

# Communication Experiences of International Students in the U.S.: A Comparison Study of Cross-Cultural Adaptation between European and Asian Students

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## **Abstract**

*The purpose of this study is to examine the communication experiences of international students on American campuses. Y. Y. Kim's (1988, 2001) Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory provides the basis for offering an explanation of the linkage between the communication competence and psychological health of international students vis-à-vis the American sociocultural milieu. In addition, the study analyzed the level of ethnic proximity and its effect on the individual adaptation experiences of European and Asian international students on American university campuses. The analysis uses portions of verbal transcripts obtained through 24 in-depth personal interviews between October and December 2012. Participants of the interview were international students from European and Asian backgrounds who were attending universities in the central Tennessee area.*

*The results show that host language competence and cultural similarities/differences reflected in verbal and nonverbal behaviors are important sources of psychological challenges/success for international students. European and Asian student groups are involved in different levels of communication activities with host nationals, based on their ethnic proximity and their degree of difficulty in adapting to the host culture. Nonetheless, as Kim's theory predicts, the overall outcome of the study affirms that communication is the central force in the adaptation of international students, as it promotes psychological health in an unfamiliar host cultural environment.*

## **Problem**

Research in the adaptation of international students has gained wide attention among faculty members, administrators, and professionals. This could be attributed to the growing number of international students enrolled in U.S. colleges. There were more than 720,000 international students in the U.S. during the 2010-2011 academic year, which showed a 32% increase since the 2000-2001 academic year (Institute of International Education, 2012).

According to a recent study, the experience of studying overseas is detrimental to the well-being of only a small proportion of individuals (Rosenthal et al., 2008). International students make great contributions to their host academic communities, enriching the campus intellectual and cultural environment and bringing financial income to the U.S. economy. Studying overseas, however, involves more than simply taking classes, as international students face many of the cross-cultural problems that non-student sojourners and immigrants face. As temporary sojourners in a foreign environment, international students experience more stresses on American campuses than American students (e.g., Boyer & Sedlacek, 1988; Kaczmarek, Matlock, Merta, Ames, & Ross, 1994; Pedersen, 1991). Specifically, the factors that can be attributed to psychological distress in a sojourn experience include the extent of life changes (Lin & Yi, 1997), life stressors (e.g., Nicassio, Solomon, Guest, & McCullough, 1986), cultural distance (Furukawa, 1997; Galchenko & van de Vijver, 2007), and language problems (Zheng & Berry, 1991).

Along with the language factor, cultural distance has been regarded as an important factor in sojourner adjustment, which is one cause of low academic performance among international students (Ledwith and Seymour, 2001). The perceived cultural distance between a sojourner's home culture and the host culture is also related to sociocultural adjustment, suggesting that a greater perceived distance results in more difficulties (Galchenko and van de Vijver, 2007; Ward and Kennedy, 1993) and is directly related to the amount of stress (Babiker, Cox & Miller, 1980).

Sodowsky and Plake (1992) found that, as a group, Europeans were better acculturated to life in the United States than Asians, Africans, or South Americans. They concluded that Europeans shared more traits, beliefs, and values with the dominant society than the other groups.

Ethnic proximity refers to the degree of similarity between the cultural strangers' ethnicity and that of the natives of the host environment. Culture difference/distance would be significant if there is a greater difference in cultural strangers' ethnic background compared to their host culture. Kim (2001) strongly argues that this factor is no less important to consider than those who have received greater attention (e.g., host language competence, host interpersonal relationships, host media use, and environmental factors).

The present study investigates the communication experiences of international students (both European students and Asian students) in the U.S. to explore qualitative insights into their process of cross-cultural adaptation. The study examines how international students'

communication experiences are related to their psychological well-being vis-à-vis their host cultural milieu. In addition, the study compares the experiences of European students and Asian students in terms of their ethnic proximity. Specifically, the important related issues were posed as the following three research questions: (1) *What kind of communication related difficulties do international students face?*; (2) *What kind of contact and communication activities do international students have with local people?*; and (3) *How is the ethnic proximity of international students related to their communication activities and psychological health?* The analysis utilizes verbatim transcripts from interviews conducted in the U.S. between October and December 2012.

### Theoretical Grounding

Guiding this investigation is Y.Y. Kim's (1988, 2001, 2005) Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory. Grounded in an open systems perspective, Kim's theory (1988, 2001, 2005) approaches cross-cultural adaptation not as a specific analytic unit (or variable) but as the entirety of the evolutionary process an individual undergoes vis-à-vis a new and unfamiliar environment. Cross-cultural adaptation is therefore explained in terms of a dynamic interplay of the person and the environment. By placing adaptation at the intersection of the person and the environment, Kim defines cross-cultural adaptation as "the entirety of the phenomenon of individuals who, upon relocating to an unfamiliar sociocultural environment, strive to establish and maintain a relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationship with the environment" (Kim, 2001, p. 31). Implicit in this definition is the goal of achieving an overall person-environment "fit" that entails "almost always a compromise, a vector in the internal structure of culture and the external pressure of environment" (Sahlins, 1964, p. 136).

Based on this systemic conception of cross-cultural adaptation, the theory addresses two basic questions: (1) *What is the essential nature of the adaptation process individual settlers undergo over time?* and (2) *Why are some settlers more successful than others in attaining a level of fitness in the host environment?* The first question is addressed in the form of a *process model* that presents a three-pronged psychological movement Kim refers to as the *stress-adaptation-growth dynamic*—a movement in the generally forward and upward direction of increased chances of success in meeting the demands of the host environment. The stress-adaptation-growth dynamic is not explained as playing out in a smooth, linear progression, but in a dialectic, cyclic, and continual "draw-back-to-leap" pattern. The spiral model explains that humans, as open systems, have the natural tendency to resist evolution accompanied by the destruction of the old structure. This tendency manifests itself in various forms of psychological resistance, such as selective attention, denial, avoidance and withdrawal, as well as in compulsively altruistic behavior, cynicism, and hostility. Still, no open system can stabilize itself forever. If it were so, nothing would come of evolution. The state of misfit and a heightened awareness in the state of stress serve as the very same forces that propel individuals to overcome the predicament and partake in the active development of new habits. What follows the dynamic stress-adaptation disequilibrium, according to

the theory, is subtle growth. Periods of stress pass as settlers work out new ways of handling problems, owing to the creative forces of the self-reflexivity of human mentation.

Building on the process model, the theory turns to the second basic question: “Why do some settlers adapt faster than others?” or “Given the same length of time, why do some settlers attain a higher level of adaptation?” Integrating various factors addressed by different investigators as constituting and/or predicting differing levels or rates of adaptive change, Kim (1988, 2001, 2005) addresses this question in a structural model, depicted in Figure 1. The core of this structure is the dimension of personal communication, or *host communication competence* (Dimension 1), which is defined as the cognitive, affective, and operational capacity to communicate in accordance with the host communication symbols and meaning systems. This dimension serves as the very engine that pushes individuals along the adaptive path. Inseparably linked with host communication competence are the activities of *host social communication* (Dimension 2), through which strangers participate in interpersonal and mass communication activities in the host environment. Activities of *ethnic social communication* (Dimension 3) provide distinct, subcultural experiences of interpersonal and mass communication with fellow co-ethnics. Interacting with the personal and social (host, ethnic) communication activities are the conditions of the *host environment* (Dimension 4), including the degrees of receptivity and conformity pressure in the local population as well as the strength of the ethnic group. The individual’s *predisposition* (Dimension 5) — consisting of preparedness for the new environment, proximity (or distance) of the individual’s ethnicity to that of the natives, and the adaptive personality attributes of openness, strength, and positivity—influences the subsequent development in personal and social communication activities.

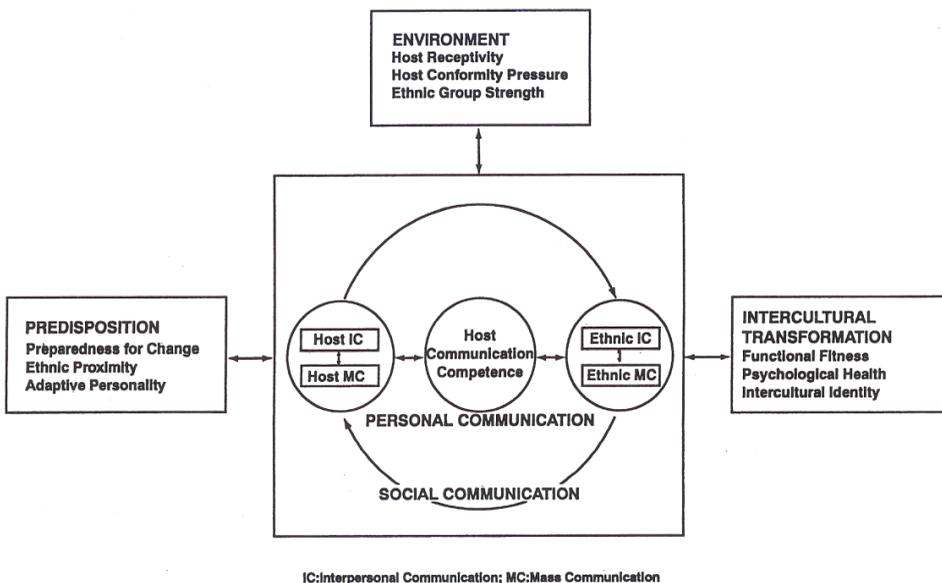


Figure 1. Y. Y. Kim’s Structural Model: Factors Influencing Cross-Cultural Adaptation (Source: Y. Y. Kim, 2001, p. 87).

Together, all of the factors identified above directly or indirectly contribute to explaining and predicting differential rates or levels of *intercultural transformation* (Dimension 6) within a given time period. The theory identifies three key facets of intercultural transformation: increased functional fitness, psychological health, and the emergence of an identity orientation that reaches beyond a single culture. The level of intercultural transformation, in turn, helps to explain and predict the levels of the other dimensions. The six dimensions constitute an interactive and functional model in which all the linkages indicate mutual stimulations (and not unidirectional causations), identified in 21 theorems (see Kim, 2001, pp. 91-92).

## Methods

The present study is based on an analysis of verbatim transcripts from interviews with 12 European students and 12 Asian students conducted in the U.S. between October and December 2012.

### Participants

The participants in this study were both European and Asian international students in universities in mid-South areas of the U.S. For the interview, both European and Asian student participants were selected by using a convenience sampling method.

For the European participants, there consists of a variety of different nationalities (see Table 1). Among the 12 interviewees, four interviewees were male (33.3%) and eight female (66.7%). The average age of the European interviewees was 24.08 years old (SD = 3.55 years; Range: 19-31 years), while the average length of stay in the U.S. was 1.5 years (SD = 1.7 years; Range: 3 months – 6.5 years). Seven interviewees were enrolled in a bachelor's degree program (58.3%), two in a master's program (16.7%), two in a doctorate program (16.7%), and one other (8.3%). Two interviewees (16.7%) had lived in a foreign country before coming to the U.S., and none of the interviewees had had prior intercultural training (100%).

For the Asian participants, there were five Chinese (41.7%), three Korean (25.0%), two Taiwanese (16.7%), and two Japanese (16.7%). Among the 12 interviewees, three interviewees were male (25%) and nine female (75%). The average age of the Asian interviewees was 28.58 years old (SD = 11.13 years; Range: 20-52 years), while the average length of stay in the U.S. was 2.18 years (SD = 2.37 years; Range: 2 months – 7 years). Five interviewees were enrolled in a bachelor's degree program (41.7%), five in a master's program (41.7%), one in a doctorate program (8.3%), and one other (8.3%). One interviewee (8.3%) had lived in a foreign country before coming to the U.S., and none of the interviewees had had prior intercultural training (100%).

### The Interview Procedures

All interviews were conducted by the first author in English, based on the interview questionnaire. All interviews took place in a library conference room or cafeteria or by phone. Most interviews took approximately 40 minutes to an hour to complete. The interviews began with an exchange of personal information (i.e., age, gender, length of stay,

education, etc.) after each interviewee had signed the consent form. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed in their entirety, with the written consent of the interviewees.

Interview questions were written in English. Among the topics covered in the interview, open-ended interview questions dealt with the main research variables: cultural differences and similarities between the interviewees and the host environment (“ethnic proximity”); communication ability and communication-related difficulties with local people (“host communication competence”); experiences of interacting with local people (“host interpersonal communication”); and overall feelings and positive/unpleasant life experiences in the host country (“psychological health”). There were also questions about their intercultural experience, including first impressions and treatment by local people.

Regarding *ethnic proximity*, questions included the degree of differences and similarities between the interviewee’s national culture and the dominant U.S. culture (e.g., “What aspects of the American culture do you find different from yours?” and “What aspects of the American culture do you find similar to yours?”). Another question included the degree of difficulty that the interviewees experienced in following American customs or cultural habits, which was intended to explore the relationship between ethnic proximity and the degree of difficulty: (i.e., “How much difficulty have you had in following the American customs or cultural habits?”).

Regarding *host communication competence*, questions included difficulties in communicating with American people and coping strategies to deal with these difficulties (e.g., “Have you ever experienced difficulties in communicating with American people?”, “Did you try anything to deal with these difficulties?” and “How did it work?”). Based on the responses, follow-up questions were used to elicit specific incidents and typical experiences illustrating these differences and difficulties.

With respect to *host interpersonal communication*, one question was asked to indicate the amount of daily interaction with Americans (e.g., “Of all your daily conversations, approximately what percentage of them do you have with American people?”). Another question followed about the types of social activities with host nationals: (i.e., “What kinds of socializing do you do with American people?”).

Concerning *psychological health*, the interviewees were asked to describe their positive and/or unpleasant life experiences while living in the host country (e.g., “What are some of the positive/unpleasant experiences you have had while living in the U.S. so far?”) as well as their general feelings about their life in the host country (e.g., “Overall, how are you feeling about your present life in the U.S., as regards your life experiences interacting with Americans?”).

Questions about intercultural communication experiences explored their first impression toward the host country (e.g., “What was one of your first impressions about America and American people?”); their perceived attitude of Americans toward foreigners in general and the interviewee himself/herself in particular (e.g., “What do you think about the attitude of American people toward foreigners/international students like you?”); and their perceived attitudes and different treatment from Americans (e.g., “Have you ever had

experiences during which you were treated differently from Americans because you are a foreigner?”).

## **Results**

The interview data were analyzed based on a portion of the qualitative verbal responses that were relevant to the interviewees' personal adaptation experiences in the host environment. The interviewees' comments and testimonials in response to the interview questions serve as the basis for addressing the three research questions posed above: (1) to explore the degree of self-perceived ethnic proximity between Asian and European interviewees and the degree of difficulty in adapting to American culture; (2) to identify the communication-related difficulties; (3) to investigate the kinds of contact and communication activities that international students have with local people; and (4) to identify the overall feelings that international students have in their life in the U.S.

In analyzing qualitative interview data, all questions and responses to open-ended questions were transcribed by the first author. After transcription, the verbatim data were grouped into common categories based on emerging themes of ethnic proximity, communication difficulties, interpersonal contact and communication, and overall feelings and intercultural experiences in the U.S. The first and second authors reviewed these common themes and categories. Any ambiguous and contradictory categories were refined based on agreement between the two authors.

### **Profiles of Interviewees**

There are 12 interviewees from each ethnic group (Asian and European), totaling 24 interviews. A brief profile of five interviewees from each group is presented in the following.

#### **Asian Interviewees**

**Interviewee #1.** She is from China and 20 years old. She has been in the United States two months as an exchange student. She is enrolled in her undergraduate program in English with an emphasis in teaching. She has never lived in another country and had six months preparation of talking with other Chinese students in her country who had previously been exchange students. She does most of her socializing with her American host family. She does not try to follow American customs or cultural habits; she prefers to follow her own. She will return to China after this semester. She speaks fluent English with only a slight accent.

**Interviewee #2.** She is from China and 24 years of age. She has been in the United States for three years and four months. She is enrolled in the last year of her second bachelor's degree. This degree will be in Music Business. She had never lived in another country other than China but has visited other countries such as Germany, France, and Italy. She will not return to China as she has plans to marry her American boyfriend she met here in the United States. She speaks fluent English and has hardly any noticeable accent. She has a very positive view of America and American customs.

**Interviewee #3.** She is from China and 23 years old. She has been in America two years and six months. She is enrolled in her second year of her master's program in Mass Communication. Before coming to the United States, she had traveled around Europe. She holds the opinion that American customs are much like Chinese customs; however, she was having a hard time understanding the American sense of humor. The clarity in which this student displays her level of understanding of the English language was inspiring for the interviewer. The interviewee would very much like to stay in America and continue her education but does not believe her visa will be renewed.

**Interviewee #4.** He is from China. He is 32 years old and has been in the United States for seven years. He is enrolled in his master's program in Accounting. He had never traveled to other countries before coming to America, but he does travel from America to China often. Although he desires to stay in America, he will go back to China to help with the family business.

**Interviewee #5.** This student is 51 and is from South Korea. She has been in America for six years and seven months. She is now in her Ph.D. program in the English department. She began learning English as a second language when she was in middle school in Korea. She is actively involved in the interaction she has with host nationals. Almost 95% of her daily life involves some sort of interaction with Americans.

### **European Interviewees**

**Interviewee #1.** She is Dutch, 22 years old, and has been in the United States for a few months. Her highest level of education before coming to the United States was two years of college. She is continuing her degree as an exchange student in the Aerospace department. She will return to Amsterdam to complete her degree and aspires to return to the United States to work as a professional pilot for a major airline. She has never lived in a foreign country before coming to the United States. Due to her ethnic markers similar to Caucasian Americans, she was thought to be Canadian by some Americans. She considers this to be a "fun" aspect of her American life.

**Interviewee #2.** This is a female student, age 29. She is from Germany and has been in the United States for a total of six years and six months. She is now in her doctorate program in Sociology. This is the second time she has been an exchange student in the United States. She also spent one year of high school in America. Before coming to America, she had never lived in another country. After receiving her Ph.D., she will stay in the United States and marry an American who is in the health field.

**Interviewee #3.** This student is from Germany and is 24 years old. She has been in America for three months. She came to the United States after finishing her bachelor's degree in Germany and is now in her master's program in Interpreting and Translation Linguists. She studied in France for one semester before coming to the United States. She did not have any prior preparation for her stay in the United States; however, she is not experiencing any difficulties. She is enjoying the culture and customs of the Southern part of the United States, particularly the custom of addressing older people with "yes,

ma'am" and "no, ma'am." She shared that around 90% of her time was spent with American people or international students who speak English. This was her second time coming to the United States. She will return to Germany after finishing her degree program.

**Interviewee #4.** This is a male student, age 26, who is from the country of Belarus, a border state to Russia. He has been in the United States for one year and four months. He came to the United States with a master's degree and is now enrolled in his doctoral program in Physics. He lived in Italy before coming to America. His first formal classes in English were when he came to the United States to pursue his doctorate. His time spent speaking with other Americans encompasses most of his experience. He did state that most of his time was spent in the lab and everyone there, even the other international students, spoke English. He enjoys America very much and hopes to either stay in the U.S. to work or to return soon after renewing his visa. He emphasized how positive his experience in learning and working in the United States has been thus far.

**Interviewee #5.** He is from France and is 22 years old. He has been in the United States for three years and four months. He is in the Aerospace program for his bachelor's degree. He hopes to return to the United States as a professional pilot. He has lived in Spain and Morocco with his parents before coming to the United States. He fluently speaks English, Arabic, Hebrew, French, and Italian. This interviewee shared with us his level of discomfort and culture shock while being here in America. He spends most of his time with other international students. American TV and movies helped the most to overcome his culture shock. At the time of this interview, this student explained that he was still experiencing many difficulties with American customs and attitudes. Even though he would like to work in the United States after he returns to his country to graduate, he did not believe he could tolerate the "arrogance" of Americans.

## **Results of Interviews with Asian Students**

### **Ethnic Proximity—Cultural Similarities and Differences**

In most cases, the responses from the Asian students concerning how different American culture was from their own reveal issues with food, cultural norms, and communication styles. One interviewee commented on the differences in food:

Okay, for the food there is a lot of fast food here and people prefer to drink Coke and eat either sweet food and for the snacks there is always chips and some cheese. But in China . . . we don't drink Coke that often. It is always normal temperature and . . . for the meals, we cook meals for ourselves and we don't eat beef so much. We eat pork and in southern China we eat rice a lot.

Another interviewee also gave a similar comment: "Americans eat very fast and like oily food. In our country, preparation of food takes a long time, and they eat no oily food."

Another student reported different cultural norms:

I found American culture is very individualistic; it respects individual choice and never pushing others. In addition, even if you and another person are friends, there is a clear distinction between public and private affairs. First, it was a little bit awkward to me.

Different verbal and nonverbal communication styles were commented on by another interviewee:

Communication is pretty straightforward. They get to the point right away. In addition, eye contact rule is totally opposite, particularly in interaction with strangers. In Japan, people are not as open or relaxed about looking and greeting people they do not know or have been introduced to. People here engage in more small talk and friendly gestures, as in Japan people just often greet each other with a simple “hi.”

One interviewee pointed out different parenting styles:

Parenting is very, very different in my country...I am reluctant to generalize those kind of things. But by my limited experience—American parents...are more kind of patient. Korean parents, we identify ourselves with our children more. So if my children have a bad grade in school, instantly I try to blame my parenting style...if my daughter does something wrong...that means I taught her something wrongly.

Regarding similarities, some respondents indicated the government system. One respondent even reported no similarities in appearance, food, social system, or social customs.

### **Communication-Related Difficulties**

Host language competence is a major factor that can pose everyday challenges to Asian students in America. One student reported the number of difficulties:

A lot. Yes, a lot. For one thing, I am not fluent as some in speaking English. So sometimes I have to wait in line. And, the people want to deal with that kind of stuff quickly; I cannot speak as fast as the American people do. If there is a lot of time, it's O.K., but if it is a hurry, they kind of run out of patience.

Another student shared her experience during shopping:

...Yes...flip-flops and the staplers and something like that. In China I can find it easy but here I have to explain the kind of things I want and I don't how to say in English so that is the [hardest] part is to communicate.

An Asian interviewee who had traveled to many countries shared that America has many slang words:

I have been to northern Europe for summer vacation with my mom, just one week. We traveled to Norway, Finland, Denmark, and Sweden.

When I first came here, I could not understand the slang communication and some accent, and I think that is it.

Another interviewee gave his account of the difficulty experienced in the classroom due to lack of host language competence:

Not with instructors, but with the American students. Sometimes they do not want to listen to you. They don't have the patience to listen what you are talking...they just stay silent...sometimes they are laughing. That's very uncomfortable.

In response to the question about coping strategies used, one interviewee stated:

I will search on the Internet how these things will be said in English or if I can find one, I use my signature, I use my body. Or I just walk around the [store] to pick up the things I want. Something like that. But with my friends, I try my best. It's the words I have to explain as much as I can.

### **Host Interpersonal Communication Contact and Communication Activities**

Socializing activities with Americans include spending time with classmates, attending churches, and interacting with host families. The twenty-year-old exchange student from China described herself as shy, and she felt a high level of culture shock among food differences, language competence, and with the level of freedom to speak her opinion. She responded with a statement concerning what activities she takes part in:

I went to church with my friend and my host family and I go to the library and go to dinner and go do some sports: like running and walking and swimming.

Another Chinese student gave her experience:

I'm not a party person, I don't like that. I love to do like Facebook things and texting messages to my American friends. And I really, really love to hang out with my host family, my professors, and my fiancé's family. They're so intelligent and they are so charming. They are happy every day, and they are so helpful. They are always trying to help you with something. I love to hang out with them. I can learn a lot of stuff.

At the same time, most of the Asian students are not actively involved in interaction with Americans. Several interviewees reported:

Interactions? 10% or 20% Americans [in my daily interaction]. I am still mostly with my Chinese friends or other international students.

It is not so much because I spend my time, almost, I spend most of my time in the class and then the library. So I don't do so much communications with American people. Because I live in a big family in China, we know each other, and we can hang out after your work. And I have a lot of friends in there. But in America I often stayed with a Chinese group. In the past seven years I only made one American true friend.

Another Asian student gave us shared a view of how different ethnic markers had an impact on the frequency of interaction between American students and international students. She explained:

It depends. They are more interested in more countries compared to other countries. If we had a student from Norway, his English is like Americans, he looks like American. He knows like tons of, he has tons of friends. He is like an American. But I don't look like an American and I don't talk like an American, so I feel like there is a gap between the countries that are like Asians, those countries that don't speak English, or German, or Spanish speaking countries. There is a difference between those countries and Americans. . . . mostly the American student will talk to the American student instead of the Chinese student. I don't know why. I don't feel that they are racist or something like that. But, because they are similar to each other more than we are similar, but if we already know each other, then we will talk.

### **Psychological Health**

Asian interviewees mentioned their first impression about America/Americans as friendliness, happiness, freedom, and a big country. Two interviewees mentioned their image of America as this:

"They never stop smiling to others. They usually say, 'Sorry; thanks; excuse me.'"

"When you talk to them, when you are in class, they always have a lot of creative ideas. I will not ever have thought about that, and they are not fear to speak it out. I like that."

Each interviewee was asked to share a time when he or she may have felt treated differently from Americans because he/she was from another country. A Chinese student shared his experience:

When I first came here my English was so bad, but I had to take a history class, Recording Industry History. I like, I don't know anybody. Any names of those people, I don't know who they are or what they did. I don't know the event's name, so I asked my professor to give me the Power Points so I will preview before the class, and he did that. He told me that he had never given anybody else the Power Points. He just gave it to me. That's a good thing as in being treated differently than Americans.

The same interviewee also continued with his unpleasant experience:

...If I am just sitting in a classroom and I'm the American student, there is an American student to my left and on my right, there is a Chinese student. Mostly the American student will talk to the American student instead of the Chinese student. I don't know why.

One Asian interviewee indicates ethnocentrism of America as an unpleasant feeling:

Sometimes they want to talk about the relationship between Taiwan and Mainland China. They barely know where is Taiwan, or where is China. They know China is a big country, but where is it? They can't tell. Because I have a class and they send out a world. A map of the world. We say draw the countries. Where is America, where is the Middle East, where is China, where is Taiwan? They just know America. So sometimes I feel you may need to know more about others, about others countries then you can say that statement. But sometimes I just don't want to talk about so much politics because I think that would be a barrier in Americans and me so I just don't.

One student expressed her mixed feeling about the attitude Americans may have towards international students:

They are super nice and very good. People are very nice until you know, they feel threatened by international students. Probably, it [would be] different when international students try to find a job. Competing with American students...In that case, their attitude is probably different.

While there are different experiences among Asian interviewees, most Asian interviewees describe their overall sojourning experience as eye opening and rewarding. Two interviewees reported their experiences:

Before I came here, I never thought about the kind of diversity...Seven years ago, Korea was kind of a homogeneous society. You think of the old people you meet on the street you have black hair and black eyes, and you use the same language. When I came here, I say oh my gosh, all the hair color is different, their eye color is different. Their face is different; their skin color is different too. And, even among the American people, their accents are different. Same thing even in Korea, but some American people even cannot understand the accent of American people. In fact I think American culture improved my being. In China we are changing a lot. It is a focus on money, not on your person. My seven years in America, I can get more personal knowledge, capable of confidence, my person [is] stronger.

Keeping in mind the individual interviewees and how their life has been changed while living in the United States helps facilitate the importance of cross-culture adaptation. When asked if the interviewee has had any negative experiences while in American; one Chinese student gave this account:

No, because here I feel like it is my home. Maybe because my fiancé's home, his family are very connected. They are just a gorgeous family. They are so nice. And, they consider me as their daughter. They give me, not gifts, but when they are shopping they think about me. So I have

never missed home. Before I met my fiancé, my host family was like my real family. They are just so nice. They will invite me for every event or holidays that they have. They are always there to help me. So I have never felt alone here. I do have great friends, I don't know why; I might be born to be independent.

Another Chinese student shared his positive feeling:

I don't know how to say, but when I am here, I feel freedom. When I am in my class, it encourages me to involve in the talking. Encourage me to speak my own opinion. I'm trying to do that. Yes, and I like the library here because you have a lot of books and it's free, I can read a lot. I really like reading.

## **Results of Interviews with European Students**

### **Ethnic Proximity—Cultural Differences and Similarities**

While they feel similar to the dominant U.S. culture in many respects, most European students indicated cultural differences in regards to food, lifestyle, communication style, values, and social customs. Several interviewees commented that food is served in very big portions, and it is tough to choose healthy foods in the U.S. Also, they pointed out commonly that life in the U.S. seems to be more fast-paced compared to their countries.

The interviewees also shared their observations about different communication styles.

One interviewee reported:

I think Americans are really good at small talk... Germans just get to the point, say whatever they want to say, couple of sentences, and Americans just talk about anything like "How are you? What's been up lately? What are you doing? How is your mother?"

Another interviewee also reported her experience:

People in the U.S., when walking past you at a close distance, say "sorry" too often. In Sweden, no one even cares or notices....there is "too much sentiment" and most of things people say tend to be sugar-coated and not straightforward.

The different gestures also puzzled another interviewee:

... In France, first when you say hi you would give a kiss on the cheek... One of my first experiences, my friend came to get me at the airport and he gave me the weirdest thing I have ever seen which was the half-hug (gestures of the half-hug). I found that it being so cold, so unwelcoming, because in my culture, if we are friends, and we meet and you shake my hand, that is considered very cold and there is something wrong between us. If we don't give the kiss on the cheeks, there is something wrong if you don't do that. So...I felt at that moment unwelcome, what is that, it's cold—that was my first, I will never forget that moment.

Different values were reported as well:

The thing that is not very common in Sweden was that here in the U.S., a sense of accomplishment seemed to be very much encouraged as well as achieving success...American culture also seems to encourage hard work and being bold.

A social custom that was a surprise to these European interviewees was the American custom of a baby shower. A German student explained:

I would have to ask friends, "What in the world are you doing?" It just seems like a strange thing to do. Basically everyone just sits in a circle, the poor, the poor host has to sit in the center and unwrap all the gifts and be excited each and every time.

Another student from Latvia also indicated different dressing styles in the U.S.:

In Europe, it is disrespectful for professors to show up to class dressed in mainly sportswear... Here, individuals wear what they want.

Along with different customs and cultural habits they observed, European interviewees also pointed out similarities of American culture to theirs. One German student commented:

I would say overall, the American and German culture, it's pretty similar, especially if you compare to African and South America's or Asian cultures compared to the U.S. I would say, it's still, we have all the music, all the art culture, all that stuff is the same, it's just translated in German. Generally, most people in Germany are white, most people here are white, so there are a lot of similarities. The differences are very subtle I would say.

Other interviewees also commented:

The interaction with people...Like the customs during the meal, and how you greet someone, and how you talk and speak and how you say good-bye. All of that is really similar.

My country seems very culturally similar to Nashville, Tennessee. Both places have a large influx of young people, making them great places that foster modern cultural activities. Both places are full of cafes, concert venues, museums, clubs, and others.

### **Communication-Related Difficulties**

Communication-related difficulties were revealed in the area of host language competence. Some of the interviewees reported that they feel frustrated when they cannot be understood or cannot understand Americans. One interviewee mentioned:

Yes, when I talk to people who are really Southern and they have the accent, I really have trouble understanding what they are saying, like the ladies at the bookstore. I was trying to explain that I needed a stapler. I didn't know what the word for stapler was, so I tried to paraphrase and

describe it, and they were not getting my point. When they were talking to me, it was like “Sorry. Again?”.

While there are language and accent issues, however, most interviewees reported they did not have any problem with limited language competence. Most of them learned to speak English before they came to the U.S. One interviewee comments reflected on this fact:

I was lucky enough to grow up in schools where the English language was always taught as an optional second language...this helped me a lot.

### **Host Interpersonal Communication Contact and Communication Activities**

Most interviewees reported being active in interpersonal contact and social activities with Americans. The variety and frequency of their interpersonal interactions are reflected the following response:

We went to Chattanooga for fall break just to see more of the country. More of the culture and do typical American things, like pumpkin carving, I enjoyed that. And I went to a shooting range last weekend; that was quite an experience. We went to the Jack Daniel’s Distillery.

Comparing the approximate amount of time spent speaking to Americans by the international students gives a strong sense of their comfort level in engaging with Americans.

Another European student observes:

Sometimes I meet colleagues, and also sometimes I meet a friend of mine. He is also American. He was an exchange student at my home university last semester. I often go to lunch with him. And, I’m in a group. It’s a new group for university exchange students. So there’s exchange students and American students as well. Sometimes they offer like movie nights here. The cultural fest today...I also have a host family. It is a program they have here...We meet from time to time, and they have three kids. I went to their place, they have like a playground;, yeah it was fun.

I have experienced that the people in the south are generally are a lot friendlier, more open than Germans are, in general, so you know they do the whole small talk thing which, you know is a foreign concept to Germans. We just say what we want right away. Without any small talk ahead of time, so that is something I had to pick up on.

While there is a variety of interpersonal interaction with Americans, one interviewee pointed out the superficial nature of their relationship:

But, on the other hand I always thought relationships were often times more superficial over here. People will say things like, “oh we should hang-out”, they didn’t actually mean it – ‘you’re cool and I want to seem nice, but I’m not really planning on calling you any ways soon’ to set up a meeting or any type of thing like that. On one hand they [Americans] are easier to talk to, and friendlier in general, you know, kind of causal

encounters, but they [Americans] are a little bit more superficial than Germans.

### **Psychological Health**

Few students reported difficulty adapting to a new cultural environment. Most European interviewees reported a smooth transition and adaptation without major difficulties. Two interviewees' experiences are presented:

Even though I had some trouble getting used to the American culture, I could actually mesh with it much quicker than expected. I adjusted to the change of attitude and time perception almost immediately. And also I made a lot of friends quickly.

I don't think I had encountered culture shock. I have just adapted to more of the thinking and behavior style of the U.S...but have kept my religion, dress style, eating and hobbies.

This easy transition could be explained by the similar ethnic/cultural background (ethnic proximity) they might have, as suggested by these responses:

There really weren't any major cultural differences to adjust to. The general culture in Europe tends to be similar to American culture.

Because of the similarities between American and Northern European culture and customs, I did not really encounter anything strange or many things I had to get used to.

Americans tend to be well receiving of Northern and Western Europeans since they view them as being similar and of equal standards of civilization. Most of the white majority's roots came from European immigrants. So, I am not being seen as different from anyone else until I speak [English with a European accent].

The interviewees were also asked what first impressions they had of American people.

Most interviewees reported positive impressions of Americans, such as their being nice and friendly. Some responses are presented here:

They are willing to help. ...When we first got here because our apartment was a mess...all kind of terrible things that needed to be fixed...the landlord and the guy working for him came over all the time, trying to help us out...It was lovely.

Actually that was nine years ago, [it] was the first time I was here, in 2003. We were late, our aircraft was late. The customs hall was too crowded. We were not allowed to leave the plane. We wanted to call my mom's friend to tell her that we will take the next plane. We wanted to use the phone but we did not have the coins, we only have the bills. Then a woman came over to us and asks if we need help. I can change your money or whatever. We were really surprised and happy about that. It was very, very nice.

Another multifaceted part of intercultural adaptation is the perceived attitude of Americans toward international students. Respondents provided their positive experiences. One student gave her opinion:

I think they have a good attitude. For example at my university, in my department, more than half are internationals. Yes, they like international students. In general, I think they have very good attitudes. For example, Germans, they do not have a good attitude about foreigners, but Americans are good for that because most are foreigner before they came here, not so far ago, just a hundred years or so, so they're very friendly to foreigners is my opinion.

The interviewees demonstrated frankness and openness when asked if they had ever felt like they were treated differently because they are from another country. Below is the response from a European student:

Not in a bad way. One of my professors, I think, I get really shy in that class, because I feel like an idiot because everyone else is a native speaker. It's a media writing class, so you have to be like a journalist, I'm like oh god, I'll never be able to keep up, and then when I say something I mess my sentences up and stutter or whatever, and then he might think I'm a little dumb. I don't know. He makes sure he explains everything very clearly. But, that's a good thing.

In spite of overall pleasant experiences in the U.S., one German student explained his unpleasant experience as well:

I don't like it, because I was a foreigner, but because I was a German, I went to [a store] with my American friend because I needed some things to make a German apple pie. In Germany we have vanilla-sugar, sugar with a bit of vanilla in it. We didn't find it, so my friend asks a woman filling out the stock, and "Do you have it here?" "No, we don't have that," and I said, "Oh, it's a German thing," and she said, "Oh, you are German?" and I said *yes*, and she said, (throwing one arm out in front of her) "Ahh, Heil Hitler" – I was really shocked. That is the only thing that ever happened like that, most people are like *Germany, Germany is so cool, I want to go there one day*. Things like that. So, that's the only bad experience.

While there were different experiences among European interviewees, most of the interviewees indicated their sojourning experience was rewarding and pleasant. One interviewee reported that he likes being in the U.S., as being able to play college sports has been a great experience and there will be more experiences to come before he graduates. A student from Germany also commented:

I love it here. When I was here for vacation a couple of years ago I was in the South and I really loved it here. So since I came to the United States I was fourteen, I just fall in love with the country, the people, everything.

I could imagine when I go back to Germany next year, I need one more year, I could imagine coming back and living here.

One student from Belarus shared his feelings:

For me the experience to study in another country, to work and do science. I like the experience of studying and working in the United States, that's why I have a positive experience in the United States.

Another student commented that they hope the friendships made in the United States could be kept:

The friends I've made definitely; the international students as well as the American students. I hope I can keep up those contacts and after I leave maybe come back some day and visit.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of the present analysis has been to examine the communication and adaptation experience of international students in the U.S. by comparing Asian and European groups. Y.Y. Kim's (1988, 2001) Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory has served as the basis for examining predispositional factors (e.g., ethnic proximity) and communication activities, which have been posed as three research questions: (1) What degree of ethnic proximity do the international students have?; (2) What kind of communication-related difficulties do the international students have?; and (3) What is the overall feeling and life experience of international students in their host cultural milieu?

The present analysis is based on the data from interviews conducted in the United States between October and December 2012. The results of the study show that both comparison groups express unique and individual experiences in their interaction with the different host environment in the process of cultural adaptation.

Regarding ethnic proximity, both groups indicated that food and eating habits were found to be major differences as compared to their ethnic cultures. In addition, different cultural values and verbal/nonverbal communication styles were also reported by both groups. For similarities, the European group reported more similarities than the Asian group (e.g., general culture, physical appearance, etc.).

Regarding communication-related difficulties, the major issue for both groups is largely centered in host language competence. However, while the lack of English language competence is a critical issue for some Asian students, European students cited accent issues as a difficulty. The European students, in general, seemed to be better prepared in English before they came to the U.S.

Regarding host interpersonal contact with Americans, European students enjoy a variety of network and socializing activities with Americans, more than their Asian counterparts. As both groups explained, this could be attributed to ethnic proximity, such as similar ethnic markers and better language competence.

Regarding psychological health, both groups generally perceived the host cultural environment positively. At the same time, both groups also reported a lack of interest and

racism in the attitudes of some Americans. This suggests that American society is very open and friendly to cultural strangers, but international students might face prejudice and racism sometimes in their daily lives. Both groups described their overall sojourning experience as rewarding and positive. However, regarding the process of adaptation, European students reported a smoother transition and adaptation without major difficulties of culture shock. Again, this could be explained by the ethnic proximity of European students with the white majority in America, as mentioned throughout the interviews.

As predicted by Kim's Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory, the results show the centrality of communication in the process of adaptation among international students. In addition, the cultural novelty and similar/dissimilar ethnic markers (ethnic proximity) of international students are closely related to better language competence and greater levels of interpersonal interaction with host nationals. This might also enhance the smoothness of transition in an unfamiliar cultural milieu. In addition, the level of friendliness and openness of classrooms and community environments (perceived host receptivity) might have an impact on the international student's life and motivation to interact with host nationals. Overall, there is a reciprocal relationship between communication and psychological health.

Methodologically, this study uses interviews to describe the communication and life experiences of international students in the American cultural milieu. This emic perspective of using in-depth interviews yields richer information on the realities international students can face in the process of their cultural adaptation.

Practically, this study provides some insights into adaptation experiences in a different host cultural environment. The findings show that host language competence and active involvement in host interpersonal communication constitute an important factor in successful adjustment. In addition, the ethnic proximity as a background factor of international students could be related to better language competence and enhancement of active involvement in host interpersonal communication and treatment by local people. Thus, international offices of American universities need to take this into account when they prepare any workshop or post-arrival training program to help international students adjust to American campuses.

Because of the small sample size, the present findings are to be interpreted and generalized with some caution. They can, however, be less problematic as consistent findings are obtained over time across different studies involving different nationalities of international students in different countries.

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**Table 1. Nationalities of the European Interviewees**

Country	No.
The Netherlands	1
Germany	3
France	1
Belarus	1
Italy	1
Denmark	1
Switzerland	1
Latvia	1
Australia	1
Sweden	1
Total	12