

## **Psycho Social Challenges of Indian Students Studying in Malaysian Universities**

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### **Abstract**

This article identifies unique Psycho Social problems experienced by Indian students in Malaysia. The uniqueness of these problems suggests the need to address them independently from other Indian and international student communities. First, an overview of the common sources of psycho social problems and specific stressors these students face is provided. This article then develops culturally sensitive programming recommendations to improve collaborative efforts between health providers, psychiatric social workers, faculty, and academic staff within universities to serve these students more effectively. This article addresses the mental health problems of Indian students who come from the origin of India and attend Malaysian universities. The article first explores the students' views of mental health, followed by an examination of common sources of mental health problems experienced by them. The main intent of the article is to develop a nuanced understanding that is needed to develop culturally sensitive programs and services. The article concludes with programming suggestions to guide collaborative efforts between health providers, mental health social workers, faculty, and academic staff within universities for serving these Indian students more effectively. The ultimate goal is to help Indian students to enhance their functioning on university campuses.

### **Introduction**

The increase in cultural diversity in the Malaysia is reflected in its educational systems. Being an important center of information and advanced technology, along with its generous scholarship policy, the Malaysia attracts more international students than any other country. Indian students represent around 19% and majority of these students are from Tamil Nadu origin. Transition to university can be a dramatic life

change for all young people. First year university students can experience elevated psychological distress (Fisher & Hood, 1987), and features of the new environment can interact with personality factors to precipitate psychological problems (Fisher, Murray, & Frazer, 1985). Therefore, not surprisingly, international students who enter Malaysian universities and also must cope with cultural relocation tend to experience more psychological problems than do Malaysian students (Leong & Chou, 1996; Mori, 2000; Pedersen, 1991; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994). In addition, Yeh and Inose (2003) found that international students from Asian countries, including China, experience more acculturative stress.

Research suggests that Indian students' psychological problems should not be simply considered the same as those of Indian immigrants. Berry, Kim, Minde, and Mok (1987) identified five distinct different acculturation groups on the basis of the nature of their contact with the host culture: immigrants, refugees, native people, ethnic groups, and sojourners. Students are most accurately described as sojourners according to this classification scheme their status as sojourners is more likely to contribute to difficulties such as lack of experience, social connectedness, and language ability. They are also less likely to have time to develop coping mechanisms to cope with discrimination and isolation and to establish a social support system, and may be more likely to be subject to many legal restrictions with regard to their academic eligibility and employment opportunities in Malaysia than immigrants (Bikos & Furry, 1999). However, despite the unique issues faced by Indian students, little research has been done on this population.

### **Emotional Behavioral Problems of Indian youth**

The problem is not that there are problems. The problem is expecting otherwise and thinking that having problems is a problem. (Theodore Rubin). Even though many physicians, parents and early childhood educators might still believe that infants and toddlers are too young to have social and emotional problems, or that they will 'grow out of it', research suggests that identifying infants and toddlers at risk of behavioral, social and emotional problems is crucial. Early recognition can prevent problem behavior from becoming the standard. What's more, considering the strong relationship between childhood social and emotional problems and later delinquency and criminality, early interventions may reduce the staggering social costs associated with criminal behavior.

The prevalence of emotional and behavioral disorders in among Indian youth is not relatively new, and its development is challenged by the question as to what really constitutes an emotional or behavioral 'problem'. The main cause could be cultural mal adjustment and displacement. Emotional and Behavioral Problems of Indian youth begins with an overview of common problems, which Gimpel and Holland have categorized into internal and external problems, abuse and neglect problems and pervasive developmental disorders (additionally, there is a miscellaneous category. characteristics of standardized social /emotional / behavior screening tools, most of which assess general social and emotional behaviors as well as adaptive abilities and play skills. Qualitative methods, such as interviews with teachers, parents, child, and

observation techniques and offer thus an inclusive and comprehensive approach to early intervention.

Emotional and Behavioral Problems of Indian youth provides parents who are concerned about the emotional or behavioral development of their children with practical, effective and applicable information. While it leaves questions related to the deeper meaning and social construction of emotional and behavioral problems unanswered.

## **Concepts of Mental Health in Indian Culture**

### **Introverted Concepts of Mental Health**

Indian and Malaysian cultures are almost same except few cultural variations. First, there are cultural variations in the concept of mental health. It has been suggested that Malaysian culture has introverted inclinations, while modern Indian culture has extroverted inclinations Indian culture with western concepts of mental health include role performance, adaptation, social functioning, and well-being in various aspects of social life (Laffrey, 1986). Individuals should function well in their families and employment settings. They also should improve or change oppressive social systems so as to assert their own rights and functions (Read & Wallcraft, 1995).

In contrast, the introverted inclinations of Malaysian culture imply self-absorption or self-demand, but not being demanding of others or trying to change the external environment The traditional Confucian concepts of mental health, which still advances in social work, Spring 2009, 10(1) 71 have a strong influence on Indian people, suggest both internal and external requirements for individuals to maintain good mental health. The internal requirements encourage people to restrain emotions, including the expression of intense emotions and desires (Sue & Sue, 1990). It suggests a step-by-step process to cultivate one's mind, restrain one's emotion, and discipline one's behavior so as to achieve peace of mind. The external requirements of Confucian concepts of mental health are moral standards in interpersonal and societal interactions. This suggests that one has to be kind, humane, and considerate in interactions with others; to be faithful to one's friends, family, and country; and to be forgiving of others' faults and shortcomings. In short, internally, a mentally healthy individual is self-cultivated with a purified mind, a well-disciplined manner and mild expressions of emotion; externally, an individual is humane, righteous, faithful, and forgiving in interactions with others.

### **Integration of Body and Mind**

The body and mind are integrated no distinction is made between physical and mental illness. Psychological, physical, and social factors are viewed as collectively contributing to the development of specific symptoms and illness. Yet, people tend to manifest stress through physical symptoms. For example, "neurological weakness" is the preferred diagnosis over the psychological diagnosis of major depression; because it recognizes the presence of a physical process. Indian students therefore often seek medical help for their physical complaints, such as sleep disturbances, eating problems, fatigue, stomachache, or headache, even when those problems may stem from psychological stressors

**Social Interaction and Communication Problems**

Social interaction is a form of action with one another as a means of communication both verbally and non-verbally. These actions can have different meanings depending on where we live and what you are doing at that given time. As well, societies share many of the same meanings of different types of social interaction that other societies may not. Social interaction is present in all societies and plays a huge part in how people relate to each other, do tasks, and in general, live their lives. Social interaction is the process by which people act towards or respond to one another. Such interaction involves the interplay of many factors including our perceptions, cognitions and behaviors in specific social contexts.

**Ethnicity and social interaction**

Social interaction can be affected by several factors, such as ethnicity, gender and social class. In general, ethnicity plays a huge role because it regulates the way the environment is perceived by providing a foundation for what is right and acceptable. Ethnicity becomes a medium through which every experience is measured and thus controls what effect it has on an individual's identity. The ethnicity of the students will have difference in their perceptions of social interaction.

Indian students encounter values and customs in the Malaysia that contradict those of their country of origin, such as cooperation versus competition (Lynch, 1992), collectivism versus individualism, and hierarchical relationships versus equality of relationships (Sue & Sue, 1990). The accepted norms and behaviors in their country of origin may be ridiculed or misunderstood in the new environment, which can create confusion and discomfort (Lynch, 1992). The students are aware of the need to learn different values and cultural norms; however, despite the widespread belief that adolescents can adjust easily to a new culture. This learning process is not easy and requires considerable time for many. Overall, differences in cultural values and customs, especially when coupled with other factors such as language, often create social interaction, social connectedness, and social communication problems.

Cross-cultural differences in social interaction may prevent Indian students from forming close relationships with Malaysian students and may contribute to acculturative stress (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). Skill in English and strong cultural differences in interactional styles are among the factors argued to contribute to such problems.

**Social Support and Social Connectedness**

Social connectedness refers to the relationships people have with others.

Social connectedness is integral to wellbeing. People are defined by their social roles, whether as partners, parents, children, friends, caregivers, teammates, staff or employers, or a myriad of other roles. Relationships give people support, happiness, contentment and a sense they belong and have a role to play in society.<sup>100</sup> They also mean people have support networks in place they can call on for help during hard times.

Social connectedness also refers to people joining together to achieve shared goals that benefit each other and society as a whole – this may range from working together

as part of a business to contributing to their communities through voluntary groups. Several studies have demonstrated links between social connectedness and the performance of the economy and positive outcomes for individual health and wellbeing. Social connectedness is fostered when family relationships are positive, and when people have the skills and opportunities to make friends and to interact constructively with others. Good health, employment, and feeling safe and secure all increase people's chances of developing positive relationships. There can be many barriers to social connectedness. The tendency to make connections outside the family varies between cultures and communities. Factors such as language differences, high levels of inequality and tensions between members of different ethnic groups can create barriers between people.

### **Indicators**

Five indicators are used to measure levels of social connectedness. These are: telephone and internet access in the home, regular contact with family/friends, trust in others, the proportion of the population experiencing loneliness and contact between young people and their parents.

Together, the five indicators measure the opportunities for and the actual levels of connection between people, both within their immediate social groups and within the wider community. Access to the internet is significant. It improves people's ability to access information and, as a consequence, it provides more opportunities for people to participate in society. Both the telephone and the internet enable people to keep in touch without seeing each other face to face. This means social connectedness can be maintained when people are in different cities or even in different countries. It also means new social networks can be opened up across geographical boundaries between people who may never have met.

For most people, social networks centre on family and friends. The second indicator measures the proportion of people who keep in touch with family and friends by having them over for a meal at least once a month. Trust in others, the third indicator, measures the extent to which people expect others to act fairly and honestly towards them. High levels of trust enhance wellbeing by facilitating co-operative behavior among people who otherwise do not know each other. Trust also enhances people's ability to develop positive relationships with others. The fourth indicator measures levels of loneliness. Feelings of isolation and loneliness undermine overall wellbeing and can be detrimental to people's physical and emotional health, resulting in stress, anxiety or depression. The final indicator, the proportion of young people who report getting enough time each week with their parents, is a measure of the extent to which people in need of care and nurturing receive that support

### **Social Support**

Research indicates that a loss of social support has a significant influence on the psychological well-being of Indian students; students may be suddenly deprived of social supports that validate their sense of self-esteem and provide emotional and social support (Sandhu, 1995). Normal responses to the withdrawal of social support include anxiety, ranging from irritation and mild annoyance to the panic of extreme

pain and the feelings of disorientation which accompany being lost (Pedersen, 1991). Loss of social support and lack of social connectedness contribute to students' acculturative stress. This acculturative stress often accompanies emotional pain, such as feelings of powerlessness, marginality, inferiority, loneliness, and perceived alienation and discrimination (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1998). In addition, particularly difficult acculturative stress experiences tend to remain within the individuals over a long period of time.

### **Adjustment Problems in understanding the Language**

Problems in understanding the new language appear to be one of the most challenging issues for Indian students (Mori, 2000). In addition, students appear to have the greatest difficulty in the use of the English language among other students. Higher frequency of use, fluency level, and the degree to which participants felt comfortable speaking English, predicted lower levels of acculturative distress among Indian students. This finding is associated with the fact that higher English fluency indicates smoother interactions with majority group members. Students with higher English fluency are able to more easily interact with people in new cultural settings, and this leads to greater feelings of adjustment. Indian students also may be less embarrassed and less self-conscious about their accent or ethnic background (Barratt & Huba, 1994).

Higher levels of English language fluency also help Indian students perform at a higher level in some academic classes, because they may feel more comfortable in articulating their knowledge in classrooms and on essay exams or research papers (Kao & Gansneder, 1995;). In contrast, low English language fluency is likely to affect Indian students' academic performance, which in turn negatively affects their psychological well-being (Lin & Yi, 1997; Mori, 2000).

### **Academic Difficulties**

Indian students also are likely to experience academic and career problems (Yeh & Inose, 2003). There are several explanations for these negative outcomes. First, language difficulties and the difference in teaching styles between the Malaysia and India can negatively influence Indian students' academic performance, as they must learn entirely new classroom norms and skills (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Unfortunately, a strong emphasis on academic achievement can result in Indian students feeling too pressured to succeed the students also experience greater anxiety, loneliness, and feelings of isolation and have difficulties in social interaction compared to other college students (Sue & Morishima, 1982).

### **The role of resilience in mental and emotional health**

Being emotionally and mentally healthy doesn't mean never going through bad times or experiencing emotional problems. We all go through disappointments, loss, and change. And while these are normal parts of life, they can still cause sadness, anxiety, and stress. The difference is that students with good emotional health have an ability to bounce back from adversity, trauma, and stress. This ability is called *resilience*. Students who are emotionally and mentally healthy have the tools for coping with

difficult situations and maintaining a positive outlook. They remain focused, flexible, and creative in bad times as well as good. One of the key factors in resilience is the ability to balance your emotions. The capacity to recognize your emotions and express them appropriately helps you avoid getting stuck in depression, anxiety, or other negative mood states. Another key factor is having a strong support network. Having trusted people you can turn to for encouragement and support will boost your resilience in tough times.

### **Role of Psychiatric Social Workers**

It is important to educate Psychiatric social workers on the importance of multicultural training to increase their awareness of the help seeking behaviors of Indian students. Because of cultural stigma or their lack of awareness of the availability of psychological services, Indian students may not seek formal assistance and may be reluctant to discuss personal problems (Pedersen, 1991). Thus, student service professionals can conduct culturally sensitive outreach programs to increase these students' awareness of the available resources to normalize their experiences. Counseling centers could also be located close to or in the same building as the health center or student affairs office to reduce the potential stigma that students may have when seeking help. Psychiatric Social Workers need to be aware that the tendency to manifest stress through physical symptoms may lead to an underutilization of potentially beneficial counseling and mental health services. They should determine whether students are experiencing mental health problems while they are reporting physical problems, and refer such students to university or for counseling (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992).

Social workers also might assist Indian students by teaching them effective coping skills like problem-solving skills and seeking social support. Social Workers should focus on the specific problems identified by the students, and assess whether the identified problems have arisen from specific constraints such as language barriers. Second, assisting students in effectively solving problems and in enhancing social support requires social workers to be aware of and provide information about the resources that may help solve problems and provide social support. A more appropriate counseling goal might be to assist Indian students in developing cultural competence to function in the host culture while embracing their home culture. Such an approach might help them bridge and integrate the two cultures. During the counseling process, social workers should listen and talk to the students patiently. This allows the concerns of the students to be presented, and reduces the level of stress. They should take an active and directive role in counseling sessions. Social support, especially from one's academic program, is essential, and schools can play useful roles along these lines (Malinckrodt & Leong, 1992). Interventions to assist Indian students in developing a strong social support system may be effective. Professors also should be informed of the potential psychological and culture issues of their students and should be aware of class diversity.

### **Advisor Advisory system**

Introducing of advisor advisory systems in the colleges where students are provided with mentors may be another useful approach. The teaching staff members can act as

a mentor who can advise and guide the Indian students to come out of their psycho social problems. The quality of student-faculty relationships may be especially important for Indian students, because of their preference for formal sources of help and their difficulty in building social relationships with Malaysian students

## Conclusion

It is right time to seriously think of the psycho social problems of Indian college students in Malaysia. No doubt that the suggestions discussed in this section, as well as a number of other creative efforts, can help prevent or reduce psycho social problems of Indian students and assist them in making a successful social and academic adjustment.

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