INTERNATIONAL STUDENT’S STUDYING ABROAD CHALLENGES: CULTURE SHOCK?

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Abstract
This article x-rays the understanding of international students’ difficulties and challenges while they are studying abroad. The articles argue against the common understanding of foreign students’ challenges abroad as culture shock and provides some insights as to why their experiences may not be that of culture shock. Using the framework of psychological trauma, the paper provides conceptual connections between culture shock and psychological trauma and evidences some of the reasons why the stages of culture shock may not necessarily apply to the experiences of foreign students while they are studying abroad. Examples are drawn from an empirical study on some group of international students whose experiences resembled those of psychological trauma as opposed to culture shock. The paper concludes that re-examining this area of knowledge has become important, such that the appropriate support will be provided to the international students when they face difficulties abroad.

Introduction
The exponential growth in foreign students’ travel and their desire to study overseas has seen many students criss-crossing the boarders mostly in pursuit of higher education. Majority of these sojourners move from developing countries to highly developed countries in the world in pursuit of quality education and degrees. Sometimes, there are salient differences between their countries of origin and the host country which may pose a threat to the realization of the foreign students’ sojourn objectives. The outcomes sometimes are unfavourable as the foreign students sometimes do not appreciate their time overseas owing to the challenges they face while studying abroad. However, the challenges and difficulties the foreign students may encounter may differ and also may be related to their individual circumstances. Some of the difficulties may be intense as the students are sometimes posed with the challenges of learning to use a new currency, obeying new laws, adapting to a different weather, meeting people with different orientations and beliefs, eating new food, often learning a new language to be able to communicate among other peculiar changes. These conditions may trigger some level of discomfort on the international students and may affect their academic, social and integrated functioning. It is already known that the experiences of international students affect their wellbeing because Grimshaw & Sears (2008) gave an instance that adjustment to the new educational environment itself presents a considerable cultural and linguistic problem and challenges. Likewise, Waver (1994) has long noted that a student who arrives in a new culture are faced with conformity with the new culture as there is a loss of the familiar cues, signs and symbols of social intercourse, breakdown of interpersonal communication and identity crisis leading to anxiety. How well these challenges are articulated in higher education literature is not clear as “culture shock” perspectives have occupied the realms of research on international students’ study abroad experiences.

What is culture shock?
In 1954, a Canadian anthropologist Karlevo Oberg proposed the model of culture shock to explain the distress experienced by American expatriates when they migrated abroad (Pantelidou and Craig, 2006). Oberg in his model of culture shock proposed that when people move to a new culture, that they experience changes that will affect their psychological disorientation with a feeling of helplessness, irritability, fear of being cheated, disgraced or injured and may also involve paranoid feelings by the victims that experience these changes in the new culture (Ward, Bochner and Furnham, 2001). The understanding ingrained in the culture shock framework as Oberg has posited are that negative consequences follow the challenges inherent in moving to another culture. However, what Oberg has not clearly done in his model of culture shock is to delineate the different groups of travellers that will experience culture shock in their transition experience, which has also made the use of culture shock framework widely upheld and even misleading.
As Ward et al (2001, p.3) said, Oberg’s culture shock framework has it that “When an individual enters a strange culture, all or most of the familiar cues are removed. He or she is like a fish out of water. No matter how broad-minded or full of good will he may be, a series of props has been knocked out from under him.” Although this assertion has received a wider attention from researchers on migration experience including international student’s studies, the applicability of this model to various groups of travellers abroad has not been questioned. For the sake of bridging this gap, the examination of alternative understanding of the difficulties and challenges of foreign students will be examined later in this article. Meanwhile, as Zhou et al (2008) noticed, systematic research on overseas students only appeared after the 1950’s. Research on internationals since this period has focused on different aspects of their experience as Ward et al (2001) noted. However, what actually constitute the experiences of international students have not been clearly stated because their challenges and difficulties may have been under-researched or partly because of the misleading theoretical knowledge and use of culture shock model in researching them.

Meanwhile, Petkova (2009) posited that, “it is accepted that a sojourner spends a medium length of time (six months to five years) at a place, usually intending to return back home” while tourists spend a shorter period overseas and migrants, and refugees spend a longer period. This obviously puts these different travellers overseas in different categories including the kind of difficulties and challenges they will face while they are abroad.

**X-raying the Stages of culture shock and foreign students’ difficulties abroad**

Oberg’s claim that people travelling abroad will experience culture shock, clearly created boxes in the form of stages that the travellers abroad will have to tick as they progress in their transition and adjustment trajectories. As Ward, Furnham and Bochner (2001) noted, there are four stages in the culture shock model; honeymoon stage, frustration stage, adjustment stage and acceptance stage. These are the four stages of culture shock that has dominated migration studies and universities across the Western countries where international students study have used this knowledge in preparing their foreign students on what to expect when they sojourn abroad. Other researchers have also applied the culture shock knowledge and postulations in studying international students from across the world.

**Honeymoon Stage:** the first stage in the culture shock model is believed to be a time of enjoyment and profound excitement as Davey (2008), noted that when people travel to another culture, they experience initial feelings of excitement which will be characterized by happiness, joy and being intrigued about being in the new culture. As Oberg in 1960 pointed out, people in a new culture within this period find life so exciting and interesting to be in a different culture and to experience the different customs and habits (Ward, Bochner and Furnham, 2001). As this period in likened to the experience of honeymoon, researchers have not really evaluated how this period apply to international students when there are in a new culture. The postulation that the adjustment journey is predictable in relation to the assumptions in the honeymoon stage may not hold for international students because Brown and Holloway (2008) have already noticed that the journey of adjustment is unpredictable and dynamic. International students when they enter a new country and culture for their studies may not experience the honeymoon stage because it have been noted that their difficulties and stress may be more prevalent during their initial stage of sojourn abroad as opposed to later(Gonzale, 2003). Of course this could more applicable to this group of travellers abroad because they have to face new people, new kind of weather conditions, new food, language and communication problems, problems with understanding accents and even difficulties arising from feeling home sick. As Chen (2010) referred to these foreign students, they are at this period like a fish out of water. This is so because the unfamiliarity that has replaced their previous life experiences may trigger difficulties and anxiety because of a feeling of loss of their previous familiar cues.

UKCISA (2010) said that foreign students while abroad, experience the honeymoon stage as an exciting period because they still remember home and are protected by close memories of their home culture. Meanwhile, some of these foreign students may not have travelled abroad in their life especially those from developing countries and may start facing complexities and stress from their first day in the new culture. As studies by Brown and Holloway (2008) noted, there was a high level of stress at the initial stage of sojourn because the foreign students had to struggle to adjust to the new uncomfortable and sometimes very pressurising difficulties they experienced as they arrived in the new culture. Likewise, Walsh (2010) also noticed that the initial stage of international students experience is not actually characterised by excitement but by difficulties and stress. When the initial stage of sojourn becomes a stage of frustration, anxiety, stress
and loss, then the honeymoon stage which some researches have noted to characterise foreign students’ experience in the new culture, becomes illusive as it may be that the early period of these students’ sojourn may not be exciting as the culture shock model assumed. It is not clear in the literature with regards to the group of foreign students that will encounter honeymoon in their early period of sojourn overseas. This is because as Lee et al (2004) research revealed, if the culture is obviously different from where they students are coming from, then there could be likelihood of more stressful adjustment.

**Frustration stage**: in the culture shock model, the second stage as Davey (2008) maintained, is a stage of disorientation and isolation. The reason why the second stage is seen as a time of frustration is because international students at this period will be able to notice cultural differences between their culture of origin and the new culture. Ward et al (2001) saw the second phase of culture shock as a stage of distress and loss of social discourse. Meanwhile, noticing the cultural difference between their own culture of origin and the host culture may actually start from the early days as opposed to later because when they meet with new order when they arrive, they may become frustrated as it will signal a clash of cultural and societal norms. There are many factors that may determine the kind of transition experiences that foreign students may have which have not been considered in the assumptions in this second stage of culture shock. As is it considered a time of difficulty, crisis and distress, it may be that different individuals may have different expectations prior to their sojourn overseas. Just as Furnham (2004) noted, the intensity of culture shock depends on the correlation between sojourners’ expectations before they entered the country and their true experiences. Personal circumstances may mean that different international students will have different kind of experience, which further makes the acceptance of the second stage of culture shock implausible.

**Adjustment stage**: the adjustment stage is the period when people who travel abroad will begin to adapt to the changes they have identified in the second stage of their transition experience as the culture shock model assumed (Ward, Furnham and Bochner, 2001). This stage is the stage where the international students will become effective and accept what they cannot change as UKCISA (2010) and Gonzale (2003) noted. Davey (2008) further added that although the sojourners may have initially experienced some problems settling in, that they should gradually become accustomed to the custom and habits. The extent at which the international students become stable while they are studying abroad has not been well articulated because again individual circumstances will always play a crucial part as the foreign students negotiate boundaries between divers others and the host societal norms and values. Although Ward and Kennedy (1999) have added weight to the fact that the length of time predicted a decrease in sociocultural adjustment difficulties in the new culture, how plausible this could apply to international students still needs to be clarified. This is of course so because other studies (Feichtinger and Fink, 1998) found that international students’ continuing stay in the host culture does not increase or decrease acculturation problem. The implication of these contradictions implies that international students may not be ticking the culture shock stage boxes as they may be having a totally different experience.

**Acceptance stage**: Acceptance stage otherwise known as the stability stage is a stage in the culture shock theory where the foreigners in the new culture will begin to accept the cultural differences, become more confident and relaxed (Davey, 2008). It is considered as a time when the international students must have mastered the new culture and adjusted adequately without further difficulties (Gonzale, 2003). In this stage, the international student as previous studies (UKCISA, 2010) have noted, will begin to realize themselves and begin to appreciate the host culture. It may be considered a time of perfection in the host culture which may never exist. Foreign students are considered as strangers and the status of a stranger may actually mean that it can never be like home. The stages of culture shock is expected to be completed within one year or less of the individual being in the new culture from the assumptions of this model(Stewart and Leggat, 2006). Meanwhile, it is not clear whether students who have longer time to spend in the host country will become comfortable in the host country since the situations that created the difficulties may not be completely removed. This theory of adjustment which has been used to study international students could be argued as having unclear empirical support because it may be that personal circumstances may debunk these assumptions as not applying to all the different groups of international students.

A U-curve model was developed to show how culture shock is experienced by people who travel abroad. The curve encompass the stages of culture shock discussed above where the individual at the top left of the U-curve experience excitement and enjoyment, gradually proceed to experiencing difficulties at the base of the U-curve and finally becoming stable and happy in the new culture(Ward, Bochner and Furnham, 2001).
This is represented below in the diagram of U-curve developed by Lysggard in 1955 (Church, 1982). Meanwhile, as much as the culture shock theory has flourished and has gained wider attention over the years, it has been argued as having poor evidence to support their assumptions that adjustment to a new culture follows a U-curve (Ward, Bochner and Furnham, 2001). It is therefore not plausible to assume that international students will go through this process while they are studying abroad.

As much as the assumptions in the culture shock theory have been used to study international students’ experiences abroad, it should be made clear that Oberg originated this theory for expatriates from the West going to the East whose experiences as Ward, Furnham and Bochner (2001) have noted, are in opposite directions. The argument is that the international students have more difficulties because of their sojourn objectives and the time they spend in the host culture. Other reason why these two groups of travellers may have different experience is because the international students often sojourn from developing countries while the opposite is the case for the expatriates. How these two groups are perceived in the host culture are not the same and this may further imply that their experiences are in different directions. However, it is known that studies using culture shock theory see the journey taken by expatriate workers or international students as one that can be thought of as “a movement from a known place into something at first unknown—a space—which with time itself becomes known as a place” (Burnapp, 2006, p.23). International students may not be following this process in their transition journey and an argument that resonates this is seen in the alternative conceptualization below.

Alternative conceptualization of international students’ experiences
Researches focused on understanding international students experiences is gaining impetus in the higher education and psychology literature. Although culture shock has dominated the theoretical knowledge of their difficulties abroad, a new explanations to the kind of experiences international students abroad have, is required. This is because it is important to examine whether the foreign students tick any of the culture shock stage boxes as assumed in the culture shock theory or whether their experiences does not fall within the culture shock understandings.

The reconceptualization
Alternative views and thinking about this area of knowledge is important in the current period because the surge in international student’s numbers overseas requires that a more contemporary insight is gained with regards to the various experiences these foreign students may be undergoing when they leave the shores of
their home countries to study abroad. International students that flow across the border to study abroad are an important part of internationalisation (Weirs-Jenson, 2003), and this means that the kind of experiences they have needs to be well articulated so that they can be guided and supported to live and study abroad and return home a happy customer. In view of this, the culture shock theoretical understanding has been examined and extended in relation to the meanings that sojourners make from their study abroad experiences and how they are affected by their experiences of difficulties abroad in this emerging argument.

In analysing international students difficult experiences abroad using the culture shock framework, researchers has found that international students suffer conditions that may have implications of affecting their wellbeing. In one of such studies, it was found that the difficulties international students had affected their emotional and psychological wellbeing and affected their normal functioning with profound feeling of helplessness, feelings of depression and anxiety occupying their culture shock experiences (Jung, Hecht and Wadsworth, 2007). Others (Davis et al, 2010; Furnham and Trezise, 1983) found that during culture shock, international students may suffer from stress, have a feeling of loss, and identity confusion. Further findings from the study of Bovin and Marx (2011) revealed that difficulties that international students had as they experienced culture shock showed that they experienced highlighted physiological problems such as increased heart rate, headache, stomach ache and dizziness. While Zhou et al (2008) in their studies on culture shock among international students found that their spiritual concentrations were affected as well their sense of self perceptions.

In the above culture shock studies, the outcomes of some of the experiences have resemblance with the experience of psychological trauma because as Levine (1997) noted, trauma threaten the psychological and physical integrity of person. A feeling of helplessness as the studies of culture shock has shown may be signalling other conditions because it is known that the most insidious aspect of psychological trauma is to make the individual feel helpless and powerless (Stolorow, 2007). Similarly, a profound feeling of anxiety and depression which creates tension in the lives of the international students as the culture shock studies have revealed, could be undischarged energies held in the body which Levine(1997) described as characterizing psychological trauma experience. This is because the entire human functioning is affected during trauma as the physiological, psychological, social, emotional and of course the spiritual functional aspects works in tandem with each other. When international students suffer conditions as those referred in the culture shock theory, they are exposed to conditions that may likely be an experience of psychological trauma than of culture shock. This is shown in the diagram below as a recent finding from a study by Eze (2014) on some international students has revealed that they suffered conditions that resembled those of psychological trauma than of culture shock.

As Stewart and Leggat (2006) noted, the experience of culture shock should be over in one year of the individual in the host culture and Oberg in 1960 posited that the experience of culture shock and the phases should be completed within a few months of the individual being in the host culture. Meanwhile, a critical examination of this assertion points that international students may not experience culture shock but other conditions since the study of Eze(2014) on some international students found that the students were already in the host culture for more than two years and were still facing difficulties of various sorts which also impacted on their overall wellbeing. Likewise, Xia (2009) also noted that adjusting to a new culture is often a long and difficult process.

The Culture shock theory as noted earlier assumes that adjustment process is predictable but it has been argued (Holloway and Brown, 2008) that adjustment may be difficult to predict and this could be so, because of the dynamic nature of the sociocultural environment where these individuals live. Of course human experiences will continue to be influenced by a variety of factors which are unexpected and can defile static explanations such as those in the culture shock framework.

In the diagram below, previous understanding of international students difficulties abroad is explained in relation to an alternative explanation from an empirical study by Eze(2014) which has conceptualised their challenges overseas not as culture shock but from the psychological trauma framework. The framework below evidences that culture shock experiences has negative impacts on the international student’s wellbeing and so does psychological trauma. However, the difference between these two frameworks is that the psychological trauma understanding is rich enough in explaining human problematic experiences as it evidences how the entire integrated human functioning is disrupted when they experience events that are
overwhelming. The framework also evidences the mediators of the difficulties experienced by some international students as the narrative study by Eze (2014) has revealed.

Fig.2 Conceptual connections of culture shock and psychological trauma

In the diagram above, culture shock was seen as causing various forms of discomfort in the international students’ lives abroad. However, because it does not go further to explain how the intricately interactive human functioning is affected, which the psychological trauma framework does, it is argued here that the psychological trauma framework may be more plausible in understanding some of the difficult challenges international students may have abroad. The psychological trauma framework explains how the psychological, the social, the physical and the spiritual functioning are affected during overwhelming situations and well articulates the implications of these disruptions in the wellbeing of the individuals.

The consequences of considering foreign students’ experiences as culture shock may reduce the kind of concern given to their individual difficulties when they sojourn abroad. This is of course true because culture shock is considered a normal reaction to unfamiliarity that will be experienced in a new culture. As Zhou et al (2008) has noted, sometimes the outcome of culture shock may lead to mental health changes as a result of their migration experiences. Meanwhile, if their experiences have implications for affecting their mental health functioning, then it may be signalling more serious conditions. The further consequences of not understanding and dealing with international students’ experiences as one that has serious implication for their overall wellbeing may mean that the students will not have an enriching overseas experiences and return home happy. Meanwhile, the kind of messages they take home should be considered because as Arshad and
Lima (2012) advised, the kind of messages international students take home should be considered important in any internationalisation strategy of higher education institutions.

Conclusion
International students’ challenging experiences abroad need to be reconsidered in terms of what they really experience and how they are affected by them. The best way of achieving this is not by assumptions, but by practical engagements with the foreign students in an attempt to understand them and what difficulties they are experiencing. The culture shock explanations have endured over time. It has also been useful in shaping various thinking about migration experiences. However, at this stage where burgeoning concerns about the kind of challenges facing international students is becoming important, questions about how best to capture and explain their difficulties should begin to surface. This will also enable educators to understand and provide the appropriate support these students need while they are studying with them. This article has x-rayed and suggested that the psychological trauma framework could be among the new line of thinking with regards to international students experiences. This knowledge has also stemmed from an empirical narrative study by Eze (2014), which found that some groups of international students suffered conditions that resembled psychological trauma than of culture shock. This paper based on this evidence and the arguments made against the culture shock assumptions in this article suggest that generally explaining international student’s difficult experiences as that of culture shock may limit our knowledge of their experiences.

References
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