

Chapter 3

Learning at Half Capacity: The Academic Acculturation Reality Experienced by Chinese International Students

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ABSTRACT

First, this chapter provides an overview of current research on international students' academic acculturation under the lens of self-determination theory in relation to international students' psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Next, the authors report on a recent study that explored academic acculturation experiences using musically enhanced narrative inquiry, a unique form of arts-based research that produces musical representations of the stories of six international student participants studying at a Canadian university. Lastly, the authors propose future directions for Canadian higher education stakeholders to become more supportive and inclusive of international students on Canadian university campuses.

INTRODUCTION

International student mobility is among the most prominent twenty-first century phenomena that higher education systems experience all around the world (Beech, 2019; Knight, 2012). Many Canadian universities are increasing international student enrollment to cope with challenges presented by the internationalization of Canadian higher education and to enhance their fiscal revenue and global prestige (Zhang & Beck, 2014). However, with the student population in Canadian universities becoming increasingly diversified, acculturation problems faced by international students have become critical, requiring more attention from Canadian higher education policy makers (Du, 2019). Tailoring infrastructure and services

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to better support international students' successful academic acculturation has become a vital task for many Canadian higher education stakeholders (Du, 2019).

In Canada, enrolment of post-secondary international students was 435,415 in 2018—a 17% jump from 2017 (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2019). The potential benefits for both host institutions and international students are substantial (Elliot, Reid, & Baumfield, 2016). The surge in international student enrollment provides institutions with economic advantages, a more internationalized campus, and a more global institutional impact (Zhang & Beck, 2014). Meanwhile, international students can benefit from better educational opportunities, enriched personal growth, and more promising employment prospects (Elliot, Reid, & Baumfield, 2016). However, international students can also encounter significant challenges (Carter, 2016; Du, 2019).

Acculturating into a foreign academic setting as an international student is a stressful process (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Helping students acculturate successfully into a new academic setting has a significant impact on their subsequent overseas learning experiences (Xing, Bolden, & Hogenkamp, 2019). Studies have consistently demonstrated that international students are psychologically vulnerable during their academic acculturation (e.g., Aubrey, 1991; Gao, 2019; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). International students encounter a range of academic acculturation stressors including language challenges, educational and social differences, discrimination, and practical stressors (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). The interaction of these stressors often leads to harsh international academic acculturation experiences for international students on Canadian university campuses (Du, 2019; Xing & Bolden, 2019). The challenges of academic acculturation not only contribute to mental health crises, but also raise concerns around equity and inclusion that tax university administrators and faculty (Choy & Alon, 2019; Tannock, 2018).

While many Canadian universities affirm their commitment to educational equity and inclusion, there exists an increasing concern that these institutions have been focusing on the economic benefits brought by international students without allocating adequate resources to support their successful academic acculturation (e.g., Gao, 2019; Houshmand, Spanierman, & Tafarodi, 2014; Zhang & Beck, 2014). For example, cultural competence training and multilingual counselling services have been identified by international students as important resources that could facilitate their academic acculturation, but were lacking in their host institutions (Kim, 2018; Xing & Bolden, 2019). Lee (2015) suggested that instead of attributing international students' adjustment issues to their lack of coping skills or inability to adapt, host institutions should examine the effectiveness of the services they provide. For instance, many support programs designed to help international students acculturate socially cannot reach international students with limited oral English communication capacity who need the most support because such support programs required a high command of oral English to fully engage and benefit (Xing, 2017). As Canadian universities continue to develop strategies to attract international students (Gopal, 2017), it is incumbent on those institutions to ensure relevant personnel—including administrators, faculty, instructors, and student services staff—have a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the academic acculturation realities experienced by post-secondary international students in Canada. Canadian universities need to design support programs and facilitate international students' academic acculturation so that they are able to have the positive Canadian educational experiences the institutions advertise.

Skyrocketing international student enrollment in Canadian universities has been accompanied by a plethora of research studies published on international students in Canada (Du, 2019). However, many of the studies have made use of quantitative research methods, with relatively few qualitative studies that report the realities experienced by international students struggling to acculturate into their host institutions (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). The authors propose that the use of qualitative methods can provide an

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in-depth understanding to help Canadian higher education stakeholders identify how to meaningfully support international students' learning experiences.

In this chapter, the authors begin by identifying the theoretical framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2002) that served as a lens for our inquiry. The authors then provide an overview of current research that addresses international students' academic acculturation, organized in relation to the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness that SDT recognizes. Next, the authors zoom in to describe our own research and share findings from a recent study that used a unique form of arts-based research—combining narrative inquiry and musical processes—to explore and represent in-depth understandings of the academic acculturation experiences of six international students at a Canadian university. The authors conclude by proposing future directions for Canadian higher education stakeholders to become more supportive and inclusive of international students on Canadian university campuses.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

While current literature addressing international students' academic acculturation has increased considerably in the past decades and provides many suggestions regarding how to support international students' success, the literature still lacks a comprehensive theoretical framework to understand and describe international students' academic acculturation in higher education settings (Ho, 2017). SDT is a comprehensive macro-theory often employed by researchers to understand human behavior and individual psychological health (Teixeira, Carraca, Markland, Silva, & Ryan, 2012). It is a powerful framework for understanding human experience that has evolved from a humanistic perspective and been supported by numerous empirical studies (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Within the SDT framework, the psychological health and personal wellbeing of all individuals hinge on the satisfaction of one's psychological needs for personal autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2002). The need for autonomy is met when one feels that one's behavioral choices are self-determined (Deci & Ryan, 2002); the need for competence is met when one feels competent and confident in the choice tasks (Deci & Ryan, 2002); and the need for relatedness is satisfied when a sense of belonging is achieved or when an individual feels personally close to others in their surroundings (Deci & Ryan, 2002). To function in a healthy state and achieve personal wellbeing requires the satisfaction of these three psychological needs for all individuals (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Given that the academic acculturation of international students is a dynamic psychological adaptation process (Smith & Khawaja, 2011), and that SDT is a comprehensive theory for understanding individual psychological health, the authors believe SDT can serve as a valuable theoretical lens to understand and illustrate the complex psychological processes international university students experience during their academic acculturation (Xing & Bolden, 2019).

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' AUTONOMY IN ACADEMIC ACCULTURATION

With regard to autonomy, the literature offers plentiful evidence that being in a foreign country creates situations that undermine the capacity of acculturating international students to make choice decisions regarding both their academic and sociocultural activities (e.g., Elliot, Reid, & Baumfield, 2016; Li, 2015; Gao, 2019; Tannock, 2018). When newly arrived international students settle in a foreign environ-

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ment, changes abound in their life routines. International students often feel that their behavior choices both inside and outside academic contexts become limited in the new environment, especially due to their unfamiliarity with local educational and cultural norms (Xing & Bolden, 2019). For example, if a student lacks familiarity with norms associated with their university library, they may not feel comfortable going there to access resources or study.

The degree of autonomy for international students' choices to engage with both academic and non-academic activities is often dependent on the student's linguistic capacity to navigate participation in those activities; inadequate linguistic capacity limits international students' learning and social engagement (e.g., Li, 2015; Xing & Bolden, 2019). International students with low language proficiency often feel "forced" to choose courses that de-emphasize skills like reading, class discussions, oral presentations, and essay writing (Li, 2015; Xing & Bolden, 2019). Socially, international students with limited language capacity often report that they are unable to enter the social circle of their host culture peers due to (a) their inability to understand their peers' language and (b) their discomfort with the lack of patience demonstrated by peers frustrated by slow and inefficient conversations (Li, 2015). As a result, acculturating international students often only befriend other international students from the same or similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds, feeling isolated or excluded from the host community (e.g., Gareis & Jalayer, 2018; Li, 2015; Xing & Bolden, 2019). In addition to the reduced behavioral choices for academic and social engagement, acculturating international students may also have limited choices available to them in their essential daily life tasks. For instance, they may have limited food choices due to communication difficulties with the cafeteria staff (Xing, 2017). In summary, when settling down in a new place to live and study, almost all tasks involve some sort of language communication. International students' capacity to be autonomous in every aspect of their lives during their academic acculturation is greatly impacted by their capacity to utilize the target language for the tasks with which they choose to engage. A lack of language proficiency narrows international students' behavioural choices, therefore is likely to undermine the satisfaction of international students' need for autonomy.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' COMPETENCE IN ACADEMIC ACCULTURATION

It is evident from literature that international students' need for competence is significantly hindered during their academic acculturation process (Kim, 2018; Xing & Bolden, 2019). International students may suffer from acculturative stress when adapting to new learning and living norms (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). This stressful state manifests in both psychological and physical forms. Many studies have reported that acculturating international students experience physical fatigue and psychological pathologies (e.g., Chen, Liu, Zhao, & Yeung, 2015; Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Nyland, & Ramia, 2012). These can negatively impact international students' learning capacity, resulting in a lower academic performance compared to domestic students (e.g., Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006).

Linguistic capacity is fundamentally linked to international students' sense of competence. First, being able to communicate freely with native speakers is a prime factor in international students' perceived communication competence (e.g., Telbis, Helgeson, & Kingsbury, 2014; Zimmermann, 1995). Frequent intercultural contact has been identified as facilitative for enhancing international students' self-confidence (Yang, Noels, & Saumure, 2006). International students who can effectively and comfortably communicate with the host community tend to perceive themselves as more competent and, therefore, feel more confident during their academic acculturation process than students who have inadequate language

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capacity (Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2006). Second, being unable to meet the language demands of their academic tasks negatively impacts international students' academic performance. As all academic tasks are expected to be accomplished in the language of instruction in the host institution, international students' capacity to demonstrate their learning is constrained by how proficient they are in articulating their learning in the target language (Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010; Xing & Bolden, 2019). As many international students study the target language in a setting that precludes much target language contact outside their language classrooms, they often struggle to meet the language demands of their academic learning tasks during their academic acculturation (Du, 2019; Xing & Bolden, 2019). Many university courses assess students' academic learning from not only exams, but also in-class participation and group projects that require a written report. Penalizing acculturating international students with a reduced grade or a grade of zero due to incapacity to actively participate in group discussions or report writing seems to be the norm in many university settings (Li, 2015). In addition, studies have shown that international students tend to have a lower GPA compared to domestic students (e.g., Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010). When GPA is used to measure students' learning, a lower grade compared to domestic students, due to the constraint of their language proficiency, is likely to further undermine acculturating international students' sense of competence, leaving them feeling inadequate or inferior to their host academic peers.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' RELATEDNESS IN ACADEMIC ACCULTURATION

A prominent theme in the literature on international students' academic acculturation is the exclusion from mainstream academic and social communities experienced by international students. Integration into the host community has been identified in numerous studies as one of the most challenging aspects of acculturation (e.g., Du, 2019; Li, 2015; Meng, 2018; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Intercultural competence and linguistic capacity have been shown to greatly impact international students' capacity to forge new relationships in a new environment (e.g., Gareis & Jalayer, 2018; Xing, Bolden, & Hogenkamp, 2019). Cultures are constructed, developed, and practiced by a community of people through socialization and are reflected in every aspect of life, including everyday social interactions (Razfar & Gutiérrez, 2003). Not being able to find the appropriate social conversation topics has been reported as a common socializing challenge encountered by many international students, particularly international students with a cultural background that is distant from the host community (Yan & Berliner, 2011). For instance, social conversation starters in Chinese contexts often start with inquiries on food and meals, which can come across as odd to many English native speakers.

The inability to speak the host language fluently is identified as the primary inhibitor for international students in developing intercultural friendships (e.g., Gareis & Jalayer, 2018; Xing, Bolden, & Hogenkamp, 2019; Yan & Berliner, 2011). Cultural diversity is becoming more and more common in a globalized world, especially in countries such as the United States and Canada (Joshee, 2004). Often it is not the cultural differences that hinder students from developing intercultural relationships, but rather the lack of language capacity to facilitate efficient communication and understanding of the true meanings or intentions behind those differences (Xing, 2017). International students with high English proficiency, particularly oral English proficiency, were found to have more host culture friends and a higher sense of connectedness to English-speaking surroundings as compared to international students with limited oral English capacity (Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2006). International students with the linguistic capacity to communicate efficiently in the target language cannot only navigate the cultural differences

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in social interactions but can also turn those differences into conversation opportunities for engaging conversations that could lead to the formation of meaningful relationships. Thus, international students with inadequate target language communication capacity are more likely to experience acculturative psychological stress (Gareis & Jalayer, 2018). Given that most universities have an admission language requirement that is far lower than what is needed to successfully acculturate into the host language community (Xing & Bolden, 2019), it is not surprising that the literature often reports that international students encounter challenges in developing meaningful intercultural relationships with host country peers, leaving them feeling disconnected and isolated (Gareis & Jalayer, 2018; Li, 2015; Xing, et al., 2019).

CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC DIFFERENCE

Although it is often reported that international students experience difficult academic acculturation processes, this is not always the case. The academic acculturation stress international students experience seems to be correlated with the degree of cultural and linguistic difference they encounter (Yan & Berliner, 2011). The more different the two cultures and the more distant two languages, the more stressful the adjustment is likely to be (Yan & Berliner, 2011). Asian international students, particularly Chinese, Korean, and Japanese, are more likely to encounter difficult challenges when acculturating into English-speaking surroundings, compared to students from European countries (Yan & Berliner, 2011). International students from a Western or European context tend to experience a more positive academic acculturation process because the cultures and languages are less distant compared to English speaking countries (Nilsson & Stålnacke, 2009; Sam, 2001). In a study on international students' self-reported life satisfaction at a Norwegian university, international students from Europe and North America overall reported a higher life satisfaction than students from Africa and Asia (Sam, 2001). International students from non-European countries, developing nations and East Asian countries tend to suffer the most acculturating stress (Yan & Berliner, 2011). International students coming from China, a non-European East Asian developing country, are prone to much more academic acculturation anxiety than students from other countries at English-speaking institutions (Yan & Berliner, 2011).

CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' ACADEMIC ACCULTURATION

Chinese international students are the biggest international student group worldwide and have been reported to show lower oral English communication capacity and encounter more acculturative and psychological problems as a group than other international students (Chen, Liu, Zhao, & Yeung, 2015; Li, Cheng, & Duanmu, 2010; Yan & Berliner, 2009). Han, Han Luo, Jacobs, and Jean- Baptiste (2013) reported that 45 percent of the Chinese international students at an American university showed symptoms of depression. The language barrier is typically the greatest obstacle faced by Chinese international students during their academic acculturation (Bertram, Poulakis, Elsasser, & Kumar, 2014; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006; Xing & Bolden, 2019; Yeh & Inose, 2003). The acculturation experiences of Chinese international students are often fraught with emotional pains and loneliness (Xing & Bolden, 2019; Yi, 2004; Zhang & Beck, 2014). Communication difficulties isolate Chinese international students from their local peers more than other international students due to their relatively lower oral English communication ability (Ippolito, 2007). Although many Chinese international students seek connection and friendship

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from students from the same or similar cultural background, they still feel excluded and disconnected from the larger social and educational surroundings in English speaking countries (Bertram, Poulakis, Elsasser, & Kumar, 2014). Given the rising number of Chinese international students worldwide and the often-reported harsh academic acculturation they experience, there is an ongoing need to further understand the academic acculturation processes of these international students (Meng, 2018).

In summary, acculturating international students often feel constrained in their academic and social choices and opportunities, incompetent in their learning and daily life tasks, and excluded from their host community peers. When all three basic human psychological needs are unmet, the psychological stress international students experience in a foreign country can be overwhelming (Chen, et al., 2015; Xing, et al., 2019). As a result, their learning capacity is impeded, which in return exacerbates their academic acculturation stress. It is then not surprising that many researchers have voiced concerns about the harsh academic acculturation processes that international students experience and have raised concerns about impending mental health crises on campus associated with increasingly more internationalized universities (e.g., Arthur, 2004; Chen et al., 2015).

PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF ACADEMIC ACCULTURATION IN CANADA

Canada prides itself on welcoming international students. “Recognizing that international students are vital to Canada’s growth, Citizenship and Immigration Canada has set out to transform Canada’s immigration system to one that is faster, more flexible, and tailored to students’ needs—a major distinguishing factor from other countries” (Gopal, 2017, p. 231). Recent immigration policies and programs have been specifically created to make it easier for international students to study in Canada, making Canada one of the leading destinations for international students seeking higher education around the globe (Gopal, 2017). The number of international students enrolled in Canadian universities has been increasing continuously for the past decade (Du, 2019). The majority of international students in Canadian higher education are from Asian countries that have the most distant cultural and linguistic differences from Canada (Du, 2019), leaving many international students on Canadian campuses prone to suffering from a lack of autonomy, competence, and relatedness during their academic acculturation.

Therefore, what are the realities experienced by international students on Canadian university campuses, especially the groups most culturally and linguistically distant from the Canadian norm? With a growing body of international students in Canadian universities, there is a continuous demand to further understand the academic acculturation processes of international students in Canada (Xing & Bolden, 2019). In particular, when more and more international students coming from China continue to enter the Canadian higher education system, a more in-depth understanding of Chinese international students’ academic acculturation experiences in Canadian universities is needed. Stakeholders need such information to build global campuses that support international students’ successful acculturation into the host institution and thereby enable them to truly reap the benefit of Canadian higher education. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the academic acculturation experiences of Chinese international students studying in Canada. The authors designed the following study to address the following main research question: What are the academic acculturation realities experienced by Chinese international students with low oral English proficiency on Canadian campuses where English is the medium of instruction?

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METHODOLOGY

In response to the need to open up richer understanding of students' academic acculturation experiences, the authors employed musically enhanced narrative inquiry (MENI) to explore the in-depth experiences of international students enrolled at a Canadian university. MENI is a unique arts-based research approach that combines traditional narrative inquiry methods with musical processes to promote empathic understanding—a fundamental aim of qualitative inquiry (Bolden, 2017; Bresler, 2006)—“resonance, an embodied state of mind that is cognitive and at the same time, affective and corporeal” (Bresler, 2006, p. 25).

As the name implies, MENI builds on narrative inquiry practices with the artistic utilization of sound and music. It involves exploring the meanings of the participants' spoken words and stories through musical processes (Bolden, 2008). The authors chose MENI as the most appropriate approach for this study for two main reasons. First, narrative inquiry is an effective methodology for understanding and representing human experiences (Creswell, 2007). Second, music is a common form of art accessible to a wide audience with the provocative power to represent and evoke emotion in storytelling across cultures and contexts to promote empathic understanding (Bolden, 2017). The opportunity for the audience to connect sound to meaning can provide a powerful mechanism for eliciting memory and emotions that could compel actions (Gallagher, 2016; Trainor). The personal academic acculturation experiences that this study sought to unpack consisted of emotionally complex stories. Musically enhanced research methods offered profound possibilities to foster deep understanding and connections among the participants, the researcher, and audiences (Bolden, 2017).

Research Site and Participants

The study site was a research-intensive comprehensive university in Ontario with a large number of international students, where English is the language of instruction. Because the study strived to gain an in-depth understanding of international students' academic experiences, the authors followed the suggestion of Creswell (2007) to recruit a small number of individuals in order to capture their detailed stories. The authors targeted Chinese international students for recruitment believing their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, distant from those of most Canadians, would likely cause the students to encounter significant challenges for academic acculturation. Six Chinese international students enrolled in different undergraduate programs were invited to share their personal and detailed stories. The participants for the study were four female and two males. All participants self-identified as having low English proficiency. Participants had been in Canada between four to eighteen months and were in various stages of academic acculturation.

Data Collection and Analysis

The authors held one preliminary and one follow-up interview with each participant in person. The interviews were semi-structured, meaning the authors followed an interview protocol but improvised probing questions in response to participants' answers (Charmaz, 2003). Each interview lasted for 45-60 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed. The analysis of the data was conducted in two parallel analysis procedures. First, in keeping with narrative inquiry methods, the authors analyzed the data through the process of re-storying (Creswell, 2007). The re-storying involved (1) transcribing interview

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conversations; (2) coding significant text segments from the interview transcripts using a general inductive analysis approach (Thomas, 2006); and (3) organizing the coded text into a sequence for re-storying that highlighted and illuminated the most important themes. Meanwhile, processes associated with the “musically enhanced” aspect of the narrative inquiry were carried out (Bolden, 2008). The authors worked with the audio data (recorded interviews) within digital audio software in order to closely and repeatedly listen to and consider the participants’ words and stories. This process enabled confirmation and deeper understanding of existing themes from the transcript analysis and the identification of new emergent themes. When the most salient themes had been identified, the authors composed music to interpret and build understanding of the meanings conveyed within the participants’ stories, and to highlight the themes. The authors then used digital music composition software to combine the composed music with the recordings of the participant voices, weaving the music in and around the students’ stories of academic acculturation.

RESULTS

Working with the data acoustically and musically enabled the crafting of seven musical representations ranging from 30 seconds to 2 minutes in duration. These representations re-tell participants’ stories in their own words and with their own voices, with the researcher-composed music serving as commentary to communicate nuances of the identified themes. For this book chapter, the authors share three of these musical representations. The pieces highlight the participants’ academic acculturation experiences and our understanding of them as informed by the SDT framework. The authors have provided permanent links to the audio files so that readers may access the musical narrative representations while reading the narrative texts.

Restricted Choices – Undermined Autonomy

Please navigate to the following link to access the musical representation for the theme:

<https://cindyxing17.wixsite.com/menistories/single-post/2017/12/28/MENI-Theme--Helplessness-and-Resignation>

Musical representation transcript

Kandy: When you are home surrounded by your family, you feel like you have someone to fall back on. When you are all alone, far away from home, everything seems heavier.

But I couldn’t tell anyone those feelings, because I didn’t want my parents to worry or be disappointed with me. I couldn’t talk about these feelings with other Chinese students around me either, because I felt they felt the same way and it would get too depressing for everybody if we started talking about those things too much.

Later on, I thought about using the counselling service but then I thought to myself: “It’s English. I can’t even talk with people in simple English. How am I going to talk to the counsellor?” I mean, I want to go

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talk about my problem of talking to make myself feel better but then I would find myself not even able to talk about my problem of talking. How would you feel? Of course, worse. So I gave it up. So I gave it up.

*So I had to keep all those feelings to myself, though I felt like the person in *The Scream*. The most I could do to was just torture my beddings in my room alone when it got too hard and I wanted to smash things to vent. I couldn't even smash those hard objects because I was afraid that the sound would attract attention. It was a really lame way to vent but also the only way.*

When I was alone in my room, I would just sit there and think about those embarrassing and suffocating moments when I couldn't talk, and I just felt like I was not made to communicate in English with people. Then I started to close myself up. Do you understand that?

When describing their academic acculturation experiences, the participants frequently made reference to the lack of choice that they had in their academic and non-academic lives. Their options were severely limited by their lack of English communication capacity, resulting in a perceived inability to access opportunities available to domestic students, as demonstrated in the participants' quotes below.

I heard from my Chinese friends that I should try to stay away from social sciences courses. Because in those courses, there are lots of group projects, presentations, reading and report writing...Chinese students always get a much lower score than Canadian students because they cannot keep up or do the assignments as effectively. I really wanted to take this psychology course but after what I heard about the grades other Chinese student got in this course, I gave up.

When I went to the cafeteria for food, I could not make the staff understand what I wanted as my oral English was not good. I would always get the wrong food, so I just chose to say simple things that they could understand. As a result, I always end up eating food that I hate in the cafeteria. I really hated the food and it was so frustrating.

I had to spend my after school time reviewing lecture recordings and notes in the library while other students relaxed and partied. I really wanted to take a break from studying but I couldn't. It felt so suffocating. I could not understand the lectures like Canadian students and had to make up for it after class. For tasks that would take Canadian students only an hour to comprehend, I would need to spend four or even five hours.

When describing their social acculturation experiences, the words "lonely" and "excluded" were used at a high-frequency when describing their social acculturation experiences, even though they all expressed a strong desire to mingle and socialize with their domestic Canadian peers. Reduced academic and social communication options undermined the participants' sense of autonomy during their academic acculturation. As Kandy described, above, she was so frustrated by the lack of choices available to her that she was reduced to screaming silently alone in her dorm room.

Inferiority Syndrome – Reduced Competence

Please navigate to the following link to access the musical representation for the theme:

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<https://cindyxing17.wixsite.com/menistories/single-post/2017/06/10/MENI-Theme--Anxiety- and-Inferiority>

Musical representation transcript

Kandy: I got very nervous and anxious when talking to professors and other students. Because I knew I was supposed to participate by speaking English, but I also knew that I was not able to express myself in English. Then I got so anxious that I could not even sit still in class. I did not know where to look when talking, and I would nervously tap my feet when sitting in class.

Lisa: I felt I was not good enough compared to other Canadian students or other international students with sufficient oral English capacity. I felt like Canadian students and I were not equal anymore when I could not express myself. When I could not say what I thought and how I felt, I felt weak among them. I think only when one can express oneself can one truly exercise the right to speak. And only when that person's voice is heard can people really have respect for them.

In addition to having limited autonomy during their academic acculturation, the participants also reported a significantly reduced sense of competence. Being limited by their English proficiency, the participants often failed to perform tasks that they needed to do and felt frustrated. Constant frustrations were salient in handling simple life or academic tasks, which eroded their confidence as independent and capable adults. This is shown through the following interview quotes.

When my friends and I arrived at the airport in Canada, it was late. So we booked a hotel to stay over the night before we take the bus to the university campus. But when we arrived at the hotel, none of us could communicate with the English-speaking hotel staff about our reservation. It was such a stressful and embarrassing experience right after I landed in Canada. I felt really inadequate and ashamed even because I had studied English for more than ten years and was very confident in my English communication capacity.

When we had group meetings in the dorm to discuss things relating to campus events, other Canadian students all actively participated and shared their thoughts. But when it came to my turn to speak, all I could muster was 'Ok. I think it is good.' I really wanted to say more but I could not because my English was not good enough for me express my thoughts freely... I felt very stupid and frustrated...

When we have group project discussions in class, I was always just listening and not saying much because I found it really hard to make them understand my English. Then gradually, other students stopped asking for my opinion. My inability to engage in effective English conversations constrained at least half of my academic capacity...I think I am just as smart as the other Canadian students intellectually, but I just could not learn things as effectively as they did...And I started doubting myself.

In the cases featured above, participants judged themselves as inadequate against domestic Canadian students. Along with frequent frustrations in their academic acculturation experiences came feelings of anxiety and inferiority.

Learning at Half Capacity**Silent Isolation – Lack of Relatedness**

Please navigate to the following link to access the musical representation for the theme:

<https://cindyxing17.wixsite.com/menistories/single-post/2017/06/10/MENI-Theme--Loneliness-and-Isolation>

Musical representation transcript

Kevin: When I was back in China, I was a very social person, making friends wherever I went. But in Canada I was forced to suppress my desire to talk because my limited spoken English would not allow me to talk. Sometimes, I really just wanted to talk to someone to make a friend or two, but after the general greeting of “Hello,” I would just get stuck there, unable to say anything more. So, I could not make friends with Canadian students and I always felt alone. I had taken thousands of pictures of the fabulous landscape of Canada. But I had no one, but I had on one to share them with around me.

During the orientation week, when we had the group dinner together, the Canadian students were all chatting and laughing with each other at the table. But I just sat there, struggling to understand what they were saying. Occasionally, I could grasp a sentence or two, but by the time I had finished thinking about how to respond, they had already moved on to something new. Then I was not able to say anything. So, I just sat there, feeling like an outsider, an invisible person, among a big table of Canadian students. Although they seemed to be right beside me, within my reach, they were still a world apart from me. I thought to myself, sitting there, “What am I going to do with a life like this? How I am going to live a life like this?” Although Canada seemed so beautiful, it did not feel like a world where I should be. It did not feel like a world where I should be.

The theme of “silent isolation” was prominent amongst all the six interviewed students’ stories. All participants described substantial challenges in communicating with their domestic Canadian peers that prevented them from developing sustained and meaningful relationships. All the participants came to Canada with a very positive outlook on forming intercultural friendships with Canadians and a strong desire to socialize with and integrate into the domestic student community. But, unfortunately, in the academic acculturation realities they experienced, they felt excluded from the host student community and only connected with student communities that had the same or similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds as a direct result of their lack of oral English communication capacity. In the quotes featured below, students described how their limited English capacity made them feel separated from the Canadian student community.

I really wanted to make some Canadian friends. They all seem really nice and friendly. Some of my Canadian classmates would even go out of their way to come to say “Hi” to me when they saw me on campus at the beginning of my studies. However, because I could not really talk with them much due to my limited spoken English; they stopped doing that gradually. I felt really lonely and started socializing with Chinese students here even though I really do not like dealing with the Chinese student community sometimes...lots of them are very competitive and snobby. But as I cannot really become friends with Canadian students, I had to stay in the Chinese student community to feel less lonely. Even though I had Chinese friends, I still felt that I did not belong to the place where I was at, a Canadian university.

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Before I came to Canada, I imagined my university life to be very colorful and multicultural...just like what I had seen in the English soap operas where university students hang out together on campus in groups, laughing out loud and having fun. I thought I would be one of them. But in reality, after I came to Canada, I found it was even hard for Canadian students to understand my basic English conversations... I never hang out with them after class, or even in class as I sit together with other Chinese students in class too...that image I envisioned for my Canadian university life now only feels like a dream that will never come true.

At the beginning of my study here, other Canadian students would invite to parties and other social events with them. But I felt alone like an outsider at those events because I could not really understand what they talk about or say what I wanted to say; Canadian students speak English so fast that I barely could keep up and they often misunderstood what I said because of my accent or they would not be patient enough to really hear me out. It was really hard to fit in at those events when you cannot talk like a normal person. Then gradually they stopped inviting me to parties.

None of the international students interviewed was able to forge close relationships with any Canadian students around them, even though all felt that Canadian students were friendly to them. Their need for relatedness in a foreign country was clearly unsatisfied.

DISCUSSION

The authors recognize that it is crucial to address the validity and trustworthiness concerns of this musically enhanced narrative inquiry as participant words were transformed through the music composition processes to create musical narrative representations, in which inherent manipulations happen. The authors acknowledge overtly that composing music to participants' words could potentially change their meanings. The musical representations could be argued to be more of a representation of the composer than participants as the author filtered the stories told by participants. Further, even though the authors intentionally employed repeating interpretive tendencies of sound to highlight the meanings identified in the reported themes, audiences could still interpret them differently based on their contexts (Gallagher, 2016). "Perception is in the ear of the beholder" (Xing, Bolden, & Hogenkamp, 2019, p. 43). However, the goal of employing music and sounds in this study was not triangulation or making truth claims of our participants' stories (Wargo, 2018). Narrative inquiry and sounded studies are not meant for pursuing "truths," but for enhancing readers' possibilities of understanding (Bolden, 2017; Gershon & Van Deventer, 2013) and achieving the fundamental aim of qualitative inquiry: promoting empathic understanding (Bresler, 2006).

Validity, the believability of a research study knowledge claim, is not "inherent in the claim but is a characteristic given to a claim by the ones to whom the claim is addressed. Thus any knowledge claim is not intrinsically valid; rather, its validity is a function of intersubjective judgment" (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 474). Whether a knowledge claim made by the researcher is plausible or not is a judgement made by the audience based on the evidence provided by the researcher (Torrance, 2013). Thus the validity of a study can be assured if the knowledge claim made is supported with relevant and sufficient evidence for the audience to make a reasonable judgement (Barone & Eisner, 2012). The authors hope that the

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evidence, the participant words and stories, reported in this study are sufficient to support the knowledge claims we made in the findings section about participants' academic acculturation experiences.

Additionally, our findings resonate with a great deal of literature on Chinese international students' academic acculturation experiences in English-speaking countries (e.g., Chen et al., 2015; Choy & Alon, 2019; Meng, 2018; Yan & Berliner, 2011; Zhang & Beck, 2014). From previous literature, it was plausible to expect that Chinese international students with limited English language communication capacity would experience a stressful academic acculturation process in English-speaking countries. However, the magnitude and intensity of the psychological stress and reactions described by our participants were not expected. Even though the small sample size in this study used does not generalize to all Chinese international students (the academic acculturation process could be influenced by a host of personal factors such as family background and personality traits), the magnitude of psychological stress reported in this study does suggest that some international students on Canadian campuses clearly need more effective support to make Canadian higher education truly inclusive and equitable to all students. The authors believe that this study makes a unique contribution to the understanding of academic acculturation of international students in Canada by bringing the audience a little bit closer to what the academic acculturation stress felt like for our participants by utilizing the evocative power of music and sound.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our research identified that the participants' academic acculturation in Canada was particularly stressful due to their undermined sense of autonomy, reduced sense of competence, and lack of relatedness to the Canadian community. This finding is significant for policy makers and senior management in Canadian higher educational institutions. When Canadian universities invest in recruitment efforts to attract more international students in the global higher education market, adequate infrastructure and support services have to be built simultaneously or preceding recruitment (Ma, 2018). Our research indicates higher education institutions should pay particular attention to the design of programs to support international students' basic psychological need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Student services offered to acculturating international students such as academic support and personal counselling could, ideally, be provided by staff who are culturally and linguistically diverse. Faculty and staff training programs on how to accommodate acculturating international students' learning needs would also be beneficial. Course design that better supports acculturating international students' sense of autonomy and competence should also be explored. For instance, group project and oral presentations can pose significant hurdles for international students. Alternative means of assessing student learning could be used to allow acculturating international students to demonstrate their achievement in ways that support their sense of autonomy and competence.

Further, the finding that acculturating Chinese international students in this study perceived the *spoken* component of English as the greatest problem in negotiating academic situations and social relationships during their academic acculturation amplifies the urgent need for higher Canadian education stakeholders to proactively mitigate the potential negative impact of inadequate oral English capacity on international students' academic acculturation. For international students' admission, many Canadian higher education institutions require a lower spoken English test score than for reading, writing and listening. This may send a misleading message to future international students regarding what is truly needed to succeed in Canadian academic contexts. Higher education institutions in Canada should consider a more stringent

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requirement for the spoken score of English proficiency language to proactively tackle the primary acculturative stressor that impedes international students' learning and academic acculturation. Similarly, designing and making accessible specific and effective oral English language support programs that incorporate international students' needs and perspectives may prove beneficial for facilitating successful academic acculturation on Canadian campuses.

LIMITATIONS

Due to the in-depth narrative nature of this study, only a small number of international students were included. This study was also limited by solely looking at undergraduate students' academic acculturation experiences. Additionally, this research was limited by its focus on participants with low English communication capacity and a Chinese educational and cultural background. Therefore, the findings from this study cannot be generalized to a wider international student population in Canadian higher education. Understanding, and telling of our participants' narratives. The findings from this study can only be interpreted with the specific research contexts in mind.

CONCLUSION

Researchers have repeatedly identified the increasing recruitment of international students in the higher education systems must be accompanied by corresponding infrastructure and support services (e.g., Arthur, 1997; Arthur, 2004; Du, 2019; Xing et al., 2019). Striving to accommodate the needs of international students that experience psychological stress due to a lack of autonomy, competence, and relatedness is a way to move towards education equity in the increasingly diverse post-secondary context in Canada. As one of the participants in our study explained, "my academic capacity is suppressed here in Canada by at least fifty percent. I am not able to demonstrate and utilize my academic intelligence like domestic students, which takes a toll on both my grades and my self-esteem."

Aside from the common psychological problems associated with academic acculturation, researchers have uncovered concerns for more serious psychiatric disorders among international students on higher education campuses. Leong and Chou (1996) speculated decades ago that academic acculturation stress could put international students at risk for the onset of mental illness. Mental health issues such as serious depression, anxiety syndromes, and suicide attempts have all been found within the international student population (e.g., Arthur, 2004; Chen et al., 2015; Choy & Alon, 2019; Oropeza, Fitzgibbon, & Baron, 1991). There have been a great number of studies into challenges facing international students during their academic acculturation within new educational systems, identifying issues such as language difficulty, academic and social differences, and financial constraints (Kim, 2018). All these challenges interact with one another in a new environment in complex ways, making academic acculturation a precarious process for international students.

The adjustments required to accommodate and facilitate the transition experiences of international students recruited into Canadian higher education are multifaceted. Policy change, staff training, curriculum accommodation, and social and language support are all important areas for improvement. International students experience adaptation challenges that involve a complex and idiosyncratic interplay between academic and non-academic experiences (Cheng & Fox, 2008). Only when adequate

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infrastructure and support are in place to meet acculturating international students' need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness can Canadian universities truly become the equitable and inclusive communities they claim to be.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Academic Acculturation: A dynamic psychological adaptation process that international students experience when migrating to study in an academic setting in a foreign country.

Academic Contexts: Settings where scholastic activities are the main focus or purpose.

Acculturation: A dynamic psychological adaptation process that one experiences when migrating into new cultures.

Cultural Distance: The degree of similarity that two cultures share in terms of values and communication norms.

English Proficiency: The ability one has to engage in listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English.

International Student Mobility: The opportunity that a student has to undertake academic studies broad in a foreign country that range from short-term experience programs to long-term degree programs.

Linguistic Distance: The degree of similarity that two languages share in terms of linguistic features.