Cultural Adaptation and Psychological Support in Social Work of International Students: Construction and Practice of Cross-cultural Psychological Service Model

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Abstract

This study focuses on the major challenges faced by international students in the process of cultural adaptation, and designs a research plan centered on social work intervention, aiming to explore effective pathways for enhancing cultural adaptation abilities and psychological well-being. The research adopts an evidence-based approach to construct a set of culture-sensitive psychological support service models, including cultural adaptation workshops, cross-cultural communication activities and individual psychological consultation. The report focuses on describing the research topic, research objectives and hypotheses, research design logic, variable measurement and tools, data collection and analysis plan, as well as ethical and feasibility analysis, providing scientific evidence and theoretical references for the application of social work practice in cross-cultural psychological support.

Keywords

International Students, Social Work, Cultural Adaptation, Psychological Support, Cross-cultural Services

Introduction

Research Background

With the progress of globalization, international education has become an important bridge of cultural exchanges. More and more students choose to study overseas, and the number of international students in the world has exceeded 5 million, showing a sustained growth trend (UNESCO, 2020). However, international students face a series of complex and diverse challenges in the process of cross-cultural adaptation, which not only relates to language barriers, but also to cultural shock, social isolation and academic pressure.

These challenges often lead to international students experiencing profound psychological discomfort in the new cultural environment, anxiety, depression, life pressure and other problems gradually emerge. These problems not only affect the academic performance of international students, but also have a far-reaching negative impact on their personal mental health (Berry, 1997). Under this background, the traditional mental health intervention mode often neglects cultural differences and cannot really touch the unique needs of international students. When facing pressure, many international students often feel disconnected from the local culture and society, lacking emotional support and understanding.

As a specialty that focuses on the interaction between individual and society, the core idea of social work is to help solve the problems in social adaptation by paying attention to the human-based needs and supporting individual growth. Especially in the cross-cultural background, social work is expected to provide effective psychological support for students. However, most of the existing services are not designed to meet the special needs of international students, and therefore their potential cannot be fully realized. It is against this background that this study attempts to construct a culture-sensitive psychological support service model, and through the comprehensive application of social work theory, strives to improve the international students' cultural adaptability and mental health level.

Research Significance and Innovation

Theoretical Significance: Through the perspective of cross-cultural psychological adaptation, this paper studies the psychological health problems of social work involving international students. The research combines social work with cross-cultural psychology, which can expand the application of social work theory and provide new theoretical support for the theoretical framework of cross-cultural psychological service.

Practical Significance: The culture-sensitive psychological support service model (Sue, 2013) mentioned in this study can broaden the service target on the basis of providing services for educational institutions, social service institutions and government, and make a positive response to the growing mental health needs of international students in universities and colleges. The study provides valuable guidance for practical operations and helps social workers to serve the international student groups better.

Social Significance: With the increase of the number of international students, how to effectively solve their problems of cultural adaptation in foreign countries has become the focus of social attention. This study not only improves the quality of life of international students, but also promotes the integration and communication of global culture by providing them with professional cultural adaptation and mental health support. The extension of this support model will help to promote social inclusion and cultural diversity coexistence in the context of globalization.

New Perspective of Cross-cultural Psychological Service: Although there are many researches on immigrants, refugees and cross-cultural groups, special researches on international students are still scarce. As a special group, international students face different adaptation challenges from immigrants, and their needs are unique. Therefore, the research focuses on the psychological adaptation of international students and explores how to provide more culturally sensitive services to this group under the framework of social work.

Design and Verification of Culturally Sensitive Service Model: This study designs and proposes a culturally sensitive psychological support service model that integrates the concept of social work. Different from the traditional single intervention mode, this service mode provides help to international students in a multi-dimensional way, striving to exert efforts in both cultural differences and mental health. Through the verification of quasi-experimental design, the research not only enriches the relevant knowledge of social work field from the theoretical level, but also provides the innovative model for practical operation.

Research Objectives and Assumptions

To investigate the current situation and needs of international students' cultural adaptation and mental health;To explore the role of social work intervention in improving cultural adaptation and mental health;Provide policy and practice guidance for universities and social institutions.

Hypothesis 1: Social work intervention can significantly improve the international students' cultural adaptability;

Hypothesis 2: The mental health status of international students who receive culturally sensitive services will be significantly better than those who do not.

Hypothesis 3: The implementation of service mode can effectively alleviate the cultural conflict and psychological pressure of international students.

Literature Review

Relevant Research on Cultural Adaptation of International Students

Cultural adaptation refers to the psychological and behavioral process in which individuals gradually adapt to the new culture after entering the new culture environment through self-adjustment and integration (Berry, 1997). This process is not only the adjustment of external behavior, but also the change of individual's cognition, emotion and social communication style to the new culture. For international students, the process of cultural adaptation is often a challenging journey. In the face of different cultural norms, lifestyles, language barriers and educational systems, international students may experience enormous pressure and confusion, and even cultural shock. Cultural shock usually manifests itself in a series of emotional and cognitive imbalances, such as anxiety, loneliness, loss, confusion and maladjustment, which may seriously affect the daily life, academic performance and mental health of international students.

Cultural shock usually occurs because international students fail to adjust their cognitive framework in time to adapt to the new cultural environment. Specifically, international students will experience the "initial idealization" stage in the cross-cultural communication, full of curiosity and expectation to the new culture; However, when they enter the unfamiliar cultural environment, many expected cultural differences and unsuitable factors begin to appear, resulting in negative emotions such as confusion, depression and anxiety (Ward, Bochner,&Furnham, 2001). In addition, due to language barriers and social distance, international students often feel isolated in the new environment, and lack of adequate social support, making the difficulty of cultural adaptation further aggravated. Especially in the case of higher academic pressure, many international students are extremely uneasy when facing learning challenges, causing academic anxiety and even mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety symptoms. The research points out that cultural shock is a multifaceted process, and the adaptability of international students is closely related to their psychological adjustment ability, which puts forward higher requirements for subsequent psychological intervention and social support. (Li Mingyang&Wang Xiaohui, 2020)

Current research shows that social support plays a vital role in cultural adaptation. Social support is not only emotional support from family and friends, but also social networking support from classmates, teachers and communities. Psychological intervention and support service is one

of the effective ways to alleviate the difficulty of cultural adaptation. It is pointed out that appropriate social support can help international students to reduce their sense of isolation and enhance their sense of belonging, thus improving their cultural adaptability (Ward et al., 2001). At the same time, psychological intervention services, such as psychological counseling, and emotional adjustment training, can also effectively alleviate the anxiety and depression of international students, to help them better cope with academic pressure and life challenges.

Role of Social Work in Cultural Adaptation

Social work emphasizes the promotion of social equity and individual well-being, and its concepts of people-oriented and resource integration provide a unique perspective for solving cross-cultural adaptation. By strengthening individual social support network and providing psychological intervention services, social work can effectively improve the international students' cultural adaptability and mental health level (Zastrow, 2021).

Insufficiency of Cross-cultural Psychological Support Service

Although some universities and institutions already provide psychological support services for international students, these services often have the following problems:

Lack of Cultural Sensitivity: They fail to fully consider the cultural backgrounds and differences of international students;

Single-service Focus: They primarily rely on psychological counseling and overlook the building of social support networks.;

Lack of Systematic Evaluation: There is no scientific validation of the service outcomes, making it difficult to continuously optimize the service model.

Theory and Practice of Related Cross-cultural Psychological Service Models

Cross-cultural psychological service mode mainly focuses on how to provide effective psychological support for people from different cultural backgrounds. In the field of theory and practice, a great deal of research has laid a foundation for the development of cross-cultural psychological service. The following are some of the main theoretical and practical results.

The core of cross-cultural psychological service theory lies in understanding and coping with the psychological health problems caused by cultural differences. Several main theoretical models are widely used in the field of cross-cultural psychological service.

Cultural Adaptation Theory (Berry, 2005): Cultural Adaptation Theory holds that immigrants or international students need to undergo cultural adaptation in a new cultural environment, including psychological adjustment and social integration. Different individuals may exhibit different adaptation strategies, such as assimilation, separation, integration, or marginalization. The theory provides a framework for analyzing cultural adaptation and individual mental health for cross-cultural psychological service.

Cultural Psychology Theory (Heine, 2016): Cultural psychology theory emphasizes the role of culture in shaping individual psychology and behavior, and points out that culture is the core factor in shaping cognitive, emotional and behavioral patterns. This theory provides support for the

personalized design of cross-cultural psychological service, and emphasizes that service providers should fully understand the customer's cultural background to provide effective psychological intervention.

Cross-cultural Communication Theory (Gudykunst&Kim, 2003): This theory focuses on misunderstandings and conflicts that may occur in the communication of people from different cultural backgrounds. In psychological services, understanding these communication barriers helps to improve the effectiveness of services, especially in cross-cultural psychological services, cultural differences between counselors and clients may affect the effectiveness of treatment.

Cultural Sensitivity Model (Sue, 2001): Cultural Sensitivity Model emphasizes that service providers should be culturally aware and able to recognize and respect the cultural characteristics of customers. In cross-cultural psychological services, service providers should not only understand cultural differences, but also design and provide services in a culturally sensitive way. The model has been widely used in the psychological services of immigrants, international students and other minority groups.

Research Design and Methods

Study Type and Design Framework

This study adopts a pre-test and post-test design, measuring participants' psychological state before and after the intervention to assess its effectiveness. The pre-test will collect data on international students' mental health, cultural adaptation, and psychological support levels using tools such as the Cross-Cultural Psychological Adaptation Scale and the Psychological Support Scale. After the intervention, a post-test will be conducted at a specific time to observe the improvements in cultural adaptation and mental health, as well as the overall effectiveness of the cross-cultural psychological support services.

Experimental Group: Participants in the experimental group will receive an eight-week period of cross-cultural psychological service. The service includes cultural adaptation training, cross-cultural communication activities, and personalized psychological support services designed to help international students better cope with cultural conflicts, improve their cultural adaptability, and improve their mental health.

Control Group: Participants in the control group will only receive routine psychological support services, which focus on emotional management, stress relief, etc., but not specifically designed for cross-cultural adaptation. The purpose of the control group is to compare the differences of mental health and cultural adaptation between different types of support services.

Sample Selection and Sampling Method

Total Sample Size: 160 international students from Nanjing University of Science and Technology and Nanjing Agricultural University;

Sampling Methods: Stratified random sampling to ensure gender, grade and nationality representation;

Inclusion Criteria: Have strong willingness to participate and do not receive other forms of

psychological support services.

Data collection methods

Questionnaire Survey: Cultural Adaptation Scale and DASS-21 were used for quantitative measurement.

In-depth Interview: Interview the participants of the experimental group to understand their service experience and feedback.

Intervention Measures

Cultural Adaptation Workshop, Teaching Cultural Difference Cognition and Psychological Adaptation Skills:

Cultural Difference Cognition: Helping students understand cultural differences and the importance of cultural adaptation.

Psychological Adjustment Skills: Teaching emotional management and stress regulation methods, such as meditation and cognitive restructuring, to help students cope with anxiety and loneliness.

Role-play and Scenario Simulation: Using simulated cross-cultural communication scenarios to enhance students' ability to handle cultural conflicts.

Cultural Exchange Activities, Through social activities to strengthen the relationship between international students, reduce loneliness, enhance resilience:

Cross-cultural Group Discussion: Students share confusion, support, and advice about adaptation.

Festivals and Cultural Exchanges: Organizing international festivals and cultural events to show and experience different cultures.

Social Networking, Encouraging students to set up support groups to provide emotional and practical help:

Individual Psychological Counseling, Help Participants to Solve the Perplexity and Psychological Problems in Adaptation:

One-to-one Psychological Counseling: Helping students deal with anxiety, loneliness, and academic stress through dialogue with counselors.

Individualized Coping Strategies: Formulating emotion management and stress coping strategies according to students' specific problems.

Continuous Psychological Support: Providing long-term psychological support for students to ensure their continuous adaptation to the new environment.

Under the joint action of these three measures, international students can better adapt to the new cultural environment, alleviate psychological distress and promote psychological health.

Variables and Measurement Tools

Variable Definitions

Independent Variable: Presence or absence of social work intervention.

Dependent Variables: The level of cultural adaptation and mental health of international students. Specifically, the study will use cultural adaptation scale (such as cultural adaptation scale, cultural conflict scale, etc.) and mental health scale (such as depression scale, anxiety scale, etc.) to measure the change of dependent variables.

Control Variables: This study will control some variables that may affect psychological adaptation, such as the gender, age, educational background and country of study, to ensure that the difference between the experimental group and the control group mainly comes from the difference of intervention content.

Measuring Tools

CCMA: Including cultural conflict, behavioral adjustment and social support dimensions.
DASS-2: measuring depression, anxiety and stress levels with high reliability and validity.

Data Collection and Analysis Plan

Data Collection Process

In the design of this section, we have carefully planned the implementation of different phases to ensure the effectiveness and operability of the interventions.

Pretest: Baseline Level Measured before Intervention. The first step of the intervention is baseline measurement. At this stage, we use quantitative tools, such as the Cultural Adaptation Scale and Mental Health Scale, to comprehensively assess participants' current status. The purpose of the pre-test is to establish a foundation for comparing intervention effects later. In addition to quantitative data, we will conduct one-on-one interviews to gain deeper insights into international students' individual challenges. These interviews will help identify the difficulties they face in adapting to a new culture and uncover the psychological pressures they experience, such as loneliness and anxiety. The core objective of this phase is to ensure that all factors influencing their adaptation are captured, providing a detailed basis for subsequent support measures.

Intervention Implementation: 8-week Service Intervention. The next is an 8-week intervention phase. At this stage, participants will participate in a series of well-designed interventions designed to help them mitigate the challenges of cultural adaptation. Each week, participants will be trained in cultural adaptation workshops to identify and understand cultural differences and to master effective psychological adaptation techniques. In addition, panel discussions and interactive activities will serve as a link to cultural exchanges, and participants will build emotional ties and social support networks by sharing their adaptation experiences. Individual psychological counseling, on the other hand, provides more personal help for students who need special attention to deal with the special confusion and psychological problems in the process of cultural adaptation. By integrating multiple intervention strategies, we strive to provide comprehensive psychological support and cultural adaptation to international students.

Post-test: Data Measurement and Interview after Intervention. At the end of the intervention, we will once again assess the changes in the cultural adaptation and mental health status of the students. Compared with the pre-test, the post-test data will help us to quantify the effect of the

intervention and reveal the progress and transformation experienced by international students in the process of adaptation. At the same time, we will also conduct in-depth interviews to understand the subjective views of international students on intervention measures, and explore the achievements and possible remaining problems in the process. This link not only provides data support for research, but also provides valuable feedback and guidance for future intervention.

Data Analysis Method

Statistical Analysis: Use paired t test and variance analysis to verify the intervention effect. In order to evaluate the effect of intervention, the paired t test was used to compare the data before and after intervention, and the changes of cultural adaptation and mental health were analyzed. Paired t's test helps to determine whether intervention has a significant effect. If the study involved multiple groups, ANOVA was also used to compare the effects of different groups to explore the effects of gender, nationality and other factors.

Qualitative Analysis: Code the in-depth interview data and extract suggestions for service model improvement. In-depth interview data are coded and analyzed to identify the key themes of cultural adaptation and mental health. Through the analysis of participants' feedback, we can extract the advantages and disadvantages of the service model and provide suggestions for further optimization of intervention measures. This process will help us to understand the actual effect of the intervention and the specific needs of international students.

Ethics and Feasibility Analysis

Ethical Issues

Informed Consent: Before the study begins, all participants will have a detailed understanding of the purpose, process and possible risks of the study and will sign the informed consent form. Participants expressed their willingness to participate in the study and to withdraw at any stage without any adverse consequences. All collected data will be processed anonymously and used for academic research only.

Privacy Protection: All participants' personal information will be kept strictly confidential and the data collection process will ensure anonymity of the participant's identity. All data in the study will be processed in encoded form to avoid any possible identity disclosure. Data will be stored in a secure database for use by the study team only, and all data will be destroyed after the study to ensure that participants' privacy is not compromised. In addition, the results of the study are for academic publication and discussion only and will not be used for commercial purposes.

Mental Health Protection: In the study, if the participants were found to have psychological problems in the adaptation process, the necessary psychological support services will be provided. Participants may seek psychological advice at any time and make referrals when necessary. All psychological intervention will be the responsibility of professionals to ensure the professionalism and safety of the intervention.

Cultural Sensitivity: As the study involves cross-cultural groups, the research team will focus on cultural differences and ensure that all interventions and surveys respect cultural differences. All

research materials will be available in multiple languages to ensure that participants clearly understand and express their needs.

Right of Withdrawal: Participants may choose to withdraw from the study at any time without providing any reason. Their withdrawal will not affect their access to subsequent support or influence the research outcomes. Upon withdrawal, their data will be promptly removed from the study analysis. All withdrawn participants will receive appropriate support to ensure they experience no psychological distress or pressure.

Conflict of Interest and Transparency in Research: The research team is committed to transparency and all results will be presented openly and fairly. Researchers will follow ethical guidelines to ensure the fairness and transparency of research.

Through the above ethical guarantee measures, we ensure the transparency, voluntary participation and privacy protection in the research process to ensure the mental health and safety of international students in the process of cross-cultural adaptation.

Research Resources and Support

Relying on the resource advantage of colleges and universities, this research can effectively contact the international student groups and obtain the samples needed by the research. Both Nanjing University of Science and Technology and Nanjing Agricultural University are suitable sources of research samples. In collaboration with the School Counseling Centre and the Office of International Student Affairs, the study will be able to successfully recruit participants and receive the necessary support. Although there is no specialized team, cooperation with the department of social work and psychology in the school can be supported by experts in relevant fields to ensure the smooth implementation of the research. In addition, although there is no special fund for the research project, the research cost is relatively small and the conditions for applying for the fund are met. It is expected that the necessary funds can be obtained through the funding channels of universities and relevant institutions. In terms of space, the building and activity space provided by the school is very suitable for workshops and psychological intervention activities. To sum up, this study is feasible in terms of resources, team work, access to funds and sites.

Resource Allocation and Budget analysis

Human Resources: Research Teams and Volunteers. The research team is composed of members from social work and psychology background. The team members will conduct research under the support of relevant disciplines in the school. The team will also recruit volunteers to assist with data collection and event organization, and volunteers will receive short training to ensure the smooth conduct of the study.

Equipment and Tools: Questionnaire and Data Analysis Software. Data will be collected using CCAM and DASS-21 and distributed online and offline. Data analysis will use SPSS and NVivo software to ensure scientific and accurate data processing.

Budget: Funds will be Applied as Required to Ensure that Expenditures are Reasonable and Transparent.

Activity Materials: Including teaching materials, psychological intervention tools, etc.

Transportation Fee: Pay participants transportation subsidy.

Software Fees: Software licensing fees such as SPSS and NVivo.

Personnel Subsidies: Subsidies for researchers and volunteers.

Psychological Intervention Service: Reserve funds for emergency psychological intervention service.

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Appendices

Sample Questionnaire

Cross-cultural adjustment scale(CCAM)

Use the following scale to indicate your level of adaptation to the following aspects during your exchange in the host country. (1 = Not adapted at all, 7 = Fully adapted)

Please select the appropriate score based on your fitness:

1）General living conditions(Such as food, housing, etc.)

　　1 2 3 4 5 6 7

2）Values and beliefs

　　1 2 3 4 5 6 7

3）Customs and practices

　　1 2 3 4 5 6 7

4）Communication with people in academic activities

　　1 2 3 4 5 6 7

5）Communication with people in non-academic activities

　　1 2 3 4 5 6 7

6）Interpersonal relationship

　　1 2 3 4 5 6 7

7）Social activities

　　1 2 3 4 5 6 7

8）Your school homework

　　1 2 3 4 5 6 7

9）Academic requirements

    1 2 3 4 5 6 7

10）Teaching style of professor

    1 2 3 4 5 6 7

11）Teaching methods

    1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Scoring method：

The scale contains 11 questions in total, and the average score or total score can be calculated.

Questions 1-3 measure general adjustment,　Questions 4-7 measure interpersonal adjustment, Questions 8-11 measure work adjustment.

Table Source：

CHAO, M., Takeuchi, R., & FARH, J. L. (2017). Enhancing Cultural Intelligence: The Roles of Implicit Culture Beliefs and Adjustment. Personnel Psychology, 70(1), 257-292.

Mental Health Scale(DASS-21)

DASS21 scale(Self-rating scale for depression, anxiety and stress)

Read the following sentence and select 0, 1, 2, or 3 to indicate the number of cases that have applied to you in the past week. There are no absolutely correct or wrong answers, please answer according to your true feelings.

Scoring standard:

0 = Not applicable to my case at all

1 = Applies to my situation to some extent or at some time

2 = generally applicable to my situation

3 = very applicable or mostly applicable to my situation

1）I find it hard to calm myself down

    0 1 2 3

2) I feel my mouth dry

    0 1 2 3

3) I don't seem to feel happy or happy anymore

    0 1 2 3

4) I feel difficulty in breathing(Such as polypnea, asthma,)

    0 1 2 3

5）I find it hard to start to work

    0 1 2 3

6）I tend to be allergic to things

    0 1 2 3

7）I feel the shock of my body(Such as hand shock)

    0 1 2 3

8）I feel like I'm consuming a lot of spirit

    0 1 2 3

9）I worry about occasions that scary or ugly myself

0 1 2 3

10） I don't think I have much hope for the future

0 1 2 3

11） I found myself easily excited

0 1 2 3

12） I find it hard to relax myself

0 1 2 3

13） I feel sad and sad

0 1 2 3

14） I cannot tolerate anything that would prevent me from continuing my work

0 1 2 3

15） I feel almost panicked

0 1 2 3

16） I have no passion for anything

0 1 2 3

17） I feel like I'm not good enough, like I don't deserve to be a person.

0 1 2 3

18） I found myself easily offended

0 1 2 3

19） I realized that my heart rhythm was abnormal when I didn't have any physical labor

0 1 2 3

20） I was afraid for no reason

0 1 2 3

21） I find life meaningless

0 1 2 3

Scoring Method:

The scale consists of 21 items, each with a score ranging from 0 to 3. Calculate your emotional state in the three dimensions of depression, anxiety, and stress based on your score.

The total score can be used to assess the individual's mental state. The higher the score, the more serious the emotional distress.

Table Source：

Lovibond, P. F., & Lovibond, S. H. (1995) . The Structure of Negative Emotional States: Comparison of the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS) with the Beck Depression and Anxiety Inventories. Behaviour Research and Therapy, 33(3), 335-343.