



International Graduate Students' Perceptions of American Culture

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Abstract

Problem Statement: International students studying in American institutions of higher education face some difficulties largely because of the differences between American culture and their home cultures. One way of better understanding the reasons of cultural difficulties could be to investigate international students' perceptions related to American culture. Having more knowledge about how international students see American way of living could provide researchers and school administrators some guidance for designing more effective multi-cultural communication environments.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study was to investigate a group of international students' perceptions related to American culture.

Method: The participants of this study were 50 international students studying in graduate level programs at a university in upstate New York. Their countries of origin were Turkey, China, South Korea, India, Russia, Syria, Iran, and Germany. The data of the study came from two sources: answers to a questionnaire and interview sessions.

Findings and Results: The results of the study indicated that international students were generally aware of the features of American culture even if some of these features conflicted with their home cultures. On the other hand, the participants of the study reported that they were not quite happy with open ended learning situations.

Conclusions and Recommendations: These results might indicate some guidelines for professors who are working with international students and for professionals who prepare orientation programs for international students.

Keywords: Cultural awareness, cultural conflicts, cultural perceptions, international students.

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INTRODUCTION

American universities host the largest population of international students in the world. This is a mutual benefit situation for all the students at American universities, both international students and American students benefit from the multi-cultural environment created on campuses (Kaikai, 1989). Most of the international students attend American universities because these universities provide them with high quality education and foreign language development that they cannot easily find in their home countries. Universities in the U.S. welcome international students because administrators of those universities believe that the presence of international students enrich the teaching and learning environment in universities. Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004) state that “the outcomes of hosting international students are beneficial for all parties involved as these students contribute to the enrichment of higher education, to the strengthening of relations with various countries in world trade, and to the promotion of global understanding (p. 167)”.

Learning how to interact with people from different cultures is very important in today’s multicultural world. Schools try to sharpen their students’ multicultural communication skills as much as possible (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). The easiest way of helping students to develop their inter-cultural communication skills is to provide them with a multi-cultural environment. This is one of the most important reasons why American universities try to provide their students and professors with a cross-cultural environment by admitting international students into their programs.

Although it is the main assumption that the interaction between international students and American students will enrich both parties’ multi-cultural communication skills, the practice does not always seamlessly coordinate with theory. Cross-cultural communication requires effective interaction between people from different cultures, and effective interaction requires understanding of each other’s cultures, or at least show some respect to other cultures. In other words, if a healthy cross-cultural interaction environment is desired to occur, it should be ensured that international students effectively interact with American students and professors. However, some studies conducted with international students revealed that, due to several reasons, the interaction between international students and American students and professors does not always reach to desired levels (Xu, 1991; Kao & Gansneder, 1995; Jones, 1999).

Many researchers have focused on international students’ adaptation process and culture-related problems. Discussing the critical variables of international students, Tomich, McWhirter, and King (2000) state that the degree to which one’s home culture overlaps with the host culture is very important in terms of adapting to the new environment successfully. In other words, the greater the gap between the home and host country’s beliefs and values, the more difficult the adaptation process will be. Therefore, focusing on the conflicts between cultures could be valuable in terms of understanding international students’ needs.

Emphasizing the serious consequences of culture-related problems of international students, Coleman (1997) states that like American students, international students face a lot of pressure and anxieties during their university years. These pressures might be due to language and cultural differences, and they

may have severe effects on students' performance. Coleman adds that these effects might be manifested in a variety of ways such as poor academic performance, health problems, sleeping and eating disorders, depression, or alcohol or drug abuse. Especially for academic performance, cultural differences come into play in the issues like class attendance, promptness, passing in assignments on time, talking or not talking in class, and relationship between faculty and students.

In another study which focused on international students and culture shock, Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004) state that "international students experience adjustment difficulties because they are not aware of the implicit social rules that regulate interaction in the host country. Being unaware of these social rules, international students may lack culture-specific social skills that allow for effective interaction with hosts (p. 167)". These researchers emphasize the fact that cross-cultural differences in social interaction are defined according to the degree of cultural distance between international students' country of origin and the host country; in other words, higher degrees of cultural conflict are associated with higher degrees of difficulty on intercultural communication.

One way of better understanding the reasons of cultural difficulties could be to investigate international students' perceptions related to American culture. Having more knowledge about how international students see American way of living could provide researchers and school administrators some guidance for designing more effective multi-cultural communication environments. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate international students' perceptions related to American culture.

METHOD

The participants of this study were 50 international students who were studying in graduate level programs at a university in upstate New York. Their countries of origin were China, South Korea, India, Turkey, Russia, Syria, Iran, and Germany. They were studying engineering, operational research, education and pharmacy. The time that the participants had been in the United States changed from nine months to two years.

The data of this study came from two sources: answers to a questionnaire and interview sessions. The researcher designed a questionnaire for this study to collect information about the participants' perceptions related to American culture. There were a total of 55 items in the questionnaire. For each item the participants read a sentence which claimed to be reflecting American culture. After reading the sentence, the participants first decided whether they agree or disagree with, or cannot decide about, the item. For the items that the participants agreed with, they continued with the second part and indicated how they felt about that particular item by marking one or some of the categories of 'this is a conflict to my culture', 'I like this', 'I do not like this', and 'I have/had problems because of this'. The main source of the items in the questionnaire was Hofstede and Hofstede (2005). In different sections of their book Hofstede and Hofstede discuss different dimensions of cultures. These dimensions include power distance, individuality-collectivism, femininity-masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-short term orientation.

Discussing these dimensions, Hofstede and Hofstede provide some lists of features of the societies reflecting different aspects of each dimension, and they also give some indexes in which different countries are ranked according to the features of each particular dimension. The items in the questionnaire were adapted from those lists from Hofstede and Hofstede, and each particular item was picked up considering the place of the United States in the indexes and the authors' explanations.

In addition to the questionnaire, fifteen participants were interviewed about their answers to the items in the questionnaire in order to better understand their views related to American culture, and the conflicts they see between their cultures and American culture.

For the data analysis procedure, the percentages of the answers to the items in the questionnaire were calculated, and the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed and analyzed to support or elaborate the results coming from the questionnaires.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Power Distance

The first twelve questions of the questionnaire focused on the participants' perceptions related to power distance dimension of American culture. Table 1 provides the answers in percentages. For seven out of 12 questions, majority of the participants stated that they agree with the items. The items that majority of the participants did not agree with are the ones related to work environments and politics. The only item that the majority of the participants could not decide whether to agree or to disagree is item twelve, which states that there are small income differentials in the society. Looking at these results, we can say that generally international students see American culture as a culture which minimizes power distance between people.

When the participants were asked in the questionnaire how they feel about the items they agree with, most of them stated that they like most of these features of American culture. Item 2, 'students treat teachers as equals'; and Item 4, 'children treat parents and older relatives as equals' are the ones that many participants reported as conflicts to their cultures, and these two items were also the ones generally reported as not liked. Interestingly, generally participants did not say that they have/had problems because of the items they agree with in the power distance section of the questionnaire. The only item some participants connected to some of their problems is Item 2, 'students treat teachers as equals'.

Table 1. Percentages of the answers related to power distance

In America	Agree	Disagree	Undecided
	%	%	%
1. Inequalities among people are minimized.	82	6	12
2. Students treat teachers as equals.	64	14	22
3. Parents treat children as equals.	58	28	14
4. Children treat parents and older relatives as equals.	56	32	12
5. Decentralization is popular.	52	34	14
6. Subordinate-superior relations are pragmatic, not emotional.	66	6	28
7. Privileges and status symbols are not considered normal and popular.	16	82	2
8. White-collar jobs and blue-collar jobs are valued equally.	14	86	-
9. All the citizens of US have equal rights, nobody have privileges.	46	50	4
10. There is more dialogue and less violence in politics.	26	52	22
11. Scandals are not covered up, they end political careers.	88	6	6
12. There are small income differentials in society.	14	22	64

The following extracts from the interviews show how international students view student-teacher relationships in the U.S.A.:

“Here in America students and teachers are friendlier. Teachers are very friendly, you can approach them whenever you want, even in class they are not very strict, but in India teachers are called ‘guru’. ‘Guru’ means that they are like something like God, so we students always approach them with fear. ... The biggest problem I had related to this is that here teachers can be addressed by their names, or like Mr., Mrs., or Dr. but in India we used to say Sir always, for any teacher you are supposed to say Sir or Madam ... here I still address my professors like that, and professors and my classmates stare at me like ‘What is he saying?’, I don’t like it.”

“In my culture students do not see their teachers as their equals, but here they see their teachers as equals, and in fact I like this because students express themselves more easily ... here students can easily discuss something they do not like about the course with the teacher, and the teachers are open to criticism. ... On the other hand, coming from a different environment, sometimes you want to discuss things like American students but your culture does not allow you to do so ... for example, if you want to reject something, generally you do not say that, you just accept it even if you do not want to ... there is still the influence of your past ... the understanding of respect is different, Americans perceive respect differently than you do, sometimes when they say something you think they are speaking in a disrespectful way, and you can be surprised.”

Individualism – Collectivism

There were fourteen questions in the questionnaire related to individualism-collectivism dimension of cultures. Participants’ answers to these questions are reported in Table 2 in percentages. As it is clearly seen in the table, a great majority of the participants stated that they agree with all the items except one in this section. There is no item that the majority disagreed, and the only item that the majority was undecided was Item 20, ‘showing happiness is encouraged, and sadness is

discouraged'. It is not surprising that the majority was undecided about this item because the item can be confusing even for the Americans. All in all, we can say that the answers to the individualism-collectivism related questions suggest that international students perceive American culture as highly individualistic.

Table 2. Percentages of the answers related to individualism-collectivism

In America	Agree	Disagree	Undecided
	%	%	%
13. Children learn to think in terms of "I", not "we".	74	10	16
14. Everyone grows up to look after himself or herself.	72	12	16
15. Speaking one's mind is a characteristic of an honest person.	76	4	20
16. Friendships are voluntary and should be fostered.	88	-	12
17. There is individual ownership of resources, even for children.	82	14	4
18. People are independent, not interdependent.	92	-	8
19. People are quite extrovert.	60	38	2
20. Showing happiness is encouraged, and sadness is discouraged.	38	12	50
21. Media is the primary source of information.	88	12	-
22. Disabled people are encouraged to participate as much as possible in normal day-to-day activities.	96	4	-
23. The purpose of education is learning how to learn.	74	10	16
24. Hiring and promotion decisions are supposed to be based on skills and rules only.	82	8	10
25. Everyone is expected to have a private opinion.	80	6	14
26. Everyone has a right to privacy.	94	-	6

As it was the case for the items related to power distance, for the items related to individualism-collectivism, when the participants were asked in the questionnaire how they feel about the items they agree with, most of them stated that they like most of these features of American culture. The items that many participants found a conflict to their cultures are item 13, 'children learn to think in terms of "I", not "We" '; item 17, 'there is individual ownership of resources, even for children'; item 18, 'people are independent, not interdependent'; and item 22, 'disabled people are encouraged to participate as much as possible in day-to-day activities'. However, for both of these items, although most of the participants reported them as conflicts to their cultures, they also stated that they like these features of American culture, and they did not say that they have or had problems because of these features of American culture. The only item that most of the participants said that they do not like is Item 14, 'everyone grows up to look after himself or herself'. Again, as it was the case for the questions related to power distance items, generally participants did not say that they have/had problems because of the items they agree with in the individualism-collectivism section of the questionnaire. The only item that some of the participants stated as a source of problems is Item 25, 'everyone is expected to have a private opinion'.

Item 13, 'children learn to think as "I" not "We" ' was one of the mostly stated conflicts in interviews, and problems related to this feature were frequently mentioned. The following is an extract:

“I am coming from a big family, for me there is ‘We’ before ‘I’ ... and I believe that children should be raised in this way ... this does not mean they should be completely dependent to their families ... but when you put ‘I’ to the first place, the first thing that comes to my mind is selfishness, and I don’t want to have a child with a selfish character ... here, for example, as a student you think people are selfish ... for example, say that you have a group assignment, you have to meet with your group members, and you try to arrange a time, Americans directly say ‘I have this that day, I have that this day, that is the only available day for me’, but I always try to adapt myself to their free times, I do not talk about my schedule, I think the group before my personal works, even if I also have things to do, but I can think of canceling them, but Americans don’t ...”

Masculinity - Femininity

Participants’ answers to the questionnaire items related to masculinity-femininity are reported in Table 3. Contrary to the results related to previous two categories, results related to this category do not indicate that the majority of the participants agree with the majority of the sentences. Participants reported that they agree with three out of six items related to this category, and they disagree with the other three. Participants said that they do not agree with the following three items: ‘there is competition in classrooms’, ‘women shop for food, men for cars’, and ‘more money is preferred over more leisure time’. The reason for not agreeing with Item 27 might be that the participants were coming from more competitive educational environments than the environment in the U.S.A., and the reasons for not agreeing with Items 30 and 31 might be attributed to American image created by the media and movies, in which men do almost everything women do and people give great importance to their leisure time activities.

Table 3. Percentages of the answers related to masculinity-femininity

In America,	Agree	Disagree	Undecided
	%	%	%
27. There is competition in classrooms.	12	74	14
28. Competitive sports are part of the school curriculum.	78	8	14
29. Job choice is based on career opportunities.	64	16	20
30. Women shop for food, men for cars.	16	84	-
31. More money is preferred over more leisure time.	22	72	6
32. People always want the economy to continue growing, big is always beautiful.	88	-	12

Most of the participants reported that they like the sentences they agree with. In addition, majority of the participants did not indicate any of the sentences they agree with as a conflict to their culture or as a source of difficulty they have or had in the U.S.A. However, during the interviews a participant said that the idea ‘big is always beautiful’ might sometimes be a conflict to her culture but she did not encounter any serious problems because of this. Following is an extract:

“Big is not always beautiful, I don’t like this view, I think liking the big all the time can distract the communication between people ... for example think of big cities, the bigger cities have bigger problems ... and no relationship ... for example

neighbor relations are not good in big places ... you do not know the cashier in the grocery you are shopping, for example ... things like that ... the bigger it is, the more separated people are ...”

Uncertainty Avoidance

As Table 4 suggests, majority of the participants stated that they agree with most of the items related to uncertainty avoidance. For seven of the items a great majority, more than 80% said that they agree with the items. This shows that international students perceive American culture as a low uncertainty avoidance culture, which corroborates Hofstede and Hofstede’s (2005) comments. Table 4 shows just one item that the majority of the participants did not agree with: Item 34, ‘what is different is not dangerous but curious for people’. There were four items that the majority of the participants were undecided: Items 33, 41, 45 and 46. Item 33, ‘people are comfortable in ambiguous situations and with unfamiliar risks’; and item 41, ‘there is tolerance for ambiguity and chaos’ corroborate each other. The reason for being undecided for these two items might be because the participants had not had enough experience with American culture in order to indicate whether they agree or disagree with these items.

Table 4. Percentages of the answers related to uncertainty avoidance

In America,	Agree	Disagree	Undecided
	%	%	%
33. People are comfortable in ambiguous situations and with unfamiliar risks.	20	18	62
34. What is different is not dangerous but curious for people.	34	62	4
35. Family life is relaxed, not stressful.	86	4	10
36. Students are comfortable with open-ended learning situations.	88	2	10
37. Teachers may say ‘I don’t know’.	92	-	8
38. Results are attributed to a person’s own ability, not to circumstances or luck.	76	16	8
39. Teachers involve parents to teaching process.	64	10	26
40. There is fast acceptance of new products and technologies.	92	-	8
41. There is tolerance for ambiguity and chaos.	18	18	64
42. Citizen protest is acceptable.	88	-	12
43. Citizens trust politicians, civil servants, and the legal system.	90	2	8
44. There is high participation in voluntary associations and movements.	88	8	4
45. There are positive attitudes toward young people.	36	22	42
46. There is tolerance, even for extreme ideas.	22	20	56
47. People are positive or neutral toward foreigners, but not negative.	52	22	26

Among the items that the majority agreed with, there were two items that they did not like: Item 36, ‘students are comfortable with open-ended learning situations’; and Item 37, ‘Teachers may say I don’t know’. For these two items participants also said that they are conflicts to their cultures and they are having some difficulties

because of these features of American culture. There are some other items that many participants reported as a conflict to their culture but not a source of problem for them in the U.S. These are Items 42, 43 and 44, all of which are related to the relationship between citizens and government or institutions.

The following extract shows how an international student feels related to open ended learning practices, and professors saying 'I don't know':

"[in my culture] I don't know if I ever met a teacher who says 'I don't know' ... if he doesn't know the answer, he changes the topic, or turns the question into homework for students ... but never says 'I don't know' ... but here they say it very comfortably ... and nobody takes it as a bad sign for that professor ... people think he is a human being, too ... it is normal not to know ... also, in discussions, we want to clearly see the end of the discussion, we want professors to close the topic with an explanation ... you expect the professor to make the final points, otherwise you feel an incompleteness ... I want to know the result, but here topics are discussed and left without solutions, that's what I feel ... for example, in one of my classes, we read articles, than we discuss some study questions, when people say their opinions the professor says OK, and continues with the other question ... I feel like this: 'OK, it was good to discuss, but what is the answer?' ... I feel that there is something incomplete."

Long/short-term orientation

Answers related to long/short-term orientation are presented in Table 5. According to the table, majority of the participants agreed with four out of eight items in this part of the questionnaire. The two items that the participants did not agree with are about spending money or being thrifty, Items 48 and 51. This result is interesting because generally the image of American culture created by the media and movies shows people spending as much as possible, but the participants of the study reported that they did not think these items reflect American culture. Items 54 and 55 are the ones that generally the participants could not decide whether or not they are reflecting American culture.

Table 5. Percentages of the answers related to long/short-term orientation

In America,	Agree	Disagree	Undecided
	%	%	%
48. There is a social pressure toward spending.	32	56	12
49. Living with in-laws is not common.	78	16	6
50. Children get gifts for fun and love.	70	14	16
51. Children should learn tolerance and respect for others, but they do not necessarily learn to be thrifty.	6	78	16
52. Birth order is not a matter of status in the family.	82	4	14
53. Main work values include freedom, rights, achievement, and thinking for oneself.	88	4	8
54. Leisure time is important.	24	22	54
55. If A is true, its opposite B must be false.	32	32	36

For all the items that the majority of the participants agreed with, they also said they like those features of American culture. The two items that many participants

reported as a conflict to their cultures are Items 49 and 52, the ones about living with in-laws, and the importance of birth order on status. Generally the participants did not report these two conflict items as sources of difficulty, most likely because they are not living with American families.

The following is an extract related to Item 49, the effect of birth order in the family:

“The conflict is, in my culture elder sibling is supposed to be more responsible for the things in the family, and that’s why they are more respected, younger ones can do whatever they want but older ones are supposed to control them ...I think it is not like that here.”

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the results of this study indicated that international students are generally aware of the features of American culture, and they generally like these features, even if some of them conflict with their cultures. On the other hand, those students are not quite happy with open ended learning situations. Although they enjoy the discussion environment created in the classrooms, they want professors to be more explicit and more authoritative especially when it is time to end the discussions. These students generally expect their professors to make the final comments and to provide some concrete information after everybody states his/her opinion. These results might indicate some guidelines for professors who are working with international students and for professionals who are preparing orientation programs for international students.

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Uluslararası Öğrencilerin Amerikan Kültürü ile İlgili Algıları

Özet

Problem Durumu: Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'ndeki eğitim kurumlarında öğrenimine devam etmekte olan uluslararası öğrenciler bazı zorluklar yaşamaktadırlar ve bu zorlukların büyük kısmı da Amerikan kültürü ile uluslararası öğrencilerin kendi kültürleri arasındaki farklılıklardan kaynaklanmaktadır. Yaşanılan bu zorlukları daha iyi anlayabilmenin ve bu öğrencilere daha etkili bir biçimde yardım edebilmenin bir yolu uluslararası öğrencilerin Amerikan kültürü ile ilgili algılarını araştırmaktır. Uluslararası öğrencilerin Amerikan yaşam tarzı ile ilgili düşünce ve algıları hakkında daha fazla bilgi sahibi olmak araştırmacılara, bu öğrencilerle çalışan öğretim elemanlarına, bu öğrencileri hem Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'ne gitmeden önce kendi ülkelerinde hem de gittiklerinde Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nde eğiten oryantasyon görevlilerine faydalı olacaktır.

Araştırmanın Amacı: Yukarıdaki problem durumu göz önüne alınarak gerçekleştirilmiş olan bu çalışma Amerika Birleşik Devletlerinde eğitim gören bir grup uluslararası öğrencinin Amerikan kültürü ile ilgili algılarını araştırmak amacıyla yapılmıştır.

Yöntem: Çalışmanın katılımcıları New York eyaletindeki bir üniversitede lisansüstü eğitim görmekte olan uluslararası öğrencilerdir. Bu öğrenciler Türkiye, Çin, Güney Kore, Hindistan, Rusya, Suriye, İran ve Almanya'dan gelmişlerdir. Çalışmanın verileri anket ve mülakat yöntemleriyle toplanmıştır.

Bulgular: Çalışmanın sonuçları uluslararası öğrencilerin genelde Amerikan kültürünün özelliklerinin farkında olduklarını ve bazen kendi kültürleri ile Amerikan kültürünün özellikleri arasında çelişkiler olmasının da farkında olduklarını göstermiştir. Diğer taraftan, çalışmanın katılımcıları özellikle Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'ndeki serbest eğitim-öğretim ortamından fazla hoşnut olmadıklarını da ifade etmişlerdir.

Sonuç ve Öneriler: Bu çalışmanın sonuçları hem uluslararası öğrencilerle çalışan öğretim elemanları hem de bu öğrenciler için oryantasyon programı hazırlayan üniversite çalışanları için bilgi verici olabilir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Kültürel algılar, kültürel çelişkiler, kültürel farkındalık, uluslararası öğrenciler.

