Foreign students

Education and culture shock

ADRIAN FURNHAM *discusses how psychology can improve the experience for our overseas visitors.*

STUDENTS have travelled from one country to another for centuries, particularly in Europe. They have often faced problems: an early study in America, published in 1925, listed difficulties for foreign students over academic issues, language, housing, economic issues, their inability to become socially accepted, health and recreation, and racial prejudice (Hammer, 1992). But it was not until comparatively recently that the foreign student experience became the focus of psychological study (e.g. Ward *et al.*, 2001). Can psychological theory and research make this experience a more positive one?

Why might foreign students have a problem?

There are various recent books exclusively on foreign students, or 'sojourners', that look at the psychology of their experience (e.g. McNamara & Harris, 1997; van Tilburg & Vingerhoets, 1997). They generally describe foreign students as young, well educated, highly motivated, adaptable and better off than many of their peers. But some remain vulnerable to depression, illness and poor academic performance. This is as true when British students go abroad on short-term exchanges (e.g. Erasmus) or on extended undergraduate and postgraduate degrees as it is when foreign students come here. Given the fact that foreign students are an increasing minority and vital to universities (see 'Facts and figures'), it is important that they adapt to the new culture rapidly so they may operate effectively in whatever they are doing. The costs of repatriation and breakdown are high. What might be behind possible 'culture shock'?

Culture shock (see box opposite) is a widely known and discussed phenomenon among young people, who travel abroad more than they used to. The fact that many students have been abroad before their educational sojourn, possibly many times, means that in theory they should be more used to culture shock. However, short holidays are less likely to have produced culture shock than extended stays or working experiences when local culture has

WEBLINKS

Council for International Education:
 www.ukcosa.org.uk
Council for International Students:
 www.cisuk.org.uk
Transworld Education:
 www.transworldeducation.com
National Union of Students: *www.nus.org.uk*

FACTS AND FIGURES

In 1973 there were 35,000 'international students' studying in the UK, but by 1992 that number had risen to 95,000. In 2001/2 there were 88,800 students from the EU and 136,290 'other' overseas students in higher education in Britain. Britain has about 17 per cent of the world's total overseas student population. The fees from fully funded overseas students totalled £310 million for 1992/3, but in addition the expenditure on UK-based goods and services was at least £405 million. In the same period about 5 per cent of the income of the universities was based on foreign students' fees (McNamara & Harris, 1997); this had risen to 6 per cent of a total income of £13.5 billion in 2001.

been 'fully engaged'. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that even frequent extended sojourns abroad do not substantially reduce the risk of culture shock, though people may learn better to expect and recognise typical reactions to living in a foreign culture and learn how to cope with it.

By the mid-1990s there was a sizeable literature on the psychological needs and problems of international students. Sandhu and Asrabadi (1994) categorised the main cause of problems as twofold:

- *Intrapersonal factors*: A profound sense of loss (family and friends); a sense of inferiority (particularly in America); a sense of uncertainty (about the future).
- *Interpersonal factors*: Communication (language and social skills); cultural shock (differences in expectations and social norms); loss of social support systems (particularly from family); miscellaneous factors such as education and immigration difficulties; making friends and establishing social support networks.

Furnham and Bochner (1986) have argued that foreign students face several difficulties, some exclusive to them (as opposed to native students). There are the difficulties that face all young people, whether studying at home or abroad, in becoming emotionally independent, self-supporting, productive and a responsible member of society. There are academic stresses when students are expected to work very hard, often under poor conditions, with complex material. But there are also the problems that often confront people living in a foreign culture, such as racial discrimination, language problems, accommodation difficulties, separation reactions, dietary restrictions, financial stress, misunderstandings and loneliness. Finally, the national or ethnic role of overseas students is often prominent in their interactions with host members. In a sense, foreign students are being continually thrust into the role of ambassadors or representatives of their nation, often by well-meaning people politely enquiring about their home customs and national origins, but sometimes by prejudiced individuals who may denigrate the policies or achievements of the student's country of origin. In shops there may be a tendency to speak slowly

CULTURE SHOCK

There remains no clear definition of culture shock, a term first used by the anthropologist Oberg (1960). In a brief and largely anecdotal article, he mentions several aspects of culture shock:

- strain due to the effort required to make necessary psychological adaptations
- a sense of loss and feelings of deprivation in regard to friends, status, profession and possessions
- being rejected by, or rejecting, members of the new culture
- confusion in role, role expectations, values
- surprise, anxiety, even disgust and indignation after becoming aware of cultural differences
- feelings of impotence due to not being able to cope with the new environment.

and clearly on the assumption that the foreigner's English is poor, and motherly ladies on buses will want to know if the student is feeling homesick. All this can be amusing, annoying or infuriating, depending on the circumstances, and is a burden that all foreigners must occasionally bear.

Do foreign students suffer from poor physical and mental health?

So, do these situations and stresses actually have a significant psychological impact on the foreign student? One of the most influential papers in this area was by Ward (1967), who argued for the existence of a 'foreign-student syndrome' characterised by vague, non-specific physical complaints,

---

'foreign students face several difficulties, some exclusive to them'

---

a passive, withdrawn interaction style and a dishevelled, unkempt appearance. His thesis, which was to influence a lot of subsequent work, was that depressed and 'culture-shocked' overseas students tend to somatise their problems so as to avoid losing face, thus providing them with the justification to attend clinics for medical, as opposed to psychological, help. Hence it is to be expected that foreign students would be overrepresented in student health services.

But studies purporting to show differences in the mental health of native and overseas students by using medical consultation rates must be interpreted with caution. Overseas students may have no other source of help, and their beliefs about the causes and treatment of illness may differ from those prevalent in the host country. For instance, diseases seen as trivial by one society may not be seen

as such by members of another culture, so that newly encountered infections could lead to a greater proportion of foreign students seeking medical advice than native-born students familiar with the problems. This might explain the larger number of overseas students supposedly with hypochondriacal symptoms (Ward *et al.*, 2001). Also, an above-average consulting rate for any group (native or foreign) may arise from very frequent visits from a small subgroup of its members prone to visiting doctors. Hence the average number of visits per individual has to be considered, and if the distribution is badly skewed, appropriate corrective statistics used.

Some studies have reported incidence of fairly severe breakdown. For instance, Janca and Helzer (1992) in a 25-year retrospective analysis of the psychiatric morbidity of foreign students in Yugoslavia, traced 63 foreign and 120 domestic students who were hospitalised, and found high rates of paranoia and depressive reactions. Of the foreign students admitted, 67 per cent showed paranoid delusions, 62 per cent anxiety, and 52 per cent anxiety, which, when compared with lower rates for domestic students, they took as evidence of the correlation between 'psychiatric morbidity and maladaptation to the new living conditions' (p.287). It is perhaps no surprise then that many educational institutions have established orientation and counselling programmes for their international students.

However, the assumption that the experience of relocating to another country is usually stressful for young people is being challenged. For instance, Nathanson and Marcenko (1995) found no significant or enduring negative effects on the 174 eighth-grade children they studied attending English-speaking schools in

Tokyo. In fact, they found that the primary determinant of a child's well-being was the stability and support in their family life.

It is certainly worth noting that for many students the 'overseas' experience is enormously beneficial and can shape their outlook for the rest of their lives. Many say it was one of their most profound life experiences, leaving them very positively disposed to their university, the town or city it was in and the country as a whole. Whatever negative culture shock they may have experienced early on was soon overcome, and mostly only positive experiences recalled.

What can be done to help?

There are so many orientation programmes now available at universities that there is an active research programme in measuring their efficacy. On the basis of their review and research, McKinlay *et al.* (1996) have recommended that higher education institutions can improve the well-being of international students via

- a more sophisticated analysis of the problems and needs of individual international students, relevant to the local higher education environment;
- the development of coherent management strategies to support international students (support is often provided by several agencies within institutions in a relatively uncoordinated and unstructured way; communication between these agencies, and between them and students, tends to be poor);
- a support system that would address student needs all year round;
- a support system that reaches those who do not participate in initial orientation programmes (the assumption tends to be made that students not participating in initial programmes do not feel they need support; however, many students are not able to participate in such programmes for reasons outside their control);
- the development of good documentation of the support system, so that international students know where to go for help and advice, and the provision of accurate information about the host environment; and
- less emphasis on the integration of international students, who will remain in a host country for a relatively short time, and an encouragement to maintain links with home, and form links with co-nationals in the host country.

There are also ways that psychologists can help, particularly in the role of student counsellor (see box below).

How can students help themselves?

One area of research of theoretical and practical importance is the work on foreign student friendship networks. Ward and colleagues (2001) found that student sojourners who have more extensive interactions with host nationals, and those who are more satisfied with these relationships, experience less sociocultural adaptation problems. Bochner and his co-workers (Bochner *et al.*, 1977; Furnham & Bochner, 1986) have shown some interesting trends in the friendship networks of overseas students. In a study of foreign students in Hawaii, Bochner *et al.* (1977) developed a functional model of overseas students' friendship patterns, stating that the sojourners belong to three distinct social networks:

- a primary monocultural network consisting of close friendships with other sojourning compatriots (main

JACKY CHAPMAN/PHOTOFUSION

WHAT CAN PSYCHOLOGISTS DO TO HELP?

Sandhu (1994) believed that the foreign student experience has various implications for counselling and psychotherapy:

- Counselling should be proactive, seeking out international students who may be vulnerable.
- Guidance services should be continuous and comprehensive, not simply confined to orientation sessions soon after arrival.
- Alternative, less stigmatised, approaches should be available through less formal and clinical contacts, such as interest or friendship groups.
- Students should be encouraged to become involved in their own adaptation process as well as the education process as a whole.
- 'Buddy systems', so long used in the American army, should be established.
- Students could be encouraged to feel a certain amount of empowerment through communication workshops set up for them.
- Counsellors should be sensitive and trained in culture differences, specifically the presentation of psychological problems.

function: to provide a setting in which ethnic and cultural values can be rehearsed and expressed);
● a secondary bicultural network, consisting of bonds between sojourners and significant host nationals such as academics, students, advisers and government officials (main function: to help the student succeed at university and adjust to the new culture); and
● a tertiary multicultural network of friends and acquaintances (main function: to provide companionship for recreational, 'non-cultural' and non-task-oriented activities).

Many argue that the amount of social support, rather than who provides it, is more important. Others, however, place more emphasis on the source of support. Thus, help from a host-national network is important because through it foreign students can learn the social skills of their culture of sojourn. Help from the co-national network is important because through it foreign students can maintain their culture of origin. The theory predicts that the well-being of foreign students depends on their having access to both types of networks. However, the evidence suggests that most foreign students do not belong to a viable host-national network (Furnham & Bochner, 1986).

Furukawa (1997) still found friendship networks (measured by the number and perceived adequacy of friends and acquaintances) to be protective against the typical problems (psychiatric morbidity) experienced by sojourners. The findings suggest that the quality rather than the quantity of friendship is important, particularly among peers. Friendships at home are important predictors, implying that personality factors like shyness, introversion and low self-esteem may also be important predictors of difficulties (especially loneliness) in a new social environment.

Spouses can also be an important source of support. In her study of nearly 50 spouses in America, de Verthelyn (1995) found extreme variability and diversity in spouse reaction, but that personal variables (personality and relationship history) were more predictive than demographic variables like geography and race. Interestingly, she found gender-role orientation and work and family values the best predictors of adaptation problems. The sojourning spouse has double adjustment problems – the new role and the new environment clearly puts pressure on the spouse. Hence, the acceptance or rejection of the homemaker role with its implications for interruption in personal career and threat to identity seemed the best predictor of happiness. This discovering and establishing a personal sense of self, and developing a role of one's own, is important in any spouse support role.

Conclusion

Despite some contradictory findings, various patterns in the literature have begun to emerge. For instance, in many cases foreign students do appear to experience more physical and mental ill health than native students, as well as more academic problems. Although there are no grand theories attempting to explain this phenomenon, various concepts have been put forward to predict the quality, quantity and chronicity of sojourner distress. One such concept is the culture-distance concept, which states simply that the absolute amount of difference or distance (defined both objectively and subjectively) between a sojourner's own and the host culture is directly proportionally related to the amount of stress or difficulty experienced (e.g. Babiker *et al.*, 1980; see

also Ward *et al.*, 2001). Another concept relates to social support and has been described as the functional friendship model. This suggests that various friendship networks (monocultural, bicultural, multicultural) serve important psychological functions, which in turn help a sojourner over numerous difficulties.

Psychological research into sojourner adjustment is comparatively new. Large-scale, multifactorial, longitudinal studies may help us to identify the problems of increasing numbers of sojourners the world over.

■ *Professor Adrian Furnham is in the Department of Psychology, University College London. E-mail: a.furnham@ucl.ac.uk.*

References

Babiker, I.E., Cox, J.L. & Miller, P. (1980). The measurement of culture distance and its relationship to medical consultations, symptomatology, and examination performance of overseas students at Edinburgh University. *Social Psychiatry, 15*, 109–116.

Bochner, S., McLeod, B. & Lin, A. (1977). Friendship patterns of overseas students. A functional model. *International Journal of Psychology 12*, 277–297.

de Verthelyn, R. (1995). International students' spouses: Invisible sojourners in the culture shock literature. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 19*, 387–411.

Furnham, A. & Bochner, S. (1986). *Culture shock*. London: Methuen.

Furukawa, T. (1997). Sojourner adjustment. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases, 185*, 263–268.

Hammer, M. (1992). Research mission statements and international students' advisory offices. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 16*, 217–236.

Janca, A. & Hetzer, J. (1992). Psychiatric morbidity of foreign students in Yugoslavia. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry, 38*, 287–292.

McKinlay, N., Pattison, H. & Gross, H. (1996). An exploratory investigation of the effects of a cultural orientation programme on the psychological well-being of international university students. *Higher Education, 31*, 379–395.

McNamara, D. & Harris, R. (Eds.) (1999). *Overseas students in higher education*. London: Routledge.

Nathanson, J. & Marcenko, M. (1995). Young adolescents adjustment to the experience of relocating overseas. *Relations, 19*, 413–424.

Oberg, K. (1960). Culture shock: Adjustment to new cultural environments. *Practical Anthropology, 7*, 177–182.

Sandhu, D. & Asrabadi, B. (1994). Development of an accumulative stress scale for international students: Preliminary findings. *Psychological Reports 75*, 435–448.

Van Tilburg, M. & Vingerhoets, A. (1997). *Psychological aspects of geographic movement*. Tilburg: Tilburg University Press.

Ward, L. (1967). Some observations of the underlying dynamics of conflict in a foreign student. *Journal of the American College Health Association, 10*, 430–443.

Ward, C., Bochner, S. & Furnham, A (2001). *The psychology of culture shock*. London: Routledge.