Anxiety Levels Among Japanese Students on American Campuses: Implications for Academic Advisors

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International students face a variety of challenges related to language difficulties, immigration issues, and culture shock. Yet, Asian students are less likely to seek help for their emotional and interpersonal problems than their American counterparts due to culturally different help-seeking preferences. This study examines levels of anxiety among Japanese international students and then compares them to those of Americans. Implications for academic advisors are discussed.

The population of international students is increasing rapidly. During the 1995–96 academic year, more than 1.2 million students pursued higher education outside their home country; 453,787 of these students were attending universities in the United States (Desruisseaux, 1996). Students from Asia comprise the majority (57%) of the international student population worldwide (Davis, 1995). Thus college student affairs professionals and faculty must be knowledgeable about Asian cultures to improve their advising, teaching, and counseling skills.

Most Asian students come from cultures in which counseling services are nonexistent (Hendricks & Skinner, 1975). In east Asian countries in particular, the idea of obtaining professional help is a foreign concept and assistance is usually sought from family members and friends (Sue & Sue, 1990). When international students seek counseling they prefer direct interventions (Exum & Lau, 1988; Leong & Sedlacek, 1986). They want solutions to specific problems and experience dissatisfaction with nondirective approaches that place heavy emphasis on self-disclosure and responsibility. In addition, Asian students are more likely to get help for academic and career problems whereas Americans are more likely to present emotional and interpersonal problems (Leong & Sedlacek, 1986; Tracey, Leong, & Glidden, 1986).

One identified reason that Asian students rarely bring up emotional or interpersonal issues is the cultural value they place on saving face. In general, Asians consider it very important to honor the family name and maintain an expected image, and discussion of interpersonal and emotional problems threatens individual and family standing in the Asian community (Lin, Tardiff, Donetz, & Goretsky, 1978; Tracy, Leong, & Glidden, 1986). When these students seek help from an academic advisor or counselor they tend to first reveal physical ailments and later, after the helper has demonstrated a willingness to listen, their psychological or interpersonal complaints (Lebra, 1976). The presentation of physical problems is fairly common and Pedersen (1991, p. 19) suggests: "these symptoms of physical illness are the student's way of saving face rather than admitting to psychological symptoms. . . ."

The typical western response has been to refer such students to a physician, who typically finds nothing more than minor medical problems (MacDougall, Wei, & Corcoran, 1992). The presentation of vague symptoms has been termed "foreign student syndrome" (Pedersen, 1991; Ward, 1967) and is sometimes trivialized. In one of the few empirical studies comparing the counseling needs of international and domestic student populations, Cheng, Leong, and Geist (1993) found that Asian international students experienced a greater degree of personal and emotional problems than do American students. Similarly, Baron and Matsuyama (1987) compared American and Japanese college students and found that the Japanese displayed significantly more symptoms of depression.

Japanese Students

There is considerable variety among Asian cultures and care must be taken not to consider Asians a homogenous group (Pedersen, 1991). Japan produces the largest number of Asian international students studying in the United States. In the academic year 1994–1995, enrollment of Japanese students in American universities increased by 3.4% from the previous year and the total number reached 45,280 (Davis, 1995). Because of their distinctive cultural and educational background, Japanese students face a number of difficulties in meeting new role expectations at American universities.

White (1989) pointed out that Japanese teachers are held in very high esteem. In Japan, a

child's work commitment is highly affected by positive and supportive rapport with teachers. This is not limited to intellectual development; Japanese teachers also recognize their involvement in a student's emotional development and share responsibility to motivate the student's intellectual engagement. Since Japanese students have close teacher-student relationships, addressing emotional and interpersonal problems is somewhat unnecessary—it is expected that teachers will become aware of issues that are not overtly expressed (White, 1989). Students are highly dependent on their teachers' assistance and may not be comfortable seeking help other than from their instructors.

The communication style of Japanese students also plays an important role in the nature of their help-seeking behavior (Hall & Hall, 1990). In daily life, Japanese people have extensive information networks with the important persons in their lives. Because Japanese society operates in a "high-context" communication system, where information flows freely and there is a commonality of experience, they do not require, nor do they expect, much background information in any given exchange (Hall & Hall, 1987). They are well-informed and maintain extensive information networks to insure that they are current on the latest developments. Thus, Japanese students may expect academic advisors or counselors to perceive their interpersonal and emotional problems during counseling even when these issues have been indirectly presented (Hall & Hall, 1990).

Collectivism is another idea central to Japanese society (Tracey, Leong, & Glidden, 1986). In a collective culture, harmony within a group is very important and direct conflicts are avoided. Ting-Toomy (1989) explained this culture's "face-maintenance" character. Losing face—diverging from the ideal image—endangers a person's kinship and networking ties to significant others, perhaps even more so in Japan than in other Asian cultures.

Although some mutual nonverbal cues between American and Japanese students are shared (Sweeney, Cottle, & Kobayashi, 1980), Japanese language and communication styles have distinctive characteristics. Japanese prefer indirect and vague use of language; they prefer ambiguous terminology. Also, sentences are frequently left unfinished; a speaker expects the listener to conclude the unexpressed lines (Harris & Moran, 1991). Because of such language preferences, Japanese students are sometimes misunderstood and thought inarticulate.

Along with language and communication issues, Harris and Moran (1991) listed some critical aspects of human relationships in Japanese culture. Japanese people generally have a positive attitude towards Americans, but they become suspicious of aggressive persons. Also, a degree of social- and self-control disguises many emotional qualities of Japanese character and relationships. Since adhering to societal norms is important, Japanese students often find difficulty dealing with unexpected or novel situations (Harris & Moran, 1991).

Although the characteristics noted are common to the Japanese, the members of the younger generation tend to be less adherent to some traditional values (Harris & Moran, 1991). They have a greater sense of individualism and are assumed to adjust to American life more quickly. However, many Japanese students preserve traditional values, and culturally sensitive counseling and advising sessions are important.

Method

Participants

Participants were current students (N = 142) attending one of several colleges in a large metropolitan area in the northwestern United States because each had limited Japanese student enrollments. The sample consisted of 79 native-born American students and 63 international students from Japan.

Measures

The Cultural Anxiety Scale (CAS) (MacDougall et al., 1992) was used as a measure of distress for this study. It asks about levels of anxiousness in each of 30 situations as depicted on a Likert scale: 1 = never or almost never; 2 = sometimes; 3 = often; and 4 = always or almost always. One-half of the survey items were reverse scored. The items were divided into those addressing academic life (items 1 to 15) and social and personal life (items 16 to 30). Total scores could range from 30 to 120 with each subscale ranging from 15 to 60. Data on items 12 through 14 of the academic anxiety section were omitted from analysis due to printing errors in the survey. The final CAS score range was 27 to 108 and the academic subscale range was 12 to 48. Higher scores represent greater anxiety level. Test-retest reliability for the CAS has been estimated at r = 0.85 (Eid & Jordan, 1989).

Procedures

Surveys were mailed directly to 200 randomly selected participants (100 Japanese and 100 American) with a return envelope. Thirty American and 41 Japanese students returned the survey for an overall response rate of 35.5%—not unusual for this type of survey. To increase the sample size, intact classes were randomly selected for additional data collection. For Americans, the CAS was administered in two undergraduate psychology classes (Motivation and Leadership, and Statistics). Additional Japanese participants were sampled from intact classes in an international business program. All students in these classes agreed to volunteer which added 49 American and 22 Japanese participants. Those contacted through their classes were statistically indistinguishable from the original group with regard to gender composition, marital status, age, and year in school.

Results

Demographic Variables

Japanese and American participants were similar on several demographic variables. Statistical comparisons found no significant differences between the groups with regard to gender composition, years of college experience, age, or marital status. For the total sample, approximately 70% were female; nearly equal numbers were designated as first-year, sophomore, junior, and senior; the modal age was 22 years; and 95% were single.

Anxiety Level Comparisons

The mean and standard deviation of each group were computed for the aggregate measure and then for each subscale (academic and social/personal anxiety). Comparisons were conducted using *t*-test analysis to determine significant anxiety-level differences overall and in the academic and social/person areas.

A significant difference in the overall CAS score showed that Japanese students demonstrate higher anxiety. See Table 1. On the academic subscale Japanese students reported significantly higher anxiety than Americans. Higher CAS subscores on other survey items suggest that Japanese students also have greater social/personal anxiety than U.S. participants.

Eleven academic items yielded significant differences between American and Japanese students. The *t*-test results for group differences on specific survey items on academics can be found in Table 2a. Japanese students reported greater general anxiety associated with their academic performance, participation in classroom discussions, being called on in class, getting along with professors, making a presentation in front of the class, writing skills, and the fairness of professors' evaluations. Conversely, American students reported being more anxious when taking tests and preparing assignments. Also, Americans felt greater academic pressure, were more frequently tense during class, and thought professors were unfair in their evaluations.

With regard to social and personal settings, eight items yielded significant differences. See Table 2b. Japanese students expressed greater difficulty in getting along with the people around them, more tension meeting new people, and less confidence in their social skills than their American counterparts. They also reported less frequently meeting their own expectations, having less stability in their lives, being less calm, were less hopeful about their future, and thought their communities less friendly than did American students. Americans did not score higher on any personal/social item.

Discussion

The significant differences in anxiety level between American and Japanese students are con-

Table 1 *t*-test results for nationality comparison on cultural anxiety scale by subscale

	Americans (n = 79)		Japanese (n = 63)		
CAS Section	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*-value
Total Score	50.9	10.2	57.0	9.0	3.68**
Academic Anxiety	23.9	5.1	26.1	4.4	2.68*
Social/Personal Anxiety	27.0	6.1	30.9	5.8	3.82**

Notes. $df = 140$ for all *t*-tests.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

Table 2a *t*-test results for nationality comparisons on CAS academic items

Survey Item	Americans		Japanese		
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*-value
Satisfied with academic performance+	2.06	0.65	2.51	0.80	3.66***
Enjoy participating in class discussions+	2.34	0.80	2.74	0.84	2.93**
Have trouble concentrating on learning	2.01	0.74	2.15	0.82	0.27
Get nervous when called on in class	2.17	0.92	2.54	0.88	2.39*
Get along with professors+	1.45	0.57	2.25	0.72	7.37***
Feel comfortable making presentations in front of the class+	2.21	1.00	2.88	0.97	4.02***
Feel shaky during tests	2.02	0.96	1.19	0.54	6.18***
Nerves get tight when preparing assignments	1.74	0.85	1.12	0.34	5.43***
Have confidence in writing skills+	1.83	0.72	3.09	0.76	10.10***
Feel a great deal of academic pressure	2.65	0.77	2.14	1.01	3.36***
Feel tense during class	1.51	0.64	1.25	0.65	2.44*
Feel professors are fair in their evaluations+	1.84	0.56	2.17	0.68	3.13**

Notes. + indicates the item was reverse scored; Likert response never was scored as 4.
$df = 140$ for all *t*-tests.
*$p < 0.05$.
**$p < 0.01$.
***$p < 0.001$.

Table 2b *t*-test results for nationality comparisons on CAS social/personal items

Survey Item	Americans		Japanese		
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*-value
Social life is enjoyable+	1.62	0.67	1.65	0.70	0.27
Feel lonely	1.81	0.79	1.71	0.87	0.69
Get along with people around me+	1.34	0.53	1.92	0.68	5.71***
Feel tense meeting new people	1.66	0.71	1.92	0.83	2.03*
Have confidence in social skills+	1.54	0.66	2.51	0.89	6.99***
Feel looked down upon	1.63	0.68	1.41	0.66	1.93
Meet own expectations+	2.14	0.75	2.57	0.89	3.14**
Feel uneasy when meeting others	1.73	0.76	1.79	0.72	0.47
Feel life is stable+	1.84	0.89	2.22	0.81	2.58*
Feel frustrated	2.09	0.70	1.90	0.87	1.39
Feel calm+	2.12	0.72	2.39	0.85	2.04*
See hope in future+	1.40	0.59	2.38	0.89	7.85***
Think community is friendly+	1.64	0.70	2.08	0.81	3.43**
Worry about financial situation	2.54	0.90	2.52	1.04	0.13
Satisfied with housing+	1.91	0.75	1.90	0.96	0.05

Notes. + indicates the item was reverse scored; Likert response never was scored as 4.
$df = 140$ for all *t*-tests.
*$p < 0.05$.
**$p < 0.01$.
***$p < 0.001$.

sistent with the findings of Cheng, Leong, and Geist (1993) who found that Asian international students experience a greater degree of personal and emotional problems. They also support the findings of Baron and Matsuyama (1987) who reported that Japanese students had more symptoms of anxiety than did American students.

One explanation for Japanese students' greater academic anxiety is the needed adjustment to American higher education, which is quite different than the Japanese system. Japanese educators advocate rote learning and discourage independent thinking (Hall & Hall, 1987). Japanese students are unaccustomed to initiating interaction in the classroom (Garner, 1989; Kaikai, 1989). As indicated by the data in this study, Japanese students are more anxious about participating in class and experience discomfort at making classroom presentations.Typically, Japanese prefer indirect communication—even when they hold strong opinions. By using unexplicit phrases, the speaker intends to leave room for the other person(s) to disagree without conflict (Tanaka, 1990). This also serves as a face-maintenance mechanism as it protects one from risking peace and harmony with others. Therefore, the demands of the typical American classroom discussion or debate may be an overwhelming adjustment.

Another factor contributing to the academic anxiety levels observed is the language barrier. Some Japanese students do not have the English proficiency level necessary for successful academic performance. Dunnett (1985) noted that many international students, even though they may be competent in conversational English, appear to have difficulty participating in higher level classes and seminar discussions due to the differences in conversational and professional language. In addition, Japanese students have increased difficulty in acquiring the English language—verbal and written—because of its dissimilarity to Japanese (Liskin-Gasparro, 1982).

Cultural differences in the teacher-student relationship increase Japanese students' anxiety in academic settings. Japanese and Americans differ in their perceptions of authority figures. As mentioned earlier, Japanese teachers are highly responsible for quality involvement in both intellectual and emotional student development (White, 1989). Therefore, Japanese (and other students with similar educational backgrounds) tend to be more dependent—or even demanding—under the assumption that professors should show, tell, or do for them that for which they would be expected to assume individual responsibility in American culture (Charles & Stewart, 1991).

In social/personal settings, Japanese students may be experiencing some frustration due to their foreign status, especially those who have had no experience overseas or have not spent much time in the U.S. New arrivals typically experience culture shock, which includes loneliness, depression, irritability, or rigidity—not characteristics conducive to academic success (Oropeza, Fitzgibbon, & Baron, 1991). The degree of culture shock experienced depends, to some degree, upon the level of dissimilarity between the two cultures with regard to communication styles, traditions, social interaction, gender roles, lifestyles, and so forth. Factors such as emotional stability, confidence in social skills, and flexibility are critical to overall adjustment. Also, changes in status, both social and economic, can "create deep feelings of loss, grief, and resentment as the student struggles to adjust to his or her new situation" (Oropeza, Fitzgibbon, & Baron, 1991, p. 281).

Even Japanese students who have well-developed social skills in their home country may come to the United States and lose confidence in their skills due to the keen cultural differences in communication style and language. The emphasis on the individual, direct expression, and the American concept of friendship are areas in which many Japanese students have difficulty adapting.

Foreign student status is also a possible source for Japanese students' anxiety about the future. Even if a Japanese student wants to work in the U.S. after graduation, he or she will likely be forced to leave the country due to difficulty obtaining a work visa or permanent residency. This is particularly true in light of the 1997 immigration rules.

Financial issues are also crucial to international students and can foster a negative vision of their future. As a result of declines in research funds and other fiscal problems in American higher education, only 16.5% of foreign students are funded by U.S. colleges and universities (Altbach, 1997). Since the law prohibits foreign students from working off campus (except under special conditions), and since they are not eligible for federal loans, most international students heavily depend on their personal and family funds for their education.

Implications for Academic Advisors

Helping students from diverse educational and cultural backgrounds requires special advising and interpersonal skills (Althen, 1983; Sue & Sue, 1990). Although the International Student

Advisors' Office usually functions primarily to assist foreign students with legal and financial requirements, it is often seen as a potential resource for students in other areas as well. Because international students at American universities experience a variety of issues related to language problems, immigration difficulties, culture shock, and culture fatigue (Leong, 1985), international student advisors are continually challenged to update their knowledge and develop appropriate interventions. For example, navigating day-to-day life in America, classroom expectations, and developing support networks are among a host of potential topics suitable for an orientation program for foreign students.

Unfortunately, on many campuses the International Student Office is limited in resources and staff or may not even exist. Moreover, even where resources are available, this office cannot meet all the needs of the international student population. Academic advisors, residence hall staff, faculty members, and counseling center staff also provide a variety of services to international students.

Academic advisors can play a critical role in meeting the needs of international students. Not only must the advisor be mindful that international students differ from American students in the degree of their needs, but also in their preferences for seeking help (Leong & Sedlacek, 1989). For instance, academic advisors need to recognize cultural differences, language limitations, adjustment issues, and so forth to help foreign students meet the demands of their degree programs (Charles & Stewart, 1991). When presented with a student's physical complaints, academic advisors must recognize them as a possible metaphor for emotional or interpersonal difficulties. Probing for additional information is necessary in such cases to identify whether referral to a campus health center or the counseling center would be most appropriate. While the possibility of illnesses must not be overlooked, advisors should not send the student to campus health personnel without ascertaining if her or his symptoms are signals to other problems.

While Japanese students may experience increased anxiety due to their unique cultural characteristics, such distress is common to the international student population. International students in general feel a great deal of pressure as academics have been a major factor in achieving success in their country of origin and remains so in the U.S. Surveys show that concerns about study, composition, and library skills, as well as test-taking anxiety, rank high as educational problems among international students (Leong, 1984). Academic advisors should plan to take a proactive approach regarding these issues by being well informed about campus resources which provide assistance in these areas and by working closely with faculty.

Faculty members should be aware that they can contribute to international students' adjustment by accommodating cultural differences. Although most international students have adequate competencies to pursue their academic goals, becoming accustomed to American educational practices is difficult for some. The academic advisor should encourage faculty members who teach international students to vary their discussion techniques and help those who are reticent to participate in class. One method is to call on students instead of waiting for students to speak up (Garner, 1989). At the beginning of the course, either verbally or via the course syllabus, faculty members should be encouraged to explicitly delineate student responsibilities with regard to participation and discussion. Jenkins (1997) suggested that instructors encourage international students to visit them during office hours at the beginning of the term. This would give the instructor opportunities to go over class expectations such as the importance of the syllabus, assignment sheet, office hours, attendance, and their expectations of students. Faculty members often assume that students understand their responsibilities and the course material simply because the latter did not ask questions in the classroom. Japanese students, like most international students, respond better to instructors in a private setting rather than in the presence of other students.

Expanding financial support for international students would help decrease their anxiety about monetary issues. Though academic advisors seldom can impact fiscal policy making, they should make students aware of scholarships available to foreign nationals and inquire about each student's financial situation. A close working relationship with the financial aid office is an essential avenue for information and referrals.

Advisors should establish referral protocols with their campus mental health professionals. The academic advising context is often too brief (or subject to other constraints) to allow for in-depth exploration of personal issues. Though Japanese students rarely seek out mental health professionals, the academic advisor is in an excellent position to identify symptoms of emotional

distress and make a referral when necessary. For this process to be effective, two components must be in place. First, the advisor must possess the skills necessary to recognize students' mental health needs. (Counseling center staff might be available for brief training.) Second, the referral process must be streamlined: referral methods should be established well in advance, and the academic advisor may need to get more involved than with domestic students. The academic advisor may need to make the appointment and accompany the student to the first session. The counseling center staff must have a sensitivity to the cultural dynamics of Japanese students, particularly the importance of saving face. The development and maintenance of a trusting relationship between advisor and student, and the successful transfer of that relationship to the counselor is critical if Japanese students are to be afforded the services of the counseling center.

The mental health field has been very active in its recognition of cultural rolls over the last decade. However, in-service training for advisors and counselors might be necessary to increase awareness of the many issues involved in working with foreign students. At the same time, an ongoing orientation or series of workshops can be targeted toward foreign students to familiarize them with mental health services on and off campus.

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