

PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL GROUP TO SUPPORT THE TRANSITION OF FOREIGN STUDENTS

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Abstract

Due to globalization, the number of students who prefer studying in countries different from their home country has grown rapidly. International students change from members of majority to members in minority in the host country. Arthur (2004) indicated that foreign students face distinct difficulties when compared to local students. International students deal with a wide variety of transition issues and experience a lot of adjustment concerns. They have problems that are different, some in kind and some in degree, from the host country students. Common problems that international students face include acculturative stress, language-related difficulties, cultural shock, racial discrimination, homesickness, isolation and loss of social support. Psycho-educational groups are structured by some central theme and designed to help people develop specific skills, understand certain themes, or progress through difficult life transitions. Group approach to counseling with international students may positively impact adjustment difficulties and psychological concerns of international students in the following ways: increasing social support and interpersonal learning, decreasing isolation and loneliness, providing a safe and normalizing environment and a non-judgmental place to practice language skills, helping group members learn practical information about living in a certain state. This paper aims to describe a psycho-educational support group which was designed and implemented in Ankara, Turkey, for some common challenges international students face and most of which relate to cross-cultural adjustment. Psycho-educational groups are structured by some central theme and designed to help people develop specific skills,

understand certain themes, or progress through difficult life transitions. The purpose of the study is to endorse psycho-educational group as an effective treatment modality for adjustment problems of international students. The psycho-education group was designed to help foreign students to better adjustment by imparting information, sharing experience with others, feeling similarity, and improving communication ability during sessions, and helping people learn how to create their own support systems outside of the group setting. A Psycho-educational group program was conducted in 8 sessions during 8 weeks, with 8 different topics. Each session lasted from 75 to 90 minutes. From what we know this was the first psycho-education group conducted in Turkey regarding international students. program and initial stage. Nevertheless, all group members agreed this experience was fruitful and they would recommend it to other foreign students.

Keywords:- *Psycho-education, support group, foreign students*

Introduction

The concept of traveling to foreign lands to learn from and teach others is not a new idea. For centuries, travel has played a central role in enlightenment and spread of knowledge throughout the world. Scholars voyaged to far lands to disseminate the notion of Christianity in Biblical times, while visitors to Britain during the Industrial Revolution would report to their home countries on the innovations discovered in their travels (Zakaria, 2005). In more modern terms, Zakaria (2005) noted that the diffusion of knowledge leads to burgeoning growth and industrialization across the globe as individuals and countries learn from each other.

Due to globalization the number of students who prefer studying in countries different from their home country has grown rapidly. International Students change from members of majority to members in minority in the host country. Arthur (2004) indicated that international students face distinct difficulties when compared to local students. Common problems that International students face include acculturative stress, language-related difficulties, cultural shock, racial discrimination, homesickness, isolation and loss of social support. Over the past three decades, the number of students enrolled outside their country of citizenship has risen dramatically, from 0.8 million worldwide in 1975 to 4.1 million in 2010 (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development – OECD; 2012). Even though Turkey is not included in the countries with a major number of international students, the number of students who come

for the purpose of education is increasing, especially in the last five years. For instance, according to data in 2009, 2710 students came to study in turkey, in 2010 this number increased in 7273 (Ozoğlu et al., 2012). The number of international students in Turkey arrived at 32.000 (ÖSYM, 2013). Mostly, International Students came from Balkan countries, Middle East, Africa and Turkish republics.

International Students and Transitions

International students deal with a wide variety of transition issues and experience a lot of adjustment concerns. They have problems that are different, some in kind and some in degree, from the host country students. Sandhu (1994) talks about internal and external factors of transitions. International students meet many distinct challenges in their path to adjusting to new academic surroundings, and these changes may influence the students' academic achievement and psychological well-being, as well as educational institutions' efficiency in retaining these students on their campuses (Barratt & Huba, 1994; Pedersen, 1991; Zhai, 2002). While each international student is unique, common problems may include: language barriers, cultural differences and racial discrimination, social interaction and personal adjustments (Abe, Talbot & Geelhoed, 1998; Luzzo, Henao, & Wilson, 1996). Despite of the problems, research suggests that International students underutilize counseling services and that there is typically a low level of satisfaction with those services (Pederson, 1991).

In Turkish literature, Özçetin (2013) researched the problems faced by international students in higher education in Turkey and the factors that influence these problems. He investigated loneliness and problems caused by cultural differences are the most important objects that effect International students.

The special needs of these students are evident, and as the number of students' increases, this need becomes even greater. However, the ability of foreign students to cope with the changes in their life style depends on personal factors, past knowledge of the host country, the length of stay in the host country, and the number and intensity of differences and similarities between the student`s culture and host country`s culture (Dunnet, 1981).

Cross-Cultural Adjustment Concerns of International students

The primary characteristic of international students is that they are people in cross-cultural transition (Arthur, 2003). They must explore the needs and demands of leaving home, adjusting to the culture in the host country, and then make the re-entry transition home. The term most often associated with this disruption of culture when talking about international student transition is culture shock (Lysgaard, 1955; Oberg, 1960). Culture shock refers to the experience of sojourning international students who must learn to deal with the lack of familiar customs, and become familiar with the host country, often with the expectation of integrating into the new cultural practices (McKinlay, Pattison, & Gross, 1996). Other researchers (Berry, 1997; Draguns, 1996; Tanaka-Matsumi & Higginbotham, 1996) have emphasized that culture shock involves new learning for coping with novel aspects of a novel environment, such as assumptions, beliefs, and social norms for behavior. Despite mounting evidence against traditional models of culture shock, these models continue to dominate international student research and clinical practice. There is growing evidence that traditional conceptualizations of culture shock such as the U-curve (Lysgaard, 1955) and W-curve (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963) models inadequately explain international students' transition experiences. For example culture shock has been characterized as maladaptive versus a natural response to cultural contrasts. When culture shock is viewed as a kind of "disease," usually its implication is to let students "take the course of the 'culture shock cycle' and once 'adjusted' they 'recover' as if they have had a normal cold or the common flu" (McKinlay et al., 1996). The need for rapid cultural learning is most apparent at the initial stage of contact with a new culture. International students are faced with many of the same adjustment issues as other students; however, this is compounded by the need for rapid cultural learning. However, it is important to point out that cross cultural transitions unfold over time, and student issues may fluctuate as new demands are perceived and others are managed (Arthur, 1997; Shougee, 1999). Rather than viewing culture shock in such negative light, it can be conceptualized as cultural learning and a necessary process in the experience of crossing cultures (Berry, 1997; Huxur, Mansfield, Nnazor, Schuetze, & Segawa, 1996).

The adjustment of international students, is strongly impacted by the degree of similarity or difference between their home and host culture (Pedersen, 1991; Sheehan & Pearson, 1995). The responsiveness of the host culture, including counselors, impacts the degree of learning that is shared as people from various cultures come together in an educational environment. Although

the concept of acculturation provides counselors with a framework for understanding international student issues, the complexity of cross-cultural transitions and adjustment may be better understood as a process of enculturation. Ho (1995) makes a distinction between cultural group membership and internalized culture. Cultural group membership reflects the external culture outside of the individual such as food, dress, customs, and religion, whereas internalized culture reflects individualized levels of enculturation including specific beliefs, attitudes, and ways of thinking. As counselors, we are often more sensitized to understanding those characteristics associated with cultural group membership, which may lead to decreased attention to individual differences. In trying to be especially sensitive when working cross-culturally, counselors may assume more homogeneity than really exists. Counselors should consider the wide range of individual differences that are very apparent in people from one's own cultural background and ethnicity, and then extrapolate to other cultures. For example, in working with two Chinese international students from Singapore, the counselor may be cognizant of the traditional value forbidding sexual relationships before marriage. In counseling these women about their relationship problems, one needs to determine the individual level of enculturation on the issue of sexual intimacy. One student may adhere to the traditional value, while the other student may be engaged in a premarital sexual relationship with her boyfriend. In both cases, although the women may espouse the traditional viewpoint of her culture in public, each woman holds a different belief and value system that impacts her subsequent decisions and actions. This example highlights the range of values and beliefs in individual members of any society.

The distinction between cultural group membership and internalized culture may help counselors to better understand how international students from the same culture can be affected very differently by cross-cultural transitions. It reminds counselors about the importance of assessing the individual student's level of enculturation on each issue raised. For example, when counseling an international student from India or Pakistan the therapist may understand that culturally, women are less valued than men, and they are expected to be subservient to their fathers and husbands. However, the student may reject her culture's strong preference for males, while holding strong feminist ideals of egalitarianism and equality for men and women. This example highlights the range of beliefs and values within any given individual that may conform or conflict with their own cultural group norms and values.

Draguns (1996) describes how internationalized or subjective culture, including perceptions and expectations, is like the air we breathe, and it is only through deprivation that we become aware of it. This explanation reminds counselors that international students' experiences can prompt learning about their own internalized culture, as well as learning more about the host culture. For instance, an international student from Peru may not have considered making her own decisions or traveling alone in the city because of cultural experiences that discourage these actions in her own country. In Canada, when she encounters women who make decisions without consulting their boyfriends, take taxis by themselves, and have little contact with their families even when they live in the same city, she suddenly experiences her own beliefs differently. In counseling such a student, the therapist must deal with her dissonance associated with two culturally different social scripts available to women. It is not only she sees that the new attitudes and actions are different from her own, but she can choose to reflect on the meaning and relevancy of all possible conditions and options. It is this kind of dissonance that creates part of the emotional fatigue in the transition process.

Rationale for the Study

Education in a foreign country involves adjustment to the new academic and social environment that may put academic performance and adaptation at risk. There are many problems which each person faces when he travels from one country to another and for students these problems can affect their output. Psycho-educational groups are structured by some central theme and designed to help people develop specific skills, understand certain themes, or progress through difficult life transitions. Psycho-educational groups serve a number of purposes: imparting information, sharing common experiences, teaching people how to solve problems, offering support, and helping people learn how to create their own support systems outside of the group setting. Each person can dialogue freely with others about concerns, in order to better comprehend themselves and to learn new ways of thinking, feeling, and doing.

A Psycho-educational group program was conducted in 8 sessions during 8 weeks. Each session lasted from 75 to 90 minutes. Group members were from different countries (Albania, India, Indian Occupied Kashmir, Afghanistan, and Pakistan), who came to Turkey to study. Four group members were male and four female. One member was following his PhD studies, five members were following Master studies and two members were in the first year of Bachelor program.

Statement of the Problem

There is seemingly a great need for additional support for international students and many counseling centers have recognized the potential value of support group services. However, at the present time, it seems that many counseling centers have been unsuccessful in their attempts to develop and maintain this type of service. While the existing literature provides some valuable information and ideas based on each author's personal clinical experiences and knowledge, there is still much work to be done to establish professional consensus and conceptual clarity regarding best practices for international student groups. There is also very little published research evidence regarding best practices for developing and leading these types of groups. A support group would promote the development of a social support system to provide a critical buffer against adjustment stress.

Group approach to counseling with international students may directly positively impact adjustment difficulties and psychological concerns of international students in the following ways: increasing social support and interpersonal learning, decreasing isolation and loneliness, providing a safe and normalizing environment and a non-judgmental place to practice language skills, helping group members learn practical information about living in the United States, and providing opportunities to learn new coping strategies (Carr, Koyama, & Thiagarajan, 2003; Dipeolu, Kang, & Cooper, 2007; Smith et al., 1999; Walker & Conyne, 2007). Turkey attracts numbers of students these last years with different programs of scholarships.

Our Group Process and observations

The main purpose of this program was helping group members to understand and clarify the changes they most want to make and to equip them with the understanding which they need to make these changes and adjustments. The objective of this psycho-educational group is a better adjustment by sharing experience with others, feeling similarity, and improving communication ability during sessions. The program was consisting eight sessions which included members from various countries like Albania, India, Indian Occupied Kashmir, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Each session we designed as per the needs of the situations and after regress literature review about the common problems faced by the international students in new country. The most common issues which came under the light of our attention during each session was as follows:

1. Language
2. Food differences
3. Cultural differences
4. Homesickness
5. Lonliness
6. Racisim
7. Religion

These was some common issues which came up and the only one factor among these was considered by group as a positive discrimination which was religion. Most of the member explained their experience how people behave positively with them when they had been asked for their religion and if it was similar i.e. Islam, people behaved well and tried to help them. Now we will discuss about the strongest factors which are almost interwoven together and influence the adjustment on a whole.

Being in a new country with totally new language and the place where somebody rarely speak English is a big challenge and adjusting in such a place is itself a challenge. Turkey with a unique culture and language uniqueness which is having some common words from French and Arabic but in itself a unique language with to some extent English alphabets is a first challenge each non-Turkish faces as they land in Turkey. Similarly our each group members share their emotional as well as funny experiences while they came in Turkey. According to each member of the group there is difference in every country but here in Turkey language makes it worse. It has been observed within the group that people struggle a lot because of language and learning the language in Tomer (Language Learning Institutes) is totally different then the academic Turkish Language. As one of the group member commented “ *Tomer teaches you only how to buy tomatoes and potatoes....nothing else*”.

Another key factor to adjustment was food which we found a strange connection with adjustment. As most of our group members was staying in Government Dormitories and the quality of food as per they say is not good. So for adjustment and adaptations issue food also plays a key challenge which they share is not at all similar to theirs. Here I as a counselor what's to mention that most of group members are Asian and in those countries food plays a very important role in culture as well as adjustments.

Turkish culture is rich and unique but as per the experiences the group members didn't

find it much difficult to adapt except some small issues which are unique and as such culture or norms didn't made much issues related to adjustment. May be again here staying in dormitories didn't gave such a big cultural shock to the students here except food. In dormitories the cultural contact is less and because if spending one year in Tomer rather than University where people meet only foreigners so during first year the effect of culture is less.

Homesickness and loneliness are also a hard problem which each member accepted is very difficult to face especially when you are in a country too far from your own. Here also we find that many other factors are interwoven because staying in a dormitories and the most key factor which remind them of staying away from is food. As one of the group member quoted "I remember my mother always when I sit in our canteen for eating".

After the first stage of adjustment when people finish language courses and entered universities, it's the first time they have a strong cultural contact but here the language becomes the big barrier for almost all students to make new friends especially Turkish. The members in a group share their experiences and explained language plays a key role to share feelings and also they felt a close bond with foreigners rather than Turkish fellow mates. At this point of time culture starts playing a key role as one of the group member quoted "*Turkish fellow mates are unable to understand and get connected with our problems because ours are unique for them and they never faced such problems*". And such situation leads to homesickness and loneliness and they start looking for people around who belongs from their country or also a foreigner.

One of the last highlighted factor is racism and here we want to mention that none of our group member was African but members had experienced with their co-mates when they had been discriminated. Here a type of bond had been seen among all foreigners vs. Turkish. People start forming a bond and understand each other's problem more and connected more to each other no matter which country they are in verses the country they are living in.

Discussion and Evaluation

From what we know this was the first psycho-education group conducted in Turkey regarding international students. Group members at the beginning were not aware of the need for external support and were skeptic about its benefits. Being in a foreign country with new experiences made them more skeptic and they was like used to see what's going on around and same way they took the program and initial stage. Nevertheless, all group members agreed this experience was fruitful and they would recommend it to other foreign students. Moreover, because

expectations of gender role vary from culture to culture, it was useful to have two group facilitators, one of either sex. Group member participation was enhanced by having the leader and co-leader from the same culture.

Limitations of the Study

Finally, some limitations in this study merit comment. First of all is the number of participation in the group consists of just eight members and based on their experience we cannot generalize our observations. Second limitation was the members belong to few countries like Asia and from just one East European country. These are countries with some culture aspects and religion elements the same to Turkey. We do not know how the experiences of international student group members from other countries may differ. Last but not the least limitation was the Leader and co-leader also belongs to the same culture as that of members so there might be some observational biases or differences among the leaders.

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