

Acculturative Stress and Well-Being: Need of Study among Students of Higher Education in India

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Abstract

The phenomenal increase in internationalization for pursuing higher education is seen globally and within the states of India in recent years. Many students face challenges due to the processes of acculturation, which adversely affect the well-being of students. Several studies have focused on migrants and international students studying abroad; however, previous studies have not yet amply focused on students of higher education. There is still a lack of research on acculturative stress and its effect on higher education students' well-being. The primary purpose of this article is to advocate the essentiality of studying acculturative stress and the adverse impact it has on the well-being of higher education students of India. Further, it tries to enlighten the administrators and educators' paramount importance in taking effective measures for identifying and improving the status of well-being influenced by acculturative stress among higher education students moving from state to state within the country.

Keywords: Acculturation, acculturative stress, well-being, students of higher education

Introduction

In order to pursue higher education, many students from all over the world travel from their home countries to other countries. It is widely known that internationalization has increasingly been growing in the last few decades to get the best higher education available. India has also become one of the most important centres in providing education, skills and professionalism for international students from different parts of the globe. The Ministry of External Affairs (2019) estimated to over 10.9 lakhs students pursuing higher education programs in abroad as of July, 2019. Likewise, the total number of international students enrolled in higher education in India is 47,427 (The Economic Times, 2019).

At the same time, students move from state to state within the country for higher education. According to the 2021 Indian University Ranking (uniRank), around 884 Indian higher-education institutions are across the country. Students from different corners of the country migrate from state to state for higher studies as well as for employment. A student's reasons to move from state to state for higher studies vary significantly from person to person. One may opt to pursue education in other states due to high and better quality of education at a particular institution or university, whereas one may choose due to limited seats in institutions and limited quality intake of students due to extreme competition across the country. Even though the standard of courses available across institutions in India is developing, there still seems to be a lack of opportunities for practical application of skills learned through conceptual understanding due to limited resources and facilities, especially in rural areas of the country. This leads to struggle in job placement, thereby driving students to pursue a better quality of education from rural areas to metropolitan cities. In addition, due to financial constraints, all students cannot opt to go abroad, leaving with the only option of finding admission within the country.

Another obvious and well-known reason could be that exposure to different environments, better equipment, facilities and technologies, diverse cultures, advanced and other teaching methods enhance students' knowledge and skills for their future career. India also has reputed and world ranking institutions and universities within reach for its students-citizens and foreigners from different parts of the world, including the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) at Bombay, Madras, Kanpur, Delhi and Kharagpur. Other higher education institutes like fundamental research, medical science, management, agriculture, design, planning, mental health and neurosciences and many more with specific specialization and those that offer varieties of courses are available. Further, the main reason students move to other states for higher studies may be considered due to the diverse

interest of specialization offered at a particular or specific institution, especially in different metropolitan cities of the country.

With the increase of international students studying here, it can be said that different problems and challenges are inevitable. For Indians studying abroad, as well as students moving from state to state within the country, a multitude of challenges tends to rise, including financial constraints, ineffective communication, change in environment, experiences of discrimination, cultural and religious differences, feeling of homesickness and isolation, change in food habits, finding suitable accommodation, and different learning methods. Likewise, the problems of international students are no other when coming to India for higher education.

All these challenges generate acculturative stress. Acculturative stress is often defined as a “culture shock”. People who migrate to another country or move from state to state often find it difficult to adjust due to the differences mentioned in their practices with the new environment. According to Sandhu and Asrabadi (1994), the several general factors that additionally contribute to the international students’ acculturative concern include lack of confidence to communicate in the local language, feeling of intimidation to take part in social activities, lack of sense of belongingness to the host community, worries about what to do after completing one’s study whether to go back to their home country or stay abroad. Stressors may result due to this varying experience of acculturation. For some people, acculturative changes may be all in the form of stressors, while others may be of no problem. These varying levels of acculturative stress may manifest as a result of acculturation experiences and stressors.

When different stressors arise due to acculturation, it is evident that it may adversely affect students’ well-being. Unfortunately, the level of well-being has been slowly declining at all ages globally in this present technological age. World Health Organization (2012) has defined well-being as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. It is the experience of health, happiness, and prosperity. It includes having good mental health, high life satisfaction, a sense of meaning or purpose, and the ability to manage stress. With a decrease in well-being, one’s ability to manage stress also decreases. Therefore, it is crucial to look into the adverse impact of acculturative stress on the students’ well-being to help overcome their issues.

This article aims at advocating the crucial importance of examining the sources of acculturative stress and well-being of students staying in a host state for higher education. The objective of the study is to provide awareness and understanding on:

- the importance of identifying the major factor leading to acculturative stress,
- the effect of acculturative stress on the well-being of the students, and
- to identify the necessary measures and implications to be taken up to reach the desired physical and mental well-being of students pursuing higher education.

Acculturative Stress

The prevalence of acculturative stress is evident in different researches done on immigrants. Researches have also indicated that stress is increasing not only among immigrants but among students as well. Likewise, Indian students have also experienced acculturative stress in foreign countries in pursuing better and higher education—the majority of studies on acculturative stress focused primarily on international students studying abroad. Focus has also been given to migrants worldwide.

Certain variables concerning acculturative stress such as language barriers, academic achievement, social support, perceived discrimination, length of stay in the host state or country, anxiety, depression, socio-demographic factors, age, and gender have been carried out for students studying abroad. It is evident from various researches that the language barrier is a significant contributor to acculturative stress. Rajab et al. (2014) indicated in their study a high level of acculturative stress for non-English speaking international students. Likewise, Friday (2018), in a study among international graduate students in the U.S.A, has also revealed that the contributing factors to acculturation stress include the language barrier.

Individuals cope with stress, specifically acculturative stress, differently. Studies have found that the experience of acculturative stress is affected by socio-economic status. As mentioned earlier, many students are from low socio-economic status backgrounds moving in search of better studies in metropolitan cities without the scholarship. This makes it difficult for them to cope with the insecurity of good flow on finance for their accommodation and educational expenses. It has also been found that international students were challenged by social interactions and financial issues (Nasirudeen et al., 2014). This combination of financial constraints and acculturative stress has also been identified as a factor.

When a person migrates from rural to urban, state to state, or abroad, he has to adjust himself to different cultures, values, and attitudes. But individuals often find it difficult to adapt themselves to the other culture. Significant life changes such as moving into an unfamiliar location and new settings are likely to cause high spikes in stress. Students dealing with any stress are likely to be affected mentally, physically, and emotionally. Too much stress can result in physical and mental health problems, reduce self-esteem, and affect academic

achievement. A study has also proved that acculturative stress is significantly correlated with academic performance (Lee, 2016). Another study indicated that students with higher academic performance have lower acculturative stress (Benita & Supriya, 2016). For students who are distressed by different stressors as a result of acculturation often experiences a change in sleeping habits, change in eating habits, lack of motivation, lack of support system, new responsibilities, increased workload and may be unable or find it challenging to manage and balance their work with the stresses. Elevated stress levels among students can also result in reducing their ability to concentrate. This can limit the students' ability to be at their optimal levels and to think critically. This can lead to decreased academic accomplishments and can affect both the students' physical and mental health. Therefore, studies on coping with acculturative stress and its associated factors will significantly impact higher education to help improve academic performances.

From the findings of various studies, these variables are undoubtedly considered the direct or indirect factors that affect an individual's adaptation to a new cultural and environmental context. It is essential to understand that acculturative stress signifies unresolved problems resulting from new practices and experiences in a different and pristine environment, which cannot be overcome easily by simply adjusting. A study has revealed that participants reported they needed assistance adapting to the various types of experienced stress (Poulakis et al., 2017). It is equally essential to recognize that not all forms of stress can become good stress, but assisting one in changing the perception of stressors can help achieve a positive mindset. Perceiving stress as a challenge and as a motivator to survive helps one see the potential benefits of any situation and overcome them.

Just as important is finding out the major factors leading to acculturative stress: suggest or find measures to resolve the issues that students face due to acculturation. Social support from parents and peers are important agents in influencing a low level of acculturative stress. Studies have also indicated that social support activities reduced the level of acculturative stress, and social support from parents was the most important predictive factor in determining acculturative stress levels (Thomas & Choi, 2006). At this time, the need for indispensable positive orientation of administrators and faculty towards diverse students emerges.

The motive on why many studies have been conducted itself justifies the importance and the need for further research of acculturative stress on students and the stressors associated with it. This will significantly help in the knowledge and understanding of the sources of stress among students, which are crucial for implementing stress reduction strategies because stress may reduce motivation and decrease academic performance as well as the overall functioning of the students.

Well-Being

It is very important to realize that well-being is a much broader concept than moment-to-moment happiness. It includes happiness and includes how an individual is satisfied with his life and his sense of purpose in life. It also includes how people feel and how they function personally and at a societal level, maintaining positive relationships, having some control over one's life and having a sense of purpose, self-esteem and self-confidence.

The different aspects of well-being include physical, emotional, social, psychological, subjective and institutional well-being. Physical well-being includes practising good exercise habits and healthy eating habits to improve the functioning of the body. Managing one's emotional well-being includes the ability to practise stress-management techniques, be resilient, and generate the emotions that lead to a healthy mindset. Social well-being includes communicating, developing meaningful relationships with others, maintaining a support network, and having positive relations with others that help overcome loneliness. The ability to create a feeling of purpose and meaning in life, self-acceptance, personal growth, and development concerns psychological well-being. An equally important aspect is subjective well-being, defined as a person's cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life' (Diener et al., 2002). The definition of Institutional Well-being has been proposed by Dohms (2014) as "a result of the effectiveness of the institution as a result of a harmonious, effective and affective coexistence, coming from all its collaborators in action, and the promotion of a healthy environment in which teaching and learning processes (in the case of an educational institution) more significant, generating positive effects throughout the chain of relations that constitute the institution".

The association between acculturative stress and well-being is less frequently studied. Most studies have explored the adverse effects it has on mental health, such as anxiety and depression. Only a few studies are undertaken for positive effects such as life satisfaction and quality of life. Acculturative stress is typically considered and viewed as negative health as well as mental health influence. This makes researchers confer and review it as a potential reducer of well-being rather than as factors that increase the level of well-being. This leads to an assumption that an increased level of acculturative stress would relate to lower levels of well-being.

A number of studies on the negative effects of acculturative stress have been carried out, especially on Asian immigrants (Kim et al., 2012; Ma, 2017, Mui & Kang, 2006, Cho & Haslam, 2010; Xu & Chi, 2013), Pakistani immigrants (Jibeen, 2011), and Mexican Americans (Hovey, 2000; Crockett et al., 2007; Mejía & McCarthy, 2010). It has been found that the association of acculturative stress with depression has a negative impact on other mental health concerns such as suicide, anxiety, and diminished well-being. Other studies also

explored how acculturative stressors indicated a high level of depression and were the most frequently reported variable followed by acculturation (Gebregergis, 2018; Li et al., 2014). It has also indicated that experiencing higher acculturative stress predicted more negative emotional reactions (Ladum, 2019). From these studies, it can be assumed that acculturative stress is a factor or related to factors that intensify psychological mechanisms related to suicidal ideation, anxiety and depression. Some students experiencing increased levels of difficulty with the acculturative stressors may be more likely to experience higher levels of stress, which may reduce the level of different aspects of well-being. A change in the various aspects of an individual's well-being may be reflected in an alteration of behavior or a task or activity's performance.

As mentioned, only a few studies related to positive outcomes have been undertaken. The influence of acculturative stress on meaning in life, life satisfaction, collectivistic coping, psychological adaptation and including well-being researches though few in number have indicated that relational coping and perceived social support moderated the direct effect of acculturative stress (Yi, 2017; O'Reilly, 2018). From this, it is evident that the primary importance for improving well-being and reducing the stressors of acculturation is to not only measure the status of students but to take measures in order for students to reach a desirable physical and mental state.

Improving one's well-being alone is not always easy. It requires the effort to figure out what aspects of well-being is most important for you. It also requires the ability to figure out how to improve the skills of well-being. Furthermore, while merely measuring the status of well-being can show improvements overtime at the individual level, it is also essential to look beyond and ask how students are feeling. Their self-perception and view of their well-being are balanced with indicators relating to the quality of life, such as health, physical activity and social interaction. Having this information enables professionals to get the best possible perspective on someone's overall well-being and how well they manage daily. This calls for the need of professionals and educators to help identify the needs and help build the status of well-being among the students. Improving one's well-being can be difficult without being aware of what to do and how to do it.

Conclusion

The vital importance of identifying students' status on acculturative stress and well-being is evident from the discussion above. However, there is poor and lack of previous research. Little research has been pointed towards the Indian higher education students, especially in the north-eastern states, in relation to their acculturative stress and well-being beliefs and practices that can be culturally bounded. A study of such would make it possible to find out what students' experiences are and how to manage stress while studying away from home. Findings will help illuminate the complex nature of well-being in the acculturation process and be more aware of the necessity of giving proper and appropriate counselling to students in order to help reduce the acculturative stress that they face when they are in a new and different geographical area.

The world has recognized the importance of well-being in society and educational institutions in recent years. Little is known about student perspectives on the stressors in university or institutional environments and the steps that universities could take to better support student well-being. Although any form of stress may be considered normal and may act as challenges to some in building their skills to manage them, it may not be for many. Students need to control and manage these stressful events not to let the stress impact their lives and academic achievements. The responsibility of imparting resilient skills to higher education students lies with every institution in order to help their students overcome their barriers in helping accomplish their goals.

Moreover, resilient skills are necessary to inculcate achievement aspirations, leadership aspirations, educational aspirations, and job search self-efficacy for their future careers. Certain measures can be taken to support students' well-being. Strengthening and adjusting course design, programme administration, establishing students' support services, assessing students' status, changing or modifying teaching practices by educators and administrators can play important roles in preventing high rates of students' distress.

The above mentioned can only be achieved with the awareness of the importance of exploring the different stress factors resulting from acculturation among institutions nationwide. Further, more studies on the association between acculturative stress and well-being can pave the way for making specific implications to support diverse sets of students and determine the most adaptive acculturation strategy for an individual account of well-being.

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