

International Students' Awareness and Use of Counseling Services

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Psychology

Abstract

Although differences between domestic and international students' sources of academic stress, awareness and use of counseling services have been studied extensively, less attention has been devoted to the impact of unawareness and underutilization of counseling services on international students' academic stress. In addition, little is known about the relation between academic stress and psychological adaptation in international students. Data was collected from 62 international students at a large public university in the Rocky Mountain region. As predicted, results showed a significant difference in academic stress between international students who are aware of counseling services and those who are not aware. In addition, international students who reported higher levels of academic stress also reported poorer psychological adaptation. Implications for counseling international students will be discussed.

Introduction

The number of international students enrolled in U.S. universities and colleges is increasing each year. The *Open Doors Report on International Exchange* reports that the number of international students enrolled in universities and colleges in the U.S. increased by 3% to a total of 582,984 in the 2006/07 academic year (Institute of International Education, 2007). Studying in the United States poses many challenges for international students, such as adjusting to a new university system, establishing a new identity in an unfamiliar culture, communicating in a foreign language, and being away from their familiar social support system (Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2007; Komiya & Eells, 2001). Over the years, researchers have examined international students' numerous academic concerns and needs. In fact, when studying in the United States, international students may experience academic difficulties, even when they have been highly successful in their home countries (Yeh & Inose, 2007). They may face the same types of academic difficulties that U.S. students face, such as test anxiety, difficulty with concentration, and time management, but they may also struggle with different challenges, such as language and/or reading difficulties, and unfamiliarity with American teaching methods (Yoon & Portman, 2004).

The language barrier is probably the most challenging problem for the majority of international students (Brown, 2008; Mori, 2000). Academically, international students struggle with completing essay examinations and taking notes during lectures due to limited language proficiency and the difficulties of studying effectively in a new educational system (Mori; Yi, Lin, & Kishimoto, 2003). The students' inadequate language skills also often diminish their ability to understand lectures, to complete reading and writing assignments and examinations, and to orally express their opinions and ask questions in classes (Mori). Thus, lack of English skills is likely to affect international students' academic performance, and academic difficulties in turn may affect their psychological adjustment to college life (Yeh & Inose, 2003). A great deal of research has examined the effects of stress on students' psychological adjustment in domestic students in the United States (Dyson & Renk, 2006; Goldman & Wong, 1997; Pritchard & McIntosh, 2003; Pritchard, Wilson, & Yamnitz, 2007). Dyson and Renk found that the levels of college stress reported by college students, as well as their endorsement of avoidant coping, significantly predicted their levels of depressive symptoms. Similarly, Pritchard and McIntosh reported that, among other predictors of adjustment, strain from academic pressure was correlated with poorer psychological outcomes.

Nationwide, academic stress is on the rise among college students, and high levels of academic stress are associated with negative health outcomes (Mortenson, 2006). Mortenson found that international students are less inclined than American students to engage in the healthiest form of emotional coping (seeking emotional support) and more inclined to engage in the most unhealthy form of coping (avoidance). Despite their high need for support, international students are reluctant to seek help through counseling services (Brinson & Kottler, 1995; Mori, 2000).

Research suggests that international students are less likely to use counseling services than are domestic students (Carr, Koyama, & Thiagarajan, 2003; Hyun et al., 2007; Mau & Jepsen, 1988), and even when they seek available services, they are far more likely than American students to terminate therapeutic relationships prematurely (Mori). One reason for the underutilization of counseling services is that international students have not been exposed to such services in their own countries (Kilinc & Granello, 2003). A second explanation is the lack of awareness of their needs for mental health services. A third reason for this is the cultural stigma associated with emotional expression (Hyun et al., 2007; Vogel, Wester, & Larson, 2007). Because the values of international students are different from those of American students, their attitudes toward counseling may be different as well (Zhang & Dixon, 2003). The influence of cultural values on help-seeking behavior can be particularly important in cultures that have close networks, and where counselors are seen as out-group members who are not part of the social network or family (Vogel et al.). Thus, international students use family and friends rather than counselors when they need help. For example, Kilinc and Granello found that most Turkish students reported that they would prefer to go to a friend or family member for psychological assistance rather than use a professional resource.

Komiya and Eells (2001) found that international students who had received counseling previously possessed more open attitudes toward seeking counseling than did other international students. Experience or familiarity with college counseling centers have a favorable influence on help-seeking attitudes (Kilinc & Granello, 2003). Unfortunately, studies have also shown that international students are less likely than domestic students to ask for help or seek assistance with troubling feelings about academic performance (Mortenson, 2006). Thus, the present study examined the differences in academic stress between international students who are aware and use counseling services and those who are not aware and do not use counseling services.

Many researchers have studied international students' awareness and use of counseling services, sources of academic stress, and the reasons for their underutilization of counseling services (Carr et al., 2003; Hyun et al., 2007; Mau & Jepsen, 1988). Research suggests that the higher international students' levels of acculturation are, the more positive attitudes they hold toward seeking professional psychological help (Kilinc & Granello, 2003; Zhang & Dixon, 2003). Numerous studies have explored the difficulties that international students face when coming to the United States, for example language, cultural adjustment, feeling alone, vocational, social, financial, differences in academia, etc. (Brown, 2008; Jacob & Greggo, 2001; Olivas & Li, 2006). Other studies have examined the sources of international students' academic stress and how they cope with it (Mortenson, 2006). However, no research has been done to investigate the relation between international students' awareness and use of counseling services and their academic stress. Thus, there is a need for investigating whether or not significant differences in academic stress exist between international students who are aware of and use counseling services and those who are not aware and do not use these services. Research suggests that college life can be a stressful experience for all students (Dyson & Renk, 2006). But it can be even more stressful for international students because of the unique challenges they face (Hyun et al., 2007; Komiya & Eells, 2001).

Furthermore, previous research has indicated that academic stress has a negative impact on domestic college students' psychological adjustment (Dyson & Renk, 2006; Goldman & Wong, 1997; Pritchard & McIntosh, 2003; Pritchard et al., 2007). However, no studies have examined this relationship in international students studying in the United States. Given that international students face unique challenges when studying in the United States (Brown, 2008; Mori, 2000; Yi, Lin, & Kishimoto, 2003; Yoon & Portman, 2004), it is important for researchers to examine the relationship between academic stress and psychological adjustment in international students. The present study investigated whether or not there is a significant difference in levels of academic stress between international students who are aware of and use counseling services and those who are not aware of and do not use counseling services. We hypothesized that international students who are aware and use counseling services experience less academic stress than those who are not aware and do not use these services. In addition, the present study examined the relationship between academic stress and psychological adjustment in international students. We hypothesized that higher levels of academic stress would relate to poorer psychological adaptation.

Method

Participants

Sixty-two international students (35 female and 24 male, average age = 24.46, *SD* = 5.59) at a large public university in the Rocky Mountain region completed the survey. The Institutional Review Board approved all procedures prior to data collection.

Measures

Academic stress. We assessed 53 stressful events specifically oriented to college students' lives (e.g., "struggling to meet your own academic standards") using the Inventory of College Student Recent Life Experiences (Kohn, Lafreniere, & Gurevich, 1990). Participants were asked to rate to what extent such events have been a part of their lives in the past month on a scale from 1 = *not at all* part of my life to 4 = *very much* part of my life ($\alpha = .92$). This scale has been shown to be reliable and valid (Kohn et al.).

Psychological adaptation. To measure psychological adaptation, students responded to a thirty-item short version of the POMS, which has been shown to be valid and reliable (McNair, Lorr, & Droppleman, 1981). The POMS assesses tension ($\alpha = .83$), depression ($\alpha = .82$), anger ($\alpha = .85$), vigor ($\alpha = .76$), confusion ($\alpha = .71$), and fatigue ($\alpha = .83$). Responses were measured on a 5-point scale, from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*).

Use of counseling services. To measure counseling services awareness and use, students reported on four items. The responses for the first three items were measured on a yes no scale: 1) "Before filling out this survey, did you know that the university has counseling services available to all students?" 2) "Have you ever used on-campus counseling services?" 3) "Have you ever used off-campus counseling services?" The final item asked, "If you were experiencing a personal problem that frequently upset you, what are the chances that you would talk it over with someone?" Responses were measured on a scale from 1 (*most certain*) to 7 (*definitely not*).

Procedure

An email was sent to all international students inviting them to participate in the study. The email to international students read: "We are conducting a study about the awareness and use of counseling services among international students and how it affects their academic stress. We invite you to take a short survey. All survey responses are completely anonymous and confidential. You may skip any item you do not wish to answer or stop completion of the survey at any time. Thank you for your participation."

Results

The relation between academic stress and awareness and use of counseling services

To test whether or not significant differences in academic stress exist between international students who are aware of counseling services and those who are not aware, we conducted an independent samples *t* test levels. As predicted, international students who were aware that counseling services were available to them reported significantly lower stress levels ($M_{stress} = 2.10$, $SD = .42$) than did international students who were not aware of these services ($M_{stress} = 2.35$, $SD = .38$), $t(56) = -2.19$, $p < .05$.

To test whether or not significant differences in academic stress exist between international students who do not use counseling services and those who do, we again conducted an independent samples *t* test levels. Unfortunately, only six international students had used on-campus counseling services and three international students had used off-campus counseling services. Because there was such a small number of international students who had used on-campus counseling services, the findings showed no significant differences in academic stress between international students who used counseling services on-campus and those who did not, $t(55) = .19$. Similarly, there was no significant difference in academic stress between international students who used off-campus counseling services and those who did not, $t(56) = -.17$. Finally, students were asked, "If you were experiencing a personal problem that frequently upset you, what are the chances that you would talk it over with someone?" To assess the relation between willingness to see a counselor and academic stress levels, we conducted a Pearson's *r* correlation. There was no relation between willingness to see a counselor and academic stress, $r = -.01$.

The relation between academic stress and psychological adaptation

To examine whether students with higher levels of academic stress displayed poorer psychological adaptation, Pearson's *r* correlations were computed. As predicted, international students with higher levels of stress reported significantly higher levels of fatigue, tension, depression, confusion, and anger (see Table 1).

Table 1. The Relation between Academic Stress and Psychological Adaptation

Measure of Psychological Adaptation	Academic Stress
Vigor	-.02
Fatigue	.46***
Anger	.42***
Tension	.54***
Depression	.46***
Confusion	.45***
Overall Negative Moods	.55***

Note: *** $p \leq .001$

Discussion

The first purpose of the present study was to ascertain whether international students who were aware of and used counseling services experienced less academic stress than those who were not aware and did not use these services. As predicted, the results indicated that international students who were aware of counseling services reported significantly lower levels of academic stress than international students who were not aware of these services. Our results are in line with Hyun et al. (2007), who found that international students' awareness of counseling services available on-campus was significantly lower than the awareness of domestic students. Thus, our results highlight the importance for international students having access to information.

Previous research has shown that international students are significantly less likely to use counseling services than are domestic students (Carr et al., 2003; Hyun et al., 2007; Mau & Jepsen, 1988). We found no significant differences in academic stress between international students who had used on-campus and off-campus counseling services and international students who had not used these services. However, this was likely due to the fact that a small number of international students reported that they had used on-campus and off-campus counseling services. Previous research has indicated that academic stress has a negative impact on domestic college students' psychological adjustment (Dyson & Renk, 2006; Goldman & Wong, 1997; Pritchard & McIntosh, 2003; Pritchard et al., 2007). As predicted, our results showed a significant relationship between academic stress and psychological adaptation. International students with higher levels of stress reported significantly higher levels of fatigue, tension, depression, confusion, and anger.

As with other studies, there are several limitations of the current study. The sample was small, self-selected (those who responded to e-mail request), and included only international students studying at one university. Thus, the sample may not be generalized to other international students. The results of the current study provide additional information about the impact of international students' awareness and use of counseling services on their academic stress, and the impact of higher levels of academic stress on international students' psychological adjustment, but there is a need for more work to be done. Future researchers should focus their attention in identifying ways on how to increase international students' awareness and utilization of counseling services.

Conclusion

This study focuses on the impact of international students' awareness and use of counseling services on academic stress and identifies the relation between higher levels of academic stress and psychological adaptation. Given the rise in student stress nationwide and the poor psychological outcomes associated with high levels of

academic stress, it is important that counselors help international students handle academic stress effectively by increasing their awareness and utilization of counseling services. This study has provided additional information about the impact of international students' awareness and use of counseling services on their academic stress, and the impact of higher levels of academic stress on international students' psychological adjustment.

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