

Using emotion regulation to cope with challenges: a study of Chinese students in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

There is increasing number of research on the challenges that Chinese students experience during their study abroad, but limited studies have explored how they self-regulate their emotions to address these challenges. This paper identifies key stressors experienced by Chinese postgraduate taught students during their study in UK institutions and analyzes emotion regulation strategies that they use, such as situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation. Understanding the emotional experiences will provide important insights into Chinese students' learning behavior when interacting with peers and academic tutors, specifically, the implications for their choice of different emotion regulation strategies. Effective strategies of using emotion regulation to improve individual student experiences and their interaction with tutors and peers will be proposed and discussed.

Key words: Chinese international students; emotion regulation; studying abroad; interaction with academic tutors; peer interaction

Using Emotion Regulation to Cope with Challenges: A Study of Chinese Students in the United Kingdom

Internationalisation has far-reaching implications for the higher education sector (Teichler 2015). For example, the number of international students studying in the UK has increased to 436,585 in 2015, of which 25% are from China (UKCISA 2016). This cultural diversity inevitably leads to diverse learning approaches in educational contexts (Guo and Chase 2011; Volet and Ang 2012). Studies reveal that international students face many challenges with respect to language proficiency, academic expectations, social integration, cultural integration, as well as factors related to personal, host country, residence and support service from the university (Heikinheimo and Shute 1986; Biggs 1999; Brown 2007; Wu and Hammond 2011; Chien 2015). These challenges can cause stress and negatively influence their emotional state, academic performance as well as general wellbeing.

Research proposes that international students could deploy various strategies to cope with the stresses and to integrate themselves within UK institutions (Clark 2005; Morosanu, Handley and Donovan 2010; Inkelas, Daver, Vogt and Brown 2007; Palmer and Rodger 2009; Quan et al. 2013; Busher, Lewis and Comber 2016). One recommended strategy is student induction programs (Hultberg et al. 2009), requiring student adjustment to university culture and the expectations of individual disciplines (Beasley and Pearson 1999). Some other strategies emphasise students' engagement with learning, interaction with staff, and participation in social activities (Burnett 2007; Kift, Nelson and Clarke 2010). Academics are advised to actively support and engage students, and provide them meaningful timely feedback (Kift 2009; Lizzio 2012).

Despite services and programs offered by educational institutions, there is a need for international students to develop internally-driven skill and competencies, in order to efficiently adapt to a new culture and achieve educational objectives (Wu and Hammond 2011). Many studies detail international students transitioning to UK universities (Quan, He and Sloan, 2016), but rarely examine the emotion regulation skills that they employ. This paper will address this gap and explore Chinese postgraduate taught students' experiences of using emotion regulation to cope with challenges during their study in the UK. It proposes that understanding how students learn must consider how they regulate their emotions when experiencing challenges. Emotion regulation skills have been demonstrated to influence performance (Lane et al. 2016). Therefore, they represent a worthwhile avenue for research investigation when studying how international students learn and how they interact with peers and academic staff in UK institutions.

Emotion regulation

Emotion regulation here refers to a controlled process that involves initiating, maintaining and modifying the occurrence, intensity, and duration of feeling states (Eisenberg, Fabes, Guthrie and Reiser 2000; Gross and Thompson 2007). Emotion regulation strategies have been organised according to numerous classification schemes (Parkinson and Totterdell 1999; Koole 2009; Gross and Thompson 2007). Gross (1998; 2015) draws a distinction between antecedent- and response-focused emotion regulation strategies. Antecedent-focused strategies refer to strategies employed before the emotion response has become fully activated and have changed our behavior and peripheral physiological responding (Gross and John 2003). There are four types of

antecedent-focused strategies: situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, and cognitive change. Situation selection involves taking actions to engineer circumstances that we expect will give rise to the emotions we would like to have. Situation modification involves efforts to modify the situation directly so as to alter its emotional impact. Attentional deployment involves redirecting attention within a given situation in order to influence emotional responses. Cognitive change seeks to change one or more of these appraisals in a way that alters the situation's emotional significance. This is achieved by changing how we think either about the situation itself or about our capacity to manage the situational demands (Gross and Thompson 2007). Antecedent-focused strategies are contrasted with response modulation strategies which occur late in the emotion-generative process, after the emotional responses are generated (Gross and Munoz 1995; Gross and Thompson 2007). Response modulation influences physiological, experiential, or behavioural responses directly after the emotion has occurred (Gross and Thompson 2007). Expressive suppression is a response-focused strategy and involves inhibiting ongoing emotion-expressive behavior (Gross and Thompson 2007).

Cultural influence on emotion regulation

According to Wierzbicka (1994) and Gross (2014), differences in emotion regulation tendencies can be influenced by culture, as culture plays an important role in emotion regulation norms and practices (Matsumoto, et al. 2008). Cultural values, specifically those concerning interpersonal relationships and emotions, help to create and reinforce norms concerning what triggers emotions, what emotions are appropriate to express, and what regulation strategies might be most effective. Ford and Mauss (2015) argued that culture shapes the motivation to regulate emotions, and that individuals from

interdependent cultures are more motivated to regulate their emotions in order to preserve social harmony. This coincides with research (Gross, Richards and John 2006; Mauss et al. 2010) that suggests Chinese individuals report higher frequencies of emotion regulation than Europeans and that Chinese tend to use suppression more readily than cognitive reappraisals.

Studies have demonstrated links between the use of suppression and poor health outcomes and wellbeing (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema and Schweizer 2010; John and Gross 2004). However, Soto, Perez, Kim, Lee and Minnick (2011) reveal that while suppression is associated with adverse psychological functioning in European Americans, this is not necessarily the case with Chinese populations. Similarly, Yuan, Long, Ding, Lou, Liu and Yang (2014) have shown that emotions in Chinese individuals are actually regulated more quickly through suppression than with reappraisal. This further strengthens the argument that suppression could be an effective strategy for Chinese populations.

Emotion regulation and academic performance

While research has long emphasized the links between emotional regulation and performance, research in higher education has only recently begun to systematically examine the implications for student performance (Ben-Eliyahu and Linnenbrink-Garcia 2013; Davis, DiStefano and Schutz, 2008; Dettmers et al. 2011; Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia 2012). Perera and DiGiacomo (2015) tested the relationship between academic performance and trait emotional intelligence during times of university transition in Australia. They found that trait emotional intelligence directly predicted engagement coping and social support, as well as indirectly predicted academic achievement via engagement and adjustment. In contrast, Chataway and

Berry (1989) examined students' acculturation experiences in Canada and they suggested that Chinese students reacted to their problems with less positive-thinking and less tension-reduction coping responses than their peers from different cultural background. Specifically, these Chinese students experienced higher trait anxiety, more prejudice, more adaptation and communication problems, lower English language competence, and lower perceived social support of friends than their peers.

Rationale for the study

The above research suggests that studying abroad can be very stressful for Chinese students. This paper argues that there is a need to understand Chinese students' experience of using emotion regulation to cope with challenges when studying abroad. It will explore how Chinese postgraduate taught students select and adopt emotion regulation strategies, when experiencing challenges at interaction with peers and academic tutors in British universities.

According to Gross (1998), emotion can be regulated at five points in the emotion generative process: selection of the situation, modification of the situation, deployment of attention, change of cognitions, and modulation of response. Gross' (1998) five families of emotion regulation strategies will be used as a framework to explore how Chinese students cope with the stressors during their postgraduate studies in the UK, how they express their emotions, and what types of emotion regulation strategies they use. By analysing the strategies that Chinese students adopt and the reasons behind the strategies adopted, this study will propose effective practices of using emotion regulation to improve students' interaction with peers and academic tutors during their study.

Methodology

Ethics approval was sought and granted for this study. Informed consent was given before each interview. Student participants were notified that they could withdraw at any point of the study. Gender, subject, and age were considered in the selection of participants. Thirty-three Chinese postgraduate taught students (14 male and 19 female) from a British university were selected for the study. They were from business (B) and engineering (E) studies, because these are popular subject areas among Chinese students. The university is chosen for study because it is well known in the UK and has a large number of Chinese postgraduate students, especially in the fields of business studies and engineering.

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the challenges Chinese students experienced and their choice of emotion regulation strategies. The interviews were conducted in English. Interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured to include a range of topics encompassing the experiences and challenges of Chinese international students within British universities. Interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed. Follow up probe questions were used when appropriate to encourage participants to expand on topics and issues that arose throughout the interview.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) was used to identify, analyse and report the data for the study. The transcripts were carefully analysed to identify reported stressors and emotion regulations strategies. Emotion regulation skills were analyzed following Gross' (2015) five families of emotion regulation strategies. Extracts were chosen to represent themes to be used in reporting the research.

Results

Analysis of the interview transcripts suggests that Chinese student participants experienced a lot of stressors during their study in the UK. The stressors are most notably pertaining to interactions with their lecturers or instructors, interactions with peer groups from different cultural backgrounds, and language difficulties.

Stressors

Interactions with lecturers

Recent advances in technology have led to an increased reliance on virtual interactions outside the classroom. A quarter of the Chinese participants reported that this type of setting was uncomfortable and difficult to adjust to. For example, a student from business studies described that it was difficult to get close to his tutors, which was very different from his previous experiences in China:

The relationship between lecturer and students is not so close comparing to China, because in China students communicate and share experience with teachers frequently. But here we are only supposed to contact some relevant teaching staff using emails or electronic tool, but we are not able to get very close. (B3)

Chinese students in general expressed frustration about the impersonal nature of classroom instruction and limited opportunity to interact with instructors outside the classroom.

We have supervisor, but I don't think supervisor is really helpful. Because I don't want to complain about that, we can only have a meeting once a month. Even I can send email, but I'm not sure she cares about that. Sometime I am confused. I don't know whom should I ask for help. (B2)

This impersonal setting is also manifested in frustrations with assignment feedback. For example, a student from business studies was annoyed that the feedback on her assignment was not useful:

I am really annoyed that every time I finish the assignment more than 3000 words it's very hard for me. All they give me is just a mark and unclear feedback. When I contact the tutor to ask for some further details, they seldom give satisfactory reply. (B14)

Chinese students also expressed that the expectation for independent learning was difficult to adjust to. For example, a student from engineering studies found it overwhelming to study in an environment where there was lack of instruction/information from tutors:

When I was study in China, sometime teacher will give lots of project and give you lots of lessons for you to study with, now when I came me, teacher didn't give lots of things to follow. All on ourselves. (E2)

Interactions with peers

Beyond the interactions with their instructors, the Chinese students in this study reported emotional challenges pertaining to the interactions with their peers from different cultural backgrounds during class and leisure times. One of the key challenges is that despite being in a UK institution, participants actually found themselves in classrooms that composed of primarily Chinese students, especially in business studies. This limited their opportunities for networking and getting to know peers from different culture. For example, a student from business studies was disappointed that 95% students are Chinese in his class:

In my class, almost 95% students are Chinese, so it's less opportunity to meet foreigners in class (B4).

Nearly half of the participants reported that course workload prevented the opportunity to increase interaction with their peers. For example, a student from business studies explained:

We have three courses every term and it is just about two or three hours per week. There is not so much time for us to practice, so the chance for communication is also very little. (B11)

About one third of the Chinese students were able to create or attend social outings that encouraged international exchanges and opportunities for growth. However, these outings did not always result in pleasurable emotional experiences. As a student from engineering studies described that he made effort to make friends with peers from different culture, but it ended up with disappointment. He had no idea why it didn't work out:

I made some friends from Greece, Mauritius, and India. I tried to make friends with them, and I invited them to my home. We didn't finish a bottle of alcohol and then several times, we don't even talk. I don't know why. Feel weird. (E2)

Other participants, though recognising the importance of social interaction with peers from different nationalities, remained intimidated by such exchanges. For example, a female Chinese student from business studies found it challenging to speak with stranger, though she knew that it would be beneficial to her intercultural experiences:

I felt scared to go to non-Chinese people flat and then meeting new people or chatting with strangers.... I think it is very beneficial process when you

are speaking with new people because they can share their own experiences. (B17)

Language barrier

The interview data suggests that a key potential moderator in the difficulties experienced by Chinese students stems from language barriers. Although all the Chinese participants had passed the official English language test, most of them expressed frustration, anxiety, and embarrassment resulting from an inability to verbally communicate with those around them. The language barrier manifests at different times of the learning experience. For example, a student from engineering expressed his nervousness in class discussions with the instructor:

My English is not so good, so I'm nervous to talk to teacher. I think most Chinese students feel the same. They don't want to talk in class with teachers. They may feel nervous and don't want to make something wrong. (E12)

Similarly, a student from business studies pointed out that the fear of asking questions in classroom settings is quite common among Chinese students:

I have classmate like that. She's afraid that she can't express the question exactly, and she needs a friend to accompany her to explain better. (B4)

This fear was also acknowledged by another student from business studies:

I'm afraid I can't ask the question clearly. (B5)

These potential language barriers exasperated feelings of shyness or introversion among Chinese students. As participant B17 mentioned:

We are afraid of speaking wrong. In grammar or wrong sentence something like that. Other reason is we are a little bit shy, a little bit introvert. (B17)

Participant B18 from business studies expressed similar sentiments and pointed out that this had made some tutors treated Chinese students different by preferring to speak to students whose first language is English:

The Chinese students are really shy, and they don't want to talk. Some tutors like English speaker more than Chinese. (B18)

Emotion regulation strategies

In order to cope with the stressors inherent within their learning experiences, the Chinese participants reported their use of different types of emotion regulation strategies. These strategies are categorised by using Gross' (1998) five families of emotion regulation strategies.

Situation selection

Most participants responded instances where they tried to change their emotions by facilitating certain situations in which to be in. For example, a student from business studies mentioned how she preferred the company of Chinese students in order to minimise feelings of worry:

I prefer to stay with Chinese, because you don't need to worry about when you say something you get into trouble. (B9)

Other participants however were willing to seek out social situations, such as looking to generate pleasant emotions that accompany new friendships. For example, a male student from business studies mentioned that he went to gym to make friends:

I will go to gym every day and talk to foreigner friends and Chinese friends.

Whilst participant B16 witnessed similar social dynamics:

They [Chinese students] tried a lot to approach native students. Some try to talk to other native speaker in other major, to be social, and seek opportunity to talk to them. (B16)

Another example demonstrates that Chinese students would organise social events in order to generate pleasant feelings and to make friends with peers from different culture:

Last year, my birthday, I invited some friend come to my flat. I think it's quite international because they are from Greece, Indonesia, Japan, Nigeria, India, also Chinese. We hangout together, and we eat together. It's good. (E7).

Situation modification

Another strategy employed by most participants involved changing or modifying some aspect of their environment to regulate their emotions. For example, in order to regulate feelings associated with speaking in class, a student from business studies described how he would approach the instructor outside of class time to ask questions:

But sometime I will also try to ask teacher outside the class, because I'm nervous and I can't speak clearly. (B5)

Other examples of situation modification included changing study habits to help cope with the stress and worry of assignments and examinations. As participant B7 mentioned:

In China I don't prepare before class, but here I have to take 1 or 2 days to prepare before class, read Powerpoint slides and materials teacher uploaded on Moodle. Cause I'm not familiar with the major, and because it is not my mother language. I suppose if you want to study better than others, you have to spend more times. (B7)

Attentional focus

Attentional focus is another strategy that Chinese participants used in order to cope with misunderstandings and frustration. It involves managing what aspects of the environment one can focus on or choose not to focus on. As participant B14 mentioned, this type of strategy was employed when interacting with peers who had misunderstandings about China:

Most of them (peers) haven't been to China, and they have some bias and understanding issue about China. A year ago I tried my best to explain the stories and situation, now I just ignore. It's too difficult to explain everything to everyone. (B14)

Cognitive change

The fourth type of emotion regulation strategy that Chinese students employed to cope with the challenges involved cognitive change whereby participants tried to adopt a different appraisal of a situation in order to elicit different emotions. This type of strategy is well illustrated by a student from business studies, who described how a cognitive change of perspective led to her ability to interact with a fellow classmate in a more beneficial manner:

She (a peer) always pushed us to work forward, to do some extra work, or to decide the submission deadline... To be honest I was very pissed off and even cried for my mother... But finally I changed my perspective from her perspective and also changed my thoughts during the study... It's quite a good experience for me but also quite a challenge as well. (B1)

Additionally, one third of the participants were able to place a positive perspective on the challenges that they encountered by reminding themselves that there might be certain benefits that come from facing adversity. As participant B3 noted:

All these things (challenges) can make you stressful, and make you more mature.

Response modulation

The fifth emotion regulation strategy adopted by Chinese students involves suppression any type of emotion response. In this study, some participants described instances where despite their feelings, they engaged in whatever activity was needed to accomplish their learning goals. For example, a student from engineering suggested that Chinese students “must try to communicate with their lecturers. And just don't be afraid to ask professor about question in the class. It's pretty necessary to communicate and get knowledge about what you are not sure about.”

Discussion

This study investigated the emotional stressors experienced by Chinese postgraduate taught students in a British university and the emotion regulation strategies these students employed. It reveals that Chinese students experienced stress pertaining to interactions with their instructors, peers, and with language barriers. In order to cope

with these stressors, participants employed numerous emotion regulation strategies representing each type of categorical family proposed by Gross (1998). Specifically, participants reported using situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation as emotion regulation strategies.

Indicative of their interactions with academic tutors, participants reported that they often had difficulty integrating themselves with the learning environment. For example, participants experienced difficulty with distant and infrequent supervision as well as using virtual communication rather than in person interactions. This corroborates similar research which has found that Chinese students can struggle with the differences between Chinese and UK learning environments (Zhou and Todman 2009).

It is worth noting that the emotion regulation strategies that the participants in this study reported were to evoke or elicit hedonic emotions. That is, the goal of emotion regulation for these students was to evoke or maintain pleasant feelings throughout their learning experience. This finding contrasts previous research which suggests that Asian populations might not be as predisposed to engage in hedonic emotion regulation as Westerners (Miyamoto and Ma 2011).

However, in opposition to hedonic motivations, emotion researchers (Gruber, Mauss and Tamir 2011; Tamir 2009) have begun investigating instrumental emotion regulation. That is, individuals evoke or maintain certain emotions, regardless of their hedonic feeling, if they believe these emotions will help them accomplish their tasks. For example, some students will heighten their anxiety in preparation for, and during exams (Davis, DiStefano and Schutz 2008) in order to re-focus their attention on the task at hand. Given the tendency for Eastern populations not to engage in hedonic emotion regulation as much as Westerners (Gruber, Mauss and Tamir 2011), it could

be useful for Chinese students studying in Western universities to become familiar with the idea of increasing pleasant feelings in order to reap the behavioural benefits.

In many of the reported emotion regulation strategies, participants reached out to others to help regulate emotions. Recent emotion regulation theory has presented the notion of intrinsic interpersonal emotion regulation (Gross 2015; Zaki and Williams 2013) whereby an individual will regulate his or her own emotions through some type of social interaction. This type of emotion regulation strategy was frequently employed by the participants in this study regardless of the specific strategy. For example, participant B14 mentioned how he avoided certain individuals to preclude feeling certain emotions, such as peers' barriers about China.

Wei et al. (2007) proposed that Asian students might have a predisposition to regulate emotions on their own, suggesting that to seek out social support might lead to a perceived shameful or embarrassing personal failure to exhibit self-control. This led Smith and Khawaja (2011) to argue that Asian students might rely more heavily on emotional suppression as a method of emotion regulation. In contrast, our findings suggest that Chinese participants utilise a full variety of emotion regulation strategies and transcending through those strategies is a tendency to involve others in their own emotion regulation.

A noted limitation in the current study is measuring the extent to which certain emotion regulation strategies used by the participants were actually successful in changing the intensity of emotions. Webb, Miles and Sheeran's (2012) meta-analysis of emotion regulation strategies revealed that cognitive change strategies are particularly effective in modifying emotions. Quantitatively, the participants in the current study spoke more frequently about their attempts to select or modify situations or circumstances in order

to regulate their emotions. It could be that programmes or resources designed to teach cognitive change strategies might be useful for Chinese students in UK institutions.

However, research has also indicated that with Eastern populations, suppression might be a strategy that is more culturally aligned and therefore easily utilised by Chinese students (Soto et al. 2011; Yuan et al. 2014). Webb and colleagues found that suppression proved to be an effective strategy specifically when the aim was to suppress the expression of emotion, as opposed to suppressing the experience of emotion or suppressing thoughts of the emotion-eliciting event (Webb, Miles and Sheeran 2012). Therefore, future research should investigate the effectiveness of suppression as an emotion regulation strategy in Chinese students to improve academic performance.

An important practical recommendation from this study would be to ensure acculturation programmes in universities comprise a social element to them. Acculturation programmes in higher education institutions have often included elements designed to create or enhance social networking (Bertram, Poulakis, Elsasser and Kumar 2014). However, often these programs are not assessed for potential benefits to emotion regulation abilities. Future research on acculturation programme assessment should include emotion regulation measures to ensure that students are developing these abilities in their new institution.

Additionally, universities will need to incorporate emotion coaching as part of their international student induction programmes in order to develop students' emotion regulation abilities and thus improve their learning experiences. There is increasing research (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema and Schweizer 2010; Gross and John 2003; Troy and Mauss 2011) that suggests that emotion coaching could reduce exclusion, improve academic attainment and enhance mental health. Emotion coaching has two key elements – empathy and guidance (Salovey and Mayer 1990). Empathy involves

recognising and labeling student's emotions, in order to promote emotional self-awareness. The guidance on appropriate behaviour and consequences is key to this process, helping students to recognise and label their emotions and feelings. For example, if a student appears quiet in the classroom, this could represent an opportunity for the academic tutor to communicate with them about how they were feeling, and how to manage their feelings and behaviours. After experiencing this kind of coaching, students could develop greater empathy about the impact of their behaviour, and they could learn to moderate how to express feeling, and how to interact in a better way with tutors and peers.

Conclusion

The number of Chinese students studying in the UK is increasing, but there is limited research on how they use emotion regulation to cope with challenges. This research offers a new perspective to understand Chinese postgraduate taught students' experiences, investigating their use of emotion regulation strategies during their study in British universities. Gross' (1998) five families of emotion regulation strategies are used as a framework to interpret when Chinese students had emotions, how they experienced and expressed them, and what types of emotion regulation strategies they used.

This paper reveals that there are three key stressors that Chinese students experienced, which are related to language difficulties, their interactions with academic staff and their interactions with peers from different culture. Chinese students were actively engaged with using a range of strategies to cope with these stressors, such as situation selection, situation modification, attentional focus, cognitive change, and response modulation.

This paper argues that it is important for academic staff and the university to realise and acknowledge emotional diversity prevalent in an internationalised academic setting by addressing the full range of emotions experienced by both home and international students. It proposes effective practices of using emotion regulation to improve students' interaction with peers and academic tutors during their study, such as emotion coaching and acculturation programmes. This will help international students to understand their emotions, regulate their emotions, and see positive side at stressful events.

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