

Psychological Support of Korean International Students in US Higher Education

¹Minkyung Cho

¹University of California, Irvine, USA
minkyc1@uci.edu

Abstract

Psychological support is crucial in navigating one's academic and professional lives, especially for students living abroad and pursuing higher education. This study aims to explore the narratives of social support seeking in a group of Korean international graduate students in an urban university setting in the United States. Qualitative research method of narrative approach was used to examine how three Korean graduate students exchanged psychological support. Analysis of interviews, observations, and documents found that four types of social support (informational, instrumental, appraisal, and emotional) were being exchanged and that emotional support was accessible predominantly in individual meetings than in group gatherings. Additionally, the reasons for abstaining from initiating group gatherings are discussed in relation to the Korean culture where participants were mindful of not infringing on each other's time. These findings inform theory on socio psychological support seeking and its relation to cultural values and offer practical insights into psychological support in international students in higher education settings.

Keywords: Psychological Support, Graduate Students, International Education, Higher Education, Narrative Approach

1. INTRODUCTION

On one Friday night, five people gathered at a house, bringing in Korean snacks and drinks they've treasured at home. Saying hello for the first time after seeing each other at the big gathering through Korean Graduate Students Association, they looked happy to be invited to a casual hang-out. Drinking, getting to know each other, and talking about adjusting to life in the US, there was laughter and moments of sympathy throughout the evening, lasting long after midnight. Nobody said anything, but everyone knew they already felt attached to this group of people, in whom they would find comfort through times of trouble and joy. This random gathering would be repeated to this day, forming a group called "Lancaster Village."

Having been a founding member of "Lancaster Village," bringing people together as a group, the researcher has been curious about how a supportive network like "Lancaster Village" thrives in the context of co-national graduate students living in the US. Although there has been research on the experiences of international students in higher education that examined the struggles they face and the support groups they form [1, 2], no qualitative study has yet focused on following a group closely from an insider's perspective. This study used qualitative research method including narrative approach to analyze the interviews, documents, and

Manuscript received: February 17, 2023 / revised: March 1, 2023 / accepted: March 13, 2023

Corresponding Author: minkyc1@uci.edu

Tel: *** - **** - **** / +1-949-317-6789

School of Education, University of California, Irvine, USA

Copyright©2023 by The International Promotion Agency of Culture Technology. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>)

observations of psychological and social support seeking in three Korean international graduate students in the United States. This study advances our understanding of the dynamic exchanges of support and their unique characteristics in Korean graduate students in the United States. Specifically, the following three research questions were addressed:

1. What kinds of support are exchanged within Lancaster Village?
2. Why do members choose (not) to seek (emotional) support?
3. What are some general characteristics of group and individual psychological support?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Socio-Psychological Support Seeking by Culture

Social support is one of the most important contents or qualities of relationships, as it brings health promoting and stress buffering effects [3]. Although people juggle relational demands and conflicts as well as social regulation and control, supportive relationships provide reasons for them to stay healthy and adapt to stress. In a conceptual analysis of social support, there are four types of support that are exchanged, based on the assumption that reciprocity is present for support to continue [4]. First, there is emotional support, involving the provision of care, empathy, love and trust. An affective transaction imparts liking, admiration and respect toward the other. Second, there is instrumental support, which refers to the provision of tangible goods, services, or aids. Third, there is informational support, indicating the information provided to someone during times of stress to assist problem-solving. Lastly, there is appraisal support, which involves the communication of information relevant more to self-evaluation than problem solving, to show affirmation of the appropriateness of acts or statements made by others. It is suggested that positive health states are established through the four intermingled attributes of support [3, 4].

There has been discussion around cultural differences in the extent of and the reasons for seeking social support. In one quantitative study, it was found that Koreans and Asian Americans in the US reported using social support less for coping with stress than European Americans [5]. The results were considered counterintuitive as it was expected that people from more interdependent or collectivist culture would be more likely to respond to stressors by explicitly asking for the help of their social support networks, compared to those from more independent, individualistic cultures. The researchers explained that seeking social support may also come with concerns for relationships, including preserving harmony, worrying it may make problems worse, facing criticism, saving face, and relying on oneself. Therefore, people from more collectivist cultures tended not to seek social support given the concern for preserving harmony in relationships. The findings from this study have been corroborated by following studies. Another group of researchers found that people from a more collectivist culture seek social support less and find it less effective than those from a more individualistic culture, with relationship concern as the prime influencer [6]. Furthermore, cultural differences in motivation and the consequences of exchanging social support were investigated [2]. Researchers found that when receiving support, European Americans had influence goals, resulting in self-esteem, whereas Japanese had adjustment goals and relational concerns, resulting in the feeling of shame and guilt. Taken together, there is a need to pay close attention to how cultural traits can trigger differences in the exchange of social support.

Experience of International Students in Diverse Contexts

Prior research has examined the experiences of international students in various contexts with a prime focus on social support seeking and adjusting to new cultures. For example, the diverse experiences that international postgraduate students in a British university go through have been explored [7] using a grounded theory

approach. Five theoretical codes were generated from twenty interviews — struggling to communicate, being an outsider, facing academic and life challenges, supporting each other, and gaining legitimacy by making the grade. Focusing specifically on how international students support each other through friendship networks, there have been qualitative and quantitative studies on the types of friendship groups and their relation to the students' emotional stability. One study has examined the adjustment experiences of postgraduate international students in England through an ethnographic study on co-national friendship [1]. It was found that there was desire to recreate home through co-national interaction driven by the urge to obtain comfort through shared language, heritage, and instrumental support. Meanwhile, it was stated that such friendship groups were formed out of fear and absence of contact with the host culture and that some students tried to break away from the monoethnic groups. In a quantitative study, it was found that international students had more friends from their home country but that participants with more friendship variability including host country individuals described themselves to be more satisfied, content, and more socially connected [8]. Likewise, the two studies showed that there is a tendency for international students to stick with friends from the same culture but that variability in friendship networks is desirable.

Regarding the experiences of Korean international students in the US, there is discussion around the positive role of social support in adapting to the host culture. One study found that social support was a moderator in the relation between acculturative stress and mental health symptoms [9]. In other words, the relation of acculturative stress to mental health symptoms depended on social support such that social support served as a buffer to mitigate the association between the two. Another study took a narrative approach to examine the experiences of five Korean graduate students with long professional careers in Korea, participating in higher education in the US [10]. The researchers illustrated the participants' life trajectories in choosing to study in a foreign country and navigating through adjustment difficulties. They further discussed the importance of understanding the participants' experiences from the Korean cultural perspective, embodying Confucianism values and ideologies that older Korean students demonstrated while studying abroad. However, no studies have focused on analyzing the specific moves and behaviors of social support seeking in Korean international students from an insider's perspective. The present study addresses this gap in the literature by engaging in qualitative inquiry using a narrative approach.

3. METHOD

Setting and Participants

The study focused on a group of Korean international graduate students, which autonomously calls itself "Lancaster Village," at an urban university in the Southwestern part of the United States. Every week, "Lancaster Village" gathers to have casual hangouts. The first member is Yejin, who is a 31-year-old female, in her second year of graduate school. The second member is Minho, who is a 26-year-old male, in his first year of graduate school. The third member is Sohyun, a 27-year-old female, in her first year of graduate school. They are all single in their marital status, hold bachelor's degrees from prestigious universities in Korea, and define themselves as "Korean," having grown up mostly within the Korean educational system, despite with some earlier living-abroad experiences.

Researcher Positionality

The role of the researcher in this study contained elements of both an insider and outsider. As the founder of "Lancaster Village" and a regular member in the weekly gatherings, the researcher was immersed in the day-to-day lives of the members, as in an ethnographic study [11]. Meanwhile, when the researcher collected

data through observations and interviews, she took on a more professional role, not participating in the conversations as much and asking structured questions to elicit responses from the participants. Being an insider in the group was beneficial because the participants expressed comfort in talking with the researcher, not having to provide prior context to their stories. On the other hand, because the researcher was an insider of the group, some participants were hesitant to share all their feelings toward individual members, knowing that their relationship would go on long after the study. The researcher negotiated her identity between being an insider and an outsider, being mindful of how the insider position may engender bias and how the outsider position may manipulate the interactions.

Data Collection

The collection of data was done with the full knowledge and consent of the participants, as an overt research. As the participants were adults agreeing to take part in the study, there was no need for IRB process for human subject protection. Data was collected from three sources: observation, interviews, and documents. Two observations were conducted during the typical weekly eat-out gatherings of “Lancaster Village.” The researcher focused on the topics of conversation and the participants’ interactions to derive meaning and record evidence of routines in people’s behavior. The interviews took place at three different places — the researcher’s house, a nearby café, and an empty office and lasted slightly more than one hour. The places were chosen based on availability and accessibility, while also considering the surrounding noise level. Descriptive, structural and contrast questions were employed sequentially during the interview, with some variation according to context [12]. The Korean language was the medium of communication, as it was the shared mother tongue and usual language of interaction between the researcher and the participants. Participants’ responses were audio recorded and later transcribed in Korean, then translated to English. Lastly, documentary evidence was collected from the group chat that all members of “Lancaster Village” were part of. The researcher screen-captured the chat exchanges between members that pertained to providing and receiving support and initiating the gatherings. Data from two months was examined and included in the analysis, as it was considered representative enough to exhibit routine interactions.

Data Analysis

Qualitative research method of narrative approach was utilized. The three data sources were utilized in the process of triangulation, which determines whether data from two or more sources converge or lead to the same finding [13]. Interviews were examined most closely as they provided rich insights into the reason for behaviors. The analysis of interviews was done with narrative methodology which focuses on analyzing data through “re-storying” stories and developing themes [14].

To begin with, in examining the three interviews, the researcher engaged in the processes of cleaning, translating, and coding for patterns and themes. First, transcription of the interviews (conducted in Korean) was trimmed so that only the content-related components were left for investigation. Then, the interviews were coded based on the preliminary framework of behavior, beliefs, attitude, and attributes. In this process, the researcher read through the transcriptions, identified quotes that pertained to the four frameworks, and organized them below each interview question. When transferring the quotes into a coding scheme, the researcher translated the original Korean utterances into English. However, some Korean words that do not have direct equivalents in English were kept in their original form, as they had connotations to Korean culture. The researcher chose to engage in translation at this point because she wanted to communicate her coding results to the English-speaking community. However, it may be more desirable to keep to the original language

as long and as much as possible so that the nuances of the language are kept intact, and the meaning is not lost in translation [15]. The preliminary data analysis using the four frameworks yielded results, uncovering patterns and themes in how people's beliefs, attitudes, and attributes influence their behavior.

After preliminary analysis, the researcher referred to relevant literature on cultural differences in social support seeking to generate a more systematic coding scheme for open (Level 1) and category (Level 2) coding. Open coding can stick closely to the original data, even bringing verbatim records, while categorical coding proceeds to a higher conceptual level [13]. In the process, the researcher read both the original interview transcripts as well as the results of preliminary analysis to elicit codes. Verbatim quotes were transported either from the original transcripts, which were translated in the process, or from the translated records in the preliminary analysis. Most were one or two sentences containing the same idea, and nouns and gerund forms were used to create the codes. In choosing salient codes, the researcher located what was frequently or commonly mentioned by the three participants.

Regarding the first research question on the kinds of support being exchanged within Lancaster Village, the researcher utilized the framework of attributes of social support [3]. After examining open coding on various behaviors of support, the researcher engaged in categorical coding looking at instrumental, informational, appraisal, and emotional support. The second research question regarding the reasons for seeking social support was addressed by reviewing the preliminary analysis and tracking down verbatim quotes that alluded to the reasons for not seeking support or deeper level of emotional support. This was examined in relation to Korean or Asian culture of seeking harmony within the group. Lastly, general patterns regarding the differences in psychological support in a group and individual setting was elicited from the codes generated from preliminary analysis.

Interview data served as the primary source for finding patterns and themes, surveying analytical frameworks, and consolidating research questions. Nonetheless, observational notes and documents were also examined to triangulate how they corresponded to the findings from the interviews. Such constant comparative method enabled the researcher to gain a fuller picture of social support seeking behaviors and served to improve the validity of the study [13].

4. FINDINGS

What kinds of support are being exchanged within Lancaster Village?

Informational Support

During the two gatherings of Lancaster Village, there were plentiful exchanges of information regarding life in the US. For example, the participants discussed topics that had relevance to Korea or Koreans. They talked about another group of Korean students who regularly play tennis on Mondays. They also talked about a Korean food service called "*dosirak*" and shared information regarding updates on the menu and how to order easily. In addition, topics related to settling in and getting to know the US as a foreigner were brought up often. Participants talked about how to upgrade their car insurance, where to travel, and which products to buy at which markets. Moreover, there was informational exchange regarding life as a graduate student. In the second observation, two of the participants engaged in a conversation about Teaching Assistant's office hours. After heated discussion about whether office hours were mandatory or not, they concluded that it depended on the department. The informational exchange was also evident in the group chats. Participants posted Youtube video links, photos, or texts about trending TV shows in Korea or about lectures or performances related to Korea that were taking place at the university. As expected, participants expressed willingness to obtain a wide variety of information related to Korea while living in the States.

Similarly, in the interviews, the participants recalled exchanging valuable information regarding life in the US and regarding surviving in the US academia. Minhó specifically mentioned how he relied on Yejin, the only second year in the group, to tell him about how things go about in Lancaster. When Yejin was asked what makes Lancaster Village different from her friendship groups back in Korea, she responded that the group talks more about “realistic matters” such as filing tax and going grocery shopping. She said, “we talk a lot about matters of survival and concerns over our English skills.” Such exchanges of information portray the participants’ status as international graduate students.

Instrumental Support

The exchange of tangible goods, services, and aids was evident in the observations of the group gatherings. Acts of service occurred around people who owned a car to provide a ride to others. In the group chats, Sohyun, who owns a car, occasionally asked if anyone was interested in joining her for grocery shopping. Minhó, who recently bought a car, also asked if anyone wanted to join him to go to the library to study. During the interviews, all three participants mentioned how they provided a ride for those who needed one. Also, Yejin shared her story of when she was sick, how other members cooked for her and bought porridge for her to eat. In a similar vein, Sohyun mentioned how comforting it was to know that there was at least one person who could help her when she got sick or hurt, in this “completely new land.”

Appraisal Support

The communication of information relevant to self-evaluation, or appraisal support, was exhibited in various ways through all three data points. In one observation, participants agreed with each other about how they could not get accustomed to the different restaurant culture in the US. They also talked about how Koreans feel uncomfortable when taking a full rest during summer break because they are workaholics. During both observations, the majority of the time was dedicated to catching up with each other’s current updates. For example, Minhó talked about his practicum experience while Yejin shared her frustration with her co-worker. These were topics that didn’t go into excessive depth but gained approval and empathy from all other participants. In the group chats, when members of Lancaster Village shared good news, everyone responded with positive messages of appraisal. For instance, when Minhó bought his car, everyone said “Congratulations” and commented on how awesome it looked. In the interviews, participants recalled incidences of appraisal support. All three participants mentioned that they felt supported when the group was willing to hang out. Yejin and Minhó perceived the group meeting as fun while Sohyun was appreciative of the fact that she felt a sense of belonging to the group and that she had trust in the members’ positivity that cheers her up. All three acknowledged how the group shares their daily life stories, listens to each other attentively, and tries to react in an appropriate manner for appraisal support.

Emotional Support

The occasions for exchange of care, empathy, love, and trust were witnessed in the interviews, less through observations and group chats. In the observation, the participants exhibited behaviors that stemmed from emotional concern, such as thanking the driver for car sharing and being considerate toward those who don’t have a car by urging them to buy heavy products whenever they can get help with the car. During the second observation, there were moments of emotional support when participants shared stories about how they are not able to know much about what’s going with their family members back in Korea. One time when Yejin said in the group chat that she could not make it to the group gathering because she was so sick, members expressed sincere worries toward her and said, “Get well soon”. In the interviews, participants shared moments when they felt emotional support. Sohyun talked about a time when her friends asked her to come stay with them,

with a message saying, “Come back to Lancaster, your home.” Minho also mentioned how he appreciated having his friend to call and talk to. He found comfort in meeting the friend regularly and expressing thoughts and feelings in Korean. Interestingly, when the three participants were talking about emotional support, they had one or two members in mind that they experienced such feelings toward, rather than the entire group.

Why do members choose (not) to seek (emotional) support?

When initiating the gatherings

When initiating gatherings in the group chat, Sohyun often took on the role of announcing the plan for a gathering. Although the group members were comfortable communicating with each other, there was the frequent use of politeness as a strategy. The initiator of the gathering mentioned her respect for others’ time and opinions, so as to mitigate the possible face-threatening effect of her invitation [16].

Does anyone want to come to dinner with Mina (some other Korean friend)? Because everyone is busy, we’ll just grab food quickly. Where do you want to meet? I can drive or someone else can drive, whatever you guys would like. If it’s okay with you all, I’ll drive and pick everyone up from your locations. – Sohyun

When asked about how the group gatherings happen, two participants mentioned how they have assumptions about the implicit rules for the gatherings. Minho said that he felt the need to initiate the meetings but was concerned about who can come or not, because he thought that there should be at least four people participating. Meanwhile, Sohyun mentioned that she would love to see other people reaching out to initiate the gatherings, rather than herself having to ask them every time. She said that she has been feeling the responsibility to ask people out because other members were relying on her to do so and were accustomed to being invited. The same two participants also mentioned that they were concerned about the possible burden they may pose to others by initiating the gatherings. Minho said he “watches out for how busy the members are” and thinks about whether it’s alright to call these busy people out to talk about trivial matters such as daily feelings. Moreover, Sohyun said she decided not to reach out too often anymore because she felt that some other members may be burdened by her way of communicating and reaching out. Likewise, they were attentive to how others might think about their act of reaching out and were careful not to infringe on other’s rights to stay independent.

Lastly, two participants mentioned that they were not always enthusiastic about group gatherings. Yejin said it would be good if she initiated the gatherings but that the process was a little tiresome or cumbersome, so she goes to the meeting when people call her. At the same time, she mentioned that she was not too obsessed with group gatherings, because she felt like she no longer relied on the whole group to go through all the hardships together. Meanwhile, Sohyun said she gradually became exhausted about the group gatherings and felt the need to take care of herself rather than using energy on reaching out.

When in group gatherings

When the participants were at the group gatherings, they tended to keep up with a positive atmosphere, talking about their current updates in a way that was fun and engaging, not too heavy. There was one occasion when everyone was feeling deeply emotional about the stories of their families in Korea. Nonetheless, the bigger the group gathering was, the more joyful and lively the atmosphere the members strived to preserve. In the interviews, the participants noted that they had assumptions about how the whole-group gatherings should be. For example, two members expressed their tendency to seek a positive atmosphere in big group gatherings. Minho specifically mentioned that he didn’t want to make everyone feel “down” because of the possible

negative emotions coming from his stories. Yejin said “the group always talks about things that are positive and comfortable” while saying that she was sometimes doubtful of whether such positivity is true of the members or not. She mentioned that everyone is kind, considerate and sensitive, but that at times, she felt like she didn’t really know what they were thinking.

In relation to the sought-for positivity, all participants mentioned how they were consciously and unconsciously adjusting the depth of the conversation, so that it doesn’t get “too serious” for the whole group. Yejin mentioned that she would not initiate conversation about deep or serious matters such as “what is the meaning of life” at the Friday meetings.

There are so many life updates from various members to catch up with, that before I even attempt to open up my feelings, it is time to go home. I’m happy to talk about anything, whether light or deep, but, at the same time, I’m skeptical about whether being serious is necessary in the group gatherings, because I think each of us can do that through individual meetings. – Minho

Sohyun also mentioned that she adjusted the depth and extent of her personal stories after she realized that not all members seemed to understand or sympathize with her situation. She added that confiding her stories only to a certain extent was beneficial for group cohesion.

What are some characteristics of group and individual psychological support?

Role-taking within the group

To begin with, when participants were asked about their identity within the group, all three mentioned that they hold a certain role, whether explicit or implicit and regardless of their liking. Yejin did not seem to be satisfied with the role she admittedly plays, mentioning that she takes “neither the central nor the peripheral role” as the only second year and the eldest. Additionally, she said that she did not feel a complete sense of belonging to the group because of what she assumes the members might expect from her status as the knowledgeable one, having more life experiences than the others. Minho, on the other hand, wanted to take on the role of the emotional supporter within the group but was not sure whether he was doing a good job. Sohyun mentioned how she took on the role of a mediator, saying that she initiates the gatherings according to her knowledge of other’s schedules. She also said that it was in her nature to fill in the gap in conversations and keep a good balance in her relationships. The interviews matched the behaviors each participant exhibited in the observations and documents. In the observations, Yejin was acting as the “eldest one,” responsible for asking questions about how others have been and providing information on what others were curious about. Sohyun was the initiator of the gatherings and a willing volunteer to be the driver of the day. Lastly, Minho, who hoped to be a good emotional supporter for everyone, exhibited such behavior throughout the gatherings, as he listened carefully to others, provided diverse reactions, and lifted up the atmosphere of the group gatherings.

Differences between individual vs group meeting

At various points in the interview, the three participants commonly brought up their thoughts about how meeting an individual and the group was different in terms of the level of openness, comfort, attachment, and mode of communication.

I am not very comfortable talking to some members one-on-one, whereas talking to them in the context of a group meeting is fine. She also said that she thinks of an individual first, then, the group, when she has some news, sees something relevant, or wants to talk. – Yejin

Minho said that there were topics that he only talks about with one member and that he was careful in approaching others because he is not equally close to everyone. Sohyun also mentioned how one-to-one situations were always the best when talking about her concerns and that the bigger the group, the harder it was to talk about her stories. At the same time, she noted how members were different in their way of communicating and that there were people whom she was naturally more drawn to. Although such differences could not be witnessed through observations of whole group meetings, the researcher continuously noticed that the language and content of the group chats were markedly different from the individual chats she had with each member. Individual chats are more daily, intimate, and unrefined in terms of language, whereas communication in the group chats were more succinct and often employed honorific forms of Korean language, which showed more formality and distancing among the interlocutors.

Desire to stay connected

Even amongst the conflicting feelings toward group and individual meetings, all three participants displayed an attitude or desire to stay connected with “Lancaster Village.” During the gatherings, members asked about their future schedules and showed how they were curious about each other by making eye contact and listening attentively. The group chat was activated regularly, for whichever form of support to be exchanged. From the interviews, Yejin mentioned that she speculates that there will be less time spent together with the group as everyone gets busy and has their own cars. Nonetheless, she expressed willingness to meet the members as often. Minho said he hopes that the group will go on “until the day they graduate.” Sohyun also mentioned that the priority in her life lies in interpersonal relationships and that it is important for her to “be there” for her friends at the current moment. Likewise, all three participants expressed how valuable “Lancaster Village” was and will be.

5. DISCUSSION

This study examined the patterns of socio psychological support seeking in a group of Korean international graduate students and classified the types of support being exchanged, considerations when seeking social support, and common assumptions about group gatherings. Two observations of group gatherings, interviews on three members, and documents from group chat were utilized as data points, analyzed through a narrative approach, and triangulated to establish validity. It was found that all four kinds of social support (emotional, instrumental, informational, appraisal) existed and that the kinds of support varied depending on the nature of the gatherings (i.e., individual, group), supporting prior literature [3].

To begin with, informational support was displayed as the most accessible kind of support because it did not warrant any tangible exchange of goods or services (i.e., instrumental support) and was not as intrinsically evaluative or caring of the person (i.e., appraisal and emotional support). Also, as the group consisted of Korean international students, it was crucial that they exchanged information regarding life in the US as a matter of survival. In other words, it did not hurt for them to share what they knew with others who had similar concerns, knowing they might also benefit from others’ information as well. Next, there was instrumental support, often displayed through the act of car-sharing. In fact, the provision of instrumental support was at a similar level of emotional depth to that which triggered appraisal support, as participants were both truly concerned provide cheerful messages to others in need of positive appraisal during the group gatherings. Therefore, instrumental and appraisal support were both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated, as members cared for certain individuals while also feeling obligated to support others whom they are not personally close to. This was because they were unavoidably tied to the support group that they associated themselves with. Lastly, emotional support, or sincere care for others, was found to be the deepest level of support that was exchanged,

beyond the other three kinds of support. Interestingly, when members talked about emotional support, they specifically referred to incidents with a certain individual, not the whole group. They said that they were able to reveal negative feelings but still feel supported by warm and kind exchange of behaviors with certain individuals. The three participants commonly made distinctions between scenarios where they were with an individual and with the whole group for emotional support, which showed the different levels of support that were provided from the group and individuals.

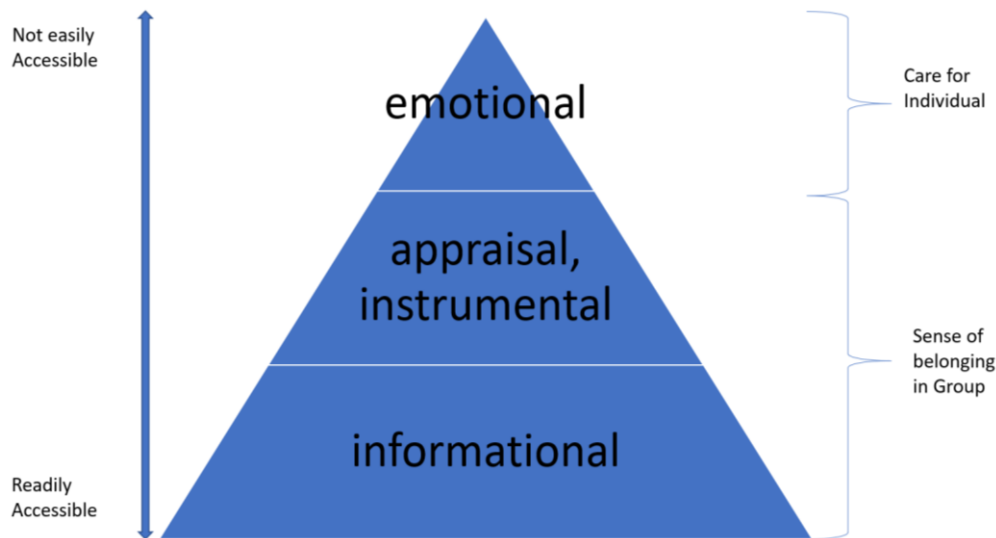


Figure 1. Hierarchy of Socio Psychological Support

Combining the four types of support, the researcher generated a diagram of the hierarchy of socio psychological support (Figure 1). The most readily accessible type of support was informational support, followed by appraisal and instrumental, and then emotional support. The underlying assumption behind informational, appraisal, and instrumental support was that members associate themselves with “Lancaster Village” and felt a sense of belonging that generated the atmosphere for exchanging support. Nonetheless, the deepest emotional support did not come from the mere fact that they are members of the group, but rather from personal attachment to individuals within the group. In other words, when one cared for an individual, all other kinds of support came for granted; however, individuals who shared informational, instrumental, and appraisal support may not be ready to exchange emotional support. The findings add to the literature on social support regarding the relation between the accessibility of each kind of support and the extent of individual attachment needed for hierarchical behaviors of support to happen.

Regarding the concerns that participants held when initiating the gatherings and when in gatherings, the current findings showed consistent results with the existing literature on cultural differences on social support [2, 5, 6]. It has been discussed that people from more collectivist culture were less willing to seek social support in stressful situations compared to those from more individualistic cultures, as collectivist culture primes relational concerns (e.g., not disturbing others). Likewise, when “Lancaster Village” initiated group gatherings, participants held implicit rules to not burden others by imposing on others time due to their act of inviting. In other words, members of “Lancaster Village” were faced with relational concerns to be attentive to the rules of the group and to other’s schedules, in saying “let’s hang out.” Participants sometimes chose not to go through the burden of initiating the gatherings as they perceived the process to be cumbersome, resorting to relying on oneself to relieve stress.

Moreover, when the participants were at the gatherings, they expressed how they were pressured to keep the atmosphere of the gathering as lively and positive as possible, rather than dealing with overly heavy topics. It was evident that the majority of the members were aware of this implicit rule and adjusted the depth of the conversational topics according to it. It is also noteworthy that “Lancaster Village” described themselves as consisting of individuals who are extremely kind and considerate, which may have amplified the pressure for relational concerns that they had to keep up with, to stay as insiders of the group. Therefore, the researcher concluded that the personalities of the members coupled with the Korean cultural trait of being attentive to relational concerns contributed to their support seeking behaviors.

6. CONCLUSION

Despite the findings, there are a few limitations to be noted for future research. First, this study was done on a small number of participants in the specific context of Korean graduate students in the United States using convenient sampling. Due to this limitation, the results of the study may not be transferrable to other contexts. Future research is encouraged to examine diverse contexts including undergraduate international students in various other countries. Moreover, there are limitations regarding the insider role that the researcher played in data collection as there may have been issues of sensitivity and intrusiveness in the data collection process. For example, despite the best efforts on the part of the researcher, the participants may not have shared enough information due to the fact that the researcher was a member of the group and there may have been instances where the researcher intruded with the participants’ behaviors. Relatedly, in interpreting the data, there may be concerns regarding how well the participants’ narratives have been “re-storied” by the researcher. Although the researcher engaged in anonymizing the participants and cross-checking the findings, there is an inherent limitation in a narrative study where there is the danger of writing a fiction and using the data to tell a deception easily as truth [14]. Therefore, future research is encouraged to attend to these matters regarding sampling, data collection, and data analysis.

In all, this study contributed to enhancing our understanding of socio psychological support seeking in international graduate students in the United States. Psychological support through social interaction is integral to navigating and persisting through academic and professional lives, especially for students living abroad to seek higher education. This study conveys an invaluable story that has implications for theoretical advancement as well as practical benefits for those interested in the experiences of international students in the higher education setting.

REFERENCES

- [1] L. Brown, “An ethnographic study of the friendship patterns of international students in England: an attempt to create home through conational interaction,” *International Journal of Educational Research*, Vol. 48, pp. 184-193, 2009. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2009.07.003>
- [2] K. Ishii, T. Mojaverian, K. Masuno, & H. S. Kim, “Cultural differences in motivation for seeking social support and the emotional consequences of receiving support: The role of influence and adjustment goals,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, Vol. 48, No. 9, pp. 1442–1456, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022117731091>
- [3] J. S. House, D. Umberson, & K. R. Landis, “Structures and processes of social support,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 14, pp. 293-318, 1988. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.14.080188.001453>
- [4] C. P. H. Langford, J. Bowsher, J. P. Maloney, & P. P. Lillis, “Social support: A conceptual analysis,” *Journal of advanced nursing*, Vol. 25, No. 1, pp. 95-100, 1997. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365->

2648.1997.1997025095.x

- [5] S. E. Taylor, D. K. Sherman, H. S. Kim, J. Jarcho, K. Takagi, & M. S. Dunagan, "Culture and social support: Who seeks it and why?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 87, No. 3, pp. 354–362, 2004. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.87.3.354>
- [6] H. S. Kim, D. K. Sherman, D. Ko, & S. E. Taylor, "Pursuit of comfort and pursuit of harmony: Culture, relationships, and social support seeking." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 32, No. 12, pp. 1595–1607, 2006. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167206291991>
- [7] P. McMahon, "'Making the grade': A grounded theory explaining the student experience of Asian and Middle-Eastern postgraduate in a British university," *Journal of higher education policy and management*, Vol. 40, No. 1, pp. 34-47, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2017.1411061>
- [8] B. Hendrickson, D. Rosen, & R. K. Aune, "An analysis of friendship networks, social connectedness, homesickness, and satisfaction levels of international students," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Vol. 35, pp. 281-295, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2010.08.001>
- [9] J.-S. Lee, G. F. Koeske, & E. Sales, "Social support buffering of acculturative stress: a study of mental health symptoms among Korean international students," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Vol. 28, pp. 399-414, 2004. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2004.08.005>
- [10] S. Seo, & M. Koro-Ljungberg, "A hermeneutical study of older Korean graduate students' experiences in American higher education: From Confucianism to western educational values," *Journal of Studies in International Education*, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp.164-187, 2005. DOI: 10.1177/1028315305274695
- [11] J. W. Creswell, & C. N. Poth, *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions* (4th ed.), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2017.
- [12] J. P. Spradley, "Interviewing an informant," In *The ethnographic interview*, pp.55-68. New York: Holt, Rinehardt and Winston, 1979.
- [13] R. K. Yin, *Qualitative research from start to finish* (2nd ed.), New York: The Guilford Press, 2017.
- [14] F. M. Connelly, & D. J. Clandinin, "Stories of experience and narrative inquiry," *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 19, No. 5, pp. 2-14, 1990. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1176100>
- [15] F. van Nes, T. Abma, H. Jonsson, & D. Deeg, "Language differences in qualitative research: is meaning lost in translation?" *European Journal of Ageing*, Vol. 7, pp. 313–316, 2010. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10433-010-0168-y>
- [16] B. Paltridge, *Discourse analysis: An introduction* (2nd ed.). Bloomsbury: London/Sydney, 2012.