

Migrants' Acculturative Stress: Comparing British and Japanese Female Migrants in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Research on the different causal factors of acculturative stress – with an emphasis on cultural distance as causal factor – was conducted by interviewing British and Japanese female migrants residing in the Netherlands. The results showed that besides actual cultural distance, perceived cultural distance might also cause acculturative stress. Moreover, the behaviour of others (e.g. locals, family) during the migration process also appeared to influence acculturative stress experience. Additionally, if (perceived) cultural distance was the main factor of the migrants' acculturative stress, they were likely to experience acculturative stress for a longer duration than migrants whose acculturative stress was mainly caused by the attitudes and behaviours of those around them. Lastly, the results indicated that bi-cultural self-efficacy largely determines to what extent migrants regard cultural distance as stressful or not.

Keywords

Acculturative stress, acculturation, migrants, cultural distance, bi-cultural self-efficacy.

INTRODUCTION

Global migration, multiculturalism, integration, and diversity have long been topics of debates with some individuals being vehemently against the arrival of migrants into their country and others having more welcoming attitudes. These topics appear to be especially relevant in the current socio-economic climate with globalisation and the number of people identifying themselves as 'global citizens' being on the rise (Grimley, 2016). They are certainly relevant for the current-day Dutch society considering the substantial increase in migrants in the Netherlands since the start of the new millennium – from 2,775,302 immigrants in 2000 to 3,665,321 in 2015 – due to the inclusion of new member states to the European Union and the growing number of refugees in Europe (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2016a; Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2016b).

Studying migrants' integration process and the difficulties they encounter could provide interesting insights into how migrants' integration processes could best be facilitated. For the economic status of a country this is important as an ineffective integration brings down the GDP growth (Callen, 2012). GDP stands for Gross Domestic Product and it is used to measure how well a country's financial state is. Moreover, social integration can enhance the mental health state of migrants' and reduce their mortality risks (Berkman & Glass, 2000).

In this qualitative research project, causal factors of acculturative stress were investigated as it was hypothesized that the experience of acculturative stress strongly influences how successful a migrant's integration process is. Emphasis was given to cultural distance as a causal factor. Two participant groups, one consisting of four British female migrants and the other group of four Japanese female migrants – all living in the Netherlands – were interviewed and their answers analysed.

METHOD

Acculturative stress experiences of British migrants ($n = 4$) and Japanese migrants ($n = 4$) in the Netherlands were gathered through interviews and then analysed and compared. Both participant groups consisted of migrant women between the ages of 44 and 66 ($\mu_{British} = 48$, $\mu_{Japanese} = 53.5$). The number of years they had been in the Netherlands varied between 7 and 43 years ($\mu_{British} = 11.25$, $\mu_{Japanese} = 25.25$). The participants were selected based on their ethnicity and their civil status through convenience sampling. A literature review was conducted and based on this review, Dutch and British interview guides were constructed and interviews conducted. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted using an interview guide.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Acculturation is an individual-level phenomenon that refers to psychological changes in an individual (in both internal and behaviour characteristics) resulting from encountering and being surrounded by a new culture (Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987). Acculturative stress refers to solely those stress factors that are empirically linked to acculturation (Berry & Annis, 1974).

Factors of acculturative stress

The causal factors of acculturative stress can be divided into three groups: (1) individual factors, (2) social factors, and (3) cultural factors.

The most important individual factors are exposure to impactful events and violence, motivation for migration, state of one's mental health, strength of family ties and social relationships, bi-cultural self-efficacy, and one's adaptation strategy (e.g. integration, marginalization). If someone is exposed to impactful events or violence the probability of that individual experiencing acculturative stress when migrating is high (Punamäki, 1989; Fazel, Reed, Panter-Brick, & Stein, 2012; Berry, 2005).

The next factor, a migrant's motivation for migration, can either impact their acculturative stress experience negatively or positively. If the migrant was forced to migrate due to dire circumstances in their home country they are more likely to experience acculturative stress than when they choose to migrate for their studies, job, or love life (Bhugra, 2004). Furthermore, someone who experiences a more general reduction in his/her mental health often displays a low level of engagement which makes it harder to integrate and increases the chances of experiencing acculturative stress (Kilduff, 2014). A migrant's acculturative stress experience can be reduced by having strong supportive relationships with their family and/or friends (Fazel et al., 2012; Berry, 2005). The level of bi-cultural self-efficacy – the extent to which people consider themselves capable of overcoming cultural differences and adopting the new culture – can also reduce the migrant's acculturative stress experience if it is high (Miller, Yang, Farrell, and Lin, 2011). Lastly, if someone chooses integration as their adaptation strategy, they are less likely to experience

acculturative stress than if they had chosen separation, assimilation, or marginalization as strategy (Berry, 2005).

The main social causal factors of acculturative stress were restrictive and discriminatory governmental policy measures, economic opportunities, level of native people's acceptance of the migrants, and intergroup experiences between the migrant and nationals of the host country. When restrictive and/or discriminatory policy measures are in place, a migrant is likelier to experience acculturative stress than when those legal barriers are not present (Silove, Steel, and Watters, 2000). Moreover, if a migrant has numerous economic opportunities instead of being limited to certain jobs and wages, they are also less likely to experience acculturative stress (Porter & Haslam, 2005). Additionally, if nationals of the host country are accepting of migrants, or if migrants perceive them to be accepting and welcoming, then the acculturative stress experience of migrants will likely be reduced (Kirmayer et al., 2011). Finally, if a migrant has various positive interactions with locals, then the migrant's acculturative stress experience will be lower than if they experienced numerous negative intergroup interactions (Berry, 2005).

Lastly, the cultural causal factors of acculturative stress were language (communication difficulties), age, racism or racism-related life-events, level of access to cultural practices, and finally, cultural distance. If the language barrier for the migrant is low, this will reduce their acculturative stress experience (Kirmayer et al., 2011). Moreover, if a migrant migrates at a young age it is easier for them to adapt to the new culture, which reduces acculturative stress experience (Kramer, Kwong, Lee, & Chung, 2002). Furthermore, migrants that encounter much racism or discrimination in the host country are likelier to experience acculturative stress than those who do not have such experiences (Miller, Yang, Farrell, & Lin, 2011).

The level of access to cultural practices is also important, because if a migrant has little to no access to celebrate their culture of origin then their acculturative stress experience will increase (Porter and Haslam, 2005). Finally, cultural distance can also affect the migrant's acculturative stress experience. If the cultural distance between the migrant's country of origin and their host country is large and hard to overcome, the migrant's probability of experiencing acculturative stress increases (Kramer, Kwong, Lee, & Chung, 2002; Porter & Haslam, 2005; Berry, 2005).

Cultural analysis

Geert Hofstede's Six Dimensions Theory of culture (2017c) was used to compare the cultural values of the Netherlands, the UK, and Japan and to establish how large the cultural distance is between the migrants' native country and the host country – the Netherlands. It was found that the cultural distance between the UK and the Netherlands was small as people in these countries both value individualism, prefer equality over hierarchy, and are more likely to indulge themselves than to restrain themselves. On the other hand, the cultural distance between Japan and the Netherlands was found to be large, with Japanese people valuing collectivism over individualism, valuing hierarchy more than Dutch people do, restraining themselves more, and having a big tendency to avoid uncertainty. Lastly, the Japanese society is significantly more masculine (i.e. achievement and competition are of paramount importance) than the Dutch society (Hofstede, 2017a; Hofstede, 2017b; Hofstede, 2017d).

RESULTS

There were 8 participants in total. The first four interviewees were British female migrants and the last four interviewees were Japanese female migrants.

Comparison of causal factors

Motivation for migration

All of the migrants ($n = 8$) had similar reasons for migrating; they migrated either because of their love live or because of their job.

Geographical distance

The four Japanese migrants had a larger geographical distance to overcome than the four British migrants.

Mental health status, family ties, and social network

At the time of the interview, all interviewees considered themselves to be in good mental health. Furthermore, half of the interviewees (1, 3, 4, and 6) had a good, strong, close, and/or supportive relationship with family members. Interviewees 2 and 5 maintained that they had good relationships with their families, but that they were not particularly close, whereas interviewee 7 mentioned that she received emotional and mental support from her family, but that they could not always help, because they did not understand the Dutch context and, therefore, she wished to receive more support. Lastly, interviewee 8 mentioned that she was not very close with both her own family and her family-in-law. Additionally, most of the interviewees (interviewees 1, 3, 4, 5, and 8) argued that they had a strong or good social network, even though some of the networks were not particularly large. Interviewee 6 and 7 said that they found it hard to make Dutch friends, but that they did have some foreign friends who could support them. Interviewee 2 was the only woman who did not have a very strong social network in the Netherlands.

Bi-cultural self-efficacy

Interviewees 2, 3, and 5 perceived themselves capable of integrating and adopting the Dutch culture, although they did mention that they found it a bit hard to achieve a high level of Dutch language proficiency. Interviewees 4, 6, and 7 had one or more obstacles they found hard to overcome. For interviewee 4 this was the language proficiency. Interviewees 6 and 7 also thought that Dutch language difficulties were still rather insurmountable, however, they also found adjusting to the individualistic aspect of the Netherlands, growing old in the Netherlands (interviewee 6), and establishing new friendships with Dutch people a challenge (interviewee 7). The only person who never thought that she would not be able to integrate and adjust to the cultural differences was interviewee 8. Lastly, the only interviewee who had very low bi-cultural self-efficacy was interviewee 1, as she deemed it hard to overcome the cultural distance between the UK and the Netherlands.

Adaptation strategy

All the interviewees, except interviewee 1, sought to integrate; although, interviewees 2, 3, and 4 did not seek to integrate actively. On the other hand, interviewee 1 adhered to an adaptation strategy that would bring her more acculturative stress, namely, separation.

Social support of the host state and governmental support during migration

None of the interviewees mentioned anything about receiving social support from the government nor did they cover the topic of governmental support during migration, except for Japanese interviewee 6. Interviewee 6 explained that when she first arrived in the Netherlands, the government had provided her with free mandatory Dutch courses and nursery for her children when she had to study for the integration exam.

Economic opportunities

Interviewees 1, 2, and 3 were not seeking any job and thus it cannot be said how many economic opportunities they would receive if they tried to find a job in the Netherlands. Interviewee 5 found herself in a similar situation. She moved because of her job and had not tried to find another job; therefore, it was impossible to establish how many economic opportunities she would receive if she tried to find work in the Netherlands. The other interviewees (6, 7, and 8) did try to find jobs in the Netherlands and all of them succeeded, although the process was quite hard for interviewee 7, as her lack of Dutch language skill and the Dutch government's refusal to recognize her Japanese diploma as equal to a Dutch one made it difficult for her to find jobs that she was interested in; in short, she did not have many economic opportunities.

Discriminatory state practices

None of the British female migrants (n = 4) mentioned any such measures; instead, they all maintained that the legal aspect of the migration process was very easy for them. The Japanese female migrants (n = 4) did mention some state practices that made it slightly more difficult for them to legally migrate to the Netherlands, such as the integration exam (interviewees 5, 6, and 7), time restrictions for finding a house and civil service number (interviewee 5), and the struggle to have a Japanese diploma be recognized as equal to a Dutch diploma (interviewee 7).

Perceived acceptance level of natives

Interviewees 1 and 2 found Dutch people's acceptance level of migrants quite low, at least in the beginning. Interviewees 5 and 6, on the other hand, posited that Dutch people were quite tolerant and open-minded, and that they, in general, treat foreigners well. The other four interviewees (3, 4, 7, and 8) did not mention any difficulties with Dutch people and their perceived level of acceptance.

Positive inter-group experiences with Dutch nationals

Interviewees 1 and 2 mentioned that they had negative experiences with Dutch people, especially interviewee 1. Interviewee 6 mentioned that while making Dutch friends is hard, she had many positive experiences with Dutch people. The rest of the interviewees did not mention any negative experiences with Dutch people, in fact, all of them, except for interviewee 3, explicitly mentioned that they had many positive experiences with Dutch nationals.

Age at the time of migration

Interviewees 1 and 8 migrated when they were (relatively) young, aged 31 and 24 respectively. Interviewees 2, 3, 5, and 6 migrated when they were slightly older – between the ages of 33 and 35 – and interviewees 4 and 7 migrated to the Netherlands when they were 47 and 41 respectively. The last two migrants would likely have experienced more acculturative stress.

Language communication difficulties

Interviewees 2, 3, 4 could communicate in English, but found it hard to communicate, at the beginning, in Dutch; however, they were able to converse in Dutch, at least in a casual setting, at the time of the interview. Interviewee 8 also struggled with the Dutch language in the beginning, but as she could not speak English, she had to improve her Dutch language communication skills quickly. Interviewees 5 and 6 mentioned that they had a moderate to high understanding of the Dutch language and that, in case it was necessary, they could always communicate in English. Lastly, interviewee 7 found it hard to obtain the level of Dutch that native speakers have, whereas interviewee 1 maintained that while she

could not speak Dutch, she could understand it, and she could always get by with speaking English.

Racism and discrimination

Interviewees 3, 4, 6, and 7 did not mention any instance of being discriminated or being subjected to racist actions. Interviewees 5 and 8 stated that they did experience some (slightly) racist or discriminatory behaviour, although they were not 100 percent sure whether they should call these actions racist or discriminatory. Interviewee 5 explained that in the beginning, Dutch people sometimes refused to listen to her, because she was not completely fluent, and they would only help her when her Dutch boyfriend became involved. Interviewee 8 explained that when she first moved to the Netherlands, Dutch people were not able to tell the difference between Asian ethnicities, such as Chinese and Japanese. Lastly, interviewees 1 and 2 mentioned that they faced discrimination and xenophobia in the beginning, although interviewee 2 also experienced discrimination in the UK, but that the situations had improved and they did not encounter much discrimination anymore. The last cultural factor was access to cultural practices. All of the interviewees had access to cultural practices; they were all able to adhere to their own cultural traditions, although for the Japanese migrants it was a bit more difficult to do so, as they had to be a part of Japanese clubs.

Hypothesized results

Taking all these factors into account, interviewees 1 and 7 should have experienced the most acculturative stress as they had either slightly more or similar acculturative stress inducing factors as acculturative stress reducing factors. All the other interviewees had considerably more acculturative stress reducing factors than inducing factors, except for interviewees 2 and 5 who only had slightly more positive than negative factors. However, when we consider cultural distance as the main causal factor of acculturative stress, interviewees 5 and 7 should have experienced the most acculturative stress, followed by interviewees 6 and 8, as they are all Japanese and the cultural distance between Japan and the Netherlands is larger than between the UK and the Netherlands. Out of the British migrants, it is expected that interviewee 1 would have experienced the most acculturative stress, followed by interviewee 2. Lastly, interviewees 3 and 4 will likely have experienced little acculturative stress, as the number of acculturative stress-reducing factors far outweighs the stress inducing factors.

Actual results

The interviewees that experienced the most acculturative stress were interviewees 1, 6, 7, and 8. All these interviewees mentioned that they had experienced a high level of acculturative stress, especially when they first moved. Interviewees 1 and 8 mostly experienced acculturative stress in the beginning; they did not experience much stress anymore during the time of the interview, although interviewee 8 did mention that she sometimes felt stressed due to her struggles with the Dutch language. Interviewees 2 and 5 experienced a more moderate level of acculturative stress, but only when they first migrated to the Netherlands; at the time of the interview they experienced little to no stress. Interviewee 3 mentioned that she still experienced some acculturative stress; the main cause of this stress was problems with communicating in Dutch. Lastly, interviewee 4 was the only interviewee who had not experienced any acculturative stress at all.

DISCUSSION

As this was a qualitative research project, the number of participants ($n = 8$) was unfortunately not high enough to make definitive conclusions, although the interviews did provide interesting insights into the different ways individuals from different cultures experience and cope with the integration process and its ensuing difficulties and how to possibly facilitate migrants' integration process in the Netherlands. For future research, it would therefore be best if the participant groups were larger to see whether the same research method can yield similar results or whether the findings found this time were completely unique to this pool of participants and thus not generalizable to a larger group of migrants.

Another suggestion to further improve this research is to include even more factors in the interview guide and to encourage interviewees to explicitly address certain topics, such as social support, so that these factors can also be taken into consideration during the analysis of the results. Additionally, if the participants were more spread out throughout the country, this would have removed "migrants' residence" as a possible independent variable and would have made for better comparisons between the British and Japanese female migrants, because all the British participants were from the same province in the Netherlands – Zeeland. Zeeland has numerous small towns that are very conservative and do not represent the general attitude and characteristics of Dutch people as whole. If the British migrants lived in other areas in the Netherlands, they might not have encountered as much discriminatory attitudes as they did now. Moreover, it would also be interesting to conduct research concerning possible gender differences in the experience of acculturative stress of British and Japanese migrants in the Netherlands as this study solely focused on the experience of female migrants.

Lastly, as this study found that, besides cultural distance, perceived cultural distance, the behaviours of people around the migrant during the period of migration and integration, and bi-cultural self-efficacy also appear to affect acculturative stress experience of migrants, it could be very interesting to also include these factors as main causal factors and to dedicate more time and attention to them during the interviewing process.

CONCLUSION

In the introduction, it was hypothesized that cultural distance would be the principal causal factor of acculturative stress and that, therefore, Japanese migrants would experience more acculturative stress than British migrants, because the cultural distance between Japan and the Netherlands is bigger than the cultural distance between the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. This hypothesis appeared to be partially true. After analysing the results, it could be deduced that it is likely not just cultural distance that causes acculturative stress, but perhaps also perceived cultural distance. It appeared that even if the actual cultural distance between two countries is not large, as long as the migrant perceives it to be large, they are more prone to experience high levels of acculturative stress.

Moreover, the actions of other people during the migration process, be it locals or family members, also appear to influence the level of acculturative stress migrants experience. When locals are unwelcoming or discriminatory, or when one's family and friends do not support you during the migration process, this is likely to engender a higher level of acculturative stress in migrants.

Additionally, it seems that if (perceived) cultural distance is the main factor of one's acculturative stress, the migrant is likelier to experience acculturative stress for a longer duration than a migrant whose main causal factor of their acculturative stress is the attitudes and behaviours of those around them (e.g. nationals, family members).

Lastly, the results indicate that bi-cultural self-efficacy plays an important role in determining to what extent migrants view the cultural distance between their country to be stressful or not. The migrants for who (perceived) cultural distance was (one of) the main factor(s) of their acculturative stress experience, all had a low level of bi-cultural self-efficacy, whereas the other migrants were less effected by the cultural distance between their country of origin and the host country, because their level of bi-cultural self-efficacy was high.

The fact that perceived cultural distance and bi-cultural self-efficacy could possibly strongly influence the level of acculturative stress migrants experience is an interesting finding, because this suggests that it might be beneficial for the integration of migrants into the Dutch society to have all of them take mandatory courses about Dutch culture, instead of solely the non-European migrants. Furthermore, if perceived cultural distance and bi-cultural self-efficacy are indeed strong causal factors of acculturative stress, it might also be beneficial to not just have migrants attend mandatory courses, but also to facilitate access to psychologists or mental health care facilities (e.g. by reducing waiting times or consultation fees, or by promoting contact between migrants and psychologists of their ethnic minority group).that concern themselves with acculturative stress matters and that can teach migrants how to increase their level of bi-cultural self-efficacy to ensure that a high level of acculturative stress experience will be prevented and migrants will better integrate into the Dutch society.

ROLE OF THE STUDENT

When the research in this report was conducted, Menthe Rijk was an undergraduate student working under Elizabeth Wiese - Batista Pinto's supervision. The original topic was proposed by the student, but revised based on the supervisor's recommendations. The design of the interview, the collection and processing of the results, the construction of the conclusion and the writing were done by the student.

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