

Academic and Social Adjustment Challenges Faced By Students of North-Indian Origin Studying In Colleges of Tamil Nadu

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ABSTRACT

Adapting to the environment of a new city can be difficult, especially if the culture of the city is different from the culture that a student is accustomed to. A lot of studies regarding the adjustment of international students have been done in universities of USA, Russia, etc. India, however, is unique as it has cultural differences even among its different states. Inspired by these cultural differences, we aimed at exploring the academic and social adjustment challenges faced by newcomers of North-Indian origin (students who have come for undergraduate education) in colleges of Tamil Nadu. For this, we carried out a comparative study on acclimatisation on students of North-Indian origin who have stayed in Tamil Nadu for less than 5 years (group 1), and students of North-Indian origin settled in Tamil Nadu for at least 12 years (group 2), to see if the duration of stay plays a role in adjustment. A total of 70 undergraduate students (18-22 years) responded to a questionnaire which measured academic and social adjustment in college. It consisted of 19 items formulated by us. We analysed these responses on aspects of social exclusion, language barriers, perceived cultural discrimination, difficulty in expressing oneself in the classroom and difficulties in academics. We then used percentage analysis to compare the findings of the two groups. The results revealed that in aspects of language barriers, perceived cultural discrimination and difficulty in expressing oneself in the classroom, group 1 had a higher percentage of adjustment issues. We hence concluded that these were the major areas where the newcomers of North-Indian origin faced adjustment challenges in the colleges of Tamil Nadu.

Keywords: *Culture Differences, Newcomer Students, Academic Adjustment, Social Adjustment, College, Tamil Nadu*

Tamil Nadu is one of the most literate states in India. The state's literacy rate is 80.09%, which is above the national average (Census 2011). Home to several prestigious institutions

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like the IIT Madras and Anna University, it is no wonder that students come from all parts of the country to study in this state. Since each state in India is unique in terms of cuisine, language, religion, and lifestyle, adapting to a new city can be extremely challenging. This is especially true if one has to make this adjustment during the transition from school to college. Students are likely to experience distress due to the academic demands of college along with the challenges of adjusting to a new culture. Newcomers can easily become 'lost in translation' (Zhou, Snape, Topping & Todman, 2008). Thus, understanding and addressing adjustment challenges faced by newcomer college students becomes essential. What are the academic and social adjustment challenges that newcomer students of north-Indian origin face in colleges of Tamil Nadu? This study aims at answering this research question.

Much of the research regarding the adjustment of students who are newcomers to a place has focused on the adjustment of international students. There has not been much research regarding the adjustment of students who move to a different city within the same country.

The word adjustment, derived from the Latin word *ad-justare*, can be defined as the process by which one balances needs and the obstacles in his or her environment (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). It is used to emphasize the individual's struggle to survive in his or her social and physical environment (Yellaiah, 2012). Yi et al. (2003) identified five areas in which international students are likely to face adjustment problems. These areas were academic, physical health, financial, vocational and personal/social (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). Gebhard (2012) found that students faced problems in adjustment in three areas: academic, social interaction, and emotional reaction to their novel environment.

Academic adjustment

Chen and Chen (2009) pointed out that though academic systems are similar across cultures, they are not identical, which forces international students to change once they enter into a new academic system. Garza, Guzman and Wu (2015) confirmed this by conducting qualitative case studies on undergraduate and graduate students in the southernmost part of the US. They found that participants spent a significant proportion of the time discussing study related issues during interviews. Most participants reported difficulties in communicating with their professors due to language barriers, cultural differences, and different expectations from professors. The results of the study conducted by Gebhard (2012) coincided with this finding. Seminars, where students were expected to ask questions, answer the professor's questions and discuss topics, challenged many of the students in his study. For example, contrary to some other parts of the world, teachers in the USA do not feel obligated to make sure each person in the classroom contributes to the discussion and acknowledge the answers and questions of students randomly and this frustrated a few newcomer students.

A study conducted by Kuo (2011), found that international students faced language challenges in the area of listening comprehension and oral proficiency. Students were not able to understand the lectures presented in class. Mesidor and Sly (2016) pointed out that

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learning styles such as, auditory, visual, or pragmatic learning can also influence the students' ability to comprehend. Some students are from educative systems where rote memory, hands on experience or pragmatics are valued. Young (2011) found that Asian students preferred rote learning and were more likely to work alone. Academic systems also vary in terms of method of evaluation used. Some students are good at writing essays, while others are better at taking multiple choice exams. Those students who are not familiar with the university's methods of evaluation may experience significant anxiety (Mesidor & Sly, 2016).

These factors may contribute to difficulties in adjusting to the new environment and may negatively impact academic achievement as well. Rajamanikam and Vasanthal (1993) found out that there was a significant positive correlation between adjustment and achievement.

Social adjustment

Lee and Robbins (1998) defined social connectedness as an aspect of the self that reflects a subjective sense of closeness and togetherness with his/her social environment. Duru and Poyrazli (2008) found that students with higher social connectedness and social support were likely to adjust easily to their new social environment. On the other hand, international students who experience feelings of estrangement and social isolation were more likely to exhibit psychological adjustment problems (Baba & Hosoda, 2014). Pathak (2014) conducted a study on 90 college students from Junagadh city of Gujarat and found a significantly high correlation between mental health and social adjustment (Singh, 2015).

Social adjustment of international college students was found to be significantly related to perceived social support (Mohd-Yusoff & Othman, 2011). Furthermore, a study in an American college showed that international students were more likely to perceive greater socio-emotional support from other international people than from Americans (Chavajay, 2013). This may be because international students perceive discrimination and prejudice from local residents. Ying, Lee, and Tsai (2007) examined perceived discrimination by Chinese immigrant students and found that they were likely to feel separated or alienated from a mainstream culture and likely to have experienced more discrimination than the latter. Zhou, Frey & Bang (2011) found out that students from both individualistic and collectivist cultures (many countries throughout Asia and Latin America) felt stress and mental difficulty due to gender discrimination, racial stereotyping, and language discrimination.

Duru and Poyrazli (2011) investigated perceived discrimination, social connectedness, and other predictors of adjustment difficulties among Turkish international students. Their findings showed that those with higher levels of social connectedness, lower levels of perceived discrimination, more years of study in the U.S, and higher levels of English language proficiency had lower levels of adjustment difficulties. Liu (2011) used her own experiences as an international student in Canada to provide further proof to this hypothesis. Liu could not understand what her instructors and classmates were talking about in her

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graduate-level classes. She expressed that her lack of English proficiency became a barrier for successful participation in community events (Chen & Chen, 2009).

Chen and Chen (2009) also noticed that international students perceived isolation from peers and thus felt lonely when they were studying in the US. Besides this, they also faced problems with professors. Beoku-Bettors (2004) observed African female graduate students in Western universities. His findings showed that professors regularly questioned these international students' ability to complete course assignments and readily criticized their accents (Garza, Guzman & Wu, 2015). As a result of this type of treatment, international students felt that they did not have support at school, and they perceived prejudicial attitudes. In addition to perceived social support and perceived discrimination, other factors like social networking and socio-economic status also played a role in social adjustment. A positive relationship was found between social networking and social adjustment (Lin, Peng, Kim, Kim, & LaRose, 2012).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sample

The sample consisted of seventy persons. There were two groups each consisting of thirty-five undergraduate college students (age 18-22 years) of North-Indian origin studying in Tamil Nadu. The first group consisted of participants who had stayed in Tamil Nadu for less than 5 years. The second group consisted of participants who had stayed in Tamil Nadu for at least 12 years. Both the groups had 17 boys and 18 girls who were of North-Indian origin (their native state was some state in North India eg: Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Assam, etc.). Purposive sampling was used to select the respondents from various arts and science, engineering, commerce and medical colleges in Tamil Nadu.

Variables

The independent variable was duration of stay in Tamil Nadu and the dependent variable was academic and social adjustment.

Materials

We formulated an online questionnaire to measure academic and social adjustment in college. Face validity was demonstrated by 3 professors of psychology and 3 M. Phil students of psychology. The questionnaire consisted of 19 questions including questions of Yes/No type (eg: Do you often feel isolated or lonely on campus?), MCQ type (eg: If your teacher uses a language you don't understand, how do you react? A) Ask him/her to explain again in a different language B) Get help from a friend C) Do not do anything about it D) Never been in such a situation) and open-ended type(eg: What did you expect from college life in Chennai? Were these expectations met?). We framed the questions keeping in mind 5 broad categories: social exclusion, language barriers, perceived cultural discrimination, difficulty in expressing oneself in the classroom and difficulties in academics.

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Procedure

We sent a link to the online questionnaire to the respondents. We instructed them to answer each question honestly. For the first section we instructed them to choose the most appropriate answer (Yes/No or MCQ) and for the second section we asked them to answer open-ended questions. We specifically told them that there are no right or wrong answers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We used percentage analysis to compare the academic and social adjustment of the two groups (Group 1: students of North-Indian origin who had stayed in Tamil Nadu for less than 5 years and Group 2: students of North-Indian origin who had stayed in Tamil Nadu for at least 12 years) in the following aspects:

Table No. 1 Percentage analysis of social exclusion

SUB-THEMES	GROUP I		GROUP II	
	Number	%	Number	%
Difficulty in making friends initially	12/35	34.3%	14/35	40%
Feel isolated/ lonely on campus	10/35	28.6%	11/35	31.4%
Feel excluded from college clubs or peer groups	14/35	40%	9/35	25.7%
Feel most people in class are not friendly to them	5/35	14.3%	3/35	8.6%
Feel people on campus stare or look at them differently	12/35	34.3%	10/35	28.6%

Mean = 30.3%

Mean = 26.9%

30.3% of the students in Group 1 and 26.9% of students from Group 2 faced social exclusion on campus. The difference was found to be negligible.

Table No. 2 Percentage analysis of difficulty in expressing oneself in the classroom

SUB-THEMES	GROUP I		GROUP II	
	Number	%	Number	%
Not comfortable raising questions in class	10/35	28.6%	3/35	8.6%
Do not voice thoughts/opinions in class	16/35	45.7%	11/35	31.4%

Mean = 37.2%

Mean = 20%

37.2% of students from Group 1 and 20% of students from Group 2 faced difficulties in expressing themselves in the classroom.

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Table No. 3 Percentage analysis of language barriers

SUB-THEMES	GROUP I		GROUP II	
	Number	%	Number	%
Unable to follow English used by teachers in class	2/35	5.7%	0/35	0%
Feel language was a barrier in making friends initially	12/35	34.3%	8/35	22.8%

Mean = 20%

Mean = 11.4%

20% of students from Group 1 and 11.4% of students from Group 2 faced language barriers.

Table No. 4 Percentage analysis of difficulties in academics

SUB-THEMES	GROUP I		GROUP II	
	Number	%	Number	%
Difficulty adjusting to the new style of teaching	16/35	45.7%	15/35	42.8%
Drastic negative change in academic performance	10/35	28.6%	10/35	28.6%

Mean = 37.2%

Mean = 35.7%

37.2% of students from Group 1 and 35.7% of students from Group 2 faced academic adjustment difficulties on campus.

Table No. 5 Percentage analysis of perceived cultural discrimination

SUB-THEMES	GROUP I		GROUP II	
	Number	%	Number	%
Have faced discrimination on campus due to cultural background	11/35	31.4%	4/35	11.4%
Feel classmates have stereotypes about their cultural group	16/35	45.7%	18/35	51.4%

Mean = 38.6%

Mean = 31.4%

38.6% of students from Group 1 and 31.4% of students from Group 2 faced prejudice based on their cultural background on campus.

Table No. 6 Percentage analysis of overall academic adjustment

THEMES	GROUP 1	GROUP 2
Academic adjustment difficulties	37.2%	35.7%
Difficulty in expressing oneself in class	37.2%	20%

Mean = 37.2%

Mean = 27.8%

Thus, students of Group 1 faced more academic adjustment issues than students of Group 2.

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Table No. 7 Percentage analysis of overall social adjustment

THEMES	GROUP 1	GROUP 2
Social exclusion	30.3%	26.9%
Prejudice based on cultural background	38.6%	31.4%
Language barriers	20%	11.4%

Mean = 29.6% Mean = 23.2%

Thus, students of Group 1 faced more social adjustment issues than students of Group 2.

Hence, it was concluded that students of Group 1 (students of North-Indian origin who had stayed in Tamil Nadu for less than 5 years) faced more academic and social adjustment challenges than students of Group 2 (students of North-Indian origin who had stayed in Tamil Nadu for at least 12 years) on college campuses of Tamil Nadu.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study showed that Group 1 (newcomer students of north-Indian origin) faced more academic and social adjustment challenges than Group 2 (students of north-Indian origin who had stayed in Tamil Nadu for at least 12 years) on college campuses of Tamil Nadu. The finding that newcomer students face academic and social adjustment problems was consistent with previous research done on international newcomer students in universities of the US, Malaysia, Japan, etc. Perceived cultural discrimination, language difficulties, difficulty expressing oneself in the classroom, etc. were themes that had previously been observed in international newcomer students. Researchers have tried to explain these findings in different ways. The following could be a few explanations:

Both the groups faced social exclusion of more or less the same degree possibly because Tamil Nadu colleges have a majority of people of South-Indian origin who may have assumed that people of North-Indian origin, whether or not they had been brought up in Tamil Nadu, could not fit in with them. They may have also believed that all students of North-Indian origin had the same lifestyle and way of thinking that was different from their own. This could have prevented them from including people of North-Indian origin in their groups.

Group 2 did not face as much difficulty as Group 1 in expressing themselves in the classroom. This might have been because they had done their schooling in Tamil Nadu and were hence familiar with what was expected and what wasn't. Thus, they might have been more confident in their ability to express their opinions and raise questions and also may have felt more comfortable interacting with their teachers. Group 1 students, being newcomers, may have felt more self-conscious and may have hesitated to voice their thoughts.

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Language was not as much a barrier in making friends for Group 2 as it was for Group 1. Group 2, having stayed in Chennai for more than 11 years, may have got a better hang of the local language as compared to Group 1. A very small percentage of students from Group 1 were unable to follow English used by teachers in the classroom. This might have been because they were used to interacting with their school teachers in their respective local languages.

Though Group 1 had a slightly higher percentage of academic adjustment problems, the difference was negligible. This might have been because the teaching styles in schools and colleges were different regardless of the state that students came from. For example, schools emphasized more on rote learning and colleges focused more on independent study and seminars. This may have negatively impacted the students' academic performance initially.

Group 2 faced lesser prejudice due to cultural background compared to Group 1. Since the duration of stay in Tamil Nadu for Group 2 was more than Group 1, they may have gotten used to the stereotypes held by peers and teachers. They may have also become immune to the discrimination that they face and when asked to report about the frequency of discrimination, they may have tended to under-report. Also, people from Tamil Nadu may have been able to connect with Group 2 students better because these students may have picked up the local language and may have been able to converse better than students from Group 1.

An important predictor of adjustment is expectations. Accurate expectations have been found to positively affect cross-cultural adjustment (Caligiuri, Phillips, Lazarova, Tarique & Burgi, 2010). The open-ended questions in the survey attempted to explore the expectations of students from college life in Tamil Nadu. The responses received were varied. The themes most widely described were: superior quality of education, a liberal atmosphere, career opportunities, and independence. For some students, these expectations were met, while for others they weren't. Students also spoke about the pride people from Tamil Nadu took in their cultural identity.

The cross-cultural adjustment difficulty in India is exacerbated by its collectivistic culture. Since identity is derived from social connections, when people are uprooted from their culture, they might lose their identity. The process of acculturation and adjustment can be made smoother if students use effective coping strategies. Some of the coping strategies used by the participants studied (newcomer students) were: relying on help from friends and roommates, asking teachers to repeat if they didn't understand something, and socializing with other students of North-Indian origin. One strategy that colleges can implement is to start a newcomers club where newcomers can share their experiences and problems, celebrate their regional festivals, and form bonds. This will help them feel less alienated and give them a platform to connect with peers, and will also sensitize classmates towards the problems faced by these students. Another strategy which colleges can implement is to have a college

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counsellor and actively encourage students, especially newcomers, to seek their help. Among the 35 newcomer students studied, none of them said that they go to a college counsellor when they have a personal problem.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be said that difficulty in expressing themselves in the classroom, language barriers and prejudice based on cultural background are the academic and social adjustment challenges faced by newcomer students of north-Indian origin in colleges of Tamil Nadu. It can also be said that the duration of stay of students of North-Indian origin in Tamil Nadu does influence their academic and social adjustment on campus. Thus, the research question was answered.

LIMITATIONS

Some limitations of the study were: the small sample size limits the generalizability of the study, other variables that could influence cross-cultural adjustment like personality factors and living circumstances weren't taken into account, and the possibility that newcomer students can adjust after 2-3 years was not considered.

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

Future research in this area can focus on effective and ineffective coping mechanisms used by newcomer students. Research can also be done on students who go from South-India to North-India to see if they face adjustment issues. Also, a study of a larger scale can be done to see the adjustment of non-student newcomers and also to see if people from some parts of India are better able to adjust than people of other parts.

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APPENDIX A

The following was the questionnaire formulated by the authors of this study.

Instructions

- 1) Read each question carefully and answer them.
- 2) Be honest with your responses. Your responses will be kept confidential.
- 3) Do not think too much about your answers. There are no right or wrong answers.

Personal information

Name (optional):

Age:

Gender:

College:

Department:

Day scholar/Hostel resident:

Hometown:

Native Place:

Length of residence in Chennai:

Language(s) most comfortable with:

Please choose the appropriate response

- 1) Do you feel comfortable raising questions in class? YES / NO
- 2) Did you initially find it difficult to make friends in college? YES / NO
- 3) When your teacher uses English in class, are you able to follow? YES / NO
- 4) Do you often feel isolated or lonely on campus? YES / NO
- 5) Did you have difficulty adjusting to the new style of teaching in college? (eg: less discussions or more independent work) YES / NO
- 6) Do you voice your thoughts/opinions in class? YES / NO
- 7) Did you ever feel like you were being excluded from college clubs or peer groups? YES / NO
- 8) If yes, what do you think was/is the reason?
 - (a) Difference of language
 - (b) Difference in way of thinking
 - (c) Different lifestyle choices

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- (d) Appearance
- (e) Others
- (f) Did not feel excluded

9) Do you feel that people on campus stare at you or look at you differently? YES / NO

10) If your teacher uses a language you don't understand, how do you react?

- (a) Ask him/her to explain again in a different language
- (b) Get help from a friend
- (c) Do not do anything about it
- (d) Never been in such a situation

11) Do you feel that most people in your class are friendly to you? YES / NO

12) Did you face any discrimination on campus because of your cultural background? YES / NO

13) If you have a personal problem, whom do you seek support/help from?

- (a) A teacher
- (b) A classmate
- (c) A roommate
- (d) The college counsellor
- (e) Someone else

14) Has your academic performance changed drastically as compared to school? YES / NO

If yes, has it improved or worsened?

- (a) Improved
- (b) Worsened
- (c) Not changed drastically

15) Do you feel some of your classmates have stereotypes about your cultural group? (eg: Calling Northeast Indians Chinese or assuming people from Bihar don't know English) YES / NO

16) If yes, what are they based on?

- (a) Appearance
- (b) Language
- (c) Lifestyle choices
- (d) No stereotypes

17) Was language a barrier for you in making friends initially? YES / NO

Please answer the following questions honestly

18) What do you find the most surprising/interesting about the culture in Chennai?

19) What did you expect from college life in Chennai? Were these expectations met?

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