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Source: *Higher Education*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (Mar., 2007), pp. 381-409

Published by: Springer

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29735060>

Accessed: 27-09-2017 03:58 UTC

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Welcome to America? International student perceptions of discrimination

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Abstract. This research explores the experiences of international students at a research university in the U.S. Southwest. Based on interviews of a sample of 24 students from 15 countries, we consider a range of difficulties they encounter which runs from perceptions of unfairness and inhospitality to cultural intolerance and confrontation. Utilizing the conceptual framework of neo-racism to explain many of their experiences, we organize our analysis and discussion around their words and the contexts in which the difficulties they encounter emerge. We find that not all of the issues international students face can be problematized as matters of adjustment, as much research does, but that some of the more serious challenges are due to inadequacies within the host society.

Without question, as international students study in American institutions they provide many benefits for the U.S. They increase the diversity of student populations, add new perspectives to classroom conversations, and, related, increase our awareness and appreciation for other countries and cultures (Bevis, 2002; Harrison, 2002). They bring knowledge and skills in many fields, especially within sciences, engineering, and technology (Barber and Morgan, 1987; Altbach, 1989, 1998; Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004). Those that stay add to the intellectual capital of the U.S., and those that return home most often do so with good will and affinity for their second home. Moreover, in the area of foreign policy the U.S. and other developed nations' institutions educate many of those who take leadership positions in other nations, which ultimately may benefit relations between countries (Altbach, 1998; NAFSA, 2003).

International student flows into the U.S. have received increasing attention following college enrollment shifts in the post-September 11 climate. In 2004 the Institute of International Education reported that colleges observed the first absolute decline in international student enrollments since 1971 (IIE, 2004). The 2.4% drop followed the smallest increase the previous year (0.6% in 2002/03), preceded by 5 years of

steady growth (IIE, 2004). From the Middle East, enrollment dropped significantly by 9% and from Saudi Arabia alone by 16% (IIE, 2004). Meanwhile, political and academic leaders demand increased support for international education in the U.S. (Peterson 1999; Harrison, 2002; NAFSA, 2003).

The international graduate student population seems to be especially impacted by recent declines, according to a 2004 survey of 530 institutions (NAFSA 2004a, 2004b). Nearly half of the 250 institutions that provided data on international graduate students indicated reductions in applications. Among 130 doctoral and research institutions, nearly 60% reported declines. Of the 25 research institutions that enroll the most international students, all 19 survey respondents indicated a decrease in graduate applications, with 15 reporting declines of more than 10%. Thirteen of the institutions in this group that responded to a question concerning Chinese students reported greater drops in Chinese graduate applications compared to all other international applicants — 30% or more, and four institutions with 50% or more. The survey indicated that many of the highest skilled students now seek further educational opportunities outside the U.S., a result of what the surveyors partly attribute to the perception of an unwelcoming climate for international students in the U.S.

The reasons for the decline in international applications and enrollment remain largely unexplored empirically, however, scholars have proposed various explanations: greater national security and obstacles related to obtaining visas (Owens 2002; NAFSA, 2003; IIE, 2003b; Arnone, 2003); increased competition from other countries (Altbach, 1989, 1998; IIE, 2003b); and discrimination and hostility towards foreign students (McMurtie, 2001; Lane, 2002; Brender, 2004; MacWilliams, 2004; Lee, 2005). As an example of the latter point, hundreds of Middle Eastern students withdrew from U.S. institutions and returned home rather than live in fear of reprisal after September 11, 2001 (McMurtie, 2001), a situation which partly explains the substantial decline in international applications from the Middle East and South Asia (Council of Graduate Schools, 2004).

To explore the issue of declining enrollment empirically we undertook a study of international student experiences. We were struck by the gravity of the problems that emerged from their stories, and also the different experiences between White students and those of color, differences that called for a consideration of discrimination. We therefore utilized the conceptual framework of neo-racism in analyzing their

reports and perceptions of acceptance after enrollment. Neo-racism emphasizes cultural differences as a basis of discrimination that appeals to popular notions of cultural preservation. Besides shedding light on dissatisfaction and discriminatory experiences as a reason for declining enrollments (Lee, 2005), this study identifies student perceptions of discrimination and how cultural discrimination may create a hostile climate in the institutions and communities international students are hosted by. Our aim is to stimulate the discussion of international students' concerns as an important step in bettering their experiences and ensuring their continued enrollment.

Literature review

We begin by describing the changing context of international education and then review articles that look into the experiences of international students. Although international education is hardly a new phenomenon, the driving forces behind it have changed considerably from that of diplomacy and intercultural exchange to globalism, often with underlying economic motivations. One such motivation has come from the shift towards understanding students as 'customers' and 'consumers,' a change which has contributed to increased recruitment of international students for revenue (Habu, 2000; Levin, 2002; Rhee and Sagaria, 2004; Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004). Unfortunately, this is not always accompanied with a strong consideration of their experiences after enrollment, a factor which we believe underlies much international student dissatisfaction.

Changing context of international education

Cross-border education has existed since the earliest formations of higher education, beginning with the University of Paris opening its doors to scholars outside France to train its students in the 13th century. Some contend that the academy has always been global in scope (Altbach, 1998) and point to the use of common languages of instruction, such as Latin, and the persistent cross-border flows of students and scholars ongoing since the European Middle Ages.

Whereas much 20th century international education was focused on diplomacy, state development, and building cultural and political ties, the massification of higher education brought with it a new market

perspective of students as a revenue source (Habu, 2000; Levin, 2002; Rhee and Sagaria, 2004; Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004). Increasing the demand for study in particular institutions added prestige and value to marketable educational products. Indeed, higher education leaders and policy makers recognize the economic advantages international students contribute; most international students pay full tuition benefiting their institutions and the local and national economies as well. International students add approximately \$12 billion to the U.S. economy (IIE, 2003a) and education is now recognized as the fifth largest export of services in the U.S. (IIE, 2003a). Well aware of this growing market, Britain and Australia have emerged as strong competitors for the financial benefits that international students bring. Tapping into the global market has become a motivating reason for the recruitment of international students. International student recruitment agencies are now prevalent in the international marketplace and a leading influence on whether and where a student will pursue international education (Pimpa, 2003). This “irony of globalization” (Habu, 2000, p. 62) is that while studying abroad provides great opportunities for personal and professional growth, it also encourages a narrow view of students as economic revenue, which in turn can place less emphasis (and accountability) on their cross-cultural and academic experiences. The added downside is that while some view international students as revenue sources and as cheap skilled labor (in the sciences and engineering departments especially), they are also perceived as threats to U.S. economic self-sufficiency (Rhoades and Smart, 1996). National policies revealed a deep-seated fear of the country’s dependency on international students, which became known as “the foreign student problem” (Rhoades and Smart, 1996, p. 142).

Many institutions have emphasized the value of campus internationalization. However, internationalization has been defined and utilized in many different ways; some have used it interchangeably with globalization, transnational education, or international education, and some have tied it to specific forms of globalization or intercultural exchange. The latter emphasis can be understood in the context of higher education as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of postsecondary education” (Knight, 2003, p. 2) in order “to understand, appreciate and articulate the reality of interdependence among nations (environmental, economic, cultural, and social) and therefore prepare [those involved] to function in an international and inter-cultural

context” (Knight and de Wit, 1995, p. 13). This definition emphasizes the motivation of intercultural exchange for improved understanding and relations between peoples. Unlike globalization, which emphasizes students as economic units, internationalization emphasizes students as central players in intercultural exchange and diplomacy between nations. Understanding internationalization in this way requires a study of actual student experiences as opposed to mere enrollment counts or flow trends.

International student experiences

Recent literature on the social experiences of international students in U.S. institutions is limited so we include in this review other national studies which shed light on the similarity of issues these students face across cultures.

Students coming to the U.S. may encounter difficulties beginning as early as obtaining permission to pursue education. Immigration regulations and interviews have become burdensome enough to discourage students from applying to U.S. institutions (Altbach, 2004). Those that persist have encountered mounting fees and delays since 9/11 which diminish their chances of filling the university seats they were offered, and visas denied entirely block some from enrollment. Words of such experiences move quickly among populations of prospective international students who weigh the time and resources spent in seeking entrance to the U.S. against the less onerous regulations of other countries, such as Canada or Australia.

Aside from entrance obstacles, social and community factors strongly affect international students’ experiences after arriving and their decision to persist. Studies have noted differences in social acceptance by country of origin and culture of international students. For example, even before 9/11 women who wore veils or saris had difficulties integrating with campus life and suffered unpleasant experiences (Bevis, 2002; Cole and Ahmadi, 2003). In their quantitative study of 190 students from Latin American and Asia studying in the U.S., Wilton and Constantine (2003) examined acculturative factors related to adjustment. They found that because of language and cultural factors, Latin American and Asian students have greater levels of stress than other international students. Heggins and Jackson (2003) found that informal social networks are very important to Asian students in the U.S. who are uncomfortable using university support services when

problems arise. They observe that studies in addition to their own show that minority international students report being treated like uninvited guests and suggest that these students lack trust in the professional avenues of help open to them.

Negotiating basic academic procedures and living arrangements are daunting tasks for some international students. Kher et al. (2003) describe how many support services at their U.S. institution, including admission, registration, residence life, and dining do not well accommodate international students despite the greater needs such students have as compared to native students. The authors discuss the critical necessity of institutions to identify ways of meeting the special needs of international students on campus, pointing out that this is more difficult for small institutions, such as the one their study considers. They also observe that the issues that international students encounter are most often addressed through counseling after the fact, and contend that the focus should be on proactive programs that assist students in their initial integration into the community.

Studies from other nations have similar findings. In their study of international students in the U.K., Pritchard and Skinner (2002) find major difficulties for international students in forging meaningful social relationships. Different food tastes, views regarding sexual openness, perceptions of time, and gender roles were just some of the cultural adjustments encountered. These researchers found that international students eventually adapted to the host culture, developing an 'inter-cultural competence' to negotiate contrary worldviews and practices. This study is both informing and disconcerting. International students confront an array of cultural adjustments, but the responsibility is often left to the student to 'adjust' or 'adapt' to the host culture (Bevis, 2002) rather than for institutions to understand and try to accommodate their unique needs. Li and Kaye (1998) in their study of international students in the U.K. report that students from Asia and other developing countries experienced much greater difficulty than students from Western Europe in the areas of language, teaching and tutoring, finances, housing accommodation, making friends, and homesickness, findings mirrored by our study. These issues greatly hinder their social integration as well as their academic progress. They found that age and gender had some marginal affect on feelings of isolation and intermixing with students in the host country while academic area degree objective did not appear to affect students' difficulties. Lloyd (2003) similarly reports housing accommodations, lack of social support, confusing enrollment

procedures, and inadequate support services as basic problems faced by international students at an Australian university.

Another Australian study (Robertson et al., 2000) reports that language, tuition cost, and feelings of isolation ranked the highest among problems faced by international students. These researchers further find that international students share an overwhelming desire to be accepted and to succeed, but tend to be so sensitive about their language abilities that they may not seek out help when needed. Their survey of staff echoed concerns about international students' language ability but also found that they were not empathetic. Staff criticized international students for not taking responsibility for their academic advancement and having little appreciation of critical thinking. Moreover, they were unaware of or unconcerned with international students' emotional and psychological dilemmas, such as homesickness and alienation. This study well illustrates that staff may not consider the cultural difficulties of international students and may wrongly mistake their silence as disinterest or incompetence, further perpetuating problems faced by these students.

Beoku-Betts (2004), in her qualitative study of African female scientists who had been graduate students in Western universities, reports of White professors questioning the graduate students' ability to do the work, asking them to take remedial classes and criticizing their accents. These students experienced feelings of exclusion and a lack of support emanating directly from prejudicial attitudes. While the author acknowledges the role of race and gender as contributing to such difficulties, she also notes "the colonial experience and the marginal position of their societies in the global economic system" (p. 132) as embedded in the negative perceptions of their home culture exhibited by their hosts.

In a quantitative study of international student satisfaction in the U.S., Perrucci and Hu (1995) consider the social context of these students and find that in a field of 12 predictors of satisfaction experiencing little or no discrimination comes in fourth, behind being married, having good language skills, and having extensive exposure to U.S. culture. Less important predictors included grades, finances, and self-esteem. They note that much research puts an emphasis on the need of internationals to cope or adjust to the host culture, but fails to consider the inadequacies of the host society that should be opposed and changed rather than accommodated. Schram and Lauver (1988) in their quantitative study of international student alienation (described as powerlessness, meaninglessness, and social estrangement) in the U.S. found social

contact with host nationals, graduate student status, and Europe as a home region negatively correlated with alienation. They suggest improving institutional orientation and intervention practices, such as creating “buddy” programs and explaining informal channels of communication, and investigating the types of circumstances that are “bewildering” to international students, which could lead to better advisement on the part of international student services. They also suggest that strategies can be tailored to specific cultural backgrounds, such as African or Asian.

Although suggestions such as offered by Schram and Lauver (1988) take some of the burden off students to develop their own coping strategies, the focus situates international students within a problem framework that presents them as having a set of identifiable and correctable problems rather than focusing on any inadequacies within the host community. Indeed, identifying student problems by culture would likely show differences, inasmuch as White European students face fewer integration issues, but issues that go beyond language difficulties to involve prejudice tend to emanate from the host society rather than from the students. We find that most of the literature concerning international student experiences describes their difficulties as issues of adapting or coping, which embodies the assumption that international students bear the responsibility to persist, overcome their discomfort, and integrate into the host society (Klineberg and Hull, 1979; Bevis, 2002; Pritchard and Skinner, 2002; Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2003; Heggins and Jackson, 2003; Zhao et al., 2005). Some of these studies call for increased sensitivity, but the underlying assumption is that host institutions are impartial and without fault. Few studies consider how institutions and individuals may purposefully or inadvertently marginalize international students (Beoku-Betts, 2004; Lee, 2005).

Despite the enormity of the issues surrounding international students in higher education, research on the impact of international students’ social experiences is limited. There are studies which look into their adjustment and psychological health, generally as related to their academic success and persistence, and there are others that consider the persistence or adaptation of particular groups from specific countries or regions. This study takes a broader perspective in investigating students’ social experiences in the host country as a large aspect of their general satisfaction.

Neo-racism theory

In order to offer a conceptual framework in which to situate any discrimination that international students encounter, we describe such incidents as direct and indirect forms of neo-racism. Neo-racism, also called 'new racism,' is discrimination based on culture and national order (Barker, 1981; Balibar, 1992; Spears, 1999; Hervik, 2004). Spears (1999) defines neo-racism as follows:

Neo-racism rationalises the subordination of people of colour on the basis of culture, which is of course acquired through acculturation within an ethnic group, while traditional racism rationalises it fundamentally in terms of biology. Neo-racism is still racism in that it functions to maintain racial hierarchies of oppression.

Barker (1981) sees this prejudice as a reemphasis of cultural discrimination flowing from the ideas of natural cultural boundaries and protection of a 'way of life,' concepts often used to promote restrictive immigration. Neo-racism finds refuge in popular understandings of 'human nature' and appeals to 'common sense' nationalist instincts, but ultimately gives new energy to principles of exclusion and nationalism. Discrimination becomes, seemingly, justified by cultural difference or national origin rather than by physical characteristics alone and can thus disarm the fight against racism by appealing to 'natural' tendencies to preserve group cultural identity—in this case the dominant group. Underlying neo-racism are notions of cultural or national superiority and an increasing rationale for marginalizing or assimilating groups in a globalizing world. Neo-racism does *not* replace biological racism but rather masks it by encouraging exclusion based on the cultural attributes or national origin of the oppressed. This national discrimination can be recently observed in many current contexts, such as the Patriot Act, which allows for detention without limit and denial of due process for some and other violations of personal freedoms, cumbersome yet ineffective foreign student tracking procedures, added hurdles in obtaining visas to enter the U.S., and fingerprinting and profiling procedures in the interest of maintaining national security. Examples that are more specific consist of mistreatment towards Middle Eastern peoples in the U.S., who have endured longer security checks at airports, questionings and detainments without charge, and insults, accusations, and physical violence for the terrorist attacks of 9/11. In the higher education setting, neo-racism can emerge in the form of rejection of admission, less than objective academic evaluations, losing or not being able to obtain

financial aid, negative remarks from faculty or fellow students, and barriers to forming interpersonal relationships in the host society.

Research design and data source

This case study is based on a large public university in the southwest region of the U.S. This institution enrolls approximately 3000 international students from every region of the globe and is among the top 30 international student-enrolling institutions in the U.S. International students were invited to participate in an online survey through an international student listserv during spring 2004. The survey sought to generally assess international student goals, experiences, and satisfaction with the university. The 501 international students who chose to participate in the survey were invited to be interviewed to discuss their experiences at the university in more depth. Twenty-four graduate and undergraduate students volunteered for interviews, including 14 females and 10 males. Given that the survey was administered towards the end of semester and that students were preparing for their final exams and leaving for the summer, our sample size was relatively small. The interviewees comprised a range of academic fields and cultural backgrounds. Academic fields included five from Engineering, five from Education, four from Sciences, three from Business, three from Languages, two from the Arts, one from Economics, one from East Asian Studies, one from Nursing, and one from Psychology.¹ Six were from India, six from East Asia, four from Latin America, three from Europe, one from Africa, one from the Gulf Region, one from the Caribbean, one from Canada, and one from New Zealand.

The interview protocol included questions about the process of choosing to study in the U.S., their initial perceptions of the U.S. and the institution, and how these perceptions have changed since enrolling in the institution. We also inquired about their personal experiences, particularly instances in which they perceived unfairness or discrimination.

Data management and analysis

In order to understand international student experiences in more depth than the survey data allowed, we interviewed two dozen volunteers. This paper relies extensively on the interview data. Interviews were

tape-recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed by developing of a list of thematic codes based on an initial read of the survey responses and transcripts. The initial codes were derived both deductively and inductively from the data. We specifically incorporated neo-racism in our framework to identify perceptions of unfairness and examples of possible discrimination and to identify responses related to intercultural experiences. We therefore focused on statements revealing instances of these rather than other experiences reported. The codes were shifted and modified as we reread and rethought the data (Bogden and Bilken, 1998; Marshall and Rossman, 1999) in the manner of open and axial coding described by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Once all transcripts were coded, the researchers identified the key categories around which the findings would be organized. These categories included international student acceptance and social integration with the campus community, faculty and classroom interaction issues, employment issues, off-campus intercultural issues, and perception changes of U.S. culture. Overall, the statements students made about their experiences, relative to the categories, were negative by approximately 2 to 1. These negative statements were associated with perceptions of unfairness and instances of discrimination related to students' race, culture, or status as foreign residents. This varied greatly by type of student, with White students reporting many more positive experiences which reversed the ratio for that subset. We cannot always be sure if the instances of discrimination perceived by international students of color were due to their international status. Such discrimination would depend on whether perpetrators knew, or cared, that they were international students. Likewise, we cannot be sure that the more generally positive experiences of White students were due to their skin color. However, a goal of our study is to reveal the perceptions international students have when confronted with cross-cultural difficulties and to suggest the possibility of cultural intolerance as a source of these problems.

Limitations

We recognize that cross-cultural experiences are riddled with subjective perceptions, which may be off the mark in terms of the reality of the situations international students find themselves in. Misperceptions are part of the territory of international sojourns. Adding to this is that in general, though certainly not in all cases, international students studying

in the U.S. are likely of a high socio-economic status in their home country and may not have been subject to such discrimination in their home countries. Therefore, many international students may be especially sensitive to prejudices that place them beneath the dominant culture in the U.S. in economic and social terms. For these reasons we understand that some claims of discrimination may be incorrect, but we feel that it is as important to understand these perceptions as it is to be aware of actual discrimination.

We also recognize that international students can face problems in all countries in which they study, not in the U.S. alone. In fact, based on the many international academic and news articles we have reviewed, their safety and well-being in some other countries are much more tenuous than we believe they are in the U.S. For example, severe violence directed towards international students in Ukraine is reported by MacWilliams (2004) and institutionalized prejudice and common social censure towards Chinese students in Japan is reported by Brender (2004). Problems that occur internationally, however, do not lessen the need for monitoring and improving the experiences of students who come to study in the U.S., where immigration for academic training has historically been welcomed and has benefited both those entering and the wider culture as well.

While the interviews were greatly informative as well as disturbing, several limitations prevent us from measuring the prevalence of neo-racism. First, although this is a case study our sample is small in relation to the total number of international students enrolled. We do not know if some of the students who agreed to participate were simply disgruntled and whether students who were the most satisfied chose not to participate in the study. For the purposes of our study, we asked our participants to elaborate on their perceptions of discrimination in order to examine the pervasiveness of neo-racism. Second, our sample is from a single institution in the southwest. We feel the institution is not unordinary but representative of international students' concerns, however, we can only infer that the problems presented to us take place elsewhere. Third, as stated earlier, some perceptions of unfairness are vague and may be cultural misperceptions on the part of the interviewees. Some of the participants with the most negative experiences had difficulty communicating their feelings and abstract thoughts in English. At times, we repeated back to the participants what we were told as a way to clarify and confirm what they shared. In other cases, participants were interviewed a second time. These instances leave us less than absolute in our understanding.

Findings

Our findings reveal that a range of international student problems suggest neo-racism as a cause. These difficulties can be found in campus social interactions, interactions with faculty and administration, denial of funding or job opportunities, and in off-campus interactions such as housing and shopping. It is impossible to know how much that is reported here is actual discrimination or exclusion based on foreign status, language, or race, and how much is misperception, but it is clear that there is a divide in the experiences of White international students and those of color. Students from Asia, India, Latin America, and the Middle East reported considerable discrimination while students from Europe, Canada, and New Zealand did not report any direct negative experiences related to their race or culture. A male student from the Netherlands succinctly pointed out:

Well I haven't experienced discrimination. But then again, I take a cynical view that I'm a White guy who speaks English. So that makes you less a target for discrimination. But if you're a non-White and you have troubles with the language then, yes, I suppose you can be even singled out. As I said, I haven't had any negative experiences...I am enjoying myself here.

When the White students were asked about their comfort level or if they felt respected within the university culture they responded positively and reported minor or no difficulties in acclimating to the culture. Most would recommend their academic experience to others at home without reservation. The same young man from the Netherlands said of his department "They are very welcoming. They reach out... [they say] 'it's really great that you are here, going to have a lot of fun together.'"... That goes for interaction I have had with classmates, people in my research group.' A woman from New Zealand said she never felt any uncomfortableness or disrespect due to her foreign status adding that 'I was like really, really welcomed and I'm sure it's dependent on which department you are in as much as anything...I haven't had a problem... I feel comfortable, very much so.' A male from Germany also said 'No problems... I have had a very positive experience so far' and that he would 'definitely recommend' study here, adding only that '[It is] hard to make friends with Americans, though.' A female from France also found it difficult to integrate with her classmates, a problem she reasoned was due to 'individualist' attitudes and lack of classroom interaction but not because she is an international student. This situation

caused international students to group together and ‘miss the point’ of being abroad, but she said that she was never treated disrespectfully.

A woman from Canada told us:

We’ve [her and friends] had a wonderful experience here.’ She was also pleasantly surprised at the financial support given to international students.

But she observed ‘I can completely see why they [students she earlier referred to as ‘from some certain countries’ or ‘Muslim countries’] wouldn’t come here...I feel fortunate, or maybe it’s unfortunate, because I happen to come from Canada where it’s really easy to fit into American culture.

It is this other side of the coin that we investigate below. We discuss perceptions of discrimination from the perspective of international students of color and offer specific examples of how neo-racism may be manifest in three domains: feelings of discomfort, verbal insults, and direct confrontation.

On cultural discrimination

Being part of a majority culture and then entering the U.S. as a ‘minority’ brought new reflections on race and status in the U.S. society. Several students commented on feelings of inferiority based on media portrayals or direct insults. Negative remarks of others’ home country or culture, hostility towards non-fluency in English, and discrimination towards internationals in the U.S. were understood as direct sources of cultural intolerance. One Mexican woman reflected,

I didn’t understand this before, but ...there are different degrees of racism, and to different groups and different people...And so there are people who are racists and would still shake your hands, and think you are inferior. I think that language has to do with it. I know that’s the case because I study second languages... People can say anything they want as long as they won’t hurt you, physically.

As this student explained, her thoughts about discrimination extended beyond physical race to cultural traits and language. She found discrimination as more complex than the way she had formerly understood it. As a foreign national, she felt degrees of disrespect towards herself depending on the context she was in, and noticed degrees of hostility projected towards different groups within the university. She

commented that Mexicans are often discriminated against in Arizona due to border issues, and that they are portrayed negatively in the media. She has had experiences where people blatantly treated her as inferior until they learned that she was teaching at the University (as part of her graduate program). She gave an example of a woman at a university staff party who asked her smugly if she was employed and was distinctly unfriendly until she learned about her connection to the university. She felt that discrimination is blended with classism in these situations, but also said that in general people connected to the university are more open to diversity than in the larger society. However, she also commented that she sees other minorities, such as those from Islamic regions, treated in worse ways than Latin Americans are, both on and off campus.

Many international students were confronted with discrimination early upon entering the U.S. and it became a difficult reality for those who have never experienced it in their home country. A woman from the Gulf Region explained, "The most difficult thing for me personally was the race issue. I wasn't that conscious of my race because of where I come from. Race issues do exist but it's more social class. American students would ask me why I spoke like a White person [and] I didn't get it. I had no clue what they were talking about." She was often wrongly classified as Black and elaborated on questioning her race based on American media portrayals and explained:

If you're going to get robbed it's going to be a Black guy, if you're going to be killed it's going to be a Black guy, because that's what's on television...I think it shifted in my understanding of what was going on in terms of race relations in America, I know there are more Blacks involved in crime and more Black men in prison more than any other group in the U.S.

Negative social images of particular racial groups are thrust upon immigrants such as her long before they understand the implications. They want to understand their place in the context of American society and also want to understand the dynamics of race for Americans because they find themselves at times pushed into particular categories while at other times excluded due to their position as outsiders. International students, then, were forced to cope with negative stereotypes from different angles. Although their cultures (i.e., American and Arab) may be very different, this particular student felt that she was stereotyped because of the color of her skin and then again because of her cultural manner in a confusing medley of novel appeal and exclusion. Similarly, a Latin American women found herself being treated as

“exotic” in some situations and as “ethnic” in others, “with all the [negative] connotations that may have,” as she commented.

Such discrimination can lead to negative feelings about one’s own cultural identity, again as offered by the Mexican woman, above, who paraphrased TV coverage of border tensions:

You hear ‘Listen how you got ripped off by the little Mexicans. They take your funding, your children, and your education.’ I’m thinking ‘Oh, my God, all they’re doing is ... making it ... there could be violence ... I notice sometimes many Americans have a very bad image about Mexico. I mean, in the news I can see a lot of stories or whatever that help to build this bad image ... At least once a week something comes on about Mexicans. I understand, you know, we all compete for resources and all that. But, there are pros and cons ... it’s not like they are all bad. They don’t come here as terrorists ... They are people from my country and I feel bad for them, and I feel like second class.

In this case, this student was shocked by regular negative portrayals of Mexicans and felt that such media coverage, although indirect, directly impacts her life. Having not been confronted with American statements about Mexicans while in Mexico, she began to rethink her position in American society. Eventually, she took the negative images about Mexicans upon herself by saying “I feel like second class.” Feelings of exclusion, inferiority or anger result from irreconcilable reflections on dual messages that arise from neo-racist implications: “we respect diversity, but you’re not really one of us.”

Feelings of discomfort

Several students reported unsettling feelings of discomfort and inhospitality after their arrival at the university but had difficulty articulating or identifying the exact source of such discomfort:

Sometimes in the [campus] parking place, the people, the feeling from the people, you can tell. Yeah, they see you in a different way. The way they approach or talk to you. I can feel, you know, even though they [say] something or some greeting, the way they greet [you] is different. (Vietnamese Female)

They [people in public] stare at you. They look at you with [some] kind of feeling. [Is it] because we are poor and [because] we dressed

not so decently? I don't know exactly the reason. But, but I have a feeling ...that's not the place that you should be. (Chinese Female)

I'm uncomfortable with the [U.S.] culture here...I don't say it's bad, it's obviously good that's why it is still there, but I'm uncomfortable with this type of culture. (Indian Male)

Some discomfort is to be expected in living abroad. This man was frustrated with wanting to know more about the culture around him and wanting to "mingle" but was surprised by the "incredible" amount of partying and drinking involved in undergraduate life and was shocked with the open sexuality of American culture. He feels excluded from friendships and gaining the type of experience he hoped for because he doesn't partake in the usual activities of his peers. However, it was not difficult for students to separate such difficulties from those they believed were directed towards them because of their cultural differences.

Feelings of discomfort were exacerbated in classrooms where international students felt ignored in lessons or excluded by other students. Already feeling like an outsider, insecurities were heightened when they are left out of students' study groups or social events. A young Chinese woman who tries very hard to master English and fit into the student culture, said that during class breaks or leaving the room after class she often hears students making plans to get together but that she and other international students are seldom invited. Some attributed their difficulties to their lack of fluency in English. Others were uncomfortable with the give and take of classroom dynamics, and were thus perceived as incompetent. Some of these negative experiences involved actions and attitudes of professors:

One professor didn't like me because my English was bad. He was impatient. Other people told me about him. But I worked really hard, I had two tutors, I paid one twenty dollars an hour, and I got the same textbook in my own language and studied both. (Brazilian Male)

I know the first time I can't understand [because] my English is not too good. But if I ask questions the professor will say, 'I don't understand' and so that makes me very embarrassed. I don't ask questions anymore. I ask other students—I don't ask the professor—I just talk to other students. (Chinese Female)

In these cases, students simply felt unwelcome or distanced from faculty because of their personal sensitivity about their limited English

abilities. Some felt genuine aversion on the part of professors unwilling to be flexible with accommodation to non-standard speakers of English, and were frustrated that people didn't have empathy for how hard they work. As shown in the previous examples, professors are often identified as dominant or superior figures, whose impatience with less than fluent English speakers or foreign accents undermined these students' confidence. While these are sometimes subtle forms of exclusion that may be inadvertent, we were surprised to find more direct conflicts with college faculty concerning cultural attributes, especially given our small sample size.

Verbal discrimination

Some international students reported direct insults from their professors. Several students spoke of faculty negatively commenting on their home country or culture during class and, in a few cases, engaging in verbal or sexual harassment:

Some professors have an attitude, some are very nice, but some of them are very bad. They don't even try to improve it....I have had some problems with some professors. I mean like [when] I got here...they don't respect women. ...they talk about sex and ask me about my sexual experience and [it was] really inappropriate. (Japanese Female)

A close friend of mine [had] troubles with her advisor. She is Indian... But she told me about trouble with her first advisor. [He said some] racial comments, also, some sexist comments. I think she had to change advisors and it was very difficult for her. He had [also] made a comment about 'wiping out the whole Middle East.' (Canadian Female)

Other students reported changing their faculty advisors because of interpersonal difficulties which they believed were due to cultural intolerance. Communication barriers and negative comments about a student's home country, and in the worst cases, sexual harassment from faculty further isolated international students in their learning environment. We cannot speculate whether such student perceptions are well founded, but were surprised to hear these reports of unprofessionalism directed towards these students and speculate that their lack of knowledge of academic norms or recourse may make them more vulnerable to abuse.

International students are also often subject to misperceptions about their culture and so to easy stereotyping. Often stereotypes are based on generalizations of world regions or cultures, such as one student's example of placing India within Islamic culture. Images of poor third world countries are often impressed upon students from well-to-do families. Such ignorance comes from faculty, fellow students, and members of the local community. One student explained:

The culture problems are immense. The apartment manager said, 'Are you Muslim or Hindu?' [I said] 'I'm Hindu, I'm from India.' The manager said, 'Yeah the same difference.' ... Others ask, 'Can you get books there?' It was [asked] from professors. ...[Even] beloved friends don't get the word Hinduism. I don't know what is so difficult [about that]... even if you are a professor... They ask me questions about India and I start explaining [and after that] they don't want to hear [anymore]. They already have [their ideas] set and they try to tell *me* how it is [there]... It is a little disconcerting because I don't see any desire in their minds, I mean true desire in the minds of people here to really understand and know another culture. (Indian Male)

As explained by this student, international students can perceive Americans as lacking any desire to understand another culture, and therefore feel they are culturally alienated. Though perhaps unintentional, such indifference to other ways of life can marginalize anything not American, anything not understood. Such apathy and unwillingness to attempt understanding translates to the rejection of international students' cultural identities.

These issues cannot necessarily be labeled as discriminatory, even though they very negatively color international students' perceptions of their acceptance. Unfortunately, more direct abuse involved verbal insults, as related by an Islamic woman and Chinese man we interviewed:

We went grocery shopping and were with this other couple, both of them are Middle Eastern, and we went were standing there talking. This guy came by in a truck and said 'niggers go home.' (Female from Gulf Region)

Off campus, at the supermarket, White people are impatient and give me dirty looks. [They] are impolite [to me] but good to others. They shout [to me], 'go back to your country.' (Chinese Male)

In both these cases, the verbal attacks were certainly racial but also included evidence of neo-racism. Statements such as 'go home,' obviously imply 'home' as outside the U.S. These students clearly described feeling unwelcome and rejected because of being from outside the culture.

Other verbal confrontations were more close and direct. In the following examples, these Asian students felt not only harassed but also incapable of defending themselves:

I know of ... a girl from Thailand and sometimes she tells me, she has a very bad feeling about Americans, I'm not quite sure what to call it, maybe a kind of verbal harassing. She told me that one time at [name of university cafeteria], a man sat next to her and said bad things ... and nobody there could help her. She didn't know what to, because she wants to be polite, she didn't know what to do so she just ran away. (Vietnamese Female)

The boy showed me the phone then the father directly asked did I do [call] with the cell phone, I say no and he asked where I am from—I tell him China and he asked did I use his cell phone ... [He said something about the] Chinese. I remember his words. I am so upset but I don't know how to reply I just feel very angry. (Chinese Female)

Several of these occurrences took place years before the interviews were conducted but, left deep impressions that these students could not easily forget. While most of the worst forms of discrimination happened off-campus, the words of the interviewees above show verbal abuse on-campus as well, such as stereotyping of cultures or nations, criticism of English accents or dialects and plain criticism of foreigners, such as reported by a young man from India who told us that when enjoying a conversation with an American woman at a party an American man came by and commented "What, you're having fun with a foreigner?" These verbal forms of exclusion show how international students are easily subjected to both subtle and overt forms of cultural intolerance.

Direct confrontation

Beyond inadvertent implications and purposeful insults, interviewees also related policies and incidents that they perceived as direct harassment because of their international status. Being excluded from

employment was one example. The prohibition of international students working more than 50% time, or 20 hours per week, on campus is an institutionalized policy. The reasons for the policies are not made clear to international students, who often struggled to support themselves financially. Because the rationale for such a restricted work policy is not clearly communicated to international students, the participants in our study interpreted such restrictions as blatant discrimination. A few admitted to having to find work that paid 'under the table,' or cash only, in order to pay for their living expenses. One student commented:

I worked for three weeks ... I thought it was thirty hours that you're allowed to work, but that's only for Americans, not for international students. Internationals are only allowed to work twenty hours ... I mean I had the time and I was doing ok, but that's another restriction on internationals. (Mexican Female)

Besides formal policies that limited the extent to which international students can work, these students were not allowed to work off-campus at all. Therefore, many who hope to be assistant researchers and technicians are left with the prospects of low paying on-campus jobs in retail or food service if their department did not offer them positions. According to an Indian male student, "Most of the students coming here want to be an intern but you can't get any off-campus jobs. They don't even consider you." Another Chinese woman discussed her story of having to change programs to work with a faculty member who would be willing to hire her (as long as she was one of his advisees) because the program for which she had originally been accepted would not offer her any paid work. She believed she was not hired because of her non-resident status.

Perceptions of discrimination surface while being employed as well. One student advised that international students must be aware of the hidden rules in succeeding at the university:

Yes, since certain things [international students] encounter and they need to be prepared to have bad experiences in language and culture. And you have to know the rules of the game or you'll be killed. (Chinese Male)

In this case, the Chinese student felt the 'rules' to succeed were not easily accessible to international students. This student offered an example of a situation when two of his Chinese graduate student friends encountered some difficulties working as teaching assistants. According to him, their faculty supervisor had not given them feedback on their

teaching performance but made comments about their inability to other faculty and to students in other classes. The students were not rehired without any explanation but found out about their supervisor's criticism through their students. When asked what they were criticized about, he explained:

The supervisor said that [problems exist] because they are from China. One Chinese student was told that it is because [the student assistant] is from the Mainland (to explain perceived limitations). It was very offensive.

Such behavior can be correctly perceived as cultural discrimination if intolerance is justified by the 'natural' and immutable condition of the oppressed and no attempt is made to address problems.

Another Indian woman described occasions where international students in her department were denied or fired from student jobs and lost favor with faculty. She elaborated:

[The faculty] know that as foreign students we have limited recourses ... and we cannot go into the department or visit the university [offices] and stuff like that. So they hold the funding...and I managed to buck them very easily because I'm very outspoken. I am not being a bigot or stereotyping here but a lot of the Chinese students will take the stuff more quietly. They have the same issue I had and a few of them left. I decided to speak up. So my contract had said I had $\frac{1}{4}$ time funding. When I came here I asked for $\frac{1}{2}$ time and I got $\frac{1}{2}$ time. But as soon as I managed to cut them off (by speaking out) ... they immediately cut off my funding and they forced me to look for something else. They do this for everybody [and] it's not like they targeted me. They do that for all foreign students.

The student later explained that she tried to file a formal complaint to no avail and that some attempts were thwarted. She further elaborated:

A foreign student finds it more difficult to get a job than the American students. The [faculty] understand that. The fact that they understand that [and] the students understand that for them the American students work at [negotiating] the price The foreign students are like, 'Yeah, whatever [salary is offered is accepted].' ... They treat you like the scum of the earth ...

Another incident involving a different student reflected similar difficulties in negotiating the process of student work and agency when things go wrong, showing that even small misunderstandings can have serious consequences:

Every time he went to talk to [his dissertation chair] with a problem she could never help him. So he spoke up and he immediately switched camps. Then he went [back] to [his first dissertation chair] and suddenly his summer funding was cut off. They would not give him letters of recommendation. It's just—pretty much maligning him for job interviews. (Indian Female)

There can certainly be various interpretations of why recommendations were not written, and the report of this incident could be from a disgruntled student. However, legitimate reasons apparently were not made clear to the student thus adding to his, and the interviewees, perception of unfairness. Beyond the negative effects of risking funding and future job opportunities, such incidents leave international graduate students with a deep-seated impression about inequities in the system:

It is basically saying that if you suck up to them, life will be simple for you again. If you say nothing against them then you... will get your funding, you [will] get [an] easy graduate assistantship, you will get scholarships, your research will go through easily. (Indian Female)

The extent of such incidents among international students is unknown, but the stories and impressions left among even a few are easily shared among fellow international peers, who often turn to each other for support and advice.

Other direct mistreatment was also reported. An African man told of being ordered to leave a neighborhood because he is Black; "Off campus, [I] was confronted for driving in a neighborhood, giving a friend driving lessons. I didn't complain. I didn't want to push [the] issue." Other students mentioned getting unequal service at grocery stores and shopping malls. Here is just one of the several reported examples:

I'm shopping, and at that time I was trying to buy wedding rings by myself, and I was in the jewelry store, and probably because I look poor, I don't know, I'm not sure whether it's because it seems I'm poor or because [of] my accent or because my English is not fluent, I can't think of the exact reason but, there is nobody who came over [to] take care of me. And, at that time, a White

man came in and they just treat[ed] him totally different. I have a strong feeling about that. (Chinese Female)

Physical attacks also took place both on and off campus. During our interviews, we were told of three separate incidents of objects being thrown at students. When asked about being treated disrespectfully, one male Indian student said:

There have been a couple of occasions when walking back home from campus with my friends, but I don't know if those were students that bothered us ... we generally walk back home from campus and it was not a big deal but people threw bottles at us. Being international students, you get used to it.

Another when asked about feeling comfortable being at the university said:

Yes, I mean other than—yeah in general ... I don't know if [it is] this campus but I mean they have [unknown people have created incidents] like when I go home ... and I don't know where that is in general [whether it is typical] ... but on campus at night when they [international student friends] are walking ... a guy was telling me that someone threw bottles at him.

In relating these incidents the international students appeared more calloused than angered. In fact, remarks of physical violence that surprised us most were tacked on after expressing general satisfaction with campus life. Although these students tended to act as if such incidents were 'no big deal' their manner seemed to suggest that they were uncomfortable talking about them and nearly left them out of their stories. While these accounts are troubling, these and most other discriminatory incidents to our knowledge were not reported to any authority on or off campus. Many of those we interviewed were not aware of their rights or of whom to turn towards for support. Others were knowledgeable about various offices on campus but did not trust that they will be heard, or feared that they would be deported to their home country for stirring up trouble.

Discussion and implications

Previous research has documented the tremendous difficulties that international students encounter but frequently fails to critically

examine the underlying reasons as to why international students struggle in their host environment. Our study reveals some of the worst hardships in negotiating university life as due to the foreign national status of some of our international guests. As we have discussed, these difficulties run from students being ignored to verbal insults and confrontation. This research also shows how this occurs in a range of contexts, both in and outside the classroom, by peers, faculty, and members of the local community. We also find that not all international students are subject to the same hardships—students from Western and English-speaking countries in our study especially encountered minimal to no discrimination compared to students from other regions. Thus, we offer neo-racism as a theory by which to understand some of the experiences of international students, not only in the U.S. but throughout the world. This framework helps to identify direct and indirect undermining of international students' capacity to become fully participating members of their host community, disadvantaging institutional policies, hostility towards cultural attributes (e.g., language barriers and foreign accents), and the negative stereotyping of whole nations or cultures, all of which hinder intercultural diplomacy and friendship and obstruct intellectual growth, which should be the outcome of exchange.

Internationalization is important to institutions of higher education, but much of what we already know about international students is only based on enrollment figures and trends. While this data has greatly informed our understanding about the imbalances in flow between developed and developing countries, or variance in flow to the U.S. over time, we argue that more attention should be paid to the experiences of international students than on the actual numbers of international students at campuses as a marker of internationalization. Recruiting to pick up the slack in flow in no way ensures the satisfaction of those who have already made large commitments to be part of our campuses. The experiences and satisfaction of international students already enrolled should be considered first if internationalization is truly the goal. Clearly, enrolling large numbers of international students does not necessarily equate with a positive experience once they are admitted.

Questions remain as to whether these negative experiences produce resentment and anger towards the U.S. that override the positive effects of U.S. study. The U.S. continues to be a top choice for students seeking to study outside their home countries and provides many attractive benefits such as degrees from world-renowned institutions, state-of-the-art

facilities and equipment, training with top researchers in the world, as well as the elusive opportunity to stay and work in the U.S. However, we question what aspects of the international experience are being ignored, from inadvertent messages from the academic community which create misperceptions and disillusionment, to discrimination against international students. The solution is not to dissuade international students from U.S. study, as we are not suggesting that all international students encounter mistreatment in the U.S., or that discrimination is particular to the U.S. Rather, we recommend that institutions consider ways to counter problems undermining the international experience.

Our findings point to a degree of institutional accountability for international student satisfaction and, ultimately, for positive relations with potential future students in the internationals' home countries. The most obvious first step is for institutions to become more aware that discrimination based on nation of origin exists in many forms, such as those this study describes, and surely others. We recommend that members of the educational community be made aware of this issue and their responsibility in creating intellectual environments that foster cross-national acceptance and learning and in rejecting the perpetuation of national stereotypes. We suggest that guidelines concerning teaching and working with international students be articulated so that administrators and faculty are aware of their responsibility in providing a safe and welcoming environment for international students. It should be understood, for example, that these students may have different perceptions of the faculty-student relationship, may respond in different ways than do U.S. students, and may feel that authority figures are beyond reproach. International students should also be made aware of intercultural issues they are likely to find, and be well informed of avenues of support and of redress should they encounter unfairness or threatening situations.

Future research could investigate the attitudes of faculty, staff, and students towards international students and their awareness of the issues internationals face on other college campuses in other countries. Questions remain on the extent of discriminatory perceptions as a function of international students' socio-economic status in their home countries. Are international students from upper-class backgrounds more sensitive to negative treatment compared to international students from lower-class backgrounds? Moreover, how much of these perceptions of neo-racism are due to language fluency or language accents? How are international students treated differently depending on their ability to communicate in

English? If international students are fluent in English but speak with a foreign accent, are they further discriminated against? Another area of study could be the experiences of visiting scholars who likely are confronted by similar problems, but on which there remains even less research. Finally, we call for additional research on ways that neo-racism occurs in higher education and research settings beyond the university.

Note

1. Number of fields exceeded 24 because two interviewees had double-majors.

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