

Acculturative Experiences of Black-African International Students

Susan Boafo-Arthur

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Abstract There has been a significant increase in the number of international students pursuing higher education in the U.S. since 2001. Upon arrival, students are often beset with feelings of isolation and alienation, which are characteristic of adjusting to a new culture. African International students, specifically Black-African international students, are no different in this regard and often experience significant adjustment concerns. Most notable of the concerns for Black-African students are the issues of prejudice and discrimination, which can lead to the experience of acculturative stress. It is, therefore, imperative that institutions find ways to help Black-African international students adjust better to life in the U.S. This paper discusses some adjustment concerns of Black-African international students and provides some suggestions for addressing their concerns.

Keywords Black-African students · International students · Counseling · Acculturation · Culture shock · Adjustment experiences

Introduction

Every year, thousands of international students arrive in the United States (U.S.) to pursue higher education. During the 2010–2011 academic year alone, the total number of international students studying at institutions of higher education in the U.S. was 723,277; of which 36,890 were Africans (Institute of International Education [IIE] 2011). The figures show a 5 % increase in the number of all international students from the numbers recorded during the previous year (IIE 2011). Overall, the IIE reports a 32 % increase in the number of international students studying in American colleges and universities since the year 2001.

Data provided by the Institute of Higher Education in 2010 list a variety of reasons that influence international students' decision to pursue education in the U.S. Some of these reasons, in order of importance, include; a wider range of schools and programs; the higher

S. Boafo-Arthur

Department of Counseling and Educational Psychology, Mississippi State University, 175 President's Circle, Mailstop 9727, Starkville, MS 39762, USA

S. Boafo-Arthur (✉)

104A Park Circle, Starkville, MS 39759, USA

e-mail: sboafoarthur@gmail.com

quality of education; a welcoming stance to international students; scholarship opportunities; and good student support services. Thus, from all indications it appears that most international students perceive the U.S. as being an appealing place to study. However, moving to a new environment can be a significant challenge, with culture shock being an unavoidable aspect, leading to acculturative stress (Berry 1994).

Some research suggests that the adjustment experience of Black-African international students may be different from that experienced by those from other continents (Warren and Constantine 2007). Despite this suggestion, however, there is very little research that explores in any detail the experiences of this particular group of students. It is important to distinguish between Black-African and other African students, as not all individuals from the African continent are Black-Africans. In addition, it is equally important to note that while the term Black-African will be used in a very broad sense in this paper, there are multiple cultural and linguistic differences even among individuals who may identify as Black-Africans. As such, their acculturative experiences may differ based on other factors such as their cultural heritage, and their countries of origin. The paper highlights international students' adjustment experiences as pertaining to culture shock and acculturative stress and pays attention to the adjustment experiences of Black-African international students in particular. Some suggestions that may be helpful in facilitating the adjustment of these students are also made.

Culture Shock

Culture shock is a term first used by Oberg (1960) to describe the feelings of discomfort experienced by those trying to adjust to life in a new culture. Such feelings can be experienced by anyone who finds themselves in an environment that they perceive as foreign to them. For example, African-Americans studying in predominantly white/elite schools have reported such feelings (Torres 2009). Likewise, Latino bilingual teachers brought to the U.S. specifically to meet the needs of some school districts have reported experiencing similar discomfort (Fee 2010).

Many international students experience culture shock (cf., Brown and Holloway 2008; Constantine et al. 2005; Ineson et al. 2006; Pantelidou and Craig 2006). This experience includes feeling confused about role expectations and self-identity, feelings of alienation, feeling rejected or discriminated against by members of the new culture, a loss of social support, and anxiety about fitting into the new culture (Mori 2000; Oberg 1960; Sandhu and Asrabadi 1994).

In a study on culture shock and social support among Greek migrant students in the United Kingdom, Pantelidou and Craig (2006) discovered that the students' experience of culture shock was influenced by their gender, the size of their social network, and the diversity and quality of social support they received from their social networks. In addition, it was found that the negative feelings associated with culture shock decreased depending on how long they stayed in the host culture (Pantelidou and Craig 2006). In another study, Ineson et al. (2006) examined the causes of culture shock as experienced by British hospitality and tourism students on internship in the U.S. The outcome of the study showed that differences in language (vocabulary and accents), a lack of preparation, and frustration at work proved to be the main reasons why the British students experienced culture shock.

The cultural adjustment experiences of Black-African international students examined by Constantine et al. (2005) are also consistent with the findings reported above. In their study, they discovered that Black-African students experienced feelings of confusion, alienation, and discrimination, both from American students and international students from other

continents. These are just a few examples of some of the experiences common to international students in other cultures. They suggest that most international students may experience frustration, annoyance, and feelings of alienation, especially if they do not have any form of social support in their new environments.

Acculturation and Acculturative Stress

Berry (1997), in his seminal work on acculturation and adaptation strategies of immigrants, describes acculturation as “the cultural changes that result from group encounters” (p. 6). These changes may include “psychological, socio-cultural, and economic” adjustments that are related to adaptation (p. 6). Acculturation by itself is not a negative experience. However, acculturative stress is experienced “when greater levels of conflict are experienced, and the experiences are judged to be problematic, but controllable and surmountable” (Berry 1997, p. 19). According to Berry (1997), there are four main ways through which people acculturate to settings that differ from their own: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization.

Berry (1997) indicates that assimilation occurs when individuals prefer to be more connected to the new culture than their own and so seek experiences that will help them achieve this in the new culture. Separation takes place when individuals maintain their own culture and make efforts to protect their cultural values by excluding themselves from interactions with members of their new environment. Integration refers to when an individual is able to co-exist simultaneously with their own cultural identity and that of their new culture. However, for integration to occur, individuals have to perceive that the society in which they now live will be accepting towards them (Berry 1997). Marginalization is said to take place when individuals neither have the wish to maintain their cultural identities nor to assimilate into the dominant culture. Berry’s work has been used as a framework of understanding acculturation in various studies and various models of acculturation have been developed based on his model (e.g., Culhane 2004; Flannery et al. 2001; Sam and Oppedal 2002; Schwartz 2008; Ward and Kennedy 1994). But, the model has not yet been applied to the population of Black-African international students, which is the focus of this study.

Berry et al. (1989) have discussed how race and the experience of discrimination and prejudice may have a negative effect on an individual’s acculturative strategies. According to the authors, when immigrants experience racial discrimination or prejudice in their interactions with members of the host culture, they tend to associate acculturation with rejection, making it more difficult for them to acculturate to their new environment. The concept of Neo-racism has also been used as a means of describing how prejudice and discrimination can cause acculturative stress in international students of color (Lee and Opio 2011). Neo-racism, according to Spears (1999, pp. 12–13):

Rationalizes the subordination of people of color on the basis of culture, which is of course acquired through acculturation within ethnic groups, while traditional racism rationalizes it fundamentally in terms of biology. Neo-racism is still racism in that it functions to maintain racial hierarchies of oppression.

Lee and Rice (2007) have used the concept of Neo-racism to study the experiences of Chinese international students in the United States. Lee and Opio (2011) have similarly explored the experiences and challenges of African (both Black- and non-Black-) student athletes in the United States. According to Lee and Opio, the difficult acculturative experiences international students of color have, has more to do with the lack of hospitality shown by their host institutions, and less to do with the personal deficiencies of these students. Thus, the authors believe that Neo-racism is useful for exploring attitudes towards

international students of color because they are often discriminated against by their race and also by their culture. For example, international students of color, in addition to racial discrimination, have to endure discrimination based on their accents, language, and stereotypes about their countries of origin (Lee and Rice 2007).

Lee and Opio (2011) further argue that international students of color are categorized as minorities upon arrival in the United States, regardless of their personal affinity towards other groups, and whether or not they believe they have something in common with the minorities raised in the United States. In the case of Black-African international students for example, Lee and Opio assert that their experiences of discrimination cannot be compared to the racial discrimination often directed towards African-Americans. This is because while Black-African students as well as African-Americans may be discriminated against based on race, Black-African students face discrimination from multiple sources (e.g., cultural differences, accents, and negative stereotypes about their countries of origin). These experiences collectively put these students at risk for acculturative stress (Lee and Opio 2011).

Experiences of Black-African International Students

There are a number of studies that examine the acculturative experiences of international students in the U.S. from all over the world (e.g., Ineson et al. 2006; Mossakowski 2003; Poyrazli and Lopez 2007; Ready 2012; Wong and Halgin 2006). Most international students pursuing education in the United States seem to some degree to have stressful acculturative experiences that include confusion, feelings of isolation and alienation, discrimination, and language barriers (Adelegan and Parks 1985; Mori 2000; Nebedum-Ezeh 1997; Poyrazli and Lopez 2007; Puritt 1978; Sandhu and Asrabadi 1994). According to Constantine et al. (2004a) such experiences can manifest in a host of physical, social, and psychological problems. Also, in adjusting to life in the U.S., Black-Africans often feel homesick, depressed, and fatigued (Lee and Rice 2007; Puritt 1978).

The most common adjustment issues experienced by Black-African international students seem to be (a) prejudice and discrimination, (b) social isolation, (c) separation from family and friends, and (d) financial concerns (Constantine et al. 2005; Lewis 2000). While each of these categories is important, social isolation, separation from friends and family, and financial concerns are often interrelated. Black-African international students may feel isolated because they are separated from their friends and family. Long distance phone calls can be expensive, and they might not have the finances to maintain regular communication with their loved ones, leading to feelings of isolation. Additionally, they may also feel isolated because they are unable to form social relationships with Americans and may not have the financial capacity to engage in the social activities that American students engage in.

While the above-mentioned experiences may be common to all international students, Black-African international students also have to deal with prejudice and discrimination based on their race, and faulty assumptions about their cultural heritage. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, prejudice and discrimination will be discussed as one category, with social isolation, separation from family and friends, and financial concerns collectively categorized as social isolation and financial difficulty.

Prejudice and Discrimination

Prejudice and discrimination seem to cause the most stress in Black-African students upon moving to the United States (Manyika 2001; Poyrazli and Lopez 2007; Puritt

1978). Constantine et al. (2005) believe that race is central in reviewing the acculturative experiences of Black-African international students. This is because most Black-African students prior to moving to the United States have no experience of racial discrimination (Bagley and Young 1988; Lee and Opio 2011; Phinney and Onwughalu 1996), and so may not have had the opportunity to develop resources to cope with such situations. Upon moving to the United States, they often find that they are evaluated with the same stereotypes that are ascribed to African-Americans by the dominant culture and are sometimes also stereotyped negatively by African-Americans as less civilized human beings (Tradore 2004). Manyika's (2001) study indicated that there was a lot of discrimination towards Blacks, and towards Black-African students on many campuses in the U.S. It has been reported by Blake (2006) that a large number of Black-African students, even at historically Black institutions, were discriminated against by instructors and students alike.

According to Bagley and Young (1988), in the West African countries of Ghana and Nigeria, the concept of black skin being beautiful is wholly embraced and accepted (p. 49). International students from such countries may, therefore, experience culture shock and acculturative stress as a consequence of exposure to racial discrimination in the United States (Adeleke 1998; Mori 2000). Adelegan and Parks (1985) in their study found that Black-African students experienced more acculturative stress than non-Black-African students. There is, therefore, the suggestion that non-Black-Africans may not be exposed to the same challenges as Black-Africans.

In considering some of the experiences of the Black-African students detailed in Constantine et al.'s (2005) study, it is easy to understand why they may find it difficult to adjust. For instance, in the vignette below one respondent said:

In a tutoring session for one of my classes, the [White] teaching assistant called me a 'stupid nigger.' I was so shocked he said this in front of [other students], that I couldn't say anything and just left the session. I ended up dropping the class because I couldn't go back to face the professor and the other students. (p. 61)

In Poyrazli and Lopez's (2007) exploratory study comparing perceived discrimination and homesickness between international students and American students, it was found that international students of European descent found it easier to acculturate and perceived less discrimination as compared to international students of color. These findings are supported by Lee and Opio's (2011) study in which the three White-Africans they interviewed reported that they had not had any discriminatory experiences, while the 11 Black-Africans and one Arab-African in the same study reported being discriminated against. These examples are an indication that supports the notion that even among international students, being White decreases the probability of being the subject of discriminatory behavior.

Some Black-African students in the Constantine et al. (2005) study also reported being discriminated against by other international students from different continents. For example, one of the respondents in their study said:

When I first moved into my dorm, I had roommates from Taiwan and Japan who both asked to be moved to another room because they didn't want to room with an [Black-] African. I also heard some Asian and [European international] students talk about being afraid of [Black-]Africans, like we're going to hurt them. (p. 62)

It becomes apparent then that not only do these students often have to deal with discrimination from Americans, but they also have to endure this from other international students.

Social Isolation and Financial Difficulties

In addition to discrimination, the Black-African students in Nebedum-Ezeh's (1997) study also experienced acculturative stress because they were not prepared, and did not have the support or assistance necessary to function effectively in their new environments. Respondents in Constantine et al.'s (2005) study reported having financial problems, such as not having enough money for rent, food, clothing, entertainment, and tuition. As the student visa status does not allow for off-campus employment or to work more than 20 h a week, students may also find it difficult to improve their financial situation (Blake 2006; Essandoh 1995). Coupled with that, some Black-African students are also expected to provide financially for their families back home, which places undue stress on the students (Essandoh 1995).

Clashes in values may also lead to acculturative stress in Black-African international students and can result in increased feelings of alienation and isolation (Constantine et al. 2005). Differences in worldview, societal norms and expectations, and interpersonal relationships (Inman et al. 2001; Myrick 2002; Okeke et al. 1999) can affect how Black-African international students adjust to life in the U.S. According to Markus and Kitayama (1991), culture often dictates how individuals perceive themselves and others, and how they relate to other people. An independent or individualistic sense of self is typically regarded as operating in American and many Western European cultures while an interdependent or collectivistic sense of self is seen to operate in Asian, African, Latin-American, and many Southern European cultures.

An independent sense of self implies perceiving oneself as "an individual whose behavior is organized and made meaningful primarily by reference to one's own internal repertoire of thoughts, feelings, and action, rather than by reference to the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others" (Markus and Kitayama 1991, p. 226). In contrast, an interdependent sense of self, implies perceiving oneself "as part of an encompassing social relationship and recognizing that one's behavior is determined, contingent on, and, to a large extent organized by what the actor perceives to be the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others in the relationship" (Markus and Kitayama 1991, p. 227). According to those authors, an individual's cognition, affect, and motivation may be influenced by their sense of self as either independent or interdependent. For example, an individual with an independent sense of self may be motivated to be altruistic because their self-esteem may be enhanced, whereas an individual with an interdependent sense of self may be motivated to be altruistic because that is what is expected.

Based on Markus and Kitayama's work, Black-African international students' perception of societal norms and expectations and interpersonal relationships could lead to acculturative stress as they have to adjust from the interdependent worldview of their home environments to the independent worldview of life in the United States. Many experience a sense of loss (from being away from their family and friends) and may find it difficult to establish relationships with local people because of differences in worldview and communication patterns (Essandoh 1995; Nebedum-Ezeh 1997; Hayes and Lin 1994). Essandoh (1995) noted that Black-African students who arrive in the United States with their family may also have unique experiences with acculturative stress as their typically patriarchal family structure gets exposed to family patterns in the United States that may be quite different, leading to conflicts between spouses, and between parents and children.

What Next: Suggestions and Conclusions

Research suggests that, in general, international students feel the most stressed during their first month of arrival (Brown and Holloway 2008). Some researchers recommend that

institutions, international student advisors, cross-cultural trainers, researchers, host families, and job/internship placement sites invest themselves in helping international students transition successfully upon arrival in their new environments (Abarbanel 2009; Brown and Holloway 2008; Chapdelaine and Alexitch 2004; Ineson et al. 2006; Pantelidou and Craig 2006). They recommend that (a) Institutions become aware of the adjustment process involved for international students, especially at the beginning of their studies, and make it an important aspect of the support services given to them (Brown and Holloway 2008); (b) teachers and other important figures should help students on their arrival by teaching them strategies that would help alleviate the discomfort (Abarbanel 2009); (c) Institutions should provide counseling and conduct social support assessments and interventions aimed at overcoming culture shock (Pantelidou and Craig 2006); (d) monitor students and provide information on stress relief as well as encouraging integrative relationships with others (Ineson et al. 2006); (e) plan and promote programs that provide opportunities for international students to interact with individuals from the host culture, and develop cross-cultural training programs for individuals who may come into contact with international students, such as faculty and staff, as a means of facilitating their transition to the new culture (Chapdelaine and Alexitch 2004).

While most of the above studies and recommendations emphasize helping behaviors that will ease the discomfort of being in a new environment, to be effective, Constantine et al. (2005) have suggested that the strategies adopted to address international students' adjustment concerns should be culturally relevant to the population being served. Cultural relevance implies that individuals working with international students in general have to be aware that strategies that focus on "differentiation, individualism, and enmeshment" may pathologize the behaviors of individuals who are from non-Western backgrounds who may not have the same ideals (Warren and Constantine 2007, p. 217).

While institutions may plan culturally relevant strategies to help such students adjust, research shows that international students in general are not likely to seek counseling for their adjustment concerns (cf., Constantine et al. 2005; Essandoh 1995; Mori 2000; Pedersen 1991; Warren and Constantine 2007; Yakushko et al. 2008). In the event that international students seek help, group counseling has been suggested as an effective and beneficial means of addressing their concerns (cf., Carr et al. 2003; Dipeolu et al. 2007; Johnson and Sandhu 2007; Mori 2000; Walker and Conyne 2007). Groups that utilize a combination of counseling interventions, psycho-educational strategies, and social support skills, are seen as being most helpful for international students (Yakunina et al. 2011).

Group counseling may be beneficial because it may provide Black-African international students, as well as international students in general, with a sense of comfort that they might not have if they were to be in an individualized counseling experience, especially for those students who may have negative stereotypes towards counseling. The group experience can also help these students meet with others who may have similar backgrounds or experiences and that may serve to increase the size of their social networks, foster a sense of community, and reduce feelings of alienation. Furthermore, the group experience can help them adjust better to life in the U.S. as they learn and realize that other people in their group may be going through similar experiences. However, research suggests that Black-African international students in general are not likely to seek counseling (Constantine et al. 2005; Essandoh 1995). Therefore, university counseling centers can utilize informal outreach programs and workshops (Constantine et al. 2005), or advertise support groups (Warren and Constantine 2007) for these students in order to help them resolve some of their adjustment problems. Using these means may make the help-seeking process become less stigmatizing for those with negative perceptions towards counseling and mental health services.

Finally, Warren and Constantine (2007, pp. 219–220) have developed five guidelines that may prove useful for counselors and counselor educators in working with Black-African international students based on the work of Constantine et al. (2005), (2004b) and Essandoh (1995). These are:

- Explore your worldviews, assumptions, and biases to determine if or how they might be interfering with your ability to work competently with Black-African international students.
- Encourage Black-African international college students to share their beliefs about the etiology of their adjustment concerns and the best ways to alleviate them. In addition, involve these students in the selection of preferred and appropriate treatment strategies and plans.
- Identify culturally-based values (e.g., having a strong communal orientation) that might encourage these students' use of therapeutic resources (e.g., support groups) to alleviate their cultural adjustment problems or concerns. For example, (a) conducting treatment in a group for students, (b) encouraging Black-African international students to learn from each other's experiences, and (c) creating an atmosphere of relatedness and connectedness among students who might be experiencing similar cultural adjustment concerns.
- Consider providing post-migratory information to Black-African international students regarding U.S. social customs and norms.
- Incorporate close friends and family members to assist with treatment goals when possible or warranted.

It is hoped that helping professionals can incorporate these guidelines and other ideas mentioned previously into their work with this population by consulting with other international students, and Black-African international students in particular, as well as with international student advisors, cross-cultural trainers, researchers, host families, job/internship placement sites, etc., so that the needs of these students can be recognized and tentative solutions on how to address these issues can be defined. It is believed that these suggestions will help institutions of higher education find ways to provide culturally relevant, psycho-educational, and process-oriented strategies aimed at helping international students maintain their sense of identity, develop effective coping skills, foster a sense of community between them and the rest of the student body as a means of combating feelings of alienation, and to help them deal effectively with the experiences of culture shock and acculturative stress.

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