Crossing Global Boundaries: Experiences of Loss by International Students

By Gita Rakhsha, Ph.D.

International students in the United States are seldom addressed in "multicultural training." More inclusive clinical, research, and teaching practices of psychology will unfold as we broaden our understanding of this population's experiences. This article highlights some common experiences of international students pursuing the highly valued "American" education.

In our effort to understand and assist this group, it is important to remain mindful of their multitudinous heterogeneity, as well as to be knowledgeable about shared challenges they confront as a result of being "foreign students". The criterion-based group membership of a "foreigner" in an American academic institution can be conceptualized as an overarching status under which lie clusters of common experiences with shared themes. Some of these themes include experiences of loss, communication difficulties, "Americanization", reconfiguration of identity, the need for negotiation of loyalty to the individualistic self and the collectivist "selves," and other similar processes that demand appreciable intellectual and emotional investment. This article focuses in particular on some of the losses common in international students' experiences.

International students leave "home" behind, cross global boundaries, arrive at a new land, and take on the academic endeavor at American universities with the expectation that this journey will eventually result in gains and an improved chance of succeeding in life. When planning this path to success it is difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of the losses one can experience. Nevertheless, both tangible and intangible losses are inevitable and integral to international students' experiences.

The more obvious tangible losses are usually experienced consciously and accompanied by a sense of nostalgia. For example, the loss of in-person access to one's home, family, friends, support systems, and even native foods and music is collectively and knowingly experienced as "homesickness". Such losses are easier to identify and are perceived as deserving of empathy. Often, however, less overt intangible losses remain unacknowledged sources of emotionally taxing experience. The loss of an effortless sense of belonging, relevancy of knowledge, and self-efficacy are examples of common but less readily identifiable losses that have significant impact on well-being.

An effortless sense of belonging is particularly notable when missing from one's repertoire of daily subconscious processes. When "at home", we do not need to strive to create a sense of connection with our surroundings. We feel the sense of belonging through experiencing people, events, objects, sounds, aromas, and all else that has been familiar to us. Hearing one's mother tongue, being able to sing the words to a favorite song played on the radio, passing a favorite café or a tea-house on the way to school, and experiencing similar daily "non-events" ground us in the experience of "being at home". Being among crowds who remind us of ourselves either because of the shared genetic pool and therefore a physical resemblance or because of shared traditional cultural practices connects us to them in effortless yet significant ways. Describing her visit home during a summer break, an international student from Iran juxtaposed this effortless sense of belonging versus its loss as "fitting in within the landscape of

a daily life much like a native plant versus having to work at developing roots and surviving a transplant".

Loss of the "social mirroring" of self creates an unsettling but difficult-to-grasp state of psychological disconnection from one's surroundings. This disconnection undermines the security and comfort with which one exists in his or her context. At best, the resulting tenuous relationship with one's surroundings motivates an international student to explore, understand, and remedy this phenomenon of psychological "homelessness" or "transplantation". Healthy coping mechanisms in this case could include seeking other international students particularly from one's own country of origin, residing in neighborhoods that do not reflect the dominance of any one cultural or national group, and displaying memorabilia and objects on oneself or in one's surroundings reflecting one's home country. Although helpful, this type of coping mechanism further foregrounds the loss of effortless belonging, as it requires effort and volition for its success.

At worst and more often, the experience of psychological "displacement" results in further physical isolation and emotional withdrawal, exacerbating the experience of loss. In the words of an international student from Iran, this loss of effortless sense of belonging and resultant disconnected state of being can be experienced as "ghorbat" which translates into "alienated and sorrowed soul when away from home".

Also significant is the loss of "tacit knowledge". Social learning theorists have taught that as we grow up we incorporate and generalize our life experiences into an unspoken understanding of the world around us. Much of our knowledge about social rules, roles, expectations, and normative practices is acquired through latent learning or "learning by absorption" (Fox, 1991). We learn how things work simply as a result of being immersed in the workings of things. This tacit knowledge affords a sense of predictability and stability on which we rely, even if unconsciously, when conducting our daily life affairs.

International students lose this tacit knowledge because what they have known about their world, and about themselves in the world, may not be applicable in the U.S. or in the American academic institution in which they find themselves. The relevancy and applicability of their tacit knowledge diminish once they become "foreign students".

A salient example of how one's tacit knowledge can create a significant difference in one's experiences is the example of student-professor relationships. The way in which a college student relates to his or her professor is often based on implicit culturally valued and permissible practices that one learns from early childhood. Very often international students' socialization process, perhaps beginning on the first day of kindergarten, demands that they exercise much more formality, deference, and reverence in their relationship with their professors than is acceptable and expected in the American academic culture. As a result, international students, especially those from "non-western" cultures, may find the "casualness" with which they are expected to relate to their professor to be surprising, confusing, frustrating, and even disturbing in their desired mentor-mentee relationship.

Loss of tacit knowledge can be quite disorienting as it brings about numerous unfamiliar, unexpected, and unpredictable encounters in one's world and daily experience. Furthermore, not realizing that the implicit rules of conduct in their new context could be divergently opposed to those in their home countries, they may be surprised to find their previously honored and valued behaviors misunderstood, not appreciated, or even judged as inappropriate. Until some

explication and mastery of the unspoken and normative rules of their new context are achieved, international students may experience themselves as precariously positioned in every endeavor they undertake. This is a taxing position in which to find oneself as it can relentlessly challenge one's perceived sense of self-efficacy. This can be especially difficult if one has been accustomed to perceiving and experiencing oneself as exceptionally efficacious and competent, as is the case for many international students.

One of the most important contexts in which international students can experience loss of self-efficacy is academia. Most of these students belong to the top tier of their cohort in their home country. They must successfully pass a series of examinations and go through other vigorous selection processes before they are granted acceptance into an American academic institution. These students' academic histories reveal praised reputations for having demonstrated admirable intelligence, motivation, commitment, and diligence in pursuit of their educational goals. However, once such previously successful students become "foreign" students, they face loss of much of their previous academic competency and self-efficacy either because of language difficulties, because of unfamiliarity with the American educational system, or because of cultural differences.

It is easy to understand how academic efficacy can be compromised as a result of language difficulties. For example, students' ability to learn the content of a course could be limited by the extent of their English mastery. However, language barriers of this nature may not be the primary reason for diminished academic efficacy. More subtle reasons such as different cultural communication styles could undermine the international students' efficacy of expression even if they are fluent in English.

American academic culture may be considered a "low context" culture (Hall, 1990) in which a clear, direct, precise, assertive, persuasive, and "to the point" style of communication is highly valued. On the contrary, in "high context" cultures (Hall, 1990) such as those in the majority of the non-European and North American countries, much more subtle, indirect, elaborate, symbolic, and deeply contextually conscientious communication styles are valued. In these cultures, the most competent communicators practice sophisticated formality, roundabout, and digressive strategies in their conversations and writings with the purpose of clearly indicating to the audience their politeness and "deference to age, rank, and wisdom" (Fox, 1994, p. 15) in addition to addressing the topic at hand.

As a result of differences in communication styles, international students' writing assignments may be perceived as incompetently written and often receive poor marks. Thus, beyond the simple and obvious difficulty of language barriers such as one's fluency in English, loss of efficacy of self-expression is a common experience for many international students because of the manner and the purpose for which they use their language. Helen Fox, an educator with extensive experience working with international students, explained the difficulty a Chilean student experienced in editing her writing assignments that required her to practice a different culturally valued expression style:

I remember what a graduate student from Chile told me about how it feels to try to do something in writing that is contrary to what everything inside you is telling you to do. "When I tried to go straight to the point," she said, "I was putting things down that I didn't want to put. Every time I got the thoughts that were natural to me, I had to look for other ones. It felt as

though I was being aggressive to myself. I was really mad sometimes, because I felt as if something was going against me. "(1994, p. 18)

In addition to communication style differences, there are other factors that can contribute to the loss of academic efficacy of even the most highly intelligent and motivated students. An example is differences in the culturally based definition of "a good student." In general, the culture of American academia values students' ability to question the status quo, to think critically and creatively, and to express their thoughts assertively and with a voice of authority. In other academic systems such as those in "high context" cultures where the opposite qualities and behaviors are often valued, the very same behaviors would mark a student as disagreeable and inappropriate. A "good student" would be defined as one who practices conformity, respect and reverence for traditions, and refrains from directly challenging the authority, i.e., teachers. It is clear that to succeed in an American university, international students must do more than master the content of their studies and negotiate the expected developmental markers that all college students experience. For international students to succeed, they may have to adopt new ways of being in the world that often mandate a change of their value system and identity.

The implications of such profound changes are extensive. Some students who are open to the change may find it extremely difficult if not impossible to return home at the completion of their studies. Others, who do not welcome the change as readily, may experience a reconfiguration of their identities as they struggle to preserve their "original selves" while incorporating and integrating new aspects of the necessary "Americanized selves". Having knowledge of these challenges can prevent university staff and faculty from extending to these students well-meaning but misinformed, and at times discouraging, guidance.

In addition to being familiar with the commonalities of their experience, it is helpful when educators are cognizant of the rich diversity of experiences within this group. Covert but equally significant differences accompany the more obvious diversities of nationality, language, economic class, and religious beliefs. They include cultural proximity of their home country and the U.S., previous level of exposure to American culture and academe, self-perceived English fluency, and immigration status. Family history, personality characteristics, emotional maturity, and other developmental characteristics also diversify this group=s experiences.

The purpose of this article has been to touch upon only a few of the losses international students commonly experience as they negotiate their path in the American academic institutions. Because of space limitations it is impossible to discuss the many successful coping strategies they often adopt. However, it must be noted that regardless of the difficulties they may face, most often international students express immense gratitude and appreciation for the opportunity to pursue the highly valued American education. They may find that they must work hard to earn respect for their intelligence and competency from their professors and fellow students. However, they accept this challenge in exchange for the opportunity to enhance their lives through receiving "a good education." By developing an understanding of and appreciation for their experiences, we as educators can better fulfill our responsibility of providing the international students with the education they trust us to be capable of providing.

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