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The Impact of Perceived Support on Multi-cultural and International College Students in Utah

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College is a time in which young adults face a large number of stressors, including academic adjustment, education and career planning, evolving family relationships, struggles with financial independence, dating and marriage, and exposure to new cultures and ideas.1 Previous studies have suggested that college students face high levels of stress, with 75% of college students reporting themselves as moderately stressed and 12% as highly stressed.2 Prolonged stress can have serious effects on both mental and physical health, including an increased likelihood of developing symptoms of depression and anxiety, decreased immune function, sleep disruption, poor cardiovascular health, increased body mass, and reduced physical activity.3 Multicultural and international students may be at increased risk for stress-related strain and illness.

Prior research has shown that acculturation (life changes that result from exposure to a different culture) can be a significant source of stress for multicultural and international college students.4 In addition to the typical stressors of college life, these students are often faced with learning new social norms both in and out of the classroom, cultural and language barriers, and perceived discrimination. Social support may serve as a buffer against the harmful effects of stress, with higher levels of perceived social support being correlated with decreased perceived stress5. Non-white and international students may have decreased social networks due to feelings of perceived racism, cultural barriers that may inhibit forming strong interpersonal relationships, and physical distance from family and former close friends.

In the present study, a small pilot sample of 20 participants’ data was collected. The purpose of this pilot study was exploratory – to broadly investigate a range of factors related to college adjustment and stress among students of all national and racial backgrounds in order to inform future directions of research. Of the 20 participants, three were non-white international students, two were white international students, six were non-white American students, and nine were white American students. Although the original study design restricted data collection to only female students, as some studies have suggested that women are more impacted by the quality of their social relationships than men, both male and female students were collected to provide the most inclusive look in this pilot investigation. The participants (mean age=20.9, 7 male) were all students enrolled at Brigham Young University at the time of their participation.

Subjects participated in several short surveys to assess stress levels and general overall health, and then completed a 15-45 minute interview discussing social relationships, cultural identity, and adjustment to college life. These interviews were semi-structured with a moderator guide aimed to encompass a broad range of social relationships including family, friend, work, academic, and extracurricular relationships and to discuss the participants’ own perceptions of their cultural identity, experiences regarding their cultural identities while enrolled as students, and the factors that made their adjustment to college easier or more difficult. Additionally, twelve of the twenty participants opted to participate in a six hour ambulatory blood pressure assessment, where blood pressure readings were taken every 20 minutes and information on who the participant was interacting with was gathered at each blood pressure reading.

Using the qualitative data gathered as a launching point for future research, there were several trends in the data that may be particularly informative in shaping larger follow-up studies. One such possible future direction is to examine the impact of previous college or other away-from-home experience – such as serving missions – on first-semester adjustment of BYU students. Of the participants interviewed, approximately half came to BYU as 18-year-old new students without prior experience living outside of
home. The other half, however, had prior experience attending other universities, including UVU, SUU, and LDS Business College, or served missions before attending school. These participants cited different challenges in their adjustment to BYU from new freshman. One Hispanic participant, who had previously attended UVU, said that she went from being one of nearly 50% of non-white students in her classes to suddenly often being the sole non-white student in her BYU courses. She said that this directly contributed to her feeling as though she did not belong in her classes. Another student who attended SUU and transferred to BYU after marriage, discussed how her spouse was the main source of support for her, rather than roommates, advisement centers, or faculty.

Another potential area of future research would be to examine the relationship between racial, ethnic, or national microaggressions – small, nearly innocuous acts of subtle discrimination that can add up to be a major stressor for non-white or non-American students – on ambulatory blood pressure. While the blood pressure analysis is still ongoing, many students discussed how they perceived microaggressions contributing negatively to their stress and health while students. One bi-racial student mentioned that she had developed a coping mechanism of immediately telling every new person that she met that she was a basic white girl to avoid questions about her Korean heritage. Another student, who was international and Hispanic, became emotional after talking about a friend who would ask, everywhere they went to eat, “Do you have sandwiches in Peru? Do you have pizza in Peru? What about this, do you have this in Peru?” Examining longer term effects of such stressors on multicultural and international students’ cardiovascular health could have significant implications in shaping clinical interventions to promote resilience in multicultural students and increased cultural sensitivity in the broader campus community.


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