

Study on the Psychological Depression of International Students in China: Taking X University in Ningxia as an Example

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Abstract

With the continuous expansion of the number of international students coming to study in China, the psychological problems of international students studying in China are increasingly apparent. Fully understanding and analyzing the mental health problems of international students and the causes, taking targeted prevention and intervention measures, are of great significance to the education, management and development of international students. Therefore, it is very important to explore the psychological depression of international students in China.

Key words: International students in China; Psychological depression; Prevention

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, with the increasing number of international students from different countries coming to study in China, it has presented new challenges to the teaching and management department of international students. While the number of international students coming to China gradually expanded, various psychological problems of international students have gradually emerged.

From the international perspective, depression is one of the most common mental health problems for international students. Foreign studies have shown that the prevalence of depressive symptoms among international students is as high as 40.5%, among which 1.2% are international students with severe depressive symptoms, 4.8% with moderate depressive symptoms, and 34.5% with mild depressive symptoms (Costa, et al, 2012). Domestic research on international students in China shows that this situation is not optimistic. For example, although the mental health status of international students in a university in Nanjing is basically good, there are some negative emotions such as depression (Tang, 2012). Research shows the interpersonal sensitivity and depression factor scores of international students in China are significantly higher than those of Chinese youth (Chen and Yu, 2010, pp.112-114). The scores of anxiety, terror, coercion, and interpersonal stress factors of Chinese students from Central South University are higher than those of domestic college students (Wu, et al., 2010).

The problem of students' depression due to psychological depression has gradually increased, and students' psychological depression has become a major problem faced by the management department of international students. Therefore, in the vigorous development of the education of international students in China, it is very important to explore the psychological depression of international students. This study hopes to help the international students' management department to establish corresponding services, guarantees and guidance mechanisms, and take effective measures to help international students adapt to the learning and living environment in university psychologically, prevent psychological problems of international students, and ensure they can complete the studying healthily.

1. RESEARCH METHODS

1.1 Research Questions

(1) What is the overall state of international students' psychological depression in China?

(2) What are the important factors that cause psychological depression of international students in China?

(3) How to prevent and alleviate the psychological depression of international students studying in China?

2.2 Research Objects

The research objects are international students of one university in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. The basic information is shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Basic Information of the Research Object

Category	Option	Number	The proportion
Gender	Male	96	63%
	Female	56	37%
Age	18-20 years old	110	72%
	21-23 years old	35	23%
	Above 23 years old	7	5%
Time in china	1-6 months	27	18%
	7-12 months	27	18%
	13-24 months	43	28%
	25-36 months	48	31%
	Above 36 months	7	5%

1.3 Research Method

This study is carried out in a combination of quantitative research and qualitative research. First, quantitative research method is used to collect processing data through questionnaires (refer to Zung Depression Self-Assessment Scale) to understand the overall status and main influencing factors of psychological depression among international students. In the qualitative research stage, in-depth interviews are conducted on groups with high depression index. And then the researcher summarized the basic characteristics of the higher depression groups, explored the main factors that caused the psychological depression of the students, and proposed strategies to prevent and solve the psychological depression of the students.

2. THE RESEARCH RESULTS

2.1 The Overall Situation of International Students' Psychological Depression in China

According to the statistics, among the international students studying in China, the highest value of depression index is 0.663, the lowest is 0.25, and the mean value of depression index is 0.46. Among them, 87 students

(57%) have no depression; 44 students (29%) have mild depression; 21 students (14%) with moderate depression; no students with severe depression. On the basis of the survey data, the psychological status of international students needs to be paid high attention. Nearly half of the students have mild or moderate depression. This study mainly analyzes the specific degree of depression index from the aspects of student's gender, age, studying time in China, level of Chinese, understanding of China, and family economic conditions etc.

(1) Gender

96 students among the research objects are male, the mean depression index of them is 0.47. 56 students are female, the mean depression index is 0.43. It can be seen that the overall depression index of male students is higher than that of female students. There are 53% of male students with no depression, 27% with mild depression, and 20% with moderate depression. There are 64% of female students without depression, 32% of them with mild depression, and 4% of them with moderate depression. It can be seen that there is a difference in the degree of depression between male and female students. The male students who have moderate depression is relatively more and the female students who have mild depression is relatively more.

(2) Age

According to the different age groups, the mean value of the depression index under the age of 20 is 0.45, 20-23 years old is 0.46, and above 23 years old is 0.47. The mean values of depression index in different age groups are not much different.

(3) Nationality

The mean values of depression index of students from India, Bangladesh, and Africa are 0.45, 0.44, and 0.46 respectively. From the data, there is no obvious difference in the mean values of depression index of international students from different countries.

(4) Religion

The mean values of depression index of students who believe in Hinduism, Islam, Catholicism, Buddhism, Christianity, and other religions are 0.43, 0.44, 0.44, 0.45, 0.43, and 0.45 respectively. There is no difference in the mean depression index of students with different religious beliefs.

(5) Student category

The mean depression index of the academic students is 0.46, and the mean depression index of the language students is 0.42. The mean depression of language students is significantly lower than that of the academic students.

(6) Studying time in China

According to the studying time in China, the following data are obtained. The students who live in China for 1-6 months, the depression index is 0.39; the students who live in China for 7-12 months, the depression index is

0.47; the students who live in China for 13-24 months, the depression index is 0.5; the students who live in China for 25-36 months, the depression index is 0.45; the students who live in China for more than 36 months, the depression index is 0.45. From the above analysis, we can see that international students living in China for 13-24 months have the highest mean depression index, followed by that of 7-12 months.

(7) Chinese proficiency

According to the students' Chinese proficiency, the following data are obtained. The depression index of the students who have very bad Chinese proficiency is 0.41; the depression index of the students who have bad Chinese proficiency is 0.46; the depression index of the students who have mild Chinese proficiency is 0.49; the depression index of the students who have good Chinese proficiency is 0.43; the depression index of the students who have very good Chinese proficiency is 0.40. So the depression index of students with mild Chinese proficiency is relatively high.

(8) The degree of understanding of China

Before coming to China, the mean values of depression index for different degree of understanding about China is as follows.

The depression index of the students who have very good understanding about China is 0.42; the depression index of the students who have good understanding about China is 0.43; the depression index of the students who have mild understanding about China is 0.45; the depression index of the students who have very little understanding about China is 0.47; the depression index of the students who have little understanding about China is 0.39. From the level of not knowing China very well to knowing very good, the mean depression index of international students gradually decreased, but the students who almost have no understanding of China showed the lowest level of depression index.

(9) Intercultural experience

The mean depression index of students who have been to other countries and those who have not been to other countries are 0.45 and 0.47 respectively. Students who have had cross-cultural experience before coming to study in China have a lower depression index than those without cross-cultural experience.

(10) Family economic conditions

The mean depression index of students with very poor, poor, average, good, and very good family economic conditions are 0.47, 0.46, 0.43, 0.40, and 0.39 respectively. The better the family's economic conditions, the lower the mean depression index.

2.2 The Relationship Between Psychological Depression and Social Support for International Students

This study divides the social support subjects that international students may seek for help when they

encounter cross-cultural adaptation problems into six groups, which are family members and relatives, Chinese friends, other foreigners, nationals in China, Chinese teachers, and personnel in international education department. Through the survey, it is found that in the social support selection tendency, 78 international students are willing to ask for help from family members, relatives and friends when they encountered difficulties, accounting for 51%. 5 people are willing to ask Chinese friends for help, accounting for 3%. 10 people are willing to ask other foreigners for help, accounting for 6.5%. 15 people are willing to ask for help from Chinese people in China, accounting for 10%. 10 people are willing to ask Chinese teachers for help, accounting for 6.5%. 25 people are willing to ask for help from personnel in international education department, accounting for 16%. 9 people do not choose any way to ask for help. Therefore, it can be seen that in the face of difficulties and problems, family, relatives and friends are the first choice for most international students to ask help, followed by the international student management staff.

2.3 Association Between Psychological Depression and Adverse Emotional Coping Styles of International Students in China

Through interviewing the international students and investigating the ways they use to solve psychological problems when bad psychological emotions appears, combined with the characteristics and actual situation of international students, six ways are designed, which are to find someone to talk, to do a hobby, to be sad alone, to seek religious comfort, to drink alcohol, and to do psychological counseling. The statistical results show that the most commonly used method for solving psychological problems is to find someone to talk. 75 students choose this one, accounting for 49%. The second commonly used method is to do the hobby, 54 students choose it, accounting for 36%. Followed by to be sad alone (29 students choose this way, accounting for 29%), to seek religious comfort (21 students choose this way, accounting for 14%). 13 students choose to do psychological counseling, accounting for 9% and 18 students choose alcohol consumption, accounting for 12%. Among them, 58 students choose both talking to others and doing a hobby. Therefore, when students have bad emotional problems, the first choice is to find someone to talk to, followed by to do their own hobbies, and being sad alone also has a certain proportion.

2.4 The Relationship Between Homesickness and Psychological Depression

International students deviate from their familiar friends, relatives and environment, go to other countries to study, no matter how long or short they will stay in that country, it will inevitably produce homesickness more or less (Lü, 2013). The obstacles of language communication,

the pressure of academics, and the lack of care when encountering problems are all likely to exacerbate the degree of homesickness. The survey find that students who often miss home accounted for 31% of the total number of students, and occasionally be homesick students accounted for 28%. Among all the samples surveyed, students with the highest depression index expressed their feelings of homesickness without exception. The survey data shows that the mean value of depression index raises with the increase of homesickness. It can be seen that homesickness is an important factor in the psychological depression of international students in China.

2.5 The Status of International Students With Moderate Depression Index

According to the survey data, a total of 21 international students had a moderate depression index and the average depression index is 0.65. Through the investigation and interviews on these 21 students, we found that they generally have the following phenomena. Their living time in China is more than 13 months. Their Chinese proficiency is in middle level. Before coming to China, they have not been to other countries and have little knowledge about China. Their family economic conditions are not good. They have little knowledge about the university. They are usually homesick. When they are in bad mood, they rarely talk to others. They have less personal interests. They like to stay alone. Boys will drink regularly, and girls do not like to communicate with roommates. They do not contact closely with classmates, but only contact with family members. Most of them are not gregarious.

3. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

According to the data analysis, the proportion of international students with psychological depression problem is relatively high, which shows that their life satisfaction and happiness are relatively poor in a degree. Some international students have weak willpower, so when they encounter difficulties and problems, they do not try to face and solve problems while choose to escape, which leads to anxiety and depression. Most of the international students will not actively talk to their counselors or psychological counselors when they are in a state of mental discomfort. A small number of international students will not even confide with their fellow country students. The psychological pressure is nowhere to be untangled but completely borne by the individual. If the situation is maintained for a long time, it will easily lead to mental illness and even interrupt the students' study career abroad. In terms of personality, the optimistic and cheerful personality of foreign students is relatively better, but it is not absolute. Some introverted foreign students think more closely, have more cognitive ability, and have better psychological adaptation.

3.1 Gender, Studying Time and Family Economic Conditions Have a Significant Impact on the Psychological Depression of International Students in China

Among the statistical factors involved in the survey, after comparing and analyzing the results, it is found that among the basic factors of the individual, the three factors of gender, studying time and family economic conditions have a significant impact on the psychological depression of international students in China. Factors such as age, Chinese proficiency, and understanding of China are shown as help-seeking targets. Among the international students, the average depression index of male students is higher than that of female students. The social pressure of male students is relatively large. Maybe the family has great hopes for them, which leads to the tendency of students to have psychological depression.

The average depression index of international students who live in China for 13-24 months is higher than that of others live in China. According to the theory of "cultural shock", the cross-cultural adaptation process has generally gone through four stages: the honeymoon phase, the cultural shock phase, the adjustment phase, and the adaptation phase (Oberg, 1960). The reason why the average depression index of international students who come to China for 13-24 months is higher than that of other international students in China may be that these students are in the stage of cultural shock and adjustment (Ma, 2017). During this period, the novelty of the new country gradually disappeared, and the discomfort caused by different cultures to their daily lives show up (Tang, 2012). As a result, a higher level of depression index is showed.

3.2 International Students Prefer to Interact With Their Nationals

Most international students like to interact with people from their own country. In the process of participating in social activities, they are more willing to be with their compatriots, and even when they are making placement choices, they will prefer a class with their own compatriots.

The researchers found that except for family members, relatives and friends, many of the international students chose Chinese friends as helpers. Many international students have learned Chinese social norms, customs and values through their interactions with Chinese students, and participated in the off-campus activities through the Chinese students' introduction. The role of university support represented by teachers and administrators in psychological depression is not significant. The sum of the two is only accounting for 22.5%, which is far lower than the expected value of the university as an international student management. There are language barriers between international students, teachers and administrators in the university. Between the university, family and friends,

international students feel that the latter can better solve the problems they encountered. International students and university may have not yet fully established a bond of mutual trust. At least in the eyes of international students, the university may sometimes has not fully played the role of serving students.

3.3 International Students Often Respond to Bad Emotions by Talking to Others and Doing Their Hobbies

When international students have bad emotions, talking to others become the preferred way to solve their psychological problems. Through interviews with international students, the problem is that if there is a suitable listening object, students are willing to confide their psychological problems. If some suggestions or help can be made, the students' bad mood will be greatly reduced, and the psychological depression problem will gradually disappear.

Doing hobbies is also one of the best way for students to solve psychological problems. International students are accustomed to distracting their inner feelings through sports and tourism. They rarely turn to professional psychological counseling institutions. On one hand, they are worried about language communication barriers. On the other hand, there is currently a lack of professional psychological counseling institutions, especially cross-cultural psychological counseling agencies for foreigners (Lü, 2013). The survey also find that only 12% of the students chose to cope with psychological discomfort in the form of alcohol consumption. It can be seen that the respondents basically do not respond to bad emotions through dangerous methods or extreme methods.

It is also possible to make international students have an objective, complete and specific understanding of China and university through admission education, introduction of Chinese culture, national education, and field visits. For the difficulties and requirements of international students studying in China, the personnel of international education department should strengthen their service awareness, take the initiative to help them solve practical problems, do a good job in logistics support, and solve the worries of international students. Face up to the individual differences of international students and do a good job for each individual to adapt to learning and living in a different cultural environment as soon as possible.

3.4 The Strategy to Prevent and Alleviate the Psychological Depression of International Students Studying in China

3.4.1 To Strengthen the Training of Students' Chinese Proficiency

To improve students' communicative competence in Chinese and create a good Chinese learning environment for students is really important and essential. Language is

the primary barrier for international students to adapt to domestic life and study. Language barrier is also one of the most common causes of psychological problems for students who are mentally healthy. Therefore, universities must attach great importance to guide international students to improve the language as soon as possible. First of all, the language requirements for the application for admission should not be arbitrarily reduced, even if the number of international students need to be increased. Secondly, Chinese language proficiency tests and specialized training are required for newly enrolled international students. For international students whose language level is not suitable for the professional study they are applying for, classification and specialized language training are required. Third, use the domestic student group to establish a "one-to-one" learning mechanism. The department of international education that enroll international students can set up a special team of domestic student volunteers to help international students to improve their language.

3.4.2 To Establish a Preventive Mechanism for the Mental Health Problems of International Students in China

The surge in the number of international students coming to China urgently requires the prevention mechanism and intervention mechanism for constructing the mental health problems of international students. Improving the mental health of international students in China is not only an important task for the management of international students in China, but also an important part of the mental health education in universities. "Prevention is the mainstay, combination of prevention and treatment" is the ideal mode for mental health education of international students in China (Gao, 2018). "Prevention first" is based on an objective premise that for the vast majority of international students studying in China, their psychology is healthy before they come to China. Most of the above mentioned serious mental health problems are produced in studying and living in China. "Combination of prevention and treatment" is to actively intervene and treat international students who have mental health problems in order to eliminate the subjective and objective conditions that stimulate their mental health problems, and help them to study in China with healthy psychology.

(1) To guide international students to adapt Chinese culture as soon as possible

Cultural adaptation is the other barrier (except for language barrier) for international students to successfully adapt domestic life and study, and it is also an important reason for the psychological problems of international students who are mentally healthy. Therefore, universities need to guide the students coming to China to adapt to the culture as soon as possible through the establishment and improvement of the mechanism. First of all, it is necessary to organize experienced teachers to carry out cultural

adaptation lectures and courses specifically for freshmen. Secondly, mobilize university community organizations, especially international student's organizations, to carry out cultural adaptation experience activities for freshmen. Thirdly, to guide the senior students to play a good role to help new students.

(2) To guide international students in China to actively integrate into the domestic student's group

In view of the more common situation in which international students have closed themselves in the small circles of compatriots and township parties, universities need to give full play to the enthusiasm, initiative and creativity of domestic student's groups, and take measures to help them to establish a benign network of interpersonal relationships. To play their role as compatriots in the university and surrounding communities, teachers also need to guide them to actively integrate into the domestic student's group, and establish close contact and good communication with students, teachers and students from other countries.

(3) To create a way of expressing religious beliefs and religious feelings for international students as much as possible

For international students who have religious beliefs, if their religious beliefs cannot be guaranteed and their religious feelings cannot be expressed in time, it is very likely to cause mental health problems. Therefore, universities need to pay attention to the religious beliefs of international students coming to China. On one hand, teachers should actively introduce relevant religious policies of China to the students, especially the relevant regulations on religious activities in China, so that they can fully understand the status of Chinese religious beliefs. On the other hand, it is necessary to introduce the formal religious places around the university and the communities in which they live, and guide them to participate in religious activities in relevant places, so that their religious beliefs and religious feelings can be effectively expressed.

(4) The mental health intervention from international student's counselors is the outpost

International student's counselors are the most exposed teachers in the international students' daily life, and should be used as an outpost for the mental health intervention of international students. International student's counselors need not only understand and learn the different cultural backgrounds, customs, development

history, geographical environment, etc. of the countries where the students originate, but also know the uniqueness and complementation of different cultures, and also actively communicate with the teachers in order to master the study of international students. Through regular and irregular visits to class, dormitories or through modern information technologies such as the new media network, WeChat group of international students, they can always communicate smoothly and understand the situation of students. At the same time, international student's counselors should also strengthen their knowledge of psychology, participate in mental health training, improve their psychological counseling ability, dynamically grasp the psychological status of international students, and timely discover the international students who need key crisis interventions, and play the outpost function role in the psychological counseling intervention management of international students.

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