POSITIVE ASPECTS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' CROSS-CULTURAL TRANSITION: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION

by

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ABSTRACT

As the international student population grows, it becomes increasingly important to understand the experience of crossing cultures. The literature has focused predominantly on associated problems while positive aspects have received little attention. The current study combines a Critical Incident Technique methodology and a positive psychology lens to explore the cross-cultural transition of seven international students, focusing on facilitative factors, growth, and personal resources. Nine categories of helpful factors emerged from the 134 critical incidents recounted in the interviews: growth and/or change, social support/building relationships, learning to navigate host culture, enjoyable activities outside of schoolwork, previous experiences and preparation, supportive faculty and staff, persevering through hard times, sense of belonging, and staying connected to roots. Further interpretation revealed four overriding themes: connecting with others, maintaining a foundation, embracing the process, and discovering strengths within. I also presented suggestions for future research and implications for counsellors and postsecondary institutions.

To my husband Gord Caines, my partner in travel and in life

I can undertake any journey if you are by my side

and

To my daughter, Amelie Sahara

Dream big, little one, the world lies at your feet

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

"The transitional experience begins with the encounter of another culture and evolves

into the encounter with the self" (Adler, 1975).

In this quotation Adler articulates the idea of cross-cultural transition not as an

event, but rather as a personal process. In doing so he reunites the experience of the

sojourner with the act of crossing cultures. Cross-cultural transition is about more than

changes in language, food, societal norms, and environment. It also entails the impact of

these changes upon individuals as they interact with the culture and environment around

them.

As Adler noted, our culture is the lens through which we experience the world.

Culture influences our preconceptions of others, what we believe, what we value, how we

judge right from wrong and good from bad. As cross-cultural transition challenges this

lens it tests the very foundations the self is built upon. As a result, it holds the potential

for a new sense of understanding, awareness, and an opportunity for growth.

Adler's description of cross-cultural transition resonated with me as a traveller

and now as a researcher. As a traveller, I had the opportunity to discover cultures across

Europe, Asia, Australia, and Northern Africa. The experience of being stripped of one's

language, literacy, established place in society, support system and even, in many ways,

identity can leave the sojourner with a sense of terrifying freedom. There is exhilaration

in discovering strengths within that you never imagined existed, strengths that might have

remained untested and undiscovered without the challenges and demands of this

transition. This is the side of culture shock that goes beyond statistics and surveys, the

side that resides in subjective experience. As a researcher, it is my hope that in voicing

the personal stories of international students this study will expand our view of cross-cultural transition.

Personal Perspectives

My Experience of Cross-Cultural Transition

My first experience of crossing cultures came when I moved from a small town in Newfoundland to Kyoto, Japan to teach English just months after graduating from university. I think perhaps my culture shock started before I even disembarked from the plane. I was instantly engulfed by the clinging heat and humidity, the unusual smells, the strange food, and troubled by my instant illiteracy and communication difficulties. Those first days and weeks in a foreign country were among the most challenging of my life.

My culture shock experience peaked shortly after I started my teaching position when I found myself alone, exhausted, and confused, standing in the rain at 10:30 p.m. I was trying to make sense of the hand-drawn map to my apartment and guessing which of the closed buildings might be the rice or teashop by which I was meant to navigate. My 20-minute walk had taken more than an hour. I was thoroughly lost. I felt panic rise and in desperation I entered a tiny restaurant and had a school manager explain my predicament over the phone to the woman working there. Moments later she and her husband, the owners, carried their sleeping toddler from her bed, closed the restaurant, and drove me around the neighbourhood to look for my apartment building.

The couple spoke almost no English and I knew even less Japanese. Yet I could see from the concern on their faces that they understood. The street address held no true meaning and just as they suggested "police box" we turned the corner and there was my apartment building. We were all filled with joy and relief. I tried my best to thank them,

but I didn't know the words to express my gratitude. In that moment I had connected with the host culture of my new home in a way that transcended language. In the midst of all the negative aspects of culture shock, and partly because of them, had come this wonderful experience of human connection across cultures. That experience was a turning point in my cross-cultural transition and in my development as a traveller. I went forward with new hope that I would get through this difficult phase and a new understanding of the connections between people of all cultures.

I never found my way back to their little restaurant, and so I wonder if those people can ever know how much their act of kindness meant to me. It was the beginning of a love of culture-based travel that went on for six years across more than 30 countries, and a passion to gain a greater understanding of cross-cultural transition.

It was this experience I thought of as I began to review the research on cultural transition. I was struck by the emphasis of negative aspects of culture shock and came to wonder where the other side of this experience might be explored. For me, culture shock had been the context and catalyst for an amazing period of personal growth and cultural learning. In retrospect, I see it as one of the most valuable aspects of my sojourns. I wondered if and how other sojourners experienced this positive side of culture shock. Yet I found little exploration of this aspect of cultural transition evident in the literature.

My Perspective as a Counsellor

When I began the practicum portion of my master's program I was again drawn to the topic of cross-cultural transition. I chose a university counselling centre placement at an institution with a diverse student population. Throughout this placement I had the opportunity to work with many individuals who had been born and raised in other

cultures. Some of these students had immigrated to Canada with their families while others had come alone to pursue a North American education. Although these students sought counselling for a variety of reasons they often spoke of their experience as a person living "between cultures" and the challenges of having one foot in their culture of origin and the other in the culture of their new home.

In preparation for my work with these clients and my desire to practice from a multicultural perspective, I pored over the literature on international students in general and counselling this population in particular. I found myself inundated with information on the problems faced by these students – anxiety, depression, isolation, and struggles with language, academics, and daily living. In short, I was left with the bleak image of an at-risk population riddled with problems.

However, I found this image difficult to reconcile with the students who sat before me each week sharing their insights and experiences of growth. Although they often discussed their challenges, what stayed with me were the strengths and resilience these students conveyed. Yet I did not find these strengths reflected in the literature. What I found on paper was a dismal representation of the study abroad experience, devoid of the voices of the students themselves.

Background and Relevance of the Study

Currently, more than 100,000 students annually travel from their home countries to live and learn in Canada and their numbers continue to increase (CBIE, 2004). International students take on the challenge of crossing cultures for many reasons. They come to learn, to experience a new culture and for adventure; they come to expand their view of the world, to create a better future for themselves, their families, or their nations.

Leaving behind all that is familiar, they venture into the unknown. In doing so, they often face complete immersion in a foreign language, the task of building new relationships, culture shock, navigating social and cultural norms, the academic expectations of a new educational system, and daily living challenges (Mori, 2000).

We know that cross-cultural transitions are often not easy. The literature is rife with studies cataloguing the problems and vulnerability of the international student population. The contrast between life in host and home cultures causes culture shock, which can result in troublesome psychological and physical symptoms (Arthur, 2004). Almost all sojourners will experience culture shock to some degree (Henderson, Milhouse, & Cao, 1993), even those with international experience (Furnham, 2004), but academic responsibilities and time restraints mean these students must adjust rapidly to these immense changes (Fernandez, 1988; Pedersen, 1991).

These issues suggest that counselling could be especially relevant for international students, although services tend to be underused (Mori, 2000). Postsecondary counsellors bear the task of supporting a rapidly expanding international student population through the unpredictable course of their transition. Despite the significant challenges of counselling across cultures (Marsella & Pedersen, 2004) counselling professionals lack concrete information to guide their work (Zhang & Dixon, 2003).

However, in addition to their unique challenges these student sojourners bring unique assets to share with their hosts, including language skills, cultural knowledge, and diverse perspectives. These contributions hold the promise of enhancing the academic experience for all (Yoon & Portman, 2004). Yet there is a scarcity of research exploring the international student experience beyond struggles and adjustment correlates. Research

identifying the strengths and resources of these student sojourners, essential to the counselling process, is lacking and much needed.

This gap exists partly because of a focus on alleviating distress, which is shared by the field of psychology at large. It has been noted that following World War II a disease model of psychology became prominent, focusing almost entirely on healing disorder and neglecting the task of building strengths (Seligman, 2005). In both cases this overemphasis on pathology has resulted in an unbalanced view of the human experience. I believe this disproportion deprives us of the opportunity to learn how international students navigate their transition and what meaning they make of their experiences. Furthermore, this perspective encourages a view of the students as a burden to the system and has been indicated as a potential obstacle to providing appropriate counselling (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004).

Proponents of the positive psychology movement remind us that "psychology is not just the study of disease, weakness, and damage; it also is the study of strength and virtue" (Seligman, 2005, p. 4). The application of a positive psychology approach to the exploration of international students' cross-cultural transition offers a fresh perspective and the opportunity to fill significant gaps in the current literature.

These observations regarding trends in the literature to date and potential gaps inform the focus and form of my research.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study is to explore positive aspects of the cross-cultural transition of international students at a Canadian university. I will pay particular attention to the experiences, strengths, and resources that facilitate students' cultural and personal

transitions. To truly explore this little-researched side of cross-cultural transition I believe it is essential that participants be given the freedom to share their individual experiences and express the meaning and interpretation they have attached to them. By exploring the self-portraits of international students I hope they will begin to see the entirety of their experiences reflected in the research, rather than merely their struggles. A further goal is to contribute to the positive psychology literature by examining the neglected positive realm of cross-cultural transitions.

The information gathered in this study is intended to advance knowledge of the complete international student experience in the field of counselling psychology. Learning about this process from the perspective of students themselves can inform more appropriate counselling interventions and a less stigmatized view of this population. In order to encourage more foreign students to make use of counselling services on campus, it is vital that we ensure relevant and appropriate counselling, which includes a well-rounded view of the international student experience. As a beginning counsellor, this study is also an opportunity to educate myself and develop my competence in working with students crossing cultures.

The research questions guiding this investigation are:

1. What experiences, strengths and resources facilitate the cross-cultural transition of international students?

2. Do international students report personal growth or learning during their cross-cultural transition?

Significance of the Study

The vast majority of research in the area comprises quantitative survey and questionnaire studies. These methodologies limit the type of information gathered and provide little from the personal experience of the student. In the current study I take the perspective that cross-cultural transition is a deeply personal and subjective experience, which, as Pedersen (1995) points out, is difficult to express quantitatively. Therefore, I have chosen a qualitative approach to provide an opportunity for international students to voice their personal experiences of cross-cultural transition.

By qualitatively exploring the positive aspects of crossing cultures and the experiences and resources that facilitate this transition, this study will contribute to a more holistic and balanced view of the international student experience, particularly for counsellors and other professionals who support this population. This will also help broaden our knowledge of how best to serve these students and inform appropriate and culturally competent counselling for this population.

A positive psychology perspective complements counselling psychology's traditionally strengths-based approach (Lopez, Magyar-Moe, & Petersen, 2006; Mollen, Ethington, & Ridley, 2006) and has been argued to be most effective for prevention of difficulties (Seligman, 2005). By providing information on positive experiences, strengths, and personal growth, this study also offers a multicultural view of positive psychology concepts, an area that has greatly lacked attention (Lopez et al., 2006).

In choosing this topic, I responded to the call for research into strengths both within the area of international student adjustment and the field of positive psychology. By taking an approach that combines these two fields this study will contribute to filling

significant gaps in the literature. I also hope this contribution will highlight the value of a positive psychology perspective for counselling research and encourage further research from this point of view.

Key Terms

One criticism of the cross-cultural transition literature has been the lack of consensus in the field regarding how to define many of the key terms (Searle & Ward, 1990; Pedersen, 1991). The terms adjustment, acculturation, and adaptation are found throughout the literature with little to distinguish between them and have been used interchangeably (Searle & Ward, 1990). To clarify the perspective of this study the following are definitions of key terms as I use them within this thesis:

1. *International Student:* In this study the term is used to describe individuals temporarily residing in a foreign country for the purpose of study. This thesis focuses on university students studying on an international student visa. It should be noted that the literature uses the terms international student and foreign student interchangeably and the literature review reflects that usage.

2. *Culture Shock:* The process of encountering and adapting to a new cultural environment in the absence of familiar norms and expectations. My conceptualization of culture shock includes the potential for both negative and positive consequences.

3. *Cross-Cultural Transition:* The process of transitioning from the experience of self in the home culture to the experience of self in the host culture, encompassing change at both the environmental/external and personal/internal levels. I prefer this term to adjustment and acculturation, terms found more commonly and often

interchangeably within the international student literature, as it emphasizes the process and developmental nature of the international student experience.

Overview of the Thesis

This thesis is comprised of five chapters. Chapter one offers an introduction to the work, information on the background and relevance of the study, my personal perspective, the purpose of the study and the research questions, followed by consideration of the significance of the study, and definitions of key terms. In chapter two, I give an overview of the literature related to the cross-cultural transition of international students. I review the current portrayal of the international student population in the literature and what is missing from this depiction. I also outline limitations of the present body of knowledge and how these considerations have shaped my research. Chapter three provides background on the two areas that have most influenced the process of the study: Critical Incident Technique and positive psychology, and details how these influences shaped the methodology. It also describes how data was gathered and analyzed and details validation procedures. In the fourth chapter, I present the findings of the study, including a description of the themes that have emerged from the data and examples of critical incidents. A discussion of the findings within the context of the existing literature and conclusions from the study can be found in the final chapter. Chapter five also explores the limitations of my research, directions for future research in the field, and implications for counselling professionals.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will provide a review of the literature relating to the cross-cultural

transition of international students. When considering new directions for research it is

important to examine where we are coming from and where we can go. I will first review

the current portrait of the international student experience, implications for counselling

professionals, and research considering facilitative factors. Bearing in mind the scarcity

of psychological research directly related to positive aspects of cross-cultural transition, I

gather information within and outside the field of international student adjustment to

illuminate positive aspects of cross-cultural transition, revealing gaps in the current

representation and addressing exciting new paths of exploration.

International students are becoming an increasingly large sector of the Canadian

educational system. The Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE, 2002)

reports that 104,662 international students were educated in Canada during 2001-2002,

with 14,231 attending colleges and trade schools and 52,325 attending a university.

Almost half (48%) of these students come to Canada from Asia with South Korea ranking

as the top country of origin, China as the third and Japan as the fifth. Enrolments by

Chinese and South Korean students have grown more rapidly than any other population

sector. These totals represent a 12.6% increase from 2000-2001 and a 27.5% increase

from 1999-2000.

Recruiting students from overseas provides North American universities with an

attractive opportunity to bolster enrolment (Misra, Crist, & Burant, 2003). Simon Fraser

University (SFU) has acknowledged the importance of international student recruitment,

both to boost enrolment and further the aim of creating a global environment. The

university saw a 3.7% drop in applications from 2005 to 2006 (SFU, 2007), citing acute competition from other English-speaking nations as a factor in this decline. SFU's plans for 2004 to 2007 (SFU, 2004) included intensifying recruitment of international students from diverse source countries to increase enrolment to 10% of the undergraduate student population. Statistics for the Fall semester of 2007 (Chan, 2007) showed 9.5% of undergraduate students and 17.2% of graduate students held an international student visa. Academic plans for the upcoming years (SFU, 2007) propose a target of 15% of the overall student body. These goals fit within a larger mandate to internationalize the SFU experience.

Furthermore, SFU has recognized that, in addition to recruiting international students, consideration must be given to successfully retaining students through graduation. SFU's strategic plan (SFU, n.d.) notes that an awareness of the unique and wide-ranging needs of the international student population is a key factor in this objective. An external review of student services at SFU (Levy & Carlberg, 2004) identified the need to be "proactive rather than reactive" with regard to international student needs as "critical to success." Moreover, the strategic plan highlights the value of optimizing international student experiences.

International students contribute significant revenue to postsecondary institutions, which, in turn, carry a responsibility for their welfare (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001; Yeh & Yang, 2003). The rapid, substantial growth and impact of the international student population suggests the practical value and ethical importance of addressing their needs. As all students require access to appropriate student resources, it is also important

to examine the relevance of counselling services available to them (Yoon & Portman, 2004).

<center>How Are International Students Portrayed in the Literature?</center>

In the following sections, I will examine two aspects of the portrait of international students created by the current literature: international students as both a problem-ridden and vulnerable population, followed by implications for postsecondary counselling professionals and research into factors facilitating cross-cultural transition. I will then examine the impression left by the literature and what is missing from the current depiction.

<center>*A Problem-Ridden Population*</center>

The majority of research on the cultural transition of international students has focused on the difficulties associated with the adjustment process (Arthur, 2004; Leong & Chou, 2002; Ward et al., 2001). In addition to the academic demands and adult responsibilities shared with their peers, navigating the challenges of a new culture can make even the most menial tasks exhausting for these sojourners (Yeh & Yang, 2003). Indeed, the literature suggests agreement within the field that foreign students are a vulnerable population and experience more problems than other students (Dillard & Chisholm, 1983; Mori, 2000; Pedersen, 1991; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994; Schram & Lauver, 1988) and that they have fewer resources to support them (Kaczmarek, Matlock, Merta, Ames, & Ross, 1994; Pedersen, 1991).

Problems develop as students encounter new and competing roles, which, if not quickly mastered, can lead to identity confusion (Pedersen, 1991). The stress potentially associated with the process of adjusting to a new culture is known as acculturative stress,

which can result in physical, psychological, and social decline (Mori, 2000; Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timimi, 2004), and contribute to more severe mental health issues (Furukawa, Sarason, & Sarason, 1998; Lee, Koeske, & Sales, 2004; Leong & Chou, 2002; Oropeza, Fitzgibbon, & Baron, 1991; Wilton & Constantine, 2003).

In a classic and comprehensive review of sojourner adjustment research, Church (1982) reported that "the most important problems appear to be language difficulties, finances, adjusting to a new educational system, homesickness, adjusting to social customs and norms, and for some students, racial discrimination" (p. 544). The author also noted that areas of concern for international students had remained consistent in the research since the 1950's, although the extent of difficulty varied among student groups.

These concerns have continued to emerge in subsequent studies (see Ward et al., 2001). In a recent review, Arthur (2004) drew attention to academic concerns, communication issues, social support, family matters, discrimination, gender roles, and financial support as key issues during cross cultural transition.

Despite the problem-focused nature of much of the literature, there remains some disagreement over whether foreign students really do experience problems to a greater degree than other students. Research in the field has been criticized for pathologizing what may be a normal learning process (Arthur, 2004; Pedersen, 1991). Indeed, some research indicates that many of the issues that trouble international students are the same as those worrying their domestic peers. Yi and Giseala (2003) found that academic studies, anxiety, and depression were the top concerns for international undergraduates while depression, time management, and romantic relationships were the main difficulties

reported by graduates, problems commonly cited among North American students as well.

A Vulnerable Population

The problems associated with culture shock and cross-cultural transition can manifest in physical ailments. International students experiencing acculturative stress commonly report physical symptoms such as fatigue, headaches, stomach upset, and pain (Arthur, 2004) that appear to have no physical cause (Misra & Castillo, 2004; Mori, 2000). They also experience psychological concerns, including anxiety, depression, and loss of identity, and social issues such as loneliness, withdrawal, and feeling like an outsider (Arthur, 2004; Brinson & Kottler, 1995). Research has suggested that students from some regions, such as Latin America and Asia, are at higher risk in terms of physical and mental health and less able to cope (Chataway & Berry, 1989; Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986; Oropeza et al., 1991, Poyrazli et al., 2004; Wilton & Constantine, 2003).

This suggested vulnerability has not, however, been unanimously supported. Despite some arguments for increased susceptibility to health problems among international student populations, a study of 129 Caucasian domestic and 75 Asian international graduate students (Leong, Mallinckrodt, & Kralj, 1990) did not find any differences in how stressful life events were related to physical and psychological health issues between the two groups. In fact, the Asian participants reported fewer stressful life events and fewer chronic health conditions than their Caucasian counterparts, but a comparable incidence of short-term health problems. The authors speculated that the latter difference might be due to Asian students' reported tendency to somaticize

psychological concerns, a hypothesis which has received some support (Lippincott &
Mierzwa, 1995).

<center>Implications for Counsellors</center>

The stressors confronting international students have raised concerns about
mental health implications. These students have been deemed to be more susceptible to
psychological problems than their host national peers (Mori, 2000). Lee, Koeske, and
Sales (2004) found acculturative stress to be highly predictive of mental health issues,
while in a study of Japanese international students (Furukawa et al., 1998), 80% reported
experiencing more than three psychiatric symptoms of emotional distress six months into
their sojourn. Wilton and Constantine (2003) also found that acculturative distress and
apprehension about intercultural competence were positively linked to psychological
distress for Latin American and Asian students, even after accounting for racial and
ethnic group and length of time in the host culture. These findings indicate that the
process of crossing cultures can be one of significant distress and students may, therefore,
experience mental health problems.

However, the lack of empirical evidence of psychological vulnerability has been
criticized (Parr, Bradley, & Bingi, 1992; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994). It is noteworthy that
Wilton and Constantine (2003) found psychological distress decreased with longer
residence in the host culture. This suggests that vulnerability may change over time.
Furthermore, what constitutes disorder and how it is expressed can vary by culture,
creating obstacles for those providing mental health services to this population (Leong &
Chou, 2002; Oropeza et al., 1991, Yang & Clum, 1995). There is still much that we do
not know.

Given the considerable challenges and the rapid growth of the international student population, it would seem that on-campus counselling services would be essential to these students during this time of cultural transition (Brinson & Kottler, 1995; Locke & Velasco, 1987; Mori, 2000; Yoon & Portman, 2004). Some argue that the need for counselling and support among international students exceeds that of domestic students (Dillard & Chisolm, 1983; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994; Ward et al., 2001), indicating that post-secondary institutes are accountable for addressing the needs of this population (Yeh & Yang, 2003).

Despite the apparent need for counselling services among international students, considerable research indicates that such services are underused by this population. Nilsson, Berkel, Fores, and Lucas (2004), in an examination of the presenting concerns of all international students attending a university counselling centre over the course of the year, found that only 2% of international students sought counselling services at the university centre. In addition, 38% of international students who attended an intake session and were referred to a counsellor did not return for their counselling session. However, similar attendance rates were found for domestic students of minority groups.

One potential reason students do not use these services is that the counselling available is not relevant or suitable for the international student population (Mori, 2000; Wilton & Constantine, 2003), perhaps due to a lack of counsellors skilled in multicultural counselling (Zhang & Dixon, 2001). This underlines the importance of ensuring that services are suitable and relevant for these students. Yet despite the importance of multicultural competence, Popadiuk and Arthur (2004) have noted that counsellor training programs rarely educate future therapists on the needs of international students.

Additionally, much of the information guiding international student counselling is derived from research on counselling minorities, which may not be valid (Yoon & Portman, 2004). Counselling theories and strategies tailored to the specific needs of international students are lacking (Yoon & Portman, 2004).

<center>What Facilitates Cross-Cultural Transition?</center>

In order to balance the information on difficulties associated with cross-cultural transition, and provide counsellors with a more holistic view of the international student experience, it is important to examine what helps students through these transitions. However, what we have learned about factors facilitating international student adjustment has primarily been deduced from research examining hindering factors. The following section provides an overview of what the literature tells us about what facilitates crossing cultures.

Given the considerable potential challenges facing international students, it is not surprising that the research literature has given extensive attention to factors and characteristics that may predict adjustment. Researchers have examined variables such as gender (Hashim & Zhiliang, 2003; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Misra et al., 2003; Poyrazli, Arbona, McPherson, & Pisecco, 2002; Sheehan & Pearson, 1995) and expectations of students as they embark on studies abroad (Chiu, 1995; Martin, Bradford, & Rohrlich, 1995). Cultural distance, the theory that attributes adjustment difficulties among international students to the extent of similarity between home and host cultures, has also garnered interest in recent years (Redmond, 2000; Yang, Noels, & Saumure, 2006). These influences hold promise for identifying subgroups that may be at greater risk. However, such factors have produced inconsistent or mixed results and only

language competence and social support have consistently predicted the adjustment of international students (Poyrazli et al., 2004).

Effective communication in the language of the host country has implications for the academic achievement, development of social networks, and cultural adjustment of international students. Mori (2000) argues "the language barrier is probably the most significant, prevalent problem for most international students" (p. 137). Numerous studies have linked English language skills, as well as students' perception of these skills, with adjustment (e.g., Kagan & Cohen, 1990; Poyrazli et al., 2002; Poyrazli et al., 2004; Redmond & Bunyi, 1993; Yang & Clum, 1995; Ying & Liese, 1990).

Social support has been reported to have a direct effect on acculturative stress, as a vital source of well-being, and a buffering effect to handle stressors (Furukawa et al., 1998; Lee et al., 2004; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Misra et al., 2003; Poyrazli et al., 2004; Redmond & Bunyi, 1993). Spending free time with host nationals has been significantly related to adaptation (Kashima & Loh, 2006; Surdam & Collins, 1984; Poyrazli et al., 2004). Maintaining contact with the home culture, through family, friends, or co-nationals, has been found to reduce stressors and stress reactions (Misra et al., 2003).

Although social support plays an important role in cross-cultural transition, and international students prefer this type of support to professional resources (Heggins & Jackson, 2003), they often struggle to make friends (Ward et al., 2001). Forming a support system can be a long and difficult process (Yoon & Portman, 2004). These findings point to the essential role of suitable counselling services to fill the gap while students build a support network (Yoon & Portman, 2004).

The varied results from the research on what influences international student adjustment have lead some researchers to question whether more than one type of adjustment, associated with different predictors, may take place during cross-cultural transition. Ward and her colleagues (see Ward et al., 2001 for an overview) discriminate between two interconnected, but distinct, types of cross-cultural adjustment: (a) psychological adjustment, encompassing feelings of well-being or satisfaction, and (b) sociocultural adjustment, positive experiences and the sense of fit within a culture (Searle & Ward, 1990). Psychological adjustment was predicted by satisfactory relationships with host nationals, extraversion, life changes, and social difficulty, while cultural difference, expectations of difficulty, and depression predicted differences in sociocultural adjustment.

One criticism of research in this area is that it relies on questionnaires and surveys. As such it provides little information on what the international students themselves deem helpful. Furthermore, the reliance on correlational data implies that facilitative influences are merely the absence of hindering factors. Research focusing specifically on what facilitates cross-cultural transition and information from the student perspective is lacking.

What is Missing From the Current Portrait of International Students?

As noted, literature in the area of cross-cultural transition has maintained a primarily problem-focused stance. Much of this preoccupation can be attributed to the negative concept of culture shock expressed by Oberg (1960) and Lysgaard's U-curve model of international student adjustment (1955), which has been central in the field for decades. Although this theory of adjustment has not been strongly supported in the

literature (Church, 1982; Furnham, 1988; Pedersen, 1991), it nevertheless continues to direct both research and practice in the field (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004). The model depicts culture shock as an abnormal and harmful response rather than a normal process (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004) and leaves little room for the influence of significant individual experiences (Arthur, 2001).

The traditionally negative focus of culture shock has been repeatedly criticized. Searle and Ward (1990) call Oberg's concept of culture shock "a major detriment to advances in the study of cross-cultural transitions" (p. 449). Pedersen (1991) notes that international students are often portrayed as "helpless" in the face of overwhelming difficulties and goes as far as to say "until recently, culture shock was assumed to be a consistently negative experience, much like an illness or disease" (Pedersen, 1995, p. 2). The term culture shock, as used in the literature, has had an almost exclusively negative connotation, which may not be an accurate reflection of the experience (Adler, 1975; Arthur, 2004; Furnham, 1988; Pedersen, 1995).

Indeed, despite potential struggles, the majority of international students succeed. A 2004 survey of 1663 international students conducted by the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) found that eight out of ten international postsecondary students reported an A or B average. Additionally, 89% of students reported success in adjusting to life in Canada with approximately half indicating "very much success." Some 91% of students were satisfied with their decision to study in Canada and 83% would recommend study in Canada to a friend. Results support similar findings from five years earlier. Survey participants included students from 16 universities and 20 colleges with proportionate numbers of men and women.

These findings offer a very different impression of the international student experience than what is described in much of the literature. This disparity suggests that when international students are given the opportunity to voice the more positive aspects of their sojourn, they offer a self-portrait of a capable and resourceful population experiencing strengths and successes. How do we reconcile these vastly different portraits?

One possible explanation is that while problems do occur students are successful in finding ways to deal with them. Furthermore, from the students' perspective the good may outweigh the bad. As Furnham (2004) points out:

> For many students the overseas experience is enormously beneficial and can shape their outlook for the rest of their lives. Many say it was one of their most profound life experiences . . . whatever negative culture shock they may have experienced early on was soon overcome, and mostly only positive experiences recalled. (pp. 17-18)

Reflecting this change in perspective, early pathological conceptualizations of culture shock are being disputed and replaced by a more educational perspective, where adjustment is seen as a growth process (Furnham, 2004; Pedersen 1995). In fact, more than three decades ago, Adler (1975) offered such an alternative view of culture shock:

> Although culture shock is most often associated with negative consequences, it can be an important aspect of cultural learning, self-development, and personal growth . . . the problems and frustrations encountered in the culture shock process are important to an understanding of change and movement experiences, and that such transitional experiences can be the source of higher levels of personality

development. Implicit in the conflict and tension posed by the transitional

experience lies the potential for authentic growth and development. (p. 14)

In short, the current picture of international study is only half complete. The following

section presents information on the positive side of the international student experience

and explores the potential for growth.

<center>*Positive Aspects of Cross-Cultural Transition*</center>

Some research emerging in the 1990s supported a more positive view of the

international student experience. Martin, Bradford and Rohrlich (1995) investigated the

pre-departure expectations and post-return appraisals of 248 international students. They

found surprising evidence that the students' experiences met their expectations or were

better than they expected. This longitudinal study also found a positive, though weak,

relationship between how much the expectations were exceeded and how positively

students evaluated the overseas experience. Having expectations met or violated was

related to region of study, but not related to previous intercultural experience.

Students who stayed in England reported greater deviation between expectations

and actual experience, which may have been due to the fact that they expected this

culture to be far more similar. It is also noteworthy that the sojourn was for only one

semester and students were provided with language classes and host family

accommodations. These factors may have contributed to a more satisfactory experience.

Martin and his colleagues hypothesized that students' positive appraisals of the

experience in relation to their expectations may have been due to pessimism going into

the sojourn, unrealistic evaluations, or self-fulfilling prophecy. However, I would argue

that students were able to call on strengths and resources they may not have known they

had, resulting in a smoother transition than anticipated. Since this study used questionnaires, we are not privy to the students' own explanations.

Yoon & Portman (2004) noted that international students possess unique strengths and resources based on diverse cultural and academic backgrounds, including bilingualism, biculturalism, and different perspectives. The authors argued that more attention must be paid to how these students can act as resources within the host institution. They pointed out that research identifying the strengths, skills, knowledge, and resources of international students would be advantageous to both the students and the host university.

Parr, Bradley, and Bingi (1992) observed that the emotional profile of international students shows them to be determined, thankful, happy, confident, cheerful, and cautious individuals. The researchers found they seemed to cope well and manage their needs, acknowledging them as "robust." In providing a "self-portrait" students described experiencing more positive than negative feelings and saw themselves as coping successfully. The authors noted that most of the international students found ways to overcome obstacles and meet their needs. By randomly contacting 100 postsecondary institutions this study, which used a questionnaire methodology, included a broader participant group. However, the authors acknowledged that the students were those in contact with international support offices on campus. These participants may not have been representative of all foreign students.

It is interesting to note that, like much of the more positive research on international students, this profile is embedded in problem-focused research. The focus of this study was student concerns. It is worrisome that consideration of student strengths

and resources must often come as a by-product of research into their problems. It is essential that we encourage research that targets positive aspects of cross-cultural transition specifically.

In addition, there is some question about how deeply the problems associated with crossing cultures affect international students. Using a combination of questionnaires and interviews, Lewthwaite (1996) explored the challenges facing 12 Asian postgraduate students. He found unexpected evidence that international students in New Zealand did not indicate excessive stress despite reporting experiences of loneliness, culture clash, frustration in immersion, aggravations related to the host culture, and difficulty communicating across cultures. The students viewed themselves as well adjusted and happy with their situation. This implies that unlike the pathological view found in the literature, culture shock may be best considered an important aspect of the "universal" experience of cross-cultural transition, as suggested by Brabant, Palmer, and Gramling (1990). Therefore, although problems exist, they may not be as overwhelming as the research suggests. These findings highlight the need to explore other facets of the cross-cultural transition and international students' own interpretation of their experiences.

Recently, further examination of the positive aspects of cross-cultural transition has provided insight into how students manage the challenges of crossing cultures. In a rare study focusing on how international students experience their cross-cultural transition positively, Tseng and Newton (2002) shared the perspective of two international students regarding what "well-being" meant to them and how they achieved it. Themes emerging from this grounded-theory analysis indicated that well-being held

meaning in two distinct, but important, ways for the students: general well-being and well-being in their study abroad life.

The participants perceived general well-being as being influenced by "physical health, happiness, joy and pleasure, harmony of body, mind and soul, feeling of security, sense of satisfaction, fulfilment or achievement, and feeling as if their life is meaningful" (p. 594). The authors said that this reflects the categories of general life satisfaction and positive affect. Strategies for achieving general well-being included exercise, asking for help, spending time with one's thoughts and adapting to them.

Well-being as an international student was described as having a meaningful study abroad life, including academic achievements and meeting future goals. The students identified eight strategies for well-being during their cross-cultural transition: a) knowing yourself and understanding the host culture, b) developing friendships, c) expanding your view of the world, d) asking for help to deal with problems, e) getting involved in cultural and social contacts, f) building relationships with advisors and instructors, g) gaining English language competence, and h) knowing when to let go.

Experience of Growth

Cross-cultural transition as a process of personal growth is a further positive aspect of interest. According to one survey, 42% of international students in Canada indicated personal growth as a benefit of their sojourn (CBIE, 2004). Certainly some research indicates that cross-cultural transition can prompt considerable personal change.

Carlson and Widaman (1988) examined changes in international attitudes and perceptions for a group of university students who studied abroad and a group who stayed at their home institution. Based on questionnaire results, they found the attitudes of the

international students and the control group to be "essentially identical" prior to sojourn. However, upon returning from Europe to their home country American international students indicated more interest in other cultures, international politics, and cultural cosmopolitanism, in addition to more positive, but also more critical, views of their home country compared to the control group.

Although it could be argued that participants who chose to take part in the study may have had more profound experiences than those who opted out, it is interesting to note the exceptionally high and nearly equal response rates for international students and those who stayed at home (67% and 65% respectively). These findings suggest that the study abroad experience may lead to a change in "lens" for students, allowing them to see their own country in a global context.

Along with an examination of perceived stressors and coping strategies, Arthur's (2001) qualitative investigation of Canadian postsecondary students studying in Vietnam explored what students learned about themselves over a 7-week cross-cultural program. Participants reported becoming more aware of their strengths and shortcomings and a third of students reported increased cross-cultural skills. Students also became more aware of how culture influenced them. Most interesting was the connection participants indicated between cross-cultural transition and personal transition. Arthur notes "students who were willing to try new experiences and maintain an open mind to cultural differences found ways to define resources in both themselves and the foreign culture" (p. 50).

Improved cross-cultural skills and an enhanced global understanding, as well as higher levels of emotional resilience, open-mindedness, independence, flexibility, and

having the experience of being an outsider have also been indicated as significant

positive gains for international students (Duffy, Farmer, Ravert, & Huittinen, 2005;

Kitsantas, 2004). In addition, there is some indication that these results may be long

lasting with students continuing to draw on the experience both personally and

professionally for years to come (Duffy et al., 2005).

Positive Psychology

Research from the positive psychology literature also provides support for the

importance of examining positive experiences and growth through adversity. Linley and

Joseph (2004) describe the positive psychology perspective in this way:

> Instead of attempting to capture varied nuances of human behaviour as being
>
> representative of some underlying psychopathology, applied positive
>
> psychologists, instead, look to people's strengths, capacities, and resources, the
>
> key attributes and assets that have allowed them to survive, and in some cases
>
> flourish, despite the obstacles they have faced. That is not to say that illness and
>
> disorder are to be neglected, but simply that they should be regarded as but one
>
> aspect of the person's experience. (p. 8)

For instance, research indicates positive emotions and experiences may play an important

role in enhancing resilience. Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, and Larkin (2003) found that

positive emotions seemed to act as a buffer against depression for resilient people

following the September 11th terrorist attacks and that resilient people seemed to emerge

from crisis stronger and more optimistic than before. The authors concluded that such

individuals might take valuable knowledge from their experience of crisis that enhances

their ability to cope with future difficulties. They also noted the importance of making meaning of difficult experiences.

Positive change and growth can occur following challenging life events. Although "great good can come from great suffering" is an old adage (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), positive change in the wake of crises has only recently gained scientific interest (Ai & Park, 2005). This phenomenon, known as stress-related growth or posttraumatic growth, has been reported to influence change in self-perception, personal relationships, and philosophy of life (Ai & Park, 2005; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Research in this area has focused primarily on growth following struggles with serious trauma such as life-threatening illness, bereavement, terrorism, natural disaster, and assault (Ai & Park, 2005; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). While these traumatic life events clearly differ from the challenges faced by international students, given the risks and potential vulnerability outlined in the international student adjustment literature the concept of stress-related growth may apply. As Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) note "it appears that the phenomenon of posttraumatic growth occurs in a wide range of people, facing a wide variety of traumatic circumstances" (p. 3). Exploration of the capacity for growth and change in challenging but less traumatic circumstances would benefit this area of study. Furthermore, these authors suggest potential change and growth in the aftermath of significant *positive* experiences is also of interest.

Limitations of the Literature Reviewed

An overall evaluation of the literature reviewed in this chapter brings to light a number of common limitations. The following section will examine these limitations and consider their implications for the research proposed.

The majority of studies concerning the cross-cultural transition of international students are quantitative designs that make use of questionnaires and surveys. Although this methodology allows researchers to reach more participants it has considerable drawbacks. First of all, such studies are unable to provide individual perspectives on the experience of crossing cultures as they fail to reflect the voices of the students (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004). Therefore, we lose the opportunity to learn from the insight of these students.

Secondly, the nature of this methodology limits the information gathered. In other words, if students are only queried about problems during transition they are confined to appropriate responses, which lack context and may not reflect the reality of their experience. Also, surveys often require speculation about hypothetical situations rather than actual behaviour, which may be quite different (Yoon & Portman, 2004). International students are rarely asked how they view or overcome these obstacles. They are given an opportunity to voice their struggles, but not their triumphs.

Even in his classic review of the international student adjustment literature, Church (1982) noted that while survey-based research suggests substantial difficulties, it fails to pinpoint a cross-cultural basis for these problems or the extent to which these problems actually affect international students. He noted that in the face of these challenges most students still manage to adjust to the demands of the culture and educational system of the host country. Yet the process of navigating these obstacles has been largely neglected in the literature.

Another drawback of using questionnaires and surveys is the lack of face-to-face contact between researchers and participants. Questionnaires are usually in English and,

while interviews can allow the researcher to gauge understanding throughout, when using a written tool it is difficult to determine whether comprehension is a problem. This may in turn discourage some participants and result in a more acculturated pool. Students who are proficient in English might be more likely to participate while those who are less proficient might decline. In fact, there may be numerous differences between students who return the surveys and those who do not.

Additionally, questionnaire studies, along with many other quantitative studies in the field, rely on correlational data. Finally, many quantitative investigations fail to use tools developed specifically for the international student population as opposed to general or minority populations and, therefore, may not be appropriate (Yoon & Portman, 2004).

These limitations inform the selection of methodology in the proposed study. By choosing to conduct a qualitative exploration, my goal is to have the experiences of international students inform my conceptualization of cross-cultural transition and to have this work accurately reflect their perspective. This study will also strive to avoid confining the participants' responses to specific topics by using a less structured approach.

Another concern arising from this review is the tendency to pathologize the international student experience, rather than view it as a normal process. This shift carries important implications for the international student population and the professionals who support them. One risk of this lop-sided view of crossing cultures is that it gives a false overall impression of international students as a difficult or burdensome population (Arthur, 2004). Such a stereotype has serious implications for how international students are viewed by educational institutions, other students, and the general public. It may also

leave counselling professionals predisposed to concentrate on "fixing" the student rather than supporting them through the process (Yoon & Portman, 2004).

A further limitation noted while studying the literature on international student adjustment is the prominence of dated research. Much of the information cited in the literature, including reviews of "recent" studies, is comprised of research dating back to the 1980s and even 1970s (e.g. Leong & Chou, 2002; Ward et al., 2001). While it is important to acknowledge the value of significant foundational research, we must also be aware that the face of the international student population is in constant flux. The current generation may have access to knowledge, skills, and resources unavailable to previous populations, particularly with regard to technology, language proficiency, previous international experience, and cultural awareness. The changing nature of this field of study makes it essential that the body of literature remain current. It is quite possible that what was true of previous generations no longer applies to today's international students. In addition, much of the available information is American and, therefore, findings may not apply to multicultural nations such as Canada.

Conclusion

In summary, a review of the current literature provides a portrait of a growing international student population that emphasizes problems and vulnerabilities with little attention to positive experiences, strengths, or resulting growth. By providing international students with a voice and focusing on individual experiences I hope to provide a more holistic and accurate representation of both the international student population and the process of crossing cultures. The focus on positive aspects of cross-cultural transition addresses a need to explore an area that has received little research

attention, but that holds great promise for informing relevant counselling services for these students. The positive psychology lens adopted for this study offers a new perspective for research in this field. This fresh point of view provides an opportunity to look beyond helping international students alleviate distress to helping them get the most out of their cross-cultural experience.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The design of the current investigation encompasses two major influences: the Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954) and positive psychology. This approach reflects a number of considerations. First, given the paucity of research on positive aspects of international students' cross-cultural transitions, the current study is exploratory in nature and requires a methodology that allows participants the freedom to discuss their transitions from their own perspectives. As such, I wanted to use an approach that encouraged international students to share their specific individual experiences in their own voices and provide their interpretations as experts on their own processes. The Critical Incident Technique is suitable for these goals.

The influence of positive psychology can be seen in my interest in the strengths, growth, and resilience of international students throughout their transition. This focus provides a means of addressing significant gaps in the international student literature regarding positive aspects of their cross-cultural transition. In addition, it provides an exploration of what facilitates this transition and much needed data to inform the creation and implementation of relevant counselling interventions for this population. This may help improve resources and services for postsecondary international students. The following sections will present further information on the Critical Incident Technique and positive psychology, while the remainder of the chapter will describe the participant population, procedure, and the analysis and assessment of data.

Critical Incident Technique

The Critical Incident Technique (CIT) was pioneered by John Flanagan (1954). The method is both qualitative and exploratory; it involves collecting observer accounts of significant incidents contributing to a particular outcome. CIT was chosen as a good fit for the proposed investigation because it offers considerable flexibility, is appropriate for investigating personal experiences and areas which have received little research attention, and has been recognized as "consistent with the skills, experiences and values of counselling psychology practitioners" (Woolsey, 1986, p. 252).

Flanagan originally developed this technique to study effective pilot performance during World War II, however, since this time the methodology has evolved considerably in function and form (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005). CIT can be used to investigate helpful and hindering factors, characteristics essential to an outcome, factual incidents, as well as personal qualities, and turning points (Butterfield et al., 2005; Woolsey, 1986). In addition, Butterfield and her colleagues (2005) noted a further emphasis on psychological experiences, retrospective self-report, changes in data analysis, and increased attention to standards for credibility as significant variations from Flanagan's initial conceptualization of the methodology. In the ensuing years the technique has been used to examine a variety of phenomena including factors influencing quality of life (Flanagan, 1978), the experience of unemployment (Borgen & Amundson, 1984), facilitating healing among First Nations people (McCormick, 1994), overcoming depression in HIV+ patients (Alfonso, 1997), coping among holocaust survivors (Baum, 1999), stressful and helpful experiences during cross-cultural transition (Arthur, 2001),

incidents that influence the transition of homeless people off the streets (Macknee & Mervyn, 2002), and what prepares breast cancer patients for surgery (Cerna, 2000).

Flanagan (1954) described the five steps of the Critical Incident Technique as: (a) determining the general aim of the activity, (b) development of plans for how data should be gathered, (c) data collection, (d) inductive analysis of emerging themes to generate data categories, and (e) interpretation and reporting of findings. Details regarding these steps will be considered in the appropriate sections of this chapter.

Positive Psychology

The positive psychology movement was initiated by Dr. Martin Seligman in 1998, during his term as president of the American Psychological Association (Seligman, Parks, & Steen, 2004). Positive psychology is the scientific study of positive experiences and personal characteristics, which seeks to expand the focus of psychology beyond pathology and the goals of therapy beyond repairing dysfunction and easing distress (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005). It has been described as "nothing more than the scientific study of ordinary human strengths and virtues" (Sheldon & King, 2001, p. 216, as cited in Gable & Haidt, 2005).

Similarly, counselling psychology has historically focused on client strengths, resources, and psychological well-being and this has set the field apart from other areas of psychology. A counselling psychology perspective suggests a strong alignment with the goals of positive psychology and allows for a unique contribution to the growth of this area of research (Linley, 2006; Mollen, Ethington, & Ridley, 2006). Indeed, Seligman (2005) notes "we need to ask practitioners to recognize that much of the best work they already do in the consulting room is to amplify strengths rather than repair the

weaknesses of their clients" (p. 5) and argues that "Positive Psychology, albeit intuitive and inchoate, is a major effective ingredient in therapy as it is now done, and if recognized and honed, will become an even more effective approach to psychotherapy" (p. 6).

There are three primary arguments for an increased focus on the positive aspects of psychology. First, the recent preoccupation with pathology in psychological research has resulted in an unbalanced view of the human experience emphasizing problems, weaknesses, and suffering. Clinical treatment has likewise come to focus on alleviating distress and dysfunction. However, as Gable and Haidt (2005) observe "the science of psychology has made great strides in understanding what goes wrong in individuals, families, groups, and institutions, but these advances have come at the cost of understanding what is right with people" (p. 105). Positive psychology seeks to correct this imbalance and further a holistic consideration of the human experience.

Second, positive psychologists question if in helping alleviate distress and repair dysfunction the work of therapists is only half done (Linley & Joseph, 2004). Is it enough to merely help people become less miserable rather than happier? Positive psychology encourages goals beyond the reduction of psychological suffering to consideration of how clients can achieve greater happiness and meaning in their lives. Duckworth, Steen, and Seligman (2005) argue that "a 'build-what's-strong' approach to therapy may usefully supplement the traditional 'fix-what's-wrong' approach" (p. 631).

Third, positive emotions and experiences hold potential to mediate negative experiences and stressful situations (Duckworth et al., 2005). Positive emotions have been shown to buffer the effects of stress, help individuals find meaning in negative

incidents, and influence resilience (see Duckworth et al., 2005; Fredrickson et al., 2003; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). Therefore, increased attention to this area of research may inform greater prevention and treatment initiatives.

These arguments exemplify the suitability of a positive psychology perspective for the current investigation. Indeed, as discussed in the second chapter, the criticisms directed at the focus of psychological research in general likewise apply to research on the cross-cultural adjustment of international students. Research in this field also maintains a negative focus contributing to an unbalanced view of the study abroad experience and is preoccupied with fixing problems, giving little attention to enhancing the experience or encouraging more positive experiences. Furthermore, there is a paucity of information to guide clinical work focused on building strengths and resources. As a result, we may be missing key information that would help international students address challenges and experience more success. For these reasons approaching the current critical incident method from a positive psychology perspective is an essential aspect of this study.

Role of the Qualitative Researcher

An important consideration for choosing the Critical Incident Technique is the role of the researcher in a qualitative investigation. Qualitative researchers are aware that they enter the research process with their own values, beliefs and, hence, biases. However, unlike their quantitative counterparts, researchers committed to qualitative inquiries do not believe they should or can deny their subjective stance. Alternatively, the perspective of the researcher is seen as the foundation of the investigation, influencing all aspects of the research process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) offer a depiction of the qualitative researcher as "*bricoleur*, as a maker of quilts" (p. 4) noting "the interpretive *bricoleur* understands that research is an interactive process shaped by his or her personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity, and by those of the people in the setting" (p. 6). As the qualitative viewpoint argues, "there is no value free science" (p. 6).

Qualitative researchers acknowledge their personal perspectives, owning their potential biases and examining their own process as the investigation progresses. The location of the researcher within the research in seen as a strength rather than a limitation. As Denzin and Lincoln (2000) explain:

> Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress *how* social experience is created and given meaning. In contrast, quantitative studies emphasize the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes. (p. 8)

I believe my experiences as both a traveller and a counsellor-in-training have significantly shaped my approach to the current study. I have included my reflections on these personal perspectives in chapter one of this document.

Research Method

Participants

Participants were seven international students, six women and one man, enrolled at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia. Although this participant population is

small, it is in line with current standards for in-depth qualitative research studies and the chosen methodology, which assesses sample adequacy by number of critical incidents, not sample size (Woolsey, 1986). Interviews took place between October, 2006 and March, 2007 and data analysis began concurrently. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 28, with an average age of 24.6 years. Four students were Asian, two were Latin American and one was from Western Europe. Five participants were graduate students and two were undergraduate students. At the time of their interview, the participants had been studying in Canada for a period of six months to four-and-a-half years, with an average of 17 months. Only two of the students had lived abroad previously. The following is a brief description of participants. Real names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Anne is a 24 year-old graduate student from China. Prior to this experience, she had never lived abroad. At the time of the interview she was in her second year of studies and had been in Canada for one year and three months. She speaks English and Mandarin.

Kate is completing her undergraduate degree and at the time of the interview had lived in Canada for 13 months. She is a 20 year-old student born in Denmark. She has travelled extensively, lived abroad on several occasions, and speaks Danish, English, Norwegian, and German.

Elise is an international graduate student from China who had been in Canada for 6 months when interviewed. She is 28 years old and speaks Mandarin and English. This is the first time she has lived abroad.

Sebastian is a 24 year-old international student from Honduras. He has had a number of international experiences and previously studied in Asia. He speaks Spanish, English, and French. He has been studying in Canada for 4.5 years.

Julia has never lived abroad before and has been studying in Canada for six months. She is a graduate student and comes from China. She is 24 years old and speaks Mandarin and English.

Lily is a 25 year-old graduate student from China. She speaks English and Mandarin. Prior to coming to Canada, she had never lived abroad. She has been studying here for 1.5 years.

Olivia is a graduate student from Argentina. This is her first experience living in a foreign country. At the time of the interview she had lived in Canada for seven months. She is 27 years old and is here with her common-law partner.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited in two ways. Initially, students enrolled in a specific international graduate program were identified through selective sampling. In line with advice from the Office of Research Ethics, I contacted the coordinator of this academic program, discussed the goals and details of the project, and received permission to approach the students and invite their participation. Research was conducted in accordance with principles one through six as outlined in the Canadian Counselling Association's Code of Ethics section for researchers (Part E) to ensure ethical conduct in collaboration with participants.

Extensive consideration was given to ethical issues unique to conducting research in collaboration with international students. For example, some participants may find it

more difficult to fully express personal experiences and emotions in a foreign language. I kept this in mind when providing clarification of interview questions and I also thought about how to balance my desire to preserve participant voices with attending to the essence of what students were conveying. I used process notes to record observations of my overall understanding and experience of the participants' stories, which were particularly useful when written transcripts failed to clearly communicate the information. Participants were also sent questions prior to the interview session to facilitate comprehension.

Following ethics approval, I approached two groups of students from the program at the end of their class time and provided information about the project and the extent of participation involved, and answered any questions. The students were clearly informed that participation was voluntary, confidential, and not related to their progress in their coursework or program. Students were invited to contact me directly if they were interested in sharing their experiences.

However, when this method secured only three participants I expanded recruitment efforts to include all international students studying at the university. A call for participants was emailed to various student clubs and organizations as well as SFU International.

All participants were currently enrolled as international students and had completed at least one semester of studies. Participants signed an informed consent form (see Appendix A) prior to the interview session.

Procedure/Process

Information on the cross-cultural transition of the participants was gathered

through one-on-one interviews of about one hour, which were audiotaped and

transcribed. I used a semi-structured format with open-ended questions to introduce

topics of interest while encouraging the interviewee to share experiences from his or her

own perspective. As espoused by Woolsey (1986), I employed empathic listening skills

and perception checking to ensure correct understanding and interpretation and provided

participants with a list of main interview questions in advance of the interview to

facilitate the identification and recall of critical incidents. As noted, I considered these

steps particularly suitable given the fact that interviews were not conducted in the

students' native language.

The methodology for the current study incorporated one significant departure

from the typical CIT methodology. While interview schedules utilizing this technique

usually include questions probing both what has helped and hindered a given outcome, I

chose to focus strictly on facilitative aspects of cross-cultural transition in the current

investigation. I acknowledge that this choice may have discouraged potential participants

who had primarily negative experiences. However, I considered this concentration

necessary in order to clearly focus on the topic of interest, augment the paucity of

research examining this specific area, and avoid the risk of having negative incidents

eclipse positive experiences. This deviation allowed research to be conducted in line with

a positive psychology aim to make a significant contribution to the understanding of the

unique strengths, resources, and positive experiences of the international student

population.

Although this departure represents an innovative modification of the Critical

Incident Technique other studies using the methodology have been found to focus more

on the facilitative aspect of the phenomenon under study. In a study of what facilitates

healing among First Nations people, McCormick (1994) first explored events that

facilitated this healing. Participants were then questioned about hindering events in order

to obtain potential additional data, but few participants recalled such incidents. Alfonso

(1997) also focused on facilitative factors in research on overcoming depression after

HIV+ diagnosis, asking about hindering events only in the latter part of the interview.

She chose not to analyse the resulting data, as it did not pertain to the focus of the study.

Similarly, a study investigating client perception of the therapeutic alliance (Bedi, Davis,

& Williams, 2005) reported enquiry of only helpful incidents that strengthened the

alliance. Further, research exploring critical experiences among study abroad students

(Arthur, 2001) included just one question on stressful incidents while the remainder

focused on coping, assistance, and insights. These examples provide some precedence for

using the Critical Incident Technique to explore primarily facilitative incidents.

Furthermore, the Critical Incident Technique can be considered sufficiently

flexible to allow for such a deviation in order to tailor methodology to the specific

research. Indeed, John Flanagan (1954), pioneer of the methodology, declared:

> It should be emphasized that the CIT does not consist of a single rigid set of rules
>
> governing such data collection. Rather it should be thought of as a flexible set of
>
> principles, which must be modified and adapted to meet the specific situation at
>
> hand. (p. 335)

The interview session began with a discussion of the nature of the study, issues of confidentiality, and the interview process, and time was spent establishing rapport. The following statement was used to orient participants to the focus of the investigation:

Hello. Thank you for agreeing to talk with me about your experience of cross-cultural transition. The purpose of this study is to find out what is helpful to international students when they cross cultures. I'm talking to students to learn about what helped them during this time. I hope that what I learn from you can help us support other international students. I am really looking forward to working with you and hearing your story.

Participants were given a consent form and I reiterated their freedom to choose not to answer questions or withdraw from the study at any time. The participants were asked if they had any questions and resulting issues were addressed. Participants also filled out a demographic information form (see Appendix B), which was used strictly for descriptive purposes.

The remainder of the interview focused on eliciting critical incidents, including experiences, personal strengths, and resources that facilitated cross-cultural transition, as well as exploration of the participants' interpretation of these critical incidents. The following questions guided the interview process:

1. Think back over your transition from your home culture to living and studying here in Canada. What helped you during this time?

2. Can you tell me about an experience or incident that was important in helping you with your cross-cultural transition? What happened?

3. How important was this incident at the time?

4. What made it so helpful?

5. What was meaningful about the incident?

6. What did you learn about yourself from this experience?

7. Did others help you? If yes, who and in what way?

8. What personal characteristics do you have that helped you get through the challenges of crossing cultures?

9. As people make the transition to a new culture they sometimes notice changes or growth in themselves and sometimes they do not. Are you aware of any changes? Can you tell me about that?

Following identification of a critical incident, questions three through six were used to gather further information about the incident and evaluate its significance. Participants were then asked to recall other critical incidents. This process continued until no further incidents could be recalled. The focus then turned to resources, strengths, and personal growth, addressed through the remaining questions.

As detailed in the earlier section, the role of the researcher is an essential aspect of qualitative research. As such, it was important that I was aware of my personal process throughout the investigation. In order to do so, I kept process notes detailing my thoughts, insights, and reactions. This also provided an opportunity to record any arising biases or ideas about emerging themes, and debrief potential issues as necessary with my supervisor. Although these notes do not feature in this document, they were particularly helpful for clarification during transcription and for noting common threads among participant accounts that later became the overarching themes discussed in chapter five.

Data Analysis and Assessment

Critical incidents were analysed in three stages: extraction of incidents from the interviews, category formation, and assessment of reliability and validity. The following sections explain each of these stages in detail.

Extraction of Incidents

I began data analysis by rereading the interview transcripts and spent time immersing myself in the participants' stories of crossing cultures. At first, anything resembling an event was extracted from the interviews. I then scrutinized the events with my research supervisor and accepted critical incidents based on the following standards taken from the CIT literature:

1. The participant's account was stated with sufficient completeness.

2. The event was clearly identified.

3. The outcome of the event was related to the focus of the study.

An example of an incident that met these criteria is:

> I also participated in the international mentorship program. So I was matched up with a mentor. She contacted me a lot by e-mailing, phone, asked me if I had any questions. We met up a few times during the semester and we're still friends now. So you feel that someone is supporting you.

The following is an example of an incident deemed unacceptable:

> Also the older international students who had been here for like two or three years could provide us with support, which is really helpful

The latter excerpt lacks sufficient completeness and it is unclear how the event was facilitative.

Overall, 134 incidents were extracted. Each incident was recorded on a 4x6 card and colour coded by participant. Incident information included the source, the event, and

the outcome, to aid categorization. Given that English was not the first language of the participants and the interview was informal, it was sometimes necessary to paraphrase the excerpt to clarify meaning. This step was taken only when deemed necessary and in such instances care was taken to preserve the meaning of what the participant conveyed.

Category Formation

Cards were sorted based on similarity to develop thematic categories. Incidents that were easily grouped were sorted first in order to shape categories. Rounds of sorting continued to add to these compilations. At times, this required referring back to the interview transcript for contextual information. Some incidents were difficult to readily categorize and were put aside. I also followed Flanagan's (1954) recommendation and held back 10% of the incident cards before sorting, to test ease of classification once categories were determined.

As the number of incidents within these groups grew, thematic categories began to emerge based on common aspects of the incidents. I read through the incidents in each category and used keywords to capture the essence of incidents within the category. I named the categories to best reflect these keywords. Throughout the category formation process, categories were evaluated in consultation with my research supervisor and continually reworked and modified based on these assessments. For instance, following the second test of interrater reliability (see *validation procedure*) two incidents from the category "Social Support/Relationship Building" were erroneously placed in "Learning to Navigate Host Culture". Upon closer examination I determined that the different types of support offered by fellow international students required further clarification.

This inductive process continued until all incidents (including ambiguous events) were placed. Next, all incidents within the categories were examined a final time for fit. A small number of incidents were moved from one category to another. The categories were then reviewed again to ensure they appeared to be representative of the information shared in the interviews. Categories with numerous incidents and more than one sub-theme were divided into sub-categories. The category "Preparation" was combined with "Previous Experiences" due to the small number of incidents. Final analysis included nine categories.

Validation Procedure

The process of identifying themes and forming categories has been described by Flanagan (1954) as "more subjective than objective" (p. 344). Therefore, a number of credibility checks, gleaned from the Critical Incident Technique literature (e.g. Alfonso, 1997; Butterfield et al., 2005; McCormick, 1994), were employed to validate findings. These included protocol approval, interrater agreement, assessment of comprehensiveness, participant feedback on themes, participation rate, expert assessment of the soundness of categories, and theoretical agreement within the research literature.

First, expert approval of the interview protocol ensured questions were appropriate for the purpose of the study. Next, reliability was tested through interrater agreement. Prior to reviewing the categorization, my thesis supervisor, experienced in the Critical Incident Technique, was given a brief description of the thematic categories and proceeded to place 10% of the critical incident cards. We then compared our categorizations and calculated the percentage of agreement based on hits and misses. A first attempt produced an agreement rate of 75%. Although this rate has been indicated as

satisfactory in the CIT literature, further efforts were made to improve interrater reliability. Based on the patterns within the "misses" two similar categories, which were problematic, were merged to create a common category.

Following this change and further refinement to the category system a second interrater check was done. I provided my research supervisor with brief written descriptions of the categories and a selection of 18 cards, which were randomly selected from all ten categories (approximately 13%). Once completed, 16 of the 18 incidents were placed correctly for a reliability rate of 89%. This process provided reassurance that the categories could be used consistently by different raters. Furthermore, both misses involved the same subcategories, which were refined as a result.

As the quality of data in CIT is assessed by its richness and detail (Woolsey, 1986), it is essential that categories provide a true reflection of the participants' experiences. Therefore, several steps were taken to address the validity of findings. It was important to offer participants an opportunity to assess how their stories were represented. Following placement of critical incidents into categories, participants were sent a detailed summary of the categories by email, with their permission. Participants were invited to provide feedback on whether the interpretation was consistent with their experience. Only two participants responded to my email and none of the seven participants provided feedback.

Categories were also checked for comprehensiveness using a procedure taken from the CIT literature (Andersson & Nilsson, 1964; Cerna, 2000; McCormick, 1994). Prior to assigning incidents to categories, 10% of incident cards were randomly withheld. During the evaluation process the researcher assesses how easily the incidents can be

sorted into the current categories. If the existing structure cannot readily assume the incidents new categories must be formed. However, satisfactory fit within the current categories indicates a comprehensive category structure. At the end of the categorization process these incidents were sorted without difficulty.

It should be noted that one test of validity commonly advocated in the CIT literature was judged unsuitable for the current study. Participation rate, the number of participants who cite a given experience divided by the number of participants overall, is noted in CIT to be an important indicator that an incident may have been distorted or fabricated (Butterfield et al., 2005; Cerna, 2000; McCormick, 1994). For example, an incident reported by only one participant and not supported by other participants is commonly considered less sound. However, given the subjective approach taken in the current investigation and its exploratory nature it was essential that categories remained true to the participant's unique and common experiences. Therefore, it would have been inappropriate to judge the substance of the category in this way. In a study of marital satisfaction, Groenhof (2000) also adopted this stance and noted Andersson and Nilsson's (1964) caution that frequency cannot be equated with importance.

Also, emphasis has been placed on assessing theoretical validity by consulting the current literature for support (Butterfield et al., 2005). Categories not addressed in the existing literature may indicate a lack of validity and are then subject to further scrutiny. However, as Butterfield and her colleagues have pointed out, it is the thoroughness of this decision-making process that is useful, as novel findings may simply indicate information that has not been previously discovered. Although I did seek support for the findings from the research literature, given the dearth of comparable research examining positive

aspects of the experience of cross-cultural transition it was essential that novel findings not be rejected. These results provided interesting and crucial direction for future research.

Conclusion

This chapter began with a consideration of the two major methodological influences: Critical Incident Technique and positive psychology. I outlined the suitability of CIT for the current investigation, particularly for the exploratory and subjective nature of the current research. I discussed the fit between a positive psychology perspective and counselling psychology research and its value to fill gaps in the international student literature. Consideration of my role as a qualitative researcher was also included. An overview of recruitment, data collection, and analysis was provided and, finally, the procedure for validating the findings was detailed.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This chapter is presented in two parts. Through analysis of personal interviews with seven international university students, both external and internal events related to the facilitation of the participants' cross-cultural transition were identified. Part one of the chapter provides a report of the nine categories of facilitative events that emerged from the interviews. A description of each category is included and a number of incidents are provided as examples. The second part of this chapter summarizes the identification of facilitative personal resources within the participant sample and also includes participant statements. Accounts of these personal strengths did not meet the full criteria for critical incidents and are therefore presented separately.

Prior to each interview, participants filled out a demographic information form. Four students identified their ethnic background as Asian, two as Latin American and one as European/Asian. Four students were born and raised in China while the remaining participants from Norway, Argentina, and Honduras. The average (mean) time period participants had been in the country at the time of interview was 17 months, with the shortest time being six months and the longest being four and a half years.

Four of the students spoke Mandarin as a first language, two Spanish, and one Danish. For five participants English was the only foreign language spoken while one participant spoke French as a third language, and another additionally spoke German and Norwegian. Five of the seven participants had never lived abroad prior to coming to Canada. However, one student had studied in Hong Kong for two years and another had lived abroad for a total of ten years in Germany, Norway, India, and Australia.

The participants' ages ranged from 20 to 28 and the average age was 24.5 years. None of the participants had children and six of them were single while one had a common law partner. All participants were university students. Six of the participants had completed an undergraduate degree and one an International Baccalaureate; five participants were currently completing graduate programs.

Part 1: Description of Categories

The seven participating international students reported a total of 134 incidents that facilitated their cross-cultural transition. The incidents were organized into nine categories. In this study, although numerous incidents might have been considered for more than one category, events were only placed in one category based on the best fit. The proportion of participants represented within each category ranged from 29% to 100%. Category titles, frequency and participation rates are presented in Table 1 on the following page.

Given that the current investigation takes the perspective that cross-cultural transition is a deeply personal experience, it is essential to note that experiences are not deemed more or less important based on how frequently the category was reported or by how many participants. However, for informational purposes and ease of organization the categories have been presented in order of the number of incidents they contain.

Table 1

List of Categories, Frequencies, and Participation Rates

Category	Frequency of incidents	Participation rate
1. Growth and/or change	35	100%
2. Social support/Building relationships	24	86%
3. Learning to navigate host culture	22	86%
4. Enjoyable activities outside of schoolwork	12	71%
5. Previous experiences and preparation	10	57%
6. Supportive faculty and staff	9	57%
7. Persevering through hard times	8	43%
8. Sense of belonging	7	43%
9. Staying connected to roots	7	29%

Category 1: Growth and/or Change (35 incidents)

This category comprises incidents detailing growth or change within the

international students, both on personal and academic levels. All seven of the participants

reported these instances as helpful during their transition. Critical incidents fell into the

subcategories of: (a) personal growth, (b) making your own way, (c) change in goals,

change in perspective, or (d) academic growth.

Personal Growth

The vast majority of participants described considerable personal growth as they

crossed cultures. They commonly noted that as they discovered the culture of their new

home they also experienced a process of self-discovery. Participants realized strengths

within themselves they did not know existed prior to the challenges of cross-cultural

transition and often expressed surprise at their capabilities. Lily explained:

> Coming here I find that I really can do something that I never thought about
> before, or before I thought that I couldn't do that but when I came here it becomes
> true . . . . Before I came here I never thought, I never thought about I could do a
> master's degree. It's still hard, I'm still working at being better . . . . During the
> process I'm always learning, learning some new things and also maybe I find
> something new in myself.

For some participants, this realization of their personal strengths came from living

independently for the first time in a completely new place. As Julia noted, "Independence

needs practice." Participants had the opportunity to forge their own identities and were

not as constrained by how they might be seen by family members, as Anne pointed out:

> Before my mom kept telling me that I don't like thinking. . . . I think that's
> because I'm just, I was never worried about anything. Like from going to school
> or university, everything my parents arranged. I don't really need to think about
> anything. So now I realize I have that ability to think, like I'm very logical. So I
> kind of built up confidence. So I feel I just need to think more. That doesn't mean
> that I'm not able to think logically.

Beyond the scope for self-discovery, Sebastian described the experience of crossing

cultures as an opportunity to create identity. He explained a process of forming ideas and

values through interaction:

> The more you share with things the more you construct and put your ideas
> together, right? And the more you discover, you know, what you really believe in.
> So, if you're telling this person about your experience in some other place or
> where you come from, then you tell it again to this other person, then you slowly
> start, you know, forming a better idea of other things to believe in and the things
> that describe you. . . . that makes you have a better idea of who you are.

Commenting on his personal transition Sebastian went on to say, "Before I was a traveller, now I feel like an ambassador."

Other participants noticed a development of particular personal characteristics through their sojourn. The students observed that they had become more patient, assertive, confident, mature, open-minded, compassionate, and aware of their strengths. An increased ability to take full advantage of opportunities and avoid procrastination was also noted, "I learned here to say okay, I'm not going to let nothing else go, right. So I'm going to do it."

The concept of process came up repeatedly among incidents in this category, as did a shift in focus from outcome to process. As one participant remarked, "It's not something like you just say you have to be confident and you can be confident. It's not what you say, it's more about the process of realizing things about yourself."

Growth sometimes involved stepping outside the students' comfort zones and taking risks to reap considerable rewards:

> At some point in time when you do these transitions, especially in the beginning, you are very cautious about establishing relationships with other people because you don't have the language and you don't have the cultural norms and then you were less eager to interact with someone. But then as you realize that if you keep on doing that you're not going to be happy, then you're forced to do that and so, at the end of the day, when you do it you get this reward like oh my God, I did it and it was not that, not as bad as I thought.

Julia echoed this sentiment saying:

> Sometimes I will feel shy, I don't have the courage to, to take the first step and I will hesitate. But anyway, I have to do that because I set a goal for myself and if I don't do that I will not achieve it. You have to…take the courage to do things and after you do that you will feel so good, so you did it! And then the second time you will not hesitate, you will be more confident.

The discovery and development of personal strengths contributed to the participants'

ability to move forward with new confidence, a topic discussed in the next section.

Making Your Own Way

Making your own way was a second theme among incidents in this category, with

many participants reporting that developing independence and learning to make their own

life decisions were influential in making a successful transition. Participants learned to

rely on their own resources during difficult times rather than turning to loved ones. As

Elise and Lily reported:

> Maybe the, the biggest change is I know how to solve problems by myself. Before, I have many friends in China and also my relatives and parents. When I confront some problems I will ask them and maybe sometimes they will solve them instead of me. So [here] you must solve problems yourself.

> Another thing is the ability to be independent. . . . I was really very dependent on my parents and friends and, because I have a very big family, grandparents, parents, sister and brother, I never did anything for myself. So it was a really big change when I came here. I find oh, it's not so, it's not so difficult, so then you really can do it. . . . If I didn't come here I would have never known that I could do so many things.

As one participant noted, students who study overseas often have more autonomy

than their domestic peers of the same age and this freedom can in fact lead to bad

decisions: "These transitions make you try things a lot, things that you would never try.

Because you're disconnected, to a certain extent, from everything."

However, such experiences may also be a catalyst for growth as individuals learn

the consequences of their actions and how to make responsible life decisions: "Then that

starts a process of reevaluation of you own self and stuff right, if you have the capacity to

do it."

Change in Goals

Over the course of their transition, a number of participants also reported a change

in purpose during their time in the host country. Goals were commonly adjusted to be

more realistic, thus reducing the pressure felt by the students. This change was

particularly evident with respect to their perspective on their English skills. As Lily

described:

> Before, I was an English teacher and I was quite confident about myself, I can speak English. I was respected by my students and parents and friends. But when I came here, I found that everyone can speak English, everybody can speak better English and there was a period of, I am afraid to open my mouth . . . I could not speak very fluent, very standard English. Maybe people laughed at me when I made mistakes and I would feel so embarrassed, so I always think about that kind of thing. But later I think, why should I? I should face the fact that I am not a native English speaker. English is just a foreign language, so I should try to get more chance to practice and hope that would be helpful to improve.

Anne expressed a similar idea also, noting that her definition of success had also changed

during this process:

> The reason why I wanted to go abroad was that I want . . . my English to be accurate, to be better than the others. And then after I got here and I started in my program, I realized that there's always a certain kind of success . . . so you have your own so-called success. So I realized that's not an ideal goal, to be really like a native speaker, but I have my own strengths because I can switch from one of the two languages. I think I kind of found my own strengths.

Participants described the process of getting past self-consciousness that could at times be

paralyzing. It was difficult for these international students to give themselves permission

to learn and make the unavoidable mistakes that go along with it. As Anne went on to

say:

> Whenever I went out with her friends I couldn't talk, I couldn't talk English. I was so conscious of my English and so afraid of making mistakes . . . It was definitely a challenge. I felt so sad, like why? Just nothing I could say, I just couldn't say anything. . . . I felt so depressed at that time. But the other change I find is now, when I go out with her friends I don't feel, I feel like it's ok for me to make

mistakes. I'm not a native speaker, why not?

Across participants this modification of goals was presented as a positive event for the

students. Participants reported greater ease in social interactions and a more relaxed

approach.

A further change noted in this category was a shift from focusing on learning

about the host culture and making friends among host nationals to an increasing interest

in their own cultural identity. Living in a foreign country as an international

representative provided an opportunity to attain a greater appreciation of and pride in

their cultural roots. This shift in focus resulted in a change of purpose while studying in

Canada.

Change in Perspective

A slightly different sub-category involves incidents that reflected a change in

perspective during the transition. This differs from *change in goals* because it entailed a

change in participants' personal viewpoints regarding either their home culture and how

it is seen by others, their status as international students, or a change in their perspective

as a professional.

For Sebastian stepping outside his culture provided new insight:

> It was like a new thing because it was like talking about things that I knew
> happened, but since I was within the system I couldn't appreciate them from other
> points of view. It was, you know, it was something that wouldn't cross my mind
> to talk or ponder about. So that was very important and so those ideas, as we
> constructed and debated them, and throughout the other courses that I took in
> Latin American studies, really made it okay for me to be Latin American in
> Canada.

Exposure to different approaches gave Lily, an experienced teacher, new options for

professional development:

> Another change that I can see . . . my teaching job. I should say, I liked my teaching job but sometimes I felt it was boring because I knew that kind of education system is always text-oriented. And now I can see, I can look at it in different ways. Sometimes a student doesn't do well in their studies. Maybe it's because of some other things, not because he is not clever. So I should not always complain about such kind of things and I should try to see things from different angles and to find other ways to help those kids.

This account represents a potential benefit of encountering different educational systems while studying abroad.

After living abroad for several years, receiving an employment visa provided Sebastian with a new perspective on his status in Canada and a new approach to meaningful connections:

> [Before the work visa] because I wasn't permanent I didn't want to establish connections with people as much. . . . Now even though, as I said, I'm in the same status, it doesn't prevent me from, you know, talking to people or establishing connections with other people. . . . That facilitated many other things, knowing that I became permanent, much more permanent. . . . I started having more relationships with other people. I have a girlfriend now who is Canadian. It doesn't impede me to establish intimate relationships with people.

Overall, the participants recounted a broadening of their perspective and a tendency to be more open-minded.

Academic Growth

Finally, the participants observed that academic progress facilitated their cross-cultural transition. Adjusting to a new educational system and the rigors of studying in a second language are considerable challenges. Participants spoke of educational goals as their main objective in the host country and expressed a sense of achievement as they came to understand and meet academic demands. For Julia, this progress heralded a new confidence as an international student:

> Academically, I know I made progress because I can feel that when I'm writing articles. I really had a hard time for the first semester and I wrote things that, you

know, my instructor didn't think very well and myself also, less confidence about these things. And then as the semester . . . went on, I feel better and better personally when I read something and write something. Yeah, much better. Before I didn't get very high grades and then, yeah.

While Kate reported less difficulty adjusting to the educational system, she also commented on the capacity to develop as a student:

I think what I've grown most in is probably academically. I feel I've learned a lot at SFU. I'm really impressed actually by, by the amount of, I don't know, like in the first year you learn a lot of writing, reading skills, how to do presentations and all these things. [It's] a very good foundation from the first year.

As participants experienced this type of academic growth their confidence in their role as an international student grew and they were increasingly satisfied with their achievements.

Category 2: Social Support/Building Relationships with Peers (24 incidents)

This category involves the creation of social networks through building relationships with peers. International students' social connections provide them with essential support through their cross-cultural transition. The three critical incident themes in this category included: (a) a supportive living environment, (b) support from other international students, and (c) general peer support from friends and classmates. The majority of participants indicated these supportive relationships as essential positive factors in their cross-cultural transitions. As one participant noted, "You cannot live alone in this world."

Supportive Living Environment

Having support in the place where they resided was reported as being a significant asset for the international students. Participants identified their roommates or peers in residence as sources of support. The students spoke of the people they lived with as their

first social connections, before they had an opportunity to make friends. Building close

relationships with those who shared their home in Canada provided an opportunity to

create a sense of "family" when they were far from loved ones. Participants appreciated

this connection at a time when they felt vulnerable. Lily described just how

overwhelming the early days of transition could be and how vital this first contact

became:

> The first time you come to a new place, if you knew nobody and you even didn't dare to go out alone, you really needed a person to accompany you to do everything . . . . Everything changed suddenly, so when I came here the first several weeks or the first days I really needed a friend to talk to, to help me . . . . Now if I have some problems I have different ways to solve them, but at that time I was alone. So that help was really meaningful and important for me.

For Olivia, a roommate's support helped when she described what she perceived as a

negative cross-cultural contact:

> When I was looking for an apartment to rent, I wanted to take her [my roommate]. I noticed that sometimes people were very kind with me, but being a foreigner I've had that experience of going to a place [and people] treating me like really, really bad for not being North American or Canadian. And it was like awful because it was complete discrimination. Almost like these people say we don't want you here because I don't know, you are like God knows from where or something like that. I felt very, very bad that day. But being here in that situation she cheered me up, that was helpful. Because the first time you don't even know, you can't even talk to friends.

While in the quote below, Sebastian explained how peer support can differ from other

sources:

> When I first came I lived in residence. And I think that in one way or another it was good to share those first months with people that were your age . . . . It is easier to talk to those people about the way you feel than to talk to an adult or talk to a person that you know has other things to do. Because at that age people in residence, we're all there and we don't have much to do. So I think that that facilitated a lot because I was able to share things more easily.

Having this level of comfort and support in their living environment, participants were able to create a type of sanctuary away from the frustrations they might experience in their daily lives.

Support from International Students

The second theme in this category highlighted the fact that fellow international students were another noteworthy source of support while crossing cultures. Participants remarked that forming ties within the international student community was often easier than building other relationships because of common interests and situation. An added benefit of forming friendships with other international students was the exposure to a diverse array of cultures apart from the host culture. The international mentorship program was also acknowledged in this category as a good way to make early connections with one participant remarking, "It's really the first friend you get in the country." For Kate international students formed the core of her support network and she was keenly aware of how essential a resource they had become:

> Friends helped quite a bit, mainly international friends I guess. . . . Everybody is keen on meeting someone and everybody is keen on increasing friendships. I think all international students find it quite difficult to make friends with Canadians. So just knowing those people and knowing there is such a group of people up here, and they're interested and you can go and approach them and they'll take care of you. I think that's like the most meaningful thing I have here pretty much. . . . and it will be the most important thing probably throughout the four years.

While for Lily, building a relationship with a friend from the same academic program provided both guidance and support:

> I have another Chinese friend and she has been here for a long time. She has already maybe finished her master's degree, finished all the courses. So some of the courses I'm taking, you know, it's, she has already taken them. So when I have some difficulties I always go to her for help. She can talk to me very patiently and give me a lot of suggestions that, I really appreciate her.

As reflected in these accounts, connection with another student going through a cross-cultural transition reminded participants that others had succeeded despite obstacles. The experience of connection was further developed with classmates and friends, as discussed in the following subcategory.

General Peer Support

In the third theme, relationships with friends and peers, in general, also played a role in facilitating cross-cultural transition. As one participant shared, "This kind of support is invisible but it's very strong for me." Classmates were identified as an important source of support. It was also noted that connecting with domestic students over academic work could be a stepping stone to creating social networks and more meaningful relationships, as Olivia explained:

> Being at the university was helpful, compared with just immigration without [the interaction of] coming to school. Because I have to go to class and I have to talk with my classmates and those kind of social activities are helpful. So that, making a kind of connection or network, yeah. That would be a kind of connection you weren't looking for but it was there.

As exemplified in Lily's comment below, the ability to reach out to others and build a support network may be a resource some international students bring with them to the cross-cultural transition:

> I always have a lot of friends, no matter in my own country or here. I am not that kind of person that has everything just in your mind, in their hearts and don't tell anybody else and just think about yourself. I think if you had anything in your mind then maybe finally you couldn't control it, couldn't handle it, and that would be maybe some kind of mental problem.

Lily was also clearly conscious of how the support received through these relationships was significant for her. She went on to say:

>Sometimes I even think maybe, maybe I just don't want to get some practical help. I just need that feeling of you can do it, believe in yourself. Yeah, I think the encouragement was really important. And maybe when I came here I'm not so confident about myself, so I have to gain that kind of confidence from the people around me.

This observation reflects Lily's self-awareness regarding her personal needs during transition.

Finally, the impact of social support often has nothing to do with specific external incidents but rather an internal shift that occurs within the participants. As Anne eloquently described, feeling valued as a person and knowing that others are genuinely interested in getting to know you is an integral part of communicating across cultures:

>I think that's like a common thing for almost all international students. . . . where people really value what you're talking about, you will feel more comfortable to talk. But if, like when I was with [acquaintances], they don't want to spend time trying to understand me. Like the environment is so important and it's not a case of what you know or how, whether you know how to say it. It's about just being comfortable to speak and your opinion being valued. So I realized from the very beginning like when I'm with some other people who are very, very friendly and who want to learn more about my country, I feel I have a lot of things to say. I feel like I am two different persons.

Taken together, these observations underscore the idea that building relationships is about far more than social interaction for international students. Participants described these relationships as deeply meaningful cross-cultural experiences. Members of the participants' social support networks were also vital sources of practical support. This aspect is described below in the category, *learning to navigate the host culture.*

Category 3: Learning to Navigate the Host Culture (22 incidents)

Events in this category involved participants finding their way through a confusing array of changes, particularly during the early phase of cross-cultural transition. This category differs from "Social Support/Building Relationships" because

the focus is on practical support and learning about the host culture rather than on emotional support through deeper relational bonds.

In a new culture even the most mundane tasks can become challenging. Sojourners must learn how to procure basic needs such as food, accommodation, transportation, telephone service, banking etc. On top of these essentials they must decipher new societal norms. Incidents in this category are characterized by a sense of discovering "how things are done" in the host culture. This process can vary greatly for students from different nations due to the extent of cultural distance, although it is an inevitable part of any cross-cultural transition.

Incidents within this category are generally categorized by: (a) the assistance of a cultural guide (for basic needs and cultural initiation), (b) general cultural learning, or (c) recognizing differences in the education system.

Cultural Guides

These international students overwhelmingly identified having the aid of a cultural guide to navigate crossing cultures as helpful. Cultural guides were frequently other international students. Participants spoke of how these fellow sojourners provided a "shortcut" for new students. The students were able to gain valuable information from their peers' struggles in crossing cultures rather than having to learn through their own mistakes. Additionally, members of a Canadian host family, other students living in residence and a sibling who had previously studied at the university provided cultural guidance.

Cultural guidance was most commonly given to secure basic needs and introduce participants to aspects of the host culture. As Julia and Elise explained:

I have a friend and he came here two years earlier . . . he was very helpful. The day after I came here he just did a tour and taught me. . . . We went to Metrotown where there would be a lot of the Chinese food and the bank and the cell phone and everything. He helped us to start our own basic things. . . . .basic needs.

When I first come here students also in the same program yeah, they helped me a lot. Because although I know I will confront many experiences, culture shocks, actually I didn't recognize the culture shock. That experience is, experience exists, like shopping, going to the bank, these kind of things. And they tell me what should I do and what is necessary, things I must do and possess. . . . What we confront now they confronted . . . if they can do this, I can do it.

International students who have not previously lived abroad often arrive with considerable formal academic knowledge but may lack practical communicative experience. Peers were an essential resource for learning the nuances of more casual aspects of the language and culture to close this gap, as Olivia recounted:

In the place of the people I was living, there was a person who rented there also, so we started to hang out together. She is an American. So she was like already in the culture. So she helped me a lot to, for example, get idioms that you don't find in books. So sometimes there was a show and I was like looking, like that, "What are they saying? It's nonsense." . . . So she helps me to understand what they, between the lines what they're saying. So that was helpful.

For Sebastian, an experienced sojourner, peers provided access to the unspoken rules of the new culture:

I got to know more about the norms and things that were expected. And it was easy, I mean we were not ashamed of anything. So it's much easier to do this cross-cultural share of norms. . . . it's more raw in that sense. There's a better chance for you to get more out of it. Those little things that you, that they are not talked about, that's what I think I got from living with people in the same, same age group in residence.

Cultural Learning

Secondly, a number of incidents of general cultural learning were shared. In this subtheme events were related to the overall transitional experience rather than a particular helpful other. Incidents ranged from learning about relevant cultural differences through

an international teaching assistant course or through residence activities to insights

attained through crossing cultures.

For some participants, the extent of variation between the home and host cultures

came as a surprise. Lily explained:

> In university I majored in English language, so I had already learned something about the cultural difference. So I thought, I thought maybe, you know every country they share some similarities. So it would not be so different. But when I came here I really find cultural differences are really very . . . significant. And I had some difficult experiences of cultural difference. . . . So from that experience I can learn something that can help me to do better next time.

Her report indicates the need to prepare international students for cultural differences

prior to the sojourn. Sebastian described the excitement of experiencing first-hand North

American social events that he had previously only seen reflected in Hollywood movies:

> In residence they organized things like dances and formal nights and barbecues and all that kind of stuff. And then I remember once that we had this welcome barbecue with all people in residence and so I went there with my neighbor who is from Toronto. So we were there and then there was music and there were cheerleaders and stuff and in my head I was like my God, I'm living in an American Pie movie! What is this? This is what I thought it would be; this is amazing! And the burgers and all of that, you know, all those things that you get to see in the movies. So it was good, it was a good way of introducing myself to North American culture.

He also went on to depict the deeper internal transformation that can result from living in

a foreign culture:

> If it doesn't bring you ideas of doing things in a different way at least it makes people, I don't know, more flexible and makes them understand that the reality that they live in is not the reality that many people live in. That's the key point I guess at the end of the day. Because if you only know what you know, that's all you know. That's probably one of the main assets that you get from these things. Knowing that your reality is just your reality.

This comment illustrates the true impact an international experience can have on

international students' developing worldviews.

Recognizing Academic Differences

The final subtheme was learning about the differences between the educational systems in the host culture versus the home culture. Despite the fact that all participants were students this is a very small subcategory. These incidents were reported by Asian students, who may have experienced a greater divergence in academic structure.

Differences in the student-instructor relationship and style of learning in Canada were highlighted. It was noted that this relationship was less formal and that it was acceptable for a teacher to make an error without causing students to doubt their credibility. Academic focus was seen as less "text-oriented" and more oriented toward discussion.

Elise spoke of the fundamental difference in educational goals she experienced. She said that while she was used to a more pragmatic use of education as a system of training, she thought that Canadian university education focused more on development:

> The system of education is different, right? And then in China they think . . . how to educate students to be very useful people. Here maybe useful people become this kind of education system, like banking system, right? Up here they educate people like not, what can I say, useful people, say how to enrich to be a, a fulfilled human being. . . . Yeah, basically the educators want to make them to be that kind of human being. Very different.

This statement indicates that it may be challenging for students to understand and accept differences in the student role in the host culture. However, as the next category details, participants also spoke of a need to look beyond academic life.

Category 4: Enjoyable Activities Outside of Schoolwork (12 incidents)

Events in this category underline the importance of having a life in the host culture outside of the student role. Participants noted that "getting involved" and "staying busy" provided numerous benefits including a way to relax, meet new people, fill free

time, and avoid loneliness. The students were also able to learn a new skill, take

advantage of opportunities that may not be available in the home culture and simply have

fun.

Besides the direct outcomes, these enjoyable activities also had several indirect

positive effects for the students. Being active took their mind off the stresses of the

transition, got them around the new city, provided access to a social network, and created

a focus for free time. Getting involved in extracurricular activities also offered a chance

to communicate in English with people in the "real world", to learn about other

international cultures as well as host national life away from the university community.

Moreover, it was a chance to really be in the moment and enjoy the experience. Critical

incidents included leisure activities such as joining clubs or activities, pursuing a hobby,

doing volunteer work, or taking a part-time job.

For Olivia, continuing a long-time hobby in a new environment provided a

creative outlet and an opportunity to socialize:

> One thing that I did, I really enjoy taking photos. So sometimes I would meet a group of people and we'll go to the place and take photos together at some park or something. . . . So that was something that I did that was helpful. So it's having something to do and knowing better the places and doing something relaxing.

For Julia work provided a way to keep busy and make contact with host nationals:

> [In] August . . . we have one month's break, so I don't have anything to do. If I didn't have the work, I would feel very down . . . I found a part-time job. So I work in a store and sell things, so yeah. At least I can communicate with these different people. Yeah, it's very helpful. I learned a lot, I enjoyed a lot from working.

Widening her experience beyond the university environment was useful for Kate:

> I did some community service around here. And that was to get off-campus and actually meet people who are not university students or professors. And also just to learn a bit about the life. And so it was partly also just to get to know

> Vancouver and to learn more about Canada. Similarly this semester I'm doing, I'm doing a dance class downtown and there are no SFU students there. Most of the people are at least a decade older than I am. I'm really enjoying that because I need to do something away from the university as well, that's just not connected to it.

These accounts emphasize that the academic role is just one facet of the international student experience.

Taking time to savour simple pleasures of the host environment, such as enjoying nature or the different pace of life, was also noted by Lily:

> I know I'm the sort of person who is very sort of sensitive, so very small things would make me feel sad and very small things would make me feel happy. So it's like every morning when I get up very early and I can smell the, you know, the smell of the grass and that would make me feel happy . . . fresh air and the green trees and birds, little things. That would make me feel happy.

One commonality among these comments is the sense of enhancing one's quality of life by nurturing other areas of their life.

Category 5: Previous Experiences/Preparation (10 incidents)

This category captures the participants' ability to draw upon previous experiences or knowledge as a resource to facilitate crossing cultures. It also includes what they did to prepare for the sojourn.

The majority of events in this category involved previous international experiences, either through an earlier sojourn or contact with people from different cultures. Participants carried forward knowledge gained and used it to address potential problems before they happened. Having gone through a previous cross-cultural transition was also seen as helpful in setting realistic expectations for the current transition and contributing to a sense of maturity. For Sebastian, a prior study-abroad experience helped

inform practical expectations but also prepared him for the more profound aspects of the

transition:

> Well the first thing that helped me, I guess it's actually specific to my experience, is that I had one transition before. So, the fact that I already had gone through the whole process of arriving to a place where I knew nobody and where it felt like you are being born again, was something that I wasn't afraid of, was something expected. And so in that sense I was a little bit more open and flexible to whatever surprises I could confront.

However, as another participant noted, even the most seasoned traveller is not immune to

transitional difficulty:

> It's never easy. I think you can, you can travel so much, you can go to so many places... [but] you always have to readjust and settle in and figure out what you shouldn't do in a new culture, that sort of thing. So it's always a new start.

Contact with international students at home and witnessing the process of cross-cultural

transition among friends can also help students prepare, as Kate explained:

> You share a lot of experiences, you talk a lot, you hear a lot of stories. So you become very aware of them and how difficult it is actually. So just being aware of like something like culture shock helps you when you go somewhere I think. That taught me a lot . . . just knowing that it's difficult. So I knew that before I arrived.

This account demonstrates how international students can be a valuable resource for

domestic students. Having visited the host city prior to attending the university also

helped provide familiarity:

> I had actually visited Vancouver twice before. . . . that helped a lot I guess. I probably spent one week here staying in the townhouses on campus when my brother was a student here. So I walked around SFU a bit; it seemed a lot bigger then.

Participants were also able to gain cultural knowledge from the comfort of home

through international media and the World Wide Web. For Sebastian, exposure to North

American culture through television and movies also set expectations and yielded a

curiosity:

> It also made it easy the fact that I was not very alien to North American culture.
> Since I was young I've seen movies, I've seen TV shows. I've seen pretty much all
> the media that we get down there. . . . So there were things that I was definitely
> expecting and that I was actually eager to see if that was really what it was,
> because of the things that I saw it reflected in movies. Some of those things were
> [accurate]. So that was sort of a confirmation at the same time. It was like oh,
> there's no surprises here. You know, like this is sort of what I expected.

Julia was able to find real-life narrative accounts of international students' transitions

from internet articles and student blogs:

> Before I came here, I heard a lot of stories of the Chinese overseas students, what
> they have experienced. So, basically I have, you know, understanding of what it
> would be like, you know, assumptions and things, about what it would be like I
> went abroad, if I went abroad. . . . So after I came here I, although there was still
> some things that surprised me, but not, you know, that much.

Taken together these accounts exemplify how today's international students have access

to a wider variety of resources than in the past and therefore may differ from previous

generations of academic sojourners. However, as the next category, *supportive faculty

and staff*, indicates traditional channels of information and support continue to be

important.

<p style="text-align:center">Category 6: Supportive Faculty and Staff (9 incidents)</p>

Several participants acknowledged support from faculty and staff as helpful

during their transition. Incidents primarily involved faculty members, who were found to

provide both academic and personal support.

Despite high-level English skills, taking university classes in a foreign language

can be an overwhelming experience for new international students, particularly those who

lack experience abroad. Participants were appreciative of instructors who were mindful of

this challenge and did what they could to ease the transition. Her instructor's reassurance

and support was important to Lily:

> The first class I, I couldn't understand maybe half of what the instructor said. I couldn't understand that, I felt so worried, so nervous. But I talked with my instructor and she said, "Oh, don't worry. As time goes by, you will get used to it and if you have some problems or some difficulties, in studying or in life, you can talk to me." I think that's an important reason for me to get used to the environment quickly.

For Julia, gaining the approval of a professor was a significant achievement in her

development as an international student:

> The instructor would say something and would say which progress I made, because like she, she taught me two courses, the first semester and the third semester. So, she can see things and then she, we talked about it. . . . I like reading and academics . . . So if I got the [approval] of my instructors and I feel my progress I feel, you know, very satisfied.

The encouragement of her professor helped Anne take on a challenging volunteer

position that helped her become involved in faculty activities:

> I e-mailed one of the executive, she was actually my teacher in the very beginning of the program, and I said I think I can't do this. I just want to let you know, I feel sorry. But she said don't worry you can do this, kind of encouraged me.

> A dedicated contact person, such as a program coordinator or staff member,

helped participants sort the potentially overwhelming practical and administrative details

of attending a foreign university. This type of support from the university was especially

beneficial during the trying early days of the transition. In several instances, participants

spoke of their coordinator almost like a surrogate parent. As Julia expressed:

> She is like a mommy. . . . She takes care of us and when we have problems we can ask her and she gives us some suggestions and she also, you know, contact the other people like SFU international and the career centre. . . . She thought of that before us and, you know, and give us instructions on how to do and what should we do. Basically, everything is done now.

Participants spoke of the quality of the relationships between faculty members and their students and the genuine support and caring expressed by professors. This relationship was seen as a valuable resource during cross-cultural transition. The following was Kate's advice for fellow international students:

> I was really impressed, and I'm still impressed, by the professor-student relationship . . . I find that the professors are very interested in students if you want to make that contact that they, students to a certain extent have to make the first move and they have to show their faces and to introduce themselves. . . . And I think like encouraging international students to ask and to introduce themselves helps a lot. Once you have done that, things go a lot smoother.

Incidents in this category highlight how support from the university community may be more meaningful for many international students than their domestic peers.

Category 7: Persevering Through Hard Times (8 incidents)

This category explores how even difficult or negative experiences were seen by the international students as contributing to their cross-cultural transition. Challenges were characterized by experiences of depression, culture shock, self-doubt, cultural differences, and the demands of independent living and a foreign academic environment.

Participants overcame these challenges in a variety of ways. Most participants mentioned the importance of being persistent despite the obstacles and learning to believe in oneself. Focusing on challenges, such as culture shock, as part of the process of transition and finding a way to use struggles as a catalyst were also identified as facilitative outcomes. Lily explained:

> I think for most of the people culture shock is just inevitable. Just that we need time to get used to it, then things will be better. . . . Even during that process, I know it was not pleasant and I felt depressed, I felt not so nice, but I told myself everything could be better than this. I just need time to get used, get accustomed to it. So I told myself: you should not give up.

Process and progress were recurring themes in this category. Incidents were meaningful

milestones in the students' achievements throughout their transitions.

In some cases the sense of challenge itself provided motivation. As some

participants noted, "That kind of frustration actually pushed me to work harder" and, with

regard to academic pressure, "The pressure is not such a bad thing. It can stimulate you

and power you to go ahead."

In other examples, being able to reflect on the hard times and knowing they had

persevered lent a sense of achievement and realization that, "You can do it if you really

try." Lily described struggling with coursework:

> This semester I take another course . . . more than 90 percent of the classmates are
> native speakers, so you can imagine how overwhelmed I was in the first several
> classes. And also the course is focused on socialism . . . I have no that kind of
> background knowledge. . . . So I found it really hard and sometimes I feel
> depressed and first I, I even thought whether I could survive or not. I even thought
> about dropping the course. Later I think I should take it . . . try my best to finish it.

For Olivia, pledging to see the experience through and not entertaining other options was

key to persevering despite obstacles:

> Starting something new has to be [a commitment]. Otherwise it's tempting to say
> I'll go back home. Yeah, I kind of found that in other situations. So, I think that
> knowing that okay, I have a goal that I want to reach and I want to get there.
> Where I want to get is often difficult but I have to keep going and going. Besides
> having very good experiences and a few bad experiences I have to look forward in
> that, so I think that that's the thing. . . . Is it the right word, persistence?

Overall, these incidents reflect a tenacity among the international students to get through

the challenges of crossing cultures and an acknowledgement of *hard times* as part of the

international experience.

Category 8: Sense of Belonging (7 incidents)

This category refers to the international students' impression of having a place or experiencing a sense of belonging in the host culture. As the "outsider" nature of the sojourner role can make it difficult to fit in, such incidents can be very meaningful. Events in this category provided a feeling of inclusion and comfort in the host environment. Participants achieved this sense of belonging most often by finding their place either in Canadian society, within the university community or with host nationals.

Diverse nations where many ethnic groups are represented can be advantageous for international students. Unlike cultures that are highly homogenous, sojourners may find integration more viable. The multicultural composition of Vancouver was noted by Sebastian as easing the transition:

> Canadian society is very flexible. It is very . . . it can readily adopt people that are not Canadian or that have not been exposed to Canadian culture before, mainly because, well this is from the experience of I guess Vancouver, mainly because Vancouver is already an international city. That really affects how we, new immigrants, come into the country. So that was definitely helpful.

One way of integrating oneself into the university community was to become more involved on campus as a contributing member. The atmosphere in the students' faculty or program was seen as contributing to a feeling of "home" and facilitating relationships with others, as Anne noted:

> The first semester I didn't really, I didn't mean to make any friends in the Faculty. Off-campus I tried to make Canadian friends and learn about the culture but I didn't really mean to make friends here. But then I realized it's a pretty friendly environment. . . . it just more came naturally. It makes me feel good that I know a lot of people in the Faculty. . . . Whenever I go from there (part-time job) to the Faculty of Education I feel like oh, I come back home.

Host nationals also played a role by opening their homes to international students and sharing cultural traditions and holidays. Such experiences provided participants with an insider's perspective on the culture and, as Olivia shared, a feeling of inclusion:

> They brought me to their home. It's not only their house, I mean like their home that they come from. . . . They invited me to attend Thanksgiving dinner. For me it's like completely new because we don't have Thanksgiving Day in Argentina. So this is like something new and they were going to spend that day with their family and they invited me and I went with them to Kelowna. So going to that place, like discovering a new very charming people make me feel included in that.

International students also noted that they enjoyed teaching host nationals about their own culture. The role of cultural representative contributed to a sense of having a place in the new culture as it provided a purpose. For Sebastian, educating others about his homeland helped him feel like a contributing member of his new society:

> There's people there that really appreciated, like were there actually because they were really interested in knowing more about the culture and so they would show a lot of interest into what I had and what I represented and what I had to say. And so that, that felt, that really made me feel like I was important, right. And that I wasn't sort of like a second-class citizen, right? It's true I was not Canadian, I couldn't vote right and do other things, but definitely I felt like one of them. It really made me feel that . . . I was from somewhere else but that even though I'm from somewhere else I can still be someone from here.

Category 9: Staying Connected to Roots (7 incidents)

Staying connected to roots was a further category of incidents identified. Roots were family, culture (language, music, cultural community) and personal identity, although overlap between these sub-categories is inevitable.

Regular contact with family was identified as a way of providing structure and something to look forward to. Family members were also seen as a touchstone during difficult times and as a reminder of one's identity beyond the host culture. Sebastian

described how family could be a safe place to land when crossing cultures became a struggle:

> [Family support], it's a backup, it's a sense of security, right? So it's like if you do a backup of your hard drive you know you're fine, you're good to go. . . . It sort of helps you cling to them sometimes because what happens sometimes is that when you go through these transitions sometimes you feel like you go into a labyrinth and then you don't find a way out. So when you don't find a way out that's where you go.

For Olivia, being joined by her partner some months after her arrival provided a much-needed connection to family and culture:

> In some ways too it's like if he wouldn't have [come], I would be wondering if I'm losing something. Sometimes although he's here and we only speak Spanish and we're talking, sometimes the words doesn't come in Spanish and I say it in English or some kind of Spanglish thing. I think, "What am I saying? What's this?" So yeah, I think it's, if he weren't here that would be even more pronounced. . . . I'm here but I also have my other side with me.

Connecting with one's cultural sub-group was also seen as helpful, allowing participants access to fellow compatriots and an opportunity to enjoy their culture and speak their native language:

> You have places that play Latin music everywhere and where you have a very established Latin community. So once you know that there are other people in there that are in the same situation . . . the chances of you having a hard time trying to adapt yourself to the culture are less. It definitely does help . . . that makes it easy in that sense.

Finally, the importance of balancing immersion with the preservation of one's own identity was noted. As Sebastian realized, international students may benefit from understanding that sojourners need not sacrifice their own cultural identity when crossing cultures:

> I don't need to leave [my cultural identity] behind. I mean it's not one or the other. I can live somewhere else and I can still be who I am, right. And I think that those course experiences help a lot in that sense. Because I have my perspective and I

have the perspective of North American people and then I was like ok, I guess I know both sides, you know? That creates a much stronger feeling of who you are.

Interestingly, only participants from Latin America reported incidents in this category. This may suggest a cultural preference for family as a source of support for these students.

In combination, these nine categories provide an overview of what participants in this study perceived as facilitative factors in their cross-cultural transition. However, international students also draw on personal strengths as they cross cultures. The following section will discuss the personal resources these students identified as helpful.

Part 2: Facilitative Personal Resources

As noted in the methodology chapter, a further aim of the current study was to explore the personal resources that facilitate international students' cross-cultural transitions. During the interview participants were asked, "What personal characteristics do you have that helped you get through the challenges of crossing cultures?" Because responses to this question did not meet the structure of complete critical incidents as they are generally defined in CIT literature, I decided to present this qualitative data in a separate section. It should be noted that participants' personal strengths and resources are also evident in many of the critical incidents categories presented earlier in this chapter. However, the current section explores personal resources directly identified by participants as helpful. The following provides an overview of the facilitative personal resources identified by the participating international students and a selection of illustrative examples.

A variety of personal characteristics and strengths were reported by the participants as helpful during their transition. Two qualities that were mentioned by the

majority of participating students were holding a positive outlook and openness. The

participants identified an optimistic mind-set as a key factor in being able to get through

hard times. They noted that choosing this perspective allowed them to avoid dwelling on

the negative aspects of crossing cultures. As Julia and Elise explained:

> I have a positive attitude, that is so important. Because whether things are good or bad I'll take that as an experience, you know? Life is not always full of flowers and we have some things unexpected sometimes that may break our heart. It's possible. So we have to, how do I say, expect for the best and prepare for the worst. It's like an exaggeration but we do have to have a positive attitude.

> Maybe optimistic . . . because every time when I confront, confronted difficulties I felt there should be a way to solve them . . . maybe what I choose it is not the best way, but it is a way.

Openness involved both open-mindedness and being open to connections with others. For

Olivia this was part of being open to the experience of the new culture:

> Maybe being open-minded? Trying to ok, I don't know what you do, how you do it, but I'd like to see how you deal with that. That's one of the characteristics that helped me be able to be here.

> Several participants also indicated determination as an important personal asset

when crossing cultures. Anne:

> I'm not a lucky person, I never depend on the destiny. I just have to always work hard on myself and then I can see the results in the end. . . . Whenever I confront any difficulty or hardship I know that, so I just keep up my work, I just never give up. I will see finally that it will be rewarded.

As Kate mentioned:

> I'm quite determined, so if I need something to work out I'm going to ask until I get it done, which helps a lot. I think a lot of international students are a bit intimidated to approach people and they don't know how you should ask and if you're allowed to ask and they don't know where to find the help. . . . You have to push quite a bit, which is not always nice, but that way it gets done.

Independence and responsibility were also identified as helpful characteristics when

studying abroad:

>I've always been very responsible with my duties, so I know that I define myself according to what I am. So if I'm a student, my responsibility number one is to do well in my studies, you know. And there's no way out of it. . . . So that helped too because it gave me a sense of purpose, right? So even though I'm international I'm a student, so I come to do whatever I have to do in here just like other people are. So we're in the same boat.

Two other helpful personal characteristics noted were being proactive and having a passion for learning. As Kate noted, taking the initiative is necessary in order to make use of resources:

>I think the help is here if you ask for it. So you have to make the effort yourself to ask . . . because otherwise you can just sit and things will not get done. I think probably in this context one of the most important things is asking for help and support.

An enthusiasm for learning is another valuable asset, as Olivia pointed out:

>I think it helps to like learning, it's important because I have to relearn too much about everything. So if you don't like learning you'd be lost.

Other personal resources identified only by individual participants were being able to solve problems, self-awareness, being a hard worker, a spirit of adventure, and courage. Olivia explained how when arriving in a new culture the smallest tasks can turn into an adventure:

>I think being a little bit adventurous. Like I'm going to risk it, I'm going to buy bread. Where are you going? Out. You're going out of there, so, are you able to come back?

She also highlighted the value of courage when faced with such adventures:

>You need courage to take the adventure, otherwise if the adventure is there you go the other way.

The personal resources presented in the second part of this chapter highlight the inner strengths that international students draw upon as they cross cultures and their perception of how these resources have been helpful. Taken in combination with the

incidents presented in part one of this chapter, we are provided with a more complete

portrait of what helps international students during cross-cultural transition.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The Critical Incident Technique and a positive psychology perspective were used

to examine events and personal resources that facilitated cross-cultural transition for

seven international university students. Interviews yielded 134 critical incidents that

participants viewed as helpful to their transition. The events were organized into nine

categories: (a) growth and/or change, (b) social support/building relationships, (c)

learning to navigate host culture, (d) enjoyable activities outside of schoolwork, (e)

previous experiences and preparation, (f) supportive faculty and staff, (g) persevering

through hard times, (h) sense of belonging, and (i) staying connected to roots.

In the previous chapter a description and illustrative examples of each critical

incident category were provided. Additionally, an overview of reported personal

resources and examples were presented. Once all nine categories were finalized I

reviewed the incidents within each category and re-read the key impressions recorded in

my process notes following the interviews and during data analysis. I became aware of

common elements that reached across the various categories and sub-categories. The four

overarching themes that emerged provide a further layer of analysis and a broader

perspective on facilitative factors. The current chapter compares the study results to the

existing literature through the following four themes: (a) connecting with others, (b)

maintaining a foundation, (c) embracing the process, and (d) discovering strengths

within.

Next, I consider the complementary processes of cultural discovery and self-

discovery. The limitations of the study, implications for postsecondary institutions and

postsecondary counsellors, and recommendations for future research are also offered. I

conclude this chapter with my personal reflections.

Findings in Light of Existing Literature

In this section I offer the four major ideas that emerged from this study, consider

their meaning for international students and, where possible, examine the relation of these

findings to the existing literature.

Connecting with Others

In a variety of incidents spanning several categories, the participants of this study

emphasized the magnitude of "knowing I'm not alone." Across the international student

adjustment literature, social support has been one of the only factors that have

consistently predicted a successful transition (Poyrazli et al., 2004), a finding supported

in this research. Social support has been acknowledged as having both a direct and

indirect buffering effect on stress related to crossing cultures (Mallinckrodt & Leong,

1992; Redmond & Bunyi, 2003). However, without the perspective of students

themselves it is difficult to know exactly what meaning they attach to this concept.

The participants in this study clearly felt that connecting with others was about

more than just assembling a social support network and enjoying social interaction.

Participants spoke of building a sense of community through relational bonds with

classmates, professors, friends, roommates, other international students, and supportive

individuals who acted as cultural guides. This community connection provided many

practical benefits but also a tremendous source of emotional support. Supportive others

buoyed participants with encouragement, demonstrated genuine caring and concern,

offered advice, made them feel valued, and helped them through experiences of

depression, culture shock, and perceived discrimination. Participants described a sense of belonging that created a feeling of "home". As Lily expressed, "This kind of support is invisible but it's very strong."

Several studies (Surdam & Collins, 1984; Poyrazli et al., 2004) have linked social interaction with host nationals and international student adjustment, reporting benefits such as greater knowledge of the host culture (Kashima & Loh, 2006), better perceived self-esteem, and more positive attitudes about host nationals (Barratt & Huba, 1994). Nevertheless, apart from references to university professors, host nationals did not appear frequently in critical facilitative incidents for a number of the participants in this investigation. There are several possible explanations for this tendency. First of all, establishing relationships with host nationals has been noted as a difficult and time-consuming process by researchers and participants in this study. As a number of these participants have been in Canada for less than one year they may not have had the opportunity to build such bonds. Participants noted difficulty making Canadian friends and disinterest in forming relationships with international students on the part of domestic peers as contributing factors.

Another possible explanation is that four of the participants in this study were in an international academic program and took the vast majority of their classes with fellow compatriots. It is notable that these students rarely indicated relationships with Canadian peers as helpful during their transition. It is unclear why students seemed unable to make meaningful connections to host nationals. However, one participant shared a fading interest in such friendships after initial attempts, through campus clubs and activities,

were unsuccessful. Finally, it is possible that for these students other sources of support were simply preferable and more helpful at this time.

On the other hand, participants spoke of relationships with co-nationals and other international students in particular as tremendously influential. Several authors (Kagan & Cohen, 1990; Pedersen, 1991; Yang & Clum, 1995) have noted the importance of support from co-nationals during cross-cultural transition, highlighting this group as a means of staying connected to their cultural identities. However, the bond with international students from a variety of other countries has received less examination in the literature. Arthur (2001) found that international students turned to one another during times of transitional stress. Kashima and Loh (2006) also noted such international ties among foreign students who reported feeling connected to their home culture and host university, as well as better adjustment.

Interesting and significant work by Schmitt and his colleagues (Schmitt, Spears, & Branscombe, 2003) lends further support to this line of investigation. These researchers propose that the more international students feel rejected by the host community the more they may bond together to create a meaningful minority group identity. They found that the tendency for international students to build a strong group identity was a valuable protective measure, shielding them from the negative impact of perceived prejudice on self-esteem. Furthermore, identification with immigrants of their own cultural group did not provide the same protection. These findings are important because they highlight how despite substantial diversity within the international student population their shared experience "can create a connection to a group where none could

have existed before" (p.3). This result also fits with the vital significance of a sense of belonging, especially with international students, that emerged from this study.

A further finding from the literature that is supported by this study is the association between social interaction and language proficiency in their impact on transition. Participants reported that through their interactions with host nationals they were able to immerse themselves in the sort of casual communication that books cannot teach. For example, one participant noted asking a friend about the language on a television show and the meaning of various English idioms.

A second link indicated by participants was the impact on language skills of feeling comfortable and valued by those around them. Feeling at ease was associated with easier communication and a better ability to express oneself. However, perhaps surprisingly, actual language ability appeared to be less of a factor. This result is supported by the research of Swagler and Ellis (2003), who found that international students' confidence in speaking English and perceived language skill were related to adjustment, although actual language proficiency was not.

Findings also supported the influence of faculty members reported by other sources (Leong & Sedlacek, 1986; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992) and suggested that relationships with instructors may hold a different significance for some international students compared to their domestic peers. Leong and Sedlacek (1986) found that international students indicated faculty members as a more preferable source of help than friends.

Participants in this study spoke of professors as mentors and, in some cases, described them in parental terms, indicating a strong attachment. This may be due to

cultural differences in student-teacher roles within the home culture and/or a natural

result of the students' need for a transitional parental figure as they adjust to the strains of

adult responsibilities in the absence of family support. For instance, the Chinese students

in this study repeatedly referenced their dependence on family members while in their

home country. They reported, "Chinese parents are like that, they do everything for their

child", "I was really very dependent on my parents", and "I never did anything for

myself." Having a trustworthy adult figure to help them negotiate the challenges of

crossing cultures may have provided a sense of security as they gained knowledge and

confidence in the host culture.

Maintaining a Foundation

Students in this study utilized aspects of their life prior to the sojourn to facilitate

their transition. By preserving their identity and ties to their culture, preparing for the

sojourn, using previous experiences to help them navigate experiences in a new culture,

and keeping up a life outside of their role as international students, participants were able

to maintain a solid base that steadied them during the turbulence of cross-cultural

transition. Doing so may have provided some protection against the loss of identity that

has been associated with crossing cultures (Brinson & Kottler, 1995; Pedersen, 1991).

Pedersen (1991) has said that being unable to master new and competing roles is the root

of difficulties among foreign students.

One aspect of maintaining a foundation was continued support from family

members and friends despite distance. Participants expressed that family provided a link

to identity in the home culture and a sense of constancy that was comforting. This finding

is supported by results from Mallinckrodt and Leong (1992) who found that family

support lowered international students' acculturative stress. However, it is noteworthy that while contact with family appeared to be particularly important for Latin American participants, those from Asia expressed a need to avoid relying on family members. In particular, students from China reported that dealing with difficulties alone was a new experience but one they felt was important, and they sometimes chose not to share struggles with their parents.

Greater cultural distance in family relations between home and host cultures may provide an explanation for this difference. In other words, while Latin American students saw family support as facilitating their transitional experience, Asian students may have viewed continued reliance on family support as incompatible with the independence required in the host culture. It was observed that parents might try to solve problems for the Chinese students and that "you must solve problems yourself" in Canada.

A final means of staying connected to ones' roots was maintaining an identity outside the student role. Students participated in various activities on and off campus and emphasized the importance of "staying busy." They joined clubs and sports teams, attended events, took on part-time jobs and volunteer positions, pursued hobbies, and participated in a variety of leisure activities. The literature supports this as a facilitative factor. Barratt and Huba (1994) found a positive relationship between international student involvement in activities on campus and in the community and the students' perceived self-esteem. Meanwhile, Toyokawa and Toyokawa (2002) found that for 84 Japanese students involvement in extracurricular activities was linked to satisfaction with life in general, involvement in academics, and advantages of extracurricular and academic activities.

Embracing the Process

Participants in this study demonstrated a high degree of flexibility and openness to the experiences of cross-cultural transition. They were receptive to new ideas and points of view and in some situations reported that their own goals and perspectives were altered as a result. One participant likened the process to "being born again." This finding is supported by Kitsantas' research (2004), which found that flexibility and openness increased among international students over the duration of their time in the host country and McCabe's (1994) finding that openness increased during a Semester at Sea, a shipboard education program where participating students visit destinations across the world.

It is also noteworthy that many of the changes reported by participants were adaptive, meaning they were not only a response to aspects of the transition, but they also helped facilitate the transition. For example, one participant entered Canada with extremely ambitious goals for language acquisition. However, upon arriving she realized that these goals might not be realistically attainable during her time in the host country. This impacted her deeply and at that time she felt, "I'm nothing." Had she maintained this stance it would have undermined her confidence and affected her cross-cultural transition. However, she, like other participants in the study, was able to modify her goal to one that was achievable and motivating rather than intimidating.

This finding is a possible extension to work done by Kitsantas (2004), which indicated that student goals play a pivotal role in students' development of cross-cultural skills, suggesting that flexibility within these goals might also contribute to international student development. Moreover, this type of change demonstrates an ability to switch

focus from weakness to building strengths and a sense of agency. This is consistent with Pedersen's (1995) observation that international students shift toward an increasingly internal locus of control throughout the course of their sojourn.

Furthermore, students' flexibility and openness extended to their perspectives on their home and host cultures as well. Participants confronted stereotypes they harboured about the host culture and were able to look at their own culture from an outside perspective that offered new insight. For example, Sebastian was initially curious about how North Americans "looked down" on people from his country but was "surprised" to find host nationals interested in discussing his culture. He also explained that he couldn't see the issues facing his homeland from other points of view when he was "within the system." A number of participants expressed the advantage of gaining a dual view noting, "I have my perspective and I have the perspective of the North American people...I guess I know both sides" and "I can make a comparison between them." This novel outlook allowed the students to appreciate both negative and positive aspects of each culture.

McCabe (1994) reported a similar finding in a study of 23 students participating in a Semester at Sea program. He noted a shift among participants from ethnocentricity to a global perspective that allowed international students to take on the viewpoint of "citizens of the world." In a questionnaire survey of 450 student sojourners, Carlson and Widaman (1988) also found that study abroad had a considerable impact on students' worldviews and resulted in heightened interest in cross-cultural issues compared to students who did not study abroad. Similarly, international study programs have been found to afford a multicultural perspective and skill set to participating students (Kitsantas, 2004). These studies lend further backing to the current findings.

Additionally, the experiences shared under this theme provide support for Furnham & Bochner's (1986) cultural learning model, which proposes that the primary objective of cross-cultural transition should not be adjustment to the host culture but rather learning culturally appropriate social skills that will facilitate their sojourn. The authors view the struggling international student as an individual who has not yet attained necessary skills rather than inadequate.

Participants in this study clearly identified experiences of cultural learning as helpful in their cross-cultural transition. "We're sharing things from other places that we didn't know before and we can get equal benefit." Even negative experiences of encountering cultural differences were acknowledged as useful because they provided valuable knowledge for the future. As Lily determined, "So from that experience I can learn something that can help me to do better next time."

As previously noted, the idea of process recurred throughout the interviews and across participants. The international students who contributed to this research demonstrated a flexibility that allowed them to be open to new encounters and embrace the environmental and intrapersonal changes they experienced. It is important to note that my intention is not to make light of the considerable challenges that these students encountered. Participants referred to numerous instances of confusion, frustration and struggle. However, these international students showed awareness that such challenges were part of the process and could be overcome with time and experience. In fact, a number of participants demonstrated an adamant "faith" in the process that seemed to bring comfort during trying times.

As such, the experiences shared by international students in this study defy the conceptualization of culture shock as harmful and maladaptive. As Arthur (2004) noted, this view of culture shock implies that it is an experience to be prevented or eliminated. However, these participants depict such experiences as an integral part of their transition and their development. This finding provides robust support for the developmental perspectives on culture shock, as a continual learning process, espoused by Adler (1975), Pedersen (1991; 1995), and Arthur (2004). The impact of the process on international students' experiences of growth will be expanded in the next section, *discovering strengths within*.

Discovering Strengths Within

The final theme that emerged from participant data, extending over personal resources and several of the categories, was international students' discovery of their individual strengths. As noted throughout this document, this is an area that has received little attention in the psychological literature. However, every international student participating in this study acknowledged the impact of ongoing self-discovery throughout his or her cross-cultural transition. Participants spoke of rising to the challenge, finding out who they are, and doing something they never thought they could do.

Looking at the events that fall within this theme, participants appeared to discover strengths in two ways: through experiences relating to living as an independent adult and through cross-cultural experiences. Overall, participants shared an expanding view of their potential that they related to the process of transition. Participants remarked, "Coming here I find that I really can do something that I never thought about before", "I realized my potential", and noted that the study abroad experience was "very important

for shaping the person that you're going to be." These findings support those of Arthur (2001) who found that self-awareness intensified through cross-cultural transition.

The accounts gathered in this study illustrate the strengths and resources that have primarily only been alluded to in the academic research. These participants exemplified the "robust" international students Parr and colleagues (Parr et al., 1992) made reference to. However, as this area of interest is underrepresented in the international student adjustment research it is difficult to provide detailed literary context.

The considerable array of personal strengths detailed here provides compelling support for the application of a positive psychology approach to the topic of cross-cultural transition. Once given the opportunity to voice their perspectives and share their personal journeys, international students provided a rich portrait of the positive aspects of crossing cultures. They described meaningful relationships, increased self-awareness, cultural learning, positive experiences of growth, and an emerging global perspective. This contribution illuminates their capacity for coping with challenges and highlights their considerable resources. The result is the beginning brushstrokes to fill the missing half of the current international student portrait.

Also of interest are substantial parallels between information emerging from this study and the resiliency literature. Like the resilient individuals described by Fredrickson and his colleagues (2003), participants in this study were found to possess an optimistic outlook and the ability to carry forward knowledge gained under difficult circumstances to apply to future situations. They also displayed a capacity to create meaning from trying times.

Furthermore, several of the characteristics noted in the resilience literature are the same personal resources participants identified as furthering their cross-cultural transition. Seligman (1992) observed that resilient people frequently possess the following characteristics: optimism, courage, a sense of adventure, self-awareness, a sense of humour, a strong work ethic, and a capacity to effectively deal with their emotions. Notably, students in this study identified optimism, courage, a spirit of adventure, self-awareness, and being a hard worker as key personal resources in their cross-cultural transition. The striking overlap in these identified characteristics offers further support for the consideration of cross-culture transition from a resilience perspective.

However, the overriding value of the current study lies in its contribution to a more holistic view of the international student experience, as called for by numerous researchers (e.g. Adler, 1975; Arthur, 2004; Pedersen, 1995; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004; Tseng & Newton, 2002). International students in this study clearly identified numerous instances of personal growth in a variety of areas and linked this development directly to their cross-cultural transition. Also of significance were the parallel processes of cultural and personal transition reported, a topic further explored in the next section.

Encountering the Culture/Encountering the Self

I began this document with the following quote from Adler (1975), "The transitional experience begins with the encounter of another culture and evolves into the encounter with the self" (p.18). These two elements of cross-cultural transition are reflected in the research questions that guided this study:

1. What experiences, strengths and resources facilitate the cross-cultural transition of international students?

2. Do international students report personal growth or learning during their cross-cultural transition?

At the outset, I had no idea how intricately entwined these questions would become. International students participating in this research depicted a simultaneous process much like the one described by Adler. Listening to their accounts it became impossible to separate these two queries and I came to realize they described a single process that could not be dissected. Participants recounted events that allowed them to discover and develop strengths, which resulted in personal growth. In turn, participants clearly saw these experiences of growth as facilitative factors in themselves, helping them along their cross-cultural transition.

The expression of these two aspects of the transitional process in the current research exemplifies the contribution of a qualitative perspective to our understanding of the international student experience. When participants' contributions are not limited to the narrow confines of a survey question we begin to see how international students make meaning of their cross-cultural transition. We are able to view their transition as a process rather than a collection of factors.

In short, the personal experiences of student sojourners participating in this study breathe life into the definition of cross-cultural transition offered by Adler (1975):

> The transitional experience is, finally, a journey into the self. Paradoxically, the more one is capable of experiencing new and different dimensions of cultural

diversity, the more one learns of oneself. Such learning takes place when a person

transcends the boundaries of ego, culture, and thinking. (p. 22)

This highlights the importance of allowing international students to educate us through

their subjective experience.

Limitations of the Study

This study contributes to a small body of knowledge regarding the positive

aspects of cross-cultural transition. However, it is limited by a number of factors. First, it

is important to note the exploratory and novel focus of this research. The main goal was

to gather and share the personal stories of international students in order to examine their

individual perspectives on what helped them as they crossed cultures. Generalization of

findings to the overall international student population was not an objective, nor is a

qualitative research methodology suitable for this purpose. To investigate generalizability

of the facilitative factors found here further study from a quantitative perspective would

be required.

Additionally, all interviews were conducted in English, a second language for the

participants. Although international postsecondary students are required to meet stringent

language ability criteria, it is also noteworthy that the TOEFL (Test of English as a

Foreign Language) is a poor indicator of overall communicative ability in English,

particularly oral comprehension and expressive proficiency (Mori, 2000; Olaniran, 1993;

Pedersen, 1991). Hence, it is possible that participants were not able to express

themselves as fully as in their native language. However, with the possible exception of

one participant who exhibited minor and infrequent difficulty, communicative issues did

not appear to be a factor in this study.

A further limitation is that participation was entirely voluntary and students were recruited to take part in a study focusing on positive aspects of cross-cultural transition. As a result, international students who have had more positive experiences may have been attracted to this study. This limitation is significant because the resources of this group may differ considerably from those of the average international student. It may also have contributed to certain expectations about what was appropriate to disclose during the interview. Nonetheless, participants did report a wide range of experiences, including negative ones, and some reported more difficulty than others.

This study also details subjective participant data through self-report rather than direct observation. One criticism frequently levelled at such research, often from a quantitative viewpoint, is that participants may not remember all related events or their recollections might be distorted. This could be viewed as an issue in the current study as participants were questioned about their cross-cultural transition in its entirety and, therefore, while some incidents reported were recent others dated back a period of years.

Throughout this study I have presented my view of the participants as experts on their personal experiences of cross-cultural transition. Consequently, I take the position articulated by Josselson (2004) in her description of an interpretive qualitative viewpoint, "We, as researchers, believe that the participants are telling us, as best they are able, their sense of their subjective experience and meaning-making" (p.5). This stance acknowledges that, "There will always be gaps and partial truths as well as power dynamics, the aim is nevertheless to try to understand the Other as they understand themselves" (pp. 5-6). Josselson has noted the importance of making the interview a genuine relational experience to further this aim, a concept I have embraced.

The final limitation of this study involves my own position as a researcher within the topic. Qualitative research emphasizes the researcher's responsibility to locate herself or himself within the research. Over-identification with participants has also been cautioned as a potential obstacle in interpreting meaning (Josselson, 2004). In order to "make plain" my own position in this research I have presented my perspective as a traveller and detailed the experiences that led me to this research. I also recorded my own process throughout the work and have used the participants' own words to illustrate my findings. Furthermore, my experiences of cross-cultural transition may have been an asset to this study, as they provided a means of connecting with the participants and afforded me additional insight in understanding some of the experiences shared. However, it is notable that another researcher may have interpreted the data differently.

Implications

Implications for Postsecondary Institutions

One interesting point that emerged from the current findings is despite the fact that all seven participants are currently enrolled in university programs, strictly academic aspects of their sojourn featured far less prominently than social aspects and experiences of personal growth. It is noteworthy that participants were more attuned to these areas of their international student experience and this suggests that the academic experience may not hold the significance we assume for cross-cultural transition.

Furthermore, when discussing critical experiences in the academic environment, students focused on their relational and developmental facets. As a result, such incidents are found across the various categories. For example, involvement in departmental activities engendered a sense of belonging, course experiences encouraged new

perspectives, encounters with professors became significant relationships, and getting through difficult academic challenges brought growth and self-confidence.

This underscores the importance of research that explores the transitional experience from the perspective of the international student. The exploratory approach of the current study gave participants the opportunity to share what they viewed as important without the restriction of predetermined influential factors. Moreover, it examined the meaning they attached to such experiences. These findings suggest the value of involving international students in the process of developing resources.

Nevertheless, participants in this study did identify university faculty as a significant source of both personal and academic support throughout their cross-cultural transition. In addition, international students may rely on them in different ways than domestic students. However, faculty members may not be aware of the unique needs of this population and may lack the knowledge to support them adequately. As the number of international students grows, it may be beneficial for postsecondary institutions to provide information and training for professionals working with international students. Such training would help professors negotiate the unique challenges of this relationship. It would also help facilitate the students' transition. Faculty members could help international students set attainable and motivating goals, normalize the academic transition, point students toward appropriate resources, particularly counselling services, and facilitate connections within the department or program.

Findings also highlighted the importance of advance preparation for the sojourn. Much of the information offered to international students is currently relayed during the orientation session when they first arrive or at the beginning of their studies. However,

since the early days in the host culture can be overwhelming it would be advantageous to provide incoming international students with relevant information, particularly cultural information, before they leave their home country. Preparatory training sessions and workshops would be useful where possible, however offering an online information video, passing on lists of helpful books, websites, and international student blogs would also be advantageous. This would allow students to peruse information at a time when they are motivated but less taxed. Another recommendation that arose from this study was encouraging students to sign up for peer support programs, such as the international mentorship program, prior to arrival and make contact soon after.

Furthermore, because arrival is such a demanding time, orientation should focus on essential information that is required from the start, with additional information sessions throughout the year to address further issues. It is important to supplement this information with current online resources such as website information that students can consult at their convenience and e-mail listservs to maintain contact. Detailed reference booklets would also be a valuable resource. Finally, adequate support must be sustained throughout the students' sojourns with attention paid to issues arising late in the study abroad experience, such as re-entry.

Social support plays a prominent role in facilitating cross-cultural transition. Many postsecondary institutions try various means of encouraging contact with host nationals. These efforts could be augmented with initiatives such as the peer-matching program described by Westwood and Barker (1990). A host family visitor program that would allow students to spend time with host nationals, particularly during holiday breaks, would also be advised. However, simply providing opportunities for cross-

cultural interaction is not adequate. Differences in expectations and cultural norms around relationships pose a challenge for such programs. Information regarding these topics and discussion of potential problem areas would facilitate their success.

Also, international students continue to report difficulty in building relationships with domestic students whom they describe as disinterested. Further attention must be given to encouraging domestic students to connect with international peers and to creating an atmosphere of cultural curiosity and openness within universities. Increasing the multicultural competence of the university community as a whole is an essential objective. This goal could be furthered by including cultural education across areas of study, promoting multicultural awareness on campus, encouraging international experiences, and giving international students the opportunity to share their unique perspectives and cultural knowledge during orientation and student events. Such efforts could lessen experiences of perceived discrimination, a known barrier, and help students feel more valued.

University initiatives aimed specifically at facilitating positive interactions across cultures would also be beneficial. Structured intercultural activities could incorporate opportunities to share and address challenges in connecting across cultures. This could enhance the cross-cultural competence of both international students and host nationals.

The findings of this study also indicate that support within the international student community is valuable and should be fostered. Regular gatherings through the university departments that support international students would help establish these connections, as would international clubs on campus. Universities could also consider the

option of international residences that could house students studying abroad and domestic

students who have a particular interest in international perspectives and global initiatives.

Finally, as a student of the Faculty of Education, I see several implications that

could be directly applied to our academic department. First, access to a dedicated contact

person was identified as a useful resource for participants in this study. Although students

in the international graduate program have a program coordinator to fit this role it would

be helpful to provide such a contact within the Faculty for other international students.

Second, this study illustrates that the input of international students is essential to the

design and implementation of resources. For example, students in our Faculty could be

invited to contribute their suggestions and experiences through a focus group and/or

regular opportunities to provide anonymous feedback.

I also think it is important for the Faculty to continue working toward the goal of

an increasingly global perspective by encouraging study abroad as well as cross-cultural

experiences at home, promoting diversity within our student body, and finding ways to

utilize the unique resources of international students to advance the international acumen

of the entire Faculty. As an example, students could be invited to provide information

sessions that would help educate the Faculty about their culture or the process of crossing

cultures. The importance of the international student community revealed in this study

also underlines the benefit of supporting such ties. Implementing a mentorship program

and international student activities within the Faculty of Education would be useful.

Other suggestions mentioned earlier in this section, education of faculty members and

preparation of students prior to their sojourn, would also be advised for this academic

department.

Implications for Postsecondary Counsellors

Informing counsellors about the international student experience was one of the key objectives of this study. Knowing how student sojourners report navigating their cross-cultural transitions, professionals who work with this population can have a better understanding of how they overcome challenges. Counsellors should avoid the tendency to focus solely on the problems associated with cross-cultural transition and the interpretation of culture shock as an exclusively negative experience.

The facilitative factors that emerged from this study could be utilized by counsellors to help ease the transition of individuals who study abroad. Examples include working with clients to identify enjoyable activities, examining aspects of previous experiences that could be helpful, as well as drawing attention to the process of their cross-cultural transition and experiences of growth and change. Counsellors could offer examples from this study to illustrate how other international students have managed their transition. They could also use this information to inform the design and implementation of counselling strategies and interventions.

The factors and personal resources identified as helpful during cross-cultural transition complement a strengths-based counselling approach. Specifically, discussing incidents that fit the categories described in the previous chapter could provide an entry point for the exploration of positive aspects of their cross-cultural transitions. Counsellors could also work with international student clients to identify their personal resources and examine how these strengths could be employed to facilitate their transition. Exploring and building these personal resources is in line with the developmental approach espoused by the field of counselling psychology.

Since social support has repeatedly been recognized as vital for international students, counsellors should consider means of integrating support into counselling services. For instance, a psycho-educational group on the topic of cross-cultural transition would provide students with valuable information and an opportunity to connect with fellow sojourners. Such a group could be co-facilitated by an experienced international student. Peer counselling programs also offer the opportunity to lend support in a way that may be less stigmatized than traditional counselling. It would be particularly helpful to recruit and train other international students as peer counsellors, in addition to domestic students. This would provide the added benefit of highlighting the unique contribution foreign students offer and further encouraging these students to get involved on campus.

The needs of international students span a variety of areas both within and outside the field of counselling. A collaborative approach across student services can create a network of supports that ensure all these needs are addressed. Researchers in the field (Komiya & Eells, 2001; Mori, 2000; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004) encourage those who provide counselling services on campus to work together with other members of the university community, such as faculty and health services physicians, to make them aware of the unique needs of this population. I strongly agree with this recommendation.

The final implication emerging from this study involves the training of counselling professionals. It has been noted that, despite the growing number of international students attending Canadian postsecondary institutions, counsellors in training learn little about this population (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004). Counselling programs need to take a more active role in preparing counsellors to work in a

multicultural environment and educating postsecondary counsellors in particular about the international student experience.

In addition to required coursework in multicultural competencies, this goal can be achieved through encouraging cross-cultural experience and cultural diversity within the student body. Programs can encourage their students to engage in their own cross-cultural experiences through study abroad, international volunteer opportunities or attending international conferences. Programs can utilize the cross-cultural expertise of their students by integrating their experiences into coursework. Most importantly training programs should maximize available resources by inviting international students, both within the program and the university at large, to educate counsellors-in-training on the process of cross-cultural transition from their personal perspectives.

The information offered in this study provides a new perspective on the international student experience that contradicts the prevailing view of international students as a vulnerable and problem-ridden population. Counsellors must be open to this new information and spend time integrating it into their view of the international student population to achieve a balanced perspective.

Recommendations for Further Research

As mentioned earlier in this document, positive aspects of cross-cultural transition and international student strengths are areas that have not received adequate attention in the academic literature. Consequently, this area provides abundant potential for further research. This study contributes to a foundation for further exploration of these areas in general. It also promotes the application of a positive psychology lens to counselling

research in particular. Hopefully, this study can be a starting point to balance the negatively skewed perception of the international student experience.

However, far more research into what events and personal resources facilitate the process of cross-cultural transition is needed. It is essential that we look further at the positive aspects specifically as transitional problems can overshadow them. Replication and extension of the current study to refine the category system is suggested. It would be helpful to know if these facilitating factors vary with the culture, gender, age, or international experience level of international students or with how long they have been in the host culture. It would also be interesting to examine how the transition of couples might differ from that of single individuals.

One issue that faces the study of cross-cultural transition is the methodological challenge of capturing a moving process. Interviews with students at any one point in time can only illuminate their cross-cultural transition thus far and restricts the capacity for comparison over time. A longitudinal investigation of the process of crossing cultures in its entirety would undoubtedly provide a richer depiction and is highly recommended. Interviewing international students at various fixed points during their transition would allow a better understanding of the process of this experience and also allow participants the opportunity to integrate their experiences and reflect on their progress.

There is also a need for a comprehensive theory of the process of coping with the challenges of cross-cultural transition in particular, beyond an exclusive focus on the process of culture shock. Arthur (2004) has noted that the mechanisms of this process have been neglected. I believe a grounded theory approach would be an appropriate means to shed light on this issue.

As an academic researcher, I am also interested in learning more about how international students view their academic experience in a foreign country and how their perspective may differ from the expectations of educators. Three factors identified by these participants, growth and/or change, sense of belonging, and persevering through hard times, hold particular interest for examining how the personal journeys of these students intersect with their academic process. In order to enhance the experience of international students within our university community we must look further into where the academic experience fits in the process of crossing cultures.

Two further areas of research that could greatly benefit the international student population involve application to the field of postsecondary counselling and methods of preparing students prior to their sojourn. While this study outlines factors and personal resources that help international students during their transition, more research is necessary to understand how we can apply this knowledge to counselling interventions and training programs. Specific international student program development and evaluation studies within universities would be a useful addition to the existing literature.

Considering the experience of cross-cultural transition through a positive psychology lens, we must also commit to moving research focus beyond the alleviation of international student difficulties and begin to consider how we can optimize the study abroad experience. It might be helpful to focus on self-identified "successful" international students in particular and examine how they navigate their transition. Furthermore, this study suggests that the topic of cross-cultural transition may have a place in the resilience literature. Current research in this area focuses mainly on resilience

in children who have endured trauma. Examining resilience in international students offers the opportunity to help expand the breadth of this field.

Finally, maintaining a current body of knowledge in the area of international students' cross-cultural transitions is essential. With technological advances and increasing exposure to world cultures, the face of this population is changing. It is vital that this evolution of the international experience is reflected in the academic literature. Classic studies, while indispensable, must be supplemented with recent work in this area in order to present an accurate portrait of this population.

The current study can also be seen as a call to researchers in the field to counselling psychology to apply our strengths-based clinical approach to our research as well. I hope they will accept the challenge to explore more positive aspects of the human experience in general and the experience of crossing cultures in particular.

Personal Reflections

As I complete this thesis, I pause to reflect on my own experiences of transition since beginning this work. This study is my first venture into qualitative methodology as a novice researcher. At the beginning of the process, I was not quite sure what to expect. Writing this thesis has given me the opportunity to learn that we cannot explore a human experience devoid of the individual who lives it. Now that I am at the end of this project I have come to truly appreciate the power of narrative and the subjective, contextualized experience.

The international transitional experience is not just about a series of challenges, struggles or even triumphs. It is about the people who stumble, but forge their own path and prevail despite the obstacles. As a traveller, I am inspired by the courage,

commitment and strength of the international students who shared their stories with me. These young people make a meaningful contribution to the diversity of our campuses and further a global perspective. They embody a truly international spirit.

As a counsellor who has worked with international university students, I feel a sense of satisfaction in contributing to a more holistic and accurate portrayal of this population. In these participant accounts, I finally see a reflection of the capable and resilient individuals I have had the pleasure to work with. I hope the stories shared by students in this study inspire other counsellors to move beyond the stereotypical depiction of this group and seize the opportunity to learn from these clients.

Lastly, as I pen the final chapter of this document I cannot help but reflect on the impact this work has had for me on a personal level. The duration of this thesis coincided with a time of considerable transition for me. It marked my re-entry to my home culture as a permanent resident and, perhaps the greatest transition of my life, my journey into motherhood. This research provided me with a unique opportunity to reflect upon and make meaning of my own cross-cultural transitions as I enter a new phase in my life. It motivated me to examine the positive aspects of my own cultural experiences and the strengths and resources I carry with me into the challenges of parenting. I am grateful to have had this opportunity.

Conclusion

The current investigation combined a Critical Incident Technique methodology and positive psychology lens to consider the positive aspects of international students' experiences of cross-cultural transition. The study sought to explore the experiences, strengths and resources that facilitated this transition and potential instances of personal

growth from the subjective perspective of international students. Participants were international university students who had been enrolled in studies for more than one semester. They were asked to share critical incidents in their cross-cultural transition during one-on-one interviews and 134 events were recounted.

Resulting critical incidents were analyzed and organized into nine categories: (a) growth and/or change, (b) social support/building relationships, (c) learning to navigate host culture, (d) enjoyable activities outside of schoolwork, (e) previous experiences and preparation, (f) supportive faculty and staff, (g) persevering through hard times, (h) sense of belonging, and (i) staying connected to roots. Further interpretation revealed four overriding themes: (a) connecting with others, (b) maintaining a foundation, (c) embracing the process, and (d) discovering strengths within. These themes were explored and placed within the context of the existing literature, where possible. Finally study limitations, implications for helping professionals, and suggestions for further research were presented.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Letter of Informed Consent

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
Informed Consent By Participants In a Research Study

The University and those conducting this research study subscribe to the ethical conduct of research and to the protection at all times of the interests, comfort, and safety of participants. This research is being conducted under permission of the Simon Fraser Research Ethics Board. The chief concern of the Board is for the health, safety and psychological well-being of research participants.

Should you wish to obtain information about your rights as a participant in research, or about the responsibilities of researchers, or if you have any questions, concerns or complaints about the manner in which you were treated in this study, please contact the Director, Office of Research Ethics by email at hweinber@sfu.ca or phone at 604-268-6593.

Your signature on this form will signify that you have received a document which describes the procedures, whether there are possible risks, and benefits of this research study, that you have received an adequate opportunity to consider the information in the documents describing the study, and that you voluntarily agree to participate in the study.

Any information that is obtained during this study will be kept confidential to the full extent permitted by Canadian Counselling Association professional ethics. Knowledge of your identity is not required. You will not be required to write your name or any other identifying information on research materials. Materials will be maintained in a secure location. Any specific Professional Ethics that are used are described in the study information document (Form 5).

Title: Positive aspects of international students' cross-cultural transition: A qualitative exploration
Investigator Name: Lisa Moores
Investigator Department: Faculty of Education

Having been asked to participate in the research study named above, I certify that I have read the procedures specified in the Study Information Document describing the study. I understand the procedures to be used in this study and the personal risks to me in taking part in the study as described below:

Risks to the participant, third parties or society:

There are no physical or psychological risks involved in participating in this research study.

Procedures:

Participants will be asked in an interview to provide information about what helped them during the transition from their home culture to the host culture. If you decide not to participate in the study there will be no adverse effects on your grade or evaluation for your course of studies.

Benefits of study to the development of new knowledge:

This study will make a significant contribution toward a better understanding of what facilitates international students' cross-cultural transition and inform appropriate and relevant supports and counselling services.

I understand that I may withdraw my participation at any time. I also understand that I may register any complaint with the Director of the Office of Research Ethics.

Director, Office of Research Ethics
8888 University Drive
Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, British Columbia
Canada V5A 1S6   +1 604 291 3447   email: dore@sfu.ca

I may obtain copies of the results of this study, upon its completion by contacting:

Lisa Moores Address:214-4451 Albert Street, Burnaby, B.C., V5C 2G4 Telephone:604-291-9233 E-mail:lmoores@sfu.ca

I have been informed that the research will be confidential.

I understand that my supervisor or employer may require me to obtain his or her permission prior to my participation in a study of this kind. I understand the risks and contributions of my participation in this study and agree to participate.

The participant and witness shall fill in below. (Please Print Legibly)

Last Name: _____ First Name: _____

Contact Information: _____

_____

_____

Signature: _____Witness: _____

Date (MM/DD/YYYY): _____

Appendix B: Demographic Information Form

Age: _____

Sex: Male__ or Female __

Ethnicity: _____

Country where born: _____

Country where you grew up: _____

First Language: _____

Additional Languages: _____

Marital Status: _____

Number of Children: _____

Professional designation if appropriate (e.g. teacher): _____

Highest level of education completed: _____

How long have you lived in Canada? _____

Have you ever lived abroad before now? _____

If yes, where and for how long? _____

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