

Development of Intervention Program Based on Grit and Psychological Well-Being to Alleviate Acculturative Stress among Foreign Students

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Abstract

Studying in higher educational institutions can be particularly stressful, even more so if one is in a foreign country away from familiar people and environment. Stress related to acculturation could develop into psychological illnesses if left unaddressed. This study aimed at proposing a psychological intervention program founded on grit and psychological well-being to alleviate acculturative stress among international students in the Philippines. Nineteen foreign students were selected as participants for the first phase of the study that confirmed that grit and psychological well-being have a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.83$). Results further showed, however, that grit and psychological well-being both have a strong negative correlation with acculturative stress ($r = -0.90$ and $r = -0.80$, respectively). Five participants from the original roster were randomly selected to join Phase 2 which involved a qualitative investigation of their experiences. The data were thematically analyzed and these results were utilized in the development of an intervention program for foreign students. Levels of the variables were tested post-intervention to measure its effectiveness.

Keywords: foreign students, acculturative stress, grit, psychological well-being

Introduction

Rapid increase in movement for a borderless global community has caused many Philippine Higher Education Institutions to follow suit and set internationalization as a strategic priority. As an effect, student mobility was welcomed and the number of inbound foreign students in the country increased.

This influx did not come without challenges for the schools and the foreign students, such as those related to migration, racial discrimination, finances, climate, housing, language barrier, cultural adjustment, among others (Cheng, 2013). International students who travel and visit other countries for education may suffer from psychological illnesses due to separation from their families, difficulties in coping up and adapting to a new culture. Acculturative stress is one of the most common problems that occurs whenever a student experiences culture shock and separation anxiety. Berry, Phinney, Sam and Vedder (2016) defined it as a reduction in health status of individuals undergoing acculturation. This may affect the student's personal and academic life and hinder his or her stay in the host country.

Previous research claimed that among students, those who have higher grit (Guerrero, Dudovitz, Chung, Dosanjh, & Wong, 2015) and psychological well-being (Salles, Cohen & Mueller, 2014) are more likely to persevere, finish school, and achieve their goals. Grit and psychological well-being were found to be correlated – measuring grit is one way to recognize those who are at risk for low psychological well-being and identify those who can benefit from additional support, and vice versa. Vela, Smith, Whittenberg, Guardiola, and Savage (2018) and Schwartz et al. (2013), on the other hand, discussed the association of psychological grit and well-being to acculturation, respectively. They both mentioned acculturation positively influences the two variables. Understandably, acculturative stress has a negative relationship with grit and well-being (Revollo et al., 2010).

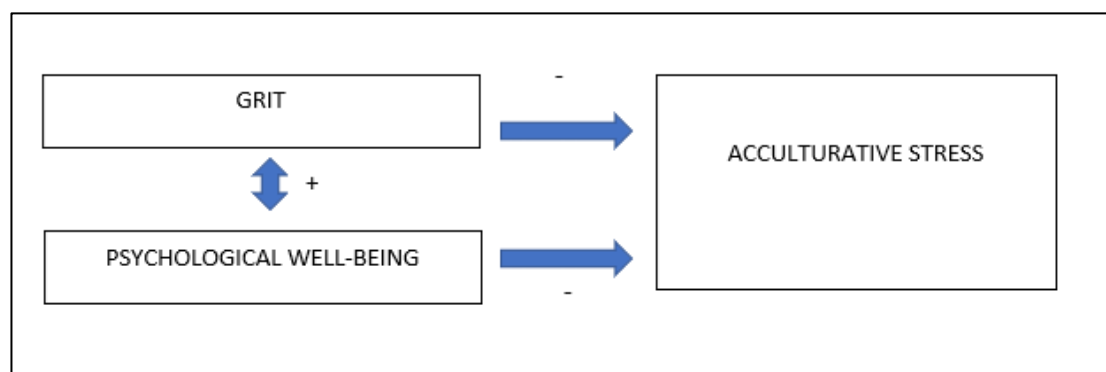


Figure 1: Relationships among the Variables

In this study, the researcher focused on proposing an intervention program grounded on grit and psychological well-being to alleviate acculturative stress among foreign students. Levels of their grit and psychological well-being were first measured then computed for any correlation. The results, alongside the qualitative data gathered during an interview, were used as bases for the proposed intervention program.

Literature Review

Roga, Lapina and Muursepp (2015) attested that internationalization is becoming distinctly one of the primary needs of colleges in Europe, as well as around the world. True enough, McKenna and her colleagues (2017) stated that in 2012, there was a worldwide increase of more than five million students who travelled abroad for education, doubling the number in 2005. In 2016, the greatest number came from Asia, which was 53% of the foreign students' population.

Yang and Cheng (2018) said that there are several benefits of being international students such as cultural learning and personal growth through cross-cultural adjustment. The Culture Learning Theory conceptualizes that cross-cultural travelers have to learn culturally-relevant social skills in order to survive in their host country or culture (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2017). It postulates that the factors affecting adjustment are knowledge about a new culture, cultural distance between home culture and host culture, language or communication competence. Foreign students leave their comfort zone and adjust to new challenges physically, culturally, and linguistically based on the location (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Unfortunately, when foreign students cannot adapt to these differences, they experience isolation, depression, and culture or transition shock.

Another psychological concern experienced by foreign students is acculturative stress, a process whereby they deal with and integrate both cultures in their everyday lives (Nailevna, 2017). Berry (2005) described that this happened when individuals are affected emotionally and physiologically due to their reactions to a new environment that has unfamiliar cultural values, customs, and expectations. International students are more exposed to stressors than their native counterparts. Some of these are financial concerns (increasing tuition fees and living expenses), emotional stressors, and academic demands (Kosheleva, Amarnor & Chernobilsky, 2015). They need to develop bicultural competence that is to maintain their own values as they adjust to the challenges of their host country. The need to master another language to keep up with the academic and life demands can also be taxing as it is time bound. The climate difference can also contribute to their overall level of stress. All these they experience, away from the usual familial support.

Ray and Brown (2015) noted that grit is a soft skill necessary for academic success and is important to survive stressful situations. Salles et al. (2014) found it to be a predictor of later psychological well-being. In their study, they discovered that people who are persevering are also happy and with low chances of experiencing burnout. Meanwhile, those individuals who have low levels of well-being are at risk for burnout and are bound to leave their programs rather than complete them. That is why they must be identified as early as possible and given psychological support to ensure program success.

Vela et al. (2018), Schwartz et al. (2013) and Revollo et al. (2010) discussed the relationships among the variables. Grit is correlated with psychological well-being and are both positively influenced by acculturation. It was noted that if a student successfully acculturates, this has a positive effect on his or her grit and sense of well-being. On the other hand, if unsuccessful, the student may tend to question his or her capabilities and be unhappy. Grit and psychological well-being, moreover, have a negative correlation with acculturative stress.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to propose an intervention program that could fight off stress brought about by acculturation, using the existing relationships among grit,

psychological well-being and acculturative stress. The levels of the foreign students' grit, psychological well-being and acculturative stress are also presented, alongside qualitative data on their experiences in the Philippines.

Statement of the Problem

This paper aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the levels of the participants?
 - a. grit,
 - b. psychological well-being, and
 - c. acculturative stress?
2. What is the relationship between
 - a. grit and psychological well-being?
 - b. grit and acculturative stress?
 - c. psychological well-being and acculturative stress?
3. What experiences do foreign students in the Philippines have in terms of living and studying in the country?
4. What design of intervention program can be proposed to alleviate acculturative stress among foreign students in the Philippines?

Methodology

In this study, the mixed methods approach was used. Phase 1 involved a descriptive-correlational method to present the levels of grit, psychological well-being and acculturative stress of the participants. Phase 2 involved a qualitative method of interviewing the participants on their experiences as foreign students in the Philippines. The data were thematically analyzed and utilized in the development of the proposed intervention program.

Participants

Nineteen foreign students who had completed at least a year of study in various universities in the National Capital Region and Region 4A of the Philippines participated in the study. They were chosen regardless of their gender, academic program, religion, and country of origin. The participants were contacted through schools' international students' associations and internationalization offices.

Ten male students and nine female students participated in the study (see Figure 2).

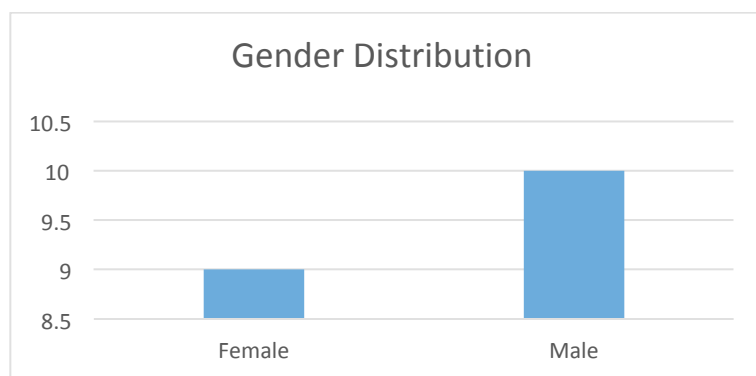


Figure 2: Gender Distribution of Participants

Of the participants, 58% were in Second Year College, 31% in Third Year, and the remaining 11% in their terminal year level. Majority of them at 42% were taking up pre-medicine, while engineering and business tied in second place at 26%. The rest were enrolled in hospitality courses.

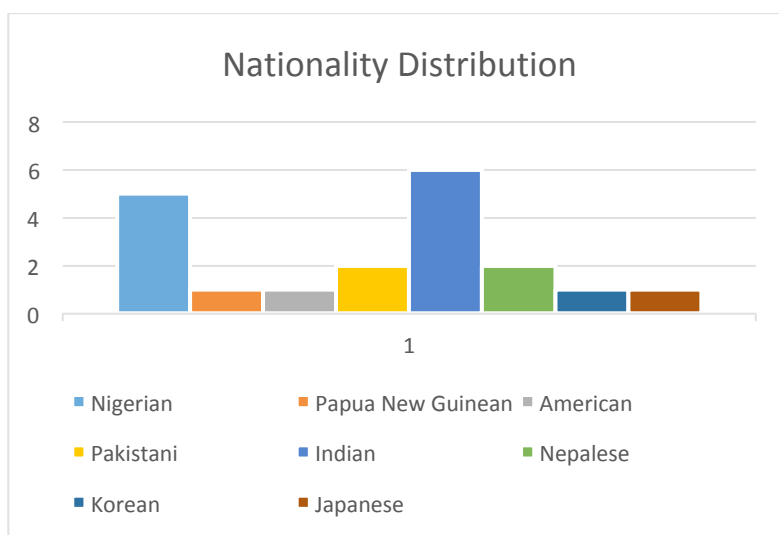


Figure 3: Nationality Distribution of Participants

Meanwhile, the countries represented were India (32%), Nigeria (26%), Pakistan (11%), Nepal (11%), Korea (5%), Japan (5%), United States of America (5%), and Papua New Guinea (5%).

Instrumentations

For Phase 1, the 12-item Grit Scale, 42-item Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale, and the 36-item Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students were used.

Grit scale. Angela Duckworth (Kim, 2015) developed the Grit Scale which has several variations: the 12-item and 17-item versions. Both versions are rated by assigning the following points: 5 = Very much like me, 4 = Mostly like me, 3 = Somewhat like me, 2 = Not much like me, 1 = Not like me at all; or for the reverse scored: 1= Very much like me, 2= Mostly like me, 3= Somewhat like me, 4= Mostly like me, and 5= Not like me at all. In the shorter version, the following items are scored as 5 = Very much like me, 4 = Mostly like me,

3 = Somewhat like me, 2 = Not much like me, 1 = Not like me at all: 1, 4, 6, 9, and 12. Meanwhile, the reverse scored items are 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, and 11. The points should be added up and divided by 12. The maximum score on this scale is 5 (extremely gritty), and the lowest is 1 (not at all gritty).

Ryff's Psychological Well-Being (RPWB) scale. The RPWB (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) was created by Carol Ryff. It has 42 items that have six dimensions namely self-acceptance, environmental mastery, positive relations with others, personal growth, purpose in life, and autonomy. Subscales with their respective item numbers are as follows: autonomy (1, 7, 13, 19, 25, 31, 37), environmental mastery (2,8,14,20,26,32,38), personal growth (3, 9, 15, 21, 27, 33,39), positive relation with others (4,10,16,22, 28, 34, 40), purpose in life (5,11,17,23,29,35,41), and self-acceptance (6, 12, 18, 24, 30, 36, 42). Participants are asked to rate statements on a six-point scale, with 1 indicating strong disagreement and 6 indicating strong agreement. Half of the items in this test are reversed scored: 3, 5, 10, 13,14,15,16, 17, 18, 19, 23, 26, 27, 30, 31, 32, 34, 36, 39, and 41. High scores indicate well-being in that aspect in the participant's life. On the other hand, low scores indicate that the participant experiences difficulty in that area of his/her life. This scale has a high internal consistency with a coefficient ranging from .86 to .95, and its purpose is to check an individual's psychological well-being (whether it is high or low).

High scorers in Self-Acceptance are said to possess a positive attitude toward the self and accepts one's positive and negative qualities. Low scorers are disappointed with what has occurred in their past life. As for the dimension Positive Relations with Others, high scorers have satisfying relationships with others, while low scorers are isolated and frustrated in interpersonal relationships. Autonomy high scorers evaluate self by personal standards; low scorers are concerned about the expectations and evaluations of others. High scores in Environmental Mastery mean a sense of competence in managing his or her environment. Low scorers in this dimension have difficulty managing everyday affairs. Purpose in Life high scorers have reasons for living while those who score low lack a sense of direction. Personal Growth high scores indicate a sense of continued development; low scores, on the other hand, mean a sense of personal stagnation (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (ASSIS). The ASSIS is a five-point Likert scale that was designed to assess the acculturative stress of international students such as guilt, perceived discrimination, perceived hatred, homesickness, fear, and stress due to change. This was developed by Sandhu (1994) and can be rated as follows: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Not Sure, 4=Agree, and 5=Strongly Agree.

Interview Guide. For Phase 2 – interviews – an interview guide was designed to probe the experiences of foreign students in studying and living in the Philippines. The 10-item guide was validated by three experts in psychology and language before being used. The questions centered on the students' challenges when they arrived, and strategies employed to alleviate the hardships. The roles of families, friends, schools, etc. were also dealt with.

Data Gathering Procedures

Letters of request were sent to schools and international students' organizations to solicit participation. Once the volunteer participants were identified, they were each requested to sign the consent form and oriented as to the design of the study. The researcher first conducted a pilot test before proceeding to the actual phases. Their demographics were taken note of for reporting. For Phase 1, three scales were administered namely, Grit Scale, RPWB

Scale, and ASSIS. The scores were computed and interpreted, and later statistically analyzed for correlations. For Phase 2, the researcher randomly chose participants for the interview, taking into consideration their scores in the ASSIS. The data collected during the interview were transcribed and initial ideas and thoughts were also noted down. After reading and re-reading, which important part to immerse in the data, the transcriptions were presented to the participants for their validation.

Data Analysis

Weighted means were used to assess the participants' levels of grit, psychological well-being and acculturative stress. To measure the correlations, Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient or Pearson R Correlation was used. This test determines the relationship between two continuous variables or at least one of the two variables. If proven to have significant relationship with the use of the probability value or significant value (strength of relationship), the Pearson r value will test the direction of the relationship, either direct or inverse relationship.

The validated transcription of the interview was re-read to ensure the researcher's closeness with the data. It was then subjected to the coding phase. The codes were generated based on their relevance to the research question. The next stage involved combining similar codes into themes. Any theme that did not have enough supporting data was discarded. Once the themes were established, the researcher underwent coding again to ensure that no code was missed. When the themes all fitted together, they were named and accompanied by detailed analysis. The final part involved choosing examples of lines from the transcription to illustrate the themes.

Results and Discussion

Phase 1

It was found that majority of the participants are Somewhat Gritty (47.37%), while 42.11% are Mostly Gritty and 10.53% are Seldom Gritty. Nobody fared as Extremely Gritty or Not at All Gritty. The average grit score of all the participants is 3.72 which could be interpreted as Somewhat Gritty-Mostly Gritty.

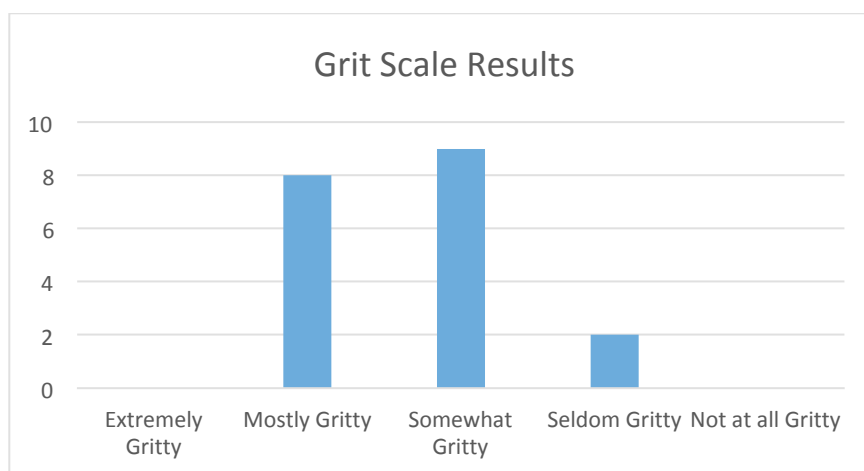


Figure 4: Grit Scale Results

Meanwhile, the average Psychological Well-Being score of the participants is 28.41 out of 42 (High PWB). Of the PWB dimensions, more participants scored highest in autonomy and positive relations with others, at 31.58% each. This was followed by purpose in life (15.79%), then self-acceptance and environmental mastery at 10.53%. Personal growth ranked lowest at 5.27%. The dimension that received the highest mean is purpose in life with 30.37 (high).

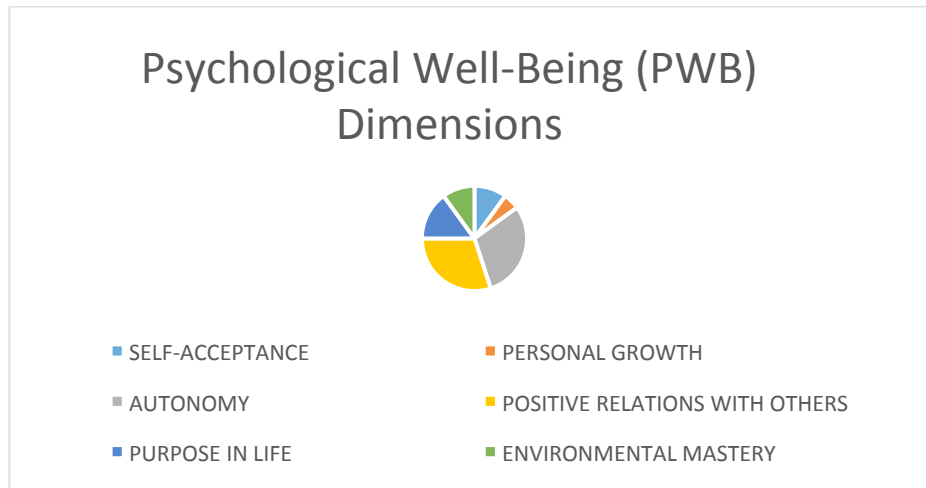


Figure 5: Ryff's PWB Scale Results – PWB Dimensions

Based from the results from the ASSIS, 47.37% of the participants scored high in acculturative stress. The rest had medium to low levels (52.63%). Mean score was 109.21 out of 180.

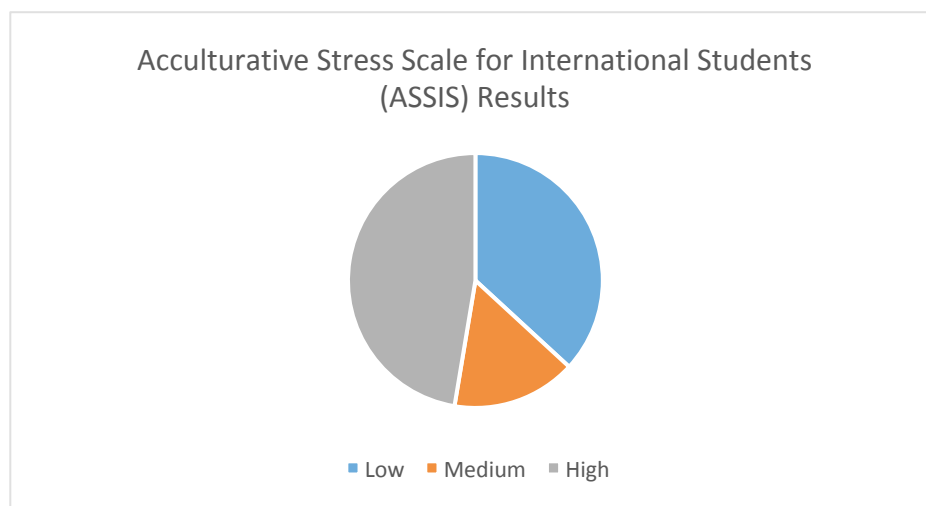


Figure 6: ASSIS Results

Upon statistical treatment, it confirmed the findings of Salles et al. (2014) that grit and psychological well-being have a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.83$). This means that as an individual's level of grit increases, we can expect his or her psychological well-being to do the same, and vice versa. This also suggests that individuals whose goal is to intensify their grit level, may work on improving their psychological well-being. The same is true if one

wants to improve his or her PWB. In a nutshell, individuals who are well and happy (PWB) may also be persevering to achieve long term goals (grit), and vice versa.

Meanwhile, it was found that grit and psychological well-being are both negatively correlated to acculturative stress. The values generated from their scores were $r = -0.90$ for grit-acculturative stress and $r = -0.80$ for PWB-acculturative stress. This states that if a student has high grit and PWB levels, his or her acculturative stress could be low. Or, if a student has high acculturative stress, his or her grit and PWB may be affected badly.

Phase 2

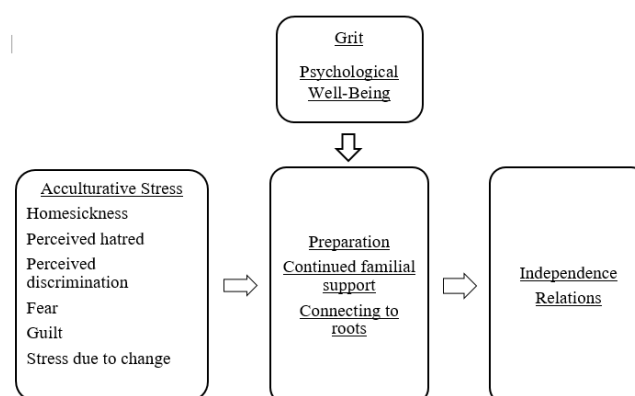


Figure 7: Emerging Themes from Interview

Based on the analysis of data obtained, this investigation noted the experiences of foreign students in the Philippines. It was found there are four major themes that could determine the impact of acculturative stress on foreign students and that they may also use to lessen its ill-effects. These are preparation, continued familial support, and connecting to roots, and are believed to work with grit and psychological well-being to produce positive results in the lives of foreign students.

“Preparation” encompasses not only the series of activities the international student had to do before leaving for the host country but also the sustained self-orientation before arriving in the Philippines. The former covers: researching in the Internet and books typically about what to expect from the country and its people, checking the website of future school to get familiar with its history and services, actually calling school officials to get more information and even visiting the country and school to have a tour.

“My dad even accompanied me to the Philippines to check on the school I would study in. We spoke with the school officials and I think that was helpful in preparing myself.” (Participant 14)

Others take advantage that friends and fellow countrymen have experience in studying and living in the Philippines, and they ask for first-hand information.

“It was helpful I have some former schoolmates who were here in the Philippines ahead of me. They provided me with much information enough to guide me even before I learn things directly.” (Participant 17)

“I also asked some of my friends who are already there to give me first-hand information.” (Participant 11)

Failing to prepare, as the old saying goes, has its own detriments.

“The preparations I made were mostly academics. Looking at it right now, I should have prepared even more by reading carefully about the new country and the school. I kept on asking myself if I am the right fit for the Philippines. I could have avoided that if I came a little more prepared.” (Participant 8)

As reported, they can continue this preparation by familiarizing themselves to the culture by asking and interviewing natives even after arrival.

“I ask. I'm very vocal when I do not know something.” (Participant 17)

Academic advising and sustained orientation activities can also help avoid future problems. The focus may not only be on expected academic performance but also on cultural assimilation. Workshops on the local dialect can be given to those having language troubles or anyone interested. Free and Kriz (2016) even proposed helping students with access to supplies, technology and practical help (e.g., leading them to markets or restaurants).

The next theme is “Continued Familial Support”. Prior to the technological era, international students reported familial support as one of their motivations for academic success. Fortunately, this time-calling and video-chatting is just one click away and this familial support can extend “virtually” regardless of distance.

“I talk to my parents back home and they constantly remind me that things will be fine...” (Participant 8)

“They are supportive and told me I should just focus on the goal... gives me advice, even until now. So I think that's helpful.” (Participant 14)

“I contact home frequently.” (Participant 17)

“...continued communication with family back home. They assure me that everything is well there and that gives me peace of mind being away. They tell me I can finish and that helps.” (Participant 2)

This supports a study cited by Furnham (2004), that relocating to another country for studies is not always stressful for students. They argued that stability and support in the family life can secure a child's well-being.

Since acculturation is a process that involves embracing another culture while rooted in the original culture, this regular contact back in country of origin is the chance to re-connect with the original culture and the familiar components it contains. This is related to the third theme that arose which is “Connecting to Roots.” This has two categories: connecting with people they have shared attributes with (e.g. fellow foreign student, fellow countryman) and talking about their origin.

“For some time, I was not eating well, and I looked forward to gatherings (with) fellow Nigerians every one or two weeks. That is when we cook our native dishes and we dance and bond.” (Participant 14)

“I talk with my fellow foreign students. It helps to know that I am not the only one who experiences this.” (Participant 2)

Furnham (2004) found that to maintain positive well-being of students, they have to maintain, in this particular order, a good network with fellow foreign students from the same country, host nationals, then other friends and acquaintances.

“(It helps that) I also have a best friend from the same country of origin, and we talk.” (Participant 17)

There must also be an emphasis on building up a socially strong school group that consists of international students coming from the same country, who can eventually mix with those from other countries, and then with domestic students. Group or individual counseling is an ideal activity to ensure early intervention for problems. International student associations may be institutionalized to provide an avenue for them to spearhead and participate in projects that can expose them to other people and the community that is hosting them. Nailevna (2017) attested to the role of including them in institutional and social activities in enhancing psychological adjustment.

It was a common report of the participants that remembering their roots and being given the opportunity to talk about it in their new environment can be “therapeutic” and stress-alleviating.

“...when they ask me to share about my country – it gives a different meaning to me being here. Taking versus giving.” (Participant 2)

“(The most fun thing about being a foreign student here) is sharing what we have back home.” (Participant 11)

International students arrive in the Philippines or any other host country with the “taking” mindset, that is, “take all the learnings,” “bring the diploma home,” “learn about their culture,” “speak their language,” among others. All these only add to the stress that they are already feeling because this requires either change or assimilation. This chance then to share about their own roots switches the “taking” mindset to a “giving” mindset and could lessen the stress they feel. Talking about one’s own country and practices can elicit a sense of pride and happiness.

A category under this is “symbiosis” wherein foreign students and Filipinos help each other to succeed. An example would be when a Korean student who had difficulty learning English partnered with a Filipino student who can and wants to be fluent in Hangul (Korean language). Another is an American participant who taught English to underprivileged children while in turn using the experience in the area to complete her social science research.

The two other themes fall under outcomes – “gaining independence” and “building relations.” If successful in overcoming acculturative stress, international students are able to enjoy the fruits of studying in another country, which are freedom and gaining new friends.

These two are the most commonly reported outcomes by the participants that they said they enjoy or look forward to.

“Gaining independence (is the most valuable learning). It proves I can do things without people's help all the time.”(Participant 11)

“Number one would be that I am able to prove to myself that I can stand on my own. The joys of testing myself and actually surviving. Also meeting new people and learning new things like culture and norms, etc.” (Participant 17)

“Independence. When I think about it, that's what I am gaining in return for all these. That makes me happy.” (Participant 14)

“Being able to prove that I can survive on my own makes me happy.”(Participant 2)

These findings support the Ryff's PWB Scale results of the participants where most of them scored highest in the dimensions Autonomy and Positive Relations with others (31.58%). Positive Relations with Others high scorers have satisfying relationships with others, while Autonomy high scorers evaluate self by personal standards and not concerned about the expectations and evaluations of others.

In conclusion, this study confirms the positive relationship between grit and psychological well-being, and the negative correlation they both have with acculturative stress. Further, the author unearthed themes that may help avoid or alleviate acculturative stress, as well as the positive outcomes that come from coping well with acculturation.

Intervention Program

Given all these data, the following intervention program is proposed:

Effective Acculturative Stress Intervention Program for International Students Intervention Description: As the name suggests, this intervention program aims to assist foreign students in better acculturating in their host country and diminish the stress it brings about. This one-week program includes stress management exercises, relaxation techniques, visualizations, mentoring assignments to improve on grit, and anecdote writing focused on big and small achievements to develop PWB.

Exercise	Objective/s	Duration
Stress Management Relaxation Techniques Breathing Exercises Expressive Art Technique ***Focus on alleviating stress***	To manage the biological and psychological symptoms of acculturative stress To teach the participants techniques on how to control or even positively express the manifestations of stress To reduce the harmful effects of stress to the mind and body	1 hour
Visualizations Positive Self-Talk	To effectively visualize the participants' Best Possible Foreign Student Selves To facilitate goal setting of participants in relation to	1 hour

	studying and living in the host country	
	To heighten positive expectations for the future	
Focus on PWB	To develop a sense of personal ability and adequacy	
Mentoring Role playing Sharing of experiences Group discussion on respective origins	To improve the level of one's grit	1 hour
	To develop esteem by taking on important "roles" and playing them during sessions that will serve as practice	
	To develop empathy for other members	
Focus on Grit	To reconnect with origins, appreciate what they have back home as something to look forward to while living in the moment of being in the host country	
Anecdote writing Strengths vs Weaknesses All the Good Things	To reflect on and celebrate past achievements, especially upon arrival in host country	1 hour
	To remind participants of their efforts and successes	
Overall	To remind them that these successes can be repeated	

Table 1: Protocol of Developed Intervention Program

This was run for four days within one week and levels of grit, PWB and acculturative stress were tested again for any difference. Only 17 from the original 19 subjects participated and the following results were generated:

There is only a slight increase in the level of grit at 3.96 (Somewhat Gritty-Mostly Gritty), while a 2.62 increase in the average score of PWB was registered (maintained at High PWB). There was no significant difference in the levels of grit pre- and post-intervention ($p = 0.1896$), but a significant difference was seen between PWB scores ($p = 0.0024$). Acculturative stress decreased from 109.21 (average) to 85.65 (low). The two-tailed p value is < 0.0001 (extremely statistically significant).

Scope and Limitations

The study focused only on international undergraduate students who have completed at least one year of study in the Philippines. They were chosen regardless of gender, religion, country of origin, and academic program. The age bracket required was 18 to 25 years. The participants all came from private higher educational institutions. These demographics were simply recorded for reporting in this study and were not used in the correlations. It is recommended though by this author that for future research purposes, these demographic variables be utilized to provide a more grounded and comprehensive result. The researcher was aware that language could be a barrier in the collection of data since the participants of the study are of different nationalities and their language proficiency levels are varying. Nonetheless, all interactions were rendered in the English language.

Future researchers may increase the number of participants in the first phase of the study to also increase the significance level of the findings. Only one individual conducted all the

phases of the study. Involving experts and other practitioners in the future to conduct the intervention may be welcomed.

The intervention program was conducted in a group setting except for the final activities on anecdote writing and reflection.

Conclusion

This paper supported earlier claims of researchers that there is a positive correlation between grit and psychological well-being, while they both have a negative correlation with acculturative stress.

Preparation, continued familial support, and connecting to roots can work together with grit and psychological well-being in order to adjust better to a certain culture. The fruits of a proper acculturation are independence and positive and new relations with others.

The intervention program is effective in alleviating acculturative stress among the foreign student participants and in increasing their PWB levels. However, grit was not significantly improved by the same, thus, the section addressing grit must be revisited.

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