

Research Perspectives on International Students

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Abstract:

This article provides a review on assumptions that guide research on international students. Five adaptation approaches (normative conflict, personality trait, friendships, orientation task of higher education institutions and plurality orientation of higher education institutions) as well as a biographical and a motivation approach are presented. These approaches are evaluated as regards to their scientific insight, and the biographical approach is proposed as the most holistic approach.

Keywords: international students, biographical research, study abroad, adaptation of international students, motivation

1. Introduction

Over the last years, two reviews have tried to systematize research on international students: Smith and Khawaja (2011) have provided a review on acculturation models trying to determine the suitability of these models for research on international students. Zhang and Goodson (2011) have analyzed predictors of international students' psychosocial adjustment to life in the U.S.

With this article I propose a different kind of review on international students' research: Instead of listing research topics, theoretic categories and research results, I would like to draw attention to the approaches used to gain scientific insight on international students. With this change in analytic stance, I want to bring up the often implicit assumptions of the approaches that guide the research, and broaden the horizon to more research foci, hoping to encourage a discussion about these different perspectives and their scientific benefit.

For this purpose I will not try to give an exhaustive survey of all research to be found on this topic, but rather concentrate on a few representative studies pointing out the characteristics of their approach. Sometimes I will just choose one study for illustration purposes, sometimes a group of studies depending on how I can best demonstrate my findings in a concise form. I choose two dimensions to structure my analysis. Usually international students are seen as *different* and this difference somehow leads to a *process of change*. The first question is therefore the question of *difference*. What is considered to be the relevant category of difference that guides the research? The second question is what kind of *change processes* are being investigated?

The reported studies are very different in so far as theoretical and methodical concepts are concerned. I do not claim that they are alike. My focus is the similarity in – more or less - implicit assumptions, which I will elaborate upon further below.

2. Perspectives on international students

Three main approaches can be distinguished: the adaptation approach, the biographical approach, and the motivation approach.

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2.1 The adaptation approach

This approach is dominant in research. Its underlying foundation is the assumption that international students are – due to migration – confronted with a new environment to which they have to adapt. This assumption is usually accompanied by concepts of “culture” often implicitly conceived as “national culture” (or “regional/ethnic culture”). The migration is therefore viewed as a change from one set of cultural norms to another. Within this approach five different conceptions can be differentiated.

2.1.1 Adaptation as a conflict of norms

The assumption of normative conflicts is very often to be found in studies of the years 1960-1980. The existence of cultural norms is usually considered to be a matter of fact. The term “culture” itself is not defined, but national norms are assumed to guide the behavior of international students. For this reason, these studies investigate the normative conflicts of students coming from one specific cultural region, like Arab students or Chinese students. Difference is located in the cultural origin of the students, be it a specific country, region or status like “developing countries”. Arriving in Germany means – according to this approach – that the students are confronted with adaptation problems due to new cultural norms, and the degree to which students adapt to the new norms is explored. Adaptation as a change process is not investigated by a comparison of the sample prior and post migration, but as deviation from the a priori defined cultural norms of the home country.

I would like to illustrate this perspective with the study from Tjioe (1972). Her study is particularly interesting in her findings and suitable to show the advantages and shortcomings of this approach. She first reports cross-culture studies to define “East Asian norms” (1972:24ff.). Then she investigates which German norms female Asian students adapt to, and which they reject and demonstrates where the Asian students see differences between their home countries and German culture. It becomes apparent in the statements she quotes, however, that the Asian women do not judge, for example, the behavior of German women in the same way, instead they position themselves in favor of or against “German” behavior.

The focus on different cultural norms (understood as national/regional cultures) has the merit to bring up the differences that international students experience and which the host society often ignores. Tjioe (1972) shows how much the interaction between the German and Asian students is influenced by judgments on each other. It is important to be aware of these perceptions of differences and the difficulties they might entail. However, by concentrating on national/regional cultures the researchers often neglect the differences among the international students themselves, although these differences might be relevant in order to understand the adaptation process in the host society. This approach does not consider the normative conflicts within the families and the societies of origin. The individual experiences leading to certain judgments and positioning towards norms cannot be understood. This brings us to another important point: If the analysis aims at new findings about adaptation as a change process in international students, then there needs to be data on the perceptions and normative positioning of the interviewees before and after migration.

2.1.2 Adaptation as a personality trait

In contrast to the previous approach this one is focused on psychological factors. However, culture -related findings are often included in the concept. In general, the adaptation of international students is investigated through their psychological constitution while studying abroad. This means that a positive psychological constitution is considered to be a sign of a good adaptation. For this approach, it is of particular interest to find factors that predict positive adaptation. The term “culture” is often referred to in these studies without further definition, but as many studies focus on students from a specific country or region, it becomes clear,

that the term “culture” is understood in national or regional terms. The study of Searle and Ward (1990) is a major work, which introduces the groundbreaking distinction between psychological and sociocultural adjustment. The first comprises psychological dimensions of well-being and satisfaction and the latter contains the sociocultural capacity to “fit in” (1990:450). On the basis of three theoretical frameworks – “clinical perspectives”, which consider personality, life events, and social support; “social learning models”; and “social cognition approaches” – the authors investigate “cross-cultural transitions” (1990:449) through a study on students from Malaysia and Singapore who lived between six months and six years in New Zealand. In their discussion (458ff.) the authors refer to the key constructs “cultural distance” and “cultural fit”, which they suggest needs further exploration. The construct “cultural distance” is often referred to in the literature. It is important to understand this approach, and therefore I want to give a summary of the studies concerned.

The Cultural Distance Index (CDI) according to Babiker, Cox and Miller (1980) wants to describe “local custom and environment”: that is, the specific social surrounding of the students, not national culture (1980:110). The ten items of the questionnaire ask for climate, clothing, language, educational background, food, family structure, etc. (114-115, Appendix A). Despite this aim, the CDI lists scores of national countries. It shows that, for example, Finland, Thailand and New Zealand score relatively close to Scotland, whereas Portugal, Kenya and Denmark lie in the middle (112, Table 4). The CDI only proves that African and Asian students score higher on “anxiety” and go to see the doctor more often than the others. In contrast to that, ‘cultural distance’ shows no relation to academic achievement, but it seems that “material comfort” is related to academic success (113). What insights does this questionnaire provide? The authors themselves critically reflect on their concepts and findings and point out the shortcomings, such as the fact that for many African countries there was just one respondent. Nevertheless, this study is often quoted to underline the validity of ‘cultural distance’ as a concept.

The study of Furnham and Bochner (1982) has a different focus. They don’t want to pathologize the problems of international sojourners (1982:163ff.) and therefore choose the approach of social learning, arguing that the adequate behavior in a different culture has to be learned (164). They investigated difficulties in specific social situations and friendship networks on the grounds of a priori defined regions of origin (176-177). Respondents were participants in language courses who had been in England between one to five months (176). Results show, that the contact with the host country population appears to be quite difficult. The specific situation of participants in language courses, who just stay a short time in the country and for this reason, usually have little or no intensive contact with the host society, is not discussed. It remains an open question if the difficulties are due to a lack of “social skills” (165) or if the problem is rather the communication in a foreign language and the short length of stay. The approaches of the two studies are quite different. Nevertheless both are often referred to with the aim to underline the relevance of “cultural distance”.

The concept of “cultural distance” is, as in the first approach “conflict of norms”, an attempt to define collective practice and to compare one set of collective practices to another. Two main problems, which can also be seen in the above mentioned studies, arise: (1) What is part of the collective practice? ...Material/physical aspects such as clothes, food, climate, housing? ...Or immaterial aspects such as norms and habits like education background, family structure, social skills or language practices? (2) Which collectives do we compare? ...Families? ...Peer groups? ...Local social structures? ...Nations or regions?

Up to this point, the approaches ‘conflict of norms’ and ‘personality traits’ seem similar. The difference lies in the psychological view that the second approach introduces. Searle and Ward do not only refer to the hypothesis of “cultural distance” but moreover recommend considering the hypothesis of “cultural fit” (Searle & Ward 1990:458): that is, exploring the

role that personality traits play. The hypothesis of cultural fit suggests that individual personality traits that resemble host country norms facilitate the adaptation process. This means that individual personality does vary within cultures and an individual positioning towards social norms has to be considered in the adaptation process.

The study of Searle and Ward is a good example of the “adaptation as personality trait” approach, as it discusses its advantages and its problems. This approach opens the perspective to the psychological factors which influence the reaction of the individual to a new environment. The quantitative studies allow for representative samples and complex data analyses, which include psychological and social information. However, the combination of individual psychological factors and social norms brings up questions as well: If “cultural distance” is a relevant concept, it needs a careful definition. Does it refer to collective norms on a national level or does it describe the immediate social surrounding of an individual? And in which way does it determine the individual’s behavior? As the (individual) cultural fit is discussed as well, how does it relate to the concept of “cultural distance”?

Ward and Searle demonstrate that psychological and sociocultural adjustment are distinct forms of adjustment, though they are interrelated. But how are they interrelated? Triandis and Suh point (2002:136) out that studies yield different results depending on whether they define 'cultures' or individuals as relevant categories of analysis. Therefore it seems necessary to specify the relation between individuality and collective imprint.

2.1.3 Adaptation through friendships

Several studies are dedicated to investigating the friendships of international students, arguing that adaptation is facilitated through friendships. Change is therefore explored in the form of building up social contacts, and the category that is analyzed in these studies is the nationality of the friendship groups. For this reason, I don’t want to summarize only one study as an illustration of this approach, but rather present the different views on friendship groups as characteristic of this approach.

Some studies focus on the difference category “host students” – “home students” (Budke 2003; Hendrickson et al. 2011; Hendrickson 2018; Glass & Westmont 2014), while others stress the importance of international friendship groups (Sobré-Denton 2011; Montgomery 2010). Whether friends from the host country or international friendship groups are more important is rather controversial. Home students would introduce the international students to the host culture and encourage cultural learning, whereas if the international friendship groups play a special role as social support group, they buffer the effects of being a foreigner. Some studies investigate whether the region of origin plays a role in participating in recreational activity and building up friendship networks (Glass et al. 2014; Rienties & Nolan 2014). As the lack of host country friendships tends to be interpreted as a lack of interest in the host culture, yet another group of researchers focuses on the attitudes of the home students (Williams & Johnson 2011; Dunne 2013). They underline that it is often the home students who lack interest in building up friendships with students from abroad. Interestingly, there are studies of international students themselves, who integrate questions concerning friendships in their research. These authors only consider friendships with co-nationals, though reflecting the ambivalence of these relationships. Friendships with students from the host country are given no special importance (Yu 2005; Zhou 2010).

This approach brings up the key factor of social integration: Without relevant social contacts there can be no exchange between the international students and the host society. Friendships as emotional and social factors are an important part in the adaptation process. However, friendship is a vague category not easy to define. The need for social contact and the quality of contact needed for well-being vary individually. A focus solely on nationality does not capture the different types and qualities of the relationships that constitute their

emotional meaning. For the development of emotionally satisfying relationships it is important how the international and host country students establish community, that means according to which criteria and needs do they connect to others and build up friendships? The answers to this question could provide new insights on the role of friendships in adaptation processes.

2.1.4 Adaptation as orientation task of higher education institutions

A different stance is taken in the studies of Hosseinizadeh (2005) and Klabunde (2014). Their focus does not lie on the adaptation of international students, but on the challenges for the higher education institutions to provide adequate counseling and support structures. Within the frame of competition for the best international students, it is not the international students anymore whose adaptation processes are investigated but instead the ability of the institutions to adapt to the needs of the international clientele. This is done in both cases by a comparison between German, U.S. and Canadian universities, respectively, and the facilities provided. Teaching and administration staff as well as students are interviewed and programmatic university documents are analyzed.

This approach has the merit to include the higher education institutions as well as their political environment in the research and to point out their role in facilitating the adaptation process. This perspective gives information on institutional structures and practical problems. It investigates the perspective of those people who counsel and advise international students. It would be of particular interest though, not only to compare programmatic proclamations but to evaluate their outcomes.

2.1.5 Adaptation as a plurality-orientation of higher education institutions

Under this headline I refer to various different studies, which all have the same approach of viewing the higher education institutions as the responsible actor to adapt to the plurality within its student and teaching staff body. Sun (2010) investigates the intercultural differences perceived by Chinese students in Germany. Schuman (2012) collected “critical incidents” about intercultural misunderstandings. These studies are concerned with cultural norms like the first approach, but investigate the academic setting, not general social norms. Otten (2006) works out a typology of interculturality orientations of teaching staff, wanting to bring about institutional change. On the basis of the difficulties of Moroccan students in Germany, Kiefer (2014) asks for a difference-sensitive university, where dominance structures are reflected. The Diversity Report (Berthold & Leichsenring 2012) of the CHE Consult explores sociologic factors that can prevent academic dropout.

All of these studies are concerned with the plurality found in international universities and the concepts of the higher education institutions to deal with it. However, and this is the important point concerning this approach, plurality is analyzed on different levels. Whereas Sun (2010) and Schumann (2012) are concerned with perceived differences of social practice, Otten (2006) investigates the discursive constructions of difference. Kiefer (2014) and the Diversity Report (Berthold & Leichsenring 2012) observe sociologic factors that constitute difference. All of the factors merit attention as they influence social reality. Particularly the correlations between perceptions, discourses and sociologic factors would provide valuable insights.

2.2. The biographical approach

Günther (2009), Yu (2005) and Aits (2008) collected data with qualitative interviews that allow comprehending the biographical context of student experiences and behavior. Change processes can be understood through biographical developments. Rather than the difference of the students being investigated, it is the way in which the individuals themselves deal with perceived or ascribed differences.

The study of Günther (2009) is particularly rich in findings, as she describes personal developments of Guinean students in Germany. She is interested in negotiation processes between social groups and the individual, as well as the margins that the adolescent individuals have to realize lifestyles diverging from their social group (2009:94-95). She identifies three different development patterns (214ff.), depending on the family relations back home. Students whose parents were empathic conflict partners manage to design their own life in Germany and deal positively with experiences of difference or even discrimination. Students, who migrated to fulfill the parents' ambitions and had no margin to try out their own lifestyle, lose their orientation in Germany, and tend to withdraw into their own ethnic community. Students of the third type live in family relationships full of conflict and are therefore still busy with these relationships while studying abroad. Günther concludes that the migration leads to an extension of the psychosocial possibilities of the students (Günther 2009:243), but that the coping with the adolescent migration situation is primarily determined by the socio-emotional resources anchored in their family experiences (245-246) as well as in the host society. She points out that the Guinean students suffer from discrimination in Germany, which limits their development potential. Therefore she sees the need to revise approaches which focus on the cultural adaptation of international students, as it is not cultural practice that determines the margin of adaptation (246).

Günther's findings do not only contradict approaches targeted towards (national) cultural traits, but – and this is true for the biographical approach in general – they allow scientific insights of a different quality: Personal traits, behavior and motivation can be analyzed and explained within the biographical context and individual positions to collective norms become visible and comprehensible. The biographical approach makes it possible to analyze the social context in which individual life styles and action strategies evolve. The subjective meaning that the interviewees give to their social world in a certain context becomes apparent and the factors that influence the individuals' development can be identified.

2.3 The motivation approach

The motivation approach examines expected difference as an impulse to study abroad and to change life perspectives in some way or other. Some studies mention motivation as one factor among others, without specifying motivation as a concept (Berthold & Leichsenring 2012:27; Heublein et al. 2004:107). The German Social Survey by the National Association for Student Affairs regularly asks the international students for their reasons to study in Germany. Among the most favored reasons are better career options, the reputation of the German degree and good study conditions (Apolinarski & Poskowsky 2013:45-46). But, as we have just seen in the study of Günther (2009), the reasons for studying abroad are often anchored in biographical context. Alfred Schuetz' fundamental distinction between "in-order-to motives" like future oriented goals and "(genuine) because-motives" like biographical reasons (Schuetz 1953:16f.) adds the biographical dimension as motivational category. I conducted a study which takes up this differentiation and develop, on the grounds of the *documentary method* (Bohnsack et al. 2010), a typology of study abroad motivation that points out the relation between experiences made within family and society and the goals linked to the study abroad project (Loy 2018). Other studies work with different concepts: Gong (2003) examines goal orientations based on Dweck (1986, Dweck & Leggett 1988), whereas Boneva and Frieze (et al. 1998) and Frieze and Boneva (et al. 2004) focus on the three motives "achievement", "power" and "affiliation", based on McClelland's (1975, 1976, 1984, 1985) motivational theory. Chirkov (et al. 2007, 2008) investigate the role of self-determined motivation (Ryan & Deci 2000; Deci & Ryan 2000) and values (Tartakovsky & Schwartz 2001) as an important aspect in the adaptation process of international students. While the migration goals appear to

be similar in most of these studies, the social genesis of the goals and therefore their social meaning in biographical context seems to be the relevant category that needs more scientific attention (a more detailed analysis is offered in Loy 2018).

The motivation approach gives research on international students a new direction: The scientific attention is drawn to what drives the students abroad. Hence, it investigates the preliminary conditions of a later adaptation process. The challenge remains to find out if, and how, motivation is related to adaptation processes and which theoretic categories can best be used to describe the motivational structures.

3. Summary and discussion

We have seen that the focus on normative conflicts reveals the confusions international students experience in their social interactions abroad. The restraint on culture conceived in geographic boundaries, however, ignores the fact that students do position themselves individually towards the norms of their home country as well as towards those of the host country. Furthermore it leaves out other difference categories such as social and educational background, gender, age, etc. The same is true for the personality approach. It has the merit to explore the role of individual personality traits in the adaptation process, but it often perceives personality determined by cultural norms similar to the first approach, without specifying the relation between individual and culture. Yet, it would be of particular interest to describe more precisely the social embeddedness of the individual: In which way is the individual determined by collective norms? What are the collectivities that influence the individual? Which effects have different collective norms on social interaction? The friendship approach takes a closer look on social interaction investigating social relations as one specific factor in the adaptation process. However, the focus on nationality groups limits the analysis to the specific role each (national) friendship group plays in the adaptation process. This might be an important factor, but leaves out the more central question of social relations: How is social relatedness constructed? What different ways are there to build up community which provides social and emotional support? All three of these approaches assume that it is the international student who should adapt to the host society. The orientation approach and the plurality approach make the important shift towards considering the role of the higher education institutions. The ‘adaptation as orientation task of the higher education institutions’ approach offers a descriptive comparison of academic counseling and support structures for international students. The effectiveness of the programmatic statements, though, is only explored in form of the individual experiences and convictions of the expert interviewees. The ‘adaptation as plurality-orientation of the higher education institutions’ points more generally to the way the higher education institutions deal with the differences to be found within its student and teaching staff body. Here it is important to be aware of the analytic levels where differences can be found: the level of perception, the level of discursive constructions or the level of sociologic factors that constitute difference. A completely new perspective is adopted in the biographical approach. Here, the change processes in the biography of the students are explored. Influences of the social environment the students experienced in their home country but also in the host country become apparent and can be described, this way offering more precise information on collective norms than the category of ‘culture’ conceived in geographic boundary does. The motivation approach identifies the goals pursued with studying abroad, but – if this focus is included in the analysis – it can also reveal the biographical reasons that give the impulse and drive for migration.

It seems that the biographical approach in particular provides new insights on international students’ development, as it combines past and present experiences of the students and includes most aspects of the other approaches. Individual personality traits can, in this way, be analyzed together with their social embeddedness, which allows identifying the

relevant collectives that form the student's behavior, but also the processes of individualization and emancipation from normative constraints. Sociologic factors of difference can be scientifically captured and motivation factors within the social environment investigated, thus making it possible to relate different motivations to adaptation processes in the host country. Social relations in the home and host country can be explored concerning their emotional quality and areas of conflict, helping to explain interaction between host and home students. This interaction could be included in research and evaluated concerning the same criteria. This approach makes it possible to conceive of student adaptation in the host country in a more general, biographical change process, for which study abroad plays an important role.

About the author

Dr. Christine Loy worked in the international office of Otto-von-Guericke University Magdeburg, setting up a tutorial program for international medical students and teaching intercultural communication before she pursued her PhD degree on the motivation of international students to study abroad. Her current research project is focused on social learning in primary schools.

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