

Examining the Social and Academic Perceptions of Graduate International Students

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Abstract – This paper examines the experiences of graduate international students as they construct meaning out of their lived experiences and interactions in the United States. The experiences reflect the understanding of their social and academic perceptions of their home nations and what in turn end up being their social reality. Fifteen graduate's students were interviewed with data collected among the international student's association in a rural south east research university. Data collected was coded and thematic analysis used to analyze the data collected. Results revealed that graduate International students go through both social and academic pressures which shape their perception of their reality. Outcome also reveals that many of the graduate students face challenges which sometimes require institutional help and support.

Keywords – International Students, Graduate Students, Social and Economic Perceptions.

I. INTRODUCTION

The United States international student population since the 1950s has witnessed a marked increase in enrollment with international student's representing 12% of all master's degree and 26.7% of doctoral degrees in 2002 representing 582,996 students (Misra & Castillo, 2004). According to the Institute of International Education (2017), the United States remains the highest destination of international students hosting 1.1 million of the 4.6 million world enrollments of students. This number is followed by United Kingdom having 11 percent and China 10 percent respectively.

The number of international students has grown to 1.18 million students representing 24% increase that is made up of more than 186 nations attending over 2,500 higher institutions across the United States. However, the percentage of international student enrollment represents a decrease from 26 to 24 percentage between 2016 - 2017. About twenty percent of the total are graduate students in the United States with about 4 out of 10 PhD graduates produced annually since 2010 being international students from Asia only. The reason for the in flock of graduates from Asia is supported by the argument that despite the economic development experienced in many of the Asian countries, their educational development has not experienced an equivalent level of development prompting a high level of attraction of the student's enrollment from this region (Misra & Castillo, 2004).

International students provide an important diversity, varying perspective, helping to supplement the declining pool of American graduates and provide the much-needed revenue generation for universities (Wan, Chapman & Biggs, 1992). About 60% of international students are graduate students who contribute to the US Gross Domestic Product (GDP) either through teaching or research. In 2017, international student tuitions generated \$36.9 billion as revenue to the US economy. There are a lot of literature on the

social life and academic adjustments of international students. A researcher must therefore be able to sift through several materials to focus on what is needed (Wan, Chapman & Biggs, 1992). Researches on the lived experiences of the international student has been described by theories by different literatures as exhibiting stress (Valedez, 1982), extreme social alienation (Owie, 1982), undergoing cultural shock (Spradley & Philips, 1972), undergoing cross-cultural adaptation (Yeh, 1979) and dangling between two cultures (Adelegan & parks, 1985).

International students face an enormous level of stress in a fast pace learning milieu which they are not used to. This is aside from the differences in educational curriculum and separation from families. This paper examines the perceptions formed by the graduate student as a result of their experiences as they navigate their nascent social life and academic adventure and how these experiences contribute to the formation of their new social reality.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs the social reality theory to examine the social and academic life of graduate international students. Social reality is the placing of meaning upon experience recognizing "the interpretation of human experience as the bedrock upon which human life is built and upon which organizational theory should stand" (Greenfield, 1979, p.97).

As adaptive beings, the environment provides information and helps to construct the individual's attitudes, opinions and behavior. It argues that the characteristics of jobs and task are not given but constructed. These characteristics include the managerial style, conditions of workplace and interpersonal relationship. The individual processes the information received from the environment to construct their own reality for instance a worker working in a 100-degree room temperature does not need anyone to tell them that the room is hot. The individual participates in the process to create their own reality.

Additionally, the need – satisfaction model asserts that the individual rather than situational influence is responsible for the behavior. "A need 'can be frequently invoked as an explanation for behavior not explainable by readily observed external demands. They are expressions, behavior constructed in response to externally generated or self-generated requests for evaluations and explanations of some other behavior" (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978, p.226).

This paper suggests that the "unit for analyzing self and society is the human being" (Weber, 1947, p.88-100) and this is based on the interpretation of human understanding. As posted by Greenfield (1979), that a set of ideas that we accept make up our experience. This set of ideas and information helps to shape and determine perceptions of international graduate students which eventuates into their social reality (Jessim, 1991).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of literature for this study considered the social and academic life experiences and how this process helps to inform their social reality. The social information theorists states that “one can learn a lot about individual behavior by studying the informational and social environment within which that behavior occur and to which it adapts” (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978, p.226). This theory draws from the fact that individuals as ‘adaptive organisms adapt attitudes, behavior and beliefs from their social context’ (p.226). Surdam & Collins (1984) opined that the international graduate student goes through an adaptation process while in their host country that are divided into three states. The first stage is when the international student is just two years in the host country. At this stage the students arrive in the country with high hopes and expectations and positive energy but soon begins to experience the U curve. At this stage, the students go through the learning curve and initiations into the new environment (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Gibson & Ogbu 1991). The stage can both be exciting and disappointing depending on the students' expectations.

The second stage is where the international student is confronted by social and academic challenges which if not well addressed results in poor adaptation. This stage can be delicate if not well understood and if enough support is not provided (Trice, 2004). The students are sometimes confused and frustrated in their efforts to either understand or to be understood. The graduate students learn, integrates and forms their perception of the host. This second stage is usually between the second year and the third year of the students stay. The third stage is usually when the student begins to prepare to leave for home and this can be at the fourth or fifth year.

This theory even though examines what may be considered the developmental stages of the international students in a foreign land, it did not consider why some international graduate students have chosen to remain in their host country after graduation or even embark on the process of naturalization. Surdam & Collins (2004) did not identify the factors responsible for these different stages or that results in good or bad adaptation (Perrucci & Hu, 1995).

III. METHODOLOGY

This study deployed the qualitative approach and is situated in the interpretative paradigm. The interpretative paradigm seeks to “interpret’ people’s construction of reality and identify patterns in their perspectives and behavior” (Glesne, 2006, p.9). This study was carried out in a large size rural research university in the southeastern part of the United States. The student population is about 19,000 with about 5% international student population and 8% black student population. Fifteen graduate international students were interviewed using an eight-question protocol. The study allowed the interview to share their opinion but also what Charmaz (2006, p.16) called “people construct data”. The students were from countries in Africa (Nigeria, Libya,

Kenya, Ugnada, Ethiopia, and Ghana), Asia (China, India and Uzbekistan), Europe (Turkey and Netherland) and the Middle East (Saudi Arabia and Jordan). The selection even though random, was selected from a pool of members from the international associations on the campus of the south-eastern rural university. The interview took place at an agreed time and convenient location where the respondents could conveniently express themselves.

Interviews were conducted after receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The interviews lasted for about 20 minutes and each interview was recorded and later transcribed manually. Researchers also had their field notes where some ideas, comments and observations were recorded.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

According to Glesne (2006) data analysis is “organizing what you have seen, heard and read so that you can make sense of what you have learned” (2006, p.147). The site of this study may be different from other institutions especially when compared to urban university with a higher percentage of student population as one of the interviewee asserted that; if the international student population were to be higher, things would have been different in that university. However, these may not make much difference because this university has about 1500 international graduates students with representation from over 90 countries. We would also want to overcome our personal subjectivity in this research by being meticulous, open minded and allow the data to speak for itself.

To enable us to achieve the purpose of making sense of what we have learned, we deployed the thematic analysis approach that involves coding, separating into themes, identify patterns, then explaining what we have learned from these patterns. It was our goal that this process will help us to “treat text as a window to human experience” (Bernard, 2000, p.276). The data collected were coded with common themes expressing the different experiences of the interviewee. The common themes identified were cultured, communication, accents, language, faulty, challenges outside of their studies, differences in educational systems and family.

Culture:

Under the culture, we had two sub-themes; cultural experiences and the American culture. Most of the participants said there are differences in the culture between the USA and their home countries and they assert that these differences affect their interaction and relationship with Americans. Even though graduate international students deplore the individual and private lifestyle in American compared to communal lifestyle they were used to at home, they are willing to learn and acculturate into the American system. The result revealed that graduate international students see a “big gap between our culture and the US culture” for instance:

“In my country you shouldn’t look into eyes straight, it means you disrespect that person. But here if you don’t look at the people them they will consider that you are not confident, you are lying. I was not looking at their eyes which will give a different impression.”

Graduate students sometimes find it difficult to integrate into the individualistic nature of the American society. Most societies outside of America are communal. Some other experiences that stood out as a cultural shock to the graduate students was the party culture like tailgating and Thursday parties on campus. An interviewee opined “I am usually embarrassed by the party culture”.

It is paradoxical that even though graduate international students see the American as closed in terms of been individualistic, they also see it as open in terms of freedom of expression.

Language Differences:

The language was divided into two sub-themes: Language differences and language barriers. Most of the respondents who had English as a second language explained that they experience language difficulties in speaking and reading which makes it difficult to express themselves and socialize: “Yes, my second language affects our social life and also our class activities”. They expressed this struggle of overcoming this language barrier:

“Sometimes it is very hard, I think we need to have a relationship with our professors and our American friends we can work on this challenge. Actually, it depends on how we use the English in our life.”

Despite these difficulties most of the interviewee asserts that second language is an asset.

Most of the participants think their problems with English language affect their grades while other interviewees think language is not a barrier to their academic and social life. This is despite not having spoken or learnt English as their first language. A common theme however, is that language barrier (especially for students with English as a second language) affects not only their academics but ability to socialize on campus.

Communication :

Participants agreed that they have a good relationship with their professors especially with their supervisors, but this relationship is within the limits of the classes and does not extend outside the university. One participant described this relationship with faculty as:

“Here we feel free, relaxed talking with the professor and other faculty. They want to help us. I feel like I am in my home. I am lucky because I have a good supervisor.”

Most international graduate students agree that their communication skills have improved since they came to the US especially because they communicate with Americans more often.

Accents:

International graduate students also see their accent in their communication especially with Americans as a challenge especially as they try to express themselves. It’s not only the difference in accent but also sometimes fast talkers are difficult to be understood by an international student.

“Another important point is that African Americans speak in a very different way. I had trouble figuring out everything that they say initially, and I happen to talk to one of my colleagues. Look I don’t understand everything you say. I figure it out and he said I didn’t know you don’t”.

Faulty:

Some participants said there are differences in communi-

-cation with faculties in the USA and their home countries at least four of the graduate students interviewed said the relationship with their faculties in their countries is formal or very official. One participant said:

“The relationship between the graduate students and the faculties in my country is different. Actually, there is very big respect between them. I think respect is not exactly good word we can say officially. The relationship is very official and students and faculties usually they cannot go to dinner or lunch together and they do not make jokes to each other.”

And another said:

“The relationship between the faculty members and the students here is a simple relationship between them but when I talk about my country there is a formal relationship between the faculty and student.”

These comments by the respondents also refer to the power distance between faculty and students in America compared to their home countries.

Relationships with Americans:

Most of interviewees said that they have a good relationship with American and non-American students on campus, but their relationship is not as cordial with American like they have with non-Americans. Some interviewee thinks their relationship with non-American is strong because they can understand their needs and problems.

Differences in Educational System:

All the interviewees said there are differences in educational system between their home countries and USA. These differences are in faculty relationship, curriculum, homework, and infrastructure. For example, one interviewee said about the differences in grade and relationship that:

“Actually, the biggest differences is the exam system especially in education we have many exams in my country but in the US they have many projects. I like this one because in my system we have to memorize many things probably after I go back to the country I am going to use the project system for my students and in my classrooms. Different education system affects the relationship between faculties and students. Exam system you do not have many relationships with your professors because they teach their class during class time then they leave but project system students have good relationships with their professors they have many questions and they ask their professors to improve their knowledge and also to complete their assignments very well.”

Also, the interviewees agree that the curriculum and the infrastructures that are used in the USA are better than what they have in their countries, because they have too much homework here than in their countries. In the US one of the interviewee opined we are encouraged to think more broadly.

Challenges Outside of Studies

Different views of participants on the challenges that they face outside of study. On a lighter note, the interviewees described his greatest challenge by asking why they drive on the left side of the road and not the right side? Some of them said they have to take care of their family beside their study and for some, it is financial problems and other side:

“Sometimes you want to do some kind of cultural activities which are different here sometimes you just want to talk in your language to somebody and somebody is not available calling home is expensive that was one challenge.”

International graduate students are faced with myriads of challenges one of which is separation from family, “I get lonely”. There are other challenges like academics, finances, stress and also there are concerns about their future after graduation from the university.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that international students find it easier to relate with fellow international students than with Americans. One may ask if this is because of cultural barrier? The data reveal that part of the reason adduced for this is the fact that the international student’s student perceive that fellow international students understand their background and story and can better relate to them than the Americans do. This can be compounded by the accent difficult from both sides this does not reveal in any way that Americans don’t care because the same interviewers also commented on the support and help they have received from their roommates and classmates who are Americans. But when it comes to a better understanding of their background fellow international students do better in understanding.

Additionally, International students perceive the American society to be very individualistic and closed. They feel they have less interaction with colleagues and even faculty outside of the classrooms. This is also paradoxical because while they claim they have more access to their professors in American than back home, they claim this access is mostly limited to official work hours. The implication of this is that other unofficial and social interactions that the graduate international students need will have to provide by other channels. This gap in interaction eventuates into a situation where the international students want to learn about new cultures as examined by the adaptation process of Surdan & Collins (1984), they go through this adaptation process. Then one is prompted to ask, what are the differences in students – professor relationships in the United States compared to other countries?

The results of this study reveal that even though international graduate students may acculturate and overcome the culture shock after spending some time in their host country, they still are not totally immersed in the American culture. On the other hand, they also reveal that the American society is open and allow for certain social freedom that they do not find in their home country. Example of this is the distance between faculty and students. International students’ belief the faculty members are easy to approach and willing to help. This they find different from what they experience in their home countries. This is also paradoxical because even though international graduate students claim they have more access to their professors in America compared to back home, this access is limited to mostly official hours. The implication of this is that the much interaction

social and informal times needed to get integrated into the American social system is restrained.

Also, the language barrier is seen as a challenge to most graduate international students in communicating with Americans. Because of this they show symptoms of withdrawal and weak interaction because they are shy and sometimes because they have to repeat themselves to be understood. This further compound the issues of interactions. But in spite of theses language barrier, they see the linguistic capital as an asset.

International Graduate students interviewed found the academic life to be very intense. The reasons for this is that the American graduate education is more developed than they are in other nations of the world. The international graduate students all indicate that academic work is more intense, a lot of homework which some of them are not used to, coupled with the problems of language barrier. Some of them see the language barrier as influencing their grades while others do not.

This study validates some of the stress related challenges that International Graduate student undergo which are stress related to school work, financial, family and loneliness (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004). The stress goes on throughout most of the social and academic life of the graduate international as alluded to by Misra & Catello (2004) until they graduate. One of the interviewees replied to one of the questions about challenges outside of studies by saying; “sorting my life out after school, doing something with my life”. The issue of life after graduations is also a big issue for them especially considering challenges of immigration laws. And even more recently, immigration has become a more source of worry to graduate students because of the changing and strict immigration regulations. They carry matters of immigration as fear and uncertainty throughout most of their stay. This is peculiar with students who may want to live in the United States after graduation.

The international graduate students dealing with the issues of culture shock, acculturation, financial challenges, family, loneliness, academic and stress begins to define their own identity and perceptions in the process. They interact with Americans and non-American but lean more to the international friends who can better relate to what they are going through. Through their interactions their perceptions begin to form into the social reality of who they are and what they consider as their reactions to their social and academic milieu. This is not to deny the influence of the academic and social environment, but these combined together to determine their social reality (Misra & Burant (2003). Findings from this study support the graduate international adoption process advanced by Surdam and Collins (1994) which describes first year experience for graduate student as that of struggle, culture shock and withdrawal. The second year is that of gradual understanding of the American system and culture (Yeh and Wang, 2000). By the third, most students have gained an understanding and decide if they want to live here or go back to their home country.

VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

According to Greenfield, the “interpretation of human experience is the bedrock upon which life is built and upon which organization theory should stand” (1979, p.97). In this paper, it is the different interpretation of the international graduate students that forms the bedrock of their social reality and defines their action and reaction to these realities. This action or reaction which can either be psychological, behavioral or emotional is usually catalyzed by the need-satisfaction model postulated by Salancik & Pfeffer that a need is a “response to externally generate or self-generate requests for evaluation and explanations of some other behavior” (1978, p.226). The study of the social and academic reality has implications on social issues like equity, equality and freedom.

The discussion of the graduate international student’s experience is important to appreciate the challenges they go through and to help create an awareness of same in program planning and policy. The next point after creating an awareness from the time of orientation is to prescribe institutional care and assistance for students who may go through challenges. What we have had in most schools have been either silence or delegation of institutional responsibilities. Attention hitherto have focused on immigration status, multicultural and international student day festival but intentional approach to international students that will initiate attention towards institutional care and assistance will be helpful.

International student’s inflow to Western countries may have started to wane because of the improvement in education in emerging economies causing students to stay in their home country and the globalization of education causing universities in Europe and America to take higher education to countries outside of their borders. The consequence of this is reduction of international students studying abroad and higher competition in the global capitalist educational system soon. And to be relevant in this system, attention and institutional care may need be paid to international students who do not only generate revenue but are also a great resource that contribute to research and human capital development. Further research on the changing educational environment and how it affects international students will be helpful.

Finally, further research on the differences between the social and academic perceptions between undergraduate and graduate international students will be interesting. It would help to understand the importance of demographics like age and gender in perceptions among international students while attempting an analysis between year one, two or PhD students from other graduate students.

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