Acculturation and cross-cultural adaptation: The moderating role of social support

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated the beneficial impacts of the acculturation strategy of integration and the detrimental impacts of the acculturation strategy of marginalization on adaptation outcomes. This study attempts to extend the existing literature by examining the potential moderating role of social support in the relationships between acculturation strategies and cross-cultural adaptation. Specifically, it was hypothesized that social support from family, local friends, and non-local friends would enhance the positive effects of the integration strategy and buffer the negative effects of the marginalization strategy on sociocultural and psychological adaptation. Participants were 188 Mainland Chinese sojourning university students in Hong Kong. Consistent with our predictions, social support from local friends was found to significantly moderate the effects of the integration and marginalization strategies on sociocultural and psychological adaptation. Unexpectedly, it was shown that social support from non-local friends significantly weakened the positive effect of the integration strategy on psychological adaptation. In addition, further analyses on the potentially domain-specific effects of acculturation strategies and social support on psychological adaptation showed that social support from local friends and non-local friends and acculturation strategies of integration and marginalization interacted to influence only one specific domain of psychological adaptation (mutual trust and acceptance). Implications of this study and possible explanations for the discordant findings are discussed.

Introduction

In the current era of globalization, there have been an increasing number of students pursuing higher education outside their home cultures (Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013). The educational experiences in host cultures provide sojourning students with opportunities to expand their intercultural competence and worldview, which in turn enhance their personal development and future career prospects (Rienties, Luchoomun, & Tempelaar, 2013). Nevertheless, adapting to a new culture can be a difficult and stressful process (Berry, 2005; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Compared with domestic students, sojourning students have been shown to encounter more adjustment problems (Li & Gasser, 2005; Pedersen, 1991). It has been suggested that sojourning students may experience a number of acculturative stressors such as language barriers, discrimination, loneliness, homesickness, financial concerns, problems in daily life tasks, and academic difficulties due to the new educational environment (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006).

The enrollment of Mainland Chinese students pursuing higher education in Hong Kong has soared since the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China (Pan, Wong, Joubert, & Chan, 2007). The number of Mainland Chinese students admitted to government-funded undergraduate and postgraduate programmes skyrocketed from 916 in 1997 to 11,890 in 2015, accounting for about 76% of non-local students in Hong Kong (University Grants Committee Hong Kong, 2016).

Although Hong Kong is a special administrative region of China, the British colonial rule from 1842 to 1997 had affected all aspects of residents' lifestyle and made Hong Kong a distinctive region in China (Ng, 2007; Ng, Ng, & Ye, 2016). Mainland Chinese generally perceive themselves as less Westernized than Hong Kong Chinese in terms of values, and their perceived value incongruence with Hong Kong Chinese leads to negative intergroup attitude towards Hong Kong Chinese (Guan et al., 2011). Besides, Mandarin is the official spoken language of Mainland China, while Cantonese is the most commonly used spoken language in Hong Kong. This language barrier has been a prominent acculturative stressor for Mainland Chinese in Hong Kong (Chen, Benet-Martínez, & Bond, 2008). Pan et al. (2007) revealed that Mainland Chinese university students in Hong Kong encountered various acculturative problems. However, this group of sojourners has received less research attention compared with Chinese sojourners in other cultures.

Past research has documented the impacts of acculturation strategies on cross-cultural adaptation (Berry, 2005; Ward & Kennedy, 1994). The present study endeavors to advance the literature by examining the potential moderating roles of social support from family, local friends, and non-local friends in the effects of the acculturation strategies of integration and marginalization on sociocultural and psychological adaptation among Mainland Chinese sojourning university students in Hong Kong.

Sociocultural adaptation and psychological adaptation

Acculturation researchers have distinguished between two distinct but related dimensions of cross-cultural adaptation or adjustment: sociocultural adaptation and psychological adaptation (Searle & Ward, 1990). Sociocultural adaptation refers to the competence of handling daily life problems and social interactions in a new cultural context, whereas psychological adaptation refers to an array of psychological outcomes related to a clear sense of personal and cultural identity, subjective well-being, and emotional satisfaction in a new cultural environment (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1994).

Empirical studies have shown that sociocultural adaptation and psychological adaptation are correlated with each other (Berry, 1997, 2005). However, there are both conceptual and empirical reasons to differentiate between them. One reason is that they are predicted by different factors. Sociocultural adaptation is predicted by the cultural distance between the home and host cultures, duration of residence in the mainstream society, cultural knowledge and competence, and contact with host nationals, whereas psychological adaptation is predicted by personality variables, life changing events, and social support factors (Ward, 1996; Ward & Kennedy, 1994; Wilson, Ward, & Fischer, 2013). Another reason is that while sociocultural adaptation is better understood within a social skills or culture learning framework, psychological adaptation is better analyzed from stress and psychopathology approaches (Berry, 1997; Ward, 1996).

Acculturation strategies

To understand the ways immigrants and sojourners live with their heritage and foreign cultures, Berry (1997, 2005) proposed two orthogonal dimensions of acculturation orientations: (a) the desire for preserving the heritage culture and (b) the desire for interacting with others in the dominant culture. On the basis of the two dimensions, Berry (1997, 2005) identified four acculturation strategies: (a) integration, (b) assimilation, (c) separation, and (d) marginalization. The integration strategy involves the interest in both maintaining the original culture and interacting with members in the mainstream society. The assimilation strategy is adopted when individuals replace their ethnic culture with active participations in the dominant society. The separation strategy includes the preservation of individuals' original culture and the avoidance of contact with members in the dominant culture. The marginalization strategy is applied when individuals fail to maintain their original culture and at the same time fail to establish relationships with host nationals.

Research linking acculturation strategies to adaptation outcomes has consistently established that the integration strategy is the most adaptive and the marginalization strategy is the least adaptive (Berry, 2005). Zheng, Sang, and Wang's (2003) study of Chinese sojourning students in Australia showed that those pursuing integration had better subjective well-being than those pursuing other acculturation strategies. Curran (2003) revealed that Irish immigrants in London pursuing integration reported better adjustment than their counterparts pursuing other acculturation strategies, especially those adopting the marginalization strategy. Hui, Chen, Leung, and Berry (2015) found that the integration strategy was positively related to sociocultural adaptation and psychological adaptation among Mainland Chinese immigrants in Hong Kong. Kosic, Mannetti, and Sam (2006) found that the marginalization strategy was associated with lower sociocultural and psychological adaptation among Polish immigrants in Italy. The study by Sam and Berry (1995) with young immigrants in Norway indicated that acculturative stress was negatively predicted by integration and positively by marginalization.

On the other hand, the assimilation and separation strategies are associated with intermediate levels of adaptation outcomes (Berry, 2005; Ward, 1996). Studies have shown that these two strategies usually have weaker predictive power than other strategies (Sam & Berry, 1995; Tinghög, Al-Saffar, Carstensen, & Nordenfelt, 2009). For instance, Sam and Berry (1995) revealed that assimilation and separation did not significantly predict acculturative stress.