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International students in the US, the need to belong and well-being

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The purpose of the present study was two-fold. First, we investigated the internal experiences of international students when they perceived themselves to be socially excluded by their American peers. Second, we examined coping strategies used to alleviate the pain caused by social exclusion. To this end, we conducted a qualitative study involving in-depth interviews of 11 international students in graduate psychology programs in the US. Our sample included students from Central and South America, Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Island Nations of the world. Using phenomenological interpretative analysis, we uncovered the following themes in the emotional experiences and coping strategies of the participants. Most students we interviewed reported acute disappointment when they realized that they were on the sidelines of group interactions and activities or that they were downright excluded (e.g., not invited to attend events or to take part in group projects). This disappointment was accompanied by a sense of confusion and efforts to make sense of why they were excluded. Typically, students first attributed exclusion to their own qualities, like accent or social deficiencies. They questioned their global self-worth and engaged in self-deprecation. As social exclusion events accumulated, most participants described increase in resultant feelings of intense loneliness, shame and inferiority, deep sadness, and hopelessness. Many students could not hold back tears when they talked about feeling excluded in interactions with their American peers. All students reported deep pain from feeling that their peers didn't care about them personally and importantly, about their countries of origin. Very painful feelings arose when social exclusion was explained by racial and national prejudice. Some students, especially in counseling psychology programs, reported anger at the peers who proclaimed commitment to social justice and cultural sensitivity while being clearly insensitive to their international classmates. Cultural indifference, lack of curiosity, and ignorance in global affairs brought out strong emotional reactions in most of our participants. Coping strategies included two broad categories: internal self-work and external adaptational strategies. Internal self-work involved cognitive reframing of the events, finding empathy for self and others, being curious about the cultures and perspectives of others, and participating in personal therapy. External strategies included seeking emotional support, sharing emotions with trusted others, socializing with other minority groups and international students, engaging in extra-curricular activities and joining religious/spiritual communities.

Biography

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