

FROM OUTSIDERS TO INSIDERS: THE CORRELATION BETWEEN CROSS-CULTURAL ADAPTATION AND BASIC PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

XiLong Zhao

College of Vocational and Further Education, Central China Normal University, Wuhan 430079, Hubei, China.
Corresponding Email: zhaoxilongff@gmail.com

Abstract: With the development of international education, the number of students studying abroad is increasing. Cross-cultural adaptation issues have become an inevitable problem for them. Based on basic psychological needs theory, this empirical study selected 105 Chinese students who are studying at the tertiary level in the United Kingdom and New Zealand as samples to verify the cross-cultural adaptation process and basic psychological needs of international students. Through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, it is found that the main reasons for the cultural shock experienced by Chinese international students are differences in the higher education between China and English-speaking countries, language ability and academic literacy problems, while the cultural shock caused by life adaptation problems is not obvious. It is also verified that the satisfaction of basic psychological needs is negatively correlated with the negative impact brought by the culture shock. The satisfaction of basic psychological needs enables international students to have a higher learning motivation, and also enables foreign students to have the motivation to study when facing difficulties in a foreign country, as well as the determination to support themselves not to compromise with difficulties.

Keywords: Cross-cultural adaptation; Basic psychological needs theory; International students from China; Overseas students in the United Kingdom and New Zealand

1 INTRODUCTION

China has become a major source of international students in 2023-2024, with nearly more than one million students studying in overseas higher education institutions [1]. In the past cross-cultural research on international students from China, it was pointed out that most international students inevitably experienced challenges during the cross-cultural adaptation stage [2].

Culture shock mentioned in this study refers to a person's psychological and physiological uncomfortable reaction in a foreign country [3]. As a relatively young and inexperienced group, some international students feel strong depression due to communication difficulties, lack of social support, and huge cultural differences [4]. In a survey on the mental health of Chinese international students, 45% of Chinese international students at the school expressed they had experienced symptoms of depression, and 29% of them had symptoms of anxiety [5]. Their study also revealed that the prejudice in Chinese culture prevents Chinese international students from seeking help and treatment from doctors because of mental illness. It puts Chinese students studying abroad at huge mental health risks. The mental health status of international students will be affected by cross-cultural shock. In another empirical research, culture shock is improved to hurt international students' psychological and sociocultural adaptation [6].

Given the profound impact of culture shock, the goal of this research is to investigate the current status of culture shock among international students and the reasons why international students encounter culture shock. To be specific, this study aims to examine the impact of Chinese students' independent motivation to study abroad in the UK and New Zealand on their cultural impact and examine the mediating role of basic psychological needs satisfaction.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Basic Psychological Needs Theory

Basic psychological needs are the core concept and important theoretical branch of self-determination theory. The basic psychological needs theory points out that people have three innate psychological needs, namely autonomy needs, competence needs and relatedness needs [7]. When these psychological needs are met, the individual develops in a positive direction; when these psychological needs are blocked, the individual develops in a negative direction. The three needs correspond to three feelings, namely, a sense of autonomy, a sense of competence, and a sense of belonging. The need for autonomy refers to the sense of control and psychological freedom that individuals feel over their own behavior, and to make action decisions according to their own wishes [7]. When people's autonomy needs are satisfied, they will have higher initiative, participation, and creativity in daily activities [8].

Competence needs are the individual's sense of control over the environment and the development of a new skill based on this. It is an individual's innate tendency to explore the environment [7]. The research proved that the satisfaction of competence needs is the mediating variable for activity feedback to affect intrinsic motivation [9]. When the sense of

competence is strong, positive feedback promotes the internalization of motivation. This study shows that satisfying competency needs can promote the transformation of extrinsic motivation into intrinsic motivation.

Relatedness needs refer to the good relationships an individual feels with others and the support they receive from others; when relationship needs are met, people will feel a safe interpersonal atmosphere [7]. When relatedness needs are met, a sense of belonging, connection, and care will occur, which will bring positive emotional impact.

Regarding the theory of basic psychological needs, individuals meet three needs at the same time [7]. Only one or two needs are not enough to achieve the healthiest development state, which determines the degree of motivation internalization. The degree of satisfaction of the three needs determines the degree of motivation internalization.

In this theory, the internalization of motivation and basic psychological needs are particularly important. Based on this theory, the internalization of motivation and the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs can effectively influence Autonomous motivation and the ability to achieve positive outcomes. In other words, international students with self-determination motivation make their decision to study abroad based on interests, hobbies, and identity rather than external reward mechanisms. After meeting the students' basic psychological needs, they should be less affected by culture shock.

For instance, Chinese students in Belgium and Canada are found to decide to study abroad on their own, rather than making decisions based on other people's expectations or the influence of the external environment [10]. Hence, it is easier for them to adapt to the cultural environment, in other words, it is less affected by culture shock.

2.2 The Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Chinese International Students

Prior studies have explored the cultural shock issues encountered by Chinese international students, the role of basic psychological needs theory, motivation and so on. A narrative study on the study abroad careers of three Chinese dancers reveals that the three Chinese international students relatively clearly and completely embodied Oberg's concept of culture shock, such as uneasiness and confusion, caused by changes in the cultural environment [11]. Freshness and a series of strong psychological changes. It reflects the different reactions of different people when encountering cultural shock. Some students feel uncomfortable of being unable to understand the culture when they first come into contact with a new culture, while others feel unable to integrate into sharing and discussion with classmates. Similar to an outsider, some students use the learning experience as an outlet to resolve cultural shock and think they can do anything. This psychological state has also changed accordingly with the passage of time. From the unfamiliarity, discomfort and freshness of arriving at the study abroad destination, to the selection, recognition and interpretation of the teaching content in the study abroad environment, and finally the acceptance of the teaching content.

A study on Chinese students' motivation to study abroad has found that self-determined motivation to study abroad is more conducive to students' cross-cultural adaptation than non-self-determined motivation to study abroad, and discovered the goals of international students [10]. A two-factor structure, which includes "protective factors" to avoid disadvantages at home and "self-development factors" to pursue a good education and better career development opportunities. Therefore, self-determination motivation brings students lower cultural shock and higher happiness. It has also confirmed that the satisfaction of basic psychological needs in self-determination theory plays a key mediating role in cultural shock, subjective well-being and self-determination motivation [12]. The satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs is related to life. Satisfaction is positively related to positive emotions and negatively related to culture shock and negative emotions.

3 RESEARCH METHODS

A random sampling data collection method was used, which can reduce sample distortion problems caused by selection bias and enable us to better understand and describe the performance of international students when they encounter cultural shock. This study distributed questionnaires to Chinese students who have stayed in the UK and New Zealand for more than 3 years through Questionnaire Star in September 2023. A total of 117 questionnaires were collected, and 105 were valid questionnaires (males: 59.05%, females: 40.95%) effective rate 89.74%. 16.19% of the respondents were between 18 and 22 years old, 59.05% were between 23 and 28 years old, and 24.76% were above 29 years old. The participants were all Chinese and went to study in the UK (54.29%) and New Zealand (45.71%) respectively. In addition, 11.43% of the respondents' language proficiency (e.g. IELTS) is between 5.0-5.5, more than half (55.24%) of the respondents are between 6.0-6.5, 27.62% have a language level of 7.0 or above, and another 5.71 % of respondents did not provide language scores. All interviewees are self-financed international students.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Culture Shock Experience

Based on the first-hand data, the process of cultural shock experienced by the participants is analysed to pave the way for subsequent research presentations. To express the process of cultural shock intuitively, according to the questionnaire results, the mean value of each question is calculated to form a curve, as shown in Figure 1.

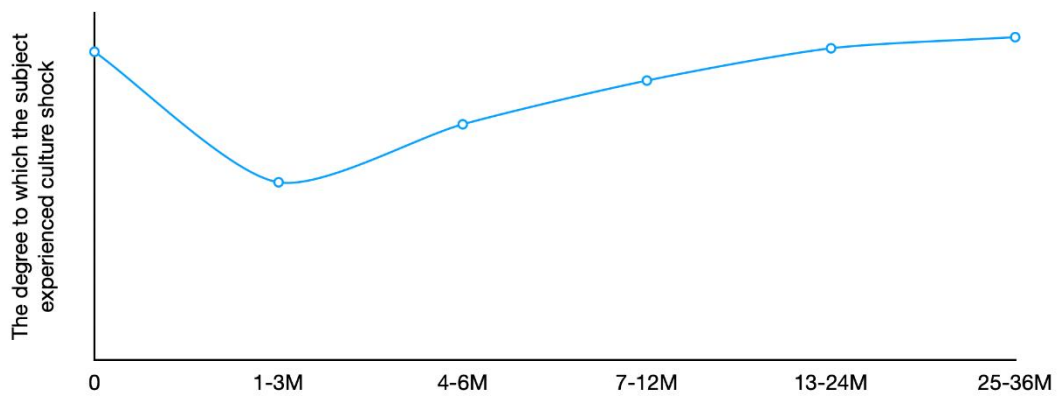


Figure 1 Overall Culture Shock Adaptation Process

Through the analysis above, Chinese international students generally go through four stages, including the honeymoon, shock, adjustment and adaptation stages. To further analyze the overall situation of cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese international students, this study set up an overall evaluation question "How do you feel about living and studying abroad?" Overall, most people think that they can adapt to life and study abroad. However, the degree of adapting to life and study is indeed different. The overall situation of cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese students going to the UK or New Zealand is good and the degree of adaptation is relatively high, as illustrated in Figure 2.

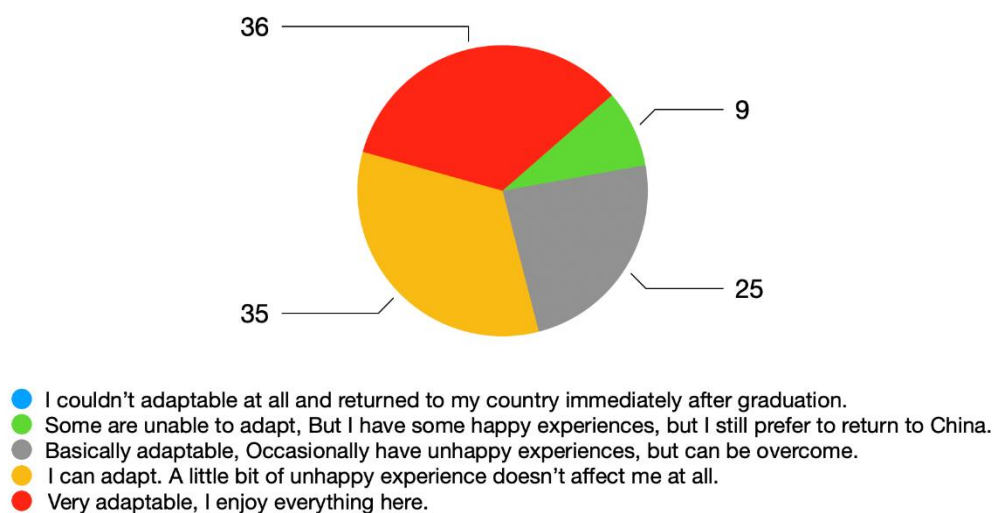


Figure 2 Culture Shock and Cultural Adaptation

The proportion of people who are adaptable to studying and living overseas accounts for 91.42%, which shows that most people can adapt to living and studying overseas despite varying degrees. Among them, 36 participants think that they are very adaptable to local life and study and can adapt to overseas study and life. The other 35 participants think they can adapt and a little unhappy experience will not affect them at all. 25 participants think they can basically adapt, and occasionally have unhappy experiences but can overcome them. 9 participants felt that they were somewhat unable to adapt and had some happy experiences, but they still preferred to return to their country. Among the 9 participants, a special case is that one interviewee rated it as somewhat unable to adapt in terms of overall feelings, but at every stage he showed that he was very unadaptable to living and studying overseas. His willingness to study abroad is not an independent wish. After arriving at the destination, he refused to socialize, but felt boring and had a strong sense of loneliness. He also encountered academic difficulties during their studies, which led to long-term persistence in the culture of the study abroad destination.

4.3 Correlation Between the Degree of Satisfaction of Basic Psychological Needs and Cultural Shock

The satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs has a negative correlation with cultural shock, as seen in Table 1. To verify whether each of the psychological needs affects the degree of culture shock, this study further splits the three independent needs into two, each corresponding to the degree of culture shock. Results indicated that each need individually mediated the negative relationship between self-determination and culture shock.

Table 1 Correlation between Three Basic Psychological Needs and the Impact of Culture Shock

Three basic psychological needs	Correlation coefficient
Autonomous needs	0.377**
Competency needs	0.389**
Belonging needs	0.394**

Note: * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

This study extends previous findings and re-verifies the relationship between three basic psychological needs and culture shock. Chinese students who have a higher degree of autonomous motivation to study abroad and a higher degree of satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs are less likely to encounter culture shock in the UK and New Zealand. These findings are in line with prior research [13]. Considering the application of new technologies, the English language level of Chinese university students is expected to increase, so reducing the challenges in the cross-cultural adaptation, which is basically consistent with research related to many existing findings [14-15].

The other consideration is that participants were all self-funded students. They had stricter requirements for themselves because of the high cost. They had a high degree of satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs and strong autonomous motivation. In addition, due to financial pressure and family expectations, as well as the goal of successfully obtaining a degree, Students show good self-discipline behavior, and clear goals also give students the motivation to adjust themselves.

5 CONCLUSION

The United Kingdom and New Zealand have brought obvious cultural differences to Chinese students. The degree of cross-cultural adaptation directly affects students' study and life. When international students move from one culture to another cultural environment, they will more or less not adapt to the phenomenon, and present certain stages. Therefore, the impact of culture shock on the cultural adaptation of Chinese international students has practical and theoretical significance.

The main findings of this study are as follows. Initially, there are stages in the cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese students studying in the UK and New Zealand, which can be roughly divided into the honeymoon period, the shock period, the adjustment period, and the adaptation period. The honeymoon period is generally 0-1 month, and the shock period is generally after starting to study. The adjustment period is longer, usually 4-12 months, and then enters the adaptation period.

Moreover, there is a negative correlation between the degree of satisfaction of basic psychological needs and the negative impact of culture shock. The satisfaction of basic psychological needs enables international students to have high learning motivation and also enables international students to learn when facing difficulties in a foreign country. The motivation to continue, and the determination to support oneself and not compromise with difficulties.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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