

## **Working With International Students: cross cultural and psychodynamic perspectives**

Cherian Verghese, Ph.D.

Imagine yourself as a student in a foreign university. You are sitting in class with students who are distinctly different from you in physical appearance, hair style, clothing and most of all in the way they talk and express themselves. The professor arrives and begins speaking -in a language in which you had developed a fair degree of mastery and comfort before undertaking the sojourn. However, because of the professor's strongly accented speech, which is so different from what you had learned in the language courses you passed with flying colors back home, as well as her liberal use of local slang phrases and words, you are forced to focus intently and intensely. Fear of embarrassment keeps you from acting on your strong desire to frequently ask the professor to repeat what she had just said or explain what she meant. Imagine also that the professor then asks a question and directs you to respond. You rapidly translate the question silently in your mind, think of an answer in your native language and translate that back into english. As you begin to answer, you become aware of the incredible awkwardness of expressing yourself in this foreign tongue, taking away any possibility of feeling spontaneous or free. You are also aware of the puzzled look on your professor's face, and a few looks of impatience, perhaps even a snicker, from somewhere behind your left shoulder. You realize that your face is flushing and, with horror, notice that you are starting to feel paralyzed, unable to think. You become quiet and are only vaguely able to recollect the rest of what follows. This is a scenario is played numerous times in US institutions of higher education.

Of course, it is well known to college counselors and psychotherapists that a variety of changes, voluntary or involuntary, can cause significant psychological and physical stress, taxing the individual's capacity for coping. College students encounter a multitude of changes as they leave home and familiar educational environments and emotional support systems to attend college, often in a different part of the state or country. Those who excelled in highschool typically find themselves up against stiffer competition and often have to settle for less prized positions in college. They may have to negotiate tight living quarters with other students while also consolidating a personal identity, charting a career and life path, and beginning to explore deeper and more intimate interpersonal and sexual relationships. While international students have to deal with most of the concerns faced by US students, they are confronted with a host of additional requirements that challenge the notion of resilience. Typically, international students have to adjust to drastically different food, climate, educational systems, social values, and language. It is not easy for them to maintain contact with their support systems back home. They generally lack the resources to visit or call home with the type of regularity that US students are able to do. Add to this the all too frequent taboos against disclosing personal/emotional matters to strangers, including to mental health professionals, lack of an emotional language to communicate their problems, and a propensity for presenting with somatic complaints, and it becomes clear that counseling/psychotherapy with this population can present special challenges for the mental health professional. In this article, I will briefly discuss the process of adjustment that international students experience during their sojourn; factors that affect the quality of their adjustment in the host country; and implications for counseling and psychotherapy with this population.

### **Adjustment patterns**

As early as 1955, Lysgaard suggested a U-curve in the adjustment pattern of international students, based on self-reports of attitudes toward their host country after completing programs of various lengths in the US. Results indicated generally positive attitudes (a "honeymoon period") for those returning home after a 6 month; negative and critical attitudes for students returning home after one year, and more positive attitudes for students who returned home after 18 months. Similar patterns of adjustment were also later identified for international students over their individual courses of stay in the US, i.e., longitudinally, at six, 12, and 18 months. A general interpretation of those studies related to the U-curve hypothesis is as follows. At the start of the sojourn, the international student is likely excited by finally getting to the US and all the stimulations from the new environment, and generally feels optimistic and positive toward the host. However, soon the reality of academic work in a foreign language, difficulty making close friendships, hassles of everyday tasks that don't yield to tried and true methods of problem-solving, all combine to generate feelings of frustration, self-doubt and negative attitudes toward the host country and educational system. The student's self-esteem and sense of efficacy plummets, leaving him/her vulnerable. (Psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut's concept of narcissistic injury and loss of sustaining selfobject functions can help us understand this phenomenon at an even deeper level). This downturn accounts for the trough in the U-curve. Gradually, as the student gains in the

requisite understanding and competencies for successfully meeting the challenges of the host country social and educational environment, find a few friends, etc., his self-esteem and general attitude and emotions also improve. This last phase is enhanced by the prospect of returning home, especially for those students who have bright futures back home.

(Although it does not directly deal with the temporary stay of international students, Salman Akhtar's 1999 book Immigration and Identity, provides an excellent description of the process of splitting, projective-identification and, finally, the development of an integrated bi-cultural identity among those foreigners who immigrate, more or less permanently, to a new country).

Further research has yielded somewhat limited support for the U-curve hypothesis, and other shapes to this adjustment curve have also been identified. For example, unlike the Scandinavian students in the earliest studies, some non-European students from Asia and Africa were shown to follow an upsidedown U-curve in their adjustment, raising some questions and speculations. It is likely that international students who resemble US ideals of attractiveness, such as the blond blue-eyed Scandinavians, experience greater initial acceptance, accounting for the honeymoon period, which is not necessarily experienced by Asian and African students whose personal and cultural characteristics are less valued by US culture. Perhaps, students from these latter groups come to the US expecting different treatment than the former. Support systems may be differentially made available to, or utilized by, internationals from different nations. Finally, a W-shaped curve has also been identified when the process of readjusting to their home country post-sojourn was also included. Americanization can have differential effects on these students as they re-enter a home culture which may exhibit differential levels of tolerance, or intolerance, for the student's new found identity and attitudes.

### **Factors Determining Quality of Adjustment**

Perhaps the most obvious aspect of the international student's process of adjusting to the US culture is the one related to the *degree of difference between her home and host cultures*. Those arriving from English speaking countries with a predominant Christian orientation are likely to experience less problems in adjustment than those from non-English speaking countries where Christianity is either not well known or is viewed with suspicion. Gary Weaver (1987) provides a continuum of contrasting cultural perspectives from abstractive to associative world-views. Differences can be small to large between two countries in areas of social structure, philosophic outlook, patterns of thinking, as well as interpersonal/interactive styles. Alan Roland (1988) identifies several differences that separate Indian and Japanese Cultures from the United States and other western nations. Some of the factors specific to the Indian culture include an acceptance of open expression of dependency needs vis-a-vis elders and those in hierarchically superior positions; need for a benefactor; the concept of the "familial self"; and a belief in destiny as opposed to individual efforts. Self expression is often viewed negatively and marriages are arranged by family making dating unnecessary and an unfamiliar aspect of most Indians experience. In contrast to US cultural emphasis on encouraging people to be independent and to stand out from others, Japanese believe in the notion that children are born independent and need to be trained to become social and group orientation. Individuality is clearly discouraged in the Japanese saying, "the peg that stands out will be hammered back in". Differences that distinguish one culture from others are what provides individuals of the first culture with a unique sense of cultural identity; they are impossible to replicate in a foreign country. Therefore, the loss of such cultural selfobjects as the symbolism of the national flag, music and art, as well as numerous other background aspects of the home culture can have significant impact on the international student's quality of adjustment in the new environment.

Given the simultaneous and multiple losses of selfobject experienced by the international student's sojourn, it is important that the student have *access to sustaining selfobjects* (supportive individuals and environment) in the host culture. The degree to which this is available to the individual international student can vary depending on the student's country of origin, as well as where he ends up in his host country. In small colleges in the US, access to advisors and administrators can be relatively easy, while finding other international students, especially from one's area of the world, may be difficult or even impossible. In large institutions which enroll significant numbers of international students, not only will there be other internationals but there may even be a substantial group of co-nationals, including nationality groups that can help celebrate home cultural events, as well as provide a safe haven where the student can freely express herself in her native tongue. Margaret Mahler's concept of "refueling" which she uses to describe the toddler's separation-individuation process, applies to the student's touching home base before returning to the alien landscape. It also allows for "twinship selfobject" (i.e., "We are alike") experiences and can further facilitating the international student's adjustment. Obviously, there is also the potential complication that the

international student may defensively use the co-national group as a way of avoiding the anxieties of making inroads into the host culture. Boyer and Sedlacek (1988), studying non-cognitive factors which predict academic success for international students report that, along with self-confidence, the availability of a strong support person is consistently related to grade point averages and predictive of international students' persistence in college.

Finally, *pre-arrival personal characteristics* of the individual international student will have a significant impact on his/her adjustment in the host culture. Along with personality and history of emotional problems, the student's reasons for coming to the US, source of financial support, specific family circumstances, can all have significant influence on adjustment. It is important to note that certain personality traits that were valued positively in the student's home culture may be viewed critically in the host culture, or vice versa. The phenomenon of the 'geographic cure', i.e., "Let's send him abroad to study; it will be good for him" is familiar to international educators.

### **Counseling and Psychotherapy**

Getting international students to utilize counseling/psychological services can be a challenge and having a strong collaborative relationship with the campus International Services Offices (ISO) can be critical.

Counselors/psychologists can be mental health consultants to the ISO staff who in turn can be our cultural consultants. Since international students often use ISOs as their home base in the host country, their staff is accorded considerable trust which helps facilitate referrals. At times the international student advisor may walk the student over to the counseling center and may initially even facilitate the beginning of a counseling process by their very presence. International student orientations provide excellent opportunities for counseling staff to be seen by international students, and learn about counseling in a non-threatening setting, normalizing counseling within the American culture. Cultural adjustment-focused small groups co-lead by the two staffs can play a supportive function. Brief psychoeducational and academic skills based groups also serve as an entre for international students who otherwise are not likely to seek counseling except as a last resort, and when compelled by someone else. Besides ISO staff members, at times international student clients' significant others or co-nationals may serve as helpful adjuncts and culture-brokers for the counseling dyad.

Once the international student is in our consulting room, how to help them can be an even greater challenge. Our theories of counseling and psychotherapy are generally based on the assumption that all human beings are alike - i.e., are like the Anglo-Europeans by and upon whom such theories were developed. This can pose considerable problems when such a world-view is broadly applied to our work with international students, the largest proportion of whom are from non-European cultures that espouse values, customs, mores, attitudes and behaviors that vary a little or a great deal from predominant US cultural values. Harwood, et. al. (1995) comment that "... the concept of inner security, with its emphasis on the importance of self-sufficiency and inner resourcefulness and finding satisfaction in relationships with other autonomous, bounded individuals, is an ideal peculiar to dominant U.S. culture - a culturally constructed developmental endpoint that is not shared by much of the rest of the world" (p.37). Obviously, holding our theories lightly and learning about the international student client's culture and world view will go a long way in bridging the cultural-divide. Asking them to whom they would have gone if confronted with problems similar to the ones that brought them to counseling can help the therapist to have access to potential transference issues. Learning about the student's country of origin, especially values regarding emotional problems, interpersonal relating, and culturally accepted methods of healing can be enormously helpful. Understanding our own cultural identity and awareness of the biases we hold regarding the "other" is a vital aspect of competence in working with this population. Unconscious and disavowed prejudices and stereotypes, as with most unexamined aspects of the therapist's inner life, are the most likely countertransference pitfalls. Given that many of these students will have difficulty expressing their thoughts, emotions and concerns in English, it is of considerable importance that we at times encourage them to go ahead and express themselves in their native language and then struggle with them to understand its meaning. This also creates a reversal in the power dynamic between counselor and client, patient and therapist, in a way that we can better experience being the "outsider", not quite able to say the foreign word or phrase correctly, be the one who doesn't "get" the meaning of the client's experience and need his help. Clearly, much of the above requires that we remain open to bending the therapeutic frame to accommodate the specific needs and backgrounds of our "non-traditional" clients, of whom international students, and increasingly immigrants and second generation hyphenated populations, make up a significant proportion.

## REFERENCES:

- Akhtar, S. (1999). Immigration and Identity. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.
- Boyer, S. and Sedlacek, W. E. (1988). Noncognitive predictors of academic success for international students: a longitudinal study. Journal Of College Student Development, 29, 218-223.
- Harwood,, R., Miller, J., and Irizarry, N. (1995). Culture and Attachment. New York: Guilford.
- Lysgaard, S. (1955). Adjustment in a foreign society: Norwegian Fulbright grantees visiting the United States. International Social Science Bulletin, 7, 45-51.
- Roland, A. (1988). In Search of Self in India and Japan. Delhi: Ajanta.
- Weaver, G. (1987).

On a personal note: At present, I am in full-time private practice as a psychologist in Washington, DC. I am also on the faculty of the Institute for Contemporary Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis, and the Clinical Social Work Institute, both in DC as well. In 1970, I came to the US as a foreign (undergraduate) student from India. Since then, I have completed masters and doctoral (counseling psychology from Temple University) degrees here. Over the past 23 years, I have also worked in US colleges and universities as foreign student advisor, counselor/psychologist and as teacher, supervisor, and liaison to international service offices. Most recently, for almost 13 years, I was a staff psychologist at the George Washington University Counseling Center, and clinical assistant professor in GW's Psychology department.