Exploring Interpersonal Shame Among International Students: A Brief Narrative Literature Review

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the emotional impacts of interpersonal shame on international students, which is important given the increase in global student mobility, particularly from the Asia–Pacific region. This brief narrative review examines existing literature to understand the long-term effects of shame on the academic and professional development of such students, identifying critical gaps and suggesting directions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

The global increase in student mobility, particularly from Asia–Pacific regions to Western countries such as Canada, Australia, and the USA, has reshaped international education (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2024). Canada has witnessed a 400% increase in the number of international students over the past decade, diversifying its campuses and workforce (Statistics Canada, 2021). Although most international students are resilient and adapt to their destination cultures quickly, some may experience challenges, including cultural adaptation, language barriers, discrimination, and a lack of sense of belonging (Arthur et al., 2022; Carrera & Wei, 2017; Wei et al., 2020). Such challenges can lead to emotional difficulties, with interpersonal shame being a significant yet underexplored factor impacting their academic and professional development (Wei et al., 2005). This brief narrative review explores the following question: What does the literature tell us about the impact of interpersonal shame on international students' academic and professional adjustment?

Emotional Challenges

Interpersonal shame involves feelings of exposure and fear of judgment or rejection (Wong et al., 2014). It differs from traditional shame, which is characterized by chronic feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem, often owing to perceived failures to meet societal, familial, or personal standards (Gilbert, 2003). Interpersonal shame, experienced within social dynamics, impacts the academic and professional development of international students. This form of shame arises from perceived failures to meet the cultural and academic expectations of one's native and host countries, leading to chronic stress and heightened vulnerability (Wei et al., 2017; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). This cultural

discord could exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and failure, making it difficult for students to navigate their academic and professional endeavors (Carrera & Wei, 2017).

Shame can intensify feelings of unworthiness, deepen insecurities, and promote a negative self-image, potentially leading to depressive symptoms (Kim et al., 2011; Velotti et al., 2017). Furthermore, communication difficulties and cultural adaptation challenges can evoke shame, impacting students' confidence and willingness to pursue career opportunities (Li & Lindo, 2020). Perceived failures leading to shame can also result in the development of the impostor syndrome, deteriorating academic performance and hindering professional identity development (Wei et al., 2020).

Shame can drive social withdrawal as a means to avoid judgment, limiting access to supportive networks and aggravating feelings of loneliness and anxiety (Dickerson et al., 2004). The absence of familiar support systems can compound feelings of isolation, making social integration more challenging (Scheel et al., 2020). Chronic shame may trigger stress responses, heightening anxiety and deteriorating physical health, in turn increasing vulnerability to mental health disorders (Gilbert, 2003).

Navigating the job market, whether in a new country or not, can involve overcoming barriers such as understanding local employment norms and gaining relevant work experience, which can exacerbate feelings of shame (Arthur & Flynn, 2011). These barriers require psychological resilience and strategic approaches (Sinacore & Lerner, 2013). Discrepancies between career aspirations and available opportunities can lead to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, further impacting mental health (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Literature Gap

Despite the well-recognized challenges experienced by international students (Arthur et al., 2022), there remains a significant gap in research concerning the long-term impacts of these emotional challenges on international students during their university-to-workplace transition. More comprehensive studies are needed to understand how interpersonal shame affects international students' ongoing academic engagement, social integration, and professional development within their host countries. This brief review aims to provide a "call to action" for future research by highlighting insights from existing literature.

METHOD

A narrative literature review was conducted using databases such as PubMed, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar to answer the aforementioned research question. The keywords used included "career counseling," "career transition," "career planning," "career development," "career advice," "shame," "self-concept," "self-perception," "self-esteem," "international student," "foreign student," "student from abroad," and "international learner."

Inclusion criteria focused on studies discussing interpersonal shame in the context of international students; research exploring the emotional experiences of international students related to their adaptation in Canada, Australia, and the USA; and peer-reviewed articles, reviews, and empirical studies published in English. These countries were selected owing to their status as top destinations for international students from the Asia–Pacific region. Meanwhile, exclusion criteria omitted

studies not directly related to the emotional experiences of international students, articles focusing solely on academic performance without considering emotional factors, and non-peer-reviewed sources and publications not available in English. This approach was informed by traditional systematic review methods, ensuring comprehensive coverage of relevant literature across diverse academic fields.

RESULTS

Existing literature within this field highlights three key areas important for understanding the impact of interpersonal shame on international students' experiences. These areas include (a) cultural adaptation and discrimination, (b) emotional impact and shame, and (c) shame and career development.

Cultural Adaptation and Discrimination

International students can experience significant cultural and linguistic barriers, often compounded by experiences of discrimination (Arthur et al., 2022). These challenges can affect their social integration and mental health, leading to feelings of shame (Wei et al., 2020). Cultural adaptation involves navigating new social norms, values, and communication styles, which can be particularly daunting for students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Moffitt et al., 2020). Discrimination further exacerbates these difficulties, whether overt or subtle, by undermining students' sense of belonging and self-worth (Carrera & Wei, 2017).

Emotional Impact and Shame

Shame prominently emerges as a psychological response to cultural adaptation, discrimination, and the pressure of establishing a professional identity in a new country (Scheel et al., 2020). This emotional response is characterized by feelings of inadequacy, failure, and self-doubt, which can significantly impair students' academic performance and social interactions (Kim et al., 2016). The tension between maintaining a cultural identity and adapting to a new environment often aggravates these feelings, making it difficult for students to navigate their academic and professional journeys effectively.

Shame and Career Development

Shame can impact career development, obstructing professional pathways and success in the labor market. It may affect students' confidence and willingness to pursue career opportunities (Bozionelos et al., 2015). Fear of failure and judgment can lead to avoidance behaviors, such as reluctance to apply for jobs, seek internships, or participate in networking opportunities. This avoidance may further hinder their career progression and integration into the professional landscape of the host country.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

To support future research efforts, we highlight gaps in existing research based on this brief narrative literature review and advocate for emotion-focused research.

Gaps in Research

Studies exploring the long-term effects of shame on the career trajectories and professional identities of international students are currently lacking. This gap underscores the need for more targeted research addressing the emotional dimensions of international students' experiences (Velotti et al., 2017). Most existing studies primarily focus on immediate academic and social/personal adjustments, neglecting the enduring impacts of these experiences on career outcomes and long-term well-being (e.g., Arthur et al., 2022; Sinacore & Lerner, 2013;

Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Understanding these long-term effects is crucial for developing comprehensive support strategies that address both immediate and future challenges experienced by international students.

Need for Emotion-Focused Research

Current research emphasizes transactional influences such as skill development while overlooking emotional experiences that can impact international students' career paths (Kim et al., 2016). Emotional experiences, particularly those related to shame, play a critical role in shaping students' attitudes toward their careers and their ability to engage effectively with the professional world (Velotti et al., 2017). Research that incorporates these emotional dimensions can provide a more holistic understanding of the challenges experienced by international students and inform the development of interventions that support their emotional and psychological well-being.

CONCLUSION

The brief narrative literature review examines the existing research on interpersonal shame and international students. Key findings indicate that cultural adaptation, language barriers, discrimination, and social integration significantly influence students' academic performance, self-worth, and mental health. Interpersonal shame emerges as a critical psychological factor with potential adverse effects, such as mental health issues and social withdrawal.

By exploring these aspects, this brief review aims to serve as a "call to action" for future research that can enhance support strategies for international students. Advances in research in this area will help foster a learning and career-development environment characterized by empathy, inclusivity, and resilience, addressing the diverse needs of international students.

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