

Psycho-educational Group to Support the Transition of Foreign Students, in Ankara, Turkey

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Abstract— Due to globalization the number of students who prefer studying in countries different from their home country has grown rapidly. International students change from members of majority to members in minority in the host country. Arthur (2004) indicated that foreign students face distinct difficulties when compared to local students. International students deal with a wide variety of transition issues and experience a lot of adjustment concerns. They have problems that are different, some in kind and some in degree, from the host country students. Common problems that international students face include acculturative stress, language-related difficulties, cultural shock, racial discrimination, homesickness, isolation and loss of social support.

Psycho-educational groups are structured by some central theme and designed to help people develop specific skills, understand certain themes, or progress through difficult life transitions. Group approach to counseling with international students may positively impact adjustment difficulties and psychological concerns of international students in the following ways: increasing social support and interpersonal learning, decreasing isolation and loneliness, providing a safe and normalizing environment and a non-judgmental place to practice language skills, helping group members learn practical information about living in a certain state.

This paper aims to describe a psycho-educational support group which was designed and implemented in Ankara, Turkey, for some common challenges international students face and most of which relate to cross-cultural adjustment. Psycho-educational groups are structured by some central theme and designed to help people develop specific skills, understand certain themes, or progress through difficult life transitions.

The purpose of the study is to endorse psycho-educational group as an effective treatment modality for adjustment problems of international students. The psycho-education group was designed to help foreign students to better adjustment by imparting information, sharing experience with others, feeling similarity, and improving communication ability during sessions, and helping people learn how to create their own support systems outside of the group setting.

A Psycho-educational group program was conducted in 8 sessions during 8 weeks, with 8 different topics. Each session lasted from 75 to 90 minutes.

From what we know this was the first psycho-education group conducted in Turkey regarding international students. Group members at the beginning were not aware of the need for external support and were skeptic about its benefits. Nevertheless, all group members agreed this experience was fruitful and they would recommend it to other foreign students.

Three months after the end of the psycho-education group a follow up was conducted with all the group members. Positive results from the sessions were confirmed.

Keywords— Psycho-education, support group, foreign students.

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of traveling to foreign lands to learn from and teach others is not a new idea. For centuries, travel has played a central role in enlightenment and spread of knowledge throughout the world. In more modern terms, Zakaria (2005) noted that the diffusion of knowledge leads to

burgeoning growth and industrialization across the globe as individuals and countries learn from each other.

The current wave of globalization had affected every aspect of human lives. In every aspect of human life globalization had shown its influence and it bought a pace in human life and new advancement. During the process of development it

brought together all political, social and cultural aspects which revolutionized the whole human race. The impact of it is visible in every aspect of human life and in the field of education it revolutionized the education as well as educational system.

Due to globalization the number of students who prefer studying in countries different from their home country has grown rapidly. International Students change from members of majority to members in minority in the host country. Arthur (2004) indicated that international students face distinct difficulties compared to local students. Common problems that International students face include: acculturative stress, language-related difficulties, cultural shock, racial discrimination, homesickness, isolation and loss of social support.

Globalization also helped to transform the education system in every corner of the world by utilizing the modern technology and with means of new communication systems where people got excess of information regarding what they want from thousands of miles. So this trend continues and took the current shape which we can understand by the facts as globally 4.6 million students are enrolled worldwide in 2017 and the USA remains the first choice for around 1.1 million international students. The second and third most preferred destinations are England and China, hosting 11% and 10% of international students, respectively. According to the UNESCO Report the international student's mobility will reach over 8 million by 2020.

The recent demand for globalization sparked the cross border student mobility fundamentally across the world and Turkey is not an exception. The inwards flow of international students in Turkey had increased significantly. In 2016/17, there are 103,727 international students enrolled in Turkish universities (Turkey's popularity among international students, Daily Sabah, May 2017). Azerbaijan ranks the first and Syria and Turkmenistan ranks the second and third in terms of contributing the number of international students studying in Turkey.

International students study at hundreds of universities all across Turkish cities. They have become integral part of students' diversity in the university campuses. In one hand they provide different perspectives during the courses and on the other hand they strengthen the mutual understanding of the differences which are found all across the globe. It is very necessary to embrace international students in Turkish university campuses as they will represent the Turkish education system once they leave back to their countries. International students are extremely important and beneficial

to Turkish higher education due to their academic prestige and the financial resources they provide. Many international students are bright in intellect and however they have to meet requirements in academic and language aspects. These students bring diverse ways of thinking and enhance competition in academics.

International students are an important part of diversity in the university campuses. With their own culture and ethnicity they strengthen the cultural diversity of universities. International students provide a new experience of different languages, cultures, and traditions to Turkish faculties, students, and Turkish society. The results of a study shows that potential competence in intercultural relationship increases as a person experience cultural differences and learn more complex and new cultures (Hammer et al. 2003). Individuals develop diverse views of the world and their perspectives and ideologies open up when they are being exposed to the diverse cultures. Thus we can say that new culture brings new opportunities and also, on another side, brings challenges, too. Many international students face challenges when they move to another country in order to pursue their education (Hull, 1978; Ozturgut, 2009). They face different issues such as food, living circumstances, financial issues, academic, learning styles, difficulties related to language, culture, and personal barriers. There happen a series of transitions which are hard and new to them which bring difficulties in day to day life (Constantine et al 2009, Yoon, 2004). International students in Turkish universities have huge transitions in their life and culture background once they enter the borders of Turkey. Different studies have tried to explore the adjustment that foreign students in Turkey are faced with. These issues include different aspects but more are less connected with the language while Turkish language seems to be the primary issue. Other difficulties include loneliness, isolation, stress anxiety, cultural shock and adaption in their daily life. International students face social isolation and loneliness in many aspects while studying in Turkey. An Australian research founded that 41% of international students experience substantial levels of stress which could be from homesickness, cultural shock, or perceived discrimination (Russell et al., 2010). Another recent study conducted in Ankara, Turkey, concluded that 94% of the students had problems in adjusting to living in the Turkey (Nazir.T., 2018).

If Turkish universities are going to embrace international students in their campuses effectively and fully these issues of adjustment must be addressed immediately before they get severe. The current study is therefore based on the

international students who came to Turkey for their higher education.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Studies related to the adjustment problems of international students have shown that such issues often produces feeling of depression, anxiety and insecurity (Constantine., 2004; Wei., 2004).

There is seemingly a great need for additional support for international students and many counseling centers have recognized the potential value of support group services. However, at the present time, it seems that many counseling centers have been unsuccessful in their attempts to develop and maintain this type of service. While the existing literature provides some valuable information and ideas based on each author's personal clinical experiences and knowledge, there is still much work to do in order to establish professional consensus and conceptual clarity regarding best practices for international student groups. There is also very little published research evidence regarding best practices for developing and leading these types of groups. A support group would promote the development of a social support system to provide a critical buffer against adjustment stress.

Group approach to counseling with international students may directly impact adjustment difficulties and psychological concerns of international students in the following ways: increasing social support and interpersonal learning, decreasing isolation and loneliness, providing a safe and normalizing environment and a non-judgmental place to practice language skills, helping group members learn practical information about living in a certain state, and providing opportunities to learn new coping strategies (Smith et al.,1999).

Rationale for the Study

Education in a foreign country involves adjustment to the new academic and social environment that may put academic performance and adaptation at risk. Everyone faces different problems when traveling to another country but when it comes to students these problems can affect their output. Psycho-educational groups are structured by some central theme and designed to help people develop specific skills, understand certain themes, or progress through difficult life transitions. Psycho-educational groups serve a number of purposes: imparting information, sharing common experiences, teaching people how to solve problems, offering support, and helping people learn how to create their own

support systems outside of the group setting. Each person can dialogue freely with others about concerns, in order to better comprehend themselves and to learn new ways of thinking, feeling, and doing.

Group process and observations

The purpose of the study is to endorse psycho-educational group as an effective treatment modality for adjustment problems of international students. This psycho-education group was designed to help group members to understand and clarify the changes they most want to make and to equip them with the means they need to make these changes. The objective of this support group was a better adjustment by sharing experience with others, feeling similarity, and improving communication ability during sessions.

A Psycho-educational group program was conducted in 8 sessions during 8 weeks, with 7 different topics. Each session lasted from 75 to 90 minutes. As we know, this was the first psycho-educational group conducted in Turkey regarding international students. The group included members from various countries like Albania, India, Indian Occupied Kashmir, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Four group members were male and four female. One member was following his PhD studies, five members were following Master studies and two members were in the first year of Bachelor program.

The group session were conducted by a leader and co-leader, a male and a female. The leader and co-leader, previously the first session, had identified and listed, common problems faced by the international students in new country.

The most common issues which came under the light of our attention during each session were as follows:

1. Language
2. Food differences
3. Cultural differences
4. Homesickness
5. Loneliness
6. Racism
7. Managing finances

Being in a new country with totally new language and the place where somebody rarely speak English is a big challenge and adjusting in such a place is itself a challenge. Similarly, our each group members share their emotional as well as funny experiences while they came in Turkey. According to each member of the group there is difference in every country but here in Turkey language makes it worse. It has been observed within the group that people struggle a lot

because of language and learning the language in Tomer (Language Learning Institutes) is totally different than the academic Turkish Language. As one of the group member commented “*Tomer teaches you only how to buy tomatoes and potatoes....nothing else*”.

Another key factor to adjustment was food, which we found a strange connection with adjustment. As most of our group members were staying in Government Dormitories and the quality of food as they say is not good. So for adjustment and adaptations, food issue also plays a key challenge.

Turkish culture is rich and unique but as per the experiences the group members didn't find it much difficult to adapt, except some small issues which are unique. May be again here staying in dormitories didn't gave such a big cultural shock to the students here except food. In dormitories the cultural contact is less and because if spending one year in Tomer rather than University where people meet only foreigners so during first year the effect of culture is less.

Homesickness and loneliness are also a hard problem which each member accepted is very difficult to face especially when you are in a country too far from your own. Here also we find that many other factors are interwoven because staying in a dormitories and the most key factor which remind them of staying away from is food. As one of the group member quoted “I remember my mother always when I sit in our canteen for eating”.

After the first stage of adjustment when people finish language courses and entered universities, it's the first time they have a strong cultural contact but here the language becomes the big barrier for almost all students to make new friends especially Turkish. The members in a group share their experiences and explained language plays a key role to share feelings and also they felt a close bond with foreigners rather than Turkish fellow mates. At this point of time culture starts playing a key role as one of the group member quoted “*Turkish fellow mates are unable to understand and get connected with our problems because ours are unique for them and they never faced such problems*”. And such situation leads to homesickness and loneliness and they start looking for people around who belongs from their country or also a foreigner.

One of the last highlighted factors is racism and here we want to mention that none of our group member was African, but members had experienced with their co-mates when they had been discriminated. Here a type of bond had been seen among all foreigners vs. Turkish. People start forming a bond and understand each other's problem more and connected more to each other no matter which country they are in

verses the country they are living in.

For students starting university for the first time, managing their finances is another obligation to face with. Managing their finances turned out to be a challenge every group member had experienced and continued too. Psycho-education was first given by the leader and co-leader and all group members did share experiences that, mostly, had worked for them.

III. DISCUSSION AND EVALUATION

For what we know this was the first psycho-education group conducted in Turkey regarding international students. Group members at the beginning were not aware of the need for external support and were skeptic about its benefits. Nevertheless, all group members agreed this experience was fruitful and they would recommend it to other foreign students. Moreover, because expectations of gender role vary from culture to culture, it was useful to have two group facilitators, one of either sex.

Three months after the end of the psycho-education group a follow up was conducted with all the group members. Positive results from the sessions were confirmed.

Limitations of the study

Finally, some limitations in this study merit comment. First, of all is the number of participation in the group consists of just eight members and based on their experience we cannot generalize our observations. Second limitation is connected with the country of origin of the members. The participants belonged to countries with culture and religion elements the same to Turkey. We do not know how the experiences of international student group members from other countries may differ. Last but not the least, limitation was the Leader and co-leader also belongs to the same culture as that of members so there might be some observational biases or differences among the leaders.

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