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Socialisation Among the Rural-to-Urban Migrant Students in Georgia

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Abstract

Purpose. Difficulties and stress associated with cultural adjustment are significant issues affecting the life experience of the rural-to-urban migrant students. They may experience problems such as culture shock, psycho-social difficulties and interpersonal conflicts, which may negatively affect migrant students' socialization. The goal of this research was to identify socialization and adaptation related problems that migrant students encounter.

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Design/methodology/approach. In the framework of qualitative research method, the focus groups were identified and studied.

Findings. Majority of students had difficulties adapting to the urban environment. They felt uncomfortable in urban noise, traffic jams and crowded streets. For the majority of students living conditions worsened after arriving to the capital city. Because of the lack of free time, most of the migrant students could visit their families only on holidays. Some of them felt discriminated because of their language accent, taste and style. Most students plan to return to their home region and use experience and knowledge gained in urban places. However, some students do not plan to return because they don't see any career prospects back home.

Recommendations. It is recommended to develop specific types of interventions that will target the unique needs of rural-to-urban migrant students. Training and educational programs can be done to increase students' awareness of available services. In addition, creating a more flexible and tailored environment, where students can actively engage in various activities in order to increase the quality of their socialization, will be beneficial.

Keywords: *Acculturative stress, cultural adjustment, migrant students.*

Introduction

Migration can be defined as a phenomenon of individuals moving from one country to another (external migration), or from one place or locality to another in that country (internal migration) (Kanekar et al., 2010). The movement itself could be in groups or individual, unidirectional or bidirectional, intermittent or continuous (Atri et al, 2006). Seeking employment, education and a better life can be considered as the main reasons for global migration.

Since education is one of the major reasons for migration and most universities are located in Tbilisi, the capital city of Georgia, there are a lot of students who migrate from rural areas to the capital. The capital city can be described as metropolitan and multicultural compared to the rest of the country. A large number of the students admitted to universities in Tbilisi come from provincial cities and rural villages. These students face a number of challenges in the new environment.

Cultural adjustment and stress have long been considered significant issues affecting the experiences of the rural-to-urban migrant students. Migrants have difficulty adapting to the factors that are characteristic of the big city: noise, crowd, big traffic. Migrant students tend to have limited social capital and family support and financial issues (Lee et al., 2016).

It is important to consider financial demands too, as the typical stressor associated with university life, especially for the low-income country like Georgia (Asatiani and Verulava, 2017; Verulava and Dangadze, 2018; Verulava, 2019). According to the study, 62% of Georgian young adults are financially assisted by their parents; Students living in Tbilisi are more financially independent (35%) than students from other cities (27%) and from rural areas (20%) (Omanadze et. al., 2016). Most of the students (57%) often spend free time with friends, but 25% - rarely. It is worth to note, that 24% of students experience discrimination for their education levels and 31% for economic situation (Omanadze et. al., 2016).

Various studies have confirmed that the levels of stress are high in students (Marakushin et al., 2016; Brajsa-Zganec et al., 2017; Avci et al., 2016; Conner, 2015; Verulava et al., 2015). According to study 60.2% of the students have experienced loneliness and economical support (81.6%), problems with social communication (46.9%) and lack of psychosocial support (35%), which were the important needs during university education (Özdemir and Tuncay, 2008).

In addition to dealing with financial demands, academic pressures, loneliness, rural-to-urban migrant students also struggle to adapt to the urban culture and lifestyle (Tung, 2011). These adaptations have various social, health and academic outcomes (Mui, 2006). Students may experience problems such as culture shock, psychosocial difficulties and interpersonal conflicts (Desa, 2012), confusion about role expectations in the capital city and language barriers (Sodowsky & Lai, 1997), lack of social supports, homesickness, mental health problems (Crockett et al., 2007). Sometimes they even experience psychological discrimination from people living in the city that causes more stress.

This process of social, psychological, and cultural change that takes place when there is a continuous interaction and contact between individuals from different cultures is known as acculturation (Berry, 2006; Nwadiora & McAdoo, 1996). Acculturation has four categories—assimilation (condition where

the immigrant identified solely with the new culture and rejects the heritage culture), separation (situation where the individual was involved only in his native culture and rejects the receiving new culture), integration (adopts the receiving culture and retains the heritage culture), and marginalization (lack of involvement in either cultures and rejects both the heritage and receiving cultures) (Berry, 2006; Schwartz, 2010; Dow, 2011a). Assimilation, separation and marginalization were associated with increasingly poorer mental health outcomes.

This perception and experience of discrimination may negatively affect rural-to-urban migrant students' socialization with people from the capital city and thus exacerbate acculturative stress. The difficulty of coping with these acculturative stressors has contributed to the increased incidence of mental health problems, higher levels of anxiety and depression symptoms among rural-to-urban migrant students (Crockett et al., 2007; Constantine et al., 2004; Dow, 2011b; Budakoglu et al., 2014).

The goal of this research was to identify socialization and adaptation related problems that migrant students encountered after moving to urban places.

Methodology

The survey was conducted to do the research and focus groups were interviewed. Total of 4 focus groups were identified and interviewed, in the time period of March-May 2019. All interviews have been recorded and later transcribed for the data analyses purposes. The average duration of interviews for each focus group was ninety (90) minutes. In total, 24 people from different regions have participated in this survey. In addition, students were from different universities (Tbilisi State University, Ilia State University, Tbilisi State Medical University, Caucasus University), different courses and different faculties (12 women, 12 men, 6 first year student, 6 second year student and 12 third year student). Prior to the focus group interviews, each participant was informed about the purpose of the study and written informed consent was obtained. We informed participants that they had the

right to refuse participation and could retract their responses at any time during and after participation.

The study group consisted of students from different regions, who had arrived in Tbilisi. Selection:

- Target group – Migrant students from regions.
- Gender – Male and Female Students.
- Different country regions – In order to see the correlation between the distance and quality of adaptation - focus groups consisted of migrant students from different regions of the country.
- Academic Degree – Students who were pursuing a Bachelor's degree.

The results of this study are presented in four blocks: 1. Independence 2. Social discomfort 3. Emotional and physical stress 4. Integration in society and urban space. The Independence block is about students' source of income, their role in decision making, and the involvement of parents in their university life. The second block is mainly focused on urban environment and living conditions. The third block refers to the psychological and emotional state of students, where the quality of student independence and the positive and negative impacts of urban environment are united, while the fourth block refers to their lifestyle, friends and their involvement in various activities.

The main limitation of the survey was the fact that focus groups were found in only a few universities due to the lack of time.

Ethics

Research was carried out in accordance to ethical principles of scientific research, the Declaration of Helsinki and has been approved by the Research Ethics Board of Tbilisi State University.

Results

Independence

Students who arrived in Tbilisi to study fall into three main categories:

The first category includes students who rarely visited Tbilisi.

"I visited Tbilisi rarely, mostly for different music festivals, sometimes I arrived to visit my relatives for a few days, but I haven't stayed for a long time. I did not have any other connection with Tbilisi."

Majority of respondents share this opinion (46%). Most of them are from a western part of Georgia.

The second category includes students who had already visited Tbilisi several times. *"I have been in Tbilisi 5-6 times before my arrival."* A small part of the students share this opinion.

Students who were frequent visitors fall into **the third category**. *"I have visited Tbilisi many times. I have always been spending my holidays and free time here."* *"I was in touch with Tbilisi, my uncle and aunt live there and I often came to visit them, sometimes for a month, for a week or just for a few days."* 39.6% of respondents shared this opinion.

When asked how they deal with household and family affairs, such as: house cleaning, cooking and etc., part of students (The first category) answered that they shared housework with their roommates while the others did it just by themselves (The second category).

The first category of students (42%) noted that they have received help with household activities. Most of them were women. They did not have any kind of discomfort while doing housework. Most of them considered it as one of the essential criteria of independent life. The main reason for this was the desire to gain a certain role and an experience at that stage of life. At the same time, students also felt the responsibility for the people with whom they lived and thus they were trying to share responsibilities.

The second category of students did all the housework independently (25%) and most of them lived alone. However, unlike the first category of students, they had problems with housework. The issue was especially problematic for males, because as noted, they encountered things like cooking and house cleaning for the first time in their lives. In addition, the majority of students from the second

category worked and that could be considered as a problem due to the lack of time, because they had to devote time to many other activities (work, university, friends, family affairs, etc.). A small part of the focus group members (33%) thought that this issue was not a problem for them and they dealt with the household activities quite easily.

Social discomfort

Urban factors, that disturbed the migrant students after their arrival were: a noise, traffic jams, crowded places and a long commute time. Most of the respondents identified the noise as the major problem (52%). The problem was more evident in the city center, where the nightlife is relatively active. The above mentioned factors lead to insomnia and a number of stressful problems that also affect their university life, however, it should be noted that the place was still favorable for them, because of the short distance to the university. *"This issue is very problematic for me because I live on a noisy street. It's always too much noise outside, that starts from eleven o'clock and lasts up to five o'clock in the morning.*

The second problem was heavy traffic on the streets. Students often had problems getting to work and to the university on time. *"The public transport, busses and underground are always overloaded and that is very problematic for us"*

Two students mentioned crowded places as a cause of stress and discomfort, but eventually got used to it.

The long distance was also a big problem, especially for those who were affected by overloaded transport. Transportation during rush hours took too long which was very tiring for students. Due to such a big time loss, there was almost no free time left for them for relaxation and entertainment.

The majority of students stated that the air pollution was the most problematic issue in the city. *“The main difference between the city and the countryside is air. The air is fresher in my village than here. The difference is quite obvious.”*

Another problem that made students feel uncomfortable was too little space to live compared to the one in their home regions, where they have lived in a big private house with the backyard. So they found it difficult to adapt the small apartments.

“Since I had been living in a big house in my village, I found living in a small apartment uneasy”

When asked the question whether their living conditions improved or not in Tbilisi, three categories were identified. Students who felt more comfortable in the region (56%), students whose living conditions improved (25%) and students whose living conditions were almost unchanged (19%).

Students from the first category thought that they were much more comfortable at home than in the capital, but they were not dissatisfied either. The main issue for these students was related to nostalgia and certain emotions they experience towards their home and family.

"I can not compare, of course I felt more comfortable and much more secure at home than here in Tbilisi. For me it is very emotional... I miss my house and my environment"

Students from the second category thought that conditions have improved, especially: they had access to internet, 24 hour water, gas and etc. Besides, it was easier to find various services and entertainment centers in Tbilisi (Shops, banks, cinemas, theaters). They thought that life in Tbilisi gave them more opportunities for development.

"Tbilisi gives us a perspective, more comfort, I'm close to everything ... The house itself is very comfortable compared to my house in the region, because there was no constant water and electricity"

Students of the third category believed that their living conditions were almost unchanged and therefore faced no particular problem:

"I am satisfied; I've got used to it. There was no problem with the adaptation"

Emotional and physical stress

After answering questions about how pleasurable or disturbing was the feeling of independence and responsibility, the respondents' answers were divided into two categories. The first category included students who enjoyed an independent life and wanted to lead their own life and handle its difficulties. This assumption received the highest support (75%).

"I like the independence and somehow I want to be more confident in my abilities and decisions, personally I like it. I want to be even more independent."

The second group of students (17%) found such kind of 'independence' uncomfortable, because it meant more responsibilities than they could handle. The majority of respondents in this category were women.

"That feeling of independence requires some responsibility, and if it is serious, I do not know if I can handle it alone. Also these serious responsibilities are pretty dull for me for now and I try to avoid them. On the other hand, sooner or later I'll try to be independent and I think I'll be OK"

When asked a question whether changing the place of residence influenced their psychological and physical condition or caused insomnia, headaches, anxiety and etc. the respondents' opinions were divided into several categories.

For the first category (15%), changing the place of residence only affected their psychological condition. The first stage of adaptation caused many difficulties for them. For example, they didn't want to stay alone in the city and some of them have even been facing emotional stress. They did not

want to go to university or go for a walk in the city. But over time, they have become adapted to the new environment and were no longer troubled. Most of the respondents expressed similar opinions.

"Before leaving the place of residence, I always thought that I would easily adapt and I would not have any problem. But as soon as I had arrived and my parents had left me, I did not want to stay here and wanted to go home. I was very disturbed emotionally, I did not want to leave home, I did not want to go to university, but soon enough I got used to it and now I think that everything is okay. The first few months were very difficult for me, but then I got used to it."

For the second category (15%), changing the place of residence was reflected in their physical and psychological health. The loud noise of the city caused insomnias, and getting to the destination was very tiring and stressful.

"I can't sleep because of the noise in the streets. I have a long way to go from one point to another, which affects the organism, causes tiredness, exhaustion and insomnia."

For the third category of students (35%) changing the place of residence didn't cause any physical problems or psychological stress. They adapted to the new environment quite easily.

"I have neither psychological nor physical problem. I know many people who cannot sleep in the new house or in the new environment. Luckily I have no such kind of problems."

A small group of students (6%) spoke only about physical adaptation and emitted insomnia, weight loss, fatigue as symptoms, but the psychological adaptation was not an issue for them.

"My problem was that I had insomnia and loss of appetite, and I had lost more than 10 kg in less than 3 months, which caused great discomfort and fatigue; I needed almost two years to fully recover."

Integration in society and urban space

Students were allocated into three categories according to their answers concerning the friendship and new friends. The first category included the students who have acquired new friends and have no frequent contact with friends from their native region (54%). Their friendship circle gradually expanded. The majority of students in this category were on their third year of college.

"I have friends in my hometown, but we no longer get in touch. I got a lot of new friends here and I am very happy. I always try to find new friends, because I do not find it difficult to communicate with people."

The second category consists of students who have acquired a lot of new friends, and have never lost contact with old friends either (33%). Their friend zone expanded not only in the university but also in the neighborhood. Most of them are women and represent second, third and fourth year students.

"Yes I met lots of friends; except for university friends I also have very good neighbors too. Friendship circle didn't change; I can say that it expanded. If I had 5 friends earlier, now I have 15."

The third category consists of students who noted that the circle of friends has not changed too much, it has only increased a bit (13%).

"I didn't gain many new friends; I still prefer my old friends. And I am not good at communicating with new people."

When asked about how they spend their free time, students offered three options. One group of students spent free time attending various cultural and cognitive events with their friends (71%).

"I personally try to visit interesting places, or I spend my free time according to my areas of interest. I go to exhibitions, concerts, etc. which I enjoy too much. I also try to make my free time more creative and productive with my friends. I always try not to lose my time in vain."

There was the category of students who spend their free time home alone. And the reason for that is their busy study schedule (8%). They are all third year students.

"The amount of my available free time has drastically reduced, and the reason is studying. Still I try to enjoy my hobbies: painting and cars."

Some students note that they often go with friends in cafes and bars, and rarely to cinemas and theaters, because of the lack of free time (21%).

Some students face difficulties while navigating through the streets, but the majority had never experienced similar problems because they learned street maps and general directions in the capital very soon (42%). Those who faced such problems were mostly women. (33%).

"Although I have been in Tbilisi for a while, it is still a foreign city, I could not coordinate, I could not remember the direction of the route and often went to the undesirable place, that's why sometimes I was late to the university."

The third category includes students who currently don't use any kind of transport and prefer walking instead. (17%).

Each member of the focus group expressed satisfaction about the life in Tbilisi. But a small part of them (8%) noted that they were definitely going to return to the region specifically, after completing a University.

"I think I'll finish my university and I will return to my native region. There are so many people who know me, and I know them too. I will feel more comfortable there."

A significant part of the focus group members (21%) speak about returning to the region if adequate working conditions are created, which will enable them to further develop their careers.

"I love Tbilisi as a capital, as the heart of our country, and I love my native region too, maybe even more than Tbilisi. I also have a great desire to return, if I have the opportunity to get a good job".

Some students (29%) have not thought about this issue yet. They've spoken about the incompatibility of the working conditions in the region with their profession, although some of them noted that if working conditions were to improve they would reconsider and return.

"Of course, I'm going to return in my home region. I came here because I needed to get some knowledge and then use it in my region. It will be good for the country as well. The development of regions is the development of the country. Why should we have everything in Tbilisi when we have so many wonderful places? So I'm going to go back and return to help my region and develop it."

A small part of the focus group members (27%) do not plan to return to the region in the nearest future, because they consider the capital to be a better place for their professional development.

"I do not plan to return. The reason for that is that my area is not so well developed. So I don't see any prospect or future there, I will not be employed by my profession. I love my region but the development level and other things are more important for me."

We have received three options from respondents after answering questions about discrimination. A small part of students (4%) have become victims of discrimination because of their accent. Therefore, they often received mockery and cynical comments.

"This topic is very painful for me because the students who come from region naturally have a different accent. For example now I speak differently than two years ago. This happened because people were laughing at my accent"

One student (male) was discriminated because of his dressing style. He received a ridiculous comment from the lecturer, which led to the laughter from other students, which was a very painful experience for him.

"On the first course I went to this lecturer's seminar. My clothes were academic and the lecturer told me – are you going on a date? It was a great stress for me. Maybe this lecturer was joking, but I did not get it as a joke and felt insulted. I've often heard phrases from my peers - look what he is wearing!"

Most of the students did not become victims of discrimination (25%). Most of them were women.

"I never had such an issue and perhaps because I had a relationship with people who never paid attention to such things. I have not been in such situation"

Most students (83%) opted not to answer that question, so we do not know whether they were victims of discrimination or not.

Discussion

Majority of students had difficulties adapting to the urban environment. Students felt uncomfortable with urban noise, traffic jams and crowded streets. All these factors led to stress, fatigue and insomnia, which were further reflected on the university life. Living conditions of the majority of students have worsened after arriving to the capital city. Most students only visited their families on holidays, due to lack of free time. Some students felt discrimination because of their language accent, taste and style. Students also reported being anxious due to lack of knowledge about proper health services in the new environment. Most students plan to return to their home region to use experience gained in urban places to help the further development of their own region. However, some students do not plan to return because they don't see any career prospects back home.

Recommendations

It is recommended to develop specific types of interventions that will target the unique needs of rural-to-urban migrant students. Training and educational programs can be done to increase students' awareness of available services. In addition, creating a more flexible and tailored environment, where students can actively engage in various activities in order to increase the quality of their socialization, will be beneficial.

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