

International Spouses In a University Setting:
A Marginalized Population in Need of Support
Summary of Research
by Marlene Perrine (e-mail: mperrine@du.edu)

Research Question

In what ways can The Ohio State University (OSU) help the international spouses to acclimate to life in the United States during the first three months of their sojourn?

Sub-questions

- 1) According to OSU international spouses, what are the areas in which they need assistance during their arrival period?
- 2) To what degree do the international spouses perceive that their needs are being met during their first few months?
- 3) What are the sources of information and support currently being used by OSU international spouses?
- 4) In terms of psychological well-being, are the international spouses satisfied with the level of cultural adjustment they experienced during their first three months of transitioning to life in the U.S.?
- 5) What are the similarities and differences among the various groups in the population of international spouses that could affect the initial acclimation process?

Sample of Literature Review

Cultural Adjustment

- U-curve theory (Lysgaard, 1955; Oberg, 1960) – honeymoon phase, disillusionment, adaptation
- Critiques and revisions of U-curve theory (Adler, 1975; Church, 1981; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Klineberg, 1980; Klineberg & Hull, 1979), but limited research in area of adjustment cycle of international spouses
- Sojourner research shows international spouses and students share similar adjustment challenges (de Verthelyi, 1955)
- Renata de Verthelyi (1955) found many international spouses followed a pattern contrary to the U-curve theory, with the initial stage often being loneliness and depression rather than excitement. Quote:
 - “Initial feelings of sadness, loneliness, self-doubt, confusion, and frustration were present in their descriptions of the first weeks and months of the sojourn. And this acculturation stress was further increased for those who also had to overcome an important language barrier” (de Verthelyi, 1955, p. 403).

Expatriate Adjustment

- Research found that company assistance is extremely important in early stages of expatriation (de Cieri, Dowling & Taylor, 1991). Quotes:
 - Their study showed that company assistance was “one of the most consistent and strong predictors of psychological adjustment of expatriate partners to relocation” and that “the more comprehensive the company assistance, the higher the level of psychological adjustment made by the expatriate partner” (de Cieri, Dowling, & Taylor, 1991, p. 401).
- The adjustment of the expatriate spouse is important not only for his or her own well-being, but also for the expatriate. Scholars discovered a strong correlation between the adjustment of the spouse and the adjustment of the expatriate (Black & Gregersen, 1991; Black & Stephens, 1989).

Male Spouses

- Exploratory study found that companies were failing to support male expatriate spouses (Selmer & Leung, 2003).
- Non-working males spouses in particular need a considerable amount of support (Punnett, 1997).

Japanese Spouses in the U.S.

- Roblyn Simeon and Keiko Fujiu (2000) researched pre-departure preparation and post-arrival information gathering behavior of Japanese spouses in the U.S.
- Six major areas of concerns of spouses: 1) Housing, 2) Food, 3) Transportation, 4) Education, 5) Recreation, and 6) Safety
- 12 sources of information. Main personal sources: 1) Their husband, 2) Japanese friends in the U.S.
- Main non-personal sources of information: 1) Books, 2) Magazines, 3) the Internet, and 4) Company orientation programs

Spouses and the University

- M.I.T.: Study focused on attention to the minimal amount of support spouses receive, in comparison to the elaborate support system provided to students (Schwartz & Kahne, 1993).
- Without an assigned role, such as student or scholar, the spouses may feel like outsiders (Schwartz & Kahne, 1993). Quotes:
 - “.....colleges are reluctant to accept official responsibility for spouses” (p. 451).
 - “Support for spouses within universities usually is ad hoc or covertly accomplished to get around the official system” (Schwartz & Kahne, p. 453).
 - This “sense of being ‘outside’ begins with the fact that the wife’s presence is not of significant interest to college administrators. Although these women are *in* the community, they are not *of* it” (Schwartz & Kahne, 1993, pp. 453 – 454).

- University of Montana: A model community program for the spouses of international students arose out of a survey of this university's international community, where it was found that there was an unmet need to ease the acclimation process of accompanying spouses (Ojo, 1998). Quote:
 - "Spouses who remain lonely and do not adjust well often cause a hardship for the scholars, sometimes even to the point of affecting the latter's academic achievement" (Ojo, p. 6).
- Harvard University: In the adjustment period, communication difficulties, cultural differences, and social isolation among the main anxieties that Japanese spouses faced (Vogel, 1986).
- Yale University: Spousal support services should help the spouses adjust to their new environment so they may then find strength within themselves, their peers, and the host community (Mead, 2002). Quote:
 - The philosophy behind the formation of the spouses' group, International Spouses & Partners at Yale (ISPY):
 "We, as OISS administrators, believe that it is important to listen carefully to the unmet needs of a population, and where possible, empower and foster community by providing the necessary resources that will enable its members to establish self-directed systems of support. ISPY is 'by the spouses, for the spouses.' Prior to the formation of ISPY, the international spouses and partners at Yale were not yet a real community, and their only perceived tie to the university was the husband or wife who had come here to study or work. This project has provided incoming spouses with an important link to life at Yale and in New Haven. The message is that this is 'their University' and 'their town,' and that ISPY is something vibrant and important to be a part of" (Mead, 2002, p. 6).

Survey

Instrument

- Self-designed questionnaire
- Electronic questionnaire through SurveyMonkey
- Semi-structured survey with closed-ended and open-ended questions
- Total of 58 questions, divided into six sections

Themes of the Sections of the Survey

1. Length of Time in Columbus
2. Demographic Information
3. Language and Adjustment
4. Arrival Assistance
5. Adjusting to a New Place
6. Suggestions to Assist Arriving Spouses

Procedure

- Distributed survey through the Office of International Education (OIE)
- Used the database in fsaAtlas to locate international students with spouses

- Sent recruitment e-mail and survey link to 442 international spouses, via the students' e-mail accounts
- Survey was open for two weeks, April 11, 2006 – April 25, 2006

Response to Survey

- Out of the 442 surveys sent, 46 were returned.
- Four of the surveys were abandoned after the first two questions, and were discarded.
- With 42 surveys to analyze, the response rate was 9.5%.

Nationalities of Responding Spouses

Boliva	Mexico
China (13)	Poland
Egypt	Romania
Ghana	Saudia Arabia (3)
Iceland	South Korea (3)
India (7)	Sri Lanka (2)
Japan	Taiwan
Malaysia	Turkey (4)

Characteristics of Spouses

Gender & Immigration Status

Out of 42 respondents:

- Females = 76.2% (32 respondents)
Males = 23.8% (10 respondents)
- F-2 status = 71.4% (30 respondents)
J-2 status = 14.3% (6 respondents)
- Other = 14.3% (6 respondents)

Highlights

Out of 42 respondents:

- Over one-third had been married six months or less when they arrived in the U.S. – 35.7% (15 respondents).
- The majority had moved directly from outside the U.S. – 83.3% (35 respondents).
- Most of the spouses moved to Columbus after their husband or wife – 78.6% (33 respondents).
- Out of 42 respondents, 45.2% (19 respondents) had children, and 54.8% (23 respondents) did not have children.

- Out of 41 respondents, all had completed past secondary school: Bachelor’s degree, 51.2% (21 respondents); Master’s degree, 41.5% (17 respondents); Doctoral degree, 2.4% (1 respondent); and Other, 4.9% (2 respondents).
- Out of 42 respondents, 69% (29 respondents) had left a career in their home country in order to accompany their spouse to OSU. Examples of professions: lawyer, nurse, engineer, pharmacist, architect and chemist.

Level of English

Of the 42 respondents, the spouses described their level of English in the following ways:

- Beginner, 21.4% (9 respondents)
- Intermediate, 20.5% (17 respondents)
- Advanced, 38.1% (26 respondents)

Findings: Sub-question #1- According to OSU international spouses, what are the areas in which they need assistance during their arrival period?

“What areas of life did you need the most assistance in when you first arrived in Columbus?”

(Examples: English, transportation, shopping, childcare)”

- **English**
- Transportation
- Childcare
- Shopping
- Practical Needs
- Cultural Adjustment
- Social Support Quote from Spouse:
 - “Englihs...language [sic] is important for people to communicate each other. However, since I came to OSU, they have not offered any information and assistance for me. My husband help a lot for me to do things done, such as shopping, paying bills, etc. I know He has hard time both to help me and study.”

“Do you think OSU should offer international spouses their own orientation?”

Out of 37 respondents, 83.8% said “Yes.”

“If you think spouses should have a separate orientation, what topics should the orientation include?”

- Shopping
- Childcare and Children’s Activities
- English
- Healthcare
- Education for Spouses
- Cultural Adjustment
- Job Information

Note: A large demand for a variety of practical information also emerged. Quotes from Spouses:

- “life setup (such as furniture, phone, driver’s license, immunization, etc).”

- “How to get a work permission, how to apply for it. How to get my SSN. How to get a driver’s license. How to open up a bank account and where. How to find health insurance for someone like me.”
- “geograph [sic] of Columbus, the way of meeting friend, shopping, how to have an insurance and its details, how to choose a car, how to go and see a doctor, how to choose a cheeper [sic] and safe house.”
- “Probably to some extent similar to the topics in the regular orientation. For example at the beginning I didn’t know that I have free access to the library. I [sic] took me 3 weeks to figure this out.”
- “counseling (for stable emotion),” “scope and opportunity for the spouse in OSU,” “the life in OSU,” “relationship with OSU,” and the “role of OIE to spouses.”

Findings: Sub-question #2 - To what degree do the international spouses perceive that their needs are being met during their first few months?

“How much arrival assistance did you expect from OSU before you came to Columbus?”

- Out of 39 spouses, 53.9% answered they had expected assistance from OSU.

“Did OSU assist you when you first arrived?”

- Only 17.9% received assistance from the university; 82.1% did not have institutional support.

“If you were not working during your first 3 months, how satisfied were you to manage the household full-time?”

Of 41 spouses, 29.3% answered positively; 41.4% answered negatively. Quote:

- “I gave up my job in order to reunite with my husband, but I did not want to be a house wife all my entire life. So, my biggest concern was my future career. I was afraid that I could not get a job when I go back to my home country if I did not get anything like degree or certificate in the US. I wanted to go to graduate school at OSU but I did not know which program to apply and I did not know whom to talk to.”

Findings of Sub-question #3 - What are the sources of information and support currently being used by OSU international spouses?

- According to the international spouses in this survey, their main sources of information in Columbus are their spouse and a friend.
- Their spouse was the main source of information for learning about the following topics: (1) Shopping, (2) Transportation, (3) Healthcare, and (4) Children’s Schooling.
- A friend (or friends) served as their source of information for these topics: (1) English classes, (2) Things to Do in Columbus, (3) Childcare, and (4) Activities for Children.
- The international spouses lean on their student spouses for more than just information. They also look to their husband or wife for social support. 82.1% stated that they did not know anyone other than their husband or wife when they arrived in Columbus.

- When the spouses were asked the question, “Who did you talk to if you had a problem in Columbus?,” 100% of the 39 international spouses answered “spouse.”
- The international student (husband or wife of the spouse) was also the principal way the international spouses learned about the resources at OSU—67.6% of the 37 responding spouses learned about OSU resources through their husband or wife. The additional sources were (1) a friend, (2) the Internet, (3) OSU leaflets, (4) INCH, (5) The Tuesday Women’s Group, (f) the OSU International Student Handbook (most likely referring to OIE’s handbook), (6) e-mail, and (7) on their own. Some spouses were unaware of OSU resources available to them. Quotes from spouses:
 - “I did not know about any of these for 6 months.”
 - “I do not know I can have a BuckID.” and “Well, I don’t think BuckID is available to me.”
 - “I have never heard about the groups...”
 - “I did not know until now.”
- This survey asked the spouses directly if they had attended any of OIE’s programs. An overwhelming 92.1% of the 38 respondents said “No.” It is unclear if this is due to lack of interest or lack of awareness.
- Less than half of the 39 responding spouses found support in organizations outside of OSU. A large percentage—56.4%—of the spouses answered “None” when asked which spouse support groups they attended.
- Thirty-two spouses responded to the question regarding which organizations or services in Columbus were most helpful to them when they arrived.
- The resources at OSU named were OIE (3), the library (1), and the recreational center (1). One spouse wrote that the “most helpful organization is not OSU. It was IFI.” IFI was named seven times as being helpful.
- Other helpful organizations and services were church (1), the Saudi Cultural Club local mosque (1), the Korean spouse community (1), International Families Program (1), the International Spouses’ Gathering meeting (1), and Cassingham Elementary School (1).
- English classes and groups were also viewed as helpful. Examples included were INCH (4), the Tuesday Women’s Group (1), the Men’s English Conversation Class (1), the International Women’s English Class (1), the Upper Arlington Public Library English class (1), OSU’s English Language and American Culture class (1), OSU’s TOEFL preparation courses (1), and unnamed English classes (2).
- Four spouses answered “none.” Quotes from spouses:
 - “My husband was not know about most of the things. he was so busy with studies.”
 - “no” (1), “ – “ (1), “n/a” (1), “no idea” (1), and “nothing really helpful” (1).
 - The spouse who wrote “no” gave a reason, “Because I did not know the organizations or services in Columbus (including OSU) at all.”

- Demand for assistance in English was great enough to warrant looking at how the spouses found support in learning English. Examples of both passive activities and participatory learning were given.

Findings: Sub-question #4 - In terms of psychological well-being, are the international spouses satisfied with the level of cultural adjustment they experienced during their first three months of transitioning to life in the U.S.?

- The area the spouses rate as most important when adjusting to a new environment is “Good emotional health,” with 85% of 39 spouses rating “Good emotional health” as “Very important.”
- When asked to describe their adjustment to life in the United States during their first three months, the spouses indicated that it had been “Difficult” (33.3%) and “Not difficult” (33.3%). The middle answer of “Neutral” had 23.1% of the responses, while the far ends of the spectrum received fewer responses—“Very difficult” (7.7%) and “Not difficult at all” (2.6%).
- Considering the many comments throughout the survey that expressed difficulties the spouses had faced, it is surprising to me that 35.9% of the 39 respondents answered they were “Satisfied” with their level of cultural adjustment during their first three months in Columbus. In addition, 5.1% were “Very satisfied.” The largest category of responses fell under “Neutral,” with over half—51%.

Findings of Sub-question #5: What are the similarities and differences among the various groups in the population of international spouses that could affect the initial acclimation process?

1. *Gender*: A large percent (40%) of the 10 male spouses in this survey were satisfied with their level of cultural adjustment. Half of the male spouses (50%) were neutral, and only 10% were not satisfied. However, of the 9 males who responded to the question about their adjustment to life in the United States, 55.6% stated that their adjustment was difficult, and 44.4% said not difficult. Therefore, it seems the males’ responses were split. Quote from male spouse:
 - “To prove that I was a sane and able man although I could not speak fluent English. The looks I got from others made my communication efforts miserable. Feeling out of place was a terrible thingh [sic]to go through. I could tell at the tiem [sic] that I did not belong here. Lossing [sic] your social status building a brand new one from scratch is quite a hassle.”
2. *Nationality*: The acclimation process of the international spouses most likely varies according to the nationality of the spouse, but this was not examined in this study.
3. *Visa type*: It is difficult in this survey to show a correlation between status and adjustment during the arrival period. Other than employment authorization area, it appears that F-2 and J-2 spouses will need the same support during the arrival period. Quote from spouse:
 - “Not being able to work, thus having to suffer from emptiness, unusefulness, and loneliness. Not being able to get around since we cannot afford another car, thus having to feel stranded and locked in.”

4. *Children*: The adjustment of those with children and those without children was very similar, though the group without children leaned more towards the direction of having difficulty.

Both groups named English, transportation, and shopping as primary areas in which they needed support. The difference between the groups is that the spouses with children also stated they were in need of assistance with childcare, children's activities, and children's school information.

5. *English*: The level of the English of the spouse appears to be a strong determining factor in the degree of difficulty the spouse experienced when adjusting to life in the United States.

The spouses with a greater language barrier are more likely to need more assistance from the university during the arrival period.

Findings: Main Research Question - In what ways can The Ohio State University (OSU) help the international spouses to acclimate to life in the United States during the first three months of their sojourn?

- 1) Identify OSU's international spouses.
- 2) Provide pre-arrival and arrival information designed specifically for international spouses .
- 3) Welcome the international spouses to OSU.
- 4) Offer the international spouses an orientation to OSU and to Columbus.
- 5) Begin a spouses' group for ongoing support.
- 6) Seek allies in the communities of OSU and Columbus

Recommendations for Further Research

- How does helping the international spouse help the student? Survey or interview the students to hear their perspective.
- How can early intervention make a difference in the stay of international spouses? Compare a group of spouses who were given an orientation to a group who were not.
- What are other universities with large international student populations doing to support international spouses? Survey or interview international offices at universities with large international populations.

Suggested Websites for Spouses Groups:

Columbus' International Neighborhood Coffee Hour (INCH): www.inchcolumbus.org

Duke University's International House: <http://www.studentaffairs.duke.edu/ihouse>

M.I.T's spouses&partners@mit: <http://web.mit.edu/spouses>

Stanford University's International Center: <http://www.stanford.edu/dept/center/families/index.html>

Yale University's International Spouses & Partners at Yale:
<http://www.yale.edu/oiss/programs/istry/index.html>