

The Influence of Acculturation Strategies, Ethnic Identity and Cultural Distance on the Socio-cultural Adaptation of Arab Students

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Research Article

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Abstract

Background. Adaptation to the educational space of a university is a process that is a prerequisite and a way of socialization, allowing international students to actively engage in various elements of the social environment. This process can be made more complicated as a result of existing linguistic, every day, climatic, intercultural, interethnic, and motivational barriers. This research studies the relationship between acculturation strategies, socio-cultural adaptation, ethnic identity, cultural distance among students from arabic countries (Morocco, Syria, Egypt).

Methods. The questionnaire included scales for assessing acculturation attitudes, ethnic identity, cultural distance, and sociocultural adaptation. The following techniques were used during the study: methodology of J. Finney, measuring the severity of ethnic identity (Phinney, 1992; Phinney & Ong, 2007), scales for measuring cultural distance (Wark & Galliher, 2007), questionnaire measuring acculturation strategies for migrants (Berry, 1997; Berry, 2005), scales for measuring sociocultural adaptation (Ward, Kennedy, 1999). The overall number of respondents was 248 (56 from Syria, 84 from Egypt, 108 from Morocco). The average age of the respondents is 28 years (min – 20, max – 34 years).

Conclusion. Using correlation and regression analysis, we found that cultural distance is interconnected with sociocultural adaptation. However, among young migrants from arabic countries, ethnic identity and acculturation strategies are not linked to sociocultural adaptation. As a whole, our research shows the specific of adaptation of young arabs in relation to their host country.

Introduction

In the current era of globalization, there are an increasing number of students seeking higher education outside their native culture (Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013). Educational experiences in host cultures provide an opportunity to expand an individual's intercultural knowledge and worldview, which in turn enhances personal development and future career prospects (Rienties et al., 2013). However, the process of adapting to a new culture can be difficult and stressful (Berry, 2005; Ward et al., 2001).

As scientists note, international students in the process of adapting to a foreign cultural environment experience a sense of loneliness (Hunley, 2010; Wang, et al., 2015), face difficulties caused by changes to their usual way of life (Szabo et al., 2016), discrimination (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007) and experience cultural differences (Hirai et al., 2015).

Acculturation includes a wide range of patterns of behavior, attitudes, values, norms, personality characteristics that can change in contact (Ward, 2016). Acculturation orientations link the conditions of acculturation with its results. The acculturation model proposed by D. Berry (Berry, 1997) has become widespread. It describes four strategies that result from a combination of attitudes towards preserving a culture of origin and contacts with the majority group. These are assimilation (rejection of one's own culture in favor of the culture of the majority), separation (preservation of only one's own culture), integration (preservation of the key features of one's own culture while simultaneously accepting

elements of the majority culture) and marginalization (rejection of both cultures). Acculturation strategies are interconnected with its results – psychological and sociocultural adaptation (Berry, 2011).

Socio-cultural adaptation is defined as the ability to understand the culture of the host country and function properly in a new cultural environment (Kim, 1988, 2001; Ward, 2001). During socio-cultural adaptation, the individual experiences cultural stress (Berry & Annis, 1974), which can be alleviated by social support (Adelman, 1988). Researchers argue that an additional aspect of cross-cultural adaptation that needs to be studied is psychological adaptation, though they highlight the close relationship between cultural stress and human mental health. People with high levels of acculturative stress are at risk of experiencing not only depression (Mui & Kang, 2006; Rahman & Rollrock, 2004), but also suicidal ideation (Hovey & King, 1996). Further research has shown that acculturative stress is correlated with high levels of anxiety and depression in international students (Crockett et al., 2007).

In our study, we use ethnic identity, cultural distance and acculturation strategies as predictors of sociocultural adaptation. Ethnic identity refers to an individual's sense of self to belong to a particular ethnic group (Liebkind et al., 2016). The ratio of ethnic identity is comparable to the strategies of acculturation in D. Berry's model. Integration corresponds to bicultural identity - these are expressed ethnic identities. Separation identity is a combination of a pronounced ethnic identity and lack of identification with the majority, assimilated identity is a pronounced identification with the majority, marginalized identity is a lack of identification with both groups (Liebkind et al., 2016). Bicultural identity is the most beneficial for adaptation (Berry, 2011; Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013). Cultural distance (how dissimilar cultures are in language, religion, and values) has regularly been found to affect the successful adaptation of immigrants (Ward & Kennedy, 1993; Ward & Searle, 1991). The consistent finding is that adaptation is more difficult when the cultural differences between groups are large (Berry, 2005).

The results of many studies show that the severity of culture shock is positively correlated with cultural distance. The more the new culture resembles the native one, the less traumatic is the adaptation process. To assess similarity of cultures, the index of cultural distance proposed by I. Babiker and co-authors is used, which includes language, religion, family structure, level of education, material comfort, climate, food, clothing, etc.

A. Furnham, S. Bochner conducted an empirical study of the dependence of social difficulties on cultural distance (Furnham, Bochner, 1986, p. 56). According to three key criteria - religion, language and climate of the country from which the students came, they were divided into three groups according to closeness to the culture of Great Britain. The first group of "related" cultures comprised the countries of Northern and Central Europe, the second - the "mid-range" countries of Southern Europe and Latin America; the group of culturally "distant" was made up of the countries of Asia and Africa. The study confirmed the hypothesis that the greater the difference between the culture host society and culture of the country of origin, the more difficulties are experienced in everyday social situations. The most difficult situations were found to establish and maintain personal relationships with representatives of local culture. The foreign students turned out to have quite a few friends among the British, and contacts with the locals

were mostly utilitarian. The authors attribute this to a lack of social skills required for effective communication in another culture.

The concept of cultural distance is used to position cultural groups relative to each other depending on how similar or different they are. When conducting a comparative analysis of cultures based on their similarity (differences), the classification of the universal aspects of cultural groups is taken as a basis. According to D. Berry, the distance between cultures is directly proportional to the number of changes that a migrant will have to make in his behavior in order to adapt to a new cultural environment (Berry, 2003).

Thus, in our study, we use ethnic identity, cultural distance and acculturation strategies as conditions for the adaptation of young migrants from Arab countries.

Methods

Participants

The present research is based on data obtained from first-, second- and third-year students Arabic countries (Morocco, Syria, Egypt). The informants are currently studying in institutions of higher education in Moscow, Astrakhan, Kazan, Nizhny Novgorod, St. Petersburg, Perm. The overall number of respondents was 248 (56 from Syria, 84 from Egypt, 108 from Morocco). The average age of the respondents is 28 years (min – 20, max – 34 years).

Procedure

During the study, we used four techniques. A questionnaire was presented to the respondents in two ways: face-to-face and online using Google Forms. The study involved young people studying in Russian universities from 1 year to 3 years in humanitarian and technical specialties. Students from Moscow, Astrakhan, Kazan, Nizhny Novgorod, and St. Petersburg filled out an online questionnaire which was distributed through the departments that work with international students. We also distributed the questionnaire on social network groups for international students. Nevertheless, we should acknowledge the potential cognitive biases commonly associated with self-reported measures, such as the effect of social desirability. The respondents were unfamiliar with each other, and the purpose of the study was not indicated in the questionnaire itself.

Measures

1. Acculturation strategies for migrants. Here, acculturation strategies were evaluated, considered under the theory of J. Berry (Berry, 1997; Berry, 2005). The method includes 16 questions that make up 4 scales corresponding to four acculturation strategies: integration, assimilation, separation, marginalization.
2. Scales for measuring sociocultural adaptation (Ward, Kennedy, 1999). Respondents are asked to rate the degree of agreement with twenty statements using a five-point scale (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). The

respondents were asked to assess the level of difficulties they experience in various social situations in the new society. The received answers were recoded in order to get an assessment of adaptation, not maladjustment. There are 3 scales in the methodology: formal relationships, informal relationships and adaptation to everyday life. This technique was tested and adapted earlier (Lebedeva, Tatarko, 2016), the reliability – consistency of the points of the technique – $\alpha = 0.95$.

3. Methodology J. Finney, measuring the severity of ethnic identity (Phinney, 1992; Phinney & Ong, 2007). The abbreviated questionnaire contains 5 statements. The average score for all questions is a general indicator of the expression of ethnic identity.

4. Scales for measuring cultural distance (Wark & Galliher, 2007). To measure cultural distance, the respondent needs to evaluate the indicators in terms of their differences in two different cultures. The question is: “How similar and different are the following indicators in Russia and in your country?” These indicators include: food intake, attitude in the family, raising children, attitude towards women, religion, traditions and customs, values and beliefs, etc.

Analysis of the data

The primary analysis of the answers given by the respondents has enabled us to calculate the minimum, maximum and mean values, standard deviation for each variable. Differences in the features of sociocultural adaptation were identified using analysis of variance. Correlation and regression analysis were used to establish the relationship between ethnic identity, cultural distance, acculturation strategies and adaptation of young migrants from Arab countries.

Results Of The Study

Results of the study of ethnic identity demonstrated by Arabic students are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Ethnic identity of Arabic students

Scales	Min	Max	M	SD	Skew.	Kurt.
Ethnic Identity (Cronbach Alpha 0.76)	2,00	3,60	3,0296	,39741	-,707	-,183
Pride of the ethnic group	1,00	4,00	3,0559	,77937	-1,277	2,063
Maintaining the traditions of the ethnic group	2,00	4,00	2,5625	,67196	,789	-,507
Strong attachment to ethnic group	1,00	4,00	3,2928	,93156	-1,206	,472
Ethnicity	1,00	4,00	3,1349	,62265	-,430	,888
Connection with ethnic group	2,00	4,00	3,1020	,64445	-,097	-,604

M - average, SD - standard deviation, Skew. - the coefficient of asymmetry, Kurt. - kurtosis coefficient

Arab students studying in Russian universities are proud of their ethnic group, feel a strong attachment to it.

Table 2 shows the results of the peculiarities of cultural differences according to the opinion of foreign students from Arab countries.

Table 2 Perceived cultural distance among Arabic students

Scales	Min	Max	M	SD	Skew.	Kurt.
Cultural distance (Cronbach Alpha 0.64)	1,17	3,42	2,3065	,57453	-,132	,073
Eating	1,00	5,00	2,1151	1,26513	,963	,045
Family attitude	1,00	4,00	2,9408	1,23872	-,453	-1,539
Parenting	1,00	4,00	2,9309	,90022	-,601	-,326
Attitude towards a woman	1,00	4,00	1,8980	,77893	1,276	2,105
Religion	1,00	3,00	2,4638	,64894	-,813	-,404
Traditions and customs	1,00	4,00	1,7467	,97746	1,167	,247
Social norms	1,00	4,00	2,4836	,90455	,480	-,739
Appearance	1,00	3,00	1,9178	,68203	,104	-,843
Values and Beliefs	1,00	4,00	2,4770	1,08064	,305	-1,244
Attitude towards work	1,00	4,00	2,8059	1,02373	-,105	-1,330
Friendship	1,00	4,00	2,5395	,89281	,287	-,794
Language	1,00	3,00	1,3586	,63433	1,560	1,171

M - average, SD - standard deviation, Skew. - the coefficient of asymmetry, Kurt. - kurtosis coefficient

Respondents from Arab countries note a fairly high cultural distance with Russian culture in terms of language, appearance, attitude towards women, food intake. The attitude towards work has some similarities with the Russian culture. Russians and representatives of Arab countries, according to Arab students, have somewhat similar views on family relations and parenting.

Let us turn to the analysis of the study results of the acculturation strategies and socio-cultural adaptation (see Table 3 and 4).

Table 3 Acculturation strategies of Arabic students

Scales	Min	Max	M	SD	Skew.	Kurt.
Separation	1,00	2,25	1,5839	,49205	-,298	-1,822
Exclusion	1,00	3,00	1,7303	,51626	1,195	1,258
Integration	2,00	5,00	4,1431	,61947	-,624	-,060
Assimilation	1,00	3,25	1,9145	,62280	,407	,123

M - average, SD - standard deviation, Skew. - the coefficient of asymmetry, Kurt. - kurtosis coefficient

Arab students studying in Russia strive for an integration strategy that implies identification with both the Arab and the Russian culture. The process of integration of Arab students can cause the preservation of their own cultural heritage, combined with a benevolent attitude towards Russian culture. Integrating Arab students can play a positive role in reducing culture shock to forced migrants and maintaining their positive self-identification.

Table 4 Sociocultural adaptation of Arabic students

Scales	Min	Max	M	SD	Skew.	Kurt.
Sociocultural adaptation (Cronbach Alpha 0.813)	1,00	2,85	1,9628	,57503	-,232	-1,058
To make friends	1,00	5,00	2,1579	1,18352	1,278	,699
To buy food	1,00	5,00	2,3684	1,30085	,803	-,652
Follow the rules and regulations	1,00	5,00	2,0296	1,23579	1,211	,635
Deal with authorities	1,00	4,00	2,4770	1,23192	-,075	-1,607
Use transport	1,00	3,00	1,3684	,64674	1,532	1,037
Interact with officials	1,00	4,00	2,3651	1,30051	,050	-1,752
Gain understanding	1,00	4,00	2,3651	1,06314	,125	-1,223
Shopping	1,00	3,00	1,4539	,65842	1,149	,114
Understand jokes and humor	1,00	4,00	2,2664	1,14237	,199	-1,425
Find accommodation	1,00	2,00	1,3586	,48037	,593	-1,660
Be in public places	1,00	3,00	1,9013	,79404	,178	-1,392
Communicate with people of different nationalities	1,00	2,00	1,3553	,47938	,608	-1,641
Understand ethnic and cultural differences	1,00	4,00	1,9770	1,27536	,822	-1,108
Observe religion	1,00	2,00	1,2763	,44791	1,005	-,996
Build relationships with the opposite sex	1,00	4,00	1,9079	1,15387	,869	-,809
Find your way in life	1,00	5,00	2,2336	1,27740	,808	-,412
Talking about yourself to other people	1,00	5,00	2,3355	1,22107	,474	-,455
Live in this climate	1,00	4,00	2,5428	1,15104	-,112	-1,422
Family relationships	1,00	3,00	1,3520	,63282	1,594	1,272
The pace of life	1,00	5,00	2,1645	1,09872	1,233	1,273

N - number of respondents, M - average, SD - standard deviation, Skew. - the coefficient of asymmetry, Kurt. - kurtosis coefficient

Arab students, studying in Russia have a fairly low level of socio-cultural adaptation. They experience the greatest difficulties communicating with people of different nationalities. It is extremely difficult for foreign students to observe their religion under the circumstances. They have difficulty finding housing, using transport and shopping.

During interpreting the data, we were interested to establish if there are differences between ethnic identity, cultural distance, acculturation and adaptation among Arab students depending on the country of the respondents - Morocco, Egypt, Syria. With the help of an analysis of variance, it was possible to establish differences in the scales of sociocultural adaptation and cultural distance. The results are presented in table 5 and 6.

Table 5 Differences in cultural distance and sociocultural adaptation: results of an analysis of variance

Scales	Countries	N	Mean	95% Confidence interval for mean		Min	Max
				bottom bound	upper bound		
<i>Cultural distance</i>	<i>Syria</i>	56	2,4213	2,3961	2,4465	2,25	2,58
	<i>Egypt</i>	84	2,0580	1,9343	2,1818	1,58	2,50
	<i>Morocco</i>	108	2,7103	2,5742	2,8464	1,92	3,42
<i>Sociocultural adaptation</i>	<i>Syria</i>	56	2,0857	1,9777	2,1937	1,70	2,50
	<i>Egypt</i>	84	1,7726	1,7374	1,8079	1,55	1,95
	<i>Morocco</i>	108	2,5194	2,4779	2,5610	2,30	2,85

Table 6 Differences in cultural distance and sociocultural adaptation: results of an analysis of variance

Scales		Sum of squares	St.sv	Medium square	F	p
<i>Cultural distance</i>	Between groups	53,750	4	13,437	86,839	<,001
	Within groups	46,267	299	,155		
	Total	100,017	303			
<i>Sociocultural adaptation</i>	Between groups	83,965	4	20,991	386,841	<,001
	Within groups	16,225	299	,054		
	Total	100,190	303			

We found differences in the socio-cultural adaptation of Arab students studying in Russia. Despite the rather low level of socio-cultural adaptation among all Arab respondents, students from Egypt experience the greatest difficulties (with $F = 386.8$; $p < 0.001$). Students from Morocco adapt a little better, they experience less hassle when entering another cultural community. There are differences in the perceived cultural distance of Arab respondents. For students from Egypt, Arab culture differs from a Russian culture in several ways. Thus, sensing a high cultural distance, it is extremely difficult for a foreign

student to adapt to life and study in a foreign culture society. Further, we carried out correlation and regression analysis in order to establish the relationship between ethnic identity, perceived cultural distance, socio-cultural adaptation and the two dominant strategies. The link was only established between cultural distance and sociocultural adaptation (see Tables 7 and 8).

Table 7 Correlation Analysis Results

Scales	Ethnic identity	Cultural distance	Integration	Assimilation	Sociocultural adaptation
Ethnic identity	1,000	-,004	-,064	-,006	,031
Cultural distance	-,004	1,000	-,038	,002	-,157**
Integration	-,064	-,038	1,000	,102	-,042
Assimilation	-,006	,002	,102	1,000	,021
Sociocultural adaptation	,031	-,157**	-,042	,021	1,000

Table 8 Regression Analysis Results

Independent variable	Dependent variable			
	Ethnic identity	Cultural distance	Integration	Assimilation
Sociocultural adaptation	0,096	-0,182	-0,38	0,005
R ²	0,37	0,33	0,43	0,43
F	5,841	10,291**	2,648	2,201

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Cultural distance affects sociocultural distance. A high level of cultural distance leads to a low level of sociocultural adaptation. Therefore, the greater the differences between the culture of the migrant and the host culture, the more difficult and time-consuming the process of its adaptation is.

Discussion Of The Collected Data

Adaptation to the educational space of a university is a process that is a prerequisite and a way of socialization, allowing international students to actively engage in various elements of the social environment. This process can be made more complicated as a result of existing linguistic, every day, climatic, intercultural, interethnic, and motivational barriers.

Serious difficulties arise for almost all students from Arab countries with an addiction to food, new everyday clothes, the need to communicate with people of different nationalities, etc. Religion can also

affect adaptation. Islam in moderation has a positive effect on the learning process. In some Arab countries, there are no women teachers at all, so students from such countries have to get used to Russian women teachers. In Arab culture there is a great difference between a man and a woman, therefore, most likely, the male teacher will enjoy the greatest authority among Arab students at the initial stage of adaptation and entry into the educational environment.

Differences were found in the socio-cultural adaptation of Arab students depending on their home country. Since the sample included students from Morocco, Egypt, Syria, despite the rather low level of socio-cultural adaptation of all Arab respondents, students from Egypt experience the greatest difficulties. It is difficult for them to purchase food, prepare food, use public transport, etc. Students from Morocco adapt slightly better, they experience fewer difficulties entering another cultural community. Earlier Research experience shows that the learning ability of Arab students from different countries differs. Students from Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia do much better than students from other Arab countries. This is because of the French education system that has survived in these countries since the colonization of the French education system (Pavlyukova & Dryagalova, 2015).

Arab students studying in Russia note the differences between Arab and Russian culture in terms of language, appearance, attitude towards women, food intake. As noted in previous studies, most Western countries have established an equality between men and women, but Arabs still think that these two sexes have completely different personal qualities. Women in Arab culture are forbidden to move independently without being accompanied by a husband / relative, to communicate with a man (not a husband / relative). The size of the scholarship set by the government for studies is 3 times lower than for men. There are restrictions in sports. In Arab countries, there is an insufficient number of higher educational institutions for women, which is associated with the decision of many women to get education abroad (Cherkas & Turk, 2019; Chupova & Turk, 2019), for example, in Russia. Russians and representatives of Arab countries, according to Arab students, have somewhat similar views on family relations and parenting. Despite similarities in both cultures, the level of cultural distance is still quite high. Feeling a high cultural distance, it is extremely difficult for a foreign student to adapt to life and study in a foreign cultural society.

Analyzing the peculiarities of ethnic identity, we found that Arab students have a rather strong ethnic identity; they feel pride of their ethnic group and feel a strong attachment to it. When adapting in a foreign cultural environment, two strategies of acculturation are preferred - integration and assimilation. We cannot recognize the assimilation strategy as the most successful strategy of acculturation, and it is little preferred by our migrant respondents. This strategy contains three dangers: the possibility of being rejected by members of your cultural group; the opportunity to be rejected by members of the majority group; the likelihood of experiencing excessive stress when trying to simultaneously gain new attitudes and behaviors and get rid of old ones. Recent research (Berry 1997; Berry et al 2006) showed that when an individual strives for integration and achieves it, then his psychological and sociocultural adaptation, in fact, is more positive than with assimilation, separation or marginalization. Such individuals are competent in both cultures.

At the last stage of the study, it was possible to reveal that cultural distance affects sociocultural distance among Arab students studying in Russia. A high level of cultural distance leads to a low level of sociocultural adaptation. According to D. Berry, the distance between cultures is directly proportional to the number of changes that a migrant will have to make in his behavior in order to adapt to a new cultural environment (Berry, 2003).

Undoubtedly, ethnic identity and acculturation strategies affect the socio-cultural adaptation of migrants in the host country. However, on a sample of foreign Arab students, we established that it is precisely the difference in cultures that strongly influences the low level of sociocultural adaptation. Further research on a sample of other groups of foreign students will help to establish additional determinants of the socio-cultural adaptation of young migrants in Russia.

Conclusion

Studying international students and creating a favourable educational environment for them in Russia has motivated the researchers to investigate the peculiarities of how students adapt to new living and learning conditions. Sociocultural adaptation contributes to rapid inclusion in the educational process, improving the quality of training of young people and painless transition to a new cultural context. The successful adaptation of international students depends on the ability to predict difficult situations and develop the best options for their resolution.

The data obtained contribute to the further development of ideas about the role of cultural distance, ethnic identity, acculturation strategies in adaptation among international students from Morocco, Syria, Egypt. The practical significance lies in the fact that the results can be used in the disciplines "Psychology of Personality", "Intercultural Communication", "Intercultural Interaction in the Modern World". The data can be used in the development of adaptation programs for international students adapting to a new university. The limitations of the study are the impossibility of disseminating the results to all representatives of the studied cultures, however, the results can serve as a basis for further research in this area.

Abbreviations

M – Mean

St. Dev. – Standart Deviation

F – F-criterion

P – p-level

Declarations

Ethics Approval. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Consent to participate. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Consent for publication. Not applicable.

Availability of data and material. The dataset supporting the conclusions of this article are available on request (by contacting vera_goldyreva@mail.ru).

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