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## **“I Was New and I Was Afraid”: The Acculturation Strategies Adopted by International First-Year Undergraduate Students in the United States**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article utilized Berry’s acculturation model (1974, 1980, 1997) as the framework for understanding the social experiences of international first-year students in a large, public institution in the Southeast United States. Using a descriptive phenomenological research design and a sample of 10 international students, this study examined the extent to which each of the four strategies defined by the acculturation model—assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization—emerged from the social experiences of international students during their first year of college. The results revealed that all 10 participants shared the experiences of separation, either voluntary or involuntary. For seven students in the sample, the freshman year was characterized by either willing or unwilling integration. The strategy of assimilation, both freely pursued and imposed, was reported by six students. The least evidence was recorded for the pattern of voluntary or involuntary marginalization, which emerged from the experiences of four respondents.

**Keywords:** acculturation, culture, first-year students, international students, social integration

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the past decade, the United States has recorded an incremental but stable increase in international student enrollments. American colleges and universities have enjoyed a 5.1% annual growth in the number of international students over the past

10 years, with global recruitments surpassing 1 million in 2018–2019 (Institute of International Education, 2019).

Consequently, the efforts invested by higher education scholars and practitioners have been more actively devoted toward developing strategies to support the adjustment of international students and their successful transition into not only American higher education, but also their respective communities. As a result, the literature on international student adjustment is continuously expanding to include a plethora of factors that may hinder or facilitate their experiences within a host culture. In that regard, particular attention has been dedicated to understanding the contributors to students' cultural adjustment and the interdependency of their social experiences and academic performance (Chavajay & Skowronek, 2008; Wu et al., 2015).

However, contemporary research in this domain still remains limited in one important aspect. Even though a great body of knowledge has been produced in connection to international student social and cultural adjustment, very little evidence has been generated exclusively among the international first-year undergraduate students. This limitation is best reflected in the fact that the first-year transition of international students has been examined in the literature through common experiences of undergraduate and graduate students simultaneously (Hirai et al., 2015), thus limiting the opportunity for understanding the unique transitional experiences of international undergraduates. The urgency of empirically investigating the experiences of international students during their first year of college becomes even more critical when perceived through the lenses of the growing national commitments to providing wide-ranging freshman year programming and support services. Among these efforts, the most prevalent ones include first-year advising, early alert systems, orientations, and first-year seminar courses (National Resource Center, 2019). These efforts are not surprising knowing that the literature on undergraduate student success continuously identifies freshman year as a critical predictor of students' overall academic performance, retention, and degree attainment (Sidle & McReynolds, 2009).

In the attempt to enrich the ongoing scholarly discussion regarding the first-year student adjustment, this article utilized Berry's acculturation model (1974, 1980, 1997) as the theoretical framework for understanding the social experiences of international undergraduate students in a large, public institution in the Southeast United States. More specifically, this research study examined the extent to which each of the four strategies defined by the acculturation model—assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization—emerged from the social experiences of international students during their first year of college. To gain such an understanding, the following research question was investigated:

What acculturation strategies do international undergraduate students' enrolled in a large, public university employ during their first year of college?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **The Challenges to Cultural Adjustment**

The research exploring the acculturation of international students in America has identified a multitude of obstacles impeding their successful integration in the host communities. Among the recorded barriers, the unfamiliarity with American culture represents the most prevalent one (Andrade, 2005; Kim et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2015). Findings related to this phenomenon include international students' difficulties in adapting to the cultural practices of their host country, understanding the nature of interpersonal relationships in the host culture, and instances of miscommunication and misunderstandings (Leong, 2015; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Moreover, international students' inability to form friendships with the members of the host culture has been found to result in voluntary and involuntary self-segregation, social isolation, and loneliness (Leong, 2015; Wu et al., 2015).

Another recurring theme in contemporary scholarship is the widespread phenomenon of international student acculturative stress, which has been attributed to varied aspects of their personal, social, and academic lives. Some evidence ascribed acculturation stress to students' perceptions of their host communities as environments with limited understanding of cultural diversity (Chavajay & Skowronek, 2008), while others associated it with perceptions of discrimination, discomfort with others, and feelings of guilt due to not being able to fit in (Zhang & Yung, 2018).

Additionally, a considerable amount of research has been devoted to documenting the relationship between international students' acculturation stress and mental health, thus further supporting the need for better understanding their acculturation patterns. Despite the diversity of international students investigated in these studies, the conclusions remained consistent—low levels of acculturation and high levels of acculturative stress have been strongly associated with students' psychological distress and depression (Hamamura & Laird, 2014; Shadowen et al., 2019). Not surprisingly, cultural assimilation and social relationships emerged as a significant predictor of students' psychological well-being and mental health (Jackson et al., 2013).

### **The Contributors to Cultural Adjustment**

Along with identifying the main barriers to international student cultural adjustment, the literature has distinguished a wide range of factors associated with one's successful transition and integration within the host culture. According to the available evidence, international student socialization and social support have been identified as the most powerful predictor of acculturation (Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Gomez et al., 2014; Mahmood & Burke, 2018; Zhang & Yung, 2018). While some studies have provided evidence of a positive relationship between acculturation and both on- and off-campus socialization (Gomez et al., 2014), others have documented that social support from the educational institution, in particular, was significantly

and negatively correlated with students' perceived discrimination, stress, fearfulness, and guilt (Zhang & Yung, 2018).

### **Early Intervention**

Of particular importance for this study are the findings that, for international students, social and cultural stressors appear most intensely early on and decline significantly as students progress through their undergraduate or graduate education (Ying, 2005). In fact, the challenges to successful social and cultural integration have been found to be more prominent among undergraduate students than their graduate peers (Zhang & Yung, 2018) and the most intense in the first year of college (Starr-Glass, 2016). Additionally, international students who fail to adjust to their new educational setting within the first 6 months have been found more likely to continue experiencing prolonged adjustment challenges (Hirai et al., 2015).

Still, despite these critical findings, very little evidence has been produced regarding the acculturation strategies of international students in their first year or first semester of undergraduate study. As an illustration, the sample for all studies explored in this section consisted of either both undergraduate and graduate learners or of undergraduate students from all academic levels, thus limiting the applicability of this knowledge to specifically first-year undergraduate students. Therefore, the existing research on cultural adjustment of international students' needs to be expanded to differentiate between not only undergraduate and graduate learners, but also between undergraduate students of varied academic levels, primarily the first-year student population.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The primary purpose of Berry's (1974, 1997) acculturation model was to investigate "what happens to the individuals who have developed in one cultural context when they attempt to re-establish their lives in another one" (p. 5). Defining the types of change that can result from sustained group contacts, Berry (1980) established four possible ways in which one group can interact with another. Assimilation takes place when individuals do not maintain their cultural identity but successfully develop relationships with the dominant culture. Separation occurs when individuals preserve their heritage but avoid interactions with the host group. Integration can be recognized when an individual simultaneously maintains their cultural heritage while developing a relationship with the host society. Lastly, marginalization occurs when there is little or no success in either maintaining one's own heritage or developing relationships with the new culture.

**Table 1: Acculturation Strategies (Berry, 1980)**

Acculturation strategy	Intent to maintain one's home culture	Intent to maintain relationships with one's host culture
Integration	Yes	Yes
Assimilation	No	Yes
Separation	Yes	No
Marginalization	No	No

Given that the four acculturation strategies do not account for the possible ways in which the members of a dominant group can respond to acculturation, Berry (1980) recognized the third, essential question: “Who has the right to decide the first two questions?” (p. 13). Consequently, each of the four strategies became either (a) voluntary—when the members of a weaker group perceive that their acculturation strategies were developed by choice, and (b) involuntary—when the members of a weaker group perceive that their acculturation strategies were the choice of the dominant group.

For the purpose of this study, international first-year students were perceived as the members of the weaker (i.e., immigrant, nondomestic) group attempting to re-establish their lives in a new cultural, educational, and social setting. Utilizing Berry’s acculturation model, this study attempted to identify and describe the changes that international students undergo as a result of sustained contacts with the members from the dominant group—domestic students, faculty, staff, and local community members.

## METHOD

### Design

I selected descriptive phenomenological research as the most appropriate design for depicting the essence of a shared experience of international students’ acculturation during their first year of college (Moustakas, 1994). Guided by the central research question, the purpose for employing a phenomenological design was to explore and understand meaning structures behind a specific human phenomenon, in this case, international students’ cultural integration (Van Manen, 2014). The ultimate aim of such an approach was to provide a comprehensive description of the common experience shared by all participants (Moustakas, 1994).

### Setting

This study took place at a large public university in the Southeast region of the United States. The institution defines an international student as a nonresident alien entering the United States on an F-1 or J-1 visa. All international undergraduate students in the institution start their undergraduate education through a two-semester transitional program whose name was pseudonymized to the Bridge Program.

## **Participants**

I followed the frequently adopted recommendation for participant selection in qualitative research and interviewed students until reaching a point of saturation or redundancy. Saturation was determined when the data collection no longer produced new insights into the phenomenon explored (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Following the guidelines of Rubin and Rubin (2012), I concluded the data collection after 10 interviews when I realized that each new conversation added less and less to the narratives that had been already gathered and when the patterns in participants responses became redundant.

At the time I collected the data, two students were freshmen and still enrolled in the Bridge Program, while the remaining eight were sophomores who successfully completed the program. The sample consisted of students from the following seven countries: Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Indonesia, Thailand, Zimbabwe, and Oman. Seven participants were females and three were males. For five participants this was the first time in the United States, while the remaining five had already been in the host country for either travel or short-term exchange study programs. The sample was represented by students from eight majors: business management, computer engineering, event management, advertising and public relations, industrial engineering, psychology, forensic science, and biomedical science.

## **Data Collection**

Upon obtaining the approval from the Institutional Review Board, I obtained an email list of all students in the Bridge Program from the university's International Student Services. In January 2018, I invited all students to participate in one-on-one, semistructured, and face-to-face interviews. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions focusing on participants' background, prior academic experiences, overall first-year experience in the current institution, and social and academic experiences underlying their acculturation.

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, I employed two strategies. During the data collection and analysis, I engaged in the process of bracketing or exploring my own experiences, viewpoints, and assumptions in relation to the study (Moustakas, 1994). At the time of the study, I was an international doctoral student. Even though I taught first-year seminar courses at the institution where I conducted the study, I did not teach international students or did not have any prior interactions with this population within the institution. By practicing bracketing, I engaged in a continuous self-dialogue to reduce any underlying influence of preexisting thoughts, judgments, and biases.

Additionally, I employed intercoder reliability, which involved another "equally knowledgeable coder operate in isolation to code the same unit of text" (Campbell et al., 2013, p. 297). The second coder was also a first-year seminar instructor at the institution and experienced in qualitative data analysis. After we independently analyzed the data and developed themes, we met to discuss our findings. We reached intercoder agreement when we "reconciled though discussion whatever coding discrepancies they had for the same unit or text" (Campbell et al., 2013, p. 297). This

approach minimized the influence of my positionality and any unintentional misinterpretation of study findings.

### **Data Analysis**

I analyzed interview transcripts using descriptive coding or assigning one-word labels to participants' responses (Miles et al., 2014). In assigning codes, I utilized the following three-stage framework established by Berry (1974, 1980): (a) the responses coded as participants' intent to maintain their own cultural identity (b) the responses coded as participants' intent to develop relationships with the dominant group, and (c) the responses coded as participants' perceptions of their acculturation strategies as either voluntary or involuntary. I then grouped the coded data for the four frames of the theoretical framework: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization.

## **RESULTS**

The results that emerged from the data analysis revealed participants' diverse experiences regarding their first-year acculturation processes. Table 2 illustrates the thematic representation of acculturation strategies adopted by the students' during their freshman year, as well as the frequency of each strategy among the 10 participants.

**Table 2: Participants' Acculturation Strategies**

Strategy	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10
Voluntary integration	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	
Involuntary integration	✓						✓			
Voluntary assimilation		✓							✓	✓
Involuntary assimilation					✓		✓		✓	✓
Voluntary separation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Involuntary segregation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Voluntary marginalization				✓				✓		

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Strategy	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10
Involuntary marginalization						✓			✓	

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### **Evidence of Integration**

Distinguishing between voluntary and involuntary integration, Berry (1974) defined voluntary pattern as any instance where an individual freely moves from one culture to another and chooses when to maintain positive intergroup relations for the benefit of both the individual and the dominant society. On the other hand, integration becomes involuntary when the dominant society requires the individual to maintain their own cultural heritage and to establish positive intergroup relations, thus denying that individual the choice of declining these relations as needed.

According to the findings in this study, seven participants shared the experience of integrating into their new social setting. While all seven students perceived their integration as voluntary, two students reported experiencing voluntary and involuntary integration simultaneously.

#### ***Voluntary Integration***

The participants who reported developing the pattern of voluntary integration attributed these experiences to both academic and social settings. Academically, some students reported that utilizing the knowledge, skills, and competencies obtained in their home countries was not only encouraged in their new environment, but also highly appreciated and rewarded:

Last semester I took the English Composition class and my writing English was not as good as my speaking English, so I would use really simple words. Still, I would get high grades and American students would get lower grades than me. And they would ask me—how did you do it? They use big words and I use small words, but I still get a better grade. Then I asked the professor and she told me—It’s the way you elaborate topics, it makes sense, and it is interesting to learn how other people think. —P2, Oman, Computer Engineering

Academic integration was further evidenced in students’ narratives about the perceived benefits of utilizing professors’ office hours, but also the faculty appreciation of insights and perceptions that students shared during these meetings. For instance, P8, a psychology major from Thailand, shared that he initially started visiting his professor’s office hours only because he noticed other students doing so. However, this practice led him to not only improve his grades, but also understand why he was not performing to the best of his abilities. As a result, he was successful in rectifying the wrong practices. Due to this faculty member being particularly welcoming and supportive, the student started utilizing office hours in his other courses too.



The evidence of voluntary integration was much more abundant in regards to students' social experiences. Five participants particularly emphasized the willingness of various student groups on campus to welcome and include international students:

One time we went to a Greek party which was so American. Just like in the movies. We came directly to one guy and said this is our first year here and we don't know anything about Greek life. And he explained everything. He told us about Greek community and everything about it. We didn't go to those parties again because they are so different from ours but, still, they were very friendly and helpful. —P1, Ukraine, Business Management

For other students, social integration was reflected in taking group fitness classes, joining campus clubs or organization, volunteering, being invited to social events hosted by their American peers, finding the interest of the host community to learn about their counties, cultures, and language, or establishing relationships with their peer mentors. Additionally, some students revealed that campus resources and career services, in particular, further facilitated their social integration.

As illustrated by the students' responses, some participants felt integrated into their new environment on academic and social levels simultaneously and perceived that the cultural diversity they brought to their new settings was not only accepted but also highly valued. What made this integration perceived as voluntary were the participants' testimonies of the dominant society's respect for their choice to decline intergroup relations at times.

### ***Involuntary Integration***

On the other hand, two students shared experiences when they felt they had no choice over the course of their academic or social integration. Academically, involuntary integration was evidenced by participants' perceptions of being required to attend events specifically designed for international students, namely study groups, workshops, or seminars which they had no interest in and did not find beneficial:

I remember that the Bridge Program [pseudonymized] had this thing where they would make us [international students] study for five hours in a specific room during the week. And I was already very focused on my academics. But just the thing that it was mandatory and they were making me do it was irritating. I would go home and study twice more than they asked me to, but this fact was just irritating. —P7, Russia, Industrial Engineering

Acknowledging the fact that the first semester was particularly hard in terms of the amount of information any new international student needs to acquire, P1, a business management student from Ukraine, added that such extensive and rigorous programming was often overwhelming and counterproductive:

I would give at least a little bit of relief to international students in terms of all the things they have to do. We did too much. I would simply put less pressure on our shoulders. The first semester was really tough in terms of

the amount of information literary attacking my head. After going to all those meetings and informational workshops, I really felt like my head was about to explode.

In relation to her social integration, P1 expressed feelings of dissatisfaction stemming from not being allowed to decline participation in certain social events. For her, some of the events she was required to attend were not particularly useful and she considered them to be an unproductive use of her time.

### **Evidence of Assimilation**

The pattern of assimilation is characterized by the decision of a nondominant group to allow their cultural identity to blend into the culture of the dominant society for the purpose of accomplishing common goals (Berry, 1974). In the case of voluntary assimilation, the members of weaker groups see the value of and the need for adapting to the new society and willingly choose to do so. In the case of involuntary assimilation, however, this decision pattern is perceived as imposed by the dominant group.

Among the participants in this study, the assimilation pattern emerged from the experiences of five students, of which one student perceived their assimilation as voluntary and two believed this strategy was imposed by their cultural setting. The remaining two respondents experienced both voluntary and involuntary patterns simultaneously.

### ***Voluntary Assimilation***

The students who willingly decided to merge their cultural identity with that of their new setting reported doing so because they believed it would help them be more successful in their new environment:

In my first semester I would often take couple of minutes to recap what I know and how I think. And I would tell myself – ok, you think this way, but they [American students] think that way, so I should try to think in their way so that I could fit in better and do better. —P2, Oman, Computer Engineering

These students further shared that even though they abandoned some of the cultural practices from their home countries, they were highly satisfied with the outcome of such a decision, mainly in terms of getting out of their comfort zone, becoming more social, and establishing relationships with the members of the host society. For example, P10, a biomedical science student from Zimbabwe, reflected on her upbringing in her home culture and shared having been raised as a reserved child who was not prone to publicly expressing her opinion:

Back home, my mom has always sheltered me... Even in school, I was always just given information. Like, they would tell you—go and read this. The professors would just say stuff and you would do it... But here, people are extremely outspoken. Back home, we are different people. I don't know. In my country it is very uncommon to approach someone and start talking

to them. We just talk to the people we know. But then I saw that it's really, really normal for people to talk here. I feel that am more vocal than I ever was. I speak more than I used to. I am more confident about public speaking which is surprising. My mom was even shocked to hear that.

### ***Involuntary Assimilation***

At the same time, four students felt that adopting the academic and social patterns of their host culture was not a voluntary decision. These feelings were mainly supported by students' perceptions that their new educational setting did not account for many attributes and qualities that these learners possessed:

Some things I learned back home actually make me be ahead in some of the classes here, but I sometimes felt that professors underestimate us [international students] in a way. I think it would be good to be open-minded to people who learned all those things at home. P9, Indonesia, Forensic Science

P7, an industrial engineering major from Russia, added: "Some of the classes that we took were only for international students but, at the same time, the fact that international students come from different environments was not considered."

Similar to the students' experiences with integration, participants' narratives regarding assimilation revealed that adopting this acculturation pattern had more positive effects when freely pursued. If the participants believed that seeking a closer interaction with the dominant culture and adopting their cultural norms was advantageous, they were more willing to make such efforts. However, if such adaptation was not freely pursued, the students were not as willing to give up their cultural heritage or to see the benefits of doing so.

### **Evidence of Separation**

The strategy of separation is characterized by the affirmation of one's cultural identity and rejection of positive intergroup relations (Berry, 1974). In some cases, members of nondominant groups can choose to reaffirm their own culture by deciding not to adapt to the new one (i.e., voluntary separation). In other cases, the members of a weaker group can regard that the larger society prevents them from establishing such intergroup relations (i.e., involuntary separation).

The separation pattern, whether voluntary or involuntary, was the only acculturation strategy experienced by all participants in the sample. Even though students shared more examples of willingly separating themselves from the host society, their narratives revealed some instances where the segregation was perceived as imposed.

### ***Voluntary Separation***

The pattern of voluntary separation or self-segregation was mainly reflected in the fact that participants' support systems consisted primarily of other international

students. Another common experience that the participants shared was that the majority justified the phenomenon of self-segregation by their perceptions of being a burden to their American peers due to deeply rooted customs, traditions, attitudes, and values of their home cultures. As a result, the pattern of self-segregation emerged in students' voluntary practices of associating themselves only with the members of the same culture-sharing groups:

Ever since I came, I wanted to get closer to domestic students. It would be unfair to say that it's impossible, but for an international student it is very hard. I do not think it's a language barrier, because most of us can express ourselves easily. Language is really not the issue. But we are strangers, we are foreigners. They [American students] are used to their culture and they lived here their whole lives. So they feel like—ok, this is my country, I already have my life here, I don't need anyone else... So now I stick to other Russians. To the same language group. I understood quite quickly that you can't do anything about it. —P7, Russia, Industrial Engineering

Several students expressed a similar belief and reported that, due to their underlying cultural heritage, they would perceive themselves as “foreigners,” “aliens,” “different,” or “hard to understand.” Even though the practice of establishing relationships only with students from same cultural backgrounds was not the participants' intended goal, it emerged as the natural outcome of their voluntary decision not to be a burden to their American peers and to associate only with their culture-sharing peers.

### ***Involuntary Separation***

Equally prevalent as the pattern of self-segregation was the strategy of involuntary separation, which was evidenced through students' perceptions of being excluded from their new cultural setting and, consequently, exposed only to their own cultures. For eight respondents, involuntary separation was manifested through students' perceptions that their efforts to establish contact with the dominant culture were mainly hindered by being separated from their American peers in classes, social events, or housing and, therefore, limited only to interactions with other international students. In two cases, however, the participants' reported that the segregation pattern emerged as the outcome of noninclusive attitudes and behaviors expressed by the members of the dominant group:

People often assume I am American, because of my English and because I look African-American but once I tell them I am not, I see the change in the way they talk to me. They use less English, they don't talk to me as much, and they are like—he might not know what's going on, he might not understand what we are trying to say. I can see them slowly distancing themselves. On the other hand, when I am with international students—everyone is as smart and as dumb as the other. —P2, Oman, Computer Engineering

For two students the pattern of academic segregation was manifested through the feelings of being excluded from in-class discussions in their “open classes” (i.e., classes where domestic students constituted the majority) and capitalizing on their international peers in their “closed classes” (i.e., classes composed only of international students):

I don't think that all professors are aware that they have international students in the class [open class]. Sometimes they are speaking very fast or use English slang or talk about examples and things that every American would know but not international students. So I get confused ... But when I take classes with international students, we help each other, ask questions to each other, explain in a way that we understand... —P6, Costa Rica, Advertising and Public Relations

Overall, participants' responses revealed that all of them failed to establish positive relations with the larger society at some point during their first year of college, whether willingly or unwillingly. As a result, their intergroup relations were limited to students from their own culture or other non-American cultures. In some cases, this withdrawal was self-imposed and initiated out of respect for the norms, beliefs, and traditions of the larger society. In other instances, it was perceived as imposed by the dominant culture in reaction to international students' underlying cultural attributes.

### **Evidence of Marginalization**

Students' shared experiences displayed the least evidence of the fourth acculturation strategy—marginalization. Under voluntary integration, the members of a nondominant group choose not to culturally identify with either their own cultural system or the larger society. Involuntary marginalization, on the other hand, occurs when both the relation to one's own heritage and the relation to the new culture are considered as suppressed by the dominant society. In that case, Berry (1974) argued, the members of the weaker group become not only marginalized, but also characterized by high levels of apathy and loss of motivation.

#### ***Voluntary Marginalization***

Within the sample of this study, only two participants felt willingly marginalized during their first year of college, while two experienced involuntary marginalization. As an illustration, P4, an advertising major from Kazakhstan, experienced marginalization only during her first semesters and attributed this experience to increased concern for her academics: “The entire first semester I was isolated in my room because I was afraid to be influenced by people who like to party and go out. I was new and I was afraid.” Justifying why some international students decide to distance themselves not only from their new setting but also from their families and friends back home, P8, a Thai psychology student, said:

I think that a lot of international students struggle because they know how important it is to get good grades and how hard it is for their families to pay

for their education. So a lot of students don't realize that they develop this depression or anxiety and they suppress it so that no one else can see it. They just don't talk to anyone. That was one of my problems when I got here first. I didn't want to talk to anyone here and didn't want to burden anyone home with it.

### ***Involuntary Marginalization***

At the same time, two students shared their belief of having no control over becoming marginalized in their new academic settings. In the case of P6, a Costa Rican student in the advertising track, marginalization occurred after progressing from the Bridge Program and upon becoming immersed into his new cultural and academic environment. As he explained, involuntary marginalization occurred upon realizing that he was no longer able to utilize his own cultural heritage to ease this transition nor knew how to seek the adequate support from the host culture:

Something that I feel should be improved for us [new international students] is the transition from Bridge Program [pseudonymized] to the university. I felt so lost when I left the Bridge Program. Things actually change and you start having questions and questions and you don't know where to look for answers. The college, your major classes, everything is different from home... And you are also not in the Program anymore... I didn't even know who my advisor was or how to find them... I kept asking questions to my Bridge Program advisor but they couldn't help me anymore. And I didn't know these things. So I didn't know where to go.

On the other hand, P9, a forensic major from Indonesia, shared the belief of being excluded from access to certain opportunities, mainly co-curricular learning experiences such as internships and work opportunities:

My advisors told me that whatever experience I have from home—that stays home and I need to get new experience here. I tried applying for some internships, but they told me they were not open for international students. This makes it difficult for us to actually get that experience and to network with other people from our majors.

Even though voluntary and involuntary marginalization were the least frequently employed acculturation strategies, they were still adapted by several international students. Additional examples of marginalization pattern included students' decreased willingness to seek and utilize the support from either of the two cultural groups—their own or the dominant one. On a positive note, the responses of some students allowed for the assumption that, at least in regard to voluntary marginalization, the pattern of rejecting the new culture and abandoning one's own heritage can be expected to subside over time.

## DISCUSSION

This purpose of this study was to identify and describe the acculturation strategies adopted by international undergraduate students during their first year of college. The presented results revealed that all 10 participants shared the experiences of separation, either voluntary or involuntary. For seven international students in the sample, the freshman year was characterized by either willing or unwilling integration. The strategy of assimilation, both freely pursued and imposed, was reported by six students. The least evidence was generated for the pattern of voluntary or involuntary marginalization, which emerged from the experiences of four respondents.

The narratives of seven international students who felt integrated into their host culture supported Berry's (1974) premise that self-governed and free interaction of newcomers with the dominant group, while ensuring the retention of their cultural integrity, can facilitate a successful accomplishment of mutual goals. Within the context of this study, mutual goals accomplished by voluntary integration emerged in the form of student transition, adjustment, satisfaction with college experience, academic performance, and successful completion of the Bridge Program.

These findings supported the existing scholarly evidence examining the relationship between international student social support and successful acculturation (Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Gomez et al., 2014; Mahmood & Burke, 2018; Zhang & Yung, 2018). The previously documented relationship between on-campus socialization and integration (Gomez et al., 2014) was also expressed by the participants in this study for whom the engagement in campus clubs, events, and organizations was particularly beneficial for integrating into their new environment. Even though this qualitative study cannot support a causal relationship between social support and acculturation or attempt to predict successful acculturation of any international student, its findings nonetheless provide important insights into students' perceptions of the role that on-campus socialization and social support have on their ability to more smoothly integrate into the host culture.

Participants' narratives illustrating the separation pattern confirmed the existing scholarly findings according to which international students' difficulty to adapt to the cultural practices of their host country can lead to separation, isolation, and loneliness (Leong, 2015; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Wu et al., 2015). Moreover, the participants also attributed their separation to feelings of guilt due to not being able to fit in and the resulting emotions of discomfort with others (Zhang & Yung, 2018).

Simultaneously, this study provided unique insights into why these feelings occur and how they are manifested. Even though participants' narratives confirmed prior findings of attributing the separation pattern to difficulties in understanding the nature of interpersonal relationships in the host culture and the instances of miscommunication and misunderstandings (Leong, 2015; Smith & Khawaja, 2011), this research produced an alternative justification. For the majority of the respondents, the pattern of separation was perceived as imposed by the dominant culture, whether by the actions of its members or by the design and structure of the international student program. Consequently, these results shed the important light on the unintentional consequences that specific practices of international student programming can have on participants' acculturation.

Additionally, this research emphasized the important need for differentiating between the patterns of separation and marginalization adopted by international students. While the majority of literature examining international student acculturation reported the prevalence of separation or segregation patterns (Leong, 2015; Wu et al., 2015), this research demonstrated that the pattern of marginalization, even though less prevalent, is still present among international first-year students. The urgency of acknowledging and exploring this acculturation strategy is even more evident knowing that the pattern of marginalization is the only strategy that includes the rejection of both one's home and host culture. Although the pattern of involuntary marginalization had a low frequency (i.e., two out of 10 cases), it is nonetheless a very important finding that needs to be further explored and addressed within this or other educational settings.

Next, even though the sample in this study included international students from seven countries (Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Indonesia, Thailand, Zimbabwe, and Oman), none of the participants came from the leading places of origin for international students in the United States—China, India, South Korea, or Saudi Arabia (IIE, 2019). On one hand, this limitation challenges the pertinence of the findings among the most prevalent international student groups in the United States. At the same time, however, the unique nature of the sample offers valuable insights into the experiences of underrepresented and minority international students whose acculturation strategies have been less frequently explored in the literature. As an illustration, the participant samples in the scholarship reviewed for this study were predominantly represented by the students from East Asia (Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Chavajay & Skowronek, 2008; Glass, 2012; Gomez et al., 2014; Hansen et al., 2018; Hirai et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2015). The remaining studies used even more limited samples composed of either Chinese students (Leong, 2015; Zhang & Jung, 2018) or Taiwanese participants (Ying, 2005).

At the same time, however, the readership should remain cautious about generalizing the explored patterns across the cultures represented by international students in this study. Even though the experiences of participants were associated with the four acculturation patterns, it is critical to highlight that the ways in which these patterns are manifested undoubtedly remain unique to students' cultural backgrounds. Specifically, seven nationalities were represented in this study—Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Indonesia, Thailand, Zimbabwe, and Oman. In that regard, Nguyen and Larson (2017) documented that Indonesian international students, for example, share very unique acculturation needs such as culturally relevant student organizations, inclusive environments, and religiously affiliated centers in their adjustment. The cultural adjustment of Arab students, on the other hand, has been found to be characterized by high levels of culture shock, perceived prejudice, stereotypes, and isolation (Rabia, 2017). Unique acculturation patterns have also been identified for African international students as they navigate the assumptions made by their American peers and faculty (Mwangi et al., 2018) and misunderstandings about their culture and religions (Lee & Opio, 2011).

Lastly, participants' narratives supported the frequently recorded interdependency of international student cultural experiences and their academic performance (Mahmood & Burke, 2018; Wu et al., 2015). For all students in this



study, the adopted acculturation strategies were developed in relation to both social and academic experiences. Comparable to the contemporary findings, successful academic adaptation and positive academic experiences were positively associated with the pattern of integration (Mahmood & Burke, 2018). On the other hand, academic concerns and difficulties, as well as pedagogical differences and differences in academic resources, were associated with the pattern of separation (Chavajay & Skowronek, 2008; Leong, 2015).

## **Implications**

There are several ways in which the findings of this study can be applied to support the acculturation of international students during their first year of undergraduate study. Mainly, the participants in this study shed light to unintentional ramifications that separate first-year programming for international students, such as the Bridge Program, can have on their successful integration. Even though the purposeful design of such separate programming undoubtedly has many positive effects, the participants in this study revealed critical impacts of such practices on their separation and marginalization. Therefore, International Student Services should recognize the additional responsibility of not only orienting incoming students through the programming designed specifically for this student group, but also providing them with the sufficient opportunity for cross-cultural interactions and early exposure to the host society's culture.

Similarly, students' narratives of the role of academic experiences on their acculturation further indicate that cross-cultural socialization should not be regarded as a guarantor of successful integration. Participants' experiences indicated that successful integration is also sustained by culturally responsive teaching practices adopted by faculty, as well as academic interactions with domestic students. Therefore, colleges and universities should no longer perceive acculturation only in relation to one's social interactions, but should understand that all four strategies—integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization—are also shaped by students' academic experiences.

The overall implication for higher education institutions that can be deduced from participants' experiences is the necessity for establishing a more direct collaboration of campus services to promote international students' acculturation. The majority of participants in this study perceived utilization of institutional resources, mainly career and academic services, as vital to their acculturation. Therefore, institutions need to apply this knowledge by engaging their campus communities in a collaboration that would increase international students' awareness of campus opportunities and resources that can be utilized to not only promote integration but also, more importantly, overcome any emerging feelings of separation and marginalization.

## **Limitations**

Even though this study produced important knowledge regarding the international student acculturation processes during the first year of college, the

results remain limited in several important aspects. The first limitation involves research design and sample. Phenomenological research is primarily a method for questioning, not a method for answering or drawing definite conclusions (Van Manen, 2014). As such, the research design employed in this study could only describe the phenomenon of international student acculturation and could not provide diagnostic or prognostic tools and deeper insights into the likelihood of international students to adopt a particular acculturation pattern.

Second, even though the sample included international students from various countries, they all attended one institution and resided in a metropolitan city in the Southeastern region of the United States. Other higher education institutions, particularly those located in other geographical areas, or those of different sizes, may have different international student representation, campus culture, and university resources dedicated to this student group. Therefore, future research efforts should expand to colleges and universities of different types and sizes and to other regions of the United States. Such research direction would allow for exploring the acculturation differences or commonalities among international students in the United States and provide each host institution with the most appropriate recommendations for serving their students.

Third, the literature has already documented that international students' acculturation challenges are the most pronounced and strongest during their first year of college (Starr-Glass, 2016). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the timing of the interviews conducted for this study (i.e., first semester) probably had significant impacts on participants' acculturation experiences. Consequently, the results cannot be generalized to other timings in international students' first year. Additional research is needed to gain insights if the participants would report the same acculturation strategies at the end of their first year.

Fourth, the cultural backgrounds of participants in this study yield themselves to a particular set of limitations. The findings in this research were deduced from the sample of 10 students representing seven different cultures. Thus, the results can be challenged by prior studies that documented a strong relationship between international students' acculturation levels and countries of origin (Hansen et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2018), or their cultures and adjustment needs (Behl et al., 2017). For instance, students from Middle East were found to experience significantly higher level of acculturative stress than their peers from other cultural backgrounds (Behl et al., 2017), while Asian students displayed a greater level of acculturative stress than their European counterparts (Hansen et al., 2018). Consequently, the results of this study should be interpreted with a caution against unintentional generalization across participants' diverse cultural backgrounds.

Additionally, due to the strong interdependence of students' academic and acculturation experiences reported in this study, future research is needed to quantitatively measure the academic achievement of international students in relation to their acculturation. Lastly, both the findings of this study and the reviewed literature were limited to the international students in the United States. As the cultural adjustment of international students will inevitably differ from one host country to another, future research may conduct similar studies in other countries.

## CONCLUSION

The participants in this study exhibited varied experiences regarding the acculturation strategies they developed while navigating their academic and social experiences during the first year of college. In accordance with Berry's (1980) description of acculturation, international first-year students' sustained contact with the dominant group was experienced as "difficult, reactive, and conflictual rather than a smooth transition" (p. 10). Additionally, acculturation strategies adopted by the international students in this study were consistent with Berry's (1997) argument that the four acculturation patterns should not be expected to be static or predictable, but context-specific and dependent on situational factors.

In conducting this study, my intent was to produce knowledge that will assist all stakeholders involved in international student acculturation in identifying key factors influencing the adoption of a particular acculturation pattern and developing appropriate programs to promote students' voluntary integration into the American culture and education. This study particularly contributes to expanding the scarce research on international student first-year programming and the limited knowledge on the international student academic and social transition during the freshman year of undergraduate study. Knowing that acculturation stress is the most intense in early stages of one's educational journey (Ying, 2005) and more prevalent among undergraduate than graduate international students (Zhang & Yung, 2018), I hope that this study can serve as a critical foundation for early alert efforts and interventions aimed toward addressing international students' adjustment needs timely and effectively.

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