to Walmart once or twice. It’s pretty long distance. And it’s kind of weird, like, people look at you like you weird” With a look of mixed confusion and sadness Penelope claimed,

I was really unsure whether I was wrong what I should do also what I’m not used to is when I walk it sometimes seems like I am the only one who walks because everyone drives. It also makes me feel to be different and like I’m not, like I don’t belong here.

I Miss Noodles

Seven of nine participants supported the theme of having difficulties finding foods similar to what they eat at home. Sam told about how he brought items “like coffee, Arabic coffee, and...simple foods that I can bring to the U.S. and it uh remind me of home.” Tom was able to make do with “dried bamboo reeds from my hometown...very delicious...when I miss home, I just eat those things and like spicy...uh...peppers and sauces.”

Other participants talked about the food being overly flavorful as Hulan stated “sweet food are too sweet and salty food are too salty.” Penelope was confused buying food at first because she thought “like maybe I bought the wrong meat at the beginning, kind of it was too salty, or I bought toast and it was too sweet.” Some participants like Sam spoke of the repetitious nature of the food within walking distance “it’s the same thing... burgers, pizza, burgers, pizza, chicken nuggets”. Tom also agreed with the situation “I feel a little sick to think about eating too many hamburgers.”

One of the main ways that international students can actually have food that reminds them of home is to cook the food they desire. When it was discussed with the participants some of them, like David, made statements to the effect of “I brought some ingredient for cooking because I’m afraid I can’t buy here”. Madeline accentuated the claim when she described her experience trying to cook food from home,

I like cooking so I try my best to find the equivalent here but sometime it’s really hard or if I find it it doesn’t taste the same... I have been trying to cook traditional when I can but it is really hard.

Pam responded in agreement, “ingredients don’t taste as good as they do over there... there are some kinds of foods that I miss, and I cannot find them here. Or, if I find them here, it’s extremely pricy.”

Hulan, who is here for one semester, also commented on the difficulty of finding the ingredients to cook familiar foods because,

they are not available in [town] but they are available in China Town in [the city] so it is a little inconvenient for us to find the soy sauce we use ...the cooking wine and... there’s only one kind of soy sauce here and it’s like Japanese sauce so hmmm and we couldn’t find any noodles here there are only spaghetti... one month ago my dorm girls went to china town and I ask for some packs of noodles before that I didn’t eat any noodles. I really miss noodles.

The two participants, who did not support of this theme, made statements that were in opposition to other participants. Isamara stated “I am not missing food from home... I love trying different food...” John shared, “I’ve never had a Dorito or something... in my entire life, before I came here. It’s so delicious, I can’t stop, like it’s just ...can’t stop eating it”.

Being Optimistic

Seven of the nine participants endorsed an optimistic point of view about their time spent in the United States. Madeline explained about her outlook when she stated “I know that whatever happens it will be worth it...like what I am living right now is the most precious things I have”. Pam talked about how her expectations changed, “It was not that bad as I had in mind, so everything turned like I loved it.” John highlighted the importance of maintaining a positive outlook when he described:

Being optimistic... I think uh, it plays a big role ...it helps otherwise you’ll have too much negative attitude... and you will be stressful and depressed, you know. It’s just not good for you at all, so this is a good thing to have... I’m a pretty uh ... optimistic guy.

While discussing her experience Penelope said, “I didn’t regret it. I can say that for sure... maybe I refuse to regret. I just told myself you always want to come here and now you’re here. So be happy. Be happy!”

Essence of Being in Transition

One of the purposes of using a phenomenology is to describe the phenomenon using descriptions of participants’ experiences stated in their own words; this accentuates the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). When the structural and textural elements are considered in unison, a story unfolds that describes the ebb and flow of the continual transitions international students’ experience. The essence of being in transition is clearly captured in Madeline’s story about her journey,

I think it’s like going on a boat ride in the middle of the ocean...you’re there and you have the waves and you’re shaken and then the waves come down and you see the view and it is beautiful...then you have a storm, it comes and you wait but then the storm goes down and you have the sun and so it is beautiful!...then it hits you hard, but then when you look at the bigger picture you’re like there is a purpose for you...you came all this way for a reason...that’s the way I see this whole experience like it wasn’t easy but it was really worth it. When I am living here it’s an adventure you know.

Penelope mirrored Madeline’s statement when asked about her journey.

I would describe it as very stressful but you will be very happy because you will know that it is something you always want to do, you are doing it now and I think it’s also worth it, absolutely...it’s a big change.

These excerpts highlight the optimistic mentality, among other aspects, that students adopt when they embark on a journey that takes them far away from their home.

Discussion

The results of this study support many areas of focus for consideration when university campuses accept the responsibility of inviting international students to become part of their student populations. One area to consider is that international students arrive to their destination universities in a number of different ways. Some are picked up from the airport by family, friends, and university staff, while others have to fend for themselves, as Sam did when he shared that “I took my stuff and I got onto a bus.” Knowing someone upon arrival, a theme supported by all nine participants, accentuates the importance of making contact with someone from the destination university prior to traveling, which can facilitate social interaction upon arrival (Bertram et al., 2014; Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Owens & Loomes, 2010). Hulan’s statement that it is “essential for us students to be welcomed by somebody you already know” supports the importance of international students feeling welcomed by their host university (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013).

The theme of knowing someone upon arrival also supports the need to have a stable environment in place for international students on arrival and for the first six-12 months (McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Owens & Loomes, 2010). Tom stated that “if you don’t have a car in America...you don’t have legs!” Self-sufficiency in taking care of a person’s most basic needs is an aspect that contributes to having a stable environment (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). Owens and Loomes (2010) found that without significant social support, international students were only meeting the bottom two levels of needs: physiological and safety. Penelope stated the transportation issues often encouraged her to get “to know a few people and if I need something I ask whether they can drive me there,” which helped her increase her social network. Moores and Popadiuk (2011) noted that “across international student literature, social support has been one of the only factors that have consistently predicted a successful transition” (p. 300).

Lack of available transportation can be a difficult situation and source of distress for students, especially if it is a continual issue (Bista & Foster, 2011). While international students’ reliance on others to help meet basic needs can provide opportunities to become more social and develop a support network, it can also lead to feeling like a burden to others as David concurred, “but that’s our friends...we cannot often disturb them”. In other instances, it can engender thoughts like “It also makes me feel... different and like I’m not, like I don’t belong here,” which can lead to the onset of depressive symptomology and social isolation (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2011).

Unmet expectations about the overall experience of studying at a U.S. university can also contribute to the feelings social isolation and depression (Bertram et al., 2014; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2007). The themes describing the use of American TV for preparation and the first college experience being “like a movie”, could lead to international students having numerous unmet expectations based on the unrealistic portrayal of American lifestyles on American TV and movies. Also the theme of friendly strangers, which alludes to the presence of “Southern hospitality”, could mislead international students to perceive American students to be more approachable and caring than they really are, which is supported by Hulan’s statement, “ummm not all people are as good as I thought in the beginning”.

The numerous challenges international students face can lead to mental health implications that negatively impact international students’ college experiences in the U.S. (Berry, 1997; Lértora et al., 2017; Lin, 2006; Mitchell et al., 2007). When international students do seek university counseling services for assistance, actions that are historically low, there is the potential that feelings of isolation and depressive symptomology may increase instead of decrease (Hwang et al., 2014; Lin, 2006; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2007).

These effects could hinder an international student's ability to maintain the optimism, which Moores and Popadiuk (2011) identified as being crucial in helping international students view their transition experiences as positive.

Limitations

The first limitation of my study was that the sample used may be a disproportionate representation of the international student population at the university where the study was conducted. Because the participation in the study was voluntary, the sample was limited to those students who were willing to donate a portion of their time to complete the interview and conduct the follow-up member checking. In addition, many variables outside the control of the researcher may have impacted the overall international student experience. These variables included financial support from family or government programs; previous travel experience; previous living experiences; duration of stay; proficiency in host culture language; transfer student status; and the presence of home culture population at the host university. Also, the sample was one of convenience that came from one university in Texas that may not accurately reflect the lived experiences of all international students; this might have impacted the transferability of the results. Furthermore, the survey questions were provided only in English, which may have limited the ability of participants to accurately and fully describe their lived experiences because they were not responding in their primary language. A final delimitation was that students with limited English proficiency were excluded from the study, which may have omitted a segment of the international student population that could have helped to inform future social integration services.

Implications and Recommendations

The themes presented in this study, and in the previous literature, support the proliferation of proactive services to moderate the consequences of transition, in order to assist the international students in reaping as many benefits from their international experience as possible (Irizarry & Marlowe, 2010; Lértora, Liu, Robles-Pina, Starkey, & Roach, 2015; Lértora et al., 2017; Lin, 2006). Owens and Loomes (2010) stated, "social integration has been identified as a critical factor supporting successful, engaging and satisfying learning experiences" (p. 276). College counselors and career counselors can take an active part in researching, recommending, developing, and administering services, as well as nontraditional approaches to counseling, designed to assist international students with social integration and navigating transitions (Crocket & Hayes, 2011; Lértora et al., 2017; Mitchell et al. 2007).

Increasing social interactivity within the campus and community through ongoing university/community orientations, shared transportation, sporting events, social events, community activities, work-related activities, and welfare activities were shown to have positive effects on international student moral (Irizarry & Marlowe, 2010; Owens & Loomes, 2010). At many campuses, counseling services and international student services fall under the organizational umbrella of student services or student affairs. By working in collaboration with international student services, campus counselors can also provide preemptive nontraditional approaches to mental health services that prepare international students for the continual cultural, academic, and social adjustments they may experience (Lértora et al., 2017). Also, by being proactive through outreach initiatives, college counselors can assist and support international students in maintaining overall physical and mental wellbeing. Further qualitative research and focus groups should be conducted by college counselors to better inform outreach services, for campus counseling and career service center, directed at assisting international students during their numerous transitions (Lértora et al., 2017). By doing so, services can be

developed and promoted with concepts and terminology that is germane to international students' transitional experiences.

Another area of future research that could provide valuable information in gaining a better understanding of international students' expectations on coming to the U.S. study is the use of watching American TV, YouTube videos, and listening to American music to prepare for their sojourn. Exploratory research relating to impact from these personal preparations on student expectations can help international student services and college counselors in developing services that provide students with accurate information related to the campus and community culture.

Future research should also include qualitative inquiries about the presence, influence, and development of optimism in relation to transition experiences of international students (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011), as well the transitions experiences of other domestic student populations (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014). By conducting future studies about transition experiences of international students and certain domestic student populations (e.g., first generation colleges students) similarities between the transitional experiences could be identified that could inform the proliferation of support programming on university campuses that would service international and domestic students. Many researchers have stated that social integration is a key component in assisting students in overcoming their transitional difficulties and by combining services that mix domestic and international students there may be more opportunities for both student populations to socially integrate in a more global context (Lértora et al., 2017; Lértora et al., 2015; Owens & Loomes, 2010).

A final point of consideration is there is not one singular aspect of the transition experience that is the most pleasurable or problematic because the experiencing of transition is different for each person involved. That is why it is important for researchers to conduct numerous qualitative studies, about several aspects of international students' experiences in the United States, which will inform future quantitative studies that will be used to support university policies instituted to assist international students. By doing so, we can properly inform the proliferation of appropriate social integration and counseling services for international students that will help increase and maintain the retention rates of international students, as well as domestic students, on our college and university campuses (Crockett & Hayes, 2011; Author, 2015; Lertora et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2007).

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