

Young, Worried and in a Foreign Culture: Factors involved in the help-seeking behaviour of international students in Australia

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For young people throughout the world, late adolescence is a period when they face many challenges and problems. This is particularly so for young people who move from one culture to another at that time whether it be by migration or as international students. For international students, the added dimension of being a long way away from their families and normal support systems can add to these challenges and problems. Rosenthal et al (2006) studied the degree to which international students at a large metropolitan university coped with their challenges and problems. They found that while the vast majority of the students in their study had a sound sense of social, physical and psychological well-being, there was a minority of students whose sense of well-being was weaker and whose approaches to coping and adaptation were less effective. A strong sense of connectedness was a major contributor to this feeling of well-being and for students from Asian countries, in particular, this sense of connectedness came from their relationships with others from their native cultures. They found that students from Asia often felt considerable pressure to do well academically to meet their families' expectations, particularly in the light of the fact that their financial support came mostly from their families. They also found an interrelatedness between some problem areas with depression being a consistent predictor of lack of well-being and it being negatively associated with the students' satisfaction with the accommodation and financial situations.

The students in the present study all identified themselves as being ethnically Chinese. The Confucian-heritage culture which these students share has a number of dimensions which could influence the help-seeking behaviour they use when faced with challenges and problems. Chinese societies have been characterised as valuing both hierarchy and discipline very highly (Bond, 1996). While the importance of other hierarchical relationships have diminished to some extent over time, the notion of filial piety remains strong (de Bary & Chaffee, 1989, Ho, 1996, Yu, 1996). Back and Barker (2002) describe the meaning and implications of filial piety for modern-day Chinese in terms of Big Me and Little Me where the "Big Me" concept of self includes their family or close associates who take the place of family and "Little Me" refers only to the particular person. Closely related to the concept of filial piety is the notion of saving face both for one's self and for one's family and community. Yu (1996) concludes that the Chinese have a strong collective and social nature while Yang (1987) describes the larger 'power distance' that exists in Chinese culture which increases the role of favour and face. The Confucian beliefs about education and effort are also important in the context of problems experienced by Confucian-heritage students. They include the significance of and joy of learning, the educability and perfectibility of all, and the importance of effort and will power (Lee, 1996). With regard to these and other Confucian values, Bond (1996) found the present-day Chinese held many different positions rather than one, just as it is in Western societies, and in societies of immigrant Chinese – Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong – more traditional values were particularly highly held indicating the endurance of Confucian philosophy in these societies.

A number of recent studies have looked specifically at the coping and help-seeking behaviours of Chinese or Asian adolescents or students. Webster et al (2006) studied male gender role conflict and psychological distress in Chinese Canadian adolescents, noting that these young people live in two different gender worlds and used culturally specific methods of coping, including engaging others for assistance and approaching problems from a collective perspective. Both Wilton and Constantine (2003) and Zhang and Dixon (2003) studied cultural adjustment and help-seeking among Asian international students in the United States of America. Wilton and Constantine found that Asian students reported lower levels of psychological distress than Latin American students because they used more coping strategies and interpersonal and social networks to modulate cultural adjustment. They also noted that both these groups of students did not use the college counselling services as often as expected because of cultural and language differences. Zhang and Dixon believed that because the family was considered more important to these students than an individual, they did not seek help for psychological problems to prevent causing shame to the family. While Wilton and Constantine found that students with a longer period of residence in the U.S.A. reported less psychological distress, Zhang and Dixon found no differences in the students' help-seeking behaviour due to length of time in America or gender. A survey of domestic college students belonging to ethnic minorities in the U.S.A. (Kearney et al., 2005) found that Asian American students exhibited greatest distress but their help-seeking behaviour was affected by not wanting to show weakness and a lack of cultural sensitivity and knowledge among practitioners in counselling services.

All of the above studies focussed primarily upon the students or adolescents use of formal or professional services but several of them noted the importance of help provided by family and friends. Working in Israel, Grinstein-Weiss et al. (2005) studied gender and ethnic differences in formal and informal help-seeking among adolescents. The ethnic differences that were found – Arab adolescents seeking help more often from formal sources and their families and Jewish students seeking help more often from their friends – contradicted an expectation that the Arab adolescents would distrust the social institutions of the dominant culture and was attributed to the distinction between formal and informal helping agents being blurred within the Arab sector and the traditional role of their culture of the extended family as a major source of support. This parallels in some ways the situation of ethnically Chinese international students in Australia who are in close contact with their families back home and gather around them a group of friends and relatives to serve as their family here in Australia.

Working with students from local secondary schools in Australia, Boldero and Fallon (1995) investigated their help-seeking behaviour, both formal and informal, looking at the types of problems for which the students sought help, the sources from which they sought help and characteristics of the problems for which they sought help. They found that females sought help more often for problems relating to their families, to interpersonal relationships, and to their health, while the problems concerning males enough for them to seek help related more often to educational issues and issues in other areas. Students in the senior levels of the schools sought help more often for problems relating to interpersonal problems and educational matters than did younger students. Only just over half of the students sought help for their problems and the major predictors of help-seeking behaviour were being female and having a problem relating to interpersonal relationships. Older students took more responsibility for their problems and reported them to be more serious. Friends were the most frequent

source of advice about interpersonal relationships and professionals were most often consulted about specific problems. Fallon and Bowles (1999) extended this research by having a similar group of Australian students identify both a major and a minor problem they had experienced and looking at what type of problems these were, from whom the students sought help for these problems and characteristics of the problems as perceived by the students. This study confirmed many of the results of the previous study. Problems relating to the students' families and interpersonal relationships were most often identified as major problems and those relating to family issues and educational matters were most often chosen as minor problems. Within the major problems, females again identified problems relating to their families, interpersonal relationships, and their health most often and males nominated educational matters and other issues most often. Only about half the students sought help for major problems and a little less than half the students sought help for minor problems. Older students sought help more often for problems relating to educational matters and interpersonal relationships and attributed more responsibility to themselves for their problems.

The present study addresses the same issues of problem type, sources of help and problem characteristics as perceived by ethnically Chinese students studying in Australia. All the students in the study are studying at a level equivalent to the senior levels of secondary schools but their help-seeking behaviour may be influenced by factors that do not exist for Australian students at that level of education. Both the strong role of family in their cultural heritage and the distance they are living from their families may have an effect. Other cultural influences such as the importance of face and the belief in the perfectibility in the area of education through effort may also come into play. The country of origin and other demographic variables may also be important.

The Study

As part of a larger study, 314 international students who identified themselves as ethnically Chinese responded to a section of a survey in which they were asked to "think of a problem which caused you considerable concern sometime during the last 6 months and for which you asked somebody for help". These students were studying in a pre-tertiary program and had been studying in Australia for about 8 months. 53.4% of these students were under 18 years of age at the time of the survey. Of these students, 38.5% came from Malaysia, 31.8% from Singapore, 12% from Indonesia, 11.7% from Hong Kong, and 6% from the People's Republic of China. Having identified the problem in their minds, the students were asked to choose a category to describe the problem. The categories from which the students chose were family, interpersonal, financial, education, depression, accommodation and other. As another part of the survey dealt with medical problems, these were not included specifically in these categories.

They were also asked to indicate from what category of people they sought help. The choices offered here were mother or father, brother or sister living in Melbourne, brother or sister not living in Melbourne, friend living in Melbourne, friend not living in Melbourne, other relative /family friend, the student welfare office or the student's staff mentor at the college, the college counsellor or chaplain, other staff from the college, a religious advisor or priest, a medical doctor, and another source. The students were also asked to rate the problem on 5 scales that related to the seriousness of the problem, the degree to which they felt that the problem was their own fault (causal locus), whether the problem developed quickly (acuteness), the extent to

which they felt that could solve it on their own (degree of control), and the extent to which they wished that it would solve itself (ownership). Each of these scales was a 5-point Likert scale.

Demographic data on each student's gender, age, country of origin, and type of accommodation was also collected.

Results

Types of problems

Although the students were asked to identify one particular problem that had caused them concern and for which they had sought help, 40% of the students chose more than one category. In these cases, one category was chosen at random from those indicated and used in the following analysis.

Some of the responses in the section labelled 'Other' specified long term illness or psychological problems. These were combined with the considerable number of responses labelled 'Depression' to form a new category of 'Health'. Because of the small number of responses in the categories of 'Financial' and 'Accommodation' they were combined with the remaining responses in the 'Other' category. 16 students either failed to respond to this section of the survey or indicated that they had not experienced any problems in the specified period. Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage of the types of problems chosen.

Table 1

Types of problems chosen by students (n = 298)

Types of problem	Frequency	Percentage
Family	33	11.1%
Interpersonal	67	22.5%
Other	38	12.8%
Educational	107	35.9%
Health	53	16.9%

Thus educational and interpersonal problems were chosen most often.

The data was also recoded to allow for more than one problem category to be specified. Table 2 indicates the number of categories chosen by students.

Table 2

Number of problem categories chosen by students (n = 291)

Number of categories	Frequency	Percentage
1	176	60.5%
2	63	21.6%
3	35	12.0%
4	8	2.7%
5	6	2.1%
6	3	1.0%

A Chi-square analyses comparing those who chose only one problem with those who chose more than one problem was highly significant ($df = 6, p < .001$). Student who chose only one category chose educational and interpersonal problems more often than would be expected. Those who chose more than one category tended to chose groups from the other problem categories. For example, depression was chosen in a

combination with family, interpersonal and educational problems or in combination with family, financial and educational problems.

A Chi-square analysis was conducted using the variables of gender and type of problem chosen. No significant difference was found between the type of problems chosen by males and females. In contrast, a chi-square analysis looking at the type of problems chosen in relation to the student's country of origin was almost statistically significant ($p = .056$). The trends here were for student from Singapore to chose problems relating to family and interpersonal relations more often than expected and problems relating to health less often, while students from Hong Kong chose the 'Other' category considerably more often than expected and the 'Health' category more often than expected and problems relating to family and interpersonal relations less often than expected. Students from the other countries chose problems from the various categories much as would be expected except that students from Malaysian chose a lower than expected number of problems relating to their health and students from Indonesia chose a lower number of problems than expected in the 'Other' category.

Groups from which help was sought.

Because of the small number in a number of the categories indicated as sources of help, they were condensed down into four larger categories – family members, friends, professional at the college (student welfare, counsellor, chaplain, teachers), and other professionals. Table 3 shows the sources from which the students sought help for the problems that had earlier identified.

Table 3
Sources of help (n = 284)

Source of help	Frequency	Percentage
Family	52	18.3%
Friends	157	55.3%
College professionals	66	23.2%
Other professionals	9	3.2%

Friends were the most common source of help, followed by professionals from the college, and then family members. Very few students had chosen to seek help from professionals outside the college.

Chi-square analyses were conducted comparing the sources of help chosen with a number of other variables. No significant differences were found for such choices of help for males and females, for students from different countries of origin or for students who were minors compared to those who were 18 years and older. The students' types of accommodation were considered in two ways – the five original categories of homestays, hostels, students apartments, living with relatives and private rentals and the simpler classification of living in a supervised environment or living with family and friends. There were no significant differences in the sources of help chosen by students looking at their accommodation arrangements from either of these perspectives.

Characteristics of problems

ANOVA analyses were conducted for a number of the variables in conjunction with the five problem characteristic of seriousness, causal locus, acuteness, degree of control and ownership. No significant differences were found for any of these

characteristics for the student's age group and their type of accommodation. For the countries of origin, a significant difference was found for the ownership characteristic only ($F(4,283) = 2.754, p = .028$). A Post Hoc comparison revealed that students from Malaysia and Singapore wished significantly more often that their problem would solve itself than did students from mainland China. A two way ANOVA analysis was conducted using gender and the type of problem chosen as the independent variables and each of the problem characteristics as the dependant variable. No significant differences were found between males and females for each of the problem characteristics. Here significant differences were found for both causal locus ($df = 4, F = 2.653, p = .033$) and degree of control ($df = 4, F = 3.169, p = .014$). For the causal locus, the Post Hoc analysis indicated no significant difference though the difference between the 'Other' and 'Education' categories was almost significant. The students believed more often that they were responsible for their own problems in education but felt than other issues such as those relating to accommodation and financial matters were more likely to have been caused by factors beyond their control. For the degree of control, there was a significant difference ($p = .01$) between the ways that students viewed issues relating to education and those relating to health. They believed that they could solve the education issues on their own but felt that they needed help from others to solve their health issues.

Discussion

Types of problems

The ethnically Chinese international students in this study, chose educational problems most often (35.9%) and problems relating to interpersonal relationships next often (22.5%), followed by health problems, and other problems and problems relating to family least often. This order is similar to the order in which problems were chosen by Australian students of similar age, senior secondary school age (Bolero & Fallon, 1995, Fallon & Bowles, 1999). However, the international students chose educational problems most often rather than problems with interpersonal relationships and chose this category more than one third of the time. This choice of educational problems could arise from the combination of a number of reasons. One of these could be the attitudes to education that they hold from the Confucian-heritage backgrounds (Lee, 1996) and the pressure they feel as a result of this to do well academically (Kearney, 2005, Rosenthal, 2006). Another could be that the students were asked to choose a problem for which they had sought help. The institution in which the students are studying places considerable emphasis both on one-to-one academic support and on providing academic advice. Help for educational matters is readily available to these students. College professionals, who include the students' mentors and teachers, were chosen as the second most frequent source of help (23.2%) but friends were a far greater source of help (55.3%) so help for educational matters must also have come from their friends and possibly also from their families. Students who chose more than one problem, against the request of the researcher, tended to choose a cluster of problems including depression. This agrees with the finding of Rosenthal et al. (2006) that depression is a consistent predictor of well-being for international students and it is negatively associated with accommodation and financial problems. Burns and Rapee (2006), in a study of Australian students in this age group, found that these students showed greater concern for fellow students who were depressed but had a mixed ability to correctly recognise and label depression. It may be of some concern if this holds true for the international students who are ethnically Chinese, as friends were by far their largest source of help and

Rosenthal et al. (2006) found that friends were a major influence in international students seeking professional help from the university's counselling service. Future research to determine the degree of knowledge in this area of such international students would be valuable.

Some researchers have found gender differences in the problems identified by students. Working with Australian students, Boldero and Fallon (1995) found that females chose problems relating to their families, interpersonal relationships and their health more often, while males chose educational and other problems more often. These findings were confirmed by a later study (Fallon & Bowles, 1999). Also working with Australian students, Burns and Rapee (2006) found that girls showed a greater knowledge of depression, possibly because of greater personal experience with the problem in both themselves and their peers. Working with international students in Australia, Rosenthal et al. (2006) found that female students exhibited higher level of psychological distress while male students indulged in more risky health-related behaviour. However, Zhang and Dixon (2003) found no gender differences among Asian international students seeking psychological help in the U.S.A. In line with this finding, the present study found no significant differences in the type of problems of problems chosen, the sources of help, and the characteristics of the problems as perceived by the students. Further research may be needed to clarify this situation.

There were some significant differences in the problems chosen by students from different countries of origin. Those from Singapore showed more concern about family and interpersonal problems. This could be due to these students being slightly younger than the students from other countries. 85.1% of the Singaporean students were under 18 while 44.4% of students from Indonesia, 31.14% of students from Hong Kong, 30.4% of students from Malaysia, and no students from mainland China were minors. This parallels the findings of Boldero and Fallon (1995) that younger students were more concerned than older students about problems relating to their families. Students from Hong Kong were significantly more concerned about problems in the 'Other' category. This could arise from the way these students experience problems, particularly in the accommodation area, due to differences in expectations of a cultural nature. These students are less Westernised than students from Singapore and appear, at times, to be quite aggressive in their approach to matters when a culture misunderstanding exists. This can cause these misunderstandings to develop into more serious problems.

Sources of help

In the previous studies with Australian students, only just about half the students sought help for their problems (Boldero & Fallon, 1995, Fallon & Bowles, 1999). In this study, only 16 students did not specify a problem or did not seek help for the problem that they specified. This is more likely to be due to the way that the question was worded than to any cultural differences.

Students in this study relied very heavily on their friends for help with professionals from the college – the student welfare office, mentors, teachers, the counsellor, and the chaplain – being the second source of help, followed by their families and then other professional people. Other researchers have found the importance of friends as a source of help for students of this age (Boldero & Fallon, 1995, Fallon & Bowles, 1999). However, Burns and Rapee (2006) found that families played a slightly more important role in this way than did friends and Grinstein-Weiss et al. (2005) found that it depended on the ethnic background of their subjects with the Jewish students

turning more to friends and the Jewish students turning more to families. From the cultural background of the students in the present study, it might have been expected that their families would play a greater role but the increased role of friends in this way can be explained by the use of friends as a substitute family here in Australia as described by Back and Barker (2002).

With the importance of monitoring and support of international students who are under 18 years as part of their visa requirements, it is interesting to note that there was no significant difference in the sources of help used by students who are minors and those who are 18 years of age or older. As accommodation arrangements play an important role in this monitoring and support, it is also interesting to note the type of accommodation in which the students lived did not significantly affect the sources of help used by the students, nor did whether they were living with relatives or not. Modern forms of communications through phones and the internet mean that students can choose to seek help from their families easily even when they don't live with them and living with a family member does not diminish the need of support from friends.

Characteristics of problems

There was a difference in the degree to which students viewed their ownership of their chosen problem, with students from Malaysia and Singapore wishing significantly more often that their problem would solve itself than did students from mainland China. This difference may be attributed lower age and therefore lesser maturity of students from these countries. Boldero and Fallon (1995) reported that older adolescents in Australia took more responsibility for their problems. The differences that were found in the perceived characteristics of problems of different types can be attributed to these students' understanding of education through their Confucian-heritage (Lee, 1996). They believed that they were more responsible for their problems in the educational area than for other problems and that they were more able to solve educational problems themselves. These beliefs can be seen as resulting from the Confucian notions of the possibility of the perfectibility of all in education matters and the importance of effort and will power in doing this.

Limitations

The main limitation of this study is the use of a self-report survey which relies on each student's perceiving a situation accurately and then giving an accurate report of the situation. Students from Confucian-heritage backgrounds can at times give the answer they believe someone in authority wishes to hear rather than the truth as they perceive it. The anonymous nature of the survey should have counteracted this effect to a considerable degree.

Because this survey was attached to one on the use of the medical system, questions in this section did not deal with specific medical issues and these were only introduced at the students' own initiative. This may have led to a smaller number of medical problems being reported than might otherwise have happened.

Conclusion

The Confucian-heritage background, the country of origin and the age of the students in this study have all been found to contribute to the problems experienced by these students, the sources of help they use, and how they relate to these problems. These things must then be considered in providing support services for these students. In

particular, the importance of these students' friends in the help-seeking process must be noted and utilised as much as possible.

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