

The Transformative International Student Experience of Asian American Students: A Qualitative Study with Suggestions for Future Research

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Abstract

This qualitative study was designed to understand the differences between the anticipated and actual experiences of Asian American Indian international students pursuing graduate studies in India. There has been copious literature on international students coming from India to the United States to study, but there has been scant literature on international students going from the United States to India to study or on international students who go to their heritage countries to study abroad. The results will help administrators and educators at host U.S. institutions to support the academic and social needs of international students with adequate guidance to enhance their educational experience. In addition, the home institution that is the focus of this study will benefit from this study by preparing international students and informing them of the expectations of the host country (India). At the same time, the study will identify a different perspective of study abroad through the lens of Asian American Indian students who are familiar with the Indian culture but have not lived in solely an Indian culture.

Key Words

International students, Asian-American, host country, student needs.

Introduction

The quest for studying abroad opens for students a new world of global opportunities especially in the context of the 21st century. International students come from different countries and diverse cultural backgrounds. They are influenced by various social and cultural beliefs and are familiar with different educational systems. In general, international students appreciate the opportunities that are opened when they arrive in the country abroad such as the ability to continue their higher education and being able to get a job (Jhaveri, n.d.). But at the same time, there are overlaps in their academic adjustment problems, along with some problems associated with their countries of origin. Most past studies of international students have generalized the experiences of all international students, overlooking the needs of individual groups of international students (Lee, 2009; Lee, 2010).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore and describe the anticipated and actual experiences of Asian American Indian international students pursuing graduate studies at an institution of higher learning in India. Understanding the students' experiences might help administrators and educators at the host (Indian) and home (U.S.) institutions to support the academic and social needs of international students with efficient guidance to enhance the students' experiences. In addition, the home institution might benefit from this study by preparing international students and informing them about the expectations of the host country (India), and vice versa. At the same time, the study attempted to view study abroad from the perspectives of Asian American Indian students who were familiar with the Indian culture but had not lived in a solely Indian culture.

Even though Asian American Indian students from the United States and Asian Indian students from India comprise a large part of the U.S. and world student population, as a group, they have been underrepresented in research on studying abroad. Several researchers have focused on the academic and personal experiences of international students (e.g., Goh et al., 2014; Kartoshkina,

2015; Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008; Walsh, 2010), but they have generalized their results to all international students. For example, previous research on international students in the United States has clustered all nationalities of international students into one group, which has eliminated any investigation into differences in developmental and academic needs (Terrazas-Carrillo, Hong, & Pace, 2014). Some quantitative researchers (e.g., Araujo, 2011; Jiang, 2013; Li et al., 2010) have not given international students the opportunity to express their academic and personal adjustment problems because of their focus on predetermined adjustment issues of international students in general. Although Chinese and Indian students represent the majority of international students in the United States (Chow & Cho, 2011; IIE, 2014), most research has focused on the academic adjustments of Chinese students, resulting in a paucity of research on Indian students.

Theoretical Implications

The conceptual framework of the study was the theory of adult learning, also known as transformational learning, a term coined by Mezirow (1997) to show that learning reflects and interprets the experiences, ideas, and assumptions gained from previous learning experiences. Transformational learning is enhanced by experiences (Hatherley, 2011; Mezirow, 1997; Taylor, n.d.). Transformation occurs when emotions play a role in addition to critical thinking. According to Kasworm, Rose, and Ross-Gordon (2010), "Transformative learning is both epistemological and ontological, often involving a change in worldview" (p. 41). In other words, transformational learning occurs when individual perspectives on a topic change permanently, meaning that the people cannot return to what they were before the experience.

In the case of studying abroad, culture shock marks the beginning of the transformative learning process (Dirkx, Spohr, Tepper, & Tons, 2010). This process requires the sojourners to reflect on their cultural assumptions. The sojourners become aware of their assumptions only when confronted. Students' adaptations to the host country make the experience one of transformative learning.

Methodology

The research methodology used in the study was a basic qualitative research design. Data was collected via face-to-face interviews with participants, and the interviews were transcribed and analyzed to identify common themes. Also, this study will give researchers the opportunity to view how person's views about their culture change from practicing the culture on foreign land and practicing the culture on its homeland.

Participants

The qualitative study was designed to explore the anticipated and actual experiences of 17 Asian American Indian international students who went to India to further their education. The researcher had traveled to India to interview the participants in their natural setting. The participants were recruited via nonprobability purposeful convenience sampling. The participants were selected based on the following criteria: born or raised in the United States, enrolled in the medical program at the time of study, and were willing to share their academic and personal experiences.

Data Analysis and Coding

Data was generated via face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. The participants were questioned about their anticipated and actual experiences before departure from the United States while attending school in India and their suggestions for future students and institutions. This qualitative approach allowed the researcher to collect data in participants' own words.

Most qualitative data is collected en masse over the course of a study. Therefore, it is analyzed right away to allow numerous small pieces to come together to form broader and more general descriptions and conclusions. To analyze the data recorded interviews were immediately and precisely transcribed. The transcriptions were read and examined to obtain an overall sense of the responses and then divided into more manageable chunks by coding. To code, the data researcher read all the interviews together as a whole to obtain a general overview and allow themes to develop. The codes were obtained by using response analyses of the interview and from reading the data repeatedly. Coding allowed connections to form between codes that allowed themes to be formed. Coding was completed when data saturation was reached. Lastly, the study reexamined the questions and the themes to determine whether the results produced deeper understanding.

Research Question

One of the research questions that guided this study was: How closely did the actual experiences of Asian American Indian college students match their anticipated experiences as it relates to study and life experiences?

Results and Discussion

One of the themes that were generated from answers to the research question were: the positive and negative aspect of students' experiences of all the participants that came from different paths of life and places, but to the same place and for the same goal. Since each participant viewed the same or similar situation differently, therefore, their experiences molded them differently.

Positive Aspects

When Asian American Indian students visit or study in their heritage countries, the experience can be a mixture of positive feelings and discomfort (negative feelings) (Doan, 2002). The

positive feelings come from the physical characteristics that allow them to blend in easily. The positive aspects are discussed in detail below:

P1 said, "it's kind of tough environmentally and mentally to live in India but because it is hard it makes you stronger." P2, P4, P5, and P10 said that saving money and time was a positive aspect of his experience. He explained that students save money because they can enter medical school right after high school. According to P3, the education system in India taught students how to handle stress and how to increase their memorization skills. P6 and P10 noted that the culture made him appreciate things that he took for granted in the United States, such as having a car.

P8 said that having to skip MCAT and become a doctor at the age of 22 were other positive experiences. P9 saw being able to cram for exams and keeping up with class attendance as positive parts of the experience. P13 became more sociable because she was on her own and needed to adapt. P12 felt that being able to learn "good work ethic[s](sic)" of Indians was a positive aspect of her experience. She indicated that she has "definitely developed an appreciation for my culture that I didn't really have before coming here."

P11 agreed with other students that India "takes you out of your comfort zone and [puts] you in the culture where you are" And that "India helps you deal with your obstacles more" with fewer resources. P15 said that being raised in the European American culture of the United States had kept her away from the Indian culture but that she now had a second chance to understand and live in the Indian culture. P17 said that India toughened up her character and she was able to face challenges that she might not have been able to face if she were in the United States.

Negative Aspects

With the positive experiences there were responses that indicated negative experiences. The discomfort arises when the alignment with the host cultures and their ethnicities is not straight due to their lack of or limited knowledge of the new environment (Doan, 2002). The discomfort is seen as negative feelings of the experience. The following responses are the negative aspect of student's experience:

P2 viewed fines for such things as failing exams, not dressing according to the college dress code, and curfew at 9:00 p.m. for males and 7:00 p.m. for females, as negative aspects of this experience.

P3 said that the lack of confidence in NRIs by professors and local students gets us bullied a lot. For example, if there is a situation where the NRI student knew the answer and the local student did not then the professor might pass a comment such as "shame on you the NRI knows the answer." Females not being able to wear anything above their ankles but males being allowed to wear shorts after college hours were seen as a negative part of the experience. The students are not allowed to wear a certain type of clothing such as females cannot wear western clothes and males cannot wear ethnic wear.

P4, P5 and P16 mentioned that being away from parents was a negative aspect of this experience. P12 saw discrimination against NRIs for example lower score or fail the NRI students due to the preconception of NRIs.

P11 said, "People over here [in India] have different mentality and different understanding that can create conflict." P10 noted that classmates were competitors and that fear of professors was negatives of this experience. P15 said that not having enough

exposure to the Indian culture in the United States made it difficult to adjust to life in India.

Discussion on Aspects

Ajayi-Nabors (2011) commented that “when students move to a foreign country, they encounter a totally different language, culture, climate, and educational system... and [these factors] may become barriers in cross-cultural communication” (p. 20). Results of the current study supported this statement. Responses to the interview questions showed that “did not anticipate the people of India to be so judgmental” (P10); P12 came to realize “how conservative Indian culture” is; and “classes were held Monday to Saturday and were not selected by the students” (P9). The positive aspects were related to self-development, as indicated by the participants’ responses:

- Tough living environment and mentally challenging experiences make a person living in India stronger (P1).
- The education system in India taught students how to handle stress (P3).
- Indian culture made participant appreciate things that he took for granted (P15).
- India helps you deal with your obstacles more with fewer resources (P11).
- Toughened up her character (P17)

The negative aspects were related to how the education system worked:

- Curfew timing, mandatory class attendance and dress code (P1)
- Students were yelled at (P2)
- Females could not wear Western clothes, and males could not wear ethnic clothes (P3)
- Discrimination against NRI (P12)
- Being away from family (Participants P15, P5, and P16)

Recommendations

All the participants provided suggestions for the institution and for the future students. Suggestions included ways that the college could improve, and it created a picture for the future students on how life is in Indian medical school. Colleges should develop some sort of consent form that would give students more freedom and that if anything happened to the students, it would be solely their parents’ responsibility. He also believed that coming to India “[made him] stronger.

The host institution meets with NRIs every six months to check if they are having any difficulties. Suggestions for future students included taking biology classes beforehand and understanding that it is going to be difficult until they could get used to the system and environment. Students held the view that suggested that the host college teach, “so we can learn instead of just memorize for the tests.” Future students need to learn to be independent; otherwise, they are going to have more issues.

Students also wanted compassionate understanding from the professors and said that it is not fair that we come here and tell them how to do things because we are coming from two different systems. But, the professors should have more hands-on classes with discussions and they should give a syllabus to the students so the students can come to class prepared. Also, all the professors should teach the same human system at the same time. Some students asserted that college administration should be involved with the students and that producing better doctors should be the aim, not “making profit and producing doctors... as fast as they

can.”

P12 and P17 believed that the host college should offer premed classes to the NRIs so that they could catch up with the local Indian students because that was core part of the education. She also suggested that provide guidance about the social customs and culture of India. P15 said that “students should come here couple of months before and try to understand the system before going for your graduate studies.” This will help the student get a better picture of the culture and education system. The host college should “treat us like adults and perhaps guys will become more cooperative.”

Conclusion

This study examined a reverse trend that is starting to emerge where Asian Indians from the United States are going to their heritage country to further their education. The questions of the study were answered based on semi-structured interviews of participants’ actual and anticipated experiences. One of the themes discussed in this article was looking at the participants’ views (positive and negative aspects) about a same or similar situation. This theme exposed how participants’ reactions to different or same situations molded them individually.

Since the world is becoming globalized the market for international students is becoming very competitive. The need or desire of any country to stay competitive in the global market will be depended on its ability to acquire and retain international students and the country’s ability to spread international and cross-cultural awareness among its citizens (Mpiganjira, p. 358). Increasing the infrastructure of providing international educational services will increase the country’s revenue (Altbach, 2004). Therefore, countries need to invest in resources that help meet the needs of the international student market. The results analysis showed that pre-departure expectations were directly related to the home country or institution such as providing correct predeparture knowledge about their host institution or country that will help the international student adapt better to the new lifestyle. Therefore, the host should use the information to improve the conditions and alleviate any negativity that hinders international student’s experience abroad. At the same time, current expectations of international students were related to the host institution or country to provide quality education that is recognized beyond the borders of the hosting country.

The knowledge gained from this study provides host and home institutions and countries information on ways they can meet the unique needs of these students. In addition, this study gave researchers the opportunity to view how person’s views about their culture change from practicing the culture on foreign land and practicing the culture on its homeland (Brux & Fry, 2010).

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