

Ethnic Proximity and Cross-Cultural Adaptation: A Study of Asian and European Students in the United States

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Abstract: This study examines if, how, and why Asian college students tend to experience greater difficulty than their European counterparts in adapting to the American cultural environment.

Based on Kim's (1988, 2001, 2005, 2012, 2015) Integrative Theory of Cross-Cultural Adaptation, the study tested five research hypotheses derived from the theory predicting positive relationships between and among ethnic proximity, host communication competence, host interpersonal communication, and psychological health.

The study employed an integrative and two-phased research design combining quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. In Phase 1, numeric data were collected through a questionnaire survey using a snowball sampling technique. A total of 93 international students participated in the survey, including 55 Asians and 38 Europeans from five universities in the mid-south region of the United States. In Phase 2 of the study, one-on-one interviews were conducted with 12 Asian students and 12 European students selected from among the survey participants according to a quota sampling technique based on age and the length of stay in the United States. Statistical results and interview findings support all five hypotheses, predicting positive associations among constructs: ethnic proximity, host communication competence, host interpersonal communication, and psychological health.

Keywords: Asian students, ethnic proximity, host communication competence, host interpersonal communication, psychological health

1. Introduction

The number of international students attending colleges and universities in the United States continues to grow. According to the Institute of International Education (2014), more than 886,000 international students, an increase of 8.1% over the previous academic year, were in the United States during the 2013-2014 academic year. Once in the United States, international students in general, and non-European students including Asian students in particular, experience higher levels of stress than American students on college campuses, as has been documented extensively in previous studies (e.g., Kaczmarek, Matlock, Merta, Ames & Ross, 1994; Lin & Scherz, 2014; Mitchell, Greenwood & Guglielmi, 2007). Among the

commonly identified sources and symptoms of stress for international students are the various psychological challenges associated with English language proficiency (e.g., Dao, Lee & Chang, 2007) and establishing relationships with Americans (e.g., Trice, 2004), along with the experiences of homesickness (Tochkov, Levine & Sanaka, 2010), alienation, depression, loneliness, and withdrawal (Ying & Liese, 1994).

Of particular interest in understanding the adaptive challenges confronting Asian students is the relatively high degree of difference between their ethnic (including cultural) background and the mainstream ethnicity of the native population in the host society. Findings from a substantial number of studies indicate that individuals with higher levels of ethnic distance are likely to face more difficulties in adapting to the host culture (e.g., Furnham & Bochner, 1982; Galchenko & Van de Vijver, 2007; Redmond, 2000; Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013) and, thus, higher levels of adaptive stress (Babiker, Cox & Miller, 1980). Several investigators have reported that European students experienced fewest adjustment problems in the United States than their counterparts from Asia or other non-European countries (e.g., Abe, Talbot & Geelhoed, 1998; Church, 1982; Fritz, Chin & DeMarinis, 2008; Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986; Michtell, Greenwood & Guglielmi, 2007; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Poyrazli, Thukral & Duru, 2010; Sodowsky & Plake, 1992; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Poyrazli et al. (2010), for example, in their study examined how international students' ethnicity is related to their acculturative stress among 613 international students in the U.S. The findings revealed that Asian/Pacific islanders reported significantly higher levels of acculturative stress than European groups. They concluded that European students along with the similar ethnic marker, shared more traits, beliefs, and values with the dominant White society in the U.S. than the other groups did. These similarities might make it easier for them to be accepted by Americans and ultimately, make their adjustment much smoother than other groups of international students.

As such, previous studies illustrate that cultural similarity might pose differing levels of adjustment difficulty between Asian and European international students in the U.S. However, there still needs to be a clear systematic explanation why those similarities could attribute to the level of difficulty in international students' adaptation. The present study builds on these largely descriptive findings, so as to add clarity and depth to the current understanding of the role of ethnic proximity or distance in the adaptation process of international students in general, and Asian students in particular. By grounding this study in Kim's (1988, 2001, 2005, 2012, 2015) Integrative Theory of Cross-Cultural Adaptation, the authors seek to explain *why* and *how* differing national/ethnic backgrounds of international students play a role in shaping their adaptation experiences.

2. Theoretical Grounding

Integrating various macro- and micro-level factors into a single, comprehensive communication framework, Kim's theory offers a multidimensional and multifaceted account of the nature of the cross-cultural adaptation process, an account that is, by far, the most comprehensive one. By employing the broad concept, "adaptation," Kim (2001) defines cross-cultural adaptation as "the entirety of the phenomenon of individuals who, upon relocating to an unfamiliar sociocultural environment, strive to establish and maintain a relatively stable, reciprocal,

and functional relationship with the environment” (p. 31) in order to achieve “an overall ‘fit’ between the individual and the environment to maximize the individual’s social life chances” (p. 31).

Grounded in a systemic and dynamic conception of cross-cultural adaptation, this theory addresses two basic questions: (1) *What is the essential nature of the adaptation process individual settlers undergo over time?* and (2) *Why are some settlers more successful than others in attaining a level of fitness in the host environment?*

The first question is addressed in the form of a *process model* that presents a three-pronged psychological movement that Kim refers to as the *stress-adaptation-growth dynamic* — a movement of increased chances of success in meeting the demands of the host environment. The stress-adaptation-growth dynamic is not explained as playing out in a smooth, steady, and linear progression, but in a dialectic, cyclic, and continual “draw-back-to-leap” pattern. The spiral model explains that the state of misfit and a heightened awareness in the state of stress serve as the very same forces that propel individuals to overcome the predicament and partake in active development of new habits. What follows the dynamic stress-adaptation disequilibrium, according to the theory, is a subtle *growth*, or an international transformation in the direction of greater fitness vis-à-vis the host environment.

2.1. The Structural Model

In addition to the above-described process model, Kim’s theory presents a structural model of cross-cultural adaptation to address the second basic question: “Why do some settlers adapt faster than others?” or “Given the same length of time, why do some settlers attain a higher level of adaptation?” (See Figure 1) The core of the structure of cross-cultural adaptation is identified as the dimension of personal communication, or *host communication competence* (Dimension 1). Defined as the cognitive, affective, and operational (or behavioral) capabilities of an individual to communicate in accordance with the communication symbols and meaning systems of the host society, Kim argues that this dimension serves as the very engine that makes it possible for an individual to move forward along the adaptive path.

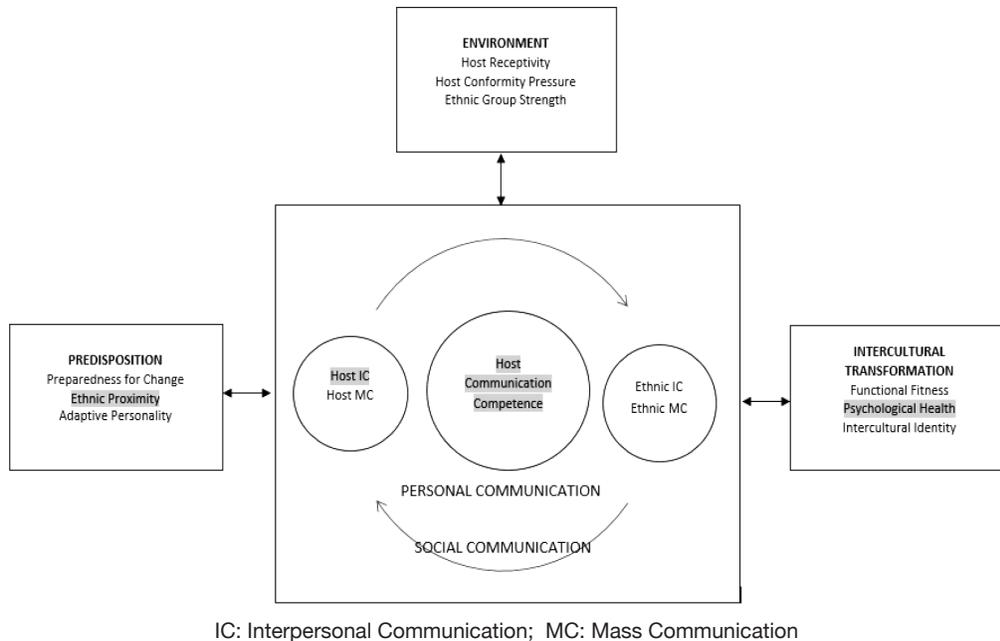


Figure 1. Y. Y. Kim's Structural Model: Factors Influencing Cross-Cultural Adaptation (Source: Y. Y. Kim, 2001, p. 87).

Host communication competence is inseparably linked with *host social communication* (Dimension 2), through which strangers participate in interpersonal and mass communication activities of the host environment. Activities of *ethnic social (interpersonal and mass) communication* (Dimension 3) provide an individual with distinct, subcultural experiences with fellow co-ethnics. Interacting with the personal and social (host, ethnic) communication activities are the three key conditions of the *host environment* (Dimension 4): *host receptivity*, *host conformity pressure*, and *ethnic group strength*. The individual's *predisposition* (Dimension 5) — consists of *preparedness* for the new environment, *ethnic proximity* (or distance), and *adaptive personality*.

The five dimensions of factors described above directly or indirectly explain and predict different rates or levels of *intercultural transformation* (Dimension 6) within a given time period. The level of intercultural transformation, in turn, helps to explain and predict the levels of all other dimensions.

2.2. Focal Constructs and Hypotheses

All six dimensions of factors identified in the above-summarized structural model work together in reciprocal causal relationships identified in 21 theorems (see Kim, 2001, pp. 91-92). The present study tests the interrelationships postulated in four of the 21 theorems that are most

directly relevant to understanding the role of ethnicity in shaping the adaptation process among international students in the United States: (1) “The greater the ethnic proximity, the greater the host communication competence” (theorem 16); (2) “The greater the ethnic proximity, the greater the host interpersonal and mass communication (theorem 17); (3) “The greater the host communication competence, the greater the intercultural transformation” (functional fitness, psychological health, and intercultural identity) (theorem 3); (4) “The greater the host interpersonal and mass communication, the greater the intercultural transformation” (functional fitness, psychological health, and intercultural identity) (theorem 5).

Based on these four theorems, the following five research hypotheses were developed.

- H1: The greater the ethnic proximity of an international student, the greater his/her host communication competence.
- H2: The greater the ethnic proximity of an international student, the greater his/her engagement in host interpersonal communication activities.
- H3: The greater the host communication competence of an international student, the greater his/her psychological health.
- H4: The greater an international student’s engagement in host interpersonal communication activities, the greater his/her psychological health.
- H5: The greater an international student’s ethnic proximity, the greater his/her psychological health.

3. Methods & Procedures

To test the five research hypotheses, the present study was conducted during the first three months of 2013 among international students studying at five universities in the central-south region of the United States. The study employed a two-phased research design, and a standardized questionnaire survey was followed by in-depth face-to-face interviews. This integrative research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to data collection and analysis allowed for the benefit of both a systematic statistical testing of theoretical hypotheses as well as qualitative insights provided in the interviewees’ interviews.

3.1. Phase 1: The Questionnaire Survey

An original version of the questionnaire was pilot-tested among three Asian students and three European students during September through November, 2012. Comments offered by these participants helped to refine some of the original wording of the questionnaire. For the main survey, a combination of convenience sampling method and snowball sampling technique was used to recruit survey participants. This combined method was utilized as the practical alternative to probability-based sampling, given the difficulty in accessing a comprehensive list of international students attending local universities.

3.1.1. The Participants

Both European and Asian students enrolled at five universities in the central-south region of the U.S. They were identified and recruited with the help of the Intercultural and Diversity Affairs office at each of the five universities. A total of 150 questionnaires were distributed via email or in person and 100 questionnaires (67%) were returned. Of 100 returned questionnaires, 7 were excluded due to many unanswered questions and the remaining 93 questionnaires have been used for the present analysis. These 93 participants represent approximately half of the entire Asian and European students enrolled at the five universities.

Of the 93 participants, 55 (59%) are from six different Asian countries: China (9), India (3), Japan (7), Korea (26), Taiwan (9), and Thailand (1). Approximately the remaining 38 (41%) are from 14 different European countries: Australia (1), Belarus (1), Denmark (1), England (3), France (5), Germany (5), Italy (3), Latvia (3), Netherlands (8), Romania (1), Russia (2), Spain (1), Sweden (3), and Switzerland (1). The 93 participants, whose ages range from 18 to 52 ($M = 26.85$, $SD = 9.82$), consist of 42 (45.2%) male and 51 (54.8%) female students. Thirty-two students are undergraduates (34.4%), along with 29 (31.1%) working toward a master's degree, 20 (22%) working on their doctoral degree, and 12 (12.5%) in non-degree programs. The lengths of residence in the U.S. range from four months to 13 years and nine months ($M = 2.5$ years, $SD = 2.6$).

3.1.2. Measurement Scales

The four theoretical constructs (host communication competence, host interpersonal communication, ethnic proximity, and psychological health) were operationalized mostly into Likert-type scales. The reliability of each scale was determined using Cronbach's alpha coefficient.

Host communication competence was measured in three areas: cognitive, affective, and operational dimensions. To examine the cognitive dimension, respondents were asked to assess their *English language ability* and their *knowledge of American culture*.

The first scale, *host language ability*, consisted of nine items assessing the participant's self-evaluation of his or her sense of adequacy in speaking, listening, reading, and writing to carry out specific communication activities (taking care of simple everyday needs, conversing with friends, understanding lectures, understanding news on American radio or TV, reading/comprehending American newspapers, and writing research papers). The scale items were mostly adapted from Maruyama's (1998) study of international students attending Japanese universities. The reliability of this nine-item scale is found to be satisfactory, with the Cronbach's alpha of .95.

The second scale of *host communication competence, knowledge of host culture* was measured by the degree of knowledge about American cultural norms and communication rules. The five scale items, adapted from Gudykunst's (1991) measure, included understanding American cultural norms/values, how Americans communicate nonverbally, how most Americans express themselves verbally, how Americans think. The answers used a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = not at all; 4 = fairly; 7 = completely). The reliability of this five-item scale

is found to be satisfactory, with a Cronbach's alpha of .92.

In the affective dimension of host communication competence, the *adaptation motivation* scale assessed the participant's motivation to adapt to the American society and culture. A seven-point Likert-type scale was used (1 = not at all; 4 = fairly; 7 = very much). Of the five items comprising this scale, three were drawn from Kim's (1976) measure of acculturation motivation (making friends with American people, understanding the ways American people behave and think, and learning about current political, economic, and social situations and issues in the U.S.). The remaining two items were adapted from Maruyama's (1998) research (i.e., learning English, interacting with American people, and adapting to American culture/society). The combined six-item scale has yielded the Cronbach's alpha of .86.

The operational dimension was assessed by the *behavioral competence scale*, comprised of eight seven-point Likert-type scale items measuring how effectively the participant could communicate with, and relate to, Americans. The first four items were adapted from Tammam's (1993) measure. The remaining items were adapted from Maruyama's study (1998): (1) avoiding misunderstandings with Americans; (2) achieving what I hope to achieve in my interactions with Americans; (3) communication flows smoothly when interacting with Americans; (4) getting my point across easily; (5) being flexible enough to handle any unexpected situation; (6) having difficulty establishing personal relationships with Americans; (7) feeling awkward and unnatural when communicating with Americans; and (8) finding interacting with Americans challenging. Cronbach's reliability test has yielded the Cronbach's alpha of .88.

Host and ethnic interpersonal communication was measured by the participant's interpersonal ties according to group categories and intimacy levels. Adapted from the measure of interpersonal communication in the study of interethnic communication (Kim, Kim, Duty & Yoshitake, 2002), the participants were asked to indicate the percentages of people with whom they had relationships in each group (Americans, co-ethnics, and others) and the corresponding levels of closeness (casual acquaintances, casual friends, close friends).

To investigate the interpersonal ties among international students, each level of the host interpersonal ties was treated as one single host interpersonal communication variable and analyzed accordingly (i.e., casual acquaintances, casual friends, close friends) for participants.

Ethnic proximity was measured in terms of the degree of similarity between the participant's ethnicity and that of the American people. The six scale items were adapted from Ward and Rana-Deuba's (1999) acculturation index along with three newly created. On a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = not at all, 4 = fairly, 7 = extremely), the participants were asked to indicate how they perceive themselves in relation to Americans in terms of extrinsic (physical appearance, food, clothing, language, and gestures/body movement) and intrinsic ethnic markers (national culture, social customs, political ideology, and religious beliefs). This combined nine-item scale has yielded the Chronbach's alpha of .86.

Psychological health, the subjective sense of well-being while living in the United States, was assessed by two indicators: "satisfaction" and "alienation."

Satisfaction was measured by seven items, consisting of four items adapted from Gao and Gudykunst's (1990) measure of intercultural adaptation of international students in the United States and three additional items adapted from Maruyama's (1998) research questionnaire. A seven-point Likert-type scale was used (1 = not at all; 4 = fairly; 7 = completely) measuring

the participant's sense of his/her life in the United States as being satisfactory, comfortable, rewarding, and stressful, as well as the participant's acceptance of American people's attitudes, satisfaction in their relationships with Americans and in their experiences of American culture. The combined seven-item scale has yielded the Cronbach's alpha of .87.

Alienation was measured by a seven-point scale comprised of six items adapted from the 10-item measure of Kim's (1980) Indochinese refugees study. The six items assessed the participant's feelings of being awkward and frustrated, difficulty in understanding the American way of life, and being disliked by Americans, as well as the overall levels of frustration and disappointment in his/her life in the United States and desire to return to the home country. The combined six-item scale has yielded the Cronbach's alpha of .88. As multiple indicators, both satisfaction and alienation scales make the measurement more reliable and valid to assess psychological health.

3.2. Phase 2: The Interviews

The questionnaire survey was followed by in-depth personal interviews of both Asian and European international students. Using a quota-sampling technique according to age and length of residence in the United States, 12 Europeans and 12 Asians were selected from the participants who had completed the survey questionnaire. With the exception of one 51-year old, all other Asian interviewees were between 20 and 32 in age. The 12 Asian interviewees' lengths of residence in the United States ranged between two months to 3.4 years. Similarly, the twelve European interviewees were between the ages of 19 and 31, with their lengths of residence in the United States ranging from 4 months to 3.4 years.

The interviews took place in a library conference room or cafeteria or by phone. Most interviews took approximately 40 minutes to an hour to complete. Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed in its entirety, with the written consent of the interviewees.

Open-ended interview questions were used to delve into the four main theoretical concepts addressed in this study. On *ethnic proximity*, open-ended questions probed each interviewee's perception of differences and similarities between his/her home culture and the mainstream American culture. On *host communication competence*, questions included difficulties in communicating with American people as well as coping strategies to deal with these difficulties. On *host interpersonal communication*, interviewees were asked to share their experiences of interacting with Americans. On *psychological health*, the interviewees were asked to describe their positive and/or unpleasant experiences in the United States. In discussing each of these interview topics, follow-up questions (such as "why do you think so?" and "Would you elaborate more?") were used to solicit details of the interviewee's thoughts and experiences.

Each interview was transcribed verbatim for a textual analysis of emerging themes, of ethnic proximity, communication difficulties, interpersonal contact and communication, and psychological health. To ensure accuracy in this thematic analysis, two independent coders coded six randomly selected interview transcripts and compared their codings to ensure a satisfactory level of inter-coder agreement.

4. Results

On the quantitative data collected from the questionnaire, the descriptive analysis has been performed to examine the distribution of data on the research variables. A bivariate correlation analysis and independent sample t-test have been employed to test the hypothesized theoretical relationships between and among the research variables.

The results from the thematic analysis of the textual interview data are consistent with the statistical findings supporting the five hypotheses. In reporting the results below, some of the interviewees' narratives are added to the statistical findings, so as to illuminate some of the specific details of the participants' experiences pertaining to the hypothesized theoretical relationships.

4.1. Descriptive Analysis

Host Communication Competence. The results of the descriptive analysis regarding *host communication competence*, show that, on the seven-point scales, the overall means of all participants (both European and Asian) are 5.43 ($SD = 1.20$) on English language competence, 4.67 ($SD = 1.07$) on knowledge of the American culture, 5.55 ($SD = .99$) on adaptation motivation, and 4.61 ($SD = 1.03$) on behavioral competence. European students show significantly higher mean scores than their Asian counterparts in all four scales: English language competence (M [Asians] = 5.28, $SD = 1.17$; M [Europeans] = 6.20, $SD = .72$; $t = -3.024$, $df = 91$; $p < .01$), knowledge of the American culture (M [Asians] = 4.57, $SD = 1.12$; M [Europeans] = 5.2, $SD = .86$; $t = -2.205$, $df = 91$; $p < .05$), adaptation motivation (M [Asians] = 5.41, $SD = 1.01$; M [Europeans] = 6.04, $SD = .90$; $t = -2.275$, $df = 91$; $p < .05$), behavioral competence (M [Asians] = 4.42, $SD = .96$; M [Europeans] = 5.19, $SD = 1.08$; $t = -2.780$, $df = 91$; $p < .01$). These results clearly indicate that, compared to European students, Asian students are less competent in the English language, less familiar with the American culture, less motivated to adapt to the American environment, and less capable of socializing with American people.

Host Interpersonal Communication. This theoretical construct was measured on three levels: casual acquaintances, casual friends, and close friends. For all participants, the level of casual acquaintance shows a mean of 39.57 ($SD = 25.17$). At the level of casual friends, the mean is 30.58 ($SD = 24.70$) and at the level of close friends, 22.37 ($SD = 25.87$). Compared to European students, Asian students have fewer interpersonal ties with Americans at all three levels of relationships. At the casual acquaintance level, Europeans show an average of 61.56 ($SD = 24.34$), compared to the 35.73 ($SD = 22.49$) among Asian participants ($t = -4.043$, $df = 91$; $p < .001$). Likewise, Europeans report an average of 55.81 American casual friends ($SD = 28.80$), while Asians report an average of 26.27 American casual friends ($SD = 19.92$) ($t = -4.826$, $df = 91$; $p < .001$). Europeans report 46.06 American close friends ($SD = 37.25$), while Asians report 17.92 American close friends ($SD = 20.71$) ($t = -4.066$, $df = 91$; $p < .001$).

Ethnic Proximity. As expected, European students report a higher level of perceived ethnic proximity ($M = 4.38$, $SD = .78$) than Asians ($M = 2.50$, $SD = .83$) ($t = -8.168$, $df = 91$; $p < .001$), i.e. Europeans perceive less ethnic distance between themselves and Americans than their Asian counterparts.

Psychological Health. This theoretical construct was assessed in terms of two 7-point scales, *satisfaction* and *alienation*. The overall mean scores 4.68 ($SD = .99$) on *satisfaction*, and 2.70 ($SD = 1.30$) on *alienation*, suggest a fairly strong sense of comfort and belonging feeling in the United States among both Europeans and Asians. A comparison of European and Asian students on the two scales of psychological health indicate that Europeans show a slightly higher level of *satisfaction* ($M = 5.08, SD = 1.12$) than Asians ($M = 4.56, SD = .97$), although this difference is statistically insignificant ($t = -1.8415; p > .05$). Likewise, no statistically significant difference is seen between the two groups in the level of *alienation* (M [Asians] = 2.28, $SD = 1.28$; M [Europeans] = 2.27, $SD = 1.50$; $t = 1.435, df = 91; p > .05$).

4.2. Hypothesis Testing

Table 1 reports the results of an independent sample t-test to compare Asian and European students to test the effects of ethnic distance on *host communication competence* and *host interpersonal communication* predicted in Hypotheses 1 and 2. Table 2 shows the results of a simple bivariate correlation testing the theoretical relationships predicted in Hypotheses 3, 4, and 5 between ethnic proximity, host communication competence, host interpersonal communication, and psychological health.

Table 1. *T*-Tests on Research Variables Comparing Asian ($n = 55$) and European Students ($n = 38$)

Variables	Asians		Europeans		T-Test	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>
Host Communication Competence						
-Host language	5.28	1.17	6.20	.72	91	-3.024**
-Cultural Knowledge	4.57	1.06	5.2	.86	91	-2.205*
-Adaptive motivation	5.41	1.01	6.04	.90	91	-2.275*
-Behavioral competence	4.42	.96	5.19	1.08	91	-2.780**
Host Interpersonal Communication						
-Casual American Acquaintances	35.73	22.49	61.56	24.34	91	-4.043***
-Casual American Friends	26.27	19.92	55.81	28.80	91	-4.826***
-Close American Friends	17.92	20.71	46.06	37.25	91	-4.066***
Ethnic Interpersonal Communication						
-Causal Co-ethnic Acquaintances	43.45	24.52	8.44	8.89	91	5.599***
-Casual Co-ethnic Friends	51.27	28.79	12.31	16.54	91	5.187***
-Close Co-ethnic Friends	64.13	28.21	31.81	32.85	91	3.965***
Ethnic Proximity	2.50	.83	4.38	.78	91	-8.168***
Psychological Health						
-Satisfaction	4.56	.97	5.08	1.12	91	-1.845
-Alienation	2.8	1.28	2.27	1.50	91	1.435

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 2. Simple Correlation Coefficients (r) between Research Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
HOST COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE													
1. Host Language Competence	1.00												
2. Cultural Knowledge	.57**	1.00											
3. Adaptive Motivation	.13	.22*	1.00										
4. Behavioral competence	.48**	.53**	.25**	1.00									
HOST INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION													
5. Casual American acquaintance	.24*	.25**	.30**	.41**	1.00								
6. Casual American friends	.31**	.32**	.33**	.48**	.83**	1.00							
7. Close American friends	.24**	.33**	.36**	.33**	.70**	.77**	1.00						
ETHNIC INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION													
8. Casual Co-ethnic acquaintance	-.28**	-.24*	-.26**	-.37**	-.69**	-.60**	-.51**	1.00					
9. Casual Co-ethnic friends	-.20*	-.21*	-.27**	-.37**	-.54**	-.63**	-.53**	.89**	1.00				
10. Close Co-ethnic friends	-.17*	-.21*	-.27**	-.30**	-.45**	-.48**	-.67**	.76**	.85**	1.00			
ETHNIC PROXIMITY													
11. Ethnic Proximity	.23*	.24*	.09	.19*	.06	.18	.24**	-.28**	-.34**	-.34**	1.00		
PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH													
12. Satisfaction	.32**	.52**	.43**	.62**	.32**	.46**	.43**	-.24*	-.28**	-.27**	.22*	1.00	
13. Alienation	-.22*	-.45**	-.36**	-.49**	-.09	-.24*	-.15	.05	.07	.06	-.20*	-.70**	1.00

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

Hypothesis 1. The first hypothesis positing the positive association between ethnic proximity and host communication competence is fully supported. European students show higher, statistically significant mean scores in all areas of host communication competence: host language competence (M [Asians] = 5.28, SD = 1.17; M [Europeans] = 6.20, SD = .72; t = -3.024, df = 91; p < .01), knowledge of the host culture (M [Asians] = 4.57, SD = 1.12; M [Europeans] = 5.2, SD = .86; t = -2.205, df = 91; p < .05), adaptation motivation (M [Asians] = 5.41, SD = 1.01; M [Europeans] = 6.04, SD = .90; t = -2.275, df = 91; p < .05), behavioral competence (M [Asians] = 4.42, SD = .96; M [Europeans] = 5.19, SD = 1.08; t = -2.780, df = 91; p < .01). These results suggest that European students with greater ethnic proximity are better in English language competence and knowledge of the host culture, and have a higher level of adaptation motivation, and behavioral skills in relating to host nationals.

This statistical result is generally supported by the text data from the interviews. Few European respondents express any difficulty with the English language, for example, compared to almost all Asian interviewees identifying the language barrier as a major challenge in carrying out daily life activities. In terms of the range of opinions among European interviewees (ranging from the lowest difficulty to highest difficulty), all 12 Europeans express a low level of experience of difficulty while mentioning a minimal accent issue. For Asians, on the other hand, 10 out of 12 respondents imply the highest experience of difficulty while only 2 indicate the middle level of difficulty experience. A 23-year-old Chinese student, for example, expresses her strong frustrations in dealing with American students as follows:

“Sometimes they do not want to listen to you. They don’t have the patience to listen what you are talking...they just stay silent...sometimes they are laughing. That’s very uncomfortable.” She has been in America two years and six months. She is in her second year of her Master’s program in Mass Communication. Before coming to the United States, she had traveled around Europe. She was having a hard time understanding the American sense of humor. The interviewee would very much like to stay in America and continue her education, but does not believe her visa will be renewed.

Hypothesis 2. The second hypothesis positing the positive association between ethnic proximity and host interpersonal communication is fully supported. Europeans are found to have more interpersonal ties with Americans than Asians in all three levels of relationships. Europeans show an average of 61.56 casual acquaintances (SD = 24.34), compared to 35.73 (SD = 22.49) among Asians (t = -4.043, df = 91; p < .001). Likewise, Europeans have an average of 55.81 American casual friends (SD = 28.80), compared to 26.27 among Asians (SD = 19.92) (t = -4.826, df = 91; p < .001). Also, at the close friendship level, Europeans have 46.06 American close friends (SD = 37.25), compared to 17.92 among Asians (SD = 20.71) (t = -4.066, df = 91; p < .001).

The interview text data reinforce the above statistical findings supporting Hypothesis 2. Although all interviewees report having interpersonal contacts and relationships with Americans, Europeans report more extensive socializing activities. All 12 European interviewees are found to be highly active in their interpersonal interaction with Americans. A 27-year-old female German student comments:

Here I feel like it is my home. I have experienced that the people in the south are generally are a lot friendlier, more open than Germans are, in general. My host family was like my real

family. They are just so nice. They will invite me for every event or holidays that they have. They are always there to help me. So I have never felt alone here. I do have great friends, I don't know why; I might be born to be independent.

In contrast, 10 out of 12 Asian interviewees tend to show active low level of activity in their interaction with Americans while other 2 are shown to be highly active in their interaction with Americans. A 20-year-old Chinese student who has more limited experiences of interacting with Americans reports:

It is not so much because I spend my time, almost, I spend most of my time in the class and then the library. So I don't do so much communications with American people. Because I live in a big family in China, we know each other, and we can hang out after our work. And I have a lot of friends in there. But in America I often stayed with a Chinese group. In the past seven years I only made one American true friend.

Hypothesis 3. The third hypothesis predicts a positive theoretical relationship between the host communication competence and psychological health. As shown in Table 2, a correlation analysis clearly supports this hypothesis. All assessed dimensions of communication competence are positively and significantly related to satisfaction: host language competence ($r = .32, p < .01$); knowledge of host culture ($r = .52, p < .01$); adaptation motivation ($r = .43, p < .01$); behavioral competence ($r = .62, p < .01$). The same dimensions are negatively related to alienation: host language competence ($r = -.22, p < .05$); knowledge of host culture ($r = -.45, p < .01$); adaptation motivation ($r = -.36, p < .05$); behavioral competence ($r = -.49, p < .01$).

Findings from the interview data add some insights into the potential challenges international students experience in communicating with Americans. Many European and Asian students refer to differences in cultural values and verbal and nonverbal communication styles as a source of frustration they experience when communicating with Americans.

For European respondents, five out of 12 respondents agree that they perceive different and unfamiliar cultural customs in their daily life in the U.S. while seven other respondents disagree with any culture shock due to unfamiliar cultures. A 22-year-old German student, for example, observes different and unfamiliar cultural customs as follows:

Americans are really good at small talk...Germans just get to the point, say whatever they want to say...Americans just talk about anything like 'How are you? What's been up lately? What are you doing? How is your mother?'...You know this is a foreign concept to Germans.

Similarly, 11 of the 12 Asian students agree that American culture is very different from theirs while one respondent disagrees, saying that the cultures are not that much different. A 24-year old female Japanese interviewee comments on different verbal communication styles, in particular:

Communication is pretty straightforward. They get to the point right away. In addition, eye contact rule is totally opposite, particularly in interaction with strangers. In Japan,

people are not as open or relaxed about looking and greeting people they do not know or have not been introduced to. People have engaged in more small talk and friendly gestures, as in Japan people just often greet each other with a simple “hi.”

A 32-year-old male Chinese student also describes the differences in cultural values:

American culture is very individualistic. It respects individual choices and never pushing others...even if you and another person are friends, there is a clear distinction between public and private affairs. [At] first, it was a little bit awkward to me.

Hypothesis 4. The fourth hypothesis predicts that host interpersonal communication is positively associated with international students’ psychological health measured by two indicators, satisfaction and alienation. As shown in Table 2, each level of interpersonal communication is positively associated with satisfaction in support of this hypothesis: casual American acquaintances ($r = .32, p < .01$); casual American friends ($r = .46, p < .01$); close American friends ($r = .43, p < .01$). In addition, casual American friendship is negatively related to alienation ($r = -.24, p < .05$), thereby supporting the hypothesis. At the other two relationship levels, however, the correlation coefficients with alienation are statistically insignificant (casual American acquaintances $r = -.09, p > .05$ and close American friends $r = -.15, p > .05$).

The interview findings are generally consistent with the hypothesized relationship between host interpersonal communication and psychological health. Both European and Asian interviewees have interpersonal ties with Americans at all three levels of intimacy. Even though Asian interviewees’ social engagement with Americans is relatively limited, both groups of interviewees unanimously agree that the relationships they have with Americans enhance their psychological well-being.

A 29-year-old female German student, for example, has been in the United States for a total of six years and six months. She is now in her doctorate program in Sociology. This is the second time she has been an exchange student in the United States. She also spent one year of high school in America. Before coming to America she had never lived in another country. After receiving her Ph.D., she will stay in the United States and be married to an American who is in the health field. In her own words, she expresses her enjoyment of socializing with American friends as follows: “We went to Chattanooga for Fall Break just to see more of the country. More of the culture and do typical American things, like pumpkin carving, I enjoyed that. And I went to a shooting range last weekend; that was quite an experience... it was fun.”

Likewise, a 51-year-old Asian student from South Korea also offers a similarly positive experience in her interactions with Americans:

I really, really love to hang out with my host family and my professors. They’re so intelligent and they are so charming. They are happy every day, and they are so helpful. They are always trying to help you with something. I love to hang out with them. I can learn a lot of stuff.

This Korean student has been in America for six years and seven months. She is now in her Ph.D. program in the English department. She began learning English as a second language when she was in middle school in Korea. She is very actively involved in the interaction she has with host nationals. Almost 95% of her daily life involves some sort of interaction with Americans.

Hypothesis 5. The fifth hypothesis, predicting a positive association between ethnic proximity and psychological health, is fully supported. As shown in Table 2, the correlational coefficients show that ethnic proximity is related positively to satisfaction ($r = .22, p < .05$) and negatively to alienation ($r = -.20, p < .01$). The interview text data tend to support this statistical finding. Whereas most Asian interviewees mention having experienced at least some culture shock, most European interviewees acknowledge the relative ease with which they are able to blend into the American environment. Ten out of 12 Asian respondents share their opinion about the level of difficulty of blending in as highest in terms of spectrum of hard to blend in and easy to blend in while two respondents belong to the middle position.

Among Europeans, all 12 respondents unanimously reported the relative easiness of blending into the host culture. A 22-year-old Dutch student who has been in the United States for one year comments:

Even though I had some trouble getting used to the American culture, I could actually mesh with it much quicker than expected. I adjusted to the change of attitude and time perception almost immediately...I don't think I had encountered culture shock. I have just adapted to more of the thinking and behavior style of the U.S.

5. Discussion

Based on Kim's (1988, 2001, 2005, 2012, 2015) Integrative Theory of Cross-Cultural Adaptation, the authors have sought to add clarity and depth to the largely descriptive insight generated from previous studies comparing adaptation experiences of Asian and European students. By linking ethnic distance to three other key factors (host communication competence, host interpersonal communication, and psychological health), and the reciprocal influences between and among them as identified in the five research hypotheses, the present study offers a more systematic explanation as to why and how Asian college students generally experience a greater level of difficulty than their European counterparts in the American social and cultural environment.

The five hypotheses have been tested through a two-phased integrative research design combining a questionnaire survey to collect numeric data and face-to-face interviews with a subset of the survey participants. Findings from both the statistical analyses of the numeric data and from the thematic analysis of the text data support all five hypotheses. European students with a greater level of perceived ethnic proximity with the host environment are found to have higher levels of host communication competence as measured by their knowledge of the host culture, adaptation motivation, and behavioral skills (Hypothesis 1), and are more actively involved in host interpersonal communication activities at all three levels of relationship from casual acquaintances and casual friends, to close friends (Hypothesis 2). These findings are

also consistent with the findings from previous studies, including the finding from a study of international students (Trice, 2004) that Western Europeans have a more active social contact with Americans, and from a study by Glass, Gomez, and Urzua (2014) in which students from Asian countries were found to socialize more with co-national peers and less with host national peers.

Likewise, the present findings from both statistical and thematic analyses indicate that all indicators of host communication competence (Hypothesis 3), the three levels of host interpersonal relationships (Hypothesis 4), and ethnic proximity (Hypothesis 5) are positively associated with psychological health. These findings reinforce the findings from previous studies (e.g., Andrade & Evans, 2009; Gudykunst & Hammer, 1988; Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011; Olivas & Lee, 2006; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006; Swagler & Ellis, 2003; Ward, 2004; Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2008).

Altogether, the study suggests that, as highlighted in Kim's theory, one's ability to communicate and participate in the host social processes is essential to successful adaptation. The more international students have host language competence (i.e., English) and know about a host country's cultural norms and systems and the more they are engaged in interpersonal relationships with host nationals, the better their psychological health is likely to be. Conversely, as predicted by the theory, this study has demonstrated the reciprocal influence between a lack of knowledge, motivation, and operational skills, a lack of interpersonal contact and interaction at all levels of relationships, and a higher level of psychological experiences of stress and dissatisfaction in the host environment.

The present study utilizes an integrative methodology combining a quantitative structured survey ("etic") with qualitative in-depth personal interviews ("emic"). This integrative approach has allowed for both a systematic testing of theoretical hypotheses as well as a set of specific illustrations, in the participants' own voices, of the adaptation experiences relevant to the hypotheses. The findings from the present study, however, leave room for further improvement for future study. The sample size was 93 international students, who were selected using a convenience sampling method combined with snowball sampling. To make these findings generalizable, efforts are needed to broaden the generalizability of the findings through a more comprehensive survey based on a sample that is more representative of international students (Asians and Europeans) in the U.S. with a larger sample size. In addition, the future study can benefit from including American participants to obtain host nationals' perspectives on ethnic distance. Their experiences in interacting with Asian and European students are likely to offer a valuable additional insight into the experiences of ethnic distance and related challenges (or lack of such challenges) reported by the international students themselves.

To members of the university faculty, staff, and administration, the present findings highlight the practical merits in providing an environment that is welcoming and accessible to international students, particularly those students whose ethnic backgrounds differ substantially from that of the mainstream native population. Special training programs could be offered to them, focusing on improving their language competence, familiarizing them with the host cultural norms and practices, and fostering meaningful social interactions with host nationals. For international students in general, and Asian and other non-European students in particular, the present findings highlight the critical importance of taking personal measures to strengthen

their host communication competence, particularly language proficiency, as they strive to overcome the challenges of their sizable ethnic distance. Rather than seeking protection from the adaptive challenges by relying heavily on fellow co-ethnics, they are encouraged to embrace the challenges and seek out opportunities to interact with host nationals, whenever possible.

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