

# The Mediating Effect of Acculturation Ability in the Relationship between Discriminatory Stress and Mental Well-Being among Chinese Students in South Korean Universities

Yizhen Zhang\*

Department of sociology, Yonsei University, Seoul, Republic of Korea

\* Corresponding Author Email: jangyijin@yonsei.ac.kr

**Abstract.** As the number of international students in Korea increases, it is particularly important to pay attention to their mental well-being and adaptability. This study aimed to explore the mediating effect of acculturation ability on the relationship between discrimination stress and mental well-being among Chinese students studying in Korea. The mental well-being of international students has always been a concern. However, for the Chinese students in Korea, who occupy the largest proportion of international students and have special discrimination stress, their psychological adaptation to the cross-cultural environment has not been fully studied. Discrimination stress may negatively affect their mental well-being, and the acculturation ability may play a key role in this process. This study examined the relationship between discrimination stress, acculturation ability, and mental well-being by reviewing data from the literature on Chinese international students studying in South Korea. This study discovered that the association between discriminatory stress and mental well-being is significantly mediated by acculturation skills. That is, international students with higher acculturation ability are more likely to mitigate the adverse effects of discrimination experiences on their mental well-being. The results of this study highlight the importance of acculturation ability in the mental well-being research of international students. In the future, support and intervention measures should be developed for Chinese students studying in South Korea to improve their acculturation ability so as to reduce the negative impact of the stress brought by discrimination on mental well-being and promote the sound development of cross-cultural education.

**Keywords:** acculturation ability; discrimination stress; mental well-being; Chinese international students; cross-cultural education.

## 1. Introduction

With the continuous export of Korean wave culture, students from all over the world constantly go to South Korea to study. Among the large group of international students in South Korea, students from China often occupy the largest proportion [1]. China and South Korea are neighboring countries across the water and share a similar cultural history. However, this has not become an opportunity for Chinese students to integrate into the social life of South Korea. Instead, in recent years, there have been a large number of cultural disputes caused by similar histories between the two countries, such as disputes about the origin of traditional clothing and traditional food. Moreover, the South Korean anti-communist sentiment left over from the Korean War has gradually evolved into an aversion to the ordinary Chinese people. According to the 2022 Pew Research Center in the US, 80 percent of South Korean respondents disliked China, hitting a record high. In addition, research on international students shows that students may experience additional challenges when studying in a new country with different cultures and customs [2, 3]. Among them, the most significant is the cultural adaptation to stress. Studying abroad means contact between different cultures. Through this contact, foreigners experience a cultural transformation and adaptation process. In this process, the psychological and cultural strain arising from disparities between the country of origin and the migration destination is termed acculturation stress [4-6]. Due to discrimination and identity confusion, international students have a high risk of experiencing acculturation stress [7]. Therefore, it can be said that Chinese students in South Korea are experiencing particular discrimination and multiple difficulties that are different from those in other regions. Most existing studies on

international students mainly address mental well-being issues through acculturation stress. However, do the mental well-being problems of international students only appear in the process of acculturation? Existing studies often ignore the various discrimination pressures faced by international students, especially the special discrimination stress faced by Chinese international students. Therefore, it is meaningful to explore the discriminatory stress and mental well-being problems of Chinese students in South Korea from the perspective of acculturation ability.

In conclusion, this study hopes to understand the acculturation problems faced by Chinese students in Korea and the impact on the mental well-being caused by discrimination stress. The core of the problem that this study tries to point out is that Chinese students are facing special challenges in South Korea. These challenges include acculturation issues, stresses of discrimination, as well as mental well-being issues. This study has conducted an extensive literature review. By reviewing these existing studies, research on the relationship between acculturation stress and the mental well-being of Chinese students in Korea, particularly with regard to their discrimination experiences, is limited. And existing measures lack effectiveness. That is, it cannot effectively help to solve the problems faced by Chinese international students. To fill the gap in existing studies, this study will gain insight into the students' experiences, try to use the results to provide some basis for developing more comprehensive and targeted policies and help improve the mental well-being and quality of life of Chinese students in Korea.

## **2. Methodology**

This study seeks to define the acculturation ability's mediation function in the connection between discriminatory stress and mental well-being among Chinese students in Korean universities, provide some insights on intervention and treatment services for mental well-being problems of Chinese students, and develop services for international students in Korean universities. This study will investigate the interplay among "acculturation ability," "discrimination stress," and "mental well-being." Among these three variables, "discrimination stress" will be examined as the independent variable, "mental well-being" as the dependent variable, and "acculturation ability" as the mediating variable. This study will reorganize a new analysis that fits the perspective of this study by reviewing the existing literature on data collected from Chinese students of different grades in Korean universities. This study will first collect data related to "discrimination stress" and "mental well-being" and conduct a regression analysis of these two variables to confirm a significant relationship between them. Data related to "acculturation ability" will then be collected through a mediation analysis of three variables to investigate whether cultural adaptation played a mediating role. The specific observation perspective is whether the mental well-being of Chinese students studying in South Korea may improve as their acculturation ability increases with a prolonged stay in South Korea, even when they experience the same discrimination stresses. The specific study hypothesis is: A detrimental relationship exists between discrimination stress and mental well-being. When controlling the variable 'discrimination experience,' acculturation stress can have an effect on mental well-being.

## **3. Data analysis**

This paper references data concerning the mediation of acculturation stress in the association between daily life stress and the mental well-being of Chinese students, sourced from Chai-Young Yoo and Ju-Kyung Lee [7]. In terms of collection, the data was collected in the form of an online questionnaire and a paper questionnaire. The questionnaire design covers the three aspects of 'mental well-being assessment,' 'discrimination stress', and 'acculturation ability measurement' that need to be explored from the perspective of this study. In the Mental Well-being Assessment section, the data was determined by using the GHQ-12 (General Health Questionnaire-12) questionnaire. Related studies point out that the measurement of mental well-being requires three aspects: subjective, positive, and all aspects of life [8]. That is, mental well-being is a subjective experience; objective conditions can

only be used as a reference. And the positive factors in mental well-being are very important, asymptomatic does not necessarily mean that psychology is healthy. In addition, mental well-being will also affect the individual's production, social, and other aspects of life. Using these three indicators as measures of mental well-being, the GHQ-12 questionnaire used in the cited literature fits the research objectives of this study. The questionnaire measured the mental well-being status from three dimensions: self-consent (positive direction of mental well-being), depression and anxiety (negative direction of mental well-being). The questionnaire was to ask the respondent what had changed compared with the usual mental state in the past 2-3 weeks so as to determine the problems in the current state. The questionnaire scale was reset by four points, giving a possible score range of 0 to 36. The higher the score, the more psychological suffering there is. The stress caused by discrimination uses the ASSIS questionnaire used in the study of Korean scholar Lee Seung-Chong [9]. This scale is a self-report scale, which consists of seven sub-factors: perceived discrimination (8 questions), homesickness (4 questions), perceived hostility (5 questions), fear (4 questions), cultural shock (3 questions), guilt (2 questions), and others (10 questions). A total of 36 questions, with the second test 5 is divided into the scale, the score range of 0-144 points. A higher score indicates greater pressure on the handling. Data related to the variable acculturation ability required for determination in this study can be found in the analysis of acculturation strategies in the cited literature. The literature uses the five problem scales used by Régner and Loose in the acculturation orientation measurement of school adolescents [10]. This scale is the modified scale of the immigrant culture adaptation scale developed by Berry [11]. The scale focuses on the academic field and organizes it into problems as short as possible. The five cultural adaptation strategies of individualism, integration, assimilation, separation, and peripheral were examined through one question. This scale uses a Likert 5-point method, and the higher the score, the more frequently the cultural coping strategy is used. This literature yielded 176 valid samples. Gender distribution of respondents: female students accounted for 54.0% of the total number, while male students accounted for 46.0%. Age data: The average age of the surveyed students was 22.8 years old. Distribution of academic year: Among the surveyed students, university grade 3 students accounted for 37.5% of the total number, grade 4 students accounted for 26.7%, grade 1 students accounted for 15.9%, and grade 2 students accounted for 10.2%. Residence data: Most of the surveyed students (63.1%) chose to live by themselves, 34.7% lived in the dormitory, while only a few students chose to live on their own (1.7%), and one person did not provide residence information. Number of years of residence data: The average number of years of residence of the surveyed students was 2.08 years. Most of the students have lived in Korea for no more than 3 years, with 29.5% living for more than 1 year but less than 2 years, 23.4% living for less than 1 year, and 15.9% living for more than 2 years but less than 3 years. Mental well-being score: the average mental well-being score of the surveyed students was 0.96, with a standard deviation of 5.32. These scores indicate that mental well-being problems are generally low, with an average score close to "occasionally (1 point)". Acculturation score: students' acculturation strategy score differs in various aspects; the comprehensive strategy score is highest (close to "general (2)"), the separation strategy score second, close to "general (2)", other strategy scores to "not too (1)" and "general (2)". Stress score: the average score of stress of the surveyed students was 1.01, which was close to "almost no (1 point)" and "average (2 points)". The stress factors scored according to descending order; the students feel the main stress factors, including homesickness (score 1.54), cultural impact (score 1.49), guilt (score 1.17), other factors (score 1.04), perceived discrimination (score 0.93), fear (score 0.87) and perceived hostility (score 0.70). This study extracted and calculated data about the three variables of the study. The mean score of the independent variable "discrimination pressure" was 7.44, standard deviation 6.53, minimum 0, maximum 26, transformed mean score 0.93; the mean score of the dependent variable "mental well-being" was 11.50, standard deviation 5.32, minimum 0, maximum 29, transformed mean 0.96; mediation variable "cultural resilience" was mean score 1.668, standard deviation 0.996, minimum 0, maximum 4, and the transformed mean score was 1.668. According to these data, it can be seen that although the students in the sample perform well in mental well-being, the standard deviation is large, indicating that there is some variability. Some students face mental well-being problems, so the overall level is still low.

Regarding the acculturation part, the interviewed students' scores varied across strategies. The comprehensive strategy scored the highest, and the separation strategy scored the second. This suggests that the interviewed students prefer to adopt diverse acculturation strategies. This may be because they need to adapt to different cultural situations in the process of studying abroad. Other strategies were scored relatively low, indicating that there are still students facing challenges in the process of acculturation. In terms of stress, the main stress factors include homesickness and cultural shock. This suggests that students generally face culturally-related stress in cross-cultural living environments. Organizing and analyzing the data provides a deep understanding of the relationship between the three variables. First of all, according to the linear analysis, a negative relationship between the independent variable "discrimination stress" and the dependent variable "mental well-being" can be confirmed. This means that, as the perceived discrimination stress increases, the individual's mental well-being situation becomes worse. This indicates the adverse influence of discrimination-related stress on mental well-being. Moreover, the effects of four different acculturation strategies on mental well-being and stress are studied in the literature. The Z-values that can be obtained from the mediation analysis were 5.1468, 4.8878, 4.0411, and 4.1079, respectively. The absolute values were greater than 1.95, so the mediation effect can be considered as statistically significant. That is, acculturation ability has a mediating effect between discrimination stress and mental well-being, and discrimination experiences can affect mental well-being by changing the degree of acculturation ability. In conclusion, acculturation ability can have various effects on mental well-being according to different acculturation strategies. Individualism and perimeter strategies influence mental well-being by promoting acculturation, whereas dissociation strategies have a direct effect on mental well-being. But overall, acculturation significantly mediates the connection between discrimination-related stress and mental well-being.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The results of this study highlight the importance of acculturation ability in the mental well-being study of Chinese international students studying in South Korean universities. This study discovered that acculturation skills played a major mediation effect in the link between discriminating stress and mental well-being by evaluating the data. This finding is important for better understanding and support for the mental well-being of a specific group of Chinese students in Korea. First, the results of this study show that Chinese students in Korea generally face specific discrimination, which exerts an adverse effect on their mental well-being. This reflects the need for measures to mitigate the adverse effects of discrimination on the mental well-being of international students. In this regard, improved acculturation ability has proven to be an effective approach. Studies have confirmed that international students with higher levels of acculturation ability are more able to cope with discrimination experiences and reduce their negative impact on mental well-being. Therefore, developing support and interventions for international students should focus on cultivating and improving their acculturation ability.

Moreover, the results of this study can provide some research basis for scholars in the field of cross-cultural psychology and international students. Furthermore, through this study it can affect some policy-making departments. The South Korean government has been noted to focus only on recruiting foreign students rather than on managing them. As a result, many international students have psychological problems because they struggle to adapt to Korean society and campus life. Therefore, through this study, the Korean education sector can be helped to develop more comprehensive and effective policies for international students. And to provide specialized mental well-being counseling services for international students who have experienced discrimination. In addition, the most important thing is the impact of this study on the group of Chinese students studying in South Korea. This study can directly have a positive impact on this group, assisting students in gaining improved insight into and effectively dealing with potential psychological issues.

However, although this study confirms and highlights the key role of acculturation ability in the mental well-being of Chinese international students, there are still some shortcomings. First, our study

was limited to Chinese international students studying in South Korea. Given the special discrimination experience of Chinese students, the research results may not be applicable to other regions or groups of international students. Therefore, international students in different backgrounds and cultural settings can be considered in further research. Second, while this study explored how acculturation ability plays a role in mediating the connection between discrimination stress and mental well-being, there are other potential factors that may influence the mental well-being of international students and require further research. For example, the impact of social support, cultural education, and mental well-being services on the mental well-being of international students. This will help to more fully understand and improve the mental well-being status of international students and promote further development in the field of cross-cultural education. The personality differences of the respondents and whether the major will affect the acculturation ability will also need to be examined more carefully in future studies. Furthermore, ways to improve the acculturation ability of international students and the effectiveness of different support and interventions should be further explored in future studies. These shortcomings provide implications for future research directions to further refine the understanding of this important topic.

## References

- [1] Ministry of Education of Korean. "Statistics of foreign students in domestic higher education institutions," 2020.
- [2] Lee, Jai mo. A Study on the Actual Conditions of Foreign Students' the Adaptation in Korea. Master's thesis. South Korea: Ewha Womans University, 2008: pp.1-120
- [3] Desa, A., Yusoooff, F., & Abd Kadir, N. B. (2012). Acculturative stress among international postgraduate students at UKM. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 59: pp.364-369.
- [4] Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation. *Applied Psychology An International Review*. vol.46, no.1: pp.5-68.
- [5] Nwadiora. E. & McAdoo, H. (1996). "Acculturative Stress Among Amerasian Refugees: Gender and Racial Differences," *Adolescence*, vol.31, no.122: pp.477-487.
- [6] Gibson, M. A. (2001). "Immigrant Adaptation and Patterns of Acculturation," *Human Development*, vol.44, no.1: pp.19-23.
- [7] Chai-Young Yoo, Ju-Kyung Lee (2017). "Mediating Effects of Acculturative Stress and Daily Life Stress between Acculturation Strategy and Mental Health among Chinese International Students." *Journal of Social Science Research* 28. no. 1: pp.61-80.
- [8] Li Yi'an, Wei Yanli (2017). "The Psychometric of GHQ-20 in University Student." *China Journal of Health Psychology*, Vol15.No.1: pp.75-79.
- [9] Lee Seung-Chong (1996). Relations between the Acculturative Stress and Belief System, Social Support of International Student. Master's thesis. South Korea: Yonsei University: pp.157-176.
- [10] Régner, I., & Loose, F. (2006). Relationship of sociocultural factors and academic self-esteem to school grades and school disengagement in North African French adolescents. *British Journal of Social psychology*, 45(4): pp.777-797.
- [11] Berry, J. W. (1990). Psychology of acculturation: Understanding individuals moving between culture. In R. Brislin (Ed.), *Applied cross-cultural psychology* :pp. 232-253.