Vietnamese Students Abroad: A Research Framework

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, a critique of the current literature on the acculturation experience of Vietnamese international students is provided. Second, a review of the distinctive cultural-historical traits of Vietnamese international students is presented, demonstrating their differences relative to other Asian sojourning groups as well as other Vietnamese migrant groups. A third purpose of this paper is to present a Vietnamese-specific psychological acculturation framework that might pave the theoretical foundation for investigations on the acculturation experience of Vietnamese international students. This framework is based upon Berry's (1997) acculturation framework, and De Jong and Fawcett's (1981) value-expectancy model.

The Misunderstood Sojourners

A large body of research has addressed the movement of individuals across cultures and adjustment to life in a new cultural context (e.g., Horenczyk & Mudnayer, 2007; Leung, Pe-Pua, & Karnilowicz, 2006). A significant part of this literature has involved the acculturation experience of international students, a rapidly growing community worldwide (Paige, 1990). This literature, however, has not been sharply focused or comprehensive in regard to the experience of international students from Vietnam (Do, 2005). Knowledge regarding the acculturation of these sojourners remains limited, both conceptually and empirically. A number of reasons exist for this limited understanding.

First, Vietnamese international students (VISs) have rarely been examined in the literature. When they have, it has been as a subordinate group in combination with students of other ethnicities (Mooney, 1995; Shore, 1986). Most often, VISs have been grouped with students of other Asian origins under the catch-all term, 'Asian', as though these Asian internationals were a monolithic group (Leung et al., 2006). Further, given the cultural similarities between Vietnam and other countries in Asia, it has been assumed that findings involving Asian students in general can also apply to Vietnamese students (Shore, 1986). This approach has been criticized by Mooney (1995):

> Vietnamese have usually been combined in studies with Laotians and Cambodians into a group which is labeled Indochinese, assuming, apparently, that the natives of these three countries are very much alike… [Thus], data gathered from students from more than one ethnic background might obscure distinctions between groups which may actually be unique. (pp. 1-2).

A second reason for this limited understanding is that, although Vietnamese immigrants and refugees have been among the most frequently researched immigrant/refugee groups, investigations involving VISs have seldom been reported (Allen, Vaage, & Hauff, 2006). Again, assumptions have been made that VISs and Vietnamese immigrants/refugees can be lumped into one group, and as such, the acculturation experience of VISs can be inferred from that of Vietnamese immigrants/refugees. It is important to emphasize that several differences exist between these two Vietnamese groups, including their motivation to go abroad, their social status, source(s) of social support, how they are received by their hosts, and how they acculturate in the host society (Paige, 1990; van Oudenhoven, 2006). For example, while Vietnamese immigrants/refugees are often reported to be more receptive to the changes demanded by the new culture, and more ready to assimilate into the mainstream culture, VISs are reported to be more protective of their cultural traditions (Saito, 1999; van Oudenhoven, 2006). In addition, Vietnamese refugees often undergo acculturation while simultaneously coping with mental health problems (e.g., posttraumatic stress disorders) that are often associated with human rights violations in their home country or that resulted from their difficulties during their journey fleeing from Vietnam (e.g., see Hintona, Safrena, Pollacka, & Tran, 2005; Silove, Steel, Bauman, Chey, & McFarlane, 2007).

Finally, research frameworks suitable for the study of international students' experience abroad have been lacking. Although much has been written to guide those conducting research on the experience of immigrant populations, few efforts have been dedicated to research on international students. Without careful modification, the application of theoretical perspectives and research instruments that were developed for immigration research to research involving international students is problematic, given the potential differences between these two groups of acculturating people.

These limitations in the current literature have impaired our ability to understand the acculturation experience of VISs. In the next section, certain characteristics of Vietnamese culture and history are discussed, which suggest a potentially different acculturation experience for VISs, and which support the view that these sojourners should be studied as a separate cohort from other groups of Asian internationals or Vietnamese migrant groups.

The Cultural-Historical Legacy of Vietnamese International Students

Analyses of several accounts of Vietnamese culture and history suggest that the cultural-historical legacy of Vietnam has shaped a unique Vietnamese character. Such a character is comprised of both 'vulnerable' and 'protective' factors for VISs in their sojourn abroad.

Given the geopolitical position of Vietnam at the heart of Southeast Asia, the Việt culture is akin to that of various ethnic groups, which inhabited ancient Southeast Asia (e.g., Laos, Cambodia, and continental Malaysia). The entire region had a common face characterized by a number of features, such as the cultivation of rice and the predominance of agriculture. Against this common backdrop, the peoples of Southeast Asia all modeled their cultures according to their distinct geopolitical conditions. Vietnamese culture was shaped through constant efforts to cope with natural calamities associated with the tropical climate (especially the devastating flooding of the Red River), and continuing struggles against foreign aggression (e.g., Chinese, French, American, Japanese, and Korean) (Huu-Ngoc, 2008). The Vietnamese nation was occupied by Chinese empires for more than 1,000 years (from the 2nd century BC to the 10th century AD), and fractured by 83 years of French colonization (1862-1945). These ordeals have made Vietnam unlike any other country, and formed certain distinctive characteristics of the Vietnamese national character (Huu-Ngoc, 2008). Among these are a strong adherence to community, a great ability to adapt, and most prominently, a vigorous sense of ethnic identity, cultural preservation, and national independence (Guffin, 1997). As pointed out by Pham (1994):

> The long domination by and later continued contacts with China, as well as recent involvements with the West have left many imprints on the Vietnamese culture, helped sharpened a strong sense of identity and independence among the Vietnamese and attested to their adaptive abilities (p.70-71).

Throughout the course of history, the Vietnamese have demonstrated that although they might take on customs of an occupying culture, they are not easily absorbed by it (Harris et al., 1962). When foreign elements are taken on, it is only after having imposed a local stamp on them. Palazoli (1981, cited in Huu-Ngoc, 2008, p. 1066) argues:

> The uniqueness of the Vietnamese lies in the ability to incorporate foreign influences through an alchemy that modifies and adapts them; and the flexibility with which they are accumulated is accompanied by an irreducible tenacity to certain basic national traits, which has allowed the country to preserve its own identity through times of servitude or dismembering.

Furthermore, due to the frequency of war, Vietnam's social development was often disrupted. Socio-economic structures have gone through repeated interruptions. Continuing economic crises, the unstable conditions of Vietnamese society, and the scarcity of national resources after wartime have resulted in a sense of resilience for the Vietnamese people (Lee, 2005).

Vietnam's long history of striving for independence and freedom has also influenced the way its people engage with others. On the surface, Vietnamese people may appear compliant, but this attitude of compliance may be a ruse useful in protecting the country from attack and assimilation. Phan (2001) suggests:

> If one knows about Vietnamese history of constantly struggling for independence and its geographical position in the Asian region, one may realize that being 'flexible' or 'compliant' is just a mask to protect the country and its people from being invaded, or assimilated by bigger nations...The history of thousands of years has formed distinctive cultural characteristics among the Vietnamese people with conditioned compliance/flexibility on the outside, but rebellion near the surface (p. 298).

Instilled with these national characteristics, VISs may be resilient sojourners with a strong sense of ethnic identity and cultural preservation. They may demonstrate a pattern of

pretending to be unquestioning, i.e., they may appear compliant and conformist, yet not completely accept the new culture. Such characteristics might distinguish them from other groups of Asian students, and might act as protective factors that could help them participate and thrive in a new culture without the expense of losing their cultural identity.

Apart from these potentially 'protective' factors, certain aspects of Vietnamese history and culture may make VISs vulnerable in their sojourn. As Huu-Ngoc (2008) argues, the other side of the Vietnamese strong sense of community is the exaggerated concern for face saving, localism, and regionalism, and difficulties achieving a sense of self-affirmation. Also, national pride and fidelity to traditions may lead to conservatism, close-mindedness, reticence, and even withdrawal when exposed to new socio-cultural norms (Huu-Ngoc, 2008).

Another aspect of Vietnamese history that has shaped a unique Vietnamese character is related to Vietnam's prolonged colonization by China. During this period, Vietnam was heavily influenced by Confucianism (McHale, 2004). For centuries, Confucianism permeated Vietnamese society, influencing the Vietnamese psyche, and characterizing a number of Vietnamese behavioral patterns, to the extent that they may cause misunderstanding for people of other cultures (Pham, 1994). For example, given its emphasis on the need to maintain a hierarchical society, Confucianism has stratified Vietnamese society with vertical relationships, and resulted in the tendency of Vietnamese people to stress formality in social relationships (Pham, 1994). Being influenced by this, VISs may show reverence to elders by keeping a distance from them, or not confronting them in front of others. While these manners are desirable in Vietnamese culture, they may make VISs appear 'unfriendly', and 'passive' in the eyes of westerners. Although Vietnam fits within the East Asian Confucian world, it has been argued that the impact of Confucianism on Vietnamese mentality is far less extensive than in China, Korea, or Japan. This is because the appropriation of Confucianism in Vietnam did not follow the same trajectory as in other East Asian countries. The Vietnamese appropriated Confucian teachings not as a sharply bounded and internally consistent doctrine, but as related fragments in a mix of Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist teachings combined with local customs and even western ideas (McHale, 2004). It may be a mistake to assume a convergence in the Confucianism-driven behaviors of Vietnamese people and that of peoples of other East Asian countries based on their surface similarities.

With regard to VISs in Australia or the U.S.A., common destinations of the Vietnamese people who fled Vietnam after the fall of the Saigon regime in 1975, another factor may lead to greater vulnerability while studying abroad. With anti-communist sentiments still fervent among many Vietnamese overseas communities in these countries, VISs in these locales are often reported to face hatred and discrimination by first wave Vietnamese immigrants. In extreme cases, they even have to conceal their identity to avoid harassment (Pham, 2002). Being in a situation like this may add to the stress experienced by these sojourners as they adjust to a new culture (Ip, Wu, & Inglis, 1998). This may place VISs in an unusual situation. Do (2005) argues:

> Being in such unparallel political and historical context naturally puts them in a different category of international students from those of other ethnic groups, such as the Koreans, the Philippines [*sic*], or the Japanese. The VISs do not receive any support from their community nor participate in its activities. In many instances, they even refrain from revealing their identity lest any indications, however small, of an association with the current Vietnamese government would not be accepted or tolerated by the anti-communist members of the Vietnamese immigrant community (p.57).

In summary, whether VISs have inherited their national character in its full manifestation, or only retained a semblance of it, one might argue that they are instilled with distinctive cultural-historical attributes. This suggests that their acculturation experience may differ from that of other Asian students, and justifies the need for research efforts that might improve our understanding of the challenges that these students face in a new culture.

Constructing a Vietnamese-specific Psychological Acculturation Framework

To investigate VISs as an independent group with distinctive characteristics, a Vietnamese-specific psychological acculturation framework has been designed (Fig. 1). This framework has been constructed by Vietnamizing Berry's (1997) acculturation framework (Fig. 2), and marrying it with De Jong and Fawcett's (1981) Value-Expectancy model. As Berry (1997) noted, his framework is not a specific stepwise guide for acculturation research, but a 'skeleton' onto which numerous 'bits of flesh' could be added. As such, the added materials in the Vietnamese-specific framework are the 'bits of flesh' that help Vietnamize Berry's framework, and expand its application to an area of research that has been neglected.
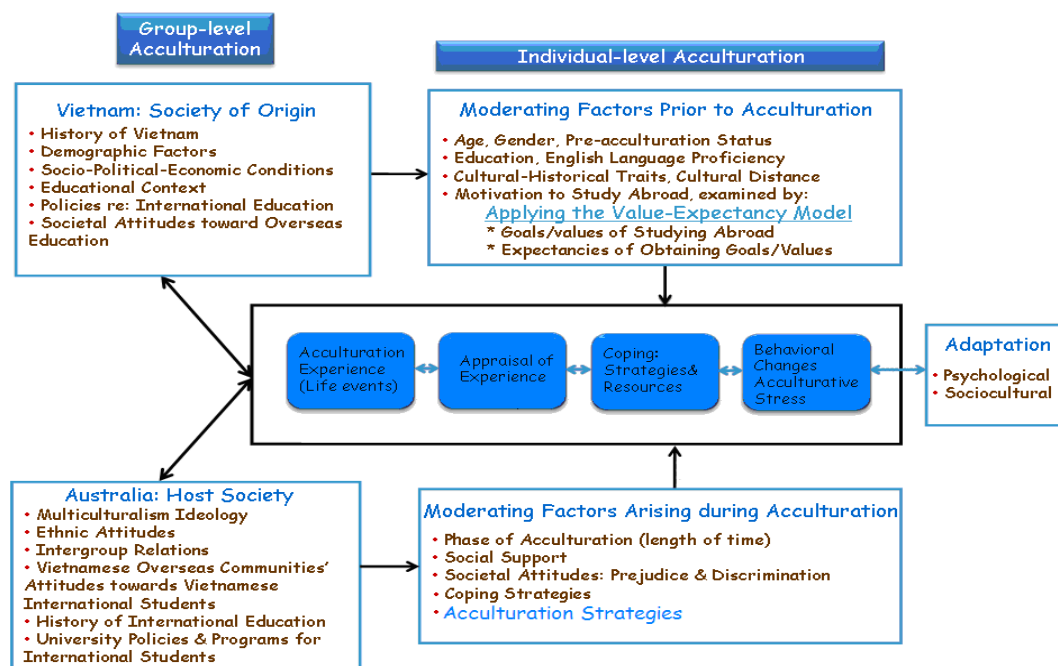

Figure 1. *A Vietnamese-specific psychological acculturation framework*
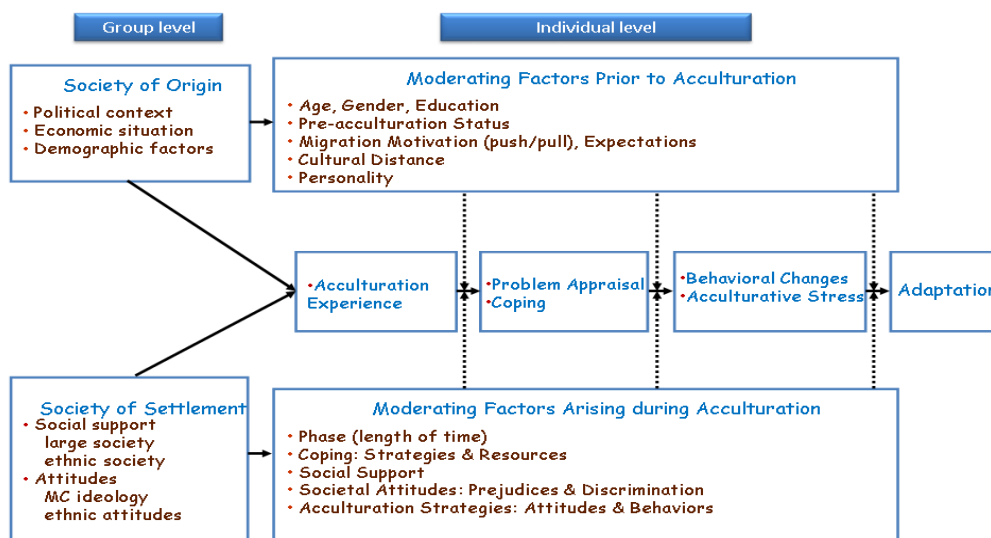
Figure 2. *Berry's (1997) acculturation framework*

As can be seen from figures 1 and 2, the Vietnamese-specific framework is comprised of a number of key elements that are adopted from Berry's framework. These elements include Vietnam as the society of origin, Australia as the host society (for the purposes of this paper), the moderating factors prior to acculturation, the moderating factors arising during acculturation, the psychological acculturation process (as presented in the central part of Fig. 1), and adaptation. The following sections describe how these elements have been Vietnamized to make the framework best accommodate investigations on the acculturation experience of VISs.

Societal Contexts

According to Berry (1997), a complete study of acculturation needs to begin with an examination of the two societal contexts in order to understand where the individuals come from and where they will be acculturating to. This also helps estimate the cultural distance between the two societies involved, and the degree to which the sojourners have voluntarily moved to the new culture.

With regard to the society of origin, Berry (1997) suggests investigating the political context, economic situation, and demographic factors. In the Vietnamese-specific framework, Vietnam's history is added as one more factor that needs to be studied. As discussed earlier, Vietnam has an eventful history that has shaped certain distinctive characteristics of the Vietnamese people, which potentially influenced the way its people acculturate. In addition, since the acculturating individuals are VISs, it is essential that the educational context of Vietnam be explored. This enables one to comprehend the milieu through which VISs have been nurtured and educated. Vietnam's policy regarding international education and societal attitudes toward overseas education are also in need of investigation. Knowledge of these factors will help capture not just the extent to which overseas study is appreciated and promoted in Vietnam, but also the 'push' factors (Martin, 1993) that have motivated VISs to study overseas.

Regarding the host society, Berry (1997) suggests examination of the general orientation of this society toward multiculturalism, and its attitudes toward different ethnocultural groups residing in it. While acknowledging that even in societies where multiculturalism is advocated, with variations in the relative acceptance toward different minority groups (i.e., there are groups that are less accepted, and those that are more favored (Berry & Kalin, 1995), Berry and his colleagues have not acknowledged the variations in the relative acceptance among the minority groups toward each other. I argue that this is also worthwhile to examine. This is

because in multicultural societies (like Australia), intercultural interactions between the host society and the ethnocultural groups, as well as intercultural interactions among members of the ethnocultural groups, are relatively equal in terms of the frequency, intensity, and influence on the well-being of the acculturating individuals. This raises the need to also explore the nature of the interrelationship between the Vietnamese groups with other ethnocultural groups currently residing in Australia. Also, as discussed earlier, given the anti-communist sentiments still prevalent among many Vietnamese overseas communities, VISs often face hostility from the first-wave Vietnamese immigrants (Do, 2005). As such, the attitude of these Vietnamese immigrants toward VISs also needs examination. In short, I suggest that there should be three main 'groups' whose orientations/attitudes toward VISs need to be examined. These include Australia and its people (the host society), the Vietnamese overseas communities, and the other major ethnocultural groups in Australia. It is also acknowledged that among these groups, the host society's attitudes are considered to be the most significant with regard to their potential to influence the acculturation experience of VISs.

Australia's history of international education is another aspect of the host context that needs to be studied when sojourners are international students. In Berry's (1997) framework, this has not been addressed. As the history of immigration/multiculturalism of the host society is important (i.e., to understand the degree of societal inclusion and relative acceptance toward immigrants/refugees), I suggest that, just like in immigrant research, knowledge of the host society's history of international education is equally important in this case. Understanding how international education has evolved over time in Australia will clarify the extent of support available to nurture international students. Also in need of investigation are Australian universities' policies and programs for international students. This will provide information regarding the welcoming nature of Australian universities toward international students and give a better picture of the acculturating context faced by VISs.

Moderating Factors Prior to Acculturation

As noted by Berry (1997), to understand how people experience acculturation, one needs to understand their personal attributes prior to acculturation. In Berry's framework, such factors include age, gender, education, pre-acculturation status, migration motivation/expectations, cultural distance, and personality. In the present framework, a number of other factors are added. One of these is the English language proficiency of VISs, as research has shown that VISs appear less competent in English than their Asian counterparts (Hamilton, 2005). Given the interrelatedness of language to other areas of life (Morrison & McIntyre, 1971), host language proficiency could greatly facilitate individuals in their acculturation process. As discussed earlier, VISs are also instilled with certain distinctive cultural-historical attributes that might support or hinder their acculturation. These factors also need to be examined. Further, this may help predict the extent of culture shedding and culture learning (and possibly, cultural conflict) that these sojourners experience given the cultural distance between Vietnam and a Western country like Australia.

Since motivation to move abroad has been found predictive of group identification and subjective well-being of acculturating individuals (Tartakovsky & Schwartz, 2001), motivation to migrate and motivation to study abroad in the case of international students are other important factors that need to be studied. Berry (1997) suggests using the concepts of push/pull motivations and expectations to examine migration motivation/expectation. However, the traditional push/pull framework has been criticized for its limited utility in micro-level research. This framework might be replaced with a cost-benefit approach, stressing both the economic and non-economic forces in an individual's decision to move (Bogue, 1977). De Jong and Fawcett's (1981) Value-Expectancy (V-E) model is thus proposed in the present framework.

De Jong and Fawcett's V-E model is an Expectancy-Value theory, a type of theory that has been proven reliable and useful when applied as a theoretical foundation for studies into human motivation (Feather, 1982). To date, the V-E model has been applied to understanding migration decision-making and motivation (De Jong, 2000; De Jong & Fawcett, 1981). It has not previously

been reported as a means to explore motivation to study abroad among international students. Yet, applying the V-E model in this case may prove beneficial in expanding our knowledge base in this area.

De Jong and Fawcett (1981) assert that migration motivation is often based on people's desires to attain certain outcomes and the expectation of achieving them by migrating. The V-E model is described algebraically as follows:

MI = $\sum_i V_i E_i$

V is the value of the outcome and E is the expectation that migration will lead to the desired outcome. MI, the strength of the motivation to move, is a function of the sum of the value-expectancy products.

Applied in the case of VISs, it might be hypothesized that these students' motivation to study abroad is related to certain outcomes, and the expectation of achieving them by studying in Australia. The V-E model might be operationalized through the following steps:

- Give the students a set of relevant outcomes

- Obtain their rating of the importance of each of these outcomes

- Obtain their rating of the expectancy of achieving each of these outcomes

- Apply formula MI = $\sum_i V_i E_i$ to obtain the total score for the strength of the motivation to study abroad

The use of the V-E model in this case might be questioned because all of the VISs are already in Australia by the time they are recruited as research participants. In theory, it is best to use a prospective design to run the V-E model. However, if such a design is not feasible, the V-E model can still be used in a retrospective study to generate descriptive data on people's motivation (De Jong & Fawcett, 1981). It is noted that the purpose of this framework is not to test how well the strength of the VISs' motivation to study abroad predicts their actual pursuit. Rather, it is to examine the factors forming their motivation, and the correlation of their met/unmet expectations to their acculturation experience.

Moderating Factors Arising during Acculturation

Similar to the moderating factors prior to acculturation, the moderating factors arising during acculturation are also in need of investigation (Berry, 1997). In Berry's framework, as well as in the Vietnamese-specific framework presented here, such factors include phase of acculturation, coping strategies, social support, societal attitudes, and acculturation strategies. In the Vietnamese-specific framework, acculturation strategies are treated as a more important "during-acculturation" factor, and are given more research attention. This is because theoretically, acculturation strategies comprise a central concept in that they are so closely aligned with other crucial conceptualizations of acculturation (Berry, 1997). Empirically, acculturation strategies have been found to significantly correlate to how people appraise their experience, employ coping strategies, utilize social support, and undergo behavioral changes and acculturative stress (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2002).

For conceptual purposes, Berry suggests four acculturation strategies used during the acculturation process, namely, integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. Chirkov, Vansteenkiste, Tao, and Lynch (2007) noted that Berry's fourfold model of acculturation, though viewed as helpful in the study of all types of acculturating groups, may be most applicable in the study of immigrants. It may not be a mold that international students readily fit into. This suggests the need for careful application of Berry's fourfold model of acculturation to studies on the acculturation of international students.

Acculturation: A Dynamic Process

Berry (1997) asserts that acculturation is a dynamic process which encompasses an array of intertwined phenomena. This, however, is not reflected in the figure he provides to describe his framework (see Fig. 2). Using one-way arrows to demonstrate the relationships among the framework's key elements, Berry depicts a causal relationship among them, rather than a reciprocal one. Berry's framework thus appears static, and can only depict acculturation as a linear, one-directional phenomenon. Two-way arrows are used in the Vietnamese-specific framework described earlier (Fig. 1), in order to better describe the mutual relationships among the framework's elements, and thus, better depict how acculturation, as an intricate and reciprocal process, may actually occur. The utility of the suggested framework in understanding the acculturation experience of Vietnamese students studying abroad may be ascertained when data, which are collected by the author based upon this framework, are analyzed as part of an investigation presently underway.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have provided a critique of the current literature on acculturation as it pertains to the experience of VISs. I have argued that the apparent distinctiveness of VISs supports the view that they should be investigated as an independent cohort. The Vietnamese-specific psychological acculturation framework presented corresponds to this need. This framework is intended to facilitate investigation of the acculturation experience of VISs, and also to help provide a stronger theoretical and methodological foundation for acculturation research on international students in general.

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