Published in final edited form as:

Asian J Soc Psychol. 2015 June 1; 18(2): 176–181. doi:10.1111/ajsp.12085.

Individualism and sociocultural adaptation: Discrimination and social capital as moderators among rural-to-urban migrants in China

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Abstract

This study examined the associations of sociocultural adaptation with individualism and collectivism and the moderating roles of discrimination and social capital in the associations among rural-to-urban migrants ($N = 641$) in Beijing, China. Results indicated that individualism was associated with poorer adaptation for migrants reporting low perceived discrimination or low social capital. However, migrants reporting high perceived discrimination showed poorer adaptation, regardless of individualism; and migrants reporting high social capital showed better adaptation, regardless of individualism. Collectivism was not related to adaptation. Findings suggest that individualism may be detrimental to migrants' adjustment to a collectivistic society.

Keywords

Sociocultural adaptation; social capital; discrimination; individualism; collectivism; migrants; China

Introduction

Adaptation occurs when individuals migrate from their own countries or cities to new countries or cities (i.e., international or internal migration). Most past research concentrated on adaptation of international migrants (Carr, 2010; Chun, Balls Organista, & Marín, 2003; Du & Li, 2013); however, internal migrants have been largely ignored. Internal migration has become a widespread phenomenon all over the world, especially in China, India, and Russia (Berry, 2010). Empirical studies in domestic intercultural settings will allow researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the acculturation experience and its outcomes (Sam & Berry, 2010). The current study attempts to explore cultural and social correlates of sociocultural adaptation among rural-to-urban migrants in China.

Sociocultural adaptation is a set of external outcomes reflecting the ability to deal with daily tasks in family life, work and school and skills of fitting in the mainstream culture (Berry, 1997). Ward and her colleagues have identified some facilitators and barriers (e.g., cultural distance, expected difficulty, and acculturation strategies) of sociocultural adaptation among international migrants (Searle & Ward, 1990; C. Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Recent research found that sociocultural adaptation of immigrants can be improved through identification with mainstream culture, language proficiency, social support, and the openness-to-change value in the mainstream culture, but impeded through trait anxiety, attachment anxiety, and discrimination (Brisset, Safdar, Lewis, & Sabatier, 2010; Swami, Arteche, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2010; Yijälä, Lönnqvist, Jasinskaja-Lahti, & Verkasalo, 2012).

Although there are many studies of international migrants, little research to date has explored sociocultural adaptation of internal migrants. China has the largest migrant population in the world and most of the migrants in China are moving from rural areas to urban areas for jobs (Wang, Li, Stanton, & Fang, 2010). Most of the rural-to-urban migrants will return to their home village because they are hardly likely to obtain permanent urban residence (Li, Stanton, Fang, & Lin, 2006). Temporary migrants are often socially isolated and suffer social and structural discrimination in urban cities (Yang, 2013) and have shown mental health and behavioral problems (Du, Li, Lin, & Tam, 2014).

According to the theoretical framework proposed by Berry (1997), adaptation is influenced by cultural distance (i.e., the dissimilarity between the mainstream culture and the heritage culture). Similarly, the culture-fit hypothesis suggests that migrants whose personal values are close to values of a new culture are more likely to acculturate to the new culture (Caldwell-Harris & Ayçiçeği, 2006; Fulmer et al., 2010; Colleen Ward & Chang, 1997). This assumption is evident in research on internal migrants. For example, Phalet and Hagendoorn (1996) reported a positive association between collectivism and acculturation among rural-to-urban migrants in Turkey, a generally collectivistic culture. On the dimension of individualism/collectivism, Chinese culture is highly collectivistic and Chinese people emphasize communal goals and obligations, which is opposite to the Western individualistic culture emphasizing uniqueness and personal goals (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). Although internal migrants are moving from rural counties to urban cities, they are still living in collectivistic culture (Du et al., 2014). Therefore, migrants with higher collectivism and lower individualism may demonstrate better adaptation.

In addition, sociocultural adaptation could be facilitated or impeded by cultural, social, and individual factors. Berry (1997) proposes that discrimination and social support are two crucial moderators in the relationship between cultural distance and adaptation. Perceived discrimination has been found to be associated with poorer sociocultural adaptation (Swami et al., 2010). Rural-to-urban migrants in China often experience social stigma and discrimination which are detrimental to psychological well-being and quality of life (Wang et al., 2010). In contrast, support from social networks and connections with the community (i.e., social capital) (Putnam, 2000) can improve sociocultural adaptation. Although there is a lack of research on social capital and adaptation, empirical studies confirming social support as a significant contributor to adaptation indicate that social capital may facilitate adjustment to a new society (Brisset et al., 2010).

The current study attempts to answer two questions: (a) what are the associations of sociocultural adaptation with collectivism and individualism, and (b) do discrimination and social capital moderate the relationship between adaptation and individualism/collectivism? We expect that sociocultural adaptation will be positively associated with collectivism but negatively associated with individualism. The relationship between adaptation and individualism/collectivism will be moderated by discrimination and social capital.

Method

Sample and procedures

Data were drawn from the baseline survey of a larger intervention study evaluating the efficacy of a sexual risk reduction program for young rural-to-urban migrants in China. The study initially recruited 660 migrants but 19 of them were excluded from the current analysis because they reported an age older than 30 years. A final sample of 641 young rural-to-urban migrants (376 males, mean age = 24.11, $SD = 3.30$) completed the survey in the current study. Participants were recruited in 2011-2012 from an urban district in Beijing, which has the largest concentration of migrant population in China. Participants were from 28 provinces and municipalities in China (Hebei, 22%; Henan, 15%; Shandong, 8%; Sichuan, 7%; Hubei, 5%; Anhui, 5%; Shanxi, 5%; and other areas) so that the sample was broadly representative of the target population. We adopted a venue-based sampling to recruit participants from workplaces (store, shop, club, dance hall, bathhouse, barbershop, office, factory, construction site), migrant settlements, streets (for those who did not have fixed workplaces, such as garbage collectors, street vendors), and job markets (for those who did not have a job), which assures the representativeness of the sample. Participants have been in Beijing for at least 3 months, but without a permanent Beijing residence. The mean length of stay in Beijing is 3.74 years ($SD = 2.69$).

Measures

Demographics—Participants were asked to indicate gender, age, ethnicity, education level, marital status, salary, having children or not, health status, frequency of home visit, plan of staying in cities, how many cities they have worked in (i.e., mobility), years of working not in hometown, and years of living in Beijing.

Sociocultural adaptation was assessed with an adapted version of the Sociocultural Adaptation scale (C. Ward & Kennedy, 1999). This measure includes 20 items with a 5-point scale (1 = not difficult at all; 5 = extremely difficult) and assesses daily life and socialization (e.g., talking about yourself with locals), infrastructure functioning (e.g., using public transportation), and organizational communication (e.g., dealing with employer or boss). We recoded all the items so that high scores indicate better sociocultural adaptation ($\alpha = .94$).

Individualism and collectivism were assessed with the 24-item Cultural Orientation Scale (Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, & Kaplan, 2003). Responses were based on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha values were .86 and .91 for individualism and collectivism, respectively.

Discrimination was assessed with a 20-item scale which has been validated among Chinese migrants (Lin et al., 2011). This scale measures discriminatory acts or unfair treatment experienced or perceived by participants during work and life (e.g., “If something got lost, people will first suspect me”, “When I look for a job, I do not have same opportunity as others”). Participants responded to the scale on a 4-point scale (1 = never happened; 4 = happened frequently). A mean score was calculated with high scores indicating more discrimination ($\alpha = .94$).

Social capital was assessed with a 14-item scale which measures trust, neighborhood connections, and social interaction (e.g., “When you encounter difficulties in Beijing, who is willing to help you?”, “Who is most likely to enjoy leisure activities with you?”). Participants responded to the scale on a 4-point scale (1 = people from hometown; 2 = migrants from other places; 3 = Beijing local residents; 4 = no friends anywhere). Items were recoded with high scores indicating more social capital in Beijing ($\alpha = .77$).

Results

We conducted a preliminary analysis to examine the association between sociocultural adaptation and each demographic or psychosocial variable. Sociocultural adaptation was positively associated with age ($r = .10, p < .05$) and negatively associated with mobility (i.e., how many cities they have worked in) ($r = -.12, p < .01$). Males reported better adaptation than females ($p < .01$). In addition, migrants with better health status reported better adaptation ($r = .18, p < .001$). However, sociocultural adaptation was not significantly correlated with ethnicity, education level, marital status, salary, having children or not, frequency of home visit, plan of staying in cities, years of working not in hometown, and years of living in Beijing ($ps > .07$).

Correlations between sociocultural adaptation and psychosocial factors appear in Table 1. Consistent with the hypothesis, adaptation was negatively associated with discrimination and positively associated with social capital. However, adaptation was only marginally correlated with individualism ($r = -0.07, p = .07$) and not correlated with collectivism.

We conducted a hierarchical regression analysis to test our hypotheses (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Four significant demographic predictors including gender (0 = men; 1 = women), age, mobility, and health status were entered in the first step as covariates. The second step of the regression included the four predictors (i.e., individualism, collectivism, discrimination, and social capital) and the third step included four two-way interaction terms (i.e., individualism $\times$ discrimination, individualism $\times$ social capital, collectivism $\times$ discrimination, and collectivism $\times$ social capital). As continuous predictors, individualism, collectivism, discrimination, and social capital were centered to reduce multicollinearity. Nonsignificant interaction terms were removed from the final model. The results can be seen in the form of the standardized regression coefficients in Table 2.

For the final model, R for regression was significantly different from zero, $F(10, 593) = 17.43, p < .001$. Predictors explained 23% of the variability of adaptation. Gender, mobility, and health status were significant predictors. Individualism was a marginally significant

predictor, indicating that people with higher individualism reported poorer adaptation. The interaction effects of collectivism with discrimination and social capital were not significant and removed from the regression analysis. In contrast, individualism was found to interact with both discrimination and social capital. The interaction between individualism and discrimination (Figure 1) showed that migrants low in individualism reported better adaptation than those high in individualism when perceiving low discrimination ($b = -.22, p < .01$). However, migrants reporting high perceived discrimination showed poorer adaptation, regardless of individualism (simple slope, $b = -.03, p = .67$). Individualism also interacted with social capital (Figure 2), such that when having less social capital, migrants low in individualism demonstrated better adaptation than those high in individualism ($b = -.27, p = .001$); however, when having more social capital, migrants demonstrated better adaptation regardless of individualism ($b = .01, p = .89$).

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to examine the associations of adaptation with individualism and collectivism, and the moderating effects of discrimination and social capital in the associations. Our findings partially supported the hypotheses. People high in individualism tend to compete with others and pursue person goals; however, a collectivistic culture (e.g., China) does not embrace the competitive values (Du et al., 2013). The discrepancy between personal beliefs (i.e., individualism) and cultural values (i.e., collectivism) may impede adaptation among Chinese internal migrants (Caldwell-Harris & Ayçiçeği, 2006; Colleen Ward & Chang, 1997). The unexpected finding is that collectivism was not associated with adaptation. We suspect that the measure used in the current study assessed collectivism in the scope of family and friends in migrants' hometowns but not social groups in Beijing (e.g., local community) (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Du, King, & Chi, 2012). Therefore, collectivistic beliefs with family and friends in hometowns have little to contribute to adaptation in the destination society.

The current study provides evidence that discrimination and social capital serve as effective moderators of the relationship between individualism and sociocultural adaptation. When migrants perceived high discrimination or had high social capital, individualism seemed not to have a strong impact on adaptation. However, when migrants did not experience high discrimination or did not have high social capital, individualism exerts a significant negative influence on adaptation. These findings confirmed the hypothesis that discrimination is detrimental to adaptation, whereas social capital can facilitate migrants to adapt to a new culture (Swami et al., 2010; Valencia-Garcia, Simoni, Alegría, & Takeuchi, 2012).

The negative association between mobility and adaptation indicates that under unstable living and working conditions migrants are not able to easily adjust to the new environment (Li, Stanton, Chen, et al., 2006). However, the number of years of working not in hometown and the number of years of living in Beijing were not associated with adaptation, which is inconsistent with previous findings among international migrants (Schwartz, Pantin, Sullivan, Prado, & Szapocznik, 2006). Rural-to-urban migrants in China face considerable difficulties in obtaining permanent urban residence in Beijing and most of them have to return to their home village after working in the city for a period of time (Li, Stanton, Fang,

et al., 2006). Without a permanent residence, migrants are difficult to overcome psychological and sociopolitical barriers.

There are several limitations to this study. First, the current study used a sample of young rural-to-urban migrants. Considering the age differences in sociocultural adaptation, it is cautious to generalize the current findings to old migrants. Second, the current sample was recruited from Beijing, the capital city of China. It remains unclear if migrants in other cities would undergo comparable experiences of discrimination and social capital in sociocultural adaptation. Cautions should be taken when comparing the current findings with those using different samples. Third, only self-report measures were used in the current data and the findings may be susceptible to common methods bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Finally, the cross-sectional research design precludes the drawing of causal inferences. Longitudinal research is needed to examine the casual relationship between adaptation and psychosocial predictors.

Despite these limitations, the research makes a valuable contribution to the literature of adaptation of internal migrants. Findings indicate the negative impact of individualistic orientation on sociocultural adaptation in a collectivistic society. Findings on moderation effects of discrimination and social capital have theoretical and practical implications for the well-being of migrants. Although the investigation represents only an initial attempt at studying the process of adaptation, it is hoped that it will draw more immediate research attention to acculturation and health of this population.

Acknowledgements

This study was supported by NIH Research Grant R01NR010498 by the National Institute of Nursing Research and National Institute of Mental Health.

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Figure 1. Interaction between individualism and discrimination in predicting sociocultural adaptation.
Note. IND = individualism; DIS = discrimination; higher and lower are defined as 1 standard deviation above or below the mean, respectively.

Figure 2.

Interaction between individualism and social capital in predicting sociocultural adaptation.

Note. IND = individualism; SC = social capital; higher and lower are defined as 1 standard deviation above or below the mean, respectively.

Table 1

Correlations between adaptation and predictors

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Adaptation	1				
2. Individualism	-0.07	1			
3. Collectivism	0.00	0.76***	1		
4. Discrimination	-0.38***	-0.01	-0.07	1	
5. Social capital	0.15***	0.07	0.14**	-0.18***	1
Mean	3.93	3.41	3.59	1.54	2.46
SD	0.72	0.60	0.65	0.51	0.43

Note.

**
 $p < .01$;

 $p < .001$.

Table 2

Hierarchical regression analysis predicting adaptation.

Predictor	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3	
	beta	SE	beta	SE	beta	SE
Gender	−0.12**	0.06	−0.18**	0.05	−0.18**	0.05
Age	0.11*	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Mobility	−0.14***	0.02	−0.07**	0.02	−0.07**	0.02
Health Status	0.18***	0.03	0.12***	0.03	0.12***	0.03
Individualism (I)			−0.13+	0.07	−0.13+	0.07
Collectivism (C)			0.06	0.06	0.05	0.06
Discrimination (D)			−0.49***	0.05	−0.49***	0.05
Social support (S)			0.13*	0.06	0.12*	0.06
I × D					0.32**	0.10
I × S					0.18*	0.08

Note.

+ $p = .06$;

* $p < .05$;

** $p < .01$;

*** $p < .001$.