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Chinese and Taiwanese International College Students' Participation in Social Organizations: Implications for College Counseling Professionals

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This qualitative focus group study explored the meaning of Chinese and Taiwanese international students' lived experiences in social organizations. Participants were 9 Chinese and Taiwanese international college students in a midwestern U.S. university. The analyses uncovered 7 themes: social support, recreation, emotional support, practical benefits, contributions to the organizations, commitment toward organizations, and stressors associated with participation. Implications of the findings for college counseling professionals are discussed.

From 1980 to 2006, the number of international students studying in U.S. colleges and universities increased from 311,880 to 564,766, and 58% of international students are from Asian countries (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). Because of cultural differences and their sojourner status, Asian international students face a number of stressors associated with adjusting to life in the United States (Wang, Lin, Pang, & Shen, 2007). Living in a foreign country limits access to familiar support systems, such as family and friends, which can create a sense of loss, homesickness, and isolation (Johnson & Sandhu, 2007; Pedersen, 1991). In addition, Asian international students may have difficulties adjusting to unfamiliar American educational systems and learning styles (Mori, 2000; Wong, 2004) as well as struggle with language barriers (Constantine, Kindaichi, Okazaki, Gainor, & Baden, 2005) and culturally different communication styles (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). For example, Yeh and Inose (2003) found that international students who had lower levels of English fluency were more likely to experience acculturative stress.

Among Asian international students who belong to the dominant racial or ethnic group in their home country, becoming a racial and ethnic minority in the United States can also be a challenging experience (Yoon & Portman, 2004). They may experience conflicts between their culture of origin and the dominant European American culture (Constantine et al., 2005). As a minority group, Asian international students may encounter stereotypes, prejudice, and racism (Johnson & Sandhu, 2007). For instance, Asian international students may be mistaken for members of another Asian nationality, encounter individuals who have stereotypical perceptions of their culture, and become victims of the model minority stereotype (e.g., the perception that all Asians are good at math; Bonazzo & Wong, 2007; Constantine et al., 2005). Collectively, these experiences may devalue the national or ethnic identities of Asian international students. Not surprisingly, Yeh and Inose (2003) found that Asian international students tend

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to experience higher levels of acculturative stress compared with European international students.

Counseling might be an appropriate forum to address many of the stressors that Asian international students face. However, international students have been shown to underutilize college counseling services compared with other U.S. racial/ethnic minority groups, such as Asian Americans, African Americans, and Hispanic Americans (Nilsson, Berkel, Flores, & Lucas, 2004). Moreover, when they seek counseling, Asian international students attend fewer counseling sessions compared with European international students (Mitchell, Greenwood, & Guglielmi, 2007).

There are several possible reasons that international students underutilize counseling. First, Asian international students may encounter language barriers in counseling. Although interpreters can help address language barriers, a study by Yoon and Jepsen (2008) revealed that more than half of Asian international students were reluctant to have interpreters in counseling. Second, counselors may lack cultural sensitivity or expertise in counseling Asian international students (Pedersen, 1991), because graduate counseling training programs rarely prepare their students to counsel international students. Indeed, most multicultural counseling textbooks do not specifically discuss issues related to international students (Yoon & Portman, 2004). Third, Asian international students may misperceive that counseling services are only for U.S. students rather than international students (Yoon & Jepsen, 2008). Fourth, Asian international students may be reluctant to seek professional mental health services because in many Asian cultures, psychological problems are highly stigmatized and the disclosure of such problems is viewed as disgraceful (Mori, 2000; Yoon & Jepsen, 2008).

Although Asian international students may be reluctant to seek formal counseling services, they may be more open to soliciting help from informal resources (Frey & Roysircar, 2006). These resources include family, friends, religious institutions, and student groups (Constantine et al., 2005; Frey & Roysircar, 2006; Pedersen, 1991). Volet and Karabenick (2006) argued that in an unfamiliar environment, international students prefer to seek emotional support from conationals or students with a shared linguistic background. In a qualitative study that examined informal help resources, Constantine et al. (2005) found that female Asian international students tended to rely on family and friends for advice to cope with cultural adjustment difficulties. Nevertheless, no study has specifically examined Asian international students' use of social organizations to facilitate their adjustment to life in the United States.

Participation in social organizations may be particularly helpful to Asian international students. Because of their collectivistic cultural backgrounds (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), Asian international students may value opportunities for interpersonal connections afforded by social organizations. Having experienced the loss of social support in their home countries, Asian international students may find that such organizations can provide a forum through which they can form new relationships and reestablish a sense of belonging (Hayes & Lin, 1994). There is some indirect empirical evidence that participation in social organizations can be helpful to international college

students. Toyokawa and Toyokawa (2002) found that international Japanese college students' participation in extracurricular activities was positively associated with their general life satisfaction. Other studies that used college samples have shown that engagement in student organizations was related to positive outcomes. Abrahamowicz (1988) showed that participation in student organizations was associated with greater college satisfaction and more positive relationships with faculty, administrators, and students. Tiamiyu, Warner, and Guthrie (2005) demonstrated that college students' involvement in religious organizations was positively related to perceived religious support, which was in turn positively related to perceived friend and family support.

Against this backdrop, we sought to conduct a qualitative investigation of Asian international students' lived experiences in social organizations. In this study, we focused specifically on the experiences of Chinese and Taiwanese students, two culturally and linguistically similar groups that, collectively, constitute almost half of all Asian international students in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). Our research questions include (a) the reasons that participants joined their social organizations, (b) how participants' experience in the social organizations facilitated their adjustment to life in the United States, and (c) the types of stressors associated with participating in these organizations.

Method

Participants

Nine Taiwanese and Chinese international college students (five female and four male) studying in a large university in the Midwest were recruited from social groups, student associations, and religious institutions through e-mails, personal direct invitations, and the snowballing technique. The criterion for participation was that the students must have participated in at least one social organization while residing in the United States. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 36 years old. Seven of the participants were graduate students and two were undergraduate students. Three were originally from Taiwan and six were from China. Participants' length of residence in the United States ranged from 10 months to 12 years.

Procedure

Two focus groups (four participants in the first group and five participants in the second group) were facilitated by the first author, who is bilingual in English and Mandarin. The naturalistic and interactive nature of focus groups is ideal for generating insight into issues and is an ideal method for exploratory research to identify new issues (Hennink, 2007). In the focus groups, participants were asked about (a) the types of social organizations they participated in; (b) factors that motivated them to join, stay in, or leave these organizations; (c) their perceptions of the benefits they received from participating in these organiza-

tions, especially with regard to facilitating their adjustment to life in the United States; and (d) the stressors associated with being in these organizations. Each focus group discussion lasted approximately 120 minutes, was video recorded with the written consent of participants, and was conducted in English. Occasionally, participants spoke in Mandarin when they had difficulty expressing themselves in English. All focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim. To safeguard participants' identities, we stored the video recordings electronically in a password-protected, secure computer server. The video recordings were permanently destroyed 2 months after the transcription of data was completed. The transcripts were stored in a locked space, and identifying information (e.g., participants' names) was deleted from the transcripts.

Data Analysis

The focus group data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis, which emphasizes the subjective meanings participants attach to their lived experiences (Wertz, 2005). In qualitative research, reliability refers to the extent to which the methodology used is consistent across different researchers and research studies, whereas validity refers to the extent to which procedures are used to enhance the accuracy of the findings (Creswell, 2009). With regard to reliability, we each independently coded the data to ensure that the findings did not simply reflect the perspective of one researcher. We then compared our independently derived findings and collaborated in grouping them into themes. We also used a number of strategies to enhance the validity of our findings. As recommended by Creswell (2009), we both reflected on how our backgrounds and experiences might influence our interpretation of the data prior to data collection. One of us (second author) is a former Asian international student and a current professor in a counseling psychology program. The other (first author) is an Asian international student in a doctoral program in counseling psychology. As to biases, we each had personally benefited from participation in social organizations and believed such participation would help international students adjust to life in the United States. In addition, we sought to ensure that information contrary to our expectations or the main themes was not excluded from our findings (Creswell, 2009). For example, although we found that, in general, participants benefited from participating in social organizations, we also included in our findings the views of participants who discussed the stressors of being in such organizations. Finally, to improve the accuracy of our findings, we followed the lead of other qualitative studies (e.g., Constantine et al., 2005) that specified the extent to which a theme was applicable to the participants. We described a theme as *general* if it applied to all nine participants, *typical* if it applied to five to eight participants, and *variant* if it applied to two to four participants.

Results

Consistent with the emphasis on subjective meanings in interpretive phenomenological analysis (Wertz, 2005), participants were allowed to decide what they considered

to be social organizations. Participants in both focus groups endorsed a broad meaning of social organizations that included formal as well as informal groups, such as a group of friends who met on a regular basis to play computer games. Table 1 presents a list of social organizations in which participants were members.

Seven themes emerged from the focus groups' discussion: social support, recreation, emotional support, practical benefits, contributions to the organizations, commitment toward organizations, and stressors associated with participation (see Table 2). Five of the seven themes included subthemes. The following sections provide descriptions and specific examples of each theme.

Social Support (General Theme)

All participants ($N = 9$) reported that social support was a key benefit they derived from their participation in social organizations. All participants explained that they valued the friendships developed through their participation in the social organizations. For example, one participant stated,

> Friend is really important. They help me be more comfortable of being here, like most of associations I was in, I met people from China, Chinese people, and we have the similar problems here in United States. They have experienced help to solve the problems and you probably share your problem with them.

Four participants shared that they valued the opportunity to connect with others from a similar cultural and linguistic background in their organization. In the words of a participant,

> [With] group of more Chinese, it's easier to communicate with them. Groups have more foreigners, including Japanese, Korean, whatever, they may be Asian, but they still are the foreigners. You will be close with Chinese people, and also you participate more frequently, you will make friends more naturally.

TABLE 1

List of Social Organizations

Type of Organization	Organization	*n*
Professional organization	Investment club	1
	Global sales leadership society	1
	Graduates in instructional systems technology organization	1
Religious organization	Buddhism study association	5
	Church	4
	Taoism reading group	3
Informal recreational group	Basketball team	3
	Video games club	3
	Soccer team	2
	Movie club	2
	Badminton group	1
	Eating and drinking group	1
Other student organization	International organization	2
	Taiwanese student association	2
	Chinese student association	2

TABLE 2

Results of Focus Group Discussion

Theme and Subtheme	Representative	*n*
1. Social support	General	9
a. Making friends		
b. Cultural connection		
c. Not having to eat alone		
d. Feeling valued by others		
2. Recreation	Typical	8
a. Interest		
b. Food		
c. Relief from boredom		
d. Stress relief		
3. Emotional support	Typical	5
a. Addressing loneliness and homesickness		
b. Help with personal problems		
c. Support for experiences with racism		
4. Practical benefits	Variant	3
a. Professional development		
b. Providing information		
c. Practical resources		
5. Contributions to the organizations	Variant	2
6. Commitment toward organizations	Variant	4
7. Stressors associated with participation	Variant	2
a. Racism		
b. Dealing with difficult people		

Note. A theme is described as general if it applied to all nine participants, typical if it applied to five to eight participants, and variant if it applied to two to four participants.

Another participant said, "I can find the feeling of home in [name of religious organization] because I can speak my mother language, so a lot of time we have lots in common we can talk about." Three participants indicated that they felt valued by others in their social organizations. In addition, two participants explained that a benefit of participating in social organizations was that they did not have to eat alone. As one participant described,

> I don't have to cook that much, or if I cook, I can have someone to share with me. I don't have to cook by myself and eat by myself . . . if I am not in that game, I am not cheerleader in that game, [and] I have to go to dinner by myself, which makes me a loser.

Recreation (Typical Theme)

Eight participants described that they were drawn to the recreational nature of their social organizations. For instance, five participants stated that the social organizations were a good fit with their interests or hobbies. As one participant said,

> I think for most of them are personal interest. I really interested in what they are doing and what they are talking about. . . . For the basketball [group], you just feel good; for [the] computer games [group], just personal hobby.

For some participants (n = 4), an important attraction of their social organizations was the availability of free food. One participant explained that

"every experience comes back to food." Furthermore, two participants stated that participation in social organizations provided relief from boredom. Two participants also viewed participation as a way to relieve stress.

Emotional Support (Typical Theme)

Five participants reported that they received emotional support from their participation in the social organizations. Four participants noted that participation in the social organizations helped reduce loneliness and homesickness in the United States. One participant said, "As [an] Asian student, you feel lonely, and very homesick, but in the church, you can feel the family atmosphere when you feel so lonely or homesick." Two participants disclosed that they received emotional support from members of their social organizations for their personal problems. One participant used the term "psychological help" to describe the help he received from other members in the social organization, whereas another noted that she could confide in her church friends about her family problems. Another participant disclosed that she felt validated by members of her organization when she shared about her encounters with racism:

> Emotional support is another thing. When I share racism experience with other people in [name of religious organization], they also share their experience with me. I feel like I am not alone, and also my experience is real. It feels like my experience is substantial and not imagine thing. So that's really helpful.

Practical Benefits (Variant Theme)

Several participants ($n = 3$) described practical benefits that they received from participating in their social organizations. Three participants who were members of student organizations explained that participation in these organizations enhanced their professional development. One participant stated, "For the Graduates in Instructional Systems [a campus-based student organization], I think it is more accumulating your experience working in the organizations. You can put on your resume about what kind of service do you provide to the community."

Two participants also noted that members of their social organizations sometimes provided useful information to them (e.g., courses to take in college and how to apply for grants). Two participants who belonged to religious organizations alluded to practical resources that members of their organizations provided; for example, members of the Buddhism Study Association helped one participant to move her belongings to a new home.

Contributions to the Organization (Variant Theme)

Two participants talked about the satisfaction they derived from contributing to the social organizations to which they belonged. One participant described,

> It's the feeling you are able to give people in your group something too. I say not only just receiving, but say you are able to give something else, like, I just able to find an apartment for somebody in my church. . . . I think being able to help other people go through that has been most of my joys in my life.

Commitment Toward Organizations (Variant Theme)

Four participants cited their commitment toward their organizations as a reason for their continued participation. One participant explained the nature of his commitment to his social organization: "I am dishwasher in my morning reading group, so we have to wash the dishes every day and bring it next morning." Another participant observed, "If you already joined the group, you already make a commitment, and you already had responsibility. That keeps some people from leaving the group for a while."

Stressors Associated With Participation (Variant Theme)

Although all participants described their experience of participating in social organizations in positive terms, two participants acknowledged that participation could also be stressful. One participant described her feeling of alienation and perception of racism in her professional organization: "I have the pressure of racism in that group that's obviously a predominantly White setting. Most people in that group are racists. You can't just see it, you just feel it." Another participant shared about the challenges of dealing with difficult people: "The challenge I am facing with is dealing with people . . . a lot of times, when people are young and smart, they will be full of themselves and full of ego."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the meaning of Chinese and Taiwanese international students' lived experiences in social organizations. A common theme that all participants endorsed was that they experienced social support as a result of their participation in social organizations. In particular, participants discussed the friendships they formed and the opportunities to connect with culturally and linguistically similar individuals as important benefits of participating in social organizations. Being away from their family and friends in their home country can result in a loss of social identity for international students (Johnson & Sandhu, 2007). In this regard, our findings coincide with prior literature suggesting that interactions with culturally similar individuals can help international students develop primary support networks and a sense of belonging (Hayes & Lin, 1994).

The majority of participants also stated that the social organizations served as recreational settings for them. Specific benefits included opportunities to pursue their interests as well as relieve stress and boredom. Four participants pointed out that an attractive feature of their social organizations was the

availability of food. This interest dovetails with scholarly observations about the centrality of food in Chinese culture. As Simoons (1991, p. 14) explained,

> Food plays such an important role in Chinese life as to lead many to characterize the Chinese as having a food-centered culture. . . . Indeed, some have noted that food is not only a common topic of conversation, but often the dominant one.

About half of the participants also alluded to the benefits derived from participating in social organizations in quasitherapeutic terms. These benefits include receiving psychological help, having opportunities to share about family problems, and receiving emotional support for one's experience with racism. Another theme that emerged from our findings are the practical benefits participants derived from their social organizations (e.g., information about courses to take and grant applications). Such help may be especially important for international students who may have difficulty planning their education because of a lack of familiarity with the U.S. higher education system.

In addition, almost half of the participants indicated that their commitment to the social organizations was a reason for their continued participation. In particular, participants who had assigned positions or roles in their social organizations felt an obligation to fulfill their responsibilities in their organizations. Furthermore, several participants acknowledged that they derived satisfaction from being able to contribute to their organizations. Nevertheless, despite the overwhelmingly positive sentiments that participants had toward their social organizations, a few participants acknowledged that they also experienced stressors associated with participating in these organizations. These included experiencing racism in a predominantly White organization as well as the interpersonal challenges involved with dealing with difficult people. These challenges suggest that the extent to which international students' participation in social organizations is a positive or negative experience may depend largely on the quality of their interpersonal relationships with members of their organizations.

Limitations

This study should be considered in light of several limitations. First, the results may not be generalizable to international students from other nationalities, given the heterogeneity of the international student population (Wang et al., 2007). Future studies should explore the experiences of international students from more diverse national and academic backgrounds (e.g., Arab international students, K–12 international students). Second, the focus group discussions were conducted mainly in English. Although all participants were fluent in English, they may have felt more comfortable communicating in Mandarin. Nevertheless, this problem was partially mitigated by the fact that during the focus group discussions, participants were permitted to speak in Mandarin whenever they had difficulty expressing themselves in English. Third, participants' length of residence in the United States (a range of 10

months to 12 years) may have affected their level of acculturation (Wilton & Constantine, 2003) and their responses in the focus groups. Nonetheless, our sample was too small for any meaningful comparisons between participants of varying lengths of residence in the United States. Fourth, the focus groups were our only source of data; the validity of our findings would have been enhanced by observations of participants' actual participation in social organizations. Finally, because the focus groups were led by one of the authors, some participants might have tailored their responses to fit their preconceived notions of what the authors were expecting in terms of research findings. For instance, it is possible that some participants might have deliberately focused more on discussing the benefits rather than stressors associated with participating in social organizations.

Implications for College Counseling Professionals

The results from this study present several practical implications for college counseling professionals. Specifically, we discuss implications for (a) increasing the utilization of counseling services; (b) the practice of counseling; (c) outreach and psychoeducation; (d) training; and (e) systemic, campuswide interventions. Given international students' underutilization of counseling (Nilsson et al., 2004), college counseling professionals need to find creative ways to promote psychological help-seeking among these students (Wang et al., 2007). For instance, college counseling centers can collaborate with campus-based international student organizations to provide information about mental health resources on the websites of these organizations. To familiarize Asian international students with counseling services, college counselors can also visit the social organizations these students participate in to talk about how counseling might help with their adjustment to life in the United States. In addition, the provision of counseling services to international students in locations other than the college counseling center (e.g., in the college's international office) might help destigmatize and increase the accessibility of counseling services.

Our findings also present several implications for the practice of college counseling with Asian international students. To assess Asian international students' level and quality of social support, we recommend that counseling intake sessions include questions about the extent to which these students participate in social organizations. In conceptualizing their Asian international clients' presenting concerns, college counseling professionals should be mindful of potential differences between the psychological needs of undergraduate students and those of graduate students. For example, issues related to ethnic identity may be more salient for undergraduate emerging adults than for graduate students. In addition, college counseling professionals' treatment planning can include ways in which their Asian international clients can use social organizations as a source of strength to cope with their presenting concerns. Accordingly, we encourage college counseling professionals to be familiar with a wide range of formal and informal social organizations so that they can refer students to these resources.

Moreover, college counseling professionals can facilitate support groups that might replicate some of the psychosocial benefits derived from participating in a social organization. Indeed, several authors have described innovative examples of successfully run support groups for international students on university campuses. Carr, Koyama, and Thiagarajan (2003) described a women's support group for Asian international students. The group provided opportunities for members to practice speaking English and to share their concerns. Each session began with students sharing positive and negative experiences as an icebreaker, followed by conversations about their concerns with no specific agenda. Dipeolu, Kang, and Cooper (2007) reported a successful support group for international students led by two doctoral-level international students. Some of the unique features of this group were the use of personalized invitations to potential group members via surveys mailed to international students and the use of family metaphors to describe group concepts during pregroup interviews. The topics addressed in the group included acculturation issues, adjustment concerns, and self-care. In another example, Chalungsooth and Faris (2009) discussed an 8-week psychoeducational support group jointly organized by the university counseling center and international office. Instead of convening at the counseling center, the group met at the university's coffee house, a location familiar to most students. Specific topics for each meeting included coping with homesickness and loneliness, navigating the American educational system, holiday isolation, and cross-cultural dating.

In terms of outreach and psychoeducation, college counseling professionals should collaborate with social organizations to develop innovative ways to reach out to Asian international students. For example, counselors can conduct psychoeducational discussion groups and workshops for international student organizations on topics such as stress management and social skills. During these activities, counselors can encourage Asian international students to share their experiences of adapting to life in the United States. Furthermore, because Asian international students may feel more comfortable seeking help from individuals who share a similar linguistic and cultural background, college counseling centers should consider training bilingual peer counselors and mentors in international student organizations to provide referrals for as well as informal assistance to these students.

In terms of training implications, it would be helpful for college counseling professionals to become more knowledgeable about the needs of international students through continuing education. Such training is important because most multicultural counseling textbooks and graduate counseling training programs do not explicitly address issues related to international students (Yoon & Portman, 2004). We encourage college counseling professionals to meet with staff members from their college's international office on a regular basis to better understand the unique needs of international students on their campus. In addition, counselors should attend workshops that specifically address issues facing international students. For example, such workshops can discuss practical issues, such as the impact of students' visa status on their

education and the ways in which international students use social organizations to cope with cultural adjustment difficulties.

Finally, it is important to recognize that Asian international students' participation in social organizations can be a stressful experience; specifically, they may experience racism or other forms of discrimination from members of their social organizations. College counseling professionals can implement systemic, campuswide interventions aimed at fostering a more inclusive climate for international students. For example, Rogers-Sirin and Sirin (2009) provided empirical support for the effectiveness of a campus-based workshop aimed at enhancing students' awareness, knowledge, and skills needed to work with diverse students as well as their ability to address ethical dilemmas related to intolerance and racism. A salient feature of the workshop was the use of five videos depicting ethical violations involving examples of intolerance. Participants brainstormed approaches to addressing these dilemmas, including considering what the characters in the videos might be thinking and the power dynamics involved. Although this workshop was designed for preservice teachers attending a private university, we suggest that it can be adapted to help college students from other backgrounds become more culturally competent in their interactions with international students. In summary, by taking into account international students' unique experiences in social organizations, college counseling professionals can play a vital and creative role in fostering a campus climate that facilitates their psychosocial adjustment.

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