Cultural Distance, Acculturative Stress, Social Support, and Psychological Adaptation of International Students

By Ariel M. Ladum Ipekcióğlu

A research study investigating the psychological adaptation of international students at Eastern Mediterranean University was conducted from the end of May to early September 2018. Both Turkish-Cypriot and international students participated in this research project. Turkish-Cypriot students were defined as any student with Turkish-Cypriot citizenship and international students were defined as all students without Turkish-Cypriot citizenship, including students from Turkey. In total, two hundred seventy-one students studying in undergraduate English-medium programs participated in this research. Sixty-two were from Northern Cyprus while 205 were international students (105 from Turkey and 100 from other countries).

There were two research questions. This first question investigated the difference between Turkish-Cypriot and international student psychological adaptation. Here, psychological adaptation was defined as students’ positive and negative emotional responses to being in North Cyprus (e.g., excited, anxious, sad, lonely, curious, homesick, etc.). The second research question focused on international students only. This question investigated if social support influenced how much stress international students perceived in relation to cultural distance, and how that perceived stress may have influenced their psychological adaptation. Cultural distance was defined as the perceived degree of difference between students’ home cultures and the host culture of North Cyprus along twelve dimensions (i.e., climate, natural environment, social environment, living, practicalities, food, family, social norms, values, people, friends, and language). Social support was defined as the availability of others to help in different situations. The measure evaluated both socioemotional (i.e., emotional support and social companionship) and instrumental support (i.e., tangible assistance and informational support). The social support scale required participants to consider if they knew any “locals” or anyone living abroad with whom they stayed in communication and who would be willing to provide these forms of help. Acculturative stress was defined as stress associated with specific experiences related to adjusting to a new cultural context. This measure included six subscales (i.e., perceived discrimination, homesickness, perceived hate, fear, stress due to change, and guilt) and 10
miscellaneous items. Sample items from the acculturative stress scale included items such as “I feel nervous to communicate in English” and “I am treated differently because of my color.”

Results of analyses investigating the first research question indicated that, overall, international students had worse psychological adaptation (i.e., more negative emotional responses to being in North Cyprus) than did students from North Cyprus. Results of analyses investigating the second research question showed that cultural distance was not related to either acculturative stress or psychological adaptation among international students. However, more financial dissatisfaction predicted higher levels of acculturative stress while more social support predicted lower levels of acculturative stress. Expectations international students had of North Cyprus prior to arrival predicted both their acculturative stress and their psychological adaptation such that if international students’ expectations were not met, they experienced more acculturative stress and more negative emotional reactions. International students who experienced more acculturative stress also exhibited more negative emotional reactions to North Cyprus. Both relationship status and Turkish proficiency predicted psychological adaptation, albeit not in the expected directions: being in a relationship predicted more negative emotional responses to North Cyprus as did being more fluent in Turkish. While English proficiency was unrelated to both stress and emotional responses to the host country, the role of Turkish proficiency produced contradictory results in that a higher proficiency predicted both more social support but also more negative emotional responses to being in North Cyprus among international students. Although relationships are often recognized as having psychological benefits, if international students are committed to long-distance relationships being away from their romantic partners may contribute to more negative emotional responses to being in North Cyprus. Also, while Turkish fluency helped international students access more social support, which predicted less acculturative stress, being fluent in Turkish may also have made them more aware of discriminatory attitudes in society thereby contributing to more negative responses to being in North Cyprus.

While more research is needed to clarify these findings, specific recommendations can be made to improve psychological adaption outcomes among international students at EMU. These recommendations include creating realistic expectations of the university and the country before international students arrive by organizing pre-departure orientation programs, providing advanced Turkish language training to non-Turkish speaking international students, offering
different forms of financial support such as work-study programs, and expanding the mental health resources available as well as making them more accessible in multiple languages.

If you have any questions or would like more information, please contact the researcher at ariel.ladum@emu.edu.tr.