A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF
ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL LIFE AT MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of international students concerning their academic and social experience at Michigan State University and have a better understanding of the factors that play a role in international student' adjustment, goals and expectations here. Through in-depth interviews it examined how these students conceptualize the accommodating and challenging experiences they may have encountered mainly in their social and academic life. More importantly, it demonstrated how international students actively negotiate U. S practices as they deal with cultural differences to become quickly adapted to their new surroundings, by learning its customs and values, as well as becoming proficient in English. However, this study revealed that integrating and adjusting to life in the U.S is more than just learning and adopting "American way of life" but also creating friendship networks with their co-nationals as well people who are culturally similar to them.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Strongly cognizant of the economic as well as cultural benefits that international students bring, colleges and universities in the US are increasing their efforts to attract international diversity (Liu: 2001). Yet successful international student recruitment does not entirely ensure positive educational experiences and smooth integration into their new academic and social environments. International students, according to Misra et al. (2003), go through the process of adjusting to a new social and educational environment. There is considerable literature that has examined factors associated with the level of socio-cultural adjustment experienced by international students. These factors include but are not limited to length of time spent in the United States, English proficiency, level of interaction they may have with students from the United States, their academic status or background, their ability to extend social networks and obtain social support from the host nation, and one's country of origin (LI Xiao-liang 2007). Compared to their domestic counterparts, international students are said to experience greater adjustment difficulties and more distress during their initial transition into the university and report greater academic and career needs (Grahame & Poyrazli, 2007). With this, international students are said to face unique social and academic needs.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of international students concerning their academic and social experience at Michigan State University and have a better understanding of the factors that play a role in international student' adjustment, goals and expectations here. Being an international student myself, the prospect of carrying out an exploratory research on the socio cultural context of this adjustment process intrigued me. I am not only eager to compare my personal experiences with other international students, but also to gain an understanding of the mechanisms that underlie and explicate the nature of the international student experience in US higher education.

This study involves the understanding of human social and adaptive behavior from the respondents' perspective, therefore, a qualitative methodology reckoned to be suitable. Qualitative data

1

provided me with the opportunity to explore and explain how the select group of international students understood their lived experiences ,and the meaning they make of that experience. The study, therefore, drew on data from in- depth interviews of 10 heterogeneous mix of international graduate students at Michigan State University , specifically their perspectives and beliefs related to their cross- cultural adjustment and learning

Through in-depth interviews it examined how these students conceptualize the accommodating and challenging experiences they may have encountered mainly in their social and academic life. More importantly, it demonstrated how international students actively negotiate U. S practices as they deal with cultural differences to become quickly adapted to their new surroundings, by learning its customs and values, as well as becoming proficient in English. However, this study revealed that integrating and adjusting to life in the U.S is more than just learning and adopting "American way of life" but also creating friendship networks with their co-nationals as well people who are culturally similar to them. Interview questions were therefore are set up so as to help theorize about diverse ways in which they learn to cope with as well as are immersed in their new social and academic environment. By examining international students' narratives of their U.S. experiences, I aimed to explore the generalizable patterns, but more importantly the unique and subjectively-lived experiences they have had in their host society.

THE FLOW OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS INTO U.S UNIVERSITIES

The Institute of International Education, in its latest *Open Doors* publication reported that the number of international students at colleges and universities in the United States increased by five percent to 723,277 during the 2010/11 academic year (Open Doors: 2011). This is considered to be the fifth consecutive year that *Open Doors* figures has shown growth, and it represents a record high in the number of international students in the United States. With the growing trend of international students pursuing higher education at United States, studies have highlighted the need to better understand factors that "push" a student to pursue educational opportunities abroad and "pull" the student to a particular host county (e.g., Mazzarol and Soutar:2002).

In the US context, talented international students, particularly graduate students are claimed to be drawn to the US for a variety of reasons, namely the high quality of research universities, the availability of research funding, as well as the opportunities for employment after schooling, for which many are known to change their student status to longer-term residence once their studies are completed (Byram: 2006). The presences of international students have also brought forth a host of benefits to the United States. From a financial perspective, in 2011 international students were reported to have contributed over $21 billion to the U.S. economy, mainly through their expenditures on tuition and living expenses(Institute of International Education:2011). In addition to their economic contributions, the presence of international students is associated with improved international relations that add an extra dimension to the educational experience (Byram: 2006). For example, international help incorporate diverse perspectives to classroom conversations, and also increase the awareness and appreciation for other cultures (Bevis: 2000). They are also known to bring specialized knowledge and skills, especially within the field of science and technology. In fact, foreign-born scholars working in the science and engineering are said to have made substantial contributions in high tech firms, universities and other sectors of society (National Research Council (U.S.) Staff Board on Higher Education and Workforce

Staff: 2005). So, on one hand, U.S high education institutions are benefiting from the flow of students who come from overseas, and on the other, such students benefits in numerous ways as well.

WHO ARE FOREIGN OR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS?

It is important to shift our understanding of students as merely "customers" and "consumers" of U. S education which has contributed to increased recruitment of international students for revenue as well as intellectual or cultural benefits (Lee and Rice: 2007).Researchers across disciplines have tried to make sense of the experiences of those individuals, who have developed in one cultural context, but attempt to live in a new cultural context. In this regard, there has been a focus on understanding individuals who make a geographical transition across cultures such as "sojourners, immigrants and refugees" (Byram: 2006). In contrast to immigrants who have migrated with relatively clear intention of settling in permanently, Byram (2006) citing Furnham (1988), claims that sojourners are those individuals who voluntarily spend a medium length of time (six months to five years) in a new and unfamiliar environment. International students form an important group within the category of sojourners, who are in transition for the purpose of achieving an educational goal (Sakurako: 2000).

With this, they are recognized as temporary migrants—the F-1 student visa grants them permission to stay in the United States only for the duration of their studies. Despite this, it is clear that a large percentage of international students apply for H-1 work visas after the completion of their degrees and then eventually adjust their status to permanent residents of the United States. Moreover, many of these initially temporary migrants have the potential to become highly skilled permanent immigrants, and may eventually be recognized as "human capital immigrants" who enter the US labor market from professional and graduate schools in the US (Alba, 2006:850). These graduates have a considerable amount of knowledge, skills, as well as the cultural and social experiences that helps them transition from school to mainstream economy not dissimilar from that of the native born (Alba:2006). The proportion of students, who stay beyond their studies is, however, determined by several factors (Hazen and Alberts: 2006).

In this study, international students will be viewed as more than just "temporary" migrants who are here to fulfill an educational goal. It is important to recognize that although international students who enter the country on student visas may not be considered immigrants in a legal sense; they are also

insiders because of their day-to-day interactions with the cultural, economic, and educational aspects of the receiving institution(Hazen and Alberts: 2006).

Their location within a university allows them to be easily accessed by researchers and a considerable amount of research has therefore been dedicated to understanding or explicating their social and academic experiences (Byram: 2006). Further, in light of the significant number of international students, and the potential benefits that might be derived from the presence of international students on American college campuses, it is crucial to identify and understand the factors that affect the quality of experience in the US. Increased attention, therefore, needs to be paid to the situation of international students upon their arrival into their new environment. This is especially pertinent because many young people as they join the growing numbers of international students in US today may face not only the demanding transition from school to higher education common to all students, but the stress of adjusting to a new country, culture and often language (Byram:2006;Lee and Rice:2007;Misra:2003). With this, the experience of international students' adjustment to academic and sociocultural life in the US is an area of research that demands attention, as international students are more likely to have a positive experience if there is better understanding of the unique needs and issues they face as a result of the cultural discord they may experience (Lee and Rice:2007). This study is, therefore, an attempt to highlight the nature of migrating international students as they enter their new social spaces and begin to integrate into social networks where they must negotiate their social belonging (Kivisto: 2003), as well as develop strategies for meeting the demands and expectations of their new academic environment.

THEORY/ LITERATURE ON ADJSUTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

The term adjustment has multifarious meanings. In context to international students, for some researchers adjustment is used to refer to whether a student experiences specific problems (e.g. academic problems, inability to communicate, financial problems; problems in time management). For other researchers, adjustment refers to the process by which students overcome some form of psychological distress (Al-Sharideh and Goe: 1998). In general, however, adjustment to higher education is typically viewed as representing a "transitional process that unfolds overtime" as students learn to cope with the external pressures of the university environment they are exposed to (Al-Sharideh and Goe,1998:701;Byram:2006). Further, scholars have argued that newcomers adjustment process involves a gradual development process from the initial experience of the unfamiliar "Other" or a "state of low self and cultural awareness" to a state of "high self- and cultural awareness" (Adler:1975).

The importance of studying international students' transitional process to university life abroad has been highlighted across many studies. Such studies have reported on the problems international students encounter due to their unique academic, cultural and social background. For instance, when international students arrive to the United States, they may experience an inconsistency with what they feel they are supposed to experience and what they actually experience. In no time, they may realize that transition in to a new culture will not necessarily occur smoothly as international students face different challenges in adjusting to living and learning in their new environment (Grahame & Poyrazli: 2007). The transition to a new culture is also generally accompanied by what many scholars refer to as 'culture shock', arising from a loss of the familiar cues and patterns of social interaction as a result of being exposed to a new culture(Byram:2006;Poyrazli & Lopez: 2007). Among the many symptoms attributed to the generalized state of culture shock in the literature are low self-esteem, social isolation, homesickness, disorientation, anxiety, depression, role strain, stress, loneliness, to name a few (Grahame & Poyrazli: 2007).These feelings have appeared over several years in many empirical studies of adjustment, which have identified several sources of strain, including weather and food differences, language prowess,

accommodation and financial problems, loneliness, homesickness and academic difficulties (Tognoli :2003; Yeh:2003).

A critical review of literature reveals that there is dispute over the inevitability of international students' encounter with culture shock. The pattern of stress they experience, therefore, may differ according to the type of students and the context in which they find themselves (Hechanova-Alampay: 2002). Here, it is important to be mindful that adjustment is not a universal term that defines whole of international student experience. This being said, researchers have not only analyzed international students as an adjustment process, but they also bring into consideration other theoretical concepts or frameworks to understand the nature of adjustment and interaction of international students with their host environment. For instance, many have tried to understand the move of international students or other immigrant groups into their new environments using the framework of assimilation and acculturation.

Cultural Assimilation and Acculturation

A central premise is that to adjust it is necessary to learn the norms and rules of the new sociocultural system (Pavel: 2006).Herbert J Gans (2012) citing Richard Alba applied the widely accepted definition of assimilation, as "the decline of an ethnic distinction and its corollary cultural and social differences" as one is immersed into a new culture (p.153). Assimilation as a concept has been subject to considerable criticism. Richard Alba and Victor Nee (2006) sheds light into the shortcomings of earlier formulations and applications of assimilation theory that seek to describe the integration of many individuals, ethnic groups and immigrants into mainstream society. Here, he is especially critical of the "canonical accounts" of assimilation that suggest that immigrants need to be integrated to the extent that they remain culturally distant from their own cultural origin and completely adopt the Native culture to the point they are indistinguishable (Alba and Nee:2006). While Alba and Nee (2006) is not alone in criticizing this model, rather than rejecting it altogether, they seek to redefine assimilation in order to render it useful in the study of immigration, in such a way that helps to understand the "social dynamics of ethnicity in American society, as opposed to its past normative or ideological as a state imposed normative program aimed at eradicating minority cultures" (p. 827). Hence, Alba and Nee (2006) reject

8

the one dimensional approach to assimilation, and renders it to be a social process that occurs spontaneously in the course of "interaction between minority and majority groups" (p.827).

In context to international students' experiences, previous research has contended that the adjustment to American universities by international students is linked to their level of "assimilation" into American culture (Basu and Aimes: 1970). With this, it is assumed that international students who are able to more extensively integrate into American culture and learn to effectively interact with Americans will be more successfully adjusted. This includes the development of proficiency in the language of the host country, the quantity of contact with host nationals, length of residence, as well as cultural knowledge to name a few (Grahame & Poyrazli: 2007)

In assimilation theory, the process of learning or acquiring cultural practices is called acculturation, which is defined by Monza and Rueda (2006) to be the level to which individuals incorporate language, values, and practices of a new culture. Acculturative models are widely acknowledged as influential in the field of intercultural communication research, focusing as they do on the experiences of the "sojourner and their relationship with the host culture" (Byram, 2006:66) or the changes that an individual experiences when in first-hand contact with another culture (Berry: 1997). Research on intercultural communication, therefore, has focused on the benefits of students from social contact with members of the host country and engaging in campus life. Further, they emphasized the importance of social ties with host community in successful social and academic adjustment (Toyokawa and Toyokawa: 2002). Strong ties with Americans, in particular, are said to be a vital source of "emotional gratification," "secuitity" as well as a "a source of social support and assistance in times of need" (Al-Sharideh and Goe,1998:703).

Others have also looked at the tension and anxiety experienced by international students due to cultural dissonance they experience upon contact with their new environment (Yeh: 2003; Trice: 2004). For instance, Tierney (1992) contends that American universities and colleges reinforce the culture of the dominant society (i.e., the culture of White Anglo-Saxon Americans). Therefore, upon entry to the

American university, members of other racial or ethnic groups may undergo a disruptive cultural experience as they must deal with a different cultural frame of reference.

The cultural discord one may experience in the new culture can also be explained by the concept of "cultural or social distance." Alba and Nee (2006) define social distance as the "subjective nearness felt to certain individuals" (p. 838). This is different from physical proximity and has more to do with closeness felt in terms of ones' customs or social and cultural norms. In this sense, these authors claim that when "social distance is low, there is a feeling of common identity and shared experiences." (Alba and Nee, 2006:838). This sense of common identity and experience is said to be important for international students' experiences. Gudykunst and Gao (1990) posited that "cultural similarity: (that is, a short cultural or social distance) produces more accuracy in a sojourner's ability to predict and explain the behavior of the host community as well as its members. This would then be beneficial in developing interpersonal relationships, and reducing the level of anxiety experienced by international students (Gudykunst & Hammer: 1990). It also has important implications for determining who students will seek friendship with or the social networks they join in order to meet their emotional and instrumental needs.

With this, many scholars have also noted the choice of international students not to fully integrate into American culture and develop relationships with Americans, and rather form enclaves or ethnic communities on campus (Al-Sharideh and Goe: 1998; Ying: 2002). At many American universities, it is contended that an important strategy by which members of international student body adjust to their new environment is the formation of social relationships with other persons of the same cultural background or nationality. This is to say, within the context of their university, international students establish and participate in ethnic communities, which consist of a network of strong social ties with people of the same cultural background. According to Al-Sharideh and Goe (1998), the network of ties established within an ethnic community can be employed by international students as a means of coping with and resolving problems that emerge during the course of their studies, thereby facilitating the adjustment process.

This is not to say that social interaction with American peers and society or having knowledge of the host society is not a crucial influence on the personal adjustment or successful integration of

10

international students (Gudykunst & Hammer: 1990). But it is easy to follow the narrowly defined notion of assimilation that assumes that immigrants, or in this case, international students have to distance themselves from their ethnic and cultural ties in order to function in mainstream society (Zhou and Lee: 1998). Similar to Alba and Nee (2006), Monza and Rueda (2006) remains critical of the acculturation model that assumes the process of learning and adopting new cultural practices, is "unidirectional", suggesting that the "extent to which one becomes proficient at English and adopts American values and practices, in essence the extent to which one becomes "American," is related to the extent to which the primary language and culture are left behind" (p.189). In other words, the traditional model assumes that the maintenance of ones' primary language and culture hinders the process of learning new cultural practices. The authors, therefore, examine the process of learning and enacting new cultural models from a "sociocultural perspective", which conceives of learning as a product of the individual in interaction with the social context. So, rather than "passive" adoption of dominant culture, immigrants are considered to be "active agents of their own learning who draw on diverse cultural practices" and identities when in interaction with their given social context. (Monza and Rueda, 2006:189). This suggests that learning new cultural practices and beliefs does not necessarily have to hinder the maintenance of existing cultures and suggests "co-existence" of diverse cultural practices (Monza and Rueda:2006).

Further, this approach, also looks at whether an "individual can determine, have access to, and is willing to employ the cultural practices, beliefs, and identities that would make for effective participation in a specific context, however effective may be defined by that person acting within the context" (Monza and Rueda,2006:191). With this, it becomes important to recognize that international students may adopt "different strategies for adapting to the host culture and that these may result in different acculturative outcomes" (Byram, 2006:70).

With this, the international student experiences provide a rich context that can reveal the multiple facets of their lives as well as the diverse ways in which they navigate American social and academic life. Their narrative beliefs and perspectives in particular help to illuminate these. This next section will

address the most appropriate methods and methodology to uncover and discuss the choices I made during

the design, implementation, and interpretation phase of this study.

METHOD

Qualitative Research

While many researchers have reported on some degree of generalizability in the experiences of international students, there is a need to view transition as a unique and subjectively-lived experience that cannot fit a narrow model of adjustment (Gao and Gudykunst: 1990; Grahame & Poyrazli: 2007).The method for this study was a qualitative approach for the purpose of providing meaningful and rich information. As indicated earlier, researchers take into account numerous cross-cultural variables, such as frequency of interaction with host nationals, length of residence, English language proficiency and so on to understand the involvement of international students in their new social environment when studying at American institutions of higher education (LI Xiao-liang :2007). There is a broad array of such literature on international students based on quantitative research that seek to ,emphasize precisely measuring these variables and testing hypotheses to gain general causal explanations. For example, such studies have sought to explain a phenomenon like student psychosocial adjustment through the gathering of numerical data or attempt to understand how establishment of social ties with Americans (measured by frequency of interaction) influences the personal adjustment of an international student using multiple regressions (Al-Sharideh and Goe:1998). Quantitative models have been largely criticized for being one-dimensional and rather limiting when it comes to recognizing the multifaceted nature of a person's life or personality differences. In other, they are considered to be devoid of descriptions of individuals' personal understandings and interpretations of a certain phenomenon (Berg and Lune: 2012).

According to Berg and Lune (2012), qualitative research is more concerned with patterns, explore how people structure their lives and make sense of themselves and others, rather than getting the average or frequency. With this, qualitative data will provide me with the opportunity to explore and explain how the select group of international students understands their lived experiences ,and the meaning they make of that experience. By leaning more towards qualitative method, I do not claim its monopoly or superiority over quantitative. The reality of international student's every day lives is imbued with meanings that cannot be quantified. In this sense there is a need to lean towards qualitative methods that

focus on the subjective understanding and perceptions of people (Berg and Lune: 2012). This will help to conceptualize their adjustment journey as an unpredictable and dynamic process, which is experienced differently among international students, as a result of individual, cultural and external factors (Yang et.al:2005).

The methods I employ to investigate the students' experiences were essentially qualitative in nature and involved interviews with 10 graduate students from multiple countries, as the main data collection tool. The interview process is rendered to be a "meaning-making occasion" in which the actual circumstance or the natural setting in which the interview is conducted provides "access to the context of people's behavior", which thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior (Berg and Lune: 2012). Since, the primary aim of this paper is to try to understand the processes from the perspective of the student; interviews are invaluable instrument to gain access to rich and meaningful data. The interview schedules were, therefore, designed to encourage the students to talk of these experiences so as to capture their views on their goals and experiences that which will potentially help to identify the individual, contextual and cultural factors that influences their experiences.

For the purpose of this paper, I intend to examine how the students interviewed conceptualize their accommodating and challenging experiences they may have encountered mainly in their social and academic life. My research has an exploratory component. This is to say that, rather than completely rely on existing literature and analytical frameworks to understand respondents' situation, my understanding will also be driven by the experience and insight of participant. As mentioned earlier, I aim to explore the generalizable patterns of international students' experiences, as well the unique and subjectively-lived experience. Their narratives about their experiences can provide a window into how they perceive themselves and their social and academic worlds.

Semi-Structured Interviews

While an unstructured interview is said to be designed to elicit information using a set of predetermined questions, unstandardized interviews allow for more flexibility, and contain questions that are changeable and modifiable whenever appropriate. As the aim of qualitative interviews is to discover

the respondents' own perspectives and feelings on certain issues, the interview that I conduct will be semi-structured. Semi-structured interviews can be located in the between the aforementioned types of interviews (Berg and Lune: 2012). So, on one hand, it involves the implementation of predetermined questions, but at the same time interviewers are afforded the leniency to digress and probe far beyond the answers to their prepared structured interviews. So, to prepare myself for the interview process, I created an interview guideline that gives me a sense of direction and indicate the subject matters that I intended to cover. I also created a set of predetermined questions based on subject areas covered. Allowing the respondents ideas and stories to freely flow may help the researchers get introduced to new and unexplored areas or ideas that pertain to the international students' socio cultural as well as academic experiences. During the interview process, instead of strictly following the predetermined questions, follow-up questions were asked when necessary, for instance, in situations where further details and clarification seemed necessary.

The questions were divided into four sections. In the first section, the participant responded to questions regarding their demographic, history or sociocultural background. I, thus, began by asking a set of questions that asked participants their personal backgrounds, such as questions about their families, the reasons they decided to come to the United States, and the nature of social life in their home. Questions were then administered to understand students' initial phase of adjustment, as well as daily interactions with other students (Americans or other internationals), and involvement in the wider university community. In the second phase, questions were addressed to capture their experiences of academic life in the United States. These questions focused on the classroom culture and interactions. In the last set of questions, participants responded to questions that asked them to reflect upon the meaning of his/her experiences as an international student.

These questions were set up so as to help theorize the complex mannerism through which various factors play out into the lives of these students and that which can help foster a connection with the host society in unique and dynamic ways. It is very difficult to capture all the factors that contribute to our understanding of the international student experiences as many complex and overlapping factors come

into play. This, however, does not mean that an exploratory qualitative research cannot is not valid, therefore, cannot take place; rather, it is this dynamic and unpredictable situation that may culminate into rich and detailed narratives that provide intricate understanding of the experiences of international students.

Selection of Research Setting

The institution where this study was conducted is Michigan State University (MSU), located in East Lansing, Michigan. It is a public institution that was founded in 1855. Located in a suburban area, the campus size is 5,192 acres. Out of the 36,675 study body, 5,898 are international students. 3,341 are undergraduates compared to 2,166 graduate international students. These students represent various countries around the globe, namely China, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran, Korea, India, Malaysia, Taiwan and Libya, Canada, Japan, Thailand, Mexico, Pakistan, Brazil, to name a few. This setting was mainly chosen for its convenience. Since this is a semester long (3-4 month) project, it proved to be an inexpensive and accessible location to connect with international students from all over.

Universities around the US employ various ways to encourage international students to develop a positive social experience while enrolled in a U.S. university. The MSU Office of International Student and Scholars (OISS) is the designated office on campus that caters to the needs of the international student body. Serving as a liaison with U.S. government agencies, foreign embassies, its main objective as stated on the Mission Statement is to help "international students and scholars integrate into and adjust to the academic, cultural and social life of MSU". Each year the OISS hosts and organizes a series of social events that provide opportunities for cross-cultural interactions. Before I began selecting students for the interview process, I decided to spend a couple hours each week observing as well participating in an international student event organized by OISS. One of the events I attended was the International Coffee Hour. This event is held every Fridays from 4 pm to 6pm during the fall and spring semesters when classes are in session. The stated purpose for this event was to help students connect with other international and domestic folks and be more involved with the MSU community. I attended altogether 5 coffee hour sessions. Another event I attended was an event organized by the MSU Counseling Center

(MSUCC), Office for International Students and Scholars (OISS) and Office of Cultural and Academic

Transitions (OCAT). Together, they organized a series of hour long workshop, called "Being a Spartan"

A cross -cultural experience" for international as well as domestic students dedicated to recognizing

intercultural relationships, and its implication for interacting across both global and domestic differences.

Throughout the fall semester, they offer six one hour workshop sessions. Each workshop emphasizes

specific cross cultural themes such as food, time, authority, friendship as well as intercultural

communication. Unfortunately, due to schedule conflict, I was only able to attend one of the workshops.

My attendance in these intercultural events, allowed me to observe the social life and interactions

of international students in real, naturally occurring setting. I also took these visits as an opportunity to

get to know as well as gain exposure to students from a range of cultural and academic backgrounds.

Directly participating with the participants also gave me get first-handed experiential information that

may be pertinent to my research. During my weekly visits to the coffee hour session, I decided not to

fully disclose my research agenda, although I did mention it to a couple of people. My hesitancy in being

completely open about my research was because I did not want my presence to alter or color their

behavior. For the most part, I wanted to be able to observe as a participant and gain access to potential

interviewees. Further, by being fully immersed in the field, it enabled me to move around and talk to

people without appearing unusual, with access to spontaneous observations. The issue of access to the

participants world and acceptance was, however, not very problematic for me. As a member of the

international student group, it did not take much effort to establish a rapport and gain access to

spontaneous observations and interactions. There were some instances when people would come up to

me and inquire where I was from. As soon as I mentioned I was from Nepal, they seemed curious to know

more about my cultural background. Being somewhat of an "insider" has its advantages as well as

drawbacks. On one hand, the insider role status frequently allows researchers more rapid and more

complete acceptance by their participants. Therefore, participants are typically more open with

researchers so that there may be a greater depth to the data gathered. In my study, many of the questions

that I ask have to do with their perceptions of Americans or life in America. I anticipated that being an

international student myself, the respondents may be more likely to give me an accurate picture, particularly when it comes to describing negative experiences. At the same time, although this shared status can be very beneficial as it affords access and a common ground from which to begin the research, I was also cautious or wary that participant may make assumptions of similarity and therefore fail to explain their individual experience fully. In other words, they may assume because I am an international student myself, they need not disclose or talk about certain aspects. I also had to be careful about not allowing my personal experiences cloud the personal experiences of the respondents.

Selection of Participants

After having chosen the institutional setting and participated in some of the activities hosted by the OISS, the next step was to select and narrow down the participants or international students. The first few students' international graduate students that were interviewed were mainly from convenient sampling, which refers to the category of samples where participants are those who are close at hand or easily accessible (Berg and Lune: 2012). Although not a monolithic group, international students as a group may find common and shared experiences with one another. Researchers have argued that the friendship patterns that these students generate are related to the particular circumstances of their academic journey (Byram:2006) . Students are also known to form networks with students who affirm and express their own culture of origin. Further, being international students they also remain part of a a broader multi-national network (Pavel:2006). With this in mind, I also opted to identify or select students through snowball sampling. Hence, many of participants were located through referral of one respondent of another (Berg and Lune:2006).

While many studies have considered the persistence or adjustment of particular groups from specific countries or regions, this study takes a broader perspective in investigating students' social and academic experiences, by considering students from multiples countries of origin. With this, a total of 10 students representing multiple countries were selected to be interviewed. Students needed to be enrolled in a degree program and have been admitted into the United States under either F-1 visa status, in order to be classified as an international student. Although, I would have preferred to interview both graduate as

well as undergraduates with F-1 status, due to limited time I selected only graduate international students (masters as well as PhD). Again, this is mainly due to convenience that arises out of my status as an international graduate student. The students represent a number of different countries: Taiwan, India, Pakistan, Turkey, China, Mexico, Japan and Serbia. Students reported studying in the following majors: statistics, psychology, sociology, economics, Environmental Engineering and education. All the international students I identified for the interview were unmarried and their age ranged between 25-35. Most of them had completed a masters' degree prior to their enrollment in MSU and have been living in the United States between 1-4 years. Interviews generally lasted between 60-90 minutes. My sample size being only 10 may not be very representative of the international student body. However, since I planned on carrying out in-depth interviews, during which international students' personal comments on their experiences in their own words will be emphasized, I expected to obtain detailed narratives as evidence towards explicating international students understanding of their situation and what meanings these various experiences, particularly that relates to their social and academic integration, have for them. No selection criteria were established for English language proficiency, country of origin, race or other factors that have been previously identified as significant in determining their social and academic experiences.

I obtained informed consent from the participants prior to taking their interviews. They were informed about the purpose of the study, and were told that they could stop the interview at any point without giving a reason, that quotes would be used anonymously or they would provide pseudo names, and that if they did not wish to answer a question then I would move on to the next one. The interviews were taken in a private setting, at the convenience of the participants. Notes were not taken during the interview, but these interviews were tape-recorded, and then transcribed later.

ANALYSIS PROCEDURE OF DATA

In this research, the analysis procedure used was influenced by the participant or field note centered approach emphasized by Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw in their book, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. The scholars urge researchers to come to the transcripts with an open mind in order to identify processes, issues and ideas that emerge during close examination and reflection on the field notes. They refer to this as "qualitative coding" which according to them opens up "avenues of inquiry" (p.151). In this sense, according to Emerson, et.al (1995), field notes are rendered to be the building blocks for constructing the "ethnographic story" and telling the story (p.170). This is to say that analysis of ethnographic data should begin with concepts that are grounded and reflect the subject or event under study, referred to as inductive process (Emerson et. al: 1995). In attempt to remain "field-note" centered, direct quotations from respondents' about their adjustment feelings, opinion and knowledge were considered to be basic source of raw data for this study.

To analyze the data I went through all the transcribed notes, and quotes, looking for critical terms, central events or themes and patterns to emerge. I wanted to take a narrative approach, which included context and description with long quotes from the subjects themselves. From, this, I also observed to see if any themes and patters emerged. I categorized similar themes and patters together, and elaborated on them to fit them in to the social setting. This process of analyzing data requires dedication to the participants' stories, which meant the transcribed notes were read multiple times, to identify patterns and themes related to international students' experiences. In developing an ethnographic story, Emerson et.al (1995) claim that researchers need to select some themes that resonate with "personal or disciplinary concerns that recur in a number of specific field notes." Hence, one of the goals was to find specific as well as recurring themes that emerged as important markers of international students' social and academic adjustment. This meant taking into consideration the experiences that help constitutes or defines certain aspects of their sociocultural and academic adjustment process. Similarly, when selecting relevant excerpts, I attempted to select those that represent or introduce specific themes or ones that represent

variations form the usual (Emerson et.al:1995). Here, multiples voices and perspectives were taken in consideration to capture the unique experiences, but at the same time I also looked for connective threads among the experiences of the participants interviewed.

While paying systematic attention to field notes to identify pertinent processes and issues that become apparent, the piecing together of field notes is rendered to be more than finding and stating what is there. Rather, Emerson, et.al(1995) claim that "it is more fundamentally a process of creating what is there by constantly thinking about the import of previously recorded events and meanings (p. 168)." So, the weaving together of students' stories is considered a process of crafting their storylines that allowed for me, as the researcher, to insert theoretical insight into their experiences. With this, they remind us that reminds us, the task is to "to develop theoretical connections between field note excerpts" (p. 164).This is an important part of the data analysis process.

Here it is important to recognize that the analysis does not simply take place after the data is collected, but it is said to permeate "all phases of the research enterprise – as the researcher makes observations, records them in field notes, codes these notes in analytic categories, and finally develops explicit theoretical propositions" (Emerson, et.al,1995: 144). This "continuously analytical character of the field notes" or the "processing" of field notes is rendered to be an interactive and interpretive process in which the researcher's assumptions, interests, and "theoretical commitments" inevitably shape the character and content of the research. This is to say that, while attempting to be "field-note" centered, one cannot ignore that the analysis is shaped both by the researcher's perspectives and theoretical positions. Hence, when analyzing international students' narratives, as researchers it is important to ask how the interview responses have been consistent with the literature or existing theories on international students or immigrants or in what ways have they gone beyond. Emerson, et.al (1995) refers to the interplay of theory and data as a ‚"dialectical‘ or "reflexive" process and contends that "theory enters at every point" (p.167). So, while the researcher is responding to the participants' words, they also revert back to existing theories and literature about the phenomenon being studied. With this, Emerson, et. al (1995) claim to go beyond the grounded theory approach which claims to be the "discovery" of theory through the analysis

of data. Instead the authors advocate for a strategy of theory development that seeks balance between "analytical propositions and local meanings" (p.169).

Consequently, a qualitative design is viable way through which we can capture international students' perceptions and investigate how their experiences in a foreign country affect the ways in which these individuals see their identities and their larger worlds. Based on a qualitative framework, in the preceding section, I elaborate on the findings and their implications. These findings represent how students conceptualize their social and academic life. Without a sociological theoretical perspective, it is difficult to make sense or interpret the meaning they make of their experiences. The rich narratives that I was exposed gave me the opportunity to connect these particular experiences to several concepts and analytical understandings that are part of the broader disciplinary knowledge (Emerson, et. al: 1995) relating to the experiences of newcomers, who contend with several cultural differences as they strive to become fully adjusted or integrated in American society.

FINDINGS

As mentioned earlier, I began by asking questions concerning their background and past experience, such as questions related to their families, the reasons they decided to come to the United States, prior perceptions of U.S culture and higher education and the nature of social life in their home. I also collected their demographic information. It should be mentioned that while demographic factors may have played a role in the participants' perceptions of academic and social experiences at MSU, this qualitative study does not specifically examine specific factors. Instead this demographic data supported the heterogeneity and individuality between participants, in order to better understand what international students in general have encountered as academic and social experiences at the University. In other words, through specific examples and general points of view, this study intended to capture the shared and unique understandings of their experiences. Participants when quoted have not always been identified by their demographic features, unless it was relevant (note that anything written in italics is statements made by the participants).

Decision to come to the United States and prior perceptions of U.S

The interview was designed to begin with questions regarding their expectations of an educational institution in the U.S as well as the preparations they went through in attempts towards meeting their own expectations. The idea behind these initial set of questions was to understand the students' mental preparedness with regard to facing the cultural, social and academic challenges that lay ahead of them. International students provided a very detailed account of their prior experience and cultural background. Data concerning participants' expectations/goals, prior to arriving at MSU, mainly revolved around their decision to come to the United States as well as their perceptions of the higher education in the United States, but it was not limited to this. Other issues such as perceived cultural differences and importance of English language, prior to their arrival were also examined. While many students reported having had positive images and perceptions of the U.S, they also shared some concerns about the U.S.

23

From an early age, attraction to international experiences and the drive to discover diverse cultures compelled some of the students to seek education abroad opportunities. As the graduate student from Serbia explained:

In Serbia there are minorities but not much diversity. There are gypsies, but not much physically differences exist. So, her perception of America as the land of "fairness", "equality" led her to anticipate a heavy prevalence of cultural diversity, which she claimed was a decisive factor in choosing to pursue a U.S higher education.

A Japanese graduate student expressed similar sentiment to pursue "international education." This participant also deemed understanding cultural diversity or maximizing knowledge about different cultures as educationally enriching. This desire to be exposed to cultural diversity, therefore, spurred her interest to pursue a Masters' degree in the United States.

As the two participants were describing their hometown, it was clear that migration and exposure to ethnic diversity were not very common issues in the immediate environment where they were raised. The Japanese student expresses this concern:

In Japan recently, many young people don't want to get out of Japan, and do not see broad perspective. But, here there are many more minorities, in japan, there are only Japanese. Here, there are whites,, blacks, Latinos, Asians and others representing diverse cultures. You constantly have to face issues resulting from cultural differences and conflicts. In Japan, I can't experience that cultural conflict and here you are constantly facing cultural differences.

Almost all the international graduate students interviewed for this study are particularly cognizant of the value of studying in a higher education institute in the United States. In fact, the perceived excellence of U.S. higher education was the most often cited influence in the students' ultimate decision to study abroad. Often, when students emphasized the perceived superiority of the quality of graduate education in the U.S, they made comparisons with their own or other countries.

For example, a student from Turkey, who also had experience studying abroad in Japan stated:

Well, I have been to many countries and I wasn't satisfied with the quality of education I got. And all these years you hear about schools in the US, saying that schools are good and they force you do creative thinking, critical writing, this and that!"

Similarly, a male student from India also shared his high expectations of education in the U.S in regards to facilities, disciplinary expertise and professional development. Also, there was a widely shared understanding that U.S education leads to greater future gains in terms of earning or career opportunities, which is seen as a strong reason to pursue an education here:

I was in touch with some colleagues who had been to the U.S. before me and other friends from other institutions. So, I had pretty good idea of what is the education system in the U.S like. I understood that U.S education is more professional. I also learned about the values that a U.S degree carries. The ultimate result is good even if it is more rigorous, and also there is good economy in the US.

In the overall, almost everyone, one way or the other expressed his or her awareness of the greater availability of professional and research opportunities in the U.S. International graduate students' perception of the powerful influence of U. S. education in tandem with their aim for individual advancement to achieve a certain professional status seemed to have overshadowed their fear and anxiety of entering a "strange culture" where "all or most of the familiar cues are removed" (Oberg: 142). Hence, many graduate students claimed to be quite confident in their ability to move to a new culture, however, were also aware that they must learn to adapt to their new learning or cultural contexts. In the case of the participants I interviewed, only one female student from Taiwan, expressed anxiousness or stress related to moving abroad ("Even though I have traveled to many places, I have never lived alone. So, I was worried about living alone"), albeit, many did report having experienced some obstacles in their academic and social life related to English proficiency, cultural differences, and unfamiliarity with the American classroom environment, and so on as their time in the U.S progressed.

These will be dealt with in depth later on. It is important to recognize here that despite the issues students are expected to encounter upon their arrival in a new environment, this study revealed that graduate students' strong awareness of the potential benefits of studying abroad, particularly in the U.S, may to some extent have outweighed their anticipation of psychological stress and trauma living in a foreign country for a significant number of years. Hence, prior to their arrival, some seemed to be more focused on preparing and honing the skills that they anticipate would help them academically such as improving English language proficiency, in terms of writing as well as reading.

The importance of the English language for navigating life in the U.S. surfaced very early on. This was many of the students' primary focus or concern. Although most of these students came from countries where English was neither their first nor officially recognized language, this did not prevent them from seeking a predominately English Speaking country when it came to applying to universities. In fact some of them explicitly stated that as being motivated to apply to countries such as the U.S. This was particularly prominent among those students who had no or minimal exposure to English before high school, namely the students from Taiwan, China and Mexico.

The Taiwanese male study eloquently expressed the significance of English in the academic world:

English is very much emphasized, but it's not taught as effectively as other bilingual societies. I don't think Taiwan is a very bilingual society, although there are many internal dialects, English was not a part of the language for daily commination. But, it is very much emphasized because it is a symbol of higher education, cultivation, and higher culture upbringing; however it is not effectively taught and used in Taiwan.

With this, this student claimed to make a conscious effort to choose an English speaking country, with U. S being a

very natural and the first option or probably the only one you can think of, in terms of which country you want to go.

Similarly, the graduate student from Mexico, recognizing the value and predominance of English in the academic world, made a conscious decision to apply to a predominately English-Speaking country:

I wanted an English speaking place, because that's the foreign language I learned. And that was going to help me to improve my English. So, it was either US, or NZ or UK. And also in college they made me aware that a lot of the scholarship is written in English. So, I was aware that it's part of the dominant language of academia. And a lot of people don't like that and I think that has to change. But, I also have to recognize that if you want to change that you also have to understand that. And so that's why I was like, I think I need a university in English. Universities here or in the UK are known to be amazing and wow.

Other international graduate students were also aware of the importance of using and speaking the English language, but expressed either confidence or some concern with their inability to speak fluently. Students who displayed more confidence in English were those who had been taught English from elementary school onwards, namely students from India, Pakistan, Serbia and Turkey. These students claimed to have a predominately British system of education and American education system in their respective countries. With this, they felt more prepared for life in the United States.

The two students from India described their upbringing with English in their British Schooling System. One of them states,

I started learning English form the very basic, from second and third standard so I've made quite a progress. In India, most schools are English. Before, it was mainly prestigious. Now a day, even if you go to a small village in India they teach English textbooks.

Both of these students felt quite confident that knowing how to effectively speak and write in English would help them with their transition:

Because I studied in an English-speaking school, speaking English is not much of a challenge, although it required a lot of groundwork. The true preparation for university life, in my view, was building a mental state where you are ready to part from the covers of your family and venture forward on your own.

It was also interesting to look into the various mediums or ways though which these students became familiar with U.S academic and social culture. The students indicated access to internationally situated information in their home countries, particularly of the U.S through mass media, such as through Hollywood movies and pop music.

The male Taiwanese student mentioned that his perceptions of university life were shaped through media prior to coming to the states that resonates with other graduate students such as those from India and Japan whose ideas were also influenced by media:

Before I came here, I got some of the impressions of college life in the US from TV and movies so I would imagine sunny days and you hold a few heavy books, pretending to be very knowledgeable walking around campus. That's more or less the ideal image I had.

While media was mentioned by almost all other international graduate students, this was not seen as the most important or the only source of information. Some graduate students also stated that they had an idea of what life would be in the United States through their relatives, friends, professors and acquaintances who are currently living in the U.S or were educated there. For example, the significance of these relationships was expressed by both the Taiwanese students.

The female Taiwanese student stated that she had relatives who were immigrants that let her know what to expect of the U.S.

I have cousins, who live here as immigrants. They live in Washington DC. They tell me different things and the experiences here. For example, like cosco. In Taiwan, we can eat fast food, we can eat outside every day and food is very fresh, food is not the same here, and most people eat frozen food. We have to go to super market here, but in Taiwan there are open markets nearby your house, and everywhere. And they sell fresh food there.

Similarly, the graduate student from Mexico, who is majoring in Education, mentioned that he benefited from having a friend who recommended him to a U.S university:

I had a friend, who graduated from Calvin College in Grand Rapids. At the time, I was thinking of being in Mexico, do masters in Mexico and I was looking for a scholarship there. And then I was like, if I do masters here, my dream was over. But, then I met this friend who said you should apply to Calvin and they are offering scholarship, you should apply for it. I was like, okay. So, I went to the website and emailed the school. I only applied to one, to Calvin because they had a tuition waiver.

This was also true for other graduate students from China, Taiwan, and India who had friends studying all over the U.S, and even at Michigan State University.

The students from Mexico, India, Japan, China and Taiwan also mentioned they had a professor who recommended them to apply to universities in the U.S. For instance, the female Taiwanese student stated:

When I was in graduate school in Taiwan, I planned to pursue my PhD in the United States, because of my adviser and committee members there; they graduated from the United States. You know most of the professors got their degree from there.

The student from Japan mentioned she was interested in Intercultural Communication, so her professors recommended that United States would be her best option as she would be exposed to more diversity and broader perspectives. Similarly, the female student from Taiwan, who liked to voice her opinions and discuss academics in class, claimed that there was not much of a discussion culture in classrooms in Taiwan, so her advisers or professors suggested to pursue a degree in the U.S:

Normally students are quiet in Taiwanese classrooms. On the contrary, I tried to ask questions. So, so my previous advisor who had US education often encouraged me to pursue PhD degree here. They said, you like to participate in class, discuss issues so other professors too encouraged me to come her.

Clearly, social ties, both informal and formal (Sovic: 2009), played an important role in students' decision to study in the U.S. A more elaborate understanding of the role of social ties and networks, and the implication this has for international graduate students' adjustment and assimilation process in the U.S will be discussed in more depth. As was evident in their responses above, the significance of social ties or networks with people from similar cultural background and co-nationals can be invaluable even before

these students arrived in their host society. This form of support was very evident in many of the students' response, particularly the support they received from their advisers, professors or mentors back home who emphasized the professional opportunities inherent in attaining a degree in the U.S. and pointed to the superior training their students would receive.

Another recurrent theme that I observed in the participants response was that many of them seemed very drawn to the idea that the American society values freedom, independence and privacy. Many of them, therefore, had a general impression that the U. S. would be an open minded and friendly place. This led some of the students to portray the restrictive aspects of their own culture and upbringing in their respective countries. The restrictions were viewed in a somewhat negative light and they expressed an implicit desire to break free from those cultural boundaries. Many of them therefore anticipated that studying in the United States would give them such an outlet.

One of the Indian graduate students described her educational experience back home as somewhat regimented and restricting. Below is what she had to say:

In terms of education, students who had already studied here had always told us that the education system was very liberal, down to small details like one could eat in class and chew gum in front of the professor, which were considered seriously disrespectful back home. I had heard that students got to choose their own classes and that the classes would be very unevenly spaced out throughout the day. Things like these were unheard of back home where classes were continuous and a campus was more like a piece of land strictly enclosed by 10 feet walls and reinforced by tall security guards.

The freedom to choose from a variety of majors, courses and career paths was something that most international students expected and looked forward to in the United States. The U.S. is also seen as a place where they are able to express themselves openly and make decisions independently. This was evident in the Chinese students' response:

I expected it to be open in terms of environment and perceptions of people; a place where you can speak your mind.

The student from Serbia also expected to experience freedom in terms of expressing herself more in the US than her own country.

The sense of freedom in the U.S for the most part was perceived in a positive light. The students' perceptions of the educational experience prior to their arrival were generally positive. This is not to say that international students did not anticipate any cultural dissonance or negative experience, prior to their arrival. For instance, a Taiwanese Doctoral student made a remark about how he was "exposed to various messages about racism in the US" and that "concerned" him. For the most part, however, there was an overwhelmingly positive view where everything about America was seen as being really nice with fewer economic or other kinds of problems, in comparison to their respective countries.

Identifying students' prior assumptions and understandings were of critical importance in understanding their adjustment and acculturation process. This provided me a general idea of how mentally prepared they felt and later it helped analyze the level of cultural dissonance they have faced. More importantly, it allowed me to understand the shifts in their identities they have had to make as a result of the incongruities between their expectations and the actual experience when they assumed life in the United States. With this, I then turned to understanding their lived experience in the United States, beginning with their response to the experiences related to their initial transition.

In the preceding sections, I present the findings concerning their initial transition. After examining their prior experience, questions were asked regarding their immediate problems, cultural shock, or any anxieties and challenges they may have encountered upon their arrival to their new environments. The various forms of social support networks they encountered that helped facilitate or provided them with opportunities to feel more socially and emotionally connected with the new cultural environment. The predominant themes that emerged during their initial adjustment was related to the challenges of day-to-day activities such as shopping, food, transportation, culture shock, language barriers, awareness of cultural differences along with the problems associated with it, as well as development of informal and formal social support that facilitated their initial transition. I describe each of these themes below:

Themes that emerged during Initial Transition

A. Logistical Challenges

My findings suggested that there were a number of common difficulties which many of the international graduate students faced. This was related to the simple day-to-day activities concerning accommodation, food, shopping, transportation, work, etc. Most of the students emphasized issues of transportation as being the major obstacle. Having no personal transportation hindered their chances of efficiently getting their tasks completed. They also had difficult times locating stores and knowing what to buy. The student from China revealed his experience in the following manner:

When you're coming from your country, of course, you are not going to bring blankets, pillows, dishes and other such things. When I first entered my dorm room, aside from furniture like bed, it looked so empty. I had no clue how to get the stuff that I wanted.

Likewise, the student from Japan also had similar experience:

First, for three days I couldn't find any stores, or so I couldn't buy any food. So, I was starving. I finally found some stores and some fast food places. That was the hardest part.

With this, almost all of them complained about how far the stores were located. At this point many of them were not familiar with the transportation system in Michigan State so this made it even more problematic for them. With this, some of them mentioned that it made it difficult to find what they needed. The female student from Taiwan expressed this concern:

In Taiwan, we can eat fast food, we can eat outside every day and food is very fresh, food is not the same here, and most people eat frozen food. We have to go to super market here, but in Taiwan there open markets near your house, and everywhere. And they sell fresh food there.

While facing problems with access to transportation, accommodation and the adjustment to American food, the students also had to adjust to the American way of life – opening bank accounts, handling credit cards, using ATMs, finding places, all seemed to be quite novice to some of them.

B. Culture Shock

The interviews revealed that students did experience culture shock, although not with the same range of emotions. The experience of the extreme symptoms associated with culture shock that includes anxiety, homesickness, sleeplessness, fear and depression as a result of being far away from home, was not a common response. So, when asked whether they experienced any homesickness or anxiety from being away from home, most of them directly responded with a "No" or "Not at all." Only the student from Turkey claimed to have a confused and emotional reaction to his new surroundings:

My brain works like a female brain (Do not say things like female brain. To say that women are emotional is a sexist remark) so the way I work is that I code everything with a specific emotion. So when I remember the problem, it evokes emotions. So most of the problems I had were related to my emotional condition as well. You know when you're a woman you don't the know source of your problems. It might have been the US or it might have been me. I don't know whether it's the US or me blaming it.

This is not to say that the other graduate students did not face any cultural shock, but many denied experiencing any upheaval and intense emotions associated with it. For instance, when asked when if he felt homesick, Taiwanese responded saying,

I get home sick sometimes, but I never get to a point where I think about my family and home town so much that I can do nothing. I guess my lack of major adjustment issues somehow helped with that. You don't get frustrated a lot so you don't think about how beautiful your life was before coming here.

This study did not find culture shock to be a universal phenomenon. The prevalence and intensity of emotional tension varied among students as a function of a host of factors. This included exposure to Western or American culture in their home country, personality, work pressure, previous experience, pre-arrival preparation, and cultural similarity. For instance, the student from Taiwan described his familiarity with American culture. He explained:

You know we (Taiwanese) have been exposed to American culture throughout our lives, especially my generation. American culture was never stranger to me, like coca cola, like those very popular pop stars, I know all the names. I probably know more than people in the US. So those cultural symbols were never stranger to me.

Later, he explained how exposure to American culture and familiarity with the English language prevented him from experiencing major culture shock:

In terms of culture shock, I cannot recall any moment where I had like this blew my mind kind of moment. Probably because Taiwan is a country deeply penetrated by American culture and also because I don't have, sometimes a culture shock is partly produced by language barriers and since I don't have any issues with that I don't think I experienced any major cultural shock.

Other students also indicated having such exposure. For instance, one of the Indian students stated,

Apart from being exposed to American culture via media and internet, I also took part in a fair that US universities conducted in different big cities in India, so I also went there and I kind of got some exposure. I also tried coaching for GRE. They also talked about US education. At the time of application I had pretty good idea.

So, when asked whether he experienced culture shock, similar to the Taiwanese student, he responded,

No, because when I was in India, where I was working I had to talk to lot of American clients, and I knew how they talk and what the culture was like. I had some exposure and some experience.

The student from Pakistan also denied experiencing any major culture shock. She had considerable experience studying and working abroad. After completing her masters' in Pakistan, she went on to get another masters' degree in Japan, and later worked in an International Organization in Belgium. Here she worked and interacted with people from all over Western Europe.

In terms of cultural distance, she felt much closer to Americans than she did with Europeans. She explained,

I feel less culturally different from Americans as compared with Europeans. So Americans are more family oriented, they care about their kids. They don't have to have an appointment to meet with their parents. In Europe, kids and parents usually make an appointment.

With this, she claimed that her past working experience in an international setting, as well as the cultural similarities she felt with Americans, prevented her from experiencing culture shock or extreme disorientation in her new surroundings.

C. English Proficiency

Throughout the data collection process, it became readily apparent that English language familiarity and mastery were critical in almost all areas of international graduate students' lives. Many international students prior to coming to the United States have spent many years learning to speak and write English. The participants in this study, however, differed in terms of the years they spent learning English, and the degree to which English was emphasized in their school. Not to my surprise, this difference influenced their confidence and command of the English language.

Those who indicated to having a solid grasp of the English language, language proficiency was a reason for a relatively smooth transition to the new culture. Majority of these students claimed to have a solid foundation in the language. Participants who expressed these views felt comfortable in their ability to navigate the new culture and access resources that were important for daily functioning. For instance, the Pakistan student, pointed to her English proficiency as being vital to her adjustment in the United States:

I learnt this language in my country. I think my English; even my professors say, I speak as good as a native speaker of English. My GRE score was better than anyone in my cohort. In Pakistan, because we have British system and education was in English language, I had the opportunity to learn English early on in my life. So, I don't think it was hard. I took a civil service exam and one subject was English which I had to test in. It was one of the toughest English

exams, and GRE is nothing compared to it. So, just studying in my country prepared me well. So, it was very easy for me here.

The male graduate student from Taiwan also explained how he had adequate training in speaking and writing English. He explained,

I would attribute my English capabilities to my education. I've been having pretty well with English along the course of my education. English is an official subject in Taiwan since Junior HS. So, if you have a college degree, you probably have been exposed to English in varying degrees. At least ten years, I would say. I also majored in English, so that helps too. After I graduated from my masters' degree I worked as a research executive at an international market research company. We did a lot of writing in English and occasionally had to speak in English as well. Along the road, I have had opportunities to use English.

With this, he recognized that English proficiency was helpful in becoming more settled and comfortable in the new environment:

Overall, I did not have serious adjustment issues. Because, you know, my English was good enough to prepare for me for circumstances.

Those students with limited English proficiency identified the importance of English but displayed dismay over their lack of English skills, which prevented them having a smooth transition or engaging in the environment. Each of these students stressed the limitations in their previous education regarding English. Students from a number of different countries made comments, such as, "Japanese English education is doing grammar not so much speaking. They teach structure, "English is mostly concentrated on grammar and vocabulary (China), and "They did not teach English. There was one English class, and until graduate school, schools did not have English. So, in terms of English I only have basic idea" (Taiwan). The student from Mexico also describes his limited experience with learning English:

In all my elementary, middle school, high school, and even college everything was Spanish. And even my immediate family, close friends, professional work, everything runs in

Spanish. I took classes one hour every day in middle school and high school, which did not help

much. They only taught me how to fill in the blanks but at least that gave me some notion of how

sentences are built and some cultural aspect.

With this, some of the students cited language proficiency as a major challenge and

expressed more frustration over this. It was not that these international students could not speak

English, but their inability to speak and understand English on the same level of their U.S. peers

that caused social barriers. A lack of English language proficiency may lead to awkward

moments, miscommunication, and frustration. Below are a few of the students' experiences:

I could understand 50 percent of my classes only. I was reading so desperately. I felt

frustrated many times. I wanted to understand every word. I couldn't get my point across and

couldn't explain anything. I was so freaked out about speaking in class (Mexico).

I mostly self –learned but it's hard. That's why in my first year, it was very tough,

because my English proficiency was not good. Even though I understand English and I wanted to

join them (Americans), they changed different topic (Taiwan).

I think I can write and speak in English. But, like, maybe my confidence is less because

my brain thinks like I can do it but I can't , you know this is due to lack of confidence. Because, it

is not my native language I feel that way. For example, when I get my assignment back, teachers

correct my grammar mistake, I feel like if I were a native speaker I would not be making these

*many mistakes (*Japan).

These examples demonstrate the necessity of English proficiency to communicate ideas

and perform academic and other daily tasks. As illustrated above, confusions in language can

occur even when there is a basic familiarity and proficiency of the English language. In other

words, it reveals that adjustment to the new cultural environment was not sufficed by knowing

grammatical rules and vocabulary. This is true even for those students who claimed to be

somewhat confident in their command of the English language. Although these students had been

studying English for quite some time, this largely involved reading and writing of an academic

nature. So, prior to their arrival they were unaware of the extent to which local accents, manners, fast speech and American idioms would affect their ability to communicate and understand American English.

Some of the participants with greater English language proficiency explicitly identified and addressed these cultural nuances. The student from Turkey, in particular, addressed the need to understand these nuances:

It's all about your English ability. Social interactions are about getting the nuances that people use now and then. When your English is not good, you don't anything about that. One has to use more effort to understand. So, you cannot make many friends when your language does not allow.

The participants further emphasized the need for language command to fully understand the nuances and social intricacies. As time progressed, these participants slowly picked up these which changed the way they mingled with the native speakers. Below are some of their responses that demonstrate this:

After coming here, it took a while to understand the accent here which is very important to get to know people more personally. In my opinion, once I was able to understand what people were saying and talk to them fluently and partake wholeheartedly in their conversations and share their views, it was very helpful in understanding the American way of life.

The male student from Taiwan expressed how he had difficulty showing his witty and humorous personality in English, but as time progressed he was able to overcome this.

 You don't know the language well enough to strike funny conversations with people, and you don't want to hang out with someone who talks about school all day. I'm much funnier now than I was before.

Other students such as those from Turkey and Serbia, who expressed less concerns with English, also talked about the difficulty of following American accent in the beginning, but eventually they felt that they were able to grasp it without much difficulty. Some also pointed that

38

it is not only English language that may cause some issues, but also knowing what to speak. For instance, the male student from Taiwan made the following comment:

First of all, I don't speak English as fluent as Americans, even though I can speak pretty good English. People can tell, native speakers can tell. Also, you don't have the life experience they have and it's easily shown in conversations u know, what you talk about its less true to life than what they are talking about. There are times when the conversation touches upon contextual knowledge of different places and you have never been there before. And so you have no idea what to say.

Similarly, the female Taiwanese student studying Psychology also recalls a moment in one of her classes where she felt like she had no idea what was being talked about and how to contribute:

I remember that when I took a class from your Department (Sociology), with Dr. Mullan. It was international inequality. And I also kept quiet because they always discuss news from America and I did not know what they were talking about. I could not join the discussion.

In contrast to the above examples, the student from Turkey said:

When I make a joke, like I play with words, the worst reaction I can get is, you're funny, it's never like, I don't understand you or what you mean. But I see that happens to other Turkish class mates. One of them, she just came from Turkey. And I see that the American students seem stressed around her and have difficult time understanding her. She gets angry and frustrated every time she is trying to express herself. But, I never had that problem.

In the overall, participants indicated that English proficiency impacted social relationships with friends and colleagues, interactions with strangers, and interactions in classrooms and other academic settings. Recognizing the importance of English language for their academic and non-academic experiences, many also conveyed the process of improving their English, and the desire to perfect their skills to become better at interacting with the host community. For instance, the student from China stated,

39

I didn't speak good English when I came, but I am slowly learning! I am trying my best to use more correct English. If you don't try to somehow improve on your own time, Americans will not try to understand you, so you will be at loss.

D. Social Support

During their initial transition, students also identified the need to develop formal and informal social support networks in their new cultural environment. These support networks provided emotional and practical support. Social support was found through both formal and informal channels (Sovic:2009). Formal support included University agencies, such as MSU Office of International Students and Scholars (OISS) that helped gain access to social opportunities, cultural learning events, or helped process students' legal documents such as a social security number, work permit and other necessary documents to stay in-status in the United States. The international student orientation, or the Teaching Assistantship orientation, conducted by their respective departments was also mentioned as being somewhat helpful during their transitional phase. However, formal networks such as the OISS were not deemed as the most important source of social support when they first arrived. The male graduate student from Taiwan had the following response when asked if he took help from OISS:

I don't have frequent interactions with the OISS. I never recall having any questions that would require me to take their help. The only time I did visit OISS or interacted was when I needed some legal advice concerning my visa. Other than that, I did not feel the need to. No offence, but I don't know what OISS can do for me. Maybe they could do a lot, but I never needed any help.

Other respondents also had similar response, with many seeking out OISS or their departmental offices for formal matters relating to paper work, visa, and so on. Most participants, however, expressed the integral helpfulness of informal support channels such as friends, professors, neighbors, co-nationals, or other international students during their initial phases. Some students admitted to knowing someone from US prior to arrival. This included students or individuals mainly from their own country, who took the initiative to help them from the very beginning of their journey. The

responses below illustrate how established social ties from their own country were seen as helpful to students as soon as they arrived in the U.S:

I knew graduate alumni from MSU. I got in touch with her before I came here. We were in the same college in Taiwan and I got hooked up with her through a mutual friend and she picked me up at the airport. And although it was just a pick up and get you settled kind of thing it helped a lot. If things go well the first day then it's much easier to make a transition and face what's coming next (Taiwan).

Before I came here, I was in touch with an Indian girl, who was my senior during my bachelors in India. She let me stay in her house the first few days. She took me to the store and gave me a short tour of the campus. It was really nice (India).

For those who did not have previous connections, upon arrival at MSU, they tended to look for individuals from their own country for socialization and other forms of support. This was mainly the case for the students from India, China and Taiwan, who found that MSU hosted a sizeable number of people from their country of origin. These students considered themselves fortunate enough to find key individuals from their country of origin to interact with during their transition. For example, some of the students were able to easily find roommates from their own country. The student from China talks about this:

Since already there were so many people from China here when I first arrived, I was able to found someone to be roommate with. He helped me meet with other Chinese graduate students, so within first few days, we all had a gathering and cooked together. It felt like being back home.

Others also gained access to individuals from their own country through their departments or other cultural events. Below are some of the responses that illustrate this:

In our department, we also have another Taiwanese student and they have a small group. So we get together. It's a small group, four or five people. 2 of us are from my department and others are from other departments.

41

The Indian student organization helped me get my apartment, and pick me up at the airport. So, we booked apartment from India so we already had that set up while in India. Apart from that, people from the department, they helped a lot and provided mental support. I would say the professors, in particular Indian professors in my department helped a lot.

I met a friend of mine, who actually came in the same year, even before we came to the US and we got in touch when we came here as well. And I met other Taiwanese friends at the International TA orientation. I don't know how, somehow you can spot your people in a strange or unfamiliar environment. And I made a few friends from there and those people became my really close friends throughout the years.

Not all international students who expressed a desire to meet other students from their own country were able to do so. Instead, these students formed ties with students who they felt had similar cultural background and experiences:

I was mostly with internationals. I did not have any friends from Mexico. I did not know where to go to find them. I was actually looking for more Mexican friends, but it was hard to find. So, I gave up and fortunately I found more friends among internationals here. I have a lot of Korean friends. First, because there are a lot of Koreans in this department. I knew a few of them and then they introduced me to other people. I spent a lot of time with them. And also because a lot of them were experiencing language barriers, in writing and mainly speaking, I had some experience. I related a lot with them. I would tell them not to worry and encourage them. Because of that I made a lot of Korean friends.

In communication, department we only have 4 Americans and 15 Chinese. But you know there were no Japanese, so I felt little isolated. I felt little lonely when they speak in Chinese. But, I think it was easier than I thought, because there were many international students from Asia.

For many students, interacting with Americans, during their initial transition was not very common. Not many international students reported taking any help from American students during

42

their initial stages. However, most of the students found that people on campus were friendly and helpful as they began to establish a new routine and understand American customs.

There were two international graduate students who reported having meaningful interactions with Americans as soon as they arrived. For instance, the student from Serbia mentioned that she did not know anyone from Serbia when she arrived at MSU. So, her initial interactions were mainly with Americans who helped her and also introduced her to other Americans:

One American professor in the department helped me a lot to go to Meijer and buy everything. And I had really nice American neighbors who helped me a lot. I did not bring anything from home. I did not have food so they helped me a lot. I did not know any Serbian people when I got here. After 3 or 4 months I met a guy from Serbia, but he was just here for a year. I have heard that there are people from Serbia and also Slovenia, because I am from there as well. But, I have never met anyone else. Also, in my department I did not know any Americans, but, my neighbor is an American and I am really good friends with her. She is like my mother and she is much older than us. She introduced me to her friends. She has very nice circle of friends and I get along with her children. So, that's how I know Americans.

The student from Pakistan, who had experience working in Europe, expressed the level of comfort she had while interacting with Americans as soon as she arrived. She claimed that her experience interacting with Europeans made her less fearful upon arrival in another Western country. In fact, she was pleasantly surprised to find how similar Americans were in terms of their values and attitudes towards family. So, when asked whom she interacted with during her initial transition, she responded:

I just met American classmates of mine; there were some international students as well in the beginning. I didn't feel any cultural difference. I found them (Americans) to be exactly the same as myself. They also consider family values. They love their parents, they care about their parents. They care about their children, they care about their wives. So, I think it's culturally very similar as compared to Pakistan.

43

Some of the students spoke about studying in departments that had a majority of other international students and not many U.S. students, making it difficult to meet and make friends with their U.S. peers. These students were mainly from the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) fields. The student from India who was majoring in Statistics made the following comment:

My immediate social group comprises people from my own age group, it doesn't really matter where they are from. Definitely since I didn't know lot of people, so initially I did make more friends from my own country, or non-US I would say, like people from China. The reason behind is that because in my department there aren't many students from the US. I would say 90 percent of students are non-U.S., mostly from India and China. So, you meet them on a daily basis so that is how you form the groups, so in that sense my friendship network developed more towards non-US people. I think this is natural for this to happen.

It is evident from my findings that many of the students had access to preexisting social groups that mainly composed of international students. It is not to suggest that these students do not encounter and interact with Americans at all. Many aspects of the life experiences of international students studying in the U.S. require interaction with Americans, both in and out of the academic arena. More importantly, regardless of whom international graduation students mingle with, the most important aspect was to feel a sense of belonging (Sovic: 2009). In this next section, the findings are geared towards understanding this sense of belonging. More importantly, these findings helped to delineate and understand how social ties with Americans, or individuals from same or similar cultural background, hinder or enable their process of integration or assimilation into American society.

In considering the fluid and dynamic nature of social ties and networks, I will try to make more sense of the process of shifting social connections as students navigate a new social and academic culture. The findings, therefore, reveal the patterns of social ties and networks that have developed over the course of their stay here.

Overall Social Experiences

A majority of international graduate students spoke about gravitating toward spending time with students from their home countries. This was particularly evident among those who had initially discovered individuals or groups from their country of origin. I found that support networks composed of individuals from the participants' same country of origin or similar culture of origin offered a unique opportunity to recall and perhaps even relive cultural traditions of their past.

As more time is spent together, international students shared stories and experiences which formed the basis for engaging with each other on a deeper and more meaningful way. Many students articulated that the common cultural background led them to gravitate toward or feel a strong sense of belonging to individuals from their own country, or even those with similar cultural background. On one hand, they talked about the inevitability of forming social circles that include folks from their own country. On the other hand, many of these students also mentioned the limited social interaction they have with Americans, and explain why that is the case in their own terms. In many cases, cultural differences were discovered by the participants in their experiences and social interactions with Americans. With this, there seems to be a general consensus that shared cultural traits and background bring international students together.

The Chinese student reported feeling more comfortable interacting with students from her own country and that she did so on a daily basis. She explained, "I interact more with people from my country because I feel comfortable with them and it is much more easier to communicate with people who are more aware of my culture." Another student added, "Sometimes I feel homesick, so I can talk to other international students or Taiwanese, because we share similar experiences and cultures, and if I share my problem with them, they have good suggestions to overcome my challenges. So, I think it is very important to have friends from Taiwan."

The students from Taiwan and Japan also had similar opinion about why they were more inclined to socialize with individuals from their own country or international students. The male Taiwanese student explained why he continued to interact with students from his own country. This participant expressed that frequent contact contributes positively to the advancement of a relationship, not only because it takes time

to know each other but also because spending time together instigates deeper and more meaningful relations:

Even now I mostly hang out with my friends from Taiwan. Probably on the one hand we are all international students so we share similar lifestyles. Many people are good people but we just don't have opportunity where we develop a friendship to the point where we can share our lives. Friendship is like brewing it takes time. And of course, it's easier to hang out with people who share your past life experience and share the same language. I guess to a certain degree you can that my social circle is excluded not intentionally, it just became that way.

This student, like many others who seemed very content with interacting with co-nationals or other international students with similar cultural background, found less of a need to interact with Americans or break into other friendship networks.

I never tried to break into any other social circle. I don't know if there are any social circles, but I never really tried hard. Of course, I made a few friends with American graduate students. So, with time I talked to other Americans.

Some International graduate students commented on the difficulty in establishing deeper friendships with Americans, and how the intimacy in friendships differed from their accustomed manner of interacting with others in their culture of origin or similar cultural background. The Japanese student emphasized this difference and expressed doubt about her ability to develop meaningful relations with Americans.

I think Americans are friendly; we talked, not just that distance, of course I feel more comfortable talking to International students. I don't know, the way we make friends is different from theirs. It's hard to explain. Americans don't want to do everything with everyone. Maybe Americans are more individualistic and like to maintain certain distance. With international students, we share same experience, like where do we need to sign papers, so we can discuss. The way of communication and experience is different from that of American students.

I don't have problems talking to Americans and they are really nice. And in some cases we are very different. For example, I was hanging out with some people from Germany, and we had similar view about

life. I would say somehow people in Europe have different, traditions, views and ways of looking at life, not everyone. I've also met some people here in the U.S who are like me, like my neighbor. She is wonderful, like my mother, and her sisters and her family, they welcomed me and we talk a lot.

Some international participants, like the student from Serbia cited above, from the very beginning of her journey abroad, had no difficulty or reservation interacting with Americans. Nonetheless, she also observed the cultural differences with Americans, in terms of the shared, personal and learned life experiences that shaped their views on life.

Another interesting point this student made was the importance of humor and how it was easier to convey jokes to students from similar cultural background. The international student from Serbia illustrates this point and talks about how even sharing a simple joke could bring students from similar cultural background together. Some students like the one from Serbia, had no difficulty interacting with Americans. Nonetheless, she makes the following observation:

Somehow, few parties I went to, I got to be with some people from Germany, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, and we have similar jokes. And we find each other quicker than with someone else.

For some students being funny or getting a joke across works to their advantage, as was the case with the student from Turkey. His ability to strike funny conversations in English and get a positive reaction out of people from the host society gave him a sense of belonging:

I don't feel like I am a foreigner or anything like that, even for a moment. This is because; it is just me not feeling it, like a foreigner. When I make a joke, like I play with words, the worst reaction I can get is, you're funny, it's never like, I don't understand you or what you mean. But I see that can happen to other class mates who have issues with language.

Although cultural differences exist and often have the potential to develop into conflicts sometimes, it did not necessarily lead international students to develop negative perception towards Americans. The general perception is that it is difficult for international graduate students to establish deep friendships with Americans. Based on the findings above, cultural difference was cited as the main reason students felt that they were unable to build a tight bond with Americans. Along with that, some students also identified

language barriers that hindered them to integrate and communicate with Americans beyond a superficial level. Regardless, the close interpersonal relationships with individuals from the United States, however, still appeared to be desirable and a goal for many of the participants. The female graduate student Taiwan makes this point clear:

Actually I want to interact with American friends. You know Taiwan academic quality is not as good as here. In Taiwan, government does not have many supportive systems and grants for research, if I want to have a good career I may choose to stay here. If I don't make American friends that is not good. So, I still try to make American friends. This semester we have four American students who take quantitative course in Psychology; in the beginning they (the Americans) did not know much about me. But, when they have study group they invited me to join them. Even though study on your own is more important, I still joined them because it is best way to make American friends. And they were all American students and so I purposely joined so I can know more American students. If I can interact with them more, maybe I can interact with them more, so it's not only study purpose.

Like the student from Taiwan, the female Indian Engineering graduate student talked about her desire to make U.S. friends. She said that she did her best to make U.S. friends during the first few weeks studying at Michigan State. However, since the majority of the students in her department were from India or China, this provided little hope of mingling with numerous U.S. classmates. After a semester, luckily, there were couple U.S. students in one of her classes, and as she explained "one of them is a friend of mine now. And I keep teasing her saying that she is now the minority."

Further, she goes on to explain how maintaining relationship with Americans was difficult mainly because of the social pressures she felt from the Indian community. She explained that her friendship with these U.S. students did not go unnoticed by her Indian roommates or her Indian classmates, especially when she tried to distance herself. She explains:

When I started to hang out with my American friend, Sara more, there was a group of traditional Indians who didn't like it and said I was trying to be this American. Through a friend of mine, I came to know there was a lot of such gossip going around about me regarding this in my Indian community.

While this student desired to make U.S. friends, the tension she felt from what she called "my Indian community" put pressure on her to act a certain way. This did not prevent her from associating with U.S. students, but she did say that she felt less comfortable and decided not to 'make problems' with those within her Indian community. Clearly, the student was conflicted by the important relationship between other Indian students and alongside the desire to make U.S. friends. She felt that she had to make a choice between being a part of the Indian community in Michigan and being a part of some U.S. social network. Nonetheless, it did not completely deter her from trying to partake in activities that involved a majority of American students. As mentioned earlier, interaction with Americans, whether international students actively choose to or not, is inevitable. Students recognize this and demonstrated a strong determination to be a part of the host community. However, many factors, as shown in this section of findings, may hinder or enable this process.

The access and opportunities to mingle with students or other individuals from their own cultural background seems to have a powerful influence on their social experiences. This occurs even when these individuals do not intentionally look for people from their own country or similar cultural background. The student from Turkey had spent couple of years in Japan doing his masters. When he came to the U.S he actively chose to interact with Japanese people, but he found himself gravitating towards people from his home country:

I was always searching for Japanese people to talk to because I felt more comfortable. There was a Japanese guy I knew from my dept. who I would contact more than anybody. I would probably call him more than any Turkish person although they were more in number. Although this changed over time. Many of my neighbors at Spartan Village were Turkish and they were very persistent. They did not let me go. They would knock on my door in the middle of night and they would bring me Turkish coffee.

Overall Academic Experiences

The American learning context provided participants with opportunities for continuous comparison with their previous learning experience. Through their ongoing reflection, they made several meaningful comparisons.

In their interactions with faculty and staff, most international students were surprised to observe the casual and informal behavior of professors. The female student from India commented, "We respect teachers in our country, and are surprised to see the casual behavior of students here. We prefer to address our faculty and staff by Ms., Mr., Dr., or even Sir or Ma'am, but here they use their first names". Another student from China also amazed at the casual atmosphere of classrooms and explained, "The atmosphere in the classroom is informal, and you can even joke with the teacher. Also, students are very talkative and active in the classroom." The student from Japan was pleasantly surprised to observe the relationship between students and professors, "I think I was surprised how close professors and students are. We had welcome party, picnic thing and professors were playing baseball with students. So, it was interesting."

Although most international graduate students, particularly, those from Taiwan, China and India, initially felt some level of discomfort with the casual relationship with professors such as addressing professors by their first names, they seemed to appreciate the informality of the student/instructor relationships in the United States.

Other aspects of U.S. culture, such as the open discussion and debate within the classroom continued to puzzle some students and impress others. Here once again, participants had opportunities for continuous comparison with their previous learning experience.

Most students appreciated the interactive nature of the class. But they also pointed out that it was somewhat problematic because they were accustomed to the teaching methods that were different from those used by instructors in the United States. This was mainly the case for students from Taiwan, Japan, China, India and Mexico. These students all expressed some level of shock at the relative egalitarian rapport between students and professors in the United States as compared to the hierarchical roles of professors in their home countries. They were used to a lecture-based classroom, where strict direction and guidelines

provided by professions were followed without much questioning. The female Taiwanese student made the following comment:

Teaching methods are also very different. In Taiwan, American faculty expects you to learn on your own, bring up research questions in class, and encourage you to contribute to discussions. But in Taiwan, I think its cultural difference, students are not encouraged to speak up and express their opinions all the time. It's different because if you have opportunity to speak up you also engage your brain. I like the atmosphere; I like the class activities.

The male Taiwanese graduate student further corroborated the comment above.

Being a student in Taiwan is very different. When I was an undergraduate student in Taiwan I rarely spoke up and it was sort of mutually recognized culture that the students don't speak up, ask questions, and they rarely express their opinion. Teachers simply lecture. So, I would say a majority of courses were conducted in a lecture format instead of seminar discussion even in graduate school. That is rare in the US and you would demand student participation a lot in grad classes and even in undergrad depending on number of students. It also influences how professors evaluate your performance. Cause here you need to speak your mind, so professors can see you or hear you. And in Taiwan you could to a graduate class, not say anything at all, and turn in a paper and get 4.0.

It was the same case for students from Japan and India. The female student from India added, "The education system back home did not facilitate group discussions. We only answered questions when asked. And unless I am very sure about it, I don't answer." There was great frustration for those international students who felt a lack of confidence in their English language ability to contribute in lectures, or for those who felt that they were not accustomed to interacting in classrooms, even though a strong motivation to do so existed.

The two female students from Japan and Taiwan experienced a conflict between their motivation to speak up and the anxiety associated with language ability as well as cultural difference in classroom experience.

*In class discussions, I have some difficulty. You may ask me a question and I answer, and you may disagree or agree with my argument. But for me it's hard because my English is not good enough so I just answer a question, or I just bring up a question, but I cannot discuss with my faculty or peer. It's hard; I just raise my hand because I want to say something. I can't have discussion. I can't continue talking (*Taiwan).

I feel so difficult to speak up in class. Like the timing and like what to say, how can I say, or can I say this, does it fit to this class or those things, I feel so hard to speak up. In presentations, it's my time, I can prepare for it. But in class, like simultaneous things I feel so difficult (Japan).

Recognizing the interactive nature of U.S. classrooms, these students worked hard to prepare themselves for class, however, as the comments above demonstrate, they had difficulty interjecting ideas and engaging in free-flowing conversations.

Some of the students did not talk at all because of their accents, and, feared being put on the spotlight. The student from China commented, "I get extremely nervous participate in group discussions. I am really conscious of my accent. Because each semester we have different people in the class it makes it difficult for me to get used to it. I have to try to adjust myself over and over again."

Another notable thing was that students who claimed to experience language difficulty also seemed to be more comfortable and satisfied with small group discussions:

 I feel more comfortable in small groups than large groups. This semester like I said this morning our faculty divided us into four groups to discuss what we want to do for the entire semester. So, we explain our ideas to our peers so I feel comfortable because only two people and it's not the discussion about an issue in the textbook. I don't feel upset or tense in small groups. We don't need to talk in public, so I don't need to feel embarrassed (Taiwan).

In this research, participants also demonstrated a propensity to alleviate the dissonance that they experienced in the classroom. Those with a better grasp of English, however, seemed to be better apt at resolving differences than those who not only said they experience cultural difference in classroom experience but also greater language barriers. The male student from Taiwan, who as mentioned earlier,

was largely accustomed to lecture-based teaching, appeared to have overcome the challenge or fear associated with "speaking up" and made a smoother transition than the female student from Taiwan, who continues to experience many stumbling blocks due to language difficulty.

I don't feel much tension anymore. I am more mindful of what I want to say and I want to sound smart so I try to think before I speak. I feel much less tension. It becomes a natural thing to me that you need to participate in class. Now, if there is a class where the teacher only lectures, I feel a bit awkward about how the class is conducted. Because I am fairly confident in speaking English, it makes it easier to participate. I am more mindful of what I have to say in class. And also most of the time, and right now if I don t speak in class it is not because I'm nervous but because I have nothing to say.

The adjustment of students from India, Pakistan, Serbia, and Turkey was also fraught with less challenge when it came to classroom interactions. All of these students indicated to having somewhat strong English background that helped. In terms of classroom experiences, this study also found that those students who perceived the least differences in teaching practices, also perceived less difficulty. For instance, the student from Pakistan made the following claim:

It's not different from Pakistan at all. Teacher is teaching you, sometimes they use blackboard, sometimes PowerPoint. They send you material via email. It's exactly the same as Pakistan. In terms of interaction in the classroom it's the same as well as the behavior of the teacher. So, I don't have any problem at all interacting.

For the Serbian, who is doing her Doctorate in Statistics, she found it rather odd that students were not interactive in the classroom:

I'm not saying that in my country we were not afraid of professors. But I was asking more questions in my country. Here it was a little awkward in the beginning because no one in class asked questions but me and everyone seemed afraid which seemed strange to me because we are all grown up.

In this study, many considered academic advisors and other key faculty as playing a crucial role in navigating their academic life at Michigan State University. One of the students noted,

I rarely talked to my professors in Japan; I didn't go to office hours or anything. Here, teachers expect us to go to office hours. So I feel closer to teacher and adviser.

Students valued the close personal relationship they established with their advisers or professors. They considered them as the link to the university and their future career. Efforts that instructors made to create a more international student-friendly environment, therefore, did not go unnoticed. Some of the participants especially were appreciative towards professors that took any steps to assist them with their struggles in English.

The Taiwanese student claimed to have developed a very strong relationship with her advisers and some of the professors in her department. Despite her difficulty in English, she was grateful for the encouragement she received from them, which she explains is not a common experience with professors in Taiwan.

American faculty encourages students. But, in Taiwan, if you are not a good student then they talk behind you. This morning I had presentation and I cannot speak very well. But, my faculty got my point very well. After class he encouraged me saying oh you did a good job. After getting encouragement, I have to work hard for next time. Also another thing is that the content of course is different, because I switch my major from Sociology to Psychology, so I had to learn more, so it's a new challenge for me. I won't get rid of my previous knowledge and so I need to integrate those two. And for me, I think I am liking my advisers and professors because they are very encouraging. But, in Taiwan it's hard because professors focus on their issues and their own family more.

The student from Mexico, who also experienced language barriers in the beginning of his academic career, had a similar account:

When I first came to the United States, you know my English was not that great, especially spoken English. And I had a difficult time communicating. But, the professor in one of my Education classes never gave up on me. She was so persistent. She never let me sit quietly. It's not that she would pick on me, but she would do it in such a way I was forced to think out of the box. Eventually, I caught on and now I able to speak freely.

Regardless of their negative experiences, all of the international graduate students represented in this study one way or the other demonstrated an ability to eventually cope and adjust into their academic environment. This adjustment took place not only by trying to improve their weak points but also recognizing their strengths. For instance, the student from Taiwan expressed her difficulty in writing academic papers. She stated:

You know we are PhD students so we are expected to publish, but because my English is not good, I mean, even though we can talk, but writing, how to write as a native speaker, how to write very well, is also another challenge. Even though work very hard, every time I finish writing a paper and I brought to writing center but it is not as good as Americans'. Before I show to my adviser, I go to the writing center, then only I show to check sentences.

Rather than only focusing on her weakness, she also emphasized her strengths:

I work in quantitative work so it's a bit easier for me with my other committee members and professors who are not familiar with quantitative. So, he collects data and I try to do model for him.

From the very beginning of their academic journey, the international graduate students in this study placed great emphasis on achieving academic excellence. As indicated earlier, many of them expected academics to be of high standard and found that to be the case. Most students highly praised the academic rigor and content of American educational system because they had benefited much from the education they received here. The findings, therefore, focused less on the difference in the content and academic rigor, but rather the cultural difference and difficulties they encountered in their classroom experiences as well as relationship with professors.

Thus far, this study disclosed the findings that relate to questions regarding their social and academic experiences. Here many students had difficulty establishing deep friendships with Americans due to language and cultural differences. In terms of academic adjustment, the most frequently mentioned stressors also relate to language barrier and the unfamiliarity with the classroom culture at MSU. Despite the issues that arose, students made efforts to orient themselves and assimilate into their new academic and socio-cultural environment. The last set of questions asked students to reflect back on this process of being

55

immersed in a new cultural environment. By asking questions such as how they see themselves as international students or how well adjusted they feel, it, therefore, attempted to capture individual's subjective sense of self and success in terms of adjustment, acculturation and assimilation to the different facets of their academic and social life.

Reflections on being International Students

Intercultural communication scholars have suggested how cross-cultural experience has the potential to bring about profound changes among international students, transforming their understanding of the self and their learning experience. Further, they claim that there is also a heightened awareness and self-consciousness of values and attitudes of the "Other" (Yang, et. al: 2005; Adler: 1975). This process of "high self and cultural awareness" as a result of being immersed in the new culture provides learners opportunities to reflect and make sense of their experiences (Adler: 1975). Over time, it is expected that they gain a deeper understanding of problem solving strategies and approaches that could resolve the discomfort and dissonance they felt upon entering a new culture (Adler: 1975). Following that, the findings in this study suggest that although encountering an unfamiliar socio-cultural context and educational system brought some level of stress and anxiety to the participants, through observation and experiential learning, many students gained information and insights that helped them employ appropriate strategies for "successful" adjustment in U.S higher education.

Further, as students experienced life within the U.S learning context, it gave them the feeling that that they had gained a relatively more accurate perception of cultural differences or similarities as well as knowledge of host society. This was evident in participants' ongoing comparison and reflection on their experiences. Through this, it was also very clear that many attempted to adjust by actively engaging with the socio-cultural and academic practices in the U.S. But, whether their attempts translated into meaningful outcomes or the degree to which students experience a satisfactory integration into their host culture depended on a mix of factors including the opportunities given and taken for being immersed in language and culture (Yang et.al:2005). So, when asked if the international graduate students felt adjusted

56

into the academic and social life they gave me variegated responses. And they also had a varied understanding of what "adjustment" meant.

Traveling within the United States, meeting people from various regions of the country, and observing the daily existence of the new culture members provided an abundance of information for participants. So for some students, discovering more about the culture and the place in which one is working and learning gave them an avenue for profound change and transformation in personal and social dimensions. In other words, this helped them garner an awareness of cultural trends that were relevant or useful to know in order to feel adjusted. In response to the question of adjustment, the female Taiwanese student made the following observation:

Yes, I feel adjusted. I won't say accommodation and assimilation. I think I just accommodated but not assimilated. I mean I like to learn different cultures; I try to know more about American students, culture and American education system. Like this afternoon, I discussed presidential election with my adviser, but when we discuss this issue, I just want to know about viewpoints of Americans. I just know more information which helps me to be here. But, I don't want to be American, like that. Knowing more information is helpful for me to live here. That's why I say that I am adjusted because I know how to get information from different persons, from different groups.

Here the student does not only talk about the information and insights gained through experiential learning as being invaluable to her adjustment process, but she also emphasizes that this does not directly lead to "assimilation" or complete integration into society. Moreover, she sees herself as being "accommodated" as a result of her efforts to resolve anxiety related to cultural differences, by familiarizing herself with the American way of life.

Regardless of whether they claimed to be adjusted or not, other interviewees similar to the Taiwanese student cited above, agreed that complete assimilation or integration to a different culture may be impossible. As the student from China articulated, "It is hard to change our cultural values or assimilate even though we want to change and fit in somehow." Few other students also hinted that as long as they are living here, they would like to feel completely adjusted or assimilated into mainstream

American culture, but it would be hard to achieve that goal. For many of them, this was mainly due to the limited number of American friends in their close circle.

Since the majority of the interviewees had only stayed a short period of time in the U.S, complete integration, where they are made to feel like they are one of the Americans, didn't sound urgent to them. In fact, some of the students such as the male student from Taiwan talked about how throughout his stay he did not need feel the need to develop or form many social ties with Americans. Instead, he was more socially involved with other students from his own country:

If you want to talk about integration, I wasn't adjusted very well in terms of integrating into the mainstream social circle. But I don't feel disoriented, lost or distanced because you know me as well as people find ways make our lives easier. I also don't feel pressing need to be integrated into mainstream society. My more or less exclusive social circle, which composes mainly of people from Taiwan, doesn't really prevent me from achieving my goals at this moment.

Despite identifying more with people from his home country, he seemed to feel comfortably adjusted. This is not to say that such students do not associate themselves with the host culture and its members, but they seemed to do it in a limited extent. This same student illustrated this behavior:

When I have problems or issues regarding schoolwork, I talk with American graduate students. I talk with a lot of people from this program (Sociology); Of course, you have personal social life issues. I talk about personal issues about this with Taiwanese friends.

A majority of the students claimed to feel well-adjusted in the academic and social setting at Michigan State University. Further, participants' levels of satisfaction and attitudes toward cultural assimilation and adjustment varied depending on their major, personality, and previous experience. Having good language skills, extensive exposure to U.S. culture, as well as prior experience studying or working abroad, were found to be the prime reasons some of them had a positive outlook on their adjustment and well-being. For example, the students from Turkey and Pakistan, who had a good command of the English language, both experienced studying in a non-English Speaking country, outside their own. They both described their transition and experience in non-English speaking countries as being

fraught with frustration and anxiety due to language barriers. So compared to their prior experiences, they agreed that studying abroad in the United States is worthwhile and, pointed to their English proficiency as a reason for feeling adjusted to the new culture. Being fluent in dominant language of the host society, therefore, allowed them to gain new perspectives and knowledge, which enabled them to have a smoother transition process. In this regard, the student from Turkey made the following comment:

In Japan, during my initial days I was in a rural town and nobody spoke English and my Japanese wasn't good at all. And the small problem I would have on a daily basis would just accumulate into something really big. I would be so frustrated and I would need someone to talk to and someone who would understand me. And I would talk to the walls, because there was no one else that I could confide to. So, that was painful. Having had that, my adjustment here is a joke. There is no adjustment, it's just fun. It was a very peaceful and there were an understandable number of challenges.

The findings thus revealed that the prevalence of positive learning incidents also helped international students gain positive outlook towards their adjustment. So, if they did not feel assimilated into the mainstream social life to the extent they desired due to limited interactions with Americans or language incompetency, they seemed to find success in their overall academic environment.

This was the case for the students who tended to report more pressure and frustrations about class discussion and academic writing due to language incompetency.

In class maybe I am not that adjusted yet but I am beginning to feel more comfortable. Because I know what teachers expect from us, like academically. Some teachers expect us to do our work and it's our responsibility. Teachers don't care whether you complete your assignments or not, it's basically up to us. From a broad perspective I think I am adjusted well, but small things like speaking up or writing in English, I can adjust better.

In terms of feeling adjusted, the students also demonstrated that they were able to feel and understand through the nuances of their new cultural surrounding, and establish a sense of belonging that would make this place more meaningful. Also, for most of them, since they had an aim of learning new skills, they also tended to prioritize the order in which they dealt with impediments. So, when asked if

59

they felt adjusted many of them talked about the necessary adjustments or skills they had to adopt to fit into their academic environment. Seeking deeper cultural integration did not seem to be the main goal for them at this point. Instead, they showed a strong desire to successfully complete their academic requirements. And so if they felt that they were making satisfactory academic progress, they also felt considerably adjusted, and looked forward to a bright future career, primarily in the United States.

In discussing their adjustment here, the respondents also viewed their study abroad experience as a learning process and phase in which there were many obstacles to overcome. Overall the group of respondents also seemed wary that they remained on the periphery of their host culture rather than completely integrated to it. This was reflected in their response to how they see themselves as international students or what the reminders of them being international students were. There were some irritation with aspects of their host culture that they expressed, but none of them reported a high level of stress associated with being international students. The irritation mainly stemmed from the limitations in applying for student loans, departmental fellowships, jobs, etc. because international students are neither citizens nor permanent residents of the United States. Many of them claimed that these were some of the most prominent reminders of their international student status. One student explained,

Well, to me now as an international student I would say I am still conscious of me being an international student. Right now I feel more as a fellow grad student to other grad students from my cohort. But there are times you are reminded by a legal document that you are a graduate student. For example, when you want to apply to a fellowship, they usually remind you that you need a citizenship, which sucks. That's an alarming reminder that you don't belong to US. So that's the moment that frustrates me that I am an international student. I feel equally capable as an American student to do jobs, particular positions require but I am rejected simply because I am not one of the American people.

Other participants were also candid about how legal issues concerning their Visa and job opportunities and immigration may impact their future. For example, the student from China and India talked about how they may not be able to leave for a short term visit to their country after graduation for fear of not being able to get their visa renewed to come back to the United States. Aside from this, many

international graduate students did not report experiencing overt discrimination, based on their race and cultural background. However, this did not mean they were unaware of it, as many talked about the experiences of other international students who were targets of racial slurs. The student from Mexico talked about his experience:

I never had an incident because I have heard stories, from my people. People were yelling at them saying "Go back home!" I never had it like that but I did experience some people looking down on you. So, they say, your country is full of violence and drugs, that's why you are here. I feel like people were very ignorant about my country.

International student's racial and ethnic background did not seem to have an obvious affect in their adjustment process, however, some of them reported as being subject to misperceptions about their culture as well as stereotypical comments. Making associations such as the one described above certainly may discourage some international students from interacting with American students as they might assume all American students are ignorant. But, from my study, participants rarely shared instances of overt types of racism or discrimination. Rather, many of them viewed their status as international student in a positive light. Below are some the responses that allude to this:

Being here in academics I feel like being part of a larger group, because there are so many universities in the US and the education is quite advanced here and there are so many people working in your area and they are quite approachable and helpful. In fact, as international student it helped to not to feel that you are in a closed box and outside there is a big space, and you are being avoided from getting into that but it feels more to become open with people so that way you can learn more things. Being an international student is more positive. People who come from non-US countries, they have to come from lots of competition, right. Once they are here, they are more welcomed in a sense that I mean if you see in US, many professors here are from India and China, from other countries, so basically they help you to pursue your education. Also if you complete your education, they want you retain here so it feels very good (Student from India).

There is no American culture here. It's so diverse. With the large number of international students, and the number of American Professors who were originally from a different country. It's truly an international environment. So, it doesn't feel different. I feel very welcomed. (Turkey).

For some students such as those from Serbia and Turkey, they felt welcomed to the extent that they did not feel like they were international students.

Further, international graduate students also indicated a tremendous amount of individual growth during their stay here. Some of the participants recognized that autonomy and independence lay at the root of many aspects of their growth. For instance, the student from Pakistan, female student from India, as well as China, talked proudly about being able to live on their own and how they had coped, for the first time, with practical demands, such as cooking, driving, and shopping for groceries. One gains the confidence to conduct life independently.

My findings also suggest that the experiences they encountered in the U.S had a strong impact on the international graduate students self and cultural awareness. In terms of cultural awareness, many of them modified preconceived cultural assumptions, as a result of being here long enough to ascertain the cultural nuances. For instance, the student from Mexico described how he revised some of the assumptions he had about the United States:

I used to be a bit naïve too and I thought everything is really nice, and they (Americans) don't have problems. But, when I came here I realize that specially because my first year of Calvin, I lived in south east Grand Rapids and that's like the nice area. And the next year, I moved to North East Grand Rapids, and that's like the poor area. And that's when it hit me that U.S. is very segregated, like you have rich people living in one area and poor people in another area. And you have very poor people, like people on the streets, so those things were also other nuances from living here. I think my friends back in Mexico I'm here because it's very nice, and it's a rich country. And in many sense it is a rich country, but in many other sense Mexico is richer. For example, they are richer in the sense of the community, in the sense of presence of people, like the warmth of people.

A small but significant number of individuals felt that living, studying, and working in the United States resulted in the transformative experience of becoming more international. For these students, becoming more international meant transforming into more open minded or global minded individuals as a result of their experiences in a different country. Their enhanced familiarity of multiple cultures and understanding of global issues is a new learning. Here some of them expressed how there is a tendency for students from all walks of life to come together. So some of them demonstrate how migrating abroad can help one break down some of the social barriers that sustain national, religious, regional or ethnic identities. The students from Turkey and India talked about such transformations as a result of being in the U.S.

In Turkey there is a huge polarization. This is political stuff, but it has to do with the whole political situation and it has do with the way I live and interact with people .There are the secularists and there are the religious, like republicans and democrats, imagine they hate each other. The politics also coincides with the social class. There are the white Turks upper class secularist Turks and there is religious "black Turks" as I call them who have not been able to make it to the level of Turkishness, and all this mess and they all don't wanna talk to each other, and white Turk would treat a black turf whose wife is wearing a head scarf like a criminal. And so I hated all of this and I never felt like belonged to that conflict. But, here is so peaceful. Here, they all are good friends. I was living with this Turkish guy who was going to stay for a short period of time and he prays five times a day and his wife is obviously wearing a headscarf. His friends would come over. And so this is like a really nice Turkish community, where we're kinda far away from all that crap that I did not like back home.

Lastly, my findings reveal that a positive outcome as a result of studying abroad has been profound personal change and perspective transformation among these students. This has implications for international graduate students' future career and professional life. Almost all the graduate students interviewed showed a tremendous desire to stay in the U.S and continue on as researchers, professors or work in other non-academic areas. Many acknowledged the positive educational benefits they received in

63

the U.S. Meanwhile, they also talked about the considerable effort they put, in order to succeed in an

American university, and expressed a strong desire to continue learning.

DISCUSSION

The paper reported on findings from a qualitative study that investigated the perception of international graduate students' adjustment process. It explored both the positive and negative experiences of these students at Michigan State University in terms of two dimensions: academic experience and social interaction or experiences. The study further also delved into the factors that enabled or hindered their adjustments, as well as what they perceived to be their most important academic and social needs and challenges. This next section includes the discussion or analysis of the findings from this study.

International graduate students while striving for academic excellence often face a unique challenge of navigating a new culture (Adler: 1975). Their navigation of academic and social life can be understood by framing their experience in the context of acculturation. This is defined as extent to which a person adopts the practices and values of a different cultural group, and as a result the changes that occur in the individual entering a new academic and social environment (Monzo and Rueda: 2006; Berry: 1994). With this, scholars have found that the particular ways of adjusting to a new situation depend on a host of personal and cultural factors as well as the particular situations the students confront (Yang et.al: 2005; Araujo:2011).The process of acculturation is said to vary from one person to the next (Monzo and Rueda: 2006). The 10 international students who participated in this study were no exception. Evidently, the data suggests that there is no uniform international educational experience. In other words, no two international graduate students experienced the same set of challenges. Despite this, many international graduate students also face common challenges. From the data numerous patterns of transitional processes have emerged. Many factors are involved in these patterns, but the ones that seemed to be most prominent are those that relate to English fluency, social support and ties established with those from same nationality, other international students as well as American students and professors, perceived cultural difference, among others. Exploring these dimensions or factors was significant in the understanding of the extent to which international graduate student felt adjusted or perceived to be integrated into the existing sociocultural framework at Michigan State University.

In this study adjustment is viewed as "representing a transitional process that unfolds over time as students learn to cope with the exigencies of the university environment" (Al-Sharideh and Goe, 1998: 701). In considering "sociocultural adjustment" to be influenced by length of residence in a new culture (Brown: 2009: Araujo: 2011), my study attempted to capture the patterns of behavior and their understanding over time. So questions were asked in such a way that students reflected on their prior, initial as well as their more current or ongoing transitional experiences. This helped capture the essential changes in students' perceptions and experiences as they navigated social and academic life. It also delineated the particular coping strategies international graduate students used to deal with "acculturative-related stress" (Crockette, et.al:2007).

Arguably, the United States is said to be the premiere destination for many international students from all over the world because of its world class institutions, internationally recognized scholars, advanced teaching and research, top notch technology facilities, as well as diverse academic environments (Kim et.al: 2010). All the interviewees considered these advantages are the top reasons why they chose to study in the U.S. With this, prior to their arrival, many stated that they had a strong desire to study in the United States, and felt prepared. Gao and G Gudykunst (1990) claimed that having prior knowledge or information of the host culture can be useful in reducing uncertainty and anxiety and that such knowledge can be obtained through various sources. Not surprisingly, many students had obtained knowledge of the United States through various sources such as mass media, books, talking to people who have been to the States, and through other sources. Further, students described their prior exposure to western media, culture, curriculum and English language, which they believed personally, prepared them or reduced the anxiety of uncertainty.

Around the globe, English has been assumed to be important in terms of providing access to educational, economic and immigration opportunities (Singh, Kell & Pandian: 2002). Students were highly cognizant of this, and hence it came as no surprise to me that the importance of being proficient in English surfaced early on. As my findings revealed, regardless of students' level of experience in English, the international graduates expressed a desire to study in a predominately English speaking country. They

also revealed their personal, educational and professional goals which they believed could be achieved in the U.S. Participants' intrinsic motivation and positive perception or knowledge of the U. S, therefore, seemed instrumental in adopting an open attitude towards new encounters and experiences.

Data point to the fact that students' educational aspirations and goals had outweighed their perceptions of future anxiety related to cultural incongruities. According to Adler (1975), prior to arrival, individuals are relatively unaware of their own values, beliefs, and attitudes. It is only during the actual "transitional process" that is, when students make the move from a familiar to a relatively unfamiliar environment and their "cultural predispositions" come into "perception and conflict" (Adler: 1975). In congruence with this, I found that for these international students, it was after they received adequate exposure and contact with the new cultural environment, recognition of cultural similarities and differences as well as their own limitations became more obvious. Further, their participation in the academic learning context, and their interactions with the preexisting social networks as well as the wider socio-cultural environment is expected to extend the participants perspectives and enhance their sense of cultural awareness (Adler: 1975). Hence, from my findings it was clear that many students continued to learn, understand, as well as revise their preexisting perceptions as they immersed in the new culture. This was evident in their ongoing comparison and reflection on their initial up until the present day experience.

In their initial transition, that is the first few weeks, international students were busy settling down in their new temporary home and taking care of required legal documents. Their most immediate concerns related to food, weather, and transportation. As mentioned earlier, studies have shown that cross-cultural experience has an effect on the psychological wellbeing of students. Some of the negative psychological characteristics they are expected to experience during the initial adjustment stages are loneliness, helplessness, desire for dependence, hostility, fear, and bewilderment (Klomegah: 2006). This stems from what scholars have termed as, "culture shock" which is said to occur when individuals enter a "strange" place, during which there is loss of "familiar cues." Kalervo Oberg (1960) described how individuals feel vulnerable when they are in an unknown or "strange" place. He thus compares the sojourners' experiences to a "fish out of water" (p. 141). So, regardless of how "broad minded" one may

67

be, feeling of frustration and anxiety is said to be inevitable once they enter a new cultural environment (Oberg: 1960). In contrast to literature that suggests the inevitability of a period of negative psychological and emotional upheaval during their initial transitional phase, many of the international students reported that they did not experience severe adjustment issues, particularly those that pertain to psychological distress such as feelings of alienation or isolation and homesickness (Klomegah: 2006). For some students, having prior knowledge of the host culture seemed to have reduced the level of uncertainty or anxiety associated with culture shock (Gao and Gudykunst: 1990). But, for most, what appeared to be helpful during their initial phase were the immediate social ties that they established or the support they received from preexisting social groups, individuals and networks. From the onset of their journey, participants expressed the need to identify social support networks in their new cultural environment. Social support is said to come from numerous sources, and "different sources may provide different levels and types of support" (Crockett, et.al:2007). Other than for legal issues related to their F-1 visas, the students in this study did not seem to heavily rely on university administrators, or other formal organizations such as the OISS. Instead, informal networks or social ties with students from their own country or other international students served as the critical means through which students obtained information relevant to accomplishing immediate tasks and negotiating university life (Rodriguez, et.al:2003;Sovic:2009). Students, particularly, from India, China and Taiwan, felt fortunate enough to discover other students from their home country. For those who did not have such contacts they gravitated mainly towards students with similar cultural background, which included mostly other international students. There were only two students who felt very comfortable and immediately only interacted with Americans. So, from this study, it was very evident that most of the international students did not develop immediate friendships with host nationals or Americans to meet their initial adjustment needs. I expected that this would change and over time students would expand their social networks to not only include those from their own country or international students, but also Americans. Their overall pattern of adjustment, however, suggested otherwise. Students, throughout their stay, maintained a relatively strong

affiliation towards individuals from their own nationality, or other international students with similar cultural background. I will explicate on this in depth later.

Further, although most of the international graduate students did not experience negative emotional states related to "acculturative stress" such as depression and alienation, the aspects of "acculturative stress" that was salient among the participants related to English language proficiency or unfamiliarity with prevailing cultural and academic practices. This made them somewhat self-conscious of their existing social values and cultural know-how, as well as challenged their preconceptions and assumptions (Adler: 1975).

Knowledge of the language spoken in the host community played a vital role within the acculturation process. Language is considered as the principal medium through which cultural information can be communicated as well as learned (Yang et.al:2005; Olivas & Lee, 2006). When asked what accounted for their language difficulties, many of these students reported the infrequent chances to practice English as well as the inadequate English language training in their respective countries, and also a lack of contextual knowledge. Due to language barriers, some students were found to have faced greater obstacles in their social and academic life. These were students mainly from China, Taiwan and Mexico, all non-English speaking countries. Studies reveal that those with lower levels of English proficiency experienced higher levels of anxiety during their sociocultural adjustment. Conversely, those who were confident in their English language ability were said to experience greater satisfaction and relatively more positive cross-cultural experience. My findings are consistent with earlier findings that demonstrated that mastery of the English language is important component of acculturation, particularly in the U.S context (Grahame & Poyrazli: 2007). Even for students who claimed to have had adequate exposure or training in English in their country of origin, such as India, Turkey, Pakistan and Serbia, the transition to America English still required effort. These respondents mentioned that the English training they received while enabled them to meet academic demands, did not prepare them for the subtleties of social interactions. So learning or understanding the American accent and expressions used in day to day life, all poses a challenge to international graduate students, regardless of English proficiency. Thus,

language differences remained a critical and ongoing concern for international students. My findings, thus, revealed the impact of language barriers on students' academic and interpersonal lives.

In terms of social interactions, incompetent oral English skills prevented students from interacting frequently with American students, and limited their capacity to indulge in meaningful conversations with them (Grahame & Poyrazli, 2007). However, its impact was reported to be more severe in classrooms as it prevented students from actively participating in discussion. So, some students felt anxious and intimidated by open discussion and debate within the classroom. In addition, their low involvement in class discussion was also related to the educational culture or classroom dynamics in their country of origin.

Wang and Mallinckrodt (2006) in their study claimed that students from China and Taiwan are particularly discouraged from expressing their opinions or thoughts openly. Although this cannot be entirely generalized, the students from Taiwan, China as well as Mexico and India discussed this cultural difference in classroom interactions and dynamics. They mainly discussed how professors or teachers emphasized lectures more than interactive class room environment. On the contrary, in an American classroom, students found that they were expected to speak up, and being quiet is usually considered to be a sign of incompetency and inattentiveness. Further, these students also talked about the informal and casual behavior of U.S. professors. Here, the cultural difference in classroom interactions was seen as a source of anxiety for some at the beginning, especially for those who were constrained by language incompetency.

Cultural difference seemed to be of concern even in non-academic situations, especially during interactions with Americans. There is research to suggest the potential impact of perceived cultural distance on stress and intercultural interactions (Redmond: 2000). Hence in my study I found that along with insufficient English, perceived cultural differences also increased international graduate students' uncertainty and anxiety when interacting with Americans (Adler: 1975). For some students, particularly, those studying in departments with a large majority of other international students, it was difficult to meet and make friends with U.S. peers. However, most international graduate students commented not only on

the challenge they faced in meeting U.S. students, some of them also described difficulty in establishing meaningful and lasting friendships with them. Here, they explained how intimacy in friendships differed from their accustomed manner of interacting with others in their culture of origin. It was the students from Taiwan, China, India and Mexico who in particular commented on the difference in friendship patterns. While reflecting on their cultural background, these students claimed to be from a rather "collectivist" society, where there is a societal emphasis on "interpersonal connectedness and emotional interdependence" (Yang et.al: 2005). The student from Mexico gave a very poignant description of this, which also summarizes others who had similar experiences:

Well, growing up I remember having a sense of community. I remember my parents will know people in the neighborhood, and all the children in the neighborhood will go to the same school. I would go to my high school buddies places, and my parents would know their parents. Interestingly, the place I was raised, when my parents bought the place, there was not much there, like no man's land. It was out in the jungle, just one dirt road, not many things around. For some reason, that place became the hotspot for development and business, and so it was becoming a prime place to live. As years passed by, it became less of a community for me. But, still I do have a great sense of community. Some neighbors, old neighbors are still there, and my parents are still there so when I visit the place, I still have a sense of community, and I still know a lot of people. All my church and school people all live in the same community. Even when my face is less communal, if I compared to the US, there is a much stronger feel for community. When I first came here, I felt isolated in all senses, like isolated geographically, from people, from school. I felt like everything was nice but it was not worth it because I did not have the same sense of closeness.

Similarly, students from Taiwan, China and India also commented on the close and personal nature of their relationship with not just their immediate family members, but their aunts, uncles, cousins, and even neighbors. Here they described a strong sense of community and realization of collective needs and goals in their home country (Yang et.al: 2005). In contrast, these students characterized the U.S as being more orientated towards an "individualistic" culture, defined as the "loosely knit social framework

71

in which individuals are supposed to take care of themselves and their immediate families only"
(Redmond,2000:152). Generally speaking, those from Euro-American descent have been characterized as
coming from a rather individualist culture (Yang et.al: 2005). Here, I am not trying to essentialize the
collectivistic versus individualistic nature when comparing U.S with other societies, but rather
demonstrate how individuals' past social conditioning may stay with them in a variety of ways (Rueda
and Monza:2006), as well as accentuate the influence of their cultural or societal background. Whether
students' patterns of interaction in the host community had something to do with coming from a relatively
collectivists or individualistic culture was not easily discernible. This is mainly due to the limited
knowledge and exploration of each participant's country of origin. However, my findings did reveal the
conscious or unconscious need to reassert this sense of community and belonging that is emphasized in a
"collectivist" culture even when they come to the United States. Hence, this may be one reason why
students seemed to have interacted with Americans on a superficial level or why they displayed more
comfort interacting with other people who shared common values, beliefs or even patterns of behavior in
building as well as maintaining relationships with friends, families, significant others, etc..

Further, the findings also revealed that as students experienced life within the U.S learning
context, it gave them more opportunities for continuous comparison with their previous experiences.
Moreover, during this time they seemed to have gained a relatively more accurate perception of cultural
differences or similarities as well as knowledge of host society (Gao and Gudykunst: 1990). Here it is
important to point out those cultural differences or the negative feelings associated with culture shock do
not necessarily lead to perpetual feelings of anxiety and frustration. This is only one among a wide
spectrum of responses and reactions to new cultural surroundings. Adler (1975) helps to illuminate this as
he rejects the inevitably of negative emotions associated with cultural differences or culture shock. Here
he states that while culture shock can be seen as a form of "alienation," but it can also be "an important
aspect of cultural learning, self-development and personal growth" (Adler, 1975:13). In other words, a
certain level of frustration and problems encountered through immersion in a "second culture" can be
important to understanding "change and movement experiences" as well be a "source of higher levels of

72

personality development" (Adler, 1975:13). With this, Adler (1975) suggests that individuals are very capable of undergoing positive changes in a new environment and finding new ways to explore the diversity of human beings. His perception helped to delineate how, despite perceived cultural differences and language barriers, international students actively sought to reduce their anxiety and uncertainty about the host environment by applying various coping strategies (Adler: 1975).

The motivation to adopt necessary skills upon encountering their new academic and socio-cultural environment needs to be differentiated from the preparatory stage where many of the students prepared for life in the U.S by honing their English skills or gathering information regarding U.S institutions through various sources. In the latter case, the motivation to change and adopt new skills, although not limited to, had a lot to do with the students' priority to achieve their educational and professional aspirations. But once they are physically present in their new environment, the motivation to adopt pertinent practices, values and skills went beyond mere academic goals as students become vigilant of the necessity and value for the wider socio-cultural integration. The motivation also may be less a result of personal determination than a demand exerted by the wider community.

Intercultural communication scholars often assume that if a person wants to survive in a foreign country, he or she will try to adapt to the host culture. For some scholars this often requires individual to acculturate the values and practices emphasized in the host society, or align their preexisting values more with dominant culture (Al-Sharideh and Goe: 1998; Monzo and Rueda: 2006). Here, there is a danger in assuming that one needs to adopt a completely new cultural frame of mind, therefore relinquish their existing value and beliefs as a way to successfully integrate or assimilate into their new environment (Alba and Nee:2006; Monzo and Rueda:2006). With this, some scholars have strongly emphasized the need to develop stronger ties or associate primarily with Americans. This is argued to be helpful in enhancing the international experience and thus promote feelings of "emotional gratification and security, and could be utilized by an international student as a means of social support and assistance in resolving personal problems" (Al-Sharideh and Goe, 1998:703: Sovic:2009). Conversely, students who interact with members of the host community to a limited extent are said to develop feelings of isolation or

73

alienation from the larger or mainstream society (Klomegah: 2006). In my findings, aside from interacting with American students, professors or administrators in their academic area, only few a couple students claimed to have established deep relationship with Americans. The interactions with American students were considered to be less personal and more difficult.

With this, overtime, although students reported to feel comfortably adjusted in their new surroundings, their rather infrequent interaction with Americans as well as relative commonality they experienced with other international students, made them feel somewhat in the periphery from mainstream social life or not fully integrated. In this study members of the host society, therefore, were not understood to be primary source of social support in resolving problems related to adjustment process. However, this was not viewed as a source of concern or isolation, and instead these students found their own way to cope with the strain that comes from not feeling completely integrated due to limited interaction with Americans. These students avoided feeling social isolated by developing positive social and peer relationships with students from the same nationality or other international students. Thus, they interacted with those who they felt shared common cultural characteristics, beliefs and values, while to some degree, resisting assimilating with USA born or American students. Of course, the ability of an international student to follow this pattern of adjustment depends on whether or not there is adequate number of students from the same nationality or those from similar cultural background. Since this was shown to be true for most graduate students that were interviewed, we can postulate that the "network of ties" established with other persons with a similar cultural background or nationality served to "buffer students from the effects of problems associated with a lack of assimilation of American culture and an inability to effectively interact with Americans" (Al-Sharideh and Goe, 1998:705; Araujo: 2011; Crockett et.al:2007).

Further, this helps to corroborate the point made in the beginning of this study, which suggests that the extent to which one adopts American values or practices and is able to establish strong relationship with members of the host community does not inevitably lead to assimilation or is not the only path to achieve it. Instead, scholars (e.g Richard and Nee: 2006; Monzo and Rueda: 2006) contend

that the path to assimilation or the process of learning and adopting new cultural practices (acculturation) is not "unidirectional" and "passive." Rather, they suggest the active role that individuals take in creating changes in their cultural orientation and learning, by "drawing on various resources as these are called upon in any give context" (Monzo and Rueda, 2006:189).

Despite facing challenges in their academic or social life, arising mainly from cultural differences and language barriers, many were able to demonstrate individual and personal growth. The findings across the current cases indicate that, overtime, these students felt linguistically and academically adjusted and acculturated to their respective graduate program at Michigan State University. More specifically, students attempted to meet their graduate program requirements as well as academic expectations by continuously improving their language proficiency using various strategies. A positive acculturation process for international students from non-English speaking countries or those who reported to having more language difficulty was also facilitated by advisers and professors who were cognizant of the language and communication difficulties. Research shows that interaction with faculty members, that is, informal as well as formal interactions, enables greater improvement in academics among minority and international students (Grahame and Poyrazil:2007).In this study, many students also learnt to communicate and actively seek or interact with American professors, who they viewed as the link to the university and their future career. Thus, most international students prioritized and reported a desire to adjust academically, showing efforts to assimilate the language and academic aspects of their host community. This was believed to be necessary to complete their graduate program. Beyond the acquisition of English language and honing their academic skills, international graduate students also expressed a desire to understand American cultural values and beliefs. The understanding and knowledge of the "second culture" was seen as desirable and having implications for their future professional careers (Adler: 1975).

Lastly, the participants' development of adaptive behavior seemed to help them function more effectively in the new cultural environment. This is in accord with previous theoretical suppositions and empirical findings that suggest that individuals have the potential for personal growth and development

during the acculturation process (Adler: 1975; Berry: 2003). Hence, as mentioned earlier, many of the students actively sought strategies and adopted skills to meet the expectations and requirements of U.S higher education. From my findings international graduate students made efforts to increase English language proficiency, developed social support networks, as well as a more nuanced appreciation for the new culture as well as their own culture of origin, and finally they also developed a more pronounced sense of self-reliance over time. Through this, they are expected to endure meaningful changes during their overseas experiences in terms of heightened self-awareness and knowledge of not just the host community, but an understanding of their self in relationship to the host community (Adler: 1975; Oberg: 1990).

In the overall, participants established that their transitional experience in the U.S has been meaningful considering the benefits of improving English skills, gaining new outlooks and knowledge of the global world, as well as nurturing academic and individual growth to enhance their opportunities for future development and career.

LIMITATIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although this study produced meaningful findings about students' academic, social and cultural experiences, this study does have certain limitations that need to be addressed. Due to limited or a small sample size, it reduced the generalizability of the findings. And because participants were recruited from only one institution, the extent to which these findings apply across the United States also remains undeterminable. Future research could use large scale surveys in order to obtain a broader understanding of international students' adjustment as well as build comparisons of the experiences across U.S higher education institutes.

This study, while qualitative in design, only provided a glimpse into these students' lives. There are other aspects to their lives that have not been explored in this study; hence, needs further investigation that might shed light into the even more significant influencers of these students. For example, this study could be expanded upon in many ways, such as further investigating patterns of social interaction as well as the social ties and networks they established. Since this study revealed how influential social networks are for their sense of belonging, future work should investigate more closely the habitual or everyday interaction students have within their social networks. In addition, longitudinal studies centered on the participants' current as well as future experiences can also be an interesting avenue to take for future research in order to have a better understanding of how students fare in U.S higher education and beyond.

Finally, the findings and analysis in this study underscore the need to promote awareness of cultural diversity in higher education. Through gradual awareness of the cultural differences and diversity as well as their own cultural limitations and strengths, international graduate students, in this study demonstrated,   tremendous potential to make academic and social adjustments. Likewise, by coming to understand the needs of international students as being rather complex, institutions can help facilitate easier integration (Sovic:2009). It was also evident that both formal and informal mechanisms must be mobilized in supporting the students. Hence, cross-cultural adaptation or adjustment can be rendered as an interactive process that involves both the newcomers and the host environment (Monzo and Rueda: 2006). However, it is not an easy task to come to terms with the full complexity of levels on which

77

international students experience difficulties during their transition. This is mainly because international students are a varied group, with different backgrounds, skills, ages, experience, and command of English. Even those from the same country can display very different characteristics; and therefore experience a unique process of acculturating into their new environment. Given this complexity, a variety of interconnecting solutions and approaches need to be explored in order to help these students make a smooth transition.

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