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Intercultural Friendship: Effects of Home and Host Region

Elisabeth Gareis

This study examines how home and host region affect international students' friendship experiences in the United States. Based on surveys completed by 454 international students, this study finds that home and host regions are significant factors influencing the number of American friends international students make as well as their satisfaction with these friendships. With respect to home region, students from English-speaking countries and from Northern and Central Europe had the most positive experiences, while students from East Asia had the least positive. Regarding host region, students fared better in the South than the Northeast, and better in non-metropolitan than metropolitan environments.

Keywords: Intercultural Friendship; Friendship Satisfaction; International Students; Home Region; Host Region

As the global demand for higher education increases, countries are competing to attract internationally mobile students (Douglass & Edelstein, 2009). Although the United States continues to be the world's leading higher-education destination (followed by the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Australia), its market share fell from 31 to 18.7 percent between 1999 and 2008 (Larsen, Martin, & Morris, 2002; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2010). This decline is due, in part, to post-9/11 visa restrictions in the United States and the intensifying efforts of other countries to recruit students—efforts that include low visa fees, scholarships, and even marketing slogans (e.g., Australia's "Love. Learn. Grow.") (American Council on Education, 2009).

The urgency with which some countries pursue international students stems from the economic importance of international enrollment. Although the United States has more international students than any other country (624,474 in 2008, versus 335,870 in the United Kingdom and 230,635 in Australia), this population makes up

Elisabeth Gareis, Department of Communication Studies, Baruch College/CUNY. Correspondence to: Elisabeth Gareis, Department of Communication Studies, B8-240, Baruch College/CUNY, 55 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10010, USA. Email: egareis@baruch.cuny.edu

only 3.4 percent of the total enrollment. The ratio is different in the other leading countries. In Australia, for example, international students comprise 20.6 percent of the total—a significant number and the reason that education services have become Australia's third largest export revenue category (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2010).

But study-abroad programs contribute more than just economic benefits. In the host country, international students enrich domestic students' educational experience (Sharma & Jung, 1985) and, especially in the case of graduate students, tend to accelerate the development of academic fields (American Embassy Information Resource Center, 2001). The international students themselves gain global experience and often fill influential leadership positions upon returning home. If the students are satisfied with their sojourns and leave with a positive view of the host country, they can play an important role in fostering productive relations with their former host country.

A central predictor of sojourn satisfaction is contact with host nationals, in particular the meaningful and intimate contact found in friendships (Rohrlich & Martin, 1991; Searle & Ward, 1990). Students desire this contact and, if it materializes, they have stronger language skills, better academic performance, lower levels of stress, and greater life satisfaction (Redmond & Bunyi, 1993; Rohrlich & Martin, 1991; Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Masgoret, 2004). Meaningful relationships also aid overall adjustment and are instrumental in improving international images (Dziegielewska, 1988; Furnham & Alibhai, 1985).

Intercultural friendship thus has immense potential for enhancing sojourns and advancing international goodwill. Unfortunately, this potential is often not realized. One of the uppermost complaints of study-abroad students is the lack of close contact with host nationals (Bochner, McLeod, & Lin, 1977; Furnham & Alibhai, 1985; Kudo & Simkin, 2003; Ward & Masgoret, 2004). It is not unusual for a third or more of international students to report having no host-national friends at all (Bochner, Hutnik, & Furnham, 1985; Furnham & Alibhai, 1985; Ward & Masgoret, 2004).

Factors Influencing Intercultural Friendship Formation

Although research on intercultural friendship is still fragmentary, some factors influencing friendship formation across cultures have been identified. The focus has been on three areas: cultural similarity, intercultural communication competence, and personality and identity.

Cultural Similarity

In giving attributional confidence, cultural similarity makes behavior explanations and predictions in initial encounters easier, thus paving the way for deeper involvement (Kim, H.J., 1991; Searle & Ward, 1990). One of the functions of close relationships is also to affirm one's self and identity, causing interactants to seek friends with similar backgrounds (Rubin, 1985). Particularly, individualism and collectivism have been identified as influential in intercultural friendship develop-

ment. Ting-Toomey (1989), for example, found that persons with an individualistic orientation tend to focus on desirable personal attributes in potential friends, whereas persons with a collectivistic orientation look for cultural or social role attributes. In a similar vein, the bonding of international students from collectivistic cultures in countries like the United States is often aided by preexisting conational networks and the absence of peer support for venturing out to establish intercultural relationships (Paige, 1983; Trice, 2007).

Some studies focus on specific aspects of friendship across cultures. At first glance, friendships in a wide variety of cultures seem to share a core of valued traits (e.g., sharing confidences, mutual affection, trust, approval, and support) (Argyle & Henderson, 1984; Argyle, Henderson, Bond, Iizuka, & Contarello, 1986). On closer inspection, however, cultural differences are apparent in how these traits manifest. Examples include variations in the degree and importance of self-disclosure (Morse, 1983), emotion expression (Wilkins & Gareis, 2006), and nonverbal immediacy (Santilli & Miller, 2011). In addition, members of different cultural groups may place different weight on the themes and values attached to intercultural contact (Collier & Bornman, 1999).

Intercultural Communication Competence

A second factor affecting intercultural friendship formation is intercultural communication competence, particularly aspects that bridge the gap between the initial stages of relationship development (when intercultural complexities are most prominent) and the more stable stages of interpersonal involvement (when cultural differences tend to retreat into the background) (Gudykunst, 1985). Working together to form a dynamic that leads to effective relational outcomes, these aspects include cross-cultural knowledge, communication skills, and motivation (Imahori & Lanigan, 1989).

Cross-cultural knowledge comprises familiarity with the elements of deep culture and an ease in using them in daily life (Kim, Y.Y., 1991). A sojourner's understanding of the host culture is essential for adjustment and relationship development (Gudykunst, 1991).

As to communication, high scores in communicative adaptability (a combination of communication skills and personal attributes) (Duran, 1992) have been found to increase international students' satisfaction with the number and quality of their intercultural friendships (Gareis, Merkin, & Goldman, 2011). In particular, the communicative adaptability components of other-orientation, sensitivity, and the ability to provide positive feelings predict success in initiating and managing intercultural friendships (Chen, 1992). Questions remain, however, about the extent to which language proficiency itself is important. A third of the international students in a large-scale New Zealand study believed that their English competence hindered their ability to make friends with New Zealanders (Ward & Masgoret, 2004). Gareis et al.'s study (2011) confirms this correlation between language proficiency and intercultural friendship satisfaction. On the other hand, Sias et al. (2008) report that the broken English of international students in the United States did not unduly

hinder intercultural friendship development. American participants in the study noted that their friends' errors even served as a source of (benign) humor and playfulness in interactions.

With respect to motivation, studies focusing on the sojourners' point of view show that task-oriented students tend to concentrate on academics, remain anchored in their home culture, and do not pursue intercultural friendships. Their antipodes are cultural seekers whose primary reason for studying abroad is to meet host nationals and learn about the host culture (Roland, 1986). While motivation considerably influences friendship development, a number of obstacles can limit its impact. Even cultural seekers, for example, have to readjust their social expectations when their sojourns are relatively short, which has been the trend in recent years (Pitts, 2009). A further impediment is non-receptivity, ethnocentrism, or even discrimination on the part of host nationals. Japanese students in Australia stated that host receptivity, in the form of the intercultural understanding and empathic communication, is crucial for friendships to develop (Kudo & Simkin, 2003). Likewise, studies show that encountering ethnocentrism (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2007) and discrimination (Lee & Rice, 2007; Ward & Masgoret, 2004) diminishes international students' motivation for pursuing intercultural friendships.

Personality and Identity

Comprehensive research on the personality traits most relevant to intercultural friendship is still lacking. It has been found, however, that intercultural effectiveness in general is aided by traits such as cultural empathy, open-mindedness, emotional stability, social initiative, and flexibility (Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2002).

Closely related to personality is the issue of identity. Individuals who define their identities along cultural dimensions tend to focus on their own culture and do not usually form as many friendships across cultural lines as those who are personal identifiers (Strom, 1988). In addition, the relational identity of the friendship itself has to be considered. Once interactants have formed a friendship, the ability to balance one's own identity with this newly emerging relational identity is important for the success of the friendship (Collier, 2002; Lee, 2008).

Home and Host Region Effect

Although progress has been made in addressing some of the abovementioned factors (e.g., through predeparture training), the friendship satisfaction levels of international students remain low and are a concern for students as well as institutions trying to maximize study-abroad experiences. Much is still unknown about intercultural friendship formation. Among the areas in need of investigation are the effects of home region and host region on intercultural friendship development.

Home Region

In 2010, the leading regions of origin of international students worldwide were Asia (49.9 percent) and Europe (23.0 percent) (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2010), with many of these students studying in Anglophone countries. Consequently, much friendship research—at least in English-language publications—has focused on the social experiences of students from these regions (e.g., Chen, 2006; Gareis, 1995; Kudo & Simkin, 2003; Trice & Elliott, 1993; Ying, 2002). Other studies look at international students as a group, without differentiating between regions (e.g., Owie, 1982) or are large-scale studies, where intercultural friendship is one aspect of a broader look at the international-student experience (e.g., Ward & Masgoret, 2004).

With respect to friendship numbers, many of these studies report that East Asian students in Anglophone countries have fewer host national friends than students from other regions, in particular those from Europe. In research comparing German, Indian, and Chinese students in the United States, for example, Gareis (1995) found that German students had the most close host-national friends, followed by Indian then Chinese students. Trice and Elliott (1993) reported that the Japanese students in their U.S. study spent most of their time with conationals. And Ward and Masgoret (2004) found that Asian students in New Zealand generally experienced more difficulty in making friends with host nationals than students from Europe, North America, and South America did. Another study conducted in the United States examined faculty explanations for international graduate students' lack of social interaction with host nationals (Trice, 2007). The recurring theme in the faculty members' reports was that Asian students (Chinese, Korean, and Indian) predominantly spent time in conational groups and had few host-national contacts.

Findings differ concerning the students' satisfaction with this status quo. Studies focusing on German students in the United States (e.g., Gareis, 2000) indicate that, while German students on average had a relatively large number of American friends, they expressed disappointment with the depth of these friendships and the commitment of their friends. With respect to East Asian students' satisfaction levels, findings are inconclusive. Some studies report dissatisfaction with host-national interaction (Gareis, 1995; Lee & Rice, 2007); others paint a picture of students who seem happy in their conational networks and not fazed by the absence of host-national friendship. A faculty member in Trice's study (2007), for example, reported that Korean students had created an infrastructure that included childcare, medical care, and a travel agency, and that they seemed quite comfortable in this conational community. Likewise, Ward and Masgoret (2004) found that Chinese students were less likely to want more New Zealand friends than the other internationals, although they—in contrast to other Asian students—did not consider making New Zealand friends as difficult.

Existing research on international students' friendship numbers and satisfaction levels either focuses on students from selected countries/regions or does not differentiate between students' backgrounds. More information is needed on how

students from a larger variety of regions in the world perceive their friendship experiences. To help fill this gap, the following research question was formulated:

- RQ1: What effect do home regions have on international students' number of host-national friends and the students' satisfaction with the number and quality of these friendships?

Host Region

Research on host-region effects is almost nonexistent. Only one study so far has identified regional differences within the host country as a factor influencing friendship formation. Thus, Ward and Masgoret (2004) found that international students in Auckland and Christchurch, New Zealand, had fewer host-national friends than students in Wellington, and the rest of the North and South Islands. Auckland has a population of over 1 million, Christchurch around 350,000, and Wellington around 180,000 (New Zealand Government, 2011). Ward and Masgoret (2004) report that "the overall trends point to a pattern where international students in urban settings, particularly Auckland and Christchurch, tend to have fewer New Zealand friends and more compatriot friends" (p. 61). They surmise that this is a function of (1) the greater density of international students in urban areas, and (2) the fact that students in Auckland and Christchurch tend to see New Zealanders' attitudes toward them as more negative than students in other regions.

With little information available on international-student density per se, Ward and Masgoret's (2004) first theory may find an explanation in research on urban planning for the integration of immigrants. Urban environments with significant diversity tend to promote intra- instead of interethnic contact and, at best, result in parallel and, at worst, in antagonistic lives. This is sometimes the case even after decades of residence (e.g., Arutiunian, 2006; Fossett & Waren, 2005). To counter this, reports recommend that urban planners should increase efforts to facilitate cooperation and productive interethnic harmony (Wood & Landry, 2007).

Ward and Masgoret's (2004) other host-region factor is localized racism. In research conducted in Australia, Forrest and Dunn (2006) mapped out a distinctive geography of racism, something they call the "everywhere different nature" (p. 167) of racist attitudes. Such attitudes are, at times, the result of demographic trends. In Auckland, New Zealand, for example, international students are predominantly northeast Asian. A recent influx of these students, and concomitant changes to the neighborhoods and businesses that cater to such students, has spurred fears of a displacement of local culture. Collins (2006) reports that significant, negative media coverage—blaming northeast Asian students for issues ranging from an increase in car accidents to a surge in crime—has led to the racialization of all Asian students as a group. This is a primary cause for their exclusion and, in turn, the basis for the students' negative perception of the hosts. No research is available on the effect of host regions on student sojourners in the United States. Of particular interest is the influence of population density (e.g., urban campuses versus medium- to small-size

college towns) and other regional factors on friendship formation. The following research question was formulated:

- RQ2: What effect does the host region have on international students' number of host-national friends and the students' satisfaction with the number and quality of these friendships?

Method

This study focuses on three regions in the United States: the metropolitan Northeast, the non-metropolitan Northeast, and the non-metropolitan Southeast. The term *non-metropolitan* refers to small college towns and medium-size cities of 100,000 inhabitants or less. Data were collected from international students at universities in these regions via an online questionnaire.

Questionnaire

Questions elicited demographic information (home and host region, gender, age, and length of stay) as well as information on the participants' number of close American friends and their satisfaction with the number and quality of these friendships. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they had zero, one, two, three, or more close American friends. Satisfaction ratings on the number and quality of friendships were elicited on a 3-point Likert scale, with the choices being *very satisfied* (1), *somewhat satisfied* (2), and *not satisfied* (3). A 3-point scale was chosen to preclude low cell counts and to focus on students with less than optimal satisfaction levels. Respondents who were only *somewhat satisfied* or *not satisfied* with the number or quality of their friendships were given the option to elaborate in free-response mode.

As is the case with most intercultural friendship studies, this paper focuses on close friendships. One way to arrive at a definition of *close friendship* is to look at numbers. While one can have many acquaintances and casual friends, the maximum number of close friendships across cultures is often given as between five and seven (Dunbar, 1998; Poguebin, 1987). Demands on time and effort for maintaining close friendships do not allow for more. Research indicates that subjects can distinguish easily between close friends and casual friends or acquaintances, even if given no a-priori definition (Adams, 1986). Respondents in the study at hand were therefore asked to answer the survey questions with their *close American friends* in mind. *American* was defined as "born and raised in the United States."

Participants

Participants were recruited by contacting the international student offices at 10 public universities in the Northeast and the South of the United States. The offices posted announcements of the survey on their listserves for international students. After giving informed consent, participants filled out an online questionnaire.

A total of 454 undergraduate and graduate students participated in the survey. The group was equally divided between male ($n = 228$) and female ($n = 226$) students.

The most common age range was 18–29 years ($n = 337$), followed by 30–39 years ($n = 98$), and 40 years or older ($n = 19$). At the time of the survey, the students had been in the United States between 0–1 years ($n = 109$), 1–3 years ($n = 160$), 3–5 years ($n = 96$), and 5–10 years ($n = 89$).

Participants indicated their home countries, which were then grouped according to cultural regions by the investigator. Regions (rather than countries) were chosen for data evaluation to allow for larger samples than would have been possible with country identification. The home regions were patterned along common language and cultural divisions and consisted of East Asia ($n = 134$), South Asia ($n = 76$), Latin America and the Caribbean ($n = 51$), North Africa and the Middle East ($n = 44$), Southeast Asia ($n = 40$), Northern and Central Europe ($n = 32$), Eastern Europe ($n = 25$), West and Sub-Saharan Africa ($n = 20$), Southern Europe ($n = 13$), Anglophone countries (i.e., English-speaking countries with some cultural similarity due to common heritage, including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom) ($n = 10$), and Russia and Central Asia ($n = 9$).

For the metropolitan Northeast, data were collected from students enrolled at universities in New York City ($n = 138$). Non-metropolitan data were collected at universities in college towns and medium-size cities in Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York State for the Northeast ($n = 132$); and in Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, and Mississippi for the South ($n = 184$).

Results

Results are presented in three clusters: (1) information on friendship numbers and satisfaction, (2) region effects on these friendship variables, and (3) qualitative findings on the lack of friendship satisfaction.

Friendship Numbers and Satisfaction

Students were asked to indicate whether they had zero, one, two, or three or more close American friends. Echoing the results of previous research, a significant number of students (38.11 percent) reported that they had no close American friends. As to the rest of the options, *1 friend* was chosen by 16.96 percent of the respondents, *2 friends* by 17.84 percent, and *3 or more friends* by 27.09 percent (see Table 1).

Next, students were asked to indicate their satisfaction with the number and quality of these American friendships. With the scale ranging from *very satisfied* (1.0) to *not satisfied* (3.0), satisfaction with the quality of friends was slightly better (1.9350) than satisfaction with the number of friends (2.1682) (see Table 2).

Effects of Regions on Friendship Variables

Chi-square tests were used to determine differences across home and host region against the number of American friends (NF), satisfaction with this number (SNF), and satisfaction with the quality of these friendships (SQF). In cases where subsample

Table 1 Friendship Numbers

| Number of close American friends | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 or more |
|----------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|-----------|
| Number of respondents | 173 | 77 | 81 | 123 |
| Percentage of total population | 38.11% | 16.96% | 17.84% | 27.09% |

sizes were small, and asymptotic results would potentially not be valid, Monte Carlo Estimates determined exact p -values (p_{mc}). Where the null hypothesis was rejected, Pearson residuals were calculated to show which variable components were the cause for divergence from independence.

Home region. First, home region was tested against the three friendship variables: NF, SNF, and SQF. All three results were significant: The chi-square obtained for NF ($\chi^2 = 74.84$, $df = 36$) was significant at $p_{mc} = .0002$; SNF ($\chi^2 = 43.47$, $df = 24$) was significant at $p_{mc} = .008$; and SQF ($\chi^2 = 35.92$, $df = 24$) was significant at $p_{mc} = .05$.

Pearson residuals were examined to determine whether there was evidence of clustering within home region subgroups. The test showed that in answer to the question "How many close American friends do you have?," the following cells were the main cause for divergence from independence: The option *3 or more friends* was chosen overwhelmingly by students from Anglo countries ($r = 3.2143$), *2 friends* by students from Northern and Central Europe ($r = 2.6328$), and *0 friends* by East Asian students ($r = 2.5873$). The option disproportionately *not* chosen were *3 or more friends* by East Asians ($r = -3.071$) and *0 friends* by Northern and Central Europeans ($r = 2.0601$). Concerning satisfaction with the number of friends, Pearson's residuals show that Anglo students were most likely to choose *very satisfied* ($r = 3.1556$) and least likely to choose *not satisfied* ($r = -1.9850$), whereas East Asians were least likely to choose *very satisfied* ($r = -2.4326$). With respect to satisfaction with the quality of friendships, the least likely to be *not satisfied* were Anglo students ($r = -1.6674$) and Northern and Central Europeans ($r = -1.5732$), least likely to be *very satisfied* were East Asians ($r = -2.0172$), and most likely to be *somewhat satisfied* were Eastern Europeans ($r = 1.7782$).

Host region. The second goal of the study was to determine whether sojourn locations in metropolitan and non-metropolitan environments in the Northeast and South had an effect on intercultural friendship formation. Since there were only three

Table 2 Friendship Satisfaction

| | (1.0) very satisfied | (2.0) somewhat satisfied | (3.0) not satisfied | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | Missing |
|--|----------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|----------|-----------|----------|
| Satisfaction with number of friends | 98 21.59% | 165 36.34% | 171 37.67% | 2.1682 | 0.7676 | 20 4.41% |
| Satisfaction with quality of friendships | 153 33.70% | 169 37.22% | 124 27.31% | 1.9350 | 0.7843 | 8 1.76% |

host regions, it was feasible to contrast specific regions in pairs. The following constellations were examined: metropolitan Northeast versus non-metropolitan Northeast, non-metropolitan Northeast versus non-metropolitan South, and general Northeast (combined metropolitan and non-metropolitan) versus South.

The constellation metropolitan Northeast versus non-metropolitan Northeast had significant results only for NF ($\chi^2 = 14.38$, $df = 3$, $p = .002$). Pearson residuals showed that the main cause for divergence from independence lay with the option *0 friends*. Students in the metropolitan Northeast marked this option dramatically more ($r = 1.5776$) and students in the non-metropolitan Northeast dramatically less ($r = -1.6131$) than any of the other options.

The constellation non-metropolitan Northeast versus non-metropolitan South had a similar pattern. Only the results for NF were significant ($\chi^2 = 8.73$, $df = 3$, $p = .003$). The Pearson residuals test showed that the main cause for the conclusion that there is association between these two variables were the cells for *1 friend*, chosen less by students in the Northeast ($r = -1.3806$), and *2 friends*, chosen more by students in the Northeast ($r = 1.5919$).

Within the constellation of Northeast (combined metropolitan and non-metropolitan) versus South, all results were significant: NF ($\chi^2 = 13.44$, $df = 3$, $p = .004$), SNF ($\chi^2 = 9.99$, $df = 2$, $p = .007$), and SQF ($\chi^2 = 5.95$, $df = 2$, $p = .05$). The main cause for divergence from independence for NF were the option *0 friends*, which students in the Northeast marked more ($r = 1.3915$) and students in the South less ($r = -1.6856$), and the option *3 or more friends*, which students in Northeast marked less ($r = -1.4748$) and students in the South more ($r = 1.7865$). With respect to satisfaction with friendship numbers, Pearson's residuals showed that students in the Northeast were markedly less likely ($r = -1.7370$) and students in the South markedly more likely ($r = 2.054$) to be *very satisfied*. And concerning satisfaction with friendship quality, students in the South marked *very satisfied* noticeably more often ($r = 1.5112$).

Comments on Lack of Satisfaction

Participants who indicated that they were only *somewhat satisfied* or *not satisfied* with the number or quality of their American friendships had the opportunity to elaborate in a free-response section. A total of 222 students responded. Comments were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), where free-response data are compared and answers grouped to determine categories and formulate theories. The students' comments fall into two broad categories: those that attribute friendship difficulties to contextual or internal factors (46 percent) and those that hold host nationals responsible (54 percent).

Concerning the first category, the following themes emerged. Cultural differences were mentioned in 18 percent of the responses. Sample comments include: "I don't expect 100 percent satisfaction because of the cultural diversity" (male West African) and "We don't share mutual values and interests...it is too hard to start a friendship" (female East Asian). About 10 percent simply expressed a desire for more

friends. One student, for example, wrote: “Unfortunately, I don’t have American friends. I wish I could have some!” (female Latin American). About 9 percent of the responses attributed the low satisfaction rate to factors related to the college environment. These factors included lack of time due to heavy workload, a preponderance of international students in lab teams, and colleges that do not encourage social interaction. As to the latter complaint, a male Latin American student at a commuter college in Manhattan wrote: “In commuter universities, there are very few social events that occur throughout a semester. If there were more social gatherings being offered, more students would be able to mingle with each other.” Another 9 percent of students focused on perceived shortcomings within themselves, including low English proficiency, lack of familiarity with American culture, and shyness. A sample response on the latter point is: “I am not very extravert; so maybe I need more efforts” (female Southeast Asian).

Of the responses attributing friendship difficulties to host-national factors, 32 percent make reference to superficiality. Sample comments include “I wish Americans were more open to sharing deep-down thoughts and emotions” (male Eastern European), “[I wish Americans were] less superficial, more personal, more intimate” (female Northern/Central European), and “We don’t really talk something deeply in the heart” (female East Asian). About 25 percent of the responses express a desire for greater open-mindedness and interest in other cultures. Thus, one student wrote “I wish they were more open and culturally sensitive” (male South Asian), and another “I think Americans don’t need to make Asian male friends” (male East Asian). Another theme is the perception of unreliability (19 percent), as in the following response: “I wish they were more constant in their friendships. Sometimes, you meet an American and never hear back from them again” (female Latin American). In a similar vein, about 12 percent of the responses describe Americans as self-oriented, with insufficient personal interest in others. One student writes: “I feel they don’t care about me as a person. They just like to have fun” (female Latin American). About 8 percent complain that Americans are too busy and not spontaneous, as in the following comment: “They don’t call me to see how I am doing, or without an excuse. If there is not a ‘plan’ to see each other, we usually don’t see each other; they are less spontaneous” (female Latin American). The remaining 4 percent attribute their friendship difficulties to the hosts’ preexisting networks. A male student from the United Kingdom, for example, wrote:

For me, there has not been a language barrier . . . However, I have found it difficult to find close friends. I suspect that this is mainly due to the fact that by now, most American students already have a close circle of friends that they have probably known for a long time.

Although some of the respondents overgeneralize—at times even in rather harsh language (e.g., a male student from the Middle East wrote that Americans are “so selfish, so snob [sic], so pragmatic, and ruthless”)—many students concede that not all Americans are alike. And sometimes, responses touch on some positive aspects

of U.S. friendship patterns, as in the following comment: “I believe Americans are easier to hang out with but somehow hard to be close friend” (male East Asian).

A look at responses according to home region showed an interesting pattern. Whereas the ratio of comments related to non-American versus American accountability was 46 percent to 54 percent for the total sample, for the East Asian group, the ratio was 78 percent to 22 percent; that is, the majority of East Asian students sought the reason for their friendship problems in themselves (e.g., shyness, language problems) or in external factors (e.g., cultural differences) rather than in the host culture.

With respect to host region, students in the South tended to paint a picture of benign distance (“friendly but not friends”), whereas students in the Northeast made more references to out-in-the-open lack of interest, as in the following comment by a male South Asian student: “Everybody is on the run . . . [and] people are very rude (not all). So how can I make them friends?”

Discussion

This study furnished several interesting results. More than a third of the respondents (38.11 percent) had no close American friends, and students on average were not very satisfied with the number and quality of their friendships.

Home region had a significant effect on both friendship numbers and satisfaction levels. Students from Anglophone countries and Northern/Central Europe frequently had multiple close American friendships while students from East Asia often had no American friends at all. Likewise, satisfaction with the number of friends was high among Anglos but low among East Asians; and satisfaction with the quality of friendships was high among Anglos and Northern/Central Europeans but low among East Asians.

The host region also had a significant effect on friendship numbers and satisfaction levels. Within the Northeast, students in metropolitan areas were most likely, and students in non-metropolitan areas were least likely to have no friends at all. Comparing the Northeast and South, students in the Northeast often had no friends but rarely three or more friends, with the opposite being the case in the South. In addition, satisfaction with the number of friends was low in the Northeast, and satisfaction with the number of friends as well as the quality of friendships was high in the South.

When asked to elaborate, some students with less-than-perfect satisfaction levels attributed difficulties to themselves (e.g., low language proficiency), some to factors in the college environments (e.g., no time to socialize), and some to cultural differences (e.g., different values and interests). But most students felt that the main problem lay with the American hosts, citing particularly their lack of interest and—in case casual friendships did materialize—their unwillingness to engage in close and intimate relationships. A number of possible explanations present themselves.

Foremost, the individualism–collectivism continuum deserves consideration. The United States is considered the world’s most individualistic culture (Hofstede, 2001); that is, sojourners from other cultures are likely to be more collectivistic than host

nationals. Aspects of individualism related to friendship are independence, self-orientation, and low levels of obligation. Collectivism, by contrast, is marked by an emphasis on social relationships, other orientation, and high levels of obligation. Hofstede (2001, p. 225), for example, asserts that in individualistic cultures, such as the United States, “ties between individuals are loose.” This statement mirrors comments by respondents in this study of “very transient friendships” (South Asian male). Although orientation handbooks for foreign students often warn sojourners about American friendship patterns, describing Americans as friendly and warm, but typically engaging in friendships that are less intense and more short-lived than those of others (e.g., Stewart & Bennett, 2005), it is clearly difficult for many international students to adjust.

In determining why problems are especially pronounced for East Asians, a look at cultural distance is helpful. East Asian students come from cultures where great value is usually placed on spending time with friends, and where the inability to harmonize with other members of society can lead to distress (Furnham & Alibhai, 1985; Trice, 2007). In Japan, for example, “being a ‘good’ person requires maintaining interdependence and fostering empathic connections with others” (Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997, p.16). When it is difficult to find connections with host nationals, this interdependence orientation can accentuate home affiliation and propel students into groups of conationals at their host campus (Chen, 2006). The comfort of the conational group coupled with a lack of peer support for venturing beyond the group can cement high identification with the home culture. This, in turn, can lead to reduced involvement in the new environment and concomitant absence of close host culture relationships (Du Bois, 1956; Paige, 1983).

Easy access to preexisting social networks also affects communication strategies. In highly collectivistic cultures, “people have less need to make special friendships, [because] one’s friends are predetermined by the social relationships into which one is born” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 225). Communication fitting this cultural pattern (e.g., implicit communication in China, little value on oral interaction in Japan, and an exceptional regard for status and position in Korea) (Chen, 2006) is not helpful for friendship initiation in the United States. The set of social skills (e.g., small talk) that is necessary for establishing friendships in the United States (Trice, 2007) may not be part of international students’ repertoire and cannot be internalized without regular exposure. A female student from Taiwan describes the problem as follows: “I didn’t expect that it is so hard to make friends with Americans. Usually I do not know what to say with them and I guess they do not either.”

In addition, East Asian languages—Chinese, Japanese, and Korean—differ more markedly from English (in terms of word order, grammar, and cognates) than many other languages. Resulting proficiency problems not only exacerbate cultural insecurities and create anxiety in sojourners (Chen, 2006), weak language skills can also lessen interest among host nationals. A female Korean student in this study commented: “[Americans] don’t really want to be an Asian’s friend because we cannot speak English well. Some of them don’t even want to talk to me.”

Compounding the problem, Asian countries (especially China and South Korea), have a relatively low status in the eyes of many Americans (Simon Anholt, 2009). Discriminatory behavior is especially pronounced with respect to international sojourners from countries accorded low national status (Bochner, McLeod, & Lin, 1977). Thus, Zhang (2010) found that in particular Asians are perceived as nerdy, most likely to be left out, and least likely to be approached for friendship in the United States.

Describing professors' views on Asian students' lack of integration in the United States, Trice (2007, p. 114) writes: "In some faculty members' eyes, American students generally had not made an effort to reach out to their international peers and so were in a way responsible for the isolation." The scenario applies to other host countries as well. Peacock and Harrison (2009, p. 506), for example, report in a United Kingdom study that "the prevailing culture [of the host] student body . . . was one of passive xenophobia. . . . Most international students were seen as culturally distant or self-excluding, with few points of reference on which to base interaction."

Studies agree, however, that hosts do not ignore students from all cultures. In Anglophone host societies, students from Anglophone and European countries tend to be embraced into the fold more readily than students from the rest of the world (Lee & Rice, 2007; Peacock & Harrison, 2009; Ward & Masgoret, 2004). Reasons for this are likely to include the greater individualism in the students' home countries and thus closer kinship with the United States (Hofstede, 2001), the Indo-European roots of most European languages and concomitant advantage for English-language acquisition (Huebner, 1998), and the relatively high status of European countries in the United States (Simon Anholt, 2009). In addition, the United States shares a common history and cultural heritage with Anglophone and European countries, leading to further similarities in religious belief systems, formal culture (e.g., art, music), and patterns of daily life (e.g., cuisine, rites of passage). Furthermore, sojourners from Anglophone and European countries generally do not look "foreign," thus eliminating contact initiation barriers based on appearance. A female Northern European respondent describes the overall advantage as follows:

I'm sure the fact that I come from a European country makes me much more acceptable . . . with a positive connotation. And so in that sense life is much more easy for me than many of my fellow students coming from other corners and cultures in the world.

Turning to the issue of host regions, this study found that non-metropolitan environments were more conducive to friendship formation and satisfaction than metropolitan areas. This finding has a number of possible explanations. For one, international students have greater access to conational support groups in areas of high population density. The metropolitan region in this study (New York City) is particularly diverse, making it easy for sojourners to find conational friends. Evidence suggests that proximity to fewer conationals promotes friendship formation with host nationals. In a study on Taiwanese students in the United States, for example, Ying (2002) found that having fewer Chinese students on campus increased social

association with Americans. More broadly, Zhao, Kuh, and Carini's (2005) large-scale study on student engagement in the United States revealed that the greater the density of international students, the more international students perceived their campus as less supportive. This finding is somewhat puzzling and warrants more research, but it may indicate that density leads not only to greater conational contact but also to lesser attention on individual sojourners by the host institution, resulting perhaps in proportionally fewer social support services for international students.

A very different explanation for the non-metropolitan advantage is suggested by Weinstein, Przybylski, and Ryan (2009). They discovered that immersion in nature elicits prosocial and other-focused value orientations, whereas immersion in non-nature environments thwarts them. After experiencing as little as eight minutes of nature in their experiment, the company of people and relationships became more important to subjects than money or reputation. The finding that nature leads to an increased sense of community and a higher value on social relationships explains the friendship formation advantage of non-metropolitan areas and also that of the South, where a warmer climate invites more outdoor exposure to nature.

In addition, the South has some unique cultural traits that foster interaction. For one, the Southern way of life is often characterized by amiability and good manners (Reed, 1993). In conflict situations, Northerners, for example, have been found to use hostility as a regulatory device, whereas Southerners tend to adhere to politeness norms (Cohen, Vandello, Puente, & Rantilla, 1999). The South is also the most collectivistic region in the United States, an orientation based on the region's minority identity after the Civil war and a focus on community due to relative poverty, the importance of agriculture, and the pervasive presence of religion (Vandello & Cohen, 1999). Even urban settings in the South retain a small-town character by maintaining contained neighborhoods with their own institutions (Reed, 1993). Similarly beneficial for relationship development is the South's slower pace of life. Levine (1998) reports that the Northeast is much more time conscious and faster paced than the South. The phenomenon is based on time urgency correlations with climate, purchasing power, and individualism (Levine & Norenzayan, 1999). A student from the Middle East reflects on the difference: "People in New York are always in a hurry and patience is not visible. . . . [In the South], people greet each other on the street. Patience is very visible."

Conclusion

Overall, this study confirms findings of previous research on international student isolation. It also strengthens evidence that East Asian students in Anglophone countries experience greater difficulties than students from other regions in finding host-national friends. Furthermore, findings suggest that population density and the level of other-orientation in the host region influence friendship success.

The study also has some limitations. Despite the clustering of countries, some of the resulting regions had a relatively small number of representatives; and one region (Pacific Islands) was not represented at all. Moreover, data were collected from only

two U.S. regions. Future studies should include other regions, such as the Midwest and the Southwest. In addition, the sole qualitative question in the survey focused on dissatisfied students. It would be interesting to gather student comments on a wider variety of topics. Likewise, responses from American students and observational data on student interaction would help round out the picture.

The study's implications are manifold. More than one third of the respondents had no close American friends and would have liked more meaningful interaction with host nationals. Although personal factors on the part of the sojourners and hosts play a role, some accountability for international student satisfaction lies with the host institution. Lee and Rice (2007) call for institutions "to counter problems undermining the international experience" (p. 406). Some initiatives that have successfully promoted sociocultural adjustment and interaction with host nationals include shared residential facilities (especially on-campus dormitories), extra-curricular activities, and communication as well as intercultural training for both sojourners and hosts (e.g., Kudo & Simkin, 2003; Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002). More institutions should implement such measures.

Considering that East Asians are the largest contingent of international students in the United States (Institute of International Education, 2011) and the least satisfied, special attention should be paid to furthering their integration. Zhao, Kuh, and Carini (2005) suggest that faculty members should promote the mingling of Asian students with domestic students in group projects and that leaders from Asian student organizations should be involved in the planning of intercultural events so that their social influence will encourage their Asian peers to participate.

The potential of intercultural friendship to increase satisfaction levels of international students and to promote international goodwill beyond the students' sojourn is enormous. Our knowledge of what helps or hinders intercultural friendship formation, however, is still relatively limited. More research is needed on host student attitudes, on the experience of Asian students in non-Anglophone countries, and also on the experience of English-speaking students abroad (e.g., U.S. students in China). In addition, longitudinal studies should explore the duration of friendships established during sojourns and the impact of these friendships on international relations. Colleges worldwide are the prime location for intercultural encounters. The potential for intercultural friendship formation and resulting international networks and goodwill should be maximized.

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