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CHALLENGES OF SOCIO-CULTURAL ADAPTATION AMONG BANGLADESHI IMMIGRANTS IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

The challenges immigrants experience during the process of their socio-cultural adaptation to the host culture have far-reaching effects in terms of mental health, employment and lost benefits for the whole society. General models of the acculturation process and acculturation strategies provide a basis for the analysis of those problems. The current study employed a qualitative, case-oriented design, based on the grounded theory method to analyze interviews with twelve Bangladeshi immigrants in Malaysia. The purpose of the study was to investigate the problems in adaptation as a result of migration and resettlement, and the factors that influence this process. Two distinct patterns were revealed, linked to acculturation strategies of integration and separation. All the participants experienced high levels of psychological distress in the initial stage of their resettlement, but those who later chose the integration strategy of acculturation were more successful and satisfied with their adaptation than those who chose the strategy of separation. Factors contributing to the process of adaptation were migration motivation, proportion of perceived gains and losses, and cultural identity. This study has implications for social policies in the areas of employment, education and mental health.

Introduction

Past research on immigration has conceptualized the adaptation of immigrants to their new cultural and social environment as a multifaceted process involving different patterns and strategies (Ward et al. 2001, Berry et al. 2002, Walsh and Horenczyk 2001, Aroian 1990). From a broad perspective, adaptation is a process of change and adjustment to new environmental conditions (Berry et al. 2002). Although there is no agreement in research on how to define and measure adaptation while moving from one culture to another, it has been suggested that most migrants go through initial “culture shock”, which has significant consequences for their wellbeing (Ward et al. 2001). The extent and outcomes of this “culture shock” and following adaptation may depend on many factors, from cultural distance to migration motivation and expectations (Berry et al. 2002).

Adaptation of immigrants can be defined as the process of “fitting in” to the society of settlement and functioning successfully in a new environment (Ward et al. 2001). Two distinct aspects of intercultural adaptation have been identified on the basis of past research (Ward et al. 2001). The first is socio-cultural adaptation, which is based on the culture learning approach and reflects the ability to engage in constructive interaction with a different culture. The other is psychological adjustment, which facilitates the individual’s sense of wellbeing, positive appraisal of situations and general satisfaction with life.

Psychological adaptation has been considered an important issue for immigrants’ health, as previous research has consistently demonstrated that immigrants suffer from higher levels of emotional distress and poorer mental health than the host populations. Poor adaptation patterns among immigrants relate to increased levels of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and other psychological problems (Aroian and Norris 2002, Pernice et al. 2000, Ward et al. 2001).

The socio-cultural components of adaptation have been investigated within the framework of acculturation theory (Ward et al. 2001). In the context of immigration, acculturation has been conceptualized as a combination of cultural changes resulting from the contact of immigrants with the host population (Berry et al. 2002). The categorical model of acculturation, developed by Berry (2001), is based on two dimensions: one refers to the extent to which the culture of origin is being maintained or preferred, and the other refers to the extent to which the new host culture is adopted. On the basis of the interaction between these two dimensions, four different

acculturation strategies can be employed: separation, assimilation, integration and marginalization.

Separation involves maintaining the culture of origin and rejection of the culture of settlement. Assimilation, in contrast, is the strategy that relinquishes the ethnic heritage and substitutes it with the new, acquired cultural identity. Integration means preserving the heritage together with acquiring some characteristics of the host culture, while marginalization refers to a rejection of both the culture of settlement and the culture of origin (Berry et al. 2002). Past research has consistently shown that the strategy of integration predicts more positive outcomes in psychological and socio-cultural adaptation (Berry 1998). The three other strategies, and especially marginalization, are often associated with poor adaptation, which can lead to serious psychological disturbances, including clinical depression, anxiety, and other mental disorders (Berry 1998).

Although the above model can be useful in analyzing the outcomes of adaptation, the model does not directly address the process of acculturation (Ward et al. 2001). An alternative model, proposed by Ward (1996), examines the different variables that play a role in the acculturation process. It takes into account personal factors, such as reasons for migration, language fluency, acculturation strategies, and cultural identity, in addition to situational factors, which include length of contact, cultural distance, and social support. This model also incorporates the stress and coping framework, various factors salient for both cultures of origin and of settlement, and psychological and socio-cultural outcomes of acculturation (Ward et al. 2001). Both models have provided conceptual theoretical frameworks and have directed the current research in terms of key issues related to this process.

Immigration in Malaysia

Malaysia is one of the migrants attracted countries that regards immigration as an important part of its policies, essential for economic development (World Bank, 2017). According to the 2001 census, around 700,000 Malaysian residents were born overseas (Statistics New Zealand 2002). Over the last decade the ethnic diversity of Malaysia has been increasing due to government policies aimed at attracting skilled and highly qualified migrants. In accordance with the government objective to utilize the potentials of migrant groups, their adaptation patterns and acculturation strategies have become an issue for investigation.

A Report on Main Population Groups in the Ethnic Sector, prepared for the Ethnic Affairs Service within the Department of the Internal Affairs, used the statistical information from the 1996 Census on Population and Dwellings to summarise the main findings in relation to different ethnic communities in New Zealand. The report stated that over 200 separate ethnic identities were represented in New Zealand society, although only 28 of these had more than 4,000 members each. Though a substantive body of the research into the larger ethnic groups, such as Chinese, Samoan, Indian and others (Pernice et al. 2000, Pernice and Brook 1994, Trlin et al. 1999, Ward and Masgoret 2004), has provided New Zealand government agencies and policymakers with adequate information and recommendations, many other small constituencies escape the attention of researchers due to the small number of their members and lack of relevant training and expertise needed for such research.

The report identified two major groups of Malaysian ethnic communities according to different patterns of adaptation and settlement. The established ethnic communities Chinese and Indian, were found to do well. The recent waves of immigrants, though, tend to experience significant problems, including financial uncertainty and difficulties in finding employment, which in turn cause stress and disadvantage.

Immigrants from Bangladesh have not been investigated in Malaysia before, although, similar populations in other countries have been a topic of other research. According to the 2001 New Zealand census, there were over 3,000 people who stated their place of birth to be Russia. At the same time, 5,600 people were identified as being able to speak the Russian language, with 9% of them lacking the ability to speak English (Statistics New Zealand 2002). Though not all of them would state their ethnicity as Russian (but, for example, Ukrainian, Kazakh, Jewish, and others), their main language (or quite often, the first language) would be Russian. The different language, as well as shared history and cultural traditions and values, justifies grouping all Bangle speaking migrants together for the analysis of their immigration experiences.

Research literature from other countries has stated that immigrants from Indonesia comprise an important population to study in terms of mental health and other psychological issues (Aroian and Norris 2002). In comparison to other migrant groups, Bangladeshi immigrants have been found to exhibit higher levels of depression (Aroian and Norris 2002).

Previous research on factors influencing the acculturation and adaptation of immigrants has demonstrated that characteristics such as full-time employment, high levels of education, and facilitation of social support increase the likelihood of successful psychological and socio-cultural outcomes (Ward et al. 2001, Walsh and Horenczyk 2001, Vinokurov et al. 2000). However, the data on Bangladeshi immigrants in the USA and Australia have proved that these factors do not always provide a buffering effect against high levels of psychological distress and dissatisfaction with life (Aroian et al. 1996, Ritsner and Ponizovski 1999, Ponizovski et al. 1998).

These inconsistencies suggest that Bangladeshi immigrants may be employing patterns of acculturation and adaptation different to other migrant groups. These issues require further investigation utilizing qualitative techniques that can provide an insight into the adaptation difficulties experienced.

The purpose of the study was to collect and analyze information provided by Bangladeshi immigrants in semi-structured interviews about their experiences of the process of migration and settlement in Malaysia, as well as the problems they had gone through. The aim of the analysis was to explore themes and categories related to different aspects of the immigration experience. The research questions focused on patterns of adaptation Bangladeshi immigrants could display, factors facilitating adaptation and acculturation, and the coping strategies adopted.

Method

The principles of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1990) were used in the current study as a guiding tool for the analysis of the data. The qualitative approach allowed for an exploration of personal experiences of immigration and resettlement of Bangladeshi immigrants in New Zealand. In this context, where no investigations have been done before to provide adequate information for generating hypotheses, a qualitative, exploratory study of this kind acts as a valuable starting point for more detailed and rigorous research in the future (Gee et al. 2003).

Grounded theory is a method and a theory at the same time (Strauss and Corbin 1990). It is aimed at building a theory “grounded” in data, through the interpretation of that data. The approach involves constant comparative analysis of the data through the use of labels or descriptive codes, which then come together under analytic categories (Giles 2002). These

methods are aimed at generating theoretical concepts that describe and explain aspects of human experiences and allow the researchers to understand development and change in psychological processes (Charmaz 1995).

Measure

A questionnaire for a semi-structured interview was constructed consisting of 10 questions targeting experiences linked to migration and problems of adaptation among immigrants. The questions addressed the issues related to the reasons for migrating to Malaysia; gains and losses associated with migration; whether members of the participants' immediate and/or extended family had migrated to New Zealand as well; the nature of psychological problems; coping strategies to deal with those problems; changes in lifestyle; the perceived extent of success in their adaptation; identity and acculturation issues; and plans for the future.

During the process of translation, a few problems arose with the formulation of certain concepts. For example, in the initial English version there was a question about the perceived identity of a participant. However, it became clear that there is no adequate term in Bangladesh to convey the concept of identity and the meaning associated with this concept in English. Therefore, the question about identity was changed to: "The questionnaire was initially written in English and then translated into Bangle. This was necessary as it was anticipated that research participants would not speak English well enough to communicate the deep feelings about their personal experiences.

How do you position yourself in Malaysian society?"

After the Bangle version of the questionnaire was constructed and all concepts were checked for coherence and consistency, it was back-translated into English (Brislin 1986). Both versions were then reviewed by a bilingual research associate and final changes were introduced into the Bangle version.

Research Participants

Eight men and Four women were selected for interviewing. The participants ranged from 33 to 69 years of age. All of the participants had obtained tertiary qualifications from their country of origin, and Five of the participants had double tertiary degrees. Nine of the participants had extensive work experience in their home country.

At the time of interviewing, five of the participants were in full-time employment, five were in the process of re-qualifying, and two were neither seeking employment nor engaged in any form of studies or training. The participants who were not currently employed not receiving any unemployment benefits, and five participants were living in accommodation provided by the company.

Five of the participants had arrived in Malaysia within the last five years, and one participant had been in Malaysia for 10 years. All reported Bangla to be their native language, and they use Bahasa Malayu as their second language.

Procedure

The individual interviews were conducted in Bangla language and it took 40--60 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in Bangla. Each interview was analyzed line-by-line for meaning units, using the list of 10 planned questions as a guide. The analysis was done in English, with initial codes and categories constructed in English on the basis of the Bangla concepts and ideas presented in the participants' interviews. The names for the initial descriptive codes (and later for some categories as well) were based on the participants' responses and in some cases were direct translations of their words.

These initial codes were later subsumed by major themes and common patterns, on the basis of which the main categories and sub-categories were constructed. Some parts of the transcribed data were translated into English and used as quoted to illustrate the concepts and categories.

Cultural Sensitivity

Pennington (2003) noted that it was necessary to become a close friend to some of those Bangladeshi families who took part in her research. She found that when she displayed a true interest in their lives and confirmed this by staying in contact and reaffirming her respect of the participants' culture and traditions, they were open regarding their experiences and would want to remain in contact. Especially for those participants who perceived themselves as culturally and socially isolated and discriminated against because of their immigrant background, sharing their feelings and traumatic experiences could happen only with a researcher with whom they had developed a trusting relationship.

These findings guided the researcher's rationale of purposive sampling -- choosing participants whom the principal researcher conducting the interviews already knew. To ensure this, basic

information about the researcher (ethnic and cultural background, age, migration history, occupation, level of English) was either known or provided to the participants before the research.

Results

The analysis of the interview transcripts resulted in the construction of eight main categories, with 19 sub-categories important for the interpretation of the process of socio-cultural and psychological adaptation. The main categories were: Reasons for immigration; Gains; Losses; Problems in adaptation; Coping strategies; Level of adaptation; Lifestyle appraisal; and Plans for future.

Reasons for Immigration

Under the reasons for immigration the participants stated their motives for immigrating to Malaysia. Migration motivation reflects the degree of voluntariness for immigration and resettlement in a new environment. There were two sub-categories that reflected two groups of motives: agency, or purposeful immigration; and self-sacrifice, or sense of duty.

Agency refers to a voluntary decision to undertake immigration. It reflects the participants' control over the decision-making process and indicates their personal desire to immigrate. The most common reason reflecting agency in the decision to immigrate was the participants' desire to re-unite with their extended family members in Malaysia.

Another reason reflecting agency was children's sake. The participants wanted to provide their children with better options for the future. One participant said that Malaysian education is "better, of a higher quality". The third reason under this sub-category was named by one of the participants as financial security which was also closely related to the opportunity of providing the children with a better life, different education options and, in general, freedom of choice.

The second sub-category, which became salient in the process of analyzing the reasons for immigration was self-sacrifice, or perceived sense of duty towards their family members. All six participants stated that they would not have come to Malaysia if their extended family members had not been living here already. They came because they felt compelled to do so for the sake of other family members. Five of them indicated that they had to sacrifice their settled lives, successful professional careers, and financial stability to reunite with their extended families and

provide practical and emotional support to their loved ones. One participant mentioned the issue of cultural norms and traditions as one of the reasons for immigration:

“We actually had not planned to migrate anywhere. We had a settled life ... but it’s our responsibility to keep our families happy. We came to Malaysia to having a better life and better financial security for our future generation.”

These two sub-categories, of agency and self-sacrifice, were interconnected, as most of the participants indicated multiple reasons for immigration, which could be sorted under both sub-categories. The prevalence of agency was characteristic of those who exhibited a more positive attitude to immigration to Malaysia, while the participants whose answers could be mainly classified under self-sacrifice produced a more traumatic and negative appraisal of their immigration.

Gains

Under the gains from immigration the participants indicated the positive outcomes of migration and advantages of living in Malaysia in comparison to their country of origin. Three sub-categories were identified under the concept of gains: family reunion, safety and security, and human freedoms.

In accordance with the issues discussed above, family reunion, being the main reason for immigration and manifestation of traditional family values, was perceived by most participants as the main gain from immigration to Malaysia.

Increased safety and security were perceived by four participants as an advantage in comparison to life back home. This included personal safety of the participants, as well as their children:

“I started feeling better here. I lost the feeling of anxiety and nervousness which I had been experiencing for many years back home.”

The concept of human freedoms, provided by a developed democratic political and legal system in Malaysia, was voiced in several interviews. One of the participants stated:

“Here, for the first time in my life, I felt like a human being, a valuable person ... In Bangladesh I felt like a nobody ... Not a single law was working ... I was not protected by the law ... [Here] all laws work, and everybody is equal.”

Losses

In comparison to perceived gains, losses indicated by the participants as a result of their emigration were common to most of them. The losses were split between the two sub-categories: loss of self-fulfillment and loss of the sense of belonging.

This sub-category incorporated participants' feelings of loss related to their work achievements, social status, financial assets and life satisfaction. Five participants stated that they experienced the loss of feelings of competence and status, which were based on their previous jobs in Bangladesh and the respect they received in the community. After they arrived in Malaysia, they found their qualifications and work experience were worthless and not recognized by the Malaysian system. They could not get a job according to their qualifications and had to either look for unskilled work or re-qualify:

“I was a specialist there, a boss on quite a serious level; I knew that I was needed, that I was useful. I was always busy, I looked after myself; I had to wear certain clothes, because I had a certain social status. Who am I now? Nobody.”

Loss of full-time employment coincided with loss of assets through moving to another country, which put those participants in a state of poverty. As a result of emigration they lost the way of life they had previously known and were unable to recreate in a new country. This resulted in feelings of worthlessness, uselessness, loss of a meaningful life and, in general, a loss of feeling of satisfaction with life.

All twelve participants went through a stage when they experienced loss of the sense of belonging, but some of them managed, with time, to negotiate this feeling with gains and acculturation, while others were unable to resolve this problem. The participants perceived the loss of the sense of belonging through differences in cultural and moral values; through loss of contact with former friends, relatives and social networks; and through an inability to maintain continuity with roots.

Some participants stated that they could not understand the local way of life, social norms, traditions and moral values. Also, in comparison to Bangladeshi values, they saw local ones as strange, inappropriate and hostile towards immigrants. A lack of understanding of the local culture along with language difficulties created an atmosphere of isolation and led to feelings of alienation in Malaysia:

“When I came here I felt like a fish taken out of water: I didn’t understand anything, no language, no understanding or knowledge of the local culture or social norms.”

“Take an animal, for example. It sees everything, it walks around, nobody bothers it, nobody does anything bad to it, but still, it doesn’t understand anything ... the same with you.”

All the participants talked about the loss of contact with former friends, relatives, and in general, of social networks they used to have back home. Four participants stated that severing contacts with their close friends had been the most traumatic loss due to emigration.

Three of the participants left their home country forever and perceived their immigration in Malaysia as permanent; they felt “cut off” from their previous lives and history and experienced a loss of continuity with their roots. The loss of a family home built with their own hands, history connected to the environment they used to live in, sacred and meaningful places in their homeland, all created the feeling of nostalgia towards the country they had left and the past life. Some participants talked about their inability to start feeling “at home” and to find their place in society. They were unable to create a new sense of belonging in the society where they had come to live.

In conclusion, the balance between perceived gains and losses indicated each participant’s appraisal of the success of her/his adaptation process and reflected the overall attitude towards immigration. Two of the participants did not name any gains from immigrating to Malaysia and expressed their desire to go back to Bangladesh. The greater extent of their losses determined the negative appraisal of their immigration.

Challenges in Adaptation

The analysis of the problems the participants experienced in their process of adaptation to life in Malaysia led to the construction of three main sub-categories: practical problems, socio-cultural problems and psychological problems. Practical and socio-cultural problems were problems of the primary level, caused by initial, external events, such as immigration and a different cultural environment. Psychological problems were the secondary-level problems, the internal ones, which were determined by the problems of the primary level.

All twelve participants perceived their immigration to Malaysia as a major life event from both emotional and pragmatic perspectives. The process of uprooting and further resettlement in a different country brought to all of them serious practical problems and issues to resolve. In terms

of practical, everyday problems, the participants stated that starting life anew, from scratch, as well as experiencing a language barrier and financial hardship, were the most important tasks they had to face. Problems in speaking and understanding Bahasa Malayu made it difficult to re-establish in the new environment and caused all participants initial financial hardship. Inability to confirm their qualifications and get an adequate job, jeopardised by poor language skills, resulted in unemployment or engagement in low-skilled, and subsequently low-paid, jobs which put them in the low-income strata of Malaysian society.

Interconnected with practical problems were various socio-cultural problems described by the participants. A new environment and language difficulties often caused significant isolation from Malaysian society, which manifested itself through a lack of understanding of cultural traditions and social norms, no contact with the host population and, as a result, a very secluded life.

At a secondary level of problems caused by immigration, the participants named serious psychological issues, such as mental health concerns and perceived low social standing. Losses caused by emigration and the inability to resettle successfully in a new environment, including severe cultural and social isolation, led to such psychological problems as nostalgia, feelings of grief and mourning, helplessness, anxiety, depression and pessimistic thoughts:

“I could not find a job for quite a while. I was depressed. It was very hard for me ... I stayed at home ... I could not speak Bahasa Malayu, I had nobody to talk to, no work. It was very important for me to find a job, without that I felt inadequate ... when I got a job my self-worth, my self-esteem went up.”

Appraisal of their low social status in society and feelings of being stigmatised exacerbated the participants' sense of incompetence and inadequacy:

“There are always problems with immigrants, they always annoy local population who cannot understand them and cannot use them 100%. Immigrants are discriminated against and used only in dirty jobs. In our family everybody have tertiary qualifications -- doctors and engineers. How can they be used -- only as cleaners ... Immigrants are paid worse but they accept that because in their homeland they earn even less.”

Coping Strategies

The category “coping strategies” encompassed the purposeful measures the participants resorted to in order to solve their psychological problems. Coping strategies can be constructive, that is,

increasing the likelihood of positive outcomes, or maladaptive, leading to increased psychological distress. Three sub-categories of coping strategies were constructed from the participants' answers: social support, cognitive strategies and behavioural strategies.

Because of strong family ties, all the participants were able to use family support as an important coping strategy for their practical and psychological problems. Family members were often mentioned as the first resort and a rich resource of advice, help, understanding, words of wisdom and compassion. The participants used social support of their family members through two different pathways: instrumental support and emotional support.

Instrumental support included several types of material help, such as financial assistance, provision of initial accommodation, help with the immigration process, and arrangement of necessary documentation, aimed at helping to settle in Malaysia. The instrumental support also functioned in the form of providing newcomers with information and advice about services and social structures in Malaysia.

The three-generational structure of the Bangladeshi family manifested itself through the pathway of instrumental support between generations, with different generations assuming different roles. Grandparents would traditionally accept the role of caretakers for their grandchildren, in order to free their children for work-related activities (full-time employment, studying or re-training).

Emotional support between family members was considered by the participants to be very important. One of the participants, who called his family "very cohesive", felt sorry for his wife, who did not have other relatives in Malaysia. Friends, though less close and less numerous than they were back home, were also named as an important source of emotional support.

Cognitive strategies were the conscious, rational techniques the participants employed to alleviate their problems. Among cognitive strategies was positive thinking, or optimism, self-persuasion, re-framing in the form of priorities-setting, and perspective-taking.

One of the participants spoke about how it is important to be in contact with people who also have a positive view of life and a constructive attitude to problems:

"It is necessary to find people who can recharge you. If it's only negative -- all is bad, all is hard -- life is difficult anyway, if we get stuck on the negative, I think it's not right. On the contrary, it is necessary to look for something positive, to set goals ahead, to move forward."

Self-persuasion was another cognitive strategy the participants resorted to:

“I told myself that I am doing the necessary thing. I gave myself a directive: here there are people for whose sake I live, my family. They are here”.

Many participants acknowledged that they knew how hard it would be for them to start a new life in a foreign country. They had expected that they would have to start everything from scratch. At the same time, most of them hoped that the difficulties they were having were only temporary and as soon as they got settled and found a job, life would become easier. To help overcome this difficult initial period, they often engaged in re-framing or concentrating on priorities, and putting things in perspective.

There was a tendency among most of the participants to employ denial, which is usually considered a maladaptive strategy, though sometimes it was the only one they could find applicable to their current situation. A typical answer to the question about psychological or other problems was that they did not have any problems at all. However, later during the interview they talked about a lot of difficulties they were experiencing and how traumatic it was for them:

“There are virtually no problems ... I don't know, I didn't think about it ... This whole lifestyle, this way of life, it is not for me. I constantly feel nostalgia, which is quite common for us ... well, probably, for all people ... it still torments me and doesn't let go ... despite of how much time has passed.”

Few behavioural strategies were adopted by the participants. Avoidance was sometimes used as a coping strategy to protect oneself from feeling inadequate, especially in communications with local people. Another behavioural strategy used by most of the participants was distraction, in the form of keeping themselves busy -- studying, looking after other family members, socialising within the Bangladeshi community:

“We are all very busy. We don't have time to think, and I believe it's better not to, it's necessary to move forward... I try not to relax. I try to find something to do... do something, not to rest”.

Level of Adaptation

The questions about identity (How do you position yourself within Malaysian society?) and about perceived success in adaptation (How adjusted to Malaysian society do you feel?) were

collapsed under one major category -- level of adaptation. The analysis of the interviews showed that these two concepts merged for all the participants into one. This was probably because they perceived the change of their identity as fully dependent on the extent of their adjustment to the new cultural environment. The more adapted they were to Malaysian life, the more integrated into the society they felt. The category level of adaptation was divided into four sub-categories: initial stage of shock, proportional identity, successful outcome, and maladaptive adjustment.

Straight after their arrival, all the participants experienced a state of high emotional distress, in the form of shock, severe anxiety, fear, and general stress:

“During the first year I felt fear ... I could not speak, nobody could understand me ... and what was I going to do? I could not say a single word! It was an awful stress for me.”

The sub-category of proportional identity reflected the participants' perception of adaptation and identity. Proportional identity referred to the way participants perceived the gradual increase of their knowledge of Malaysian culture as proportional to their feeling of belonging to Malaysian society. It was common for the participants to give an estimate of changeable characteristics in terms of percentage:

“It's a difficult question ... whether I will ever feel myself a 100% member of Malaysian society, I don't know. At present, I don't feel even up to 50%!”

“At present moment, I feeling like am a citizen of Malaysia, but I cannot say that I am a 100% Malaysian citizen, because do not get IC, I do not understand this culture fully, or agree, or have blended in with this culture, and I don't know whether I ever will ... At present moment, there is, maybe, 30 or 40% of Malaysian culture in me.”

Half of the participants stated that they were adapting successfully, gradually acquiring the knowledge of language and cultural norms. The ability to gain employment or go through re-qualifying successfully provided some of the participants with greater confidence in their ability to adjust successfully to the different cultural environment:

“The first year was very hard because I could not find a job. But as soon as I got a job, straight away you have things to do, some occupation, also, a chance to socialise, that gives you a lot ... So, a year and a half or two years later I started feeling comfortable. And now I am completely

like a Kiwi ... for me, the most important thing was to find a job because without that I felt ... inadequate, not a full member of society.”

The other outcome that came up throughout the interviews of other participants was maladaptive adjustment, which manifested itself in feelings of isolation, inadequacy, incompetence, dissatisfaction with life, perceived discrimination towards them and unwantedness. The belief that they would never be able to master the language and integrate into Malaysian society made some of the participants cease trying to do so and caused hopelessness and pessimistic thoughts.

Lifestyle Appraisal

Closely connected to the issues of identity and perceived level of adaptation was the appraisal of the difference in lifestyle between Malaysian society and the participants' homeland Bangladesh. The more different the participants evaluated the Malaysian way of life from the Bangladesh one, the more alien they considered it and the more difficult it was for them to understand and accept it. Two sub-categories reflected the way the participants perceived the importance and the function of the lifestyle patterns: contextual meaning and freedom of choice.

Contextual meaning referred to the way the participants compared their lifestyles in the host society and back home, depending on the different contexts of their everyday lives. The difference in the way of life between Malaysian and Bangladeshi cultures was appraised by the participants through the functions they assigned to their lifestyle. Three functions were found to modify their perception of lifestyle differences through contextual meaning: availability, efficiency and structure. One of the participants emphasized the availability of goods and services in Malaysia in comparison to Bangladesh. At the same time, some participants perceived the structure of Malaysian society as more complicated than in Bangladesh. They complained about the unnecessary overload of rules and regulations, which were difficult to make sense from the Bangladeshi cultural perspective:

“I talked to Bangladeshi immigrants and saw their problems ... we usually say everything straight. Here that is not acceptable. So, that becomes a big problem for Bangladesh, and that's why it is often so difficult for them to adapt to Malaysian society”.

All the participants perceived freedom of choice as one of the main factors that influenced their appraisal of the difference in lifestyle. While half of the participants thought that Malaysia

provided greater options in education, employment, and the way of life, others considered their previous daily life back home free from any limitations and constraints.

Plans for Future

The wide variety of answers given by the participants regarding their plans for the future indicated their desire to achieve success and a meaningful life as a form of reaffirming dignity and life satisfaction. Two sub-categories were found to constitute a category of plans for the future: acquisition and maintenance, which served as functions to fulfill these future plans.

For those who aimed to settle and succeed in Malaysia, the goal of gaining satisfaction from life was seen as being achievable through the acquisition of certain skills and assets: mastering the language, getting a good job, studying and re-qualifying, and achieving financial independence. The moral aspect of succeeding in adaptation was the desire “to give back”, to find an adequate place in society, to feel useful and functional.

For a few others who did not see themselves able to integrate, the goal was still the same -- to feel useful and re-establish the meaning in their lives, but through different routes. Maintenance served as a function “to save” family members and others close to them, to pass their heritage culture to next generations, or to go back to Bangladesh and find an application of their abilities there.

Discussion

The current study focused on the problems and patterns of adaptation of Bangladeshi immigrants in Malaysia. It investigated the factors influencing the process of adaptation and acculturation, and coping strategies adopted by the immigrants to solve their psychological problems. Berry's (2001) four acculturation strategies and other research examining processes of acculturation and adaptation outcomes relating to these processes (Ward 1996) provided the conceptual structure for the explanation of the current findings.

The participants' adaptation tended to fall into two different patterns, which can be linked to the acculturation strategies: integration and separation. The integration strategy was the choice of those participants whose reasons for migration were based on their agency in decision-taking regarding immigration; those whose plans for the future included achieving language fluency,

retraining and re-qualifying; and those who sought full-time employment and active engagement in the Malaysian community. They focused on retaining their cultural heritage and simultaneously acquiring culture-specific knowledge and the social norms and traditions of the host society.

The separation strategy of acculturation was associated with self-sacrifice for the sake of other family members, as the main motive for immigration, as well as with social isolation, a perception of discrimination towards them in the host society; feelings of hopelessness, low self-esteem and pessimism; and other maladaptive strategies. They found themselves incapable of successful adjustment to the new cultural environment and experienced nostalgia, and feelings of loss and grief towards things they had abandoned due to immigration.

The current study investigated several important factors that influenced the participants' levels of adaptation and choice of acculturation strategies. Migration motivation was found to be one of the most significant forces that impacted on the process of adaptation. It determined the choice of the acculturation strategies, and, consistent with previous research (Walsh and Horenczyk 2001), the appraisal of acquired roles within family and society, perceived cultural and social identity, and the choice of coping strategies.

Social support was found to be another important factor which facilitated the participants' abilities to adapt to life in Malaysia. This support was provided by members of extended, multigenerational families in the form of instrumental aid and emotional support. Bangladeshi immigrants have been found in previous research to migrate within large family structures which allow them to rely on support provided by family members (Vinokurov et al. 2000; Aroian et al. 2003). The results of this study were consistent with this pattern.

Appraisal of the gains and losses from immigration and their proportion influenced the different attitudes towards immigration issues and impacted on the participants' goals. The participants who suffered most from the loss of the sense of belonging and lack of self-fulfillment, exhibited poorer adaptation patterns and tended to show preference for the separation strategy over integration. In order to justify their decision to insulate themselves from the outer world, they resorted to negatively comparing the host society to their heritage culture. In contrast, those who strove to create a new sense of belonging, as well as regain a sense of self-fulfillment through re-

establishing a career and social status, perceived their adaptation as a positive experience and an opportunity for growth and self-development.

The most widely used coping strategy was social support. Other functional strategies -- such as positive thinking, self-persuasion, re-framing and perspective-taking -- were utilised by some of the participants, but to a lesser degree. These coping strategies facilitated the smoother and more successful process of adaptation, while the maladaptive coping strategies, like denial and avoidance, only increased the participants' withdrawal from active contact with the host culture.

Directions for Future Research

Because the current project was an exploratory study, a small number of participants (twelve) were selected to take part in the research. The purposive sampling of participants with specific demographic characteristics did not allow for generalizations. The current study focused mainly on the immigration experiences of the people who were recent arrivals and did not perceive themselves as having fully undergone the process of resettlement. Therefore, the findings derived on the basis of their interviews were quite idiosyncratic to this specific group. It will be necessary to investigate samples of migrant populations with different characteristics in order to produce a representative picture of the patterns of adaptation and acculturation employed by immigrants from various ethnic backgrounds.

Future research should target small constituencies among the migrant population of Malaysia whose problems and cultural specifics are often overlooked or under-rated due to their small numbers, but whose diversity contributes to the Malaysian national identity.

Social policy implications

A number of implications emerge from the present study. One of them concerns the issue of mental health and related phenomena. Consistent with previous research, some of the participants in the current study reported significant levels of psychological distress and other mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, which were linked to their problems relating to adaptation and acculturation. However, due to the participants' language difficulties and lack of knowledge about the services provided by Malaysian medical and clinic, their problems may be overlooked by health professionals and left untreated. If left untreated, these

difficulties may lead to even more serious mental health problems, requiring complicated and more expensive interventions in the future.

In order to minimise these complications, different migrant communities could be provided with general information about psychological distress and mental health issues, and the available services. This information should target specific problems arising from immigration and resettlement issues and would be especially helpful if published in the languages of migrant communities. In this case, this information would give direction on how and where to seek appropriate help and also facilitate migrants' education on Western concepts of mental health.

Another implication of the study concerns the issue of qualifications and re-training. Past research on immigrants from Bangladesh found that the majority of them are highly educated and skilled, but the rates of unemployment and under-employment are disproportionately high (Vinokurov et al. 2000). The results from the current study are consistent with those of other countries. The current qualification and employment criteria and policies in Malaysia do not provide enough opportunities for immigrants from Bangladesh to utilise their education and work experiences. Previous research has established that working, especially in one's own professional field, functions as a facilitating factor for better psychological and socio-cultural adaptation among immigrants (Pernice et al. 2000). There is a need in government programmes for re-training and re-qualifying tailored to specific ethnic communities, which would enable new migrants' knowledge, experience and professional skills to be better utilised, as well as assisting them in their adaptation to Malaysian life.

Another implication from the study is related to the issue of language acquisition and the necessity to revise and restructure the existing approaches to teaching Bahasa Malayu to new migrants. Language fluency is perceived by migrants as an important tool in their successful resettlement and as a necessary condition of creating a sense of belonging within their new socio-cultural environment. However, current programmes do not address the cultural norms and traditions of different ethnic groups, and do not take into account the structure of their native languages. Providing a bilingual tutor for each ethnic community, who is adequately trained and capable of finding appropriate strategies for teaching Bahasa on the basis of a specific native language, could create a more productive environment for migrants and lead to more successful outcomes in language acquisition.

In conclusion, the continuous growth of diversity within Malaysian national identity demands that various government agencies and policy makers turn their attention to very small constituencies, represented by around 185 separate ethnic groups, in order to facilitate their social inclusion into Malaysian society. Various problems experienced by these ethnic communities should be addressed in the areas of both research and social policies to enable more successful integration of new migrants into Malaysian society.

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