

A Study of Intercultural Adjustment Regarding Time Orientation of Russian Students in the U.S. Academic Environment

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Abstract: The study investigates intercultural adjustment (IA) of Russian students to the U.S. academic environment. IA is examined through the lens of the Time orientation (T orientation) of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's (1961) theory of value orientations. The study reveals students' T orientation and degrees, perceived difficulties, and strategies of adjustment.

Increased international contacts over the last few decades have influenced exchanges in the field of education. This increase in international educational exchanges has received attention of researchers from various fields who have seen the need to study the complex nature and structure of intercultural exchange processes. Dillon and Swann (1997), Dinges and Baldwin (1996), Kim (2001), Ting-Toomey (1999), and Ward and Kennedy (1993) focus their efforts on investigating origins, nature, and consequences of cultural differences, on the inter- and intrapersonal processes involved, and on ways of facilitating intercultural understanding. Recently, research has shifted from examining primarily traumatic experiences of cross-cultural transitions traditionally associated with culture shock to "the learning and growth facilitating nature of the same process" (Kim, 2001, p. 50) commonly termed as the intercultural adjustment process which can be identified as "the dynamic process by which individuals, upon relocating to new, unfamiliar, or changed cultural environments, establish (or reestablish) and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationships with those environments" (p. 31). Continuing that focus, this paper explores the nature of adjustment process of international students and ways to facilitate it.

Within this framework, the present study is given impetus by several deficiencies in the existing research on IA. First, a degree of confusion in terminology is apparent among scholars: some (Searley & Ward, 1990; Tsang, 2001; Ward & Kennedy, 1993) refer to the process as adjustment; some (Matsumoto et al., 2001; Ting-Toomey, 1999) as adaptation. Second, the current study agrees with Dillon and Swann (1997) and Dinges and Baldwin (1996) who insist that scholars have not yet come to agreement on the factors that impact international students' IA. For example, several researchers (Tsang, 2001; Ward & Kennedy, 1993; Ward, Okura, Kennedy & Kojima, 1999) distinguished its two domains: psychological and sociocultural. At the same time, Kealey (1996) and Matsumoto et al. (2001) concentrate only on the psychological components. Additionally, findings vary among the studies. While Searle and Ward (1990) found four variables that influence psychological adjustment, Ward and Kennedy's (1993) study supported only two of them. In short, this paper supports Ward et al. (1999) who state, "considerable controversy remains about the process of adapting to a new culture and the patterns of adjustment over time" (p. 277), and propose two causes of the problem: the lack of a strong theoretical foundation of the concept and the lack of an objective instrument. Remarkably, little research focuses specifically on students' adjustment to the U.S. academic environment. The literature review revealed only one study (Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002) that investigated the role of extracurricular activities and the students' adjustment to campus life. Finally, no study of Russian students' IA was found; meanwhile, among foreign scholars in 2000, Russians

became “the second largest group of scholars from Europe [in the U.S.] and the seventh largest worldwide” (Davis, 2000, p. 23).

To address the deficiencies, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck’s (1961) theory of value orientations was adapted. Briefly, while exploring cross-cultural variations in perceptions of the world, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck assumed the number of problems every society faces and has to solve is limited and suggested five questions that each society must answer. Proposing the answers to these questions would vary across cultures, they developed a system of five basic elements, essential for every culture, which they call value orientations. Each of the five layers in this paradigm (human—nature, man-nature, time, activity, and relational) deserves special attention; however, this paper focuses on one – T orientation-- and combines it with Sorokin’s (1943) theory of sociocultural time. Researchers (Adler, 1997; Chen & Starosta, 1998; Clarke, 1994; Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Ting-Toomey, 1999) agree the U. S. is situated at the far right extreme. For the purposes of the present study, based on the sources cited above, the author identified five most cited characteristics of the future oriented society found in the U.S. culture: (a) T as precious commodity, (b) short and medium-term planning ahead, (c) security by order, (d) activity evaluation in terms of future benefits, and (e) change and innovation.

Literature reveals no particular study has applied Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck’s (1961) theory to Russian culture. However, since Russia has been culturally and historically close to both Europe and Asia, it is reasonable to infer that it fits the profile of a past oriented society. This assumption corresponds to comments about Russian emphasis on past by Harris and Moran (1996) and Inglehart and Baker (2000) and findings by Stepanova and Trofimova (2000) that 42.3% of Russian students would prefer to live some of the past periods of Russian history. Therefore, this data suggest that Russian students are located on the past or past-present point of the T orientation continuum.

Consequently, this inquiry is based on the assumption that if emphasis on T orientation is different in different cultures, individuals might experience difficulties in adjustment during their cross-cultural transition. The study incorporates above-mentioned five characteristics of a future-oriented society, applies them to the context of a U.S. university, and examines if and how Russian students adjust to the characteristics and, hence, academic context. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to reveal: (a) Russian students’ T orientation, (b) whether their T orientation shifts towards the future after studying at a U.S. institution of higher education, (c) whether this shift in T orientation can be attributed to the students’ IA to the academic environment, and (d) what the adjustment process involves.

Method

In order to qualify for the study, a sample of Russian students enrolled at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) was non-randomly selected. The study data were collected from 25 Russian students, of whom 18 were females and 7 were males, attending UNI during the Spring 2002 semester. To be qualified to participate in the study, the students needed to have been enrolled at this institution for at least two semesters. The average length of stay was three semesters. All participants identified themselves as Russian and were graduate students.

Two instruments were used to assess the students’ T orientation and IA. The first instrument, the Value-Orientation Schedule (T section), was borrowed from Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck’s (1961) original questionnaire. It is a section of the instrument regarding T orientation which represents five scenarios followed by three possible answers. This instrument was used to identify the participants’ T orientation in order to test the construct validity of the

second instrument. The second instrument, the Time and Adjustment Instrument, was designed by the author to identify the participants' T orientation and to measure their IA. Since the present study was to investigate IA regarding T orientation in the academic setting, the sole use of the original instrument was considered insufficient. This instrument represents an open-ended interview which is based on five scenarios that were created for this study. To develop the scenarios, the original instrument used by Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck was adapted so that each scenario consisted of (a) a problem, (b) three possible answers, and (c) several discussion questions. Each problem represents an academic situation that new international students might encounter during their studies at a U.S. university and reflects one of the five characteristics of a future oriented society. The three possible answers to the problems were based on the literature identified above and reflect views of people with the three T orientations. Each of the answers contains (a) a solution to the particular academic problem, (b) its explanation, and (c) general statements about the topic from the perspective of people with the three T orientations. The discussion questions are divided into two parts to generate discussion concerning the academic situation and to examine the participants' T orientation (a) prior to coming to UNI and (b) after their experiences of studying at UNI.

To conduct the study, the researcher scheduled meetings with 25 students who met the criterion and agreed to participate during May 2002. By random selection, 12 students were asked to fill out the demographic sheet and both instruments at times convenient for them. The other 13 were additionally invited for an interview during which the discussion questions of the Time and Adjustment Instrument were asked.

Results

First, results show that upon their arrival, students chose past T orientation 29.6% of the time, present T orientation 52.8% of the time, and future T orientation 17.6% of the time. Therefore, the majority of Russian students had present T orientation upon arrival in the U.S. Second, the proportion of times in which a past, present, or future T orientation was selected indicated the students' T orientation was different after the students had studied at UNI compared to the time of their arrival. The number of answers reflecting past T orientation decreased by 16.8% and present T orientation by 22.4%. The number of choices reflecting future T orientation increased by 39.2%. Therefore, these findings suggest that Russian students' T orientation shifted after studying in the US, more often adopting future T orientation that is prevalent in their host country. Additionally, the greatest increase of future T orientation occurred in regard to such characteristics as security by order by 17 choices and the least increase was observed in regard to short-term planning ahead by only 2 choices. These data suggest that Russian students have made adjustment to future T orientation that characterizes the academic environment they experience at UNI.

Next, 8 of the 25 respondents showed a shift in T orientation in three scenarios. The information about these students obtained by the demographic sheet reveals two patterns. First, six of these students were majoring in fields related to foreign languages. Second, this group consisted of a large number of students who indicated their intent to stay in the U.S. after graduation. Two respondents did not show any change in T orientation. Though degrees of the perceived difficulty in adjustment are similar across situations, T as precious commodity was perceived as representing the highest degree of difficulty and short-term planning ahead was perceived as the easiest. The results indicate that the degrees of the perceived success in adjustment to the cultural characteristics are quite alike across the situations. The students

reported that they were more successful adjusting to T as precious commodity and the least successful adjusting to change/innovation.

A further examination of the students' responses across the five scenarios reveals several patterns concerning their adjustment process. The attitudes accompanying the students' adjustment to the five cultural characteristics fall into three categories: survival, necessary and voluntary integration, and willing acceptance of a characteristic because of its quality or the motivation to succeed academically. Moreover, the study results indicate that across the scenarios the adjustment process occurred at two levels: T management and knowledge and skills.

Discussion

T orientation

First, the findings showed present T orientation among a group of Russian students and suggest perceptions of T orientation might not be homogeneous among Russian students. Based on studies by Stepanova and Trofimova (2000) and Shmotkin (1991) and the interviews data, it is reasonable to conclude that Russian international students represent a group of young adults who are more socially mature than other Russian students of their age and who actively invest in their lives. The results show that the students' T orientation was different after they studied at a U.S. university and changed from present to future due to the individuals' IA. The respondents themselves attributed the change in their choices to their academic experiences at UNI and reported various learning gains which point to their IA and correspond to Kim (2001).

The results reveal that the greatest increase in future T orientation occurred with regard to security by order that imposed novelty in everyday academic life, was tightly connected to the students' academic performance, and lacked flexibility, forcing students to adjust and lead to the most shift in reported T orientation. Also, the participants' intent to stay in the U.S. was related to their shift in T orientation. Furthermore, the least change in T orientation occurred in regard to short-term planning ahead, which the students connected with freedom of choice and independence and reported absent in Russia. Therefore, among all five characteristics, planning ahead represents the most culturally distant one and, hence, negatively affects the adjustment process.

Intercultural Adjustment

The Russian students reported various degrees of perceived difficulties and successes of IA. Similarly to previous studies of IA, the present research identified several factors that affected students' perceptions of the cultural characteristics as the easiest/most difficult to adjust to and those that result in the least/most success in IA. Specifically, this inquiry revealed such factors as cultural distance (Ward & Kennedy, 1993; Ward et al., 1999), prior knowledge, skills and experience and their transfer (Dillon & Swann, 1997; Tsang, 2001; Ward et al., 1999), motivation to achieve academically, personal flexibility and empathy (Kealey, 1996; Martin & Harrell, 1996; Matsumoto et al., 2001). Three other factors, namely personal favor/disfavor of the cultural characteristics, students' plans after graduation, and language-related majors, appear to be good predictors of their IA.

Importantly, the study supported findings by Ward and Kennedy (1993) that employment of adjustment strategies positively affects international students' IA. First, the adjustment strategies concerned T management embraced both academic and personal life. This study revealed the second group of adjustment strategies related to academic requirements and utilization, expansion, or development of students' abilities, skills, and knowledge. These

strategies concerned language skills (Dillon & Swan, 1997; Tsang, 2001), communication skills (Redmond & Bunyi, 1991), computer skills, academic rules and expectations both inside and outside the classroom.

Limitations and Implications

The present study attempted to contribute to the existing knowledge of sojourners' IA adjustment by providing new theoretical grounds for research, developing an instrument, and providing new evidence for the complexity of the adjustment process. This research enriches the literature on intercultural adjustment in several ways. First, it shows that traditional theories of cross-cultural research, like Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's (1961), can provide valuable grounds for contemporary research. However, they should be re-examined from a dialectical perspective on intercultural communication. The current study revealed the sociocultural domain of T orientation is not uniform for one culture's population. Although Russian international students share many commonalities with other Russian people and students, they represent a distinct group. The framework of the current study did not allow the researcher to determine if and to what extent this shift in perceptions is caused by the sojourners' necessity to effectively function in the foreign culture or is internalized by the sojourners. Further research is needed to establish whether this variation is a result of generational difference or changes in the society's perception of T due to its modernization. Furthermore, the dynamics of the adjustment process is disclosed by the evidence that sojourners engage in the process of learning a new culture and undergo some shift in their perceptions, which become closer to the perceptions of the hosts. Follow-up studies are needed to determine whether the shift in perceptions has a permanent or temporary nature and the factors affecting it.

Importantly, this study provided evidence that sojourners' IA should be examined within the primary context of their activities during the cross-cultural experiences. Also, the current study supports Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's (1961) argument that T represents a sociocultural phenomenon intertwined with people's activities and social institutions; people's perceptions of T impact their cross-cultural experiences and should be included in intercultural training programs. Also, the study showed that adjustment to different sociocultural T requires sojourners to implement specific T-related adjustment strategies, which presents an interesting topic for intercultural training programs.

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