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Perceptions of Current and Prospective International Students from Kenya of the International Student Lifestyle in the US

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The number of international students in the United States has increased exponentially in the last few decades. From a population of fewer than 40,000 in 1954, the number doubled by 1965, and again by the end of the 1970s and then again at the end of the next decade (Davis, 1998). There were 565,039 international students in the US in the 2004-2005 academic year (Institute of International Education, 2005).

International students are an extremely heterogeneous group, representing over 180 nations (Paige, 1990). Asia consistently has been the world region sending the highest number of international students to the United States, accounting for 58% of currently enrolled international students in the 2004-2005 academic year. Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America accounted for 3%, 2%, and 12% of the international students, respectively. African students made up 7% of the population (Institute of International Education, 2005).

Four of the top five countries sending students to the United States in the 2004-2005 academic year were in Asia. Only two African countries were in the list of the 20 top sending countries. These were Kenya and Nigeria. Kenya was ranked 16 th worldwide with a population of 6,728 students (Institute of International Education, 2005). Nigeria was 18 th.

The purpose of this research was to explore the perceptions held by both current and prospective Kenyan students about what the lives of international students in the United States were like. A major goal of this study was to add a voice to the literature bridging the gap between research focused on current students and that on prospective students by creating a forum for both parties to tell their stories simultaneously.

This study was framed using Q methodology in order to find common themes in the participants' stories. In addition, the Social Constructionist and Narrative theoretical approaches were employed. A uniting factor for these theories is that they both hold that people's lives are a storied experience (White & Epston, 1990). Gergen (2005) stated four assumptions about Social Constructionist theory: (i) there is an infinite number of possible ways to explain or view any state of affairs; (ii) that meaning or truth are originated through relationships, which is similar to Narrative therapy which holds that people's lives are storied experiences; (iii) meaning is continuously generated by people, and in the process, traditions are sustained or changed; and (iv) although people's perceptions may be defined in a group and maintained, it is possible for those perceptions to be altered should one choose to do so.

Consequently, international students' perceptions on the international students' lives and issues faced were seen to be practically infinite in number, generated through relationships, and able to change over time. With this backdrop, the results and significance of the study are then left to the reader—nothing is demanded. Once the results are presented, interpretation or application of these results may be suggested, but there remains room for dialog on the meaning and/or implications.

A review of the literature revealed multiple issues that international students face. They were found to be classifiable under four main themes: (a) general living adjustment; (b) academic adjustment; (c) socio-cultural adjustment; and (d) personal-psychological adjustment (Tseng & Newton, 2002).

Method

Q methodology, which was introduced by Stephenson (1953), was used to explore student perceptions. Q methodology is a process that provides a way to study subjective experiences through a unique set of psychometric and operational principles, combined with statistical resources (Olsen, 2005). Systematic study of these subjective data was achieved through the Q sort process.

This methodology was chosen for this study because it provided a means for identifying response patterns and consequently finding out individual response patterns without the use of pre-specified measures. It also provided the opportunity to find out personal opinions, and can help find unrecognized discourses (Addams, 2000). Further, Q method served as a platform to pool the best of qualitative and quantitative research techniques (Dennis & Goldberg, 1996) and in some ways served

as a bridge between the two (Sell & Brown, 1984).

In carrying out the study, the researcher reviewed the literature finding perceptions people had of the international student lifestyle in the US. This resulted in a total of 131 statements, which in Q methodology are referred to as the *concourse*. The search for more statements was stopped when statements started to get redundant, and no “new” information was emerging, a condition referred to by Stainton-Rogers (1985) as “finite diversity.”

The researcher then consulted with eight Kenyan students in the United States to review all the statements and select those that were most representative of the entire *concourse*. The result was 47 statements, referred to as a Q sample, that were to be administered to the participants in the form of a Q sort.

In Q methodology, the participants are referred to as the person sample, P sample, or P set (Addams, 2000). In R methodology, the term population (or subjects) is used to refer to the individuals participating in the study, whereas in Q methodology, the *concourse* is the population (Addams, 2000). This is an important distinction because when it comes to the generalization of findings in Q methodology, emergent factors are seen to “be a genuine representation of that discourse as it exists within a larger population of persons” (Brown, 1993, p. 52) as opposed to representing a general group of people as in R methodology.

Q methodology’s major concern is how and why people believe what they do, rather than population statistics (Addams, 2000). A P sample of between 40-50 participants is sufficient because relationships between factors tend to stabilize with few cases, and there is little change effected by increasing the P sample (Brown and Ungs 1970). There were 52 participants recruited for this study: 19 current students residing in various states in the US and 33 prospective students residing in Kenya.

To gather the data needed for the study, each participant was issued a packet consisting of a deck of cards with statements on them to sort, a sorting scale, a form requesting demographic information, sorting instructions, and a recording grid. The deck of cards consisted of 47 statements representing each of the 47 items of the Q sample. The sorting scale was a frequency table showing the number of items to place under each column (see Table 1).

The participants were asked to rank order the 47 statements from those that were most like the participants’ perceptions to those that were least like their perceptions. This was to be done using a “forced-free” approach guided by a sorting scale structure. The Q sort was considered to be “forced-free” because respondents were forced to place a prescribed number of items under each rank, but the participants had the freedom to place items in any of the columns and at any point on the column (McKeown & Thomas, 1988). The participants were then given the opportunity to describe why items were placed on the extreme ends of the continuum (“most” and “least” like my perception). It is important to remember that the statements are matters of opinion, not fact, and ranking the statements from the sorter’s point of view is what brings subjectivity into the process (Brown, 1993, pp. 93-94).

Data was analyzed using the PQMethod computer program (Schmolck & Atkinson, 2002). This

program works by subjecting the data to the application of three statistical processes: (i) correlation; (ii) factor analysis; and (iii) computation of factor scores (McKeown & Thomas, 1988).

In this study 52 Q-sorts were generated by the 52 participants, as in this approach it is the people, and not the statements, that are the variables that are correlated in the analysis (McKeown & Thomas, 1988). When entered into the PQMethod 2.11 computer program (Schmolck & Atkinson, 2002) a 52 x 52 correlation matrix of all the sorts emerged. This correlation matrix was then factor analyzed using principle components analysis to reveal the groupings of opinions expressed among the participants, referred to as factors. Each factor represented a group of people who ranked statements in essentially the same order and thus shared common beliefs or view points (Stainton-Rogers, 1991). Factor scores were also computed.

Results

Factor analyzing the data is important in Q methodology because “it comprises the statistical means by which subjects are grouped—or more accurately, group themselves—through the process of Q sorting” (McKeown & Thomas, 1988, p. 49). This process therefore helped to show how participants clustered together based on how they ranked the 47 statements and helped to depict how many factors (common beliefs or view points) were generated by study participants. Q sorts which were highly correlated were considered to represent shared views (Brown, 1993). This data set resulted in the emergence of four factors.

The four factors accounted for 47% of the total variance with almost 85% of the participants loading significantly on discrete factors. Each factor represented a differing view of international students’ lifestyle in the United States of America.

Discussion

Four distinct views of the international student lifestyle emerged from this study. These are discussed below.

Factor 1: The Challenges of Financial Demands and “Saving Face”

This factor accounted for 20% of the total explained variance in perspectives of Kenyan students when considering the lifestyles of international students in the United States. Of the 52 participants, 23 (45%) loaded significantly on this factor, making it the factor accounting for the most variance and being defined by the most people.

Based on the distinguishing statements for this group, it appeared that the participants loading significantly on this factor thought that life in the US was fairly difficult especially with regard to financial and social adjustment. They strongly held that international students had to constantly work hard to support themselves and meet the increase in living costs, leaving little time for leisure. They also held that it was difficult for international students to find jobs, and that when one was found, there were strict limitations on what one could do legally. Student visas required them to remain as full time

students in all semesters, and they were allowed to work a maximum of 20 hours a week.

This group also held, though not as strongly, that international students were both psychologically and emotionally unprepared for the relocation process. Further, international students were perceived to have a difficult time forming close relationships or support systems, and had difficulties dealing with their change in social status in the US. These individuals strongly believed that international students felt very homesick and isolated. They also believed, though not as strongly, that international student had a difficult time forming close relationships or support systems, and difficulties dealing with the change in their social status in the United States. Participants also perceived international students as experiencing discrimination and racism during their sojourn, although they believed this to a lesser degree than participants loading significantly on Factor 2.

Overall, this group appeared to view international student life as being difficult and having many financial and cultural obstacles or hurdles. They appeared cautious and almost pessimistic about the international student lifestyle. Of the four original themes of the study, the one most represented in this group was general living adjustment, specifically finances.

Factor 2: The Challenges of Being/Feeling Different and Misunderstood

Factor 2 accounted for 12% of the variance in perspectives of the international student lifestyle in the United States by Kenyan students. There were 9 (17%) participants who loaded significantly on this factor.

This group did not think that international students would encounter any difficulties communicating exclusively in English. In spite of this, they strongly felt that international students were often stereotyped, encountered various forms of racism. Further, they had little to no chance of becoming US citizens or permanent residents. They felt that they were often judged on the basis of their being African or Black and that this also contributed to the stereotypes.

A substantially higher percentage of current students loaded on this factor than prospective students. This could potentially have been because perceptions related to being different may be elevated when it is the students' lived experience, or that perspective students were not fully aware of the challenges of being different or the potential for misunderstanding.

Factor 3: The Challenges of Being/Feeling Isolated and Estranged

Factor 3 accounted for 8% of the variance in perspectives of Kenyan students when considering the lifestyle of international students in the US. Five (10%) of the 52 participants loaded significantly on this factor.

Participants loading significantly on Factor 3 appeared to be conflicted. On the one hand, they believed that international students considered themselves to be successful, at ease, and competent academically. They held that grading was stricter in Kenya than in the U.S., and that the education

system was easier, giving them the ability to maintain higher GPAs.

On the other hand, they held that international students experienced isolation and estrangement during their sojourn, socially. They believed that international students struggled in making relationships that were comparable to those they had at home prior to relocating to the US, and also felt that international students would not be able to convey their “true” life experiences to their families at home for a variety of reasons. It is possible that the inability to relate with their families was perceived to compound the loss and isolation experienced. Conversely, it is possible that they international students may have isolated themselves in order to isolate their families from worry.

Factor 4: Optimistic and Hopeful Students

Factor 4 accounted for 7% of the variance in the students’ perceptions of the international student lifestyle in the United States. Of the 52 participants, 7 (13%) loaded significantly on Factor 4. This was the group with the most similarity among members, in comparison to the other three groups. All the participants in this factor were female prospective students who were single and, with one exception, were below 22 years of age. They were all prospective undergraduate students.

Overall, they were the most optimistic group. Although they held that international students would encounter some adjustment difficulties, they also felt that these could be fairly easily transcended. They believed that international students readily found jobs upon arrival to the US, which was contrary to factor 1 participants. They also held that international students would not be challenged by the change in teaching/learning styles. Further, international students were seen to be able to easily get help from other international students and the university whenever they had problems.

Another distinguishing thing for this group is that they did not believe international students would encounter any racism or stereotypes during their sojourn. One participant said, “it is not really different from what is in Kenya. There are too many cultures represented in the university and people are too busy to find time to be racist.” They expected much positive growth from the sojourn.

This group is the only one that did not feel strongly about the statements regarding international students with families. In fact, one participant said she believed that having one’s family relocate with the student for studies would be “misleading for the student,” meaning the student may be derailed from his or her school work. Further, she thought the family would pose “too much work” for the student, and thought it best that the family be left behind so that the student could meet his or her goals “without distractions.” The fact that this group did not place items to do with family on the extreme poles appears to be congruent with the group make up - single students with no families. Further, their optimism may also have been a reflection of the stage of development in the life cycle, as they were young and single.

Participants Not Loading Significantly on Any Factor

Eight (15%) of the participants did not load significantly on any of the four factors. The perspectives of these eight individuals would be considered distinct and unique perceptions or viewpoints, because

they did not share similar viewpoints with other participants in the study to a significant extent.

Applications

The findings of this study show that there are many varied perceptions that international students hold of the international student lifestyle in the US. It serves the students best if all varying views are taken into account when interventions for international students are taken into account, without stereotyping them, so that most needs are adequately addressed.

The results of the study may be of value to career counselors in Kenya and other such professionals as they prepare students to pursue studies in the United States. The study may also be of interest to students or counselors from other countries for similar reasons. This may also be of value to prospective students as they prepare for their studies abroad, as they can choose how to incorporate the findings into their preparation. For example, prospective students may expand their inquiries and discover what questions may be pertinent prior to relocation, especially where they have limited access to international students or advisors.

This study may also be helpful for the international student service providers in the US as they would be better able to understand the perceptions of prospective and current students and thereby be able to respond appropriately to them. For current students, the study may aid in normalization, helping them see the universality of their perceptions and validating the same perceptions. It could also serve as an aid in opening up conversations with their families abroad.

Table 1

Perceptions sorting scale with frequency notations (Sorting Scale)

	Perceptions Least Like Mine						Perceptions Most Like Mine		
Score	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+4
Frequency	3	4	5	7	9	7	5	4	3

Perceptions Q Sort forced grid (Score Sheet)

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