

## Addressing the Problems Faced by Married International Students

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### Abstract

In recent decade, there has been an increasing rate of international students all over the world, but little is known about the marital life of this population. The need to understand graduate students' intentions to pursue an academic career has become more important over the years. While International students' cross-cultural adjustment has received considerable attention in the sojourner literature, there is a paucity of research that addresses the unique challenges faced by the married international students. Therefore, this study attempts to examine the empirical findings of various studies that explore factors which contribute to problems of married international students, and have an integrated perspective on the problems that this population faces during their study. The results revealed that acculturation stress, financial stress and social support are the utmost problems that international couples experience. This study offers suggestions for universities to provide facilities that would decrease international students' marital problems; also to prepare workshops to increase couples' knowledge of different conflict resolution methods which would be helpful to avoid conflict during their study abroad.

**Keywords:** *marital relationship, international students, socio cultural adjustment, academic problem*

### Introduction

To date, many researches are carried out on international students in various contexts and concepts. International students are different in many aspects such as cultural background, level of degree, marital status, their ability to adapt to the environment, and cope with stressful events. It is essential to find the most important issues that impact married international students, in order to help their marriage and their educational journey to head in a right direction.

International students are defined as "a group in transition who live in a foreign country to pursue their educational goals" (Ye, 2006), in other words, international students with various cultures and lifestyles come from different countries to continue their education in higher

levels (Bektaş, 2008; Lin, 2010; Sovic, 2009). During their study, these students face many pressures in the new environment (Ataca and Berry, 2010). They have to adjust themselves to different ways of living and learning, adopt to a new culture and lifestyle, and manage the requirements of graduate study (Goff, 2004; Gold, 2006; Katz, Monnier et al., 2000; Kline and Liu, 2005). Some studies (Rosenthal and Russell et al., 2008; Ryan and Twibell, 2000) reported that the issues international students face include, but are not limited to, adjustment to a different culture (J. Lee and Rice, 2007; Sherry and Thomas et al., 2010; Wa-Mbaleka, 2014); being far from family and friends, and maintaining personal identity (Salehy and Zuria et al., 2013); a new educational system (Wa-Mbaleka and Ryszewski, 2012); financial challenges (Sherry et al., 2010; C. J. Yeh and

Inose, 2003); communication struggles in a new language (Wa-Mbaleka et al., 2012); culture shock (Sherry et al., 2010; Ward and Bochner et al., 2001; Yuefang Zhou, Jindal-Snape et al., 2008); sociocultural stresses (Myers-Walls, Frias et al., 2011); some level of depression (Dao and Lee et al., 2007); and a feeling of isolation and loneliness (Marx, 1999; O'Reilly and Ryan et al., 2010). These are some of the several challenges that international students may individually face during their study in foreign country.

These challenges may also have different impact on the marital relationship of international students and their family's lifestyle (AlHorany and Hassan, 2011), in addition, married students experience different kinds of stressors, such as marital distress, that may influence their marital relationship outcomes (Brannock and Litten et al., 2000; Gold, 2006).

### **Married International Students**

Successful marriage brings meaning to the life of couples, and also act as a protective factor against the stresses that spouses experience in their life (Fincham and Beach et al., 2007). Marital relationships is defined as a union between two people, and it includes elements of happiness, intimacy, and commitment (Amidu, Owiredo et al., 2011). Therefore, a strong marital relationship brings meaning to the life of couples and benefits the family unit and society (Fincham et al., 2007; Orathinkal and Vansteenwegen, 2006). Conversely, marital issues, which consist not only of conflict but also discord and dissatisfaction, can have a prevalent impact on family activities, couples' health, well-being, and quality of life. Marital relationship and satisfaction with marriage are

key factors for having satisfaction in life, especially for international students that are struggling with a new environment (Gold, 2006). As Brannock et al. (2000) stated, family is a significant and effective factor for being successful in different life situations such as education (Memon, Salleh et al., 2014).

Although immigration to a foreign country to pursue higher goals in life is related to a person's growth, it is also associated with a series of inconveniences (Shekarchizadeh, 2011). In this regard, many researchers stated that socio-cultural and psychological stresses are related to moving to a new country and adapting to a new context (Goff and Carolan, 2013; Myers-Walls et al., 2011). Immigration causes conflict in marriage (Darvishpour, 2002), and marital problems of international students can make their lives more difficult in the new country (Salehy et al., 2013).

Married immigrants confront new experiences that may bring difficulties of adapting to a new environment and lifestyle, which could increase the probability of divorce (Akbari, 2008; Asadinik, 2009; Darvishpour, 2002). For example, Mahdi (1999) reported that among the Iranian couples who immigrated to the USA, about 66% of the marriages will end in divorce. Although there is no report of divorce among international students, the result of immigrant's divorce present an evidence for this population.

In this regard, in order to provide facilities that would decrease the marital problems of married international students, it is significant to understand the main problems that they face in their marriage. Thus, the aim of this study is to shed lights on the challenges and hardships felt by married international students.

### **Review on problems faced by married international students**

In this study, the review of the related literature encompasses studies on married international students from a global perspective. The literature presented is a combination of recent studies and previous studies carried out by notable experts in the field. Various studies have been conducted on different geographical, cultural, and contributing factors on the issues confronted by married international students. Following are the specific issues cited by researchers that need to be considered.

Different factors such as ethical, cognitive, interactive, emotional, and social elements effect married international students' quality of marital relationship. Married graduate students confront marital hardships during their study, which influence their success in different aspects of life such as their course of study, adjustment to the new culture and their marital relationship (Gold, 2006). As studies demonstrate, marital relationship of married international students may change while they are experiencing the difficulties in facing the new culture (Myers-Walls et al., 2011; Yu Zhou, 2000). They experience psychological pressures in their marital relationships during adjustment processes (Ataca et al., 2010; Ben-David and Lavee, 1994; Goff, 2004; Katz et al., 2000; Kline et al., 2005; Negy, 2003). Researchers claimed that the most common stressors are related to money, work, and the time spent away from spouse, as a person who is both student and married does not have enough time to spend with their spouse, on the other hand, the lack of positive communication leads them to have more issues as they do not talk over their stressors to decrease them (Alayi

and AhmadiGatab et al., 2011; Fuenfhausen and Cashwell, 2013; Gold, 2006; Katz et al., 2000; Negy, 2003). These studies also stated that financial strain, psychological stress, relationship conflict and sexual dissatisfaction are other problems faced by married international students. Madanian and Mansor et al. (2013) revealed that financial problems, children education, commitment, and intimacy were essential factors that effected the level of marital satisfaction among international students. Similarly, Salehy et al. (2013) stated that the challenges that married international students faced as being immigrants are categorized into psychological adaptation, socio-cultural adaptation, financial issues and marital conflict. Fuenfhausen et al. (2013) demonstrated that changes in family and lifestyle have negative impact on marital relationship of international students. Also, Alayi et al. (2011) reported that married university students experience difficulty with children. In this regard, Quinn (2002) addressed specific behavioural patterns in marital relationships of university students which lead to divorce during the course of study. These patterns consist of insufficient support from spouse, lack of positive communication, difficulties in adaptation to the new relationship situations. Lack of spouse emotional support may result in negative behaviour; conversely, a strong support increases the chance of success in the relationship of international students (Quinn, 2002). Moreover, social support has been considered as a barrier against stress (Poyrazli and Thukral et al., 2010). Previous researchers have established social support as a positive correlate to emotional well-being in international students population, also they pointed to the relative importance of social support as a coping strategy during cross-

cultural transitions (Copeland and Norell, 2002; Da, 2003; E. Lee, 2005; Misra and Crist et al., 2003; Poyrazli et al., 2010; Ward et al., 2001). The importance of an individual's support can be substantiated by de Snyder (1987) findings in a sample of immigrant women. Emotional support from one's partner was significantly and negatively related to depressive symptomatology whereas social support from outside sources was not. These points to the weight of direct partner support are the most important contributor to the well-being of accompanying spouses and marital health (Poyrazli et al., 2010). In this regard, several studies found that the married couples tend to be more satisfied with their life in foreign countries due to spouse's support, also they are better adjusted compared to a single international students (Selmer, 2001; Selmer and Suutari et al., 2011; Van Oudenhoven and Mol et al., 2003). As married students' intention is positively related to their adjustment (Gregersen and Black, 1990).

Regarding the findings of previous studies (Church, 1982; Fuenfhausen et al., 2013; Koyama, 2005; Madanian et al., 2013; Mori, 2000), financial difficulties have been considered as another key stressors for international students. Naturally, spouses share the financial implications of moving abroad, its impact on their budget and the likelihood of their marriage downgrade. Moreover, one of the main stresses for international married students is studying in postgraduate levels. The impact of stress in post-graduation levels on students' marital satisfaction indicates that the stress of postgraduate studies negatively influences the marital relationship of the spouses (Powers, Myers et al., 2004). S.-K. Yeh (2001), found that couples experienced tension in their marital relationships due to their

academic and other adjustment problems. Gold (2006) reported that graduate education is associated with the negative impacts on the marital structure, also the findings revealed that married graduate students adapt poorly to graduate school as compared to their unmarried peers. Ott (2004) summarizes these issues: "for those students with families, the real costs of graduate school have yet to be calculated financially, psychologically, or relationally". Brannock et al. (2000) stated that graduate school negatively influences the state of marriage due to the high level of stress and challenges, which result in high rates of divorce.

In addition, many researchers insisted that cultural differences and challenges of adapting to a new culture make married international students' life more stressful. Cultural difference can be a main cause of conflicts and distress among international couples (Biever and Bobele et al., 1998; Falicov, 1995; Heller and Wood, 2000; Waldman and Rubalcava, 2004), in this regard, studies found a relationship between cultural differences and marital satisfaction or marital quality (Kim, Edwards et al., 2012; Negy and Snyder, 2000). The cross-cultural transition may put more stress on the couple as a unit, as well as the quality of their marriage. Cross cultural literature points to the fact that the level of stress that international students encounter might increase levels of acculturative stress experienced among refugees, which are usually reported as being severe (Berry, 1990; Poyrazli et al., 2010). Accordingly, in the study on Mexican immigrants, Ribeiro (2012) examined the relation between acculturation stress and marital satisfaction. The results showed that acculturation stress increases marital distress, however, having good social and family

support will decrease stress and negatively influence marital distress. Also, Yu, Chen et al. (2014) revealed that acculturation stress is mostly experienced among married students.

Table 1.

*Factors impact married international students*

-Acculturation stress	-Problem solving skills
-Financial issues	-Psychological stress
-Social support	-Intimacy
-Communication	-Academic Stress
-Lack of time together	-Relationship conflict
-Sexual dissatisfaction	-Social adjustment

Other findings indicate that different factors influence married international students from various aspects. AlHorany et al. (2011) revealed that marital adjustment among postgraduate students in Malaysia is different between male and female students, it was found that male adjustment is lower than female, also male students face more stress compared to female. Moreover, nationality has an impact on marital adjustment, with Middle East students having greater perception of marital adjustment than African and South Asian students. Bigler (2007) in an exploratory study of distress among international students, pointed to the relevance of marital satisfaction as a salient factor for the cross-cultural adjustment, also marital satisfaction was established as a moderator between acculturative stress and psychological distress. Zhang, Smith et al. (2011) found out that the wife of international students felt closer to their husbands as they have more time to spend together, also spouse's support was a key factor which contributes to the wife's positive perspective and feeling of satisfaction toward their marriage. In a similar

study, Poyrazli and Kavanaugh (2006) reported that married international students encounter lower social adjustment strain as they fulfil their social support and commitment at home.

## Conclusion

To conclude, this paper highlighted the challenges and stressors that married students faced. Review of the previous research on this phenomenon revealed the negative effect of stresses caused by immigration and graduate education on marital health of married international students. On the other hand, as researchers reported, marriage was shown to serve as one of the most important factors that decreases stress and enhances social and cultural adjustment among sojourners (Chang and Sanna et al., 2003; Poyrazli et al., 2006; Snyder, 1997; Yi and Giseala et al., 2003). In this regard, keeping a healthy marriage and increasing satisfaction in marriage is an essential task for international students, as the literature revealed, the quality of marriage is affected by multiple factors, both internal and external.

This review provides recommendation for universities and married international students to decrease their strains during their study abroad. The previously mentioned challenges that are faced by married international students will help student affairs to understand these issues, respond better to the needs of this population, and prepare a supportive environment. Also, this study may help Family Health Centres (FHC) to come up with better ways of avoiding dissatisfaction of marriage, and decreasing the divorce rate among international students. Regarding the expected stress in graduate schools, and to increase the marital satisfaction among spouses,

universities need to provide support programs. In addition, the results of this study provide help for university counsellors and psychologists who work with international students specially the married ones. Informing couples about issues that they might confront, and teaching them different ways to cope with stressors in a new environment can predict tensions and conflicts in their marriage, which may lead their relationship to be trustworthy, intimate and supportive. Furthermore, teaching the skills of positive communication regarding their stresses and problems can solve their issues before it can influence their entire marriage and relationship. Moreover, strong support from the spouse helps couples to better confront difficulties in the host country, and adjust themselves to new the culture and society. The review of the literature highlighted the importance of providing support and being loved by others as significant factors which contribute to married international students' adjustment in a new environment (Beach and Gupta, 2006; Mohd Yusof and Jauhar et al., 2010; Pasch and Bradbury, 1998). Also marital satisfaction will increase by declining marital conflict (Lee, 2005), in this regard, increasing couples knowledge about marital conflict resolution methods would be helpful to avoid conflict during their study. Kardatzke (2009) claimed that the way that graduate married students cope with their stresses and conflicts is an important factor in their marital satisfaction.

Future studies in this context could benefit from different perspectives and methodologies to find more about challenges that married international students face during their study, as there is considerable lack of study in the literature. It's crucial to concentrate on this population due to the increasing number of couples immigrating to pursue higher

educations all over the world. Despite some promising qualitative studies on married international students, further qualitative research is needed to explore the experiences that married international students gain in their life to increase the knowledge of the issues that they face during their study. Finally, these results also suggest that universities should provide educational workshops for international married students in order to reduce their marriage concerns.

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