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Acculturative Stress and Substance Use Among Chinese International Students

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Abstract

Substance use among domestic US college students has been studied at length, but research surrounding substance use among international students in the US remains minimal. Many international students experience acculturative stress (commonly known as “culture shock”) and how students cope with this stress is a topic of interest in promoting their well-being. This research focuses on Chinese international students, in particular, as this demographic is one of the largest international populations on US college campuses. Considering the increased availability of substances to students in the US, Chinese international students may turn to substance use as an outlet for their experienced acculturative stress. This study reports preliminary findings from a larger study assessing the relationship between acculturative stress of Chinese international students and overall well-being.

Background

International students from Asia studying in the US typically experience greater stress with cross-cultural transition compared to European international students (Poyrazli et al., 2004). Higher levels of acculturative stress have been attributed to fundamental cultural differences (Bertram et al., 2014) and may impact student well-being in various ways (e.g., Lange-Smith & Van Scyoc, 2017; Taliaferro et al., 2019). International students have demonstrated a greater disposition to engage in higher levels of substance use compared to domestic students (Holguin, 2011) and this behavior has been interpreted as a coping strategy by some scholars (Skromanis et al., 2018). Considering Chinese international students have been the leading demographic among all international students in the US over the past decade, (Institute of International Education (IIE), 2010; 2019) this demographic is among those most at risk for using drugs and/or alcohol to cope with their

Background cont’d

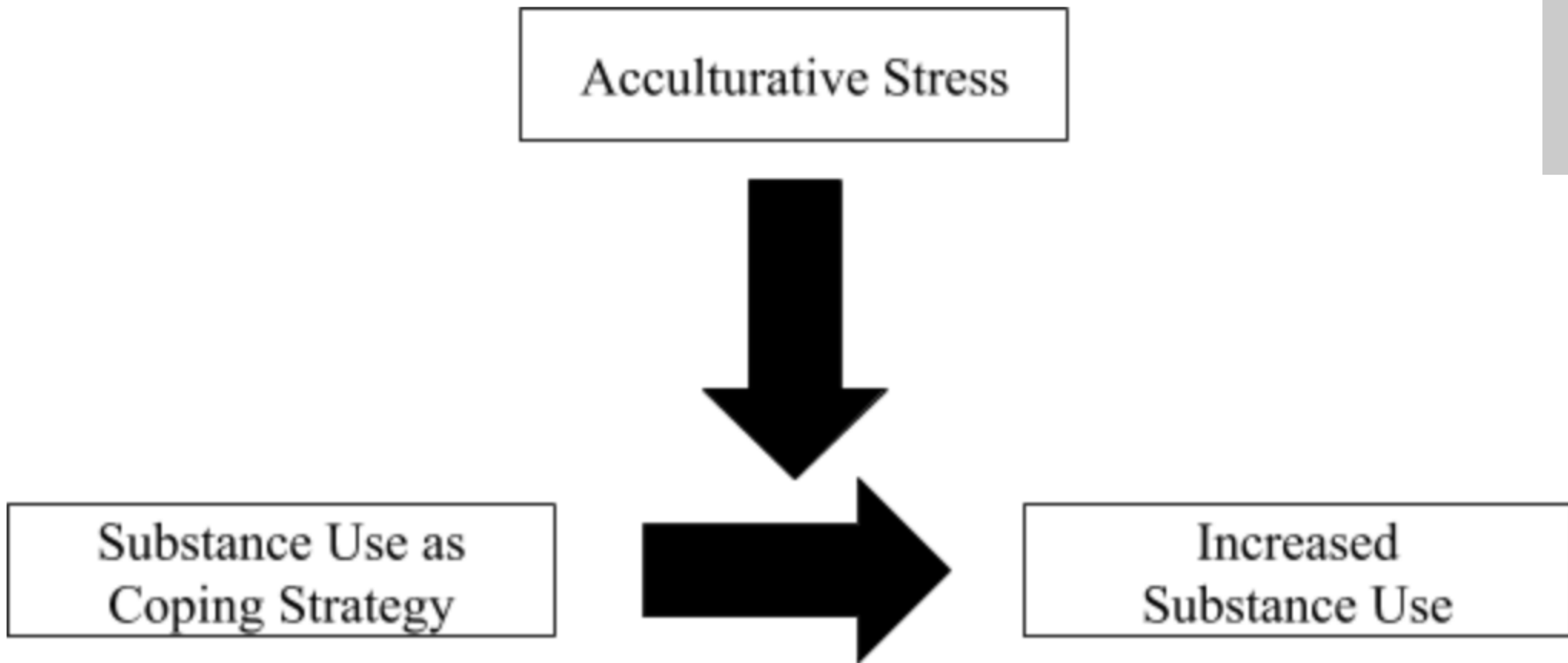
cross-cultural transition. If there is an association between acculturative stress and increased substance use, college and university can develop targeted intervention and educational programs to mitigate this behavior and promote student well-being.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1. Acculturative stress is positively associated with an increase in substance use since moving to the US. **Hypothesis 2.** The positive relationship between substance use as a coping strategy and increased substance use will be strongest when acculturative stress is highest.

Methods

24 Chinese international students were surveyed as part of a larger study to assess acculturative stress and the relation to aspects of well-being. One section of this survey asked about pressures to use drugs and alcohol and inquired about the general use of drugs and alcohol by individuals. The survey did not ask about types of drugs or alcohol used and did not ask participants to provide any other information regarding use frequency. Acculturative stress was measured using the Acculturative Stress Scale for Chinese Students developed by Bai (2012) and asked participants questions about their acculturation process. 32 questions were answered on a 7-point Likert scale with 1= never and 7= all the time, higher scores indicated higher levels of acculturative stress.



Methods cont’d

Increased substance use was measured by a 5-point Likert scale to the statement “My drug/alcohol use increased when I moved to the U.S.” with 1= strongly disagree and 5= strongly agree. Substance use as a coping strategy was measured by the statement “I use drugs/alcohol as a way to cope with the stress of living in a new culture” and was assessed on the same Likert scale as the previous statement.

Results

Results from linear regression analysis support hypothesis 2. However, there was no significant relationship between acculturative stress and increased substance use, therefore there is no support for hypothesis 1. Data is displayed in tables 1 and 2. The moderating relationship is displayed in figure 1.

Item	Mean	SD
Acculturative stress	92.4	34.25
Substance use as coping strategy	1.08	.28
Increased substance use	1.42	1.02

Table 1. Item means and standard deviations from linear regression analysis; N= 24

Model	Variables	B	R²
1	Substance use as coping strategy	1.727	.229*
	Acculturative stress	.009	.092
2	Substance use as coping strategy X Acculturative stress	.701	.425**

Table 2. Linear regression analysis with and without moderating effect; N= 24; *p ≤ .01; **p ≤ .001

Left: Figure 1. Moderating effect of acculturative stress

Discussion

Results suggest that acculturative stress strengthens the relationship between students’ use of drugs and/or alcohol as a coping mechanism and their self-reported substance use levels since being in the US. Although there was no relationship between acculturative stress and increased substance use, this supports the notion that acculturative stress does influence student behavior. Although mean values were low for substance use questions, the sample size was relatively small compared to the total number of eligible participants in the larger study. Therefore, this study design should be administered to a larger population to validate findings. Additionally, this study only looked at one demographic of international students. Future research should evaluate acculturative stress and substance use among other demographics to improve educational programming and mitigate any adverse effects of acculturation.

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