PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN MARRIAGE, COUPLE, AND FAMILY COUNSELING PROGRAMS

A dissertation submitted to the Kent State University College of Education, Health, and Human Services in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

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This phenomenological study explored the experiences of international students in CACREP-accredited marriage, couple, and family counseling programs. Seven former international students from the program who have practiced counseling in their home country were interviewed to understand their learning experiences, adaptation process and counseling practices.

Results of the study revealed three main themes: (a) overcoming learning challenges and obstacles in the United States, (b) gaining sense of belongingness in the adjustment phase, and (c) making meaningful changes to marriage, couple, and family counseling practices in their country of origin. The main themes were supported with detailed first-hand accounts from participants to give meaning to their experiences.

The results indicated international students found it hard to apply marriage, couple and family counseling practices in their home country because of the American-centric curriculum and course content. Future research could focus on different aspects of the phenomena (e.g., international supervision process, clinical training for international students).
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Colleges and universities in the United States are becoming more culturally diversified because of the influx of international students (Harvey & Anderson, 2005). International students have become one of the largest growing demographic groups in colleges and universities throughout the country (Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007). According to the Institute of International Education (2015), a total of 886,052 international students were enrolled in colleges and universities across the United States in 2013/2014, of which 37% were graduate students.

International students choose to study in the United States for various reasons, which include improving their cross-cultural knowledge and self-esteem, living an independent life, and learning new ways of thinking (Andrade, 2006; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010). However, despite the large presence of international students, many colleges and universities in the United States appear to provide little support to these students as the focus is more often on recruiting for monetary gains with little effort is put into retaining them (J. L. Lee, 2010). First-year students face many additional challenges and experience difficulties in adapting to being in a new country and environment, typically characterized as a transition phase (Ang & Liamputtong, 2008). International students in the United States may experience adjustment issues such as cultural differences (Araujo, 2011; Knox et al., 2013), loneliness/isolation (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008), language difficulties (Ang & Liamputtong, 2008; Araujo, 2011; Knox et al., 2013; Mittal & Wieling, 2006; Morris & Lee, 2004; Ng, 1
2006a; Sherry at al., 2010; Sümer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008), social adaptation (Araujo, 2011; Knox et al., 2013), and prejudice/discrimination (Araujo, 2011; Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Cadwell, & Utsey, 2005; Knox et al., 2013; Pedersen, 1991; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007).

There has been a significant increase in the number of international students in counseling programs throughout the United States. Forty-nine percent of counselor training programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) in the country provide training to international students (Ng, 2006a). In many countries outside the United States, counseling is a gradually emerging profession, and there is a distinct lack of any unified standards and accrediting bodies to govern the profession in most of the countries (Goodrich, Shin, & Smith, 2011). Most international students specializing in counseling who graduated in the United States return to their respective home countries where the counseling profession is either almost non-existent or still in its infancy (Ng, 2012). In spite of concerns that the knowledge which they have learned in the United States may not be relevant in their home countries, international students continue to come to America to study counseling (Lau & Ng, 2012). Barden and Cashwell (2014) stated that studying counseling in a different culture could have a positive effect on “increasing empathy, self-awareness, and cultural sensitivity and on expanding worldviews” (p. 56). Ng (2012) believed that internationalization could develop as a sixth force in counseling, as international students who go back to their home countries to teach or practice counseling have a key role in internationalizing the profession across the globe.
However, research in the area has provided evidence that counseling programs in the United States have not adapted to the changes needed when having international students (McDowell, Fang, Brownlee, Young, & Khanna, 2002; Ng & Smith, 2012; Wedding, McCartney, & Currey, 2009). Authors such as Friedlander, Carranza, and Guzmán (2002) and Ng and Noonan (2012) have voiced concerns about the American or Euro-centric focus of counseling programs in the United States; for example, the assumption that the Caucasian, middle-class view is universally considered to be the “normal behavior” (Friedlander et al., 2002). Counseling programs in the United States need to attend to the needs of international students to maintain the quality of their respective training programs (Ng, 2006b).

The trend could also be traced in marriage, couple, and family counseling (MCFC) programs in the United States, as international students studying MCFC in the country often go through a difficult learning experience (Mittal & Wieling, 2006). This is mainly because of the different practices in MCFC across the globe (Kaslow, 2000; Mittal & Wieling, 2006). Kaslow (2000) reviewed the marriage and family therapy process outside of the United States in eight different countries (Argentina, Brazil, England, Germany, Mexico, Scandinavia, South Africa, and Yugoslavia) aimed at attempting to provide a more global perspective of MCFC summarized that all of the eight countries usually follow the lead of the United States in terms of training MCFC practitioners as many of the theories and techniques are adapted from MCFC practices in America. However, the ideas evolve to suit the needs and traditions of the local cultures, creating unique training institutes and courses in MCFC in the different countries.
Unfortunately, MCFC training in the United States fails to capture the different trends across the world, making it difficult for international students to study MCFC.

Statement of the Problem

There is still a lack of research on international students in the United States despite their growing presence in counseling programs (Ng, 2012). Some of the research on international students focuses on supervision (Ng & Smith, 2012), perceptions and experiences of studying in the United States (Nayar-Bhalerao, 2013; Ng & Smith, 2009), and in marriage and family therapy (Killian, 2001; McDowell, Fang, Kosutic, & Griggs, 2012; Mittal & Wieling, 2006). Although there has been research on international students in MCFC and marriage and family therapy (MFT) programs, the effectiveness of the training programs on international students and the application of the training program in their respective home countries has not received much attention (Ng, 2012). The belief held by the researcher in the present study was that not much had been done by the said programs to help international students prepare to become MCFC practitioners in their own countries as the focus had still been primarily on training MCFC students to work in the United States. While multicultural competence has been emphasized in MCFC programs (Marshall & Wieling, 2003), this has been dominated by the multicultural aspect of the American demographic, overlooking the international students as part of the multicultural competence agenda (McDowell et al., 2012). International students in MCFC programs have argued for a more globalized curriculum that includes international concerns (McDowell et al., 2012); however counselor education programs have yet to respond to these pressing needs.
The faculty plays an important role in training international students. Goodrich, Shin, and Smith (2011) reaffirm the importance of counseling programs in addressing how well these programs are training international students as there is an increased interest in promoting diversity in order to internationalize the counseling profession. Jacob and Greggo (2001) have called on counselor educators to include a more global cross-cultural competency outlook into the curriculum that is sensitive to the needs of international students. However, counselor educator programs have yet to cater to these pressing needs (Mittal & Wieling, 2006; Ng, 2006b). The implication of having international students in the counseling programs, which includes the curriculum and training methods, have not been thoroughly researched in the counseling profession (Ng, 2012). Research accessing international counseling students’ own perceptions and experiences are needed so that their experiences could be understood (Ng, 2006a). This dissertation provides a starting point for counselor educators, specifically those teaching in MCFC programs, to take into consideration the needs of international students. Knowledge on international students’ training and learning successes would provide considerable information on cross-cultural counseling and supervision, effective mentoring, and the essential skills, knowledge, and values used in providing quality education to international counseling students (Ng, 2006b). This dissertation also corresponds to the suggestion by DuPree et al. (2012) to undertake more studies on the development of MCFC and its different practices across the globe that enable counselor educators to understand the similarities and differences in MCFC practices in the United States and other countries.
The present study provided insight into the first steps in informing MCFC programs of the challenges experienced by international students and in discussing ways to help them overcome the challenges. Mittal (2002) stated that research on master’s international students in MCFC programs could be beneficial as more initial struggle takes place in a master’s program as it is in most cases the students’ initial adjustment to life in America. For the study, the researcher interviewed master’s students in MCFC programs and concentrated on studying the essence of the experiences of international students in MCFC programs in the United States.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of international master’s students in marriage, couple, and family counseling programs in the United States to gain insight on: (a) the learning experiences of international students in studying MCFC a different culture, (b) ways of adaptation to the learning process, and (c) the applicability of MCFC knowledge in their own country of origin.

**Research Questions**

The research question of this phenomenological qualitative study was: What are the reflections of the experiences of international students in a CACREP-accredited marriage, couple and family counseling (MCFC) program in the United States, and how do the experiences inform their MCFC practice in their country of origin?

The sub questions of interest included:
1. What are the learning experiences of international students in a CACREP-accredited marriage, couple, and family counseling program in the United States?

2. What adaptation occurs in the learning process for international students in a CACREP-accredited marriage, couple, and family counseling program in the United States?

3. What similarities and disparities do international students experience in their MCFC practices in the United States and in their country of origin, and how do they resolve that in their MCFC practice in their country of origin?

**Definition of Terms**

**International Students.** Davis (1994) defined international students as students attending an institute of higher learning in the United States, but who are not currently United States citizens. For the purpose of this study, the researcher defined international students as students in a master’s-level graduate program in MCFC on a valid F-1 visa (for international students in the United States).

**Marriage, Couple and Family Counseling (MCFC) Program.** In this study, MCFC program referred to master’s-level CACREP-accredited MCFC training programs in the United States. Students in MCFC training programs would be “expected to possess the knowledge, skills, and practices necessary to address a wide variety of issues in the context of relationships and families” (CACREP, 2009, p. 35).

**Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) Program.** In this study, MFT program referred to master’s and doctoral-level training programs accredited by the Commission
on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education (COAMFTE), the accrediting body of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT).

Review of the Literature

This section focuses on literature review on issues and experiences involving international students. This is followed by an analysis of research on international students, psychology programs, in counselor education, and in MCFC/MFT programs.

Acculturation Issues for International Students

Berry (2006) defined acculturation as a process of change experienced by an individual when he or she comes into contact with two or more cultures that are distinctly different from his or her own. Some acculturation issues include problems transitioning to a different country, academic adjustment, lack of social support, discrimination, financial issues, and homesickness (Ang & Liamputtong, 2008; Constantine et al., 2005; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Mittal & Wieling, 2006; Morris & Lee, 2004; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Sawir et al., 2008; Sherry et al., 2010; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Sümer et al., 2008). An overview on acculturation issues is presented in this section.

Transition phase. In a study on the needs of international students, Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) have found that international students need more support after their initial arrival to the United States and have experienced different challenges in their acculturation process. Most international students find the transition difficult because they have to deal with the disparities between the culture in their respective countries of origin and with the United States (Ang & Liamputtong, 2008). The duration of the
transition phase varies as some international students may need an adjustment period of only a few days whereas others may need months to get fully adjusted during the transition period. Some of the initial problems during the transition phase include difficulty in moving around without any transportation and feeling homesick (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). For international students to successfully become adjusted during the transition period, they need to somehow integrate and adapt to the cultural norms of the United States (Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005).

**Academic-related difficulties.** Although all students go through academic-related difficulties, the issues are magnified for international students as they go through added stressors of having to acquire a second language and of adapting to a different learning environment (R. A. Smith & Khawaja, 2011). These added stressors include a different teaching and learning style, such as a more highly interactive nature of lecturing when compared to their country of origin (Pattison & Robson, 2013).

Some other academic-related difficulties reported by international students include difficulty in interacting with professors and other students in class, the different types of assignments given (i.e., written assignments and expectation to work in groups), unfamiliarity with the American accent, the different grading system and general learning culture in the United States (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Lin & Yi, 1997). Financial difficulties could affect their standing as students in the United States (visa requirement) and their student visas may potentially be revoked (Sherry et al., 2010).

**Social support.** Social support plays a vital role in the acculturation process. Sawir et al. (2008) stated that loneliness is usually triggered by what the authors define as
“cultural loneliness,” that is, the absence of a familiar dominant culture and language for the students. While some international students have adequate social support from domestic friend/faculty and other international students, social support from individuals of the same culture or language is still important and this helps students adapt to life in a different country (Knox et al., 2013). International students also prefer other international students as their close friends rather than domestic students because they share the same struggles and could identify better with them (Rosenthal, Russell & Thomson, 2007; Sawir et al., 2008). Fifty percent of international students in the United States only have other international students as their friends or support network (Sherry et al., 2010). Ang and Liamputtong (2008) stated that international students prefer family members or close friends from the same culture to domestic students as their support network, which does not help international students overcome the cultural differences and adaptation. Sherry et al. (2010) recommended using various community-based programs between the international students, the university, and the local community to help international students develop social support to foster closer ties; however, many universities do not have such programs in place.

Sümer et al. (2008) have discovered that social support plays an important role in minimizing anxiety and depression among international students. Students report higher levels of depression when they have lower social support. Older students were more likely to report higher anxiety levels, mainly because younger students are more open to learning a new culture. Sümer et al. (2008) suggested that a person’s ethnic origin could
have an impact on their anxiety levels, as the study indicated that Latin American students have higher levels of depression when compared with Asian students.

**Language proficiency.** Lack of English language proficiency is another issue for international students in the United States. Various studies have shown that lack of English proficiency remains a huge barrier for international students in the United States (Ang & Liamputtong, 2008; Araujo, 2011; Knox et al., 2013; Mittal & Wieling, 2006; Morris & Lee, 2004; Ng, 2006a; Sherry at al., 2010; R. A. Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Sümer et al., 2008). Sümer et al. (2008) also reported that international students who lack proficiency in English have higher levels of depression and anxiety when compared with those of international students with high English proficiency levels. International students with good English proficiency levels can also communicate more easily with Americans and have the capacity to gain insights into the American culture, and are more likely to establish successful social relationships with other domestic students (Trice, 2004).

**Discrimination.** There are also instances of discrimination experienced by international students (Araujo, 2011; Constantine et al., 2005; Knox et al., 2013; Pedersen, 1991; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Araujo (2011) defined this as being a “perceived discrimination” which refers to “one’s interpretation of being subject to prejudicial treatment” (p. 5), often related to one’s ethnicity or country of origin. A study conducted by Pedersen (1991) was one of the earliest literatures on discrimination against international students which reported rampant racial discrimination in colleges and universities in the United States. Most international students were shocked when they
faced discrimination since most international students were not used to being a member of a minority group outside of their own home country (Nayar-Bhalerao, 2013). A qualitative study by Constantine et al. (2005) on Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international students in the United States on their cultural adjustment experiences reported that all 12 participants have experienced discrimination. Participants of the study responded to the discrimination by trying to ignore it or to educate others about their prejudiced beliefs. Race and ethnicity also play an important role on discrimination, as Caucasian international students from Western Europe experience lower levels of discrimination in the United States when compared with international student from other regions (Trice, 2004). Beoku-Betts (2004) reported that Caucasian faculty members in the United Kingdom have questioned the academic ability of female graduate students from Africa, stating that they should be put in remedial classes, leaving the students feeling marginalized. Beoku-Betts (2004) also reported the faculty members making fun of their African accents, a clear sign of racism made by the faculty members. Finally, Lee and Rice (2007) conducted a qualitative study on the experiences of discrimination faced by international students among 24 undergraduate and graduate students in the United States have found that international students face different facets of discrimination: (a) “cultural discrimination”—others making negative remarks of their home country, (b) “feelings of discomfort”—being made to feel differently by others (i.e., being stared at), (c) “verbal discrimination”—negative comments and insults made by faculty members and other students, and (d) “direct confrontation”—harassment based on their status as international students (i.e., hard to find employment opportunities; pp.
Overall, it can be concluded based on the literature that while many international students face different levels of discrimination, most of them face some type of discrimination during their stay in the United States.

**Experiences of International Students in the United States**

This section reports four relevant studies on the experiences of international students in the United States. J. L. Lee (2010) surveyed the experiences and attitudes of international students in colleges and universities in the United States. The research questions in the study were: “(a) How do international students’ ratings of their educational experiences vary by country of origin?, and (b) To what extent do their experiences relate to recommending study at the host institution?” (Lee, 2010, p. 70). The study used a sample of 501 international students at an undisclosed university in the Southwest region. To examine the students’ experiences, exploratory factor analysis was used to analyze their responses to 20 survey items. This yielded six different factors: (a) financial difficulty, (b) social adjustment difficulty, (c) satisfaction level with institutional services, (d) treatment at institution (equally or otherwise), (e) financial and physical security, and (f) satisfaction with non-academic related life and resources. A t-test was used to compare the individual students’ ratings on the six different factors, and the individuals were later compared according to their cultural differences (i.e., non-White regions and White regions). The t-test results showed that students from non-White regions had given less positive responses ($t = 8.19; p \leq 0.01$) when compared with those of students from White-regions ($t = 8.91; p \leq 0.01$) as the former had experienced unequal treatment in and outside of class, and felt less accepted by their peers and faculty
members. The findings also indicated that international students from predominantly non-White regions had experienced greater social adjustment problems ($t = 7.38; p \leq 0.01$) when compared with those of students from predominantly White regions ($t = 9.73; p \leq 0.01$). Descriptive analysis also indicated that international students from non-White regions would not recommend the university to other international students (82%), when compared with students from predominantly White regions (89%). The author stated that based on the findings of her research, faculty, staff, and other American students should engage international students in more positive ways to promote greater diplomacy rather than forcing students to acculturate into the American culture and eliminating discriminatory behaviors, which could lessen perceived discrimination felt by non-White international students.

A study conducted by Sato and Hodge (2009) has provided information about the experiences of Asian international doctoral students studying in the United States. Their study used six international students as participants (three men and three women) in a multiple-case research design to explore the students’ experiences in assimilation, resistance, and accommodation while being enrolled in graduate programs at two American universities. Four major themes emerged from the qualitative findings: (a) language differences - difficulty in learning and using a second language, (b) academic plight - which were academic-related problems experienced by international students, as most international students focused on their perceived weaknesses (i.e., language deficiencies) rather than their strengths, (c) mixed relationship - supportive relationships enjoyed by the students who yet still felt marginalized in some social
situations, and, (d) emerging self-awareness - greater understanding for their own cultural identity and values. Sato and Hodge reported three different experiences, with the students being accommodating in some situations (e.g., with their academic advisor), assimilating (for academic purposes), and resisting assimilation to the American culture (their own values and beliefs). It was concluded that faculty and graduate students could respect and value different cultural identities to help support international students (Sato & Hodge, 2009).

It is interesting to note that different international students adapt differently depending on their cultural background or country of origin. Tidwell and Hanassab (2007) conducted a study at the perceptions of international students regarding changes encountered since arriving in the United States according to the respective geographical regions of their home countries. Tidwell and Hanassab’s study on 640 international students of different backgrounds and origins have revealed significant changes. The most significant change reported is the different cultural viewpoint and way of life in the United States. When geographical location of the home country is taken into account, the greatest changes observed may vary. For example, among African students, understanding English has been reported as the greatest change whereas among Asian students, pursuing new ideas and information has been reported as the greatest skill change. Meanwhile, for Middle Eastern students, awareness in the different philosophies and ways of life have been reported as the greatest changes encountered by students. Therefore, it is important to take into consideration the students’ places of origin as these could impact the main concern that they have in living in the United States.
To summarize this section, it can be concluded that the experiences of international students vary according to many different factors, including their geographical region of origin (J. L. Lee, 2010; Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007) and their acculturation levels (Sato & Hodge, 2009). It can also be concluded that international students from traditionally non-Caucasian regions (i.e., Asia, Africa) experience more difficulty in acculturating to the American culture when compared with students from Caucasian regions (i.e., Europe, J. L. Lee, 2010; Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007). As a result, students from the non-Caucasian regions are more prone to experiencing issues while studying in the United States, which could include academic and language difficulties. However, international students also learn more about their cultural identity as a result of the acculturation process (Sato & Hodge, 2009). All undergraduate and graduate programs in the United States play a vital role in helping international students acculturate to the American culture which could lessen the cultural gap that exists.

**International Students in Psychology Programs**

As psychology programs share many commonalities with counseling (helping profession), the researcher reviewed four articles relevant to the experiences of international students, including three studies and one review of literature. The first article was a quantitative study on the needs of international students with regards to their training in a psychology program in the United States conducted by Nilsson and Anderson (2004). It was a survey research on 42 international students from psychology programs accredited by the American Psychological Association (APA). Four instruments were used to analyze their training needs: (a) the Counseling Self-Estimate
Inventory (COSE), (b) the Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity Inventory (RCRAI), (c) the America-International Relations Scale (AIRS), and (d) the International Student Supervision Scale (ISSS). Hierarchical regression analysis was used to study the first hypothesis of the study which predicted a positive supervisory working alliance for an acculturated international student with less role ambiguity. The analysis indicated that acculturation alone did not predict supervisory working alliance \[F(1, 38)=1.08, p = .30\], but rather a combination of acculturation, role ambiguity, and multicultural discussion with their supervisors \[F(3, 36)=4.32, p = .01; \Delta R^2 = .24, \Delta F(2, 36)=5.81, p = .01\]. The second hypothesis predicted that a higher degree of acculturation among international student, more cultural discussion with their supervisors, and a stronger supervisory working alliance would result in more counseling self-efficacy from the international trainees. The hierarchical regression analysis indicated that the second hypothesis had been supported; however, supervisory working alliance had only accounted for 25% of the variance as acculturation levels and cultural discussion both had played a bigger role as predictors of counseling self-efficacy. Overall, international trainees who reported as being less acculturated had less counseling efficacy and less effective supervisors alliance with their supervisors, more difficulty adapting to a role in supervision, and engaged in more frequent discussion on cultural issues with their respective supervisors. Nilsson and Anderson (2004) stated in the discussion section of their article that it was important for supervisors to establish a strong working alliance with international supervisees as this would allow both the supervisors and their supervisees to discuss important cultural-related issues during supervision that may otherwise be difficult to discuss.
In the second article, Mori, Inman, and Caskie (2009) examined the relationship between acculturation and supervisor multicultural competence among clinical and counseling psychology international students. This quantitative study was conducted to explore the relationship between the acculturation levels and cultural discussion of international students on supervision satisfaction. There were two main purposes of the study: (a) “exploring how international trainees’ level of acculturation and cultural discussions influence supervision satisfaction, and (b) examining how levels of cultural discussions may mediate the relationship between perceived supervisor multicultural competence and satisfaction with supervision” (Mori et al., 2009, p. 11). The study used a sample size of 104 international students. The study used four different instrument: (a) American-International Relations Scale (AIRS), (b) International Student Supervision Scale-Multicultural Discussion (ISSS-MD), (c) Supervisor Multicultural Competency Inventory (SMCI), and (d) Supervision Satisfactory Questionnaire. Multivariate analyses were used to test the two hypotheses in the study. The first hypothesis tested the relationship between acculturation and cultural discussion during supervision on the international trainees’ level of satisfaction with supervision. It was anticipated that acculturation would have a negative relationship with supervision satisfaction based on the results of previous studies on supervision of international students. On the contrary, it was found that both acculturation and cultural discussion had positive relationships with supervision satisfaction, respectively. Meanwhile, the second hypothesis tested the mediating factor of cultural discussion on the relationship between the supervisors’ cultural competence and the international trainees’ satisfaction levels. It was found that
both factors had been crucial in mediating the relationship between the supervisor’s competence levels and the satisfaction level. The results of the study indicated that international students who had lower acculturation levels but had engaged in more cultural discussions with their supervisors would be more satisfied with their supervision process. Mori et al. (2009) indicated that this had happened because more acculturated international students may feel that their supervisors had been less culturally competent; hence, cultural discussion would just be ignored during supervision. In contrast, less acculturated students may feel that they had a lot more to learn about the American culture; therefore, they would be more than ready to engage in cultural discussion with their supervisors. Mori et al. (2009) indicated that based on the results of their study, cultural discussion had played an important role in improving the quality of the supervision process, and international students should embrace their cultural background and acknowledge how culture would influence their clinical work.

The third article investigated areas that graduate programs in professional psychology could focus on to improve training program for international students. K. C. Lee (2013) has written extensively on the topic of international students in psychology programs, and based on a review of literature has identified four areas of concern among international students in psychology programs: “financial difficulties, language barriers, career concerns, and cultural differences” (pp. 62-67). K. C. Lee concluded the article by providing some suggestions. First, Lee stated the importance of faculty in psychology programs recognizing international students’ strengths by trying themselves to learn in an environment that is very different from their own as it would help them to appreciate
their students more. Secondly, Lee also stated that international students could facilitate their learning process by providing insights into their cultural experiences as part of the educational process.

The final article by Knox et al. (2013) was a qualitative study among international counseling psychology doctoral students. The purpose of the study was to examine the perspective of international students in counseling psychology doctoral programs in the United States. In this research, 10 participants were interviewed, nine of whom came from Asian countries and one from a Latina/Hispanic country (the exact name of country was not stated). The participants came from at least seven different counseling psychology programs in the United States. Knox et al. (2013) indicated that most international students see more challenges rather than benefits as an international student. Some of the challenges the participants shared included being discriminated against (i.e., faculty members making assumptions that the participant would not understand the general American culture), language issues, adjustment problems (acculturation), academic issues (different American education system in comparison with country of origin), lack of any social support (i.e., American Caucasian students only mingling among themselves), and financial problems (i.e., not working because of visa status). The only benefit that participants of the study felt was the professional and personal growth as the students expanded their knowledge and broadened their horizons by being exposed to a different culture. To prepare themselves, the participants of the study indicated that it would be better for international students to do their master’s in the US first to help them cope with the transition better.
To summarize the section, it can be stated that the levels of acculturation have a major impact on the experiences of international students in psychology programs. Less acculturated students in psychology programs have been found to have less counseling efficacy and difficulty during supervision, but they are also more willing to conduct cultural discussion with their supervisors (Mori et al., 2009; Nilsson & Anderson, 2004). The experiences have also inspired international students to work harder in their clinical practices and supervision process (Knox et al., 2013).

**International Students in Counselor Education Programs**

This section focuses on international students in counselor education. The number of international students in counselor education programs has continued to grow over the years. Goodrich et al. (2011) surveyed 16 CACREP-accredited doctoral programs in the United States reported that international students in doctoral counseling programs accounted for 11% to 15% of the total students between 2005 and 2009. Turner-Essel and Waehler (2009) indicated that international students would often bring an international perspective through collaborations in research or by organizing an international-themed activity in the faculty. Enrolling international students in counseling programs and having an outlet for them to share their viewpoints could expand the perspective of other students, the faculty and the program itself (Turner-Essel & Waehler, 2009).

However, international counseling students often face more adversities in counseling programs even though counseling programs promote cross-cultural qualities such as social justice, diversity and multiculturalism (Delgado-Romero & Wu, 2010).
According to Wedding et al. (2009), some of the issues include Western-biased theories in counseling, focus on personal growth that could be uncomfortable for some international students, and the difficulty in using the correct words in English during therapy.

Counseling is practiced differently throughout the world, with different qualifications needed. In Spain, students typically complete an intensive undergraduate program in a single field to become a practicing counselor (Friedlander et al., 2002). In Turkey, there are more undergraduate-level counseling programs in comparison with graduate programs as an undergraduate degree is the minimum requirement to practice counseling (Doğan, 2000; Ilhan, Korkut-Owen, Furr, & Parikh, 2012). Likewise in Malaysia, a bachelor’s degree in counseling is the minimum requirement needed to practice counseling (See & Ng, 2010). Although there are no licensure requirements to practice counseling in Turkey (Stockton & Güneri, 2011), in Malaysia a counseling license granted by the Board of Counselors Malaysia is a mandatory requirement to practice counseling (See & Ng, 2010). This shows the different requirements needed to practice counseling in different countries throughout the world, and provides an understanding that international students have different needs when studying counseling in the United States.

Many international students in counseling programs return back to their home country to make significant contributions to the counseling profession in both their respective home countries and around the world (Lau & Ng, 2012; Leung et al., 2009). According to Nilsson and Anderson (2004), 57% of international students plan to return
home once they have completed their studies in the United States. There is also a growing concern that counselors trained in the United States often fail to apply what they have learned because it is not applicable in their place of origin (Norsworthy, Heppner, Ægisdóttir, Gerstein, & Pedersen, 2009). However, international students continue to come to the United States to study counseling and other psychology-related programs as the number of international students in these programs increases on a yearly basis (Goodrich et al., 2011; Lau & Ng, 2012).

Lau and Ng (2012) conducted a study on the experiences of international students in counseling who had returned to their countries of origin of their training after studying in the United States. The study examined the relevance and effectiveness of the training received when studying counseling in the United States. Nine participants who had graduated from counseling programs in the United States and were working in their home countries at the time the study was conducted had been interviewed for the purpose of this exploratory qualitative study. According to the results based on the interview transcripts, eight themes emerged: (a) “pioneering and leadership”—the risk taken by the students to study in the United States and being looked up upon as leaders or experts in the counseling field, (b) “American-centric training”—too much focus on American issues and not from an international perspective, (c) “sojourner and returnee adjustment distress”—the feeling of being left out during class because of the American-centric training, (d) “personal investment from trainers”—varied support from faculty on international students, (e) “student-centered training”—training not catering to the students’ unique background, goals, and experiences, (f) “time and financial
constraints”—high cost of studying in the United States, (g) “independent learning”—making changes to all the students’ learning experiences because of the cultural differences, and, (h) “research”—research training found to be helpful because of the lack of opportunity to learn advanced research in their home country (Lau & Ng, 2012, pp. 93-99). Overall, Lau and Ng concluded that participants of the study had mixed experiences of studying in the United States and found it difficult to customize the training received into their own respective cultures. The participants also focused on the socio-emotional distress experienced not just during their adjustment period in the United States but also upon re-entry to their respective home countries.

International students often reported difficulty being an international student in a counseling program in the United States. A study conducted by Ng and Smith (2009) analyzed the perceptions and experiences of international counseling students in the United States compared with those of the American students. The study recruited 56 international students in counseling programs and 82 domestic counseling students as participants in the study. The participants rated their level of agreement in a Likert-type scale for 13 survey items developed for the study. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to statistically determine the significant differences in their perceptions. The findings of the study indicated the following 10 areas which international students perceived themselves experiencing more problems when compared to those of the domestic students based on the survey: (a) academic problems ($M = 2.63$), (b) English proficiency problems ($M = 3.18$), (c) cultural adjustment problems ($M = 2.84$), (d) social/relational problems with peers ($M = 2.50$), (e) difficulties in clinical courses
(i.e., internship; \( M = 2.73 \)), (f) problems fitting into clinical placement/site \((M = 2.53)\), (g) problems communicating with clients during sessions because of language barriers \((M = 2.47)\), (h) experience conflict with Western understanding and approaches to treating mental health \((M = 2.32)\), (i) discrimination by faculty members \((M = 1.84)\), and (j) discrimination by other counseling students \((M = 1.95; \text{Ng} \& \text{Smith}, 2009)\). The results also indicated that there were no significant differences in the perceptions of international students and domestic students in four instances: (a) their reports of experiencing mental/emotional distress (b) frequency of mentoring experienced from faculty members, (c) belief in their contribution to their learning environment, and (d) performance in their training (Ng & Smith, 2009). In the discussion section, Ng and Smith stated that based on their findings, faculty members and supervisors would need to increase their own personal knowledge and biases to help international students grow and expand beyond their own personal cultural encapsulation.

The study by S. D. Smith and Ng (2009) viewed the perceptions of international students regarding their multicultural counseling training received in the United States. Twenty-one international students participated in the study, with 18 of the students from CACREP-accredited program, and one student from a non-CACREP-accredited program while two students did not report any accreditation status. Participants were asked to rate their multicultural counseling training usefulness using a 5-point Likert scale. Participants then answered open-ended questions regarding their multicultural counseling training experiences. The findings indicated that most international students had found their multicultural counseling training to be very helpful in improving their multicultural
counseling knowledge (average rating of 3.24), multicultural counseling awareness of self (average rating of 3.26), and multicultural counseling awareness of others (average rating of 3.37). Only one participant had found the MC skill training to be useful during their training. In the open-ended questions section, the participants shared some negative experiences in their MC training: (a) narrow focus and relevancy of MC training, (b) subtle discrimination by professors (i.e., showing preference for issues related to the American context), and (c) not feeling like a valued member during training because of a lack of input provided by international students. The participants also made recommendations to improve MC training, and these included: (a) improving the curriculum, (b) improving the instructors’ MC knowledge, (c) widening the representation of diversity issues in MC training, and (d) creating a more practical hands-on learning experience for international students. Overall, international counseling students were dissatisfied with some parts of the MC training received and struggled to administer what they had learned to their own culture. S. D. Smith and Ng (2009) further stated that based on the findings some concepts being taught in the United States are alien to international students. For example, oppression as a concept would be viewed differently in various cultures, so it would make little sense to international students if the concept of oppression was taught in class according to the American perspective. For example, the use of oppressive (stigmatizing) languages (i.e., *jewed me down*) would make little sense to some international students because of the cultural context. S. D. Smith and Ng (2009) suggested that counselor educators must address issues such as
oppression beyond the United States setting and its applicability in a more international level when teaching multicultural counseling.

Nayar-Bhaleralo (2013) conducted a phenomenologically heuristic study to examine the perceptions and needs of international students in CACREP-accredited counseling programs. The study recruited seven master’s and doctoral students as participants. The findings indicated seven core themes: (a) “adapting to the foreign land”—challenges faced to adapt to life in the United States, (b) “clinical concerns”—concerns of doing clinical work and practicum/internship, (c) “academics”—problems with assignments, class participation, group work, and others, (d) “multiculturalism and diversity issues”—difficulty in understanding multicultural concepts, lacking diversity in class, being stereotypes or discriminated against, (e) “social connectedness”—facing social isolation, failure to connect with others, (f) “impact of the counselor training program”—some gaining personal growth, while others questioning their self-esteem, and (g) “the role of counseling faculty and department”—faculty members providing help and offering good support system (Nayar-Bhaleralo, 2013, pp. 59-88). The findings indicated several recommendations; however, what was fascinating to the researcher is the idea provided by the author of the research to expand multicultural coursework that includes more international perspective so that international students could better understand it as some participants felt a disconnection with the materials used during multicultural coursework (Nayar-Bhaleralo, 2013).

A review of an article by Fuertes, Potere and Ramirez (2002) discussed the effect of speech accents in counseling and its implication to practice. Most international
students have different accents when conversing in English. Fuertes et al. (2002) stated that counselors with different English accents may have to struggle and cope with their clients’ speech accent effects. The different English accents used by a non-American counselor may create a negative image of the counselor to the client, that is, they may be perceived as being less trustworthy and skilled when compared with a counselor who would talk in a ‘standard’ American accent (accent generally spoken by the dominant group in a society). Based on the literature reviewed by Fuertes et al. (2002), the authors suggested that international trainees should discuss their different accents during counseling as a way to mitigate the effect. However, because the effect would strongly be related to the client’s own worldview, there would be no definitive way to minimize the effect.

Faculty members play an important role in the development of international students in their respective programs; however, they could also potentially become a source of problems for international students. Ng (2006b) conducted a study on the perception of counselor educators in the United States on the experiences of international students in their programs. The research, which surveyed 37 counselor educators (24 female and 13 male) in the United States, revealed that counselor educators were aware of the difficulties experienced by international students in their program, especially in specific areas such as clinical training, adjustment, cultural differences, and language. However, it is interesting to note that 20% of the counselor educators surveyed thought that it was unnecessary to treat international students as a unique student group, since the experiences of international students would not be considered sufficient to place them in
their own category (Ng, 2006b). Ng stated in the discussion section of the article that it would be important for counselor educators to recognize the group differences that existed to help international students to succeed. There was also evidence of discrimination shown by faculty members and supervisors towards international students, as the study conducted by Knox et al. (2013) indicated that some faculty members had negative assumptions about international students (i.e., assuming they would not understand the American culture) while a supervisor had uttered a slur regarding a supervisee still not thinking in an American way (“thinking like a [supervisee’s ethnicity]”). Delgado-Romero and Wu (2010) in their study on Asian international students revealed that students had found it hard to discuss discrimination committed by faculty members because of the students’ respect for elders—a value deeply ingrained in the Asian culture. Some faculty members did not have awareness of their predicament and failed to make changes to their courses and exams, as the materials given may not be relevant to them (Delgado-Romero & Wu, 2010).

Academic issues could arise during clinical practice and supervision. Sangganjanavanich and Black (2009) conducted a phenomenological study to examine the supervisory experiences of international students during their first practicum. The international students comprised four master’s students and one doctoral student. All of the international students used English as their second language. The findings of the study indicated four major themes: (a) “supervisors insensitivity”—students felt that their supervisors had failed to understand their unique cultural background during supervision, (b) “interpersonal isolation”—students felt being isolated when learning in a training
group, (c) “inter-cultural confusion and stereotyping”—students felt that their supervisors were making culturally insensitive comments that were derogatory in some instances, and (d) “unique learning experience”—students did not regret the painful experiences, and felt fortunate to be experiencing multicultural supervisory. The results indicated that acculturation would be a big problem for international students, as international students would feel like an outcast during their training. Supervisors play an important role by providing assistance through helping international students understand the American culture and the proper use of English. Sangganjanavanich and Black also reported that international supervisees had “multiple disappointments in the lack of depth and meaning in supervisory relationships because cultural issues were often dismissed or ignored in supervision” (p. 56). In the recommendations section, Sangganjanavanich and Black emphasized the importance of supervisors inviting their international supervisees to help them understand their culture so that the supervisors could work more effectively with the supervisees and help them foster closer ties with the American students.

In another study related to clinical practice among international students, Ng and Smith (2012) examined the relationship between international counseling students and their training level, role ambiguity, acculturation, and multicultural discussions in supervising and training international counseling students. The study was conducted among 71 international students in counseling programs in the United States. Five different instruments were used to measure the different variables used in the study. Multivariate analysis was used to analyze the data. Results from the first multivariate
analysis revealed that supervisory working alliance was not predicted by their training level, but rather by role ambiguity and multicultural discussion as evidenced by having 37% more variance \[F(6, 64)=15.21, p < .001; \Delta R^2=.37, \Delta F(2, 64)=28.59, p < .001\]. This indicated that role ambiguity and multicultural discussion had played a more crucial role in predicting their supervisory working alliance when compared with role ambiguity. Further multivariate analysis also revealed that the students’ training levels \[F(1, 69)=5.54, p = .02; R^2 = .07\] and language use \[\Delta R^2=.03, \Delta F(2, 64)=1.15, p = .32\] had predicted the students’ counseling self-efficacy. The findings of the study indicated that it would be imperative for supervisors to attend to the students’ multicultural issues and role ambiguity, including issues involving acculturation and its impact of their academic and clinical performance. Ng and Smith’s (2012) findings also discovered that international trainees with low levels of role ambiguity had the tendency to engage in multicultural discussions with their supervisors. Ng and Smith concluded that role ambiguity and discussion of multicultural issues would be important in developing better supervisory working alliance, and identifying the trainees’ training levels could have an impact on their training experience and needs.

To end the section, two studies on international students in counselor education outside the United States were reviewed. The first is a qualitative study on the experiences of international students studying counseling in Turkey conducted by Ilhan et al. (2012). The purpose of this study was to examine the training experiences and perceptions of international students studying counseling in Turkey. The study, conducted among 20 international students, produced four major themes. The first theme
referred to the choice made by the international students to study in Turkey without undertaking any background check on the program or department, and some even made the choice by chance. The second theme revolved around language, as many international students found it hard to express themselves and could not communicate well with their clients. The third theme centered on cultural adjustment, and the majority of the students did not find it hard to adjust because most of the international students shared a similar culture with Turkey. There were no obvious culture shock responses; nevertheless, other problems arose such as eating local foods and religious adjustments (i.e., for non-Muslim students). The fourth theme was concerned with the curriculum used, as most counseling programs in Turkey did not offer a multicultural counseling course, as well as the lack of actual hours in practicing counseling and supervision. The findings indicated that similarity in culture would help the acculturation process for international students. However, the same trend was not occurring in the United States as English would be their second language for the majority of international students in the United States.

Pattison and Robson (2013) focused on the experiences of international counseling students in the United Kingdom. The study was conducted among 12 international students who had completed a master’s counseling program in the United Kingdom. The qualitative research found three themes from the students’ experiences. The first theme referred to “culture”, the cultural differences of studying in a different country as learning would be more interactive in nature and that students would be expected to share their emotions and concerns during the learning process. The second
theme was “*skills and qualities*”, which referred to the students’ ability to increase their own self-knowledge about the meaning of culture and help them become more empathetic in their counseling work. For example, working with clients of different cultures because they would be also going through the same struggle. This would help international students become more confident in their own abilities as a counselor. The third theme was “*expectations, motivations and outcomes*”, which referred to having better understanding of their own self and others. For example, the students’ increased critical awareness of their own culture or country, and ways to provide a more global understanding of counseling in their own countries of origin. This may cause the students to experience culture shock upon their return to their respective home countries. Pattison and Robson (2013) concluded that being in a different country would present international students with the challenges to their view of learning and professional roles, and a deeper intercultural understanding of their clients’ point of view through the use of empathy. This would lead to better use of counseling skills and techniques, and would be seen as critical to their development as a counselor, both personally and professionally.

To conclude, it can be said that factors such as faculty, role of supervisors, and the course content (curriculum) play important roles in ensuring successful learning of what international students would need to learn in a counseling program in the United States. Hurley, Gerstein, and Ægisdóttir (2013) stated that counseling programs need to adapt to the internationalizing needs in a borderless society. In internationalizing the profession, it is important for counselors to be able to “recognize their physical and social location in the world,” which refers to where they come from and what their social locations are (i.e.,
ethnicity, age, gender, culture, nationality; Tang et al., 2012, p. 255). Social locations play an important role in the adjustment process to the host country, as this would help gain an understanding of students’ own cultural identity and a more global worldview (Tang et al., 2012). Internationalizing the counseling programs, in essence, would allow international students to comprehend the learning process as it would adopt a more global outlook of the world rather than just from the American perspective. This has been supported by Ng and Noonan (2012) who studied counselor educators in the United States by stating that an internationalizing of the counseling training curriculum and pedagogy could prepare its students to meet the globalized challenges in the counseling world. Instead of focusing on including international students’ issues under the multicultural coursework, all counseling coursework should be supplemented with a cultural sensitive training ambience (incorporating issues relevant to international students into the curriculum and supervision practices) and providing clinical opportunities in a culturally diverse population (Dickson & Jepsen, 2007). Table 1 presents an overview of all relevant qualitative studies on international counseling students.

**Marriage, Couple, and Family Therapy/Counseling Programs**

The AAMFT was founded as the American Association of Marriage Counselors (AAMC) in 1942 (Broderick & Schrader, 1991). However, as the profession changed its focus to family therapy, the AAMC became known as the American Association of Marriage and Family Counselors in 1970, and eventually as the AAMFT in 1978 (Broderick & Schrader, 1991). The AAMFT has played a key role in the development of
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<th>Information on Qualitative Study</th>
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| **Author:** Lau and Ng (2012). **Purpose:** Examine the relevance and effectiveness of the counseling training received by international students who had returned to their country of origin. **Number of Participants:** Nine. | (a) **Pioneering and leadership**—being regarded as experts in their home countries  
(b) **American-centric training**—too much focus on American issues  
(c) **Sojourner and returnee adjustment distress**—feeling left out during class  
(d) **Personal investment from trainers**—varied support from faculty  
(e) **Student-centered training**—training did not cater to the students’ unique background  
(f) **Time and financial constraints**—high cost of studying in the US  
(g) **Independent learning**—making changes to all the students’ learning experiences because of the cultural differences  
(h) **Research**—helpful research training |
| **Nayar-Bhalerao (2013).** **Purpose:** Perceptions and needs of international students in CACREP-accredited counseling programs in the United States. **Number of Participants:** Seven. | (a) **Adapting to the foreign land**—challenges faced to adapt to life in the United States,  
(b) **Clinical concerns**—concerns of doing clinical work and practicum/internship  
(c) **Academics**—problems with assignments, class participation, group work, and others  
(d) **Multiculturalism and diversity issues**—difficulty in understanding multicultural concepts, lacking diversity in class, being stereotypes/discriminated against  
(e) **Social connectedness**—facing social isolation, failure to connect with others  
(f) **Impact of the counselor training program**—some gaining personal growth, while others questioning their self-esteem  
(g) **The role of counseling faculty and department**—faculty members providing help and offer good support system |

*(table continues)*
### Table 1 (continued)

**Themes of Qualitative Research in Counselor Education Programs**

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<th>Information on Qualitative Study</th>
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<td><strong>Sangganjanavanich and Black (2009).</strong>&lt;br&gt;Purpose: Examine the supervisory experiences of international students in the United States during their first practicum.&lt;br&gt;Number of Participants: Five.</td>
<td>(a) <em>Supervisors insensitivity</em>—international students felt their supervisors failed to understand their unique cultural background during supervision  &lt;br&gt;(b) <em>Interpersonal isolation</em>—international students felt isolated when learning in a training group  &lt;br&gt;(c) <em>Inter-cultural confusion and stereotyping</em>—international students felt their supervisors were making culturally insensitive comments during supervision  &lt;br&gt;(d) <em>Unique learning experience</em>—students did not regret the painful experiences, and felt fortunate to be experiencing multicultural supervision.</td>
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<td><strong>Ilhan, Korkut-Owen, Furr, and Parikh (2012).</strong>&lt;br&gt;Purpose: Examine the training experiences and perceptions of international students studying counseling in Turkey.&lt;br&gt;Number of Participants: 20.</td>
<td>(a) <em>Going to Turkey</em>—choice made by the international students to study in Turkey without making any background check on the program or department, and some even made the choice by chance  &lt;br&gt;(b) <em>Language</em>—most international students found it hard to express themselves and could not communicate well with their clients  &lt;br&gt;(c) <em>Lack of cultural adjustment issues</em>—similarity with the Turkish culture. However, other problems arose (i.e., local foods and religious adjustments)  &lt;br&gt;(d) <em>Problematic curriculum</em>—no multicultural counseling course offered</td>
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<td><strong>Pattison and Robson (2013).</strong>&lt;br&gt;Purpose: Examine the experiences of international counseling students in the United Kingdom.&lt;br&gt;Number of Participants: 12.</td>
<td>(a) <em>Culture</em>—more interactive learning experience  &lt;br&gt;(b) <em>Skills and qualities</em>—increased ability to improve their own self knowledge about the meaning of culture helped international students to become more empathetic in their counseling work  &lt;br&gt;(c) <em>Expectations, motivations and outcomes</em>—better understanding of the student’s own self and others</td>
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the first professional standard for marriage and family therapy through the accrediting standards developed by COAMFTE, the accrediting body for the AAMFT (Murray & Murray, 2009). The history of the marriage and family counseling sub-specialty program by CACREP and the American Counseling Association (ACA) started in 1949 with the formation of the American Personnel and Guidance Association (APGA). It is comprised of four different national associations related to guidance and counseling in the United States (Bobby, 2013). The APGA would eventually be known as ACA in 1992.

CACREP was established in 1981 to create counselor education standards in the counseling profession under the ACA, including specialty areas such as marriage and family therapy/counseling. The sub-specialty program in marriage and family counseling started to gain traction with the formation of the ACA division, the International Association of Marriage and Family Counseling (IAMFC) in 1989 (Bobby, 2013).

The process of accrediting AAMFT marriage and family therapy programs began formally in 1974, and the first accreditation standard was established in 1975 (Everett, 1990). The COAMFTE, the AAMFT’s accrediting body, was formally recognized by the United States Office of Education as a body of accreditation for marriage and family therapy programs (Everett, 1990). It was also a huge achievement for the AAMFT as it recognized marriage and family therapy as a distinct field of study, separate from counseling and psychology programs (Everett, 1990). The COAMFTE would start to provide accreditation to marriage and family therapy program in the late 1970s to the early 1980s after being recognition by the United States Office of Education (Sweeney, 1992, 1995).
However, a second avenue to study marriage and family therapy would eventually be developed by the counseling profession through CACREP (Bobby, 2013). Between 1988 and 1989, CACREP through the IAMFC Training Standards Committee started to develop its own standards for marriage and family therapy/counseling (R. L. Smith, Carlson, Stevens-Smith, & Dennison, 1995). A joint task force was eventually established with the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) to further develop the standards resulting in the first standards for marriage and family therapy/counseling being officially completed on October 13, 1990 (R. L. Smith et al., 1995). However, CACREP’s right for accrediting marriage and family therapy/counseling programs was contested by AAMFT and the American Psychological Association before the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA) granted the right for CACREP to accredit marriage and family therapy/counseling programs in October 1992 (Bobby, 2013).

There are many glaring differences in both COAMFTE-accredited (AAMFT) and CACREP-accredited training programs. The course work in AAMFT programs seeks training from a “systemic and interactional perspective” (Stevens-Smith & Hinkle, 1993, p. 117). The content focuses more on the systemic paradigm of family interactions (Stevens-Smith & Hinkle, 1993). The newest COAMFTE standards (version 11.0) also place emphasis on a student’s mastery of a set of competencies in their therapeutic skills and knowledge and outcome-based pedagogy, no longer confining to only their supervision and total hours of therapy experience (COAMFTE, 2005; Gehart, 2011). Training in CACREP programs view marriage and family therapy/counseling as a
specialized field since students would first learn counseling knowledge, skills, and techniques as their core counseling area before they are taught family therapy theories and techniques, including systems theory (Stevens-Smith & Hinkle, 1993). Professionals are initially trained in counseling, and subsequently complete training and skill building in working with couples and families as marriage and family counselors and therapists (R. L. Smith et al., 1995; Stevens-Smith & Hinkle, 1993). However, the word “therapy” has since been replaced in the 2009 CACREP standards with “counseling,” which results in the area of specialization to be called Marriage, Couple, and Family Counseling (Bobby, 2013; CACREP, 2009). The current CACREP standards state that MCFC students are “expected to possess the knowledge, skills, and practices necessary to address a wide variety of issues in the context of relationships and families” (CACREP, 2009, p. 35).

**International Students in Marriage, Couple, and Family Therapy/Counseling Training Programs**

This section presents literature on MCFC and MFT for international students. It should be noted that all of the literature in this section is taken from AAMFT-accredited MFT programs because of the lack of any literature on international students in CACREP-accredited MCFC programs. The literature suggests that international students often struggle to study MCFC/MFT in the United States. This has been attributed to the curriculum of MCFC/MFT programs not being designed with international students in mind (Kaslow, 2000; Mittal & Wieling, 2006). The responsibility lies with each program to support its students’ needs by making them feel included in the program, maximizing
their growth and potential, and guiding them to adapt the knowledge learned in the United States to their country of origin (McDowell et al., 2012). However, the faculty in most MCFC/MFT programs are still ill-equipped to respond to the internationalizing needs. McDowell et al. (2002) stated that faculties in MFT programs need to re-evaluate their beliefs and attitudes to develop a more cross-culturally sensitive perspective in their curriculum.

Marriage and family counseling/therapy is still a new profession in many countries around the world, and are viewed differently according to the respective countries and cultures. A phenomenological study was conducted by DuPree et al. (2012) to look at the different international perspectives on marriage and family counseling/therapy. The purpose of their study was to gain an understanding of its practices around the world. To achieve this, a total of 22 family therapists/counselors were interviewed. The findings indicated that the various countries had viewed the status of marriage and family therapy/counseling differently. For example, a participant from Turkey indicated that he had encountered resistance from his family when he wanted to practice marriage and family therapy/counseling because he already had a well-paying job in business. The findings also suggested that most participants were optimistic that marriage and family therapy/counseling would grow in their respective countries. However, there were some issues that could deter this, for instance, governmental laws and lack of any training programs. There was also the potential issue of cultural norms, as marriage and family therapy/counseling could be seen as imposing a westernized practice on a different culture.
Marriage and family therapists/counselors also differ in terms of their practice in different countries. In Spain, family therapists typically use bilingual language (i.e., Spanish and a local dialect, Gagllego) and a very short form of brief therapy (Friedlander et al., 2002). There are also different cultural norms and expectations during class. In Spain, classes starting late are to be expected and cigarette smoking is not prohibited (Friedlander et al., 2002).

The faculty and supervisor play an important role in ensuring the success of international students in their program. In the MCFC/MFT field, having experience in working with students from a diverse background has become a priority. A study by Killian (2001) examined the supervisory relationship and interaction with students of different background. Killian interviewed six supervisors and six supervisees from AAMFT-accredited program in the United States. All supervisees in the study were international students from six different countries (Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Mexico, Russia, and Spain). The findings of the study indicated that all supervisees had reported instances in which they felt that they did not fit into the program. The supervisees indicated that it would be important to establish a rapport with their supervisors and find some commonalities between them. The supervisees suggested that their supervisors should be more aware of the differences in culture and show an interest in the challenges faced by their supervisees as this could help build rapport between them. In the discussion section, Killian stated that supervisors would need to discuss the application of different MFT theories with their students so that the cultural contexts would be taken into consideration. Killian also added that international students had brought their culture
into the supervision process, for example, not talking back to their teacher or professor. Killian recommended that supervisors should take a more proactive approach in discussing the cultural consideration and applicability of their learning into their own culture for a more enriching learning experience for international students.

A study by Marshall and Weiling (2003) also illustrated the importance of working with students from different backgrounds for the supervisor. Marshall and Weiling studied the phenomenological experiences of cross-cultural supervision in MFT programs which involved three different focus groups for the purpose of the study: (a) minority students without same-race supervision, (b) majority student with minority supervisor, and (c) majority student with same race supervision. The results indicated that respondents from group A and group B reported having positive cross-cultural supervisory experiences (with the exception of two students). Some of the positive experiences included more discussion of cultural differences with their clients, for instance, topics on race and gender, the supervisors’ sensitivity about the culture of their supervisees (not making gross generalizations), and the supervisors’ willingness to learn more about the supervisees’ culture. Two of the students from group A experienced negative cross-cultural supervisory relationship as their supervisors made occasional statements that were not culturally sensitive. Receiving supervision from someone of the same race was also valued by some students in group A. One student stated that she had felt “a connection” when working with someone from their own race/culture. Gender and country of origin of the supervisor would also play an important role in a supervisory relationship in MFT. For example, a practitioner from India in group A stated that
supervisory relationship in MFT would depend on whether the supervisor was an Indian who was raised in India or an Indian who was raised in America. The participant stated that there would be a difference between the two as the supervisor who was raised in India would be able to understand her better because they would be “able to relate” to each other (Marshall & Weiling, 2003, p. 182). The participant also stated that she would find it difficult to work with a male supervisor from India because of her gender inequality beliefs. In addition, she added that it would also depend on the male supervisor’s views on gender equality. Finally, all supervisees felt that race would have a tremendous influence on supervisory relationship. One participant from group C referred to the process as “curiosity” as he related that he would give a thought if he was supervised by a supervisor from the minority race or ethnic group, but would give it no such thought if supervised by someone of the same race.

Morris and Lee (2004) conducted a similar study, but focused not only on the impact to the supervisor but also the client and trainees (students). The study analyzed the experiences of immigrant trainees practicing MFT in the United States and their impact on the client, supervisor, and the trainees in MFT programs. The immigrant trainees in the study referred to foreign-born students currently residing in the United States. The study used a phenomenological research method and interviewed four immigrant MFT trainees who provided MFT at a university-based MFT clinic. Twenty-six clients also completed questionnaires (consisting of one quantitative section and another section with open-ended questions) which measured their satisfaction towards the therapy provided by the MFT trainees. A total of 15 clients were assigned to a non-native
English-speaking MFT trainee (immigrant trainee) while another 11 clients were assigned to a native English speaker. The satisfaction ratings for immigrant trainees and native English-speaking trainees were compared to determine their differences. The results were separated into two different groups: (a) client questionnaires, and (b) trainee interviews. For the client questionnaire, which used a 6-point Likert scale ($1 = \text{Very dissatisfied}$ and $6 = \text{Very satisfied}$), the scores for the relationship between the clients and the immigrant therapists were 4.63, and 4.86 with English-speaking trainees. From the open-ended questions, Morris and Lee (2004) found three similarities among the responses. The first was labeled "language challenge," which referred to the difficulty for the client to understand what their non-native English-speaking trainees were saying during therapy. The second similarity was "cultural distinction," that is, the cultural differences which were viewed as barriers during therapy. The final similarity was "non-issue," which referred to situations in which some clients who did not view working with an immigrant therapist as being a problem.

From the trainee interviews, the findings indicated three different themes. The first theme was labeled "opportunity/benefit vs. barrier" which reflected the cultural and language differences as being both a positive and a negative. It was thought of as being negative because participants could not actually understand the struggles that the client would be going through, but it was also a positive as they could learn more about the client through clarification. The second theme was "time and learning" which referred to the hard work the participants had gone through to comprehend the English language and the American culture. The final theme was "suggestions vs. expectations" which referred
to the trainees’ expectations to have more frank responses from their supervisors about their current MFT practice and to correct any of their mistakes in language and culture. Morris and Lee (2004) concluded that MFT training programs could do more to provide a better training process for immigrants or international students, and accepting the challenges and pitfalls that may be involved when working with international students.

McDowell (2004) explored the experiences of racial discrimination that has appeared in MFT programs. The study uses a qualitative approach to construct knowledge on topics related to ethnicity and racism in MFT programs. The study interviewed eight participants, in which two of the participants were international students. The international students shared some racial experiences when training to become marriage and family therapists for the purpose of the study. The participants shared their experience of having struggled with the Euro-centrism (Caucasian American) focus of the MFT programs in the United States, and found it hard to apply what they had learned in the United States when working in their respective countries of origin. The international students also shared their experiences of being a minority in America which had helped them to become more aware of the struggles that minority groups in their own country often had to go through, as concepts such as racial privilege and oppression took a new meaning for the students. McDowell (2004) concluded that based on the findings of her research, a more critical view of current MFT teaching practices would need to be evaluated to challenge the Euro-centric focus of current MFT practices in the United States so that they could be used more effectively in societies outside of the country.
Overall, it can be said that international students have mixed experiences undergoing marriage and family therapy/counseling programs across the United States. International students are expected to be independent, flexible, and open to new experiences when studying in a MFT or MCFC program (Friedlander et al., 2002). In reality, international students could contribute significantly to the profession. McDowell et al. (2012) stated that international students could promote multicultural competence through active participation in the program and through social participation. However, marriage and family therapy/counseling programs in the United States are not fully utilizing the potential advantages of having international students in their programs (McDowell et al., 2012), but are instead making international students feel unappreciated and fail to adapt to the different needs of the American education system (McDowell et al., 2012). McDowell et al. (2002) stated that MFT programs are more concerned in filling up diversity quotas rather than changing their own practices, which lead to MFT programs focusing more on recruiting culturally different students but failing to create programs that could truly support their diverse needs. It is no surprise that based on a study among international students in an MFT program by McDowell et al. (2006), it was found that students preferred to be in the company of other international students. This would enable them to discuss their experiences and struggles of adapting to the American culture without their own cultural heritage being diminished (McDowell et al., 2006). One participant stated that being able to share her experiences with other international students was a “cathartic” feeling as their experiences mirrored her own and made her feel less isolated (McDowell et al., 2006, p. 13).
Research on the Experiences of International Students in Marriage, Couple, and Family Therapy/Counseling Program

Two past studies share similarities with the researcher’s study on international students in marriage, couple, and family therapy/counseling programs. The first study was conducted by Mittal and Wieling (2006) while the second study was conducted by McDowell et al. (2012). Mittal and Wieling’s (2006) study focused on the phenomenological experiences of international students in doctoral-level COAMFTE-accredited MFT programs in the United States. The study interviewed 13 doctoral students in an MFT program to gain insights into their training experiences in an MFT doctoral program. The findings of the study could be divided into four broad categories: (a) experiences related to perceptions of aspects of one’s self, (b) experiences related to relationships with systems external to self, (c) experiences related to other factors, and (d) strategies that helped international students cope. In category one, international students experienced feelings of self-identifying as an outsider, which resulted in them feeling inferior when compared to the American students, and feelings of anxiety because of the lack of English proficiency. In category two, which focused on the students’ relationships with other people on campus, the international students stated positive and negative experiences. Some felt positive experiences as the experiences enabled them to have multicultural experience as people were interested in learning more about their respective countries of origin. However, some students felt negative experiences because of the lack of cultural diversity in the program and within the community surrounding their university, which led to negative attitudes towards them. Students also reported
feeling some pressure in assimilating to the American culture and values (becoming more assertive, confrontational, and talking more during class), which led to positive experiences (fitting better to the American environment) and negative experiences (feelings of discomfort to become someone different from their real selves). Some students also felt marginalized or insulted in their training experiences, as some experienced stereotypical responses towards their culture (Muslim women) and feeling of being marginalized by faculty members (not being aware of their cultural differences and thus neglecting their needs). However, many international students still experienced positive feelings towards faculty involvement, as seven of the respondents felt their faculty members were open towards diversity while five students enjoyed a supportive relationship with their faculty members. Students who were the only international students in their cohort also felt more marginalized, and having other international students in their cohort or students from their own country usually made their training experiences more comfortable.

Category three focused on changes that occurred because of the different cultural contexts and adaptation to a different educational system. Six of the respondents shared their difficulties in transitioning to a different culture and having to adapt to changes in their ways of being, thinking, and talking, for example, calling professors informally by their first name. Three respondents also struggled to adapt to the culture of sharing thoughts and opinions in class. There were some respondents who expressed specific frustrations during their training, including six respondents who cited the lack of any diversity issues being discussed in class and five respondents who said that their
supervisors did not engage in any discussion about their cultures of origin and differences. However, nine respondents stated that the faculty fully supported their interest in cross-cultural research. Category four referred to how respondents coped with studying in their program. The respondents shared three different strategies: (a) embracing cultural differences among them (talking to clients about their cultural differences), (b) becoming more assertive and confident to stand up for one’s self (being more direct with supervisors when there were uncertainties about their therapy practices), and (c) having strong perseverance in facing all adversaries (the faculty had asked one respondent to “go home” but the student remained steadfast and eventually graduated).

The findings indicated that stress levels could be greatly reduced with better familial support, good working relationship with faculty members, and the faculty’s interest in their international students’ well-being and professional development (Mittal & Wieling, 2006). Mittal and Wieling suggested some recommendations for MFT programs in the United States to help their international students: (a) considering the unique individuality of the international students instead of generalizing their experiences, (b) having regular conversations with the international students, (c) helping the international students make connections with other people in and around the university and community (mentors), (d) becoming more proactive to help international students by building a small community among them to help them cope with common issues that may affect their learning, (e) having collaborative discussions with international students regarding their needs and expectations of their future practice (in their countries of origin instead of the American culture), and (f) encouraging their
international students to share their feelings and being flexible in teaching them, to further develop their skills.

Finally, the study by McDowell et al. (2012) also investigated the experiences of international students in MFT programs in the United States. Instead of using a qualitative method, their study used a mixed methods research methodology with a combination of close-ended surveys and open-ended questions that were emailed to 40 participants who agreed to join the study. Analysis of the data produced five major themes for the study: “(a) feeling understood and valued, (b) forming personal connections and experiencing marginalization, (c) including international perspectives in curricula, (d) considering the relevance/transferability of knowledge, and (e) attending to barriers to learning” (pp. 335-341). The first theme referred to importance of being understood by their cohorts and the faculty; however, some participants reported feeling devalued by their colleagues while others were put into the position of being the “spokesperson” for his or her entire country. The second theme referred to their wish to make personal connections with their cohorts; however, some of the international students felt that they were viewed as “outsider” and would usually talk to other international students about their frustrations. The third theme referred to no interest being shown by their colleagues and faculty when it came to international perspective, as it was often the case that international students would know a lot about the American culture but their American peers and faculty would know nothing about the international students’ countries of origin. The fourth theme referred to the application of all MFT theories and practices in their home countries. One participant stated that while the
faculty and his supervisor had worked hard to understand him, he could still feel that they were “unconsciously” trying to make him a “White therapist” (McDowell et al., 2012, p. 340). However, most participants agreed that their faculty members had made an effort in helping them to apply their knowledge learned back in their countries of origin. The final theme referred to the participants working hard to meet the demands of the respective program; however, most participants conceded that using their second or third language while working with families was a difficult process. Further findings suggested that doctoral students reported having experienced greater discrimination when compared to master’s students. McDowell et al. (2012) suggested that this may happen because doctoral students would be more critical in analyzing international issues and what they had been undergoing as opposed to master’s students who would still be learning the basics of the America-centric family therapy process. McDowell et al. (2012) also suggested that the curricula in MCFC and MFT programs should be revised to include more international concerns, such as including authors in marriage and family counseling/therapy from outside America in the training program, and assignments or class discussions on the similarities and differences between marriage and family counseling/therapy services outside the United States. McDowell et al. (2012) concluded that the inclusion of an international perspective into marriage and family counseling/therapy programs would help to promote a more holistic understanding of family life and how global relation would impact individual and family interactions in our daily life.
Need for the Study

Understanding the experiences of international students studying in the United States is vital. Review of related literature has shown that most international students struggle to adapt because of various factors including having to experience discrimination (Araujo, 2011; Constantine et al., 2005; Knox et al., 2013; Pedersen, 1991; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007).

Fifty-seven percent of international students in the United States plan to move back to their respective home countries once they complete their studies (Nilsson & Anderson, 2004). Some of the acculturation issues that impact international students include language proficiency issues (Ang & Liamputtong, 2008; Araujo, 2011; Knox et al., 2013; Mittal & Wieling, 2006; Morris & Lee, 2004; Ng, 2006a; Sherry et al., 2010; Sümer et al., 2008), different learning styles (Pattison & Robson, 2013), and failure to adapt to the academic changes (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; K. C. Lee, 2013; Lin & Yi, 1997). Knox et al. (2013) stated that most international students would only see the difficult challenges rather than the benefits of studying in the United States.

To adapt to the challenges, international students usually develop behaviors as a means of coping. Sangganjanavanich and Black (2009) have highlighted in their study that students view the benefit of being in a unique learning experience as a way to adapt to the changes. K. C. Lee (2013) added that international students could also aid in the process by providing insights into their cultural experiences as part of their educational process as this would help other students, supervisors, and faculty understand them better. McDowell et al. (2012) noted that some international students adapt by having to
work harder than other students in their respective cohorts, especially with improvement in their English proficiency. Other students choose to adapt by keeping company with other international students, as it would give them the opportunities to exchange opinions and share their feelings with others who go through similar experiences (McDowell et al., 2006). While there are studies being conducted on understanding the experiences of international students in COAMFTE-accredited MFT programs (Mittal & Wieling, 2006; McDowell et al., 2012), to the best of the present researcher’s knowledge, there has yet to be a study being conducted on understanding the experiences of international students in CACREP-accredited MCFC programs.

Another major issue in MCFC is the application of the American-centric MCFC knowledge in their home countries (DuPree et al., 2012; Norsworthy et al., 2009; McDowell, 2004; S. D. Smith & Ng, 2009; Wedding et al., 2009). International students may experience shock once they return back to their respective home countries as much of the knowledge that they bring to their home countries is not applicable because of the cultural differences (Pattison & Robson, 2013; S. D. Smith & Ng, 2009). However, a study on understanding the application in MCFC knowledge in other countries, its applicability, and the adaptation process involved has yet to be conducted. Therefore, the present study makes a unique contribution to the literature on understanding of the phenomenological experiences of international students in MCFC programs in the United States, the acculturation process, and the applicability of the MCFC in their home countries.

The research questions of the study were as follows.
Primary Research Question: What are the reflections of the experiences of international students in a CACREP-accredited marriage, couple and family counseling (MCFC) program in the United States, and how do the experiences inform their MCFC practices in their country of origin?

Sub Question 1: What are the learning experiences of international students in a CACREP-accredited marriage, couple, and family counseling program in the United States?

Sub Question Two: What adaptation occurs in the learning process for international students in a CACREP-accredited marriage, couple, and family counseling program in the United States?

Sub Questions Three: What similarities and disparities do international students experience in their MCFC practices in the United States and in their countries of origin, and how do they resolve that in their MCFC practice in their country of origin?

**Summary of Chapter 1**

This chapter provides an overview of the proposed study, with the purpose of understanding the experiences of international student in MCFC programs in the United States. The primary research question of the study was: What are the reflections of the experiences of international students in a CACREP-accredited marriage, couple and family counseling (MCFC) program in the United States, and how do the experiences inform their MCFC practice in their country of origin? The review of literature has provided an in-depth understanding of international students, the common issues
affecting international students, relevant research on international students as well as in other mental health programs, an overview of international students in counselor education as well as international students in MCFC programs and their related research.
CHAPTER II
METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of international students in MCFC programs in the United States to gain insight on: (a) the challenges and struggles of studying MCFC in a different culture, (b) ways of adaptation to the challenges experienced, and (c) the applicability of MCFC knowledge in their own country of origin. This study was guided by the research questions: “What are the reflections of the experiences of international students in a CACREP-accredited marriage, couple and family counseling (MCFC) program in the United States, and how do the experiences inform their MCFC practice in their country of origin?”. To explore the essence of the structure of their experiences as guided by the research question, a phenomenological research design was used in the study.

Phenomenological Research

Qualitative research is a research methodology using inductive reasoning, with ideas and hypotheses generated from the patterns emerging within the data (Creswell, 2007). The experiences of individuals (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998, 2002) and the environment that they live in (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010) are two integral parts of any qualitative research. Phenomenological research, a subset of qualitative research, is an approach that places importance on the perspective of the participants and the shared meanings of the experiences (Creswell, 2007; Giorgi, 2009; Hatch, 2002; Hays & Wood, 2011; Merriam, 1998, 2002). Phenomenology as a research method is seen as being congruent with the counselling profession because of the similar nature of placing
importance on understanding a client’s experience and on a client’s thick description of a phenomenon of interest (Hays & Wood, 2011).

Philosopher Edmund Husserl originally conceived phenomenology as a qualitative research method in its modern form in the early 20th century (Giorgi, 2009). At its core, the basic philosophy of phenomenology is to seek understanding of any phenomenon that could be understood through the awareness one has of anything that is “given” from the person undergoing the experience (Giorgi, 2009). Husserl (1962, 1970) referred to phenomenology as being related to one’s consciousness, and how a phenomenon could present itself into one’s consciousness. Giorgi (2009) has simplified this by stating that phenomenology is a study of the structures of the phenomena as they appear to one’s consciousness. Van Manen (2007) called phenomenology “a project of sober reflection on the lived experience of human existence” (p. 12), sober as in being free from any assumptions made by the researcher. A phenomenological researcher would withhold any judgment about the phenomena occurring in the ‘natural world’ no matter how much they believe in it (Husserl, 1962).

Two main ideas from phenomenology separate it from other forms of qualitative method: phenomenological reduction and bracketing (Giorgi, 2009; Merriam, 2002; Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological reduction refers to the exploration of a consciousness as the participant experiences it, not an interpretation of the consciousness by other individuals (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). It is designed to heighten the participants’ presence to their consciousness (Giorgi, 2009). Bracketing (or epoché) is an extension to phenomenological reduction (Giorgi, 2009), as the researcher puts aside any
prejudice in the participants’ experiences (Giorgi, 2009; Hays & Wood, 2011) and the participants’ consciousness is treated as the only absolute reality in the phenomenon (Groenewald, 2004). Hays and Wood (2011) stated that a phenomenological researcher aims to understand a phenomenon “through the eyes of those who have direct, immediate experience with it” (p. 291). In short, as noted by Moustakas (1994), phenomenology ultimately seeks to return “back to the things themselves!” (p. 26).

The lifeworld (or lived experience) represents a key term used in phenomenology that represents the essence of the phenomena (Van Manen, 1990, 2007). Giorgi (2009) referred to lifeworld as “the common everyday world into which we are all born and live” (p. 10), representing the understanding of specialized worlds in our lives (Giorgi, 2009; Van Manen, 1990).

While there are many versions of what one would consider to be a phenomenological research, this study used Giorgi’s (2009) descriptive (or transcendental) phenomenological method rooted in Husserl’s (1962, 1970) core philosophy of phenomenology and a more scientific method emphasizing sound research strategies in Giorgi’s (2009) research methodology. Husserl’s (1962) philosophy stresses on the acceptance of a transcendental phenomenological attitude during research to help the researcher refrain from the natural attitude and the practice of bracketing. Furthermore, Giorgi (2009) focused on a detailed data analysis procedure to complement Husserl’s (1970) philosophy and designed a thorough 3-step data analysis method to describe the research findings. This research used a 5-step data analysis method based on ideas developed by Giorgi (2009), Wertz (2005), and Worthen and McNeill (1996).
In this study, the researcher explored the experiences of international students studying MCFC in the United States. The focus of the study was more on how the individuals interpreted their own experiences as international students, or in Merriam’s (2002) words “the essence of the meaning of the interaction” (p. 3). Creswell (2007) described it as the subjective meaning of the experiences that are shared by individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. A phenomenological approach fits the criterion as this study focused on the lived experiences of persons in a specific phenomenon of interest (international students in the United States studying MCFC) (Kvale, 1995). According to Moustakas (1994), the goal of phenomenological approach is to elicit detailed descriptions of the participants’ lived experiences; therefore, the focus is on giving the opportunity to the participants to share their experiences and what it means to them. To achieve this, several aspects such as phenomenological reduction (continually returning to the description of phenomenon as it is according to the participants) and bracketing or epoché, that is, to abstain from using personal bias (Moustakas, 1994), were used.

The researcher’s passion and interest in understanding the experiences of international students led him to become interested in this topic of study. The researcher found that discovering the essence of what international students had made of the meaning of their experiences studying MCFC in the United States to be an important part of therapy; thus, there were many commonalities between this research topic and the phenomenological approach especially with regards to the essence of the experiences. With the use of bracketing, the researcher felt he would be able to set aside any previous
preconceived notions on this topic of interest and be able to get real insight of the phenomenon through their lenses as international students. The researcher believed phenomenology represented the research approach that would be appropriate for the topic.

**Sampling Procedures**

Giorgi (2009) has highlighted that a researcher in a phenomenological study focuses on “obtaining concrete descriptions of experiences from others who have lived through situations in which the phenomenon that the researcher is interested in have taken place” (p. 96). This research focused on the experiences of international students studying MCFC in the United States. A purposeful sampling procedure was required as only certain participants who had experienced the phenomenon would be qualified for the research (Creswell, 2008; Patton, 1990, 2002). From Patton’s (2002) description of 16 different types of purposeful sampling, the researcher selected mixed or combination purposeful sampling out of the list, which resulted in the use of more than one purposeful sampling procedures (Patton, 2002). The first purposeful sampling used was criterion sampling, which involved selecting participants who met specified criteria determined by the researcher (Patton, 1990, 2002). According to Creswell (2007), participants recruited using criterion sampling technique are selected based on their connection to the phenomenon of interest in the study (international students studying MCFC in the United States). Participants willing to be involved in the study are able to describe a rich, thick description of the phenomenon considered essential to the phenomenological research (Van Manen, 1990). The second purposeful sampling technique used was snowball
sampling, which involved the use of people who would know of other people meeting the researcher’s specified criteria for participants in the study (Patton, 2002). Snowball sampling helped the researcher in identifying more participants for the study, as faculty members or other students knew of international students in MCFC programs who could become potential participants for the study.

Although there has been no real consensus in terms of the number of participants required in a phenomenological study, Boyd (2001) has suggested that any number of participants from two to ten is considered good enough to reach a point of saturation in a phenomenological study whereas Morse (1994) has recommended that at least six participants are needed before no new themes would emerge in a qualitative study. With this in mind, the researcher interviewed seven participants for the study in order to achieve the point of saturation.

**Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

The process of identifying participants began with identifying criteria that would be important when choosing someone to be interviewed. According to Creswell (2008), among the criteria needed are participants who would have experienced the phenomenon being studied and could articulate their lived experiences clearly. Students who have completed their studies in master’s programs in marriage, couple, and family counseling were chosen to become participants of the study. The inclusionary criteria were:

1. International students who had completed their studies in a CACREP-accredited master’s level marriage, couple, and family counseling program in the United States,
2. Participants who possessed an F-1 student visa for identification as international students when they were studying,

3. Participants must be fluent in oral English,

4. Participants must be at least 21 years old,

5. Participants who were willing to be interviewed at least once for the purpose of the study, and

6. Participants who were willing to set aside two hours of time for each interview. However, the duration of the interview itself would take less than two hours.

Exclusionary criteria includes:

1. Participants who had not practiced marriage, couple, and family counseling in their home countries, and

2. Participants who were still holding students’ status (at the time of interview) in a CACREP-accredited master’s level marriage, couple, and family counseling program in the United States.

**Research Procedures**

After approval from the Kent State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) had been obtained, the researcher recruited participants for the study using three different methods. The first method involved the use of a listserv subscribed by many faculty members and counseling students (including MCFC students in CACREP-accredited programs), the Counselor Education and Supervision Network Listserv (CESNET-L) to solicit participants for the study. CESNET-L is commonly used by counseling students
to seek research participants for a study. International students who were subscribed to the listserv responded directly to the researcher by email about their willingness to participate in the study. The researcher provided basic information of the study including the purpose of the study, interview process, and the inclusion and exclusion criteria for eligibility as participants in the email.

The second method involved soliciting information through CACREP-accredited MCFC program coordinators across America. The CACREP website revealed 44 CACREP-accredited MCFC programs in the United States (as of August 2015). The researcher identified MCFC programs in the Midwest region and email/contact the program coordinators of the respective programs to solicit information on international students in their MCFC programs. The decision to release their contact information is entirely up to the program coordinators, as per the IRB’s approval. An email was sent to the international students once the program coordinators had released the information to the researcher. The researcher widened his scope and attempted to look for participants outside the Midwest region to search for more participants for the study.

The third method involved the use of snowball sampling procedure described in the sampling procedure section. Existing participants and other international students that the researcher had known were asked if they knew of anybody who would be suitable candidates for the study. They then provided the potential participants’ email addresses, and the researcher directly sent the invitation to the potential participants via email to see if they were interested in becoming participants. Those who showed interest
were sent an email that included the basic information of the study (purpose of the study, interview process, and the inclusion and exclusion criteria for eligibility as participants).

International students who were interested in becoming participants would respond directly to the researcher by email. Prospective participants were contacted via email to inform them that they were being considered as participants and asked questions relating to their demographic information. A consent information form (more information about this is explained in Step 1 of data collection process) was also attached in the email. The researcher selected participants according to the predetermined criteria for the research and time availability. Shortlisted participants were notified via email, and proposed times on availability for interviews were discussed through further emails. After interview times had been set, the researcher interviewed the participants via Skype. Face-to-face interview was conducted with one participant who lived in Malaysia.

Ethical considerations were adhered to throughout the research process. Besides written informed consent, verbal consent was obtained to ensure that participants had understood the purpose of the study. The researcher provided participants with total control over their right to participate in the study. Participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any given time. However, none of the participants in the study had withdrawn from the study. The participants’ names were replaced with pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. All audio (mp3) and visual (Skype) recordings were kept safe in the researcher’s laptop, which was protected with a private password. All audiotape (mp3) and visual (Skype) recordings were deleted after completion of data analysis and all printed transcripts were shredded to maintain confidentiality.
Data Collection Procedures

The researcher played an important role as the primary instrument in the data collection process (Merriam, 2002). Figure 1 illustrates an overview of the data collection process which consists of four steps: (a) recruitment process, (b) phenomenological interviews, (c) transcribing, and (d) data saturation. An in-depth discussion of the data collection process and the role of the researcher in each of the steps are made in this section.

Figure 1. Data collection

Step 1: Recruitment Process

The data collection process started with the researcher contacting international students who had indicated their interest in becoming participants in the research via email. The researcher sent an email with the following information and forms:

(a) inclusion and exclusion criteria for the research, (b) purpose of the study, (c) information about the research (length of interview, confidentiality), and
(d) demographic information form (see Appendix B and Appendix E). Participants filled in the demographic form and emailed it back to the researcher, and went through the other information to gain more understanding about the research.

Participants could contact the researcher via email or telephone if they needed any further clarification or information about the research. Selected participants were contacted to inform them that they had been chosen as participants for the study. Participants who agreed to become participants filled out the research consent form (see Appendix C and Appendix D) and sent back the PDF or scanned version electronically via email to the researcher. An email was sent to participants to discuss scheduling hours for interviews.

**Step 2: Phenomenological Interview**

Interviews were the major source of data in qualitative research (Merriam, 2002). Rubin and Rubin (2012) have noted that “qualitative interviewers listen to hear the meaning of what interviewees tell them” (p. 6). Groenewald (2004) recommended phenomenologists to conduct unstructured in-depth interviews with the participants, focusing on “what goes on within” (feelings and beliefs) and encouraging them to describe the lifeworld that is free from any intellectual or societal constructs. Groenewald described the interview process as being a “dialogue” between the researcher and the participant (2004, p. 13).

The length of the interview and amount of questions asked were dependent on the participants (Groenewald, 2004). For this study, the researcher has done one in-depth phenomenological interview with the participants. The length of the interview differed
between participants, contingent on the experiences they were willing to share. The shortest interview conducted was 75 minutes, while the longest interview conducted was in 87 minutes.

For the research, a semi-structured format using open-ended questions was chosen to help participants articulate a thick description of the phenomenon (Langdridge, 2007). In a semi-structured interview, limited sets of questions were asked by the researcher to probe a specific topic, with follow-up questions used to probe deeper (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Giorgi (2009) stated that a basic question in phenomenology should follow this form: “Please describe for me a situation in which you experienced learning (or anything else)” (p. 124). The interview questions were designed to follow this form (see Appendix F for interview guide).

Step 3: Transcribing

The researcher transcribed interviews verbatim immediately after an interview was conducted, following the suggestion made by Rubin and Rubin (2012) that transcribing “should be done as soon as the interview is finished” (p. 101). This was done to help the researcher remember things said that may not be clear in the audio recording (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The audio recording played a vital role in transcribing, and was recorded using an app on the researcher’s laptop. Transcribing was done using Microsoft® Word for Mac 2011. To ensure accuracy, the entire audio recording was frequently listened to by continuously rewinding and forwarding the audio file on the researcher’s laptop. After completion of transcription, the researcher read and
re-read the transcripts to ensure immersion to the participants’ perspective of their experiences as international students.

**Step 4: Data Saturation**

Saturation, or redundancy derived from the data, involves critical reflection by the researcher based on the research goals and the value of the data collected (Wertz, 2005). The best indicator for data saturation is when a researcher is presented with the same redundant themes or meaning units from the participants and the data would not offer newer insight into the phenomena (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Merriam, 2002). For the purpose of the study, the researcher interviewed six participants when he noticed that some of the phenomenon shared was repeated from previous participants. An extra participant was interviewed to ensure data saturation was achieved, making it a total of seven participants interviewed for the purpose of the study.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

Data analysis was done manually by reading and re-reading transcripts multiple times before immersion of the experience was developed by the researcher. Giorgi (2009) stated transcripts help make the data analysis process easier and make sharing the results of the study with readers less complicated. Interviews were transcribed verbatim immediately after each interview had been conducted. In phenomenology, data analysis consisted of listening and reading the interviews repeatedly. The transcript was also used to identify the meaning units, which was used later in the data analysis process (Wertz, 2005).
Data analysis procedure for this study followed a phenomenological data analysis procedure based on literature by Giorgi (2009), Wertz (2005), and Worthen and McNeill (1996). Worthen and McNeill’s approach is a modified version of Giorgi’s (1989) transcript analysis method, while Giorgi’s (2009) method represents a more contemporary description of Giorgi’s (1989) data analysis method. Wertz (2005) and Worthen and McNeill (1996) present their analysis based on a two-tier process of analysing the individual interview first before analysing the commonalities among the individual meaning units, a process that the researcher followed when conducting this study. Figure 2 provided an overview of the whole process, consisting of five steps. The five steps were: (a) read for the sense of the world, (b) determination of meaning units, (c) defining relevant and psychologically explicit meaning, (d) compilation of meaning unites, and (e) the summary of the general meaning structure of the experiences.

**Step One: Read for Sense of the World**

The first step refers to the process of repeatedly reading all transcripts to get the whole meaning of the participants’ experiences. The whole point of this step was to “get a sense of the entire description” by going through the whole transcript individual by individual (Giorgi, 2009, p. 128). Patton (2002) has stated that data in qualitative research are often long and tedious; therefore it is important for a qualitative researcher to understand the individual experiences before analyzing the data further. The whole transcript was read without taking into consideration the research focus to help the researcher understand the participants’ experiences and its meaning in a wider context (Wertz, 2005).
Another important aspect in this step was the attitude displayed by the researcher, which refers to the researcher’s empathetic understanding of the participants’ experiences and situations (Wertz, 2005). The researcher did not apply any judgment on the values displayed by the participants, but instead focused purely on understanding the meaning of the experiences (Wertz, 2005). The researcher applied phenomenological epoché in employing zero value judgment (Giorgi, 2009; Wertz, 2005).

Figure 2. Data analysis procedures
According to Giorgi (2009), the main difference between phenomenology and other approaches in qualitative research is the use of phenomenological reduction during the process that allows the researcher to have a certain degree of flexibility while reading through the transcript. The researcher focused on the phenomena while reading through the description experienced by the participants. In this process, the researcher started to identify various meaning units in the whole description. However, meaning units were not identified as of yet, but were “simply observed” in this step (Giorgi, 2009, p. 129). Worthen and McNeill (1996) recommended each individual interview transcript be read at least three or four times before commencing further with the data analysis process.

**Step Two: Determination of Meaning Units**

Because the descriptions taken from the transcripts would be too long, it was necessary to break them into smaller parts where its meaning would be more easily understood (Giorgi, 2009). Hence, in this step, the focus was to create some “units of meaning” that would be psychologically sensitive from the perspective of the study (Giorgi, 2009). The process started off by identifying any meaning units or shifts in the experiences that were relevant to the focus of the study (Worthen & McNeill, 1996). Wertz (2005) called this process “analyzing individual descriptions” (p. 172). The main difference in identifying meaning units in phenomenological research when compared with other qualitative research is that the process not only focused on the explicit meanings shared by the participants but also delved deep into the implicit meanings (Wertz, 2005). The process is also very arbitrary in nature, and different researcher could identify different meaning units (Giorgi, 2009). However, this is not seen as a weakness
in phenomenological research as the process of transforming meaning units and how it is related to the phenomenon is more important (Giorgi, 2009).

To identify meaning units, each shift in the meaning that had been identified by the researcher would be marked by a slash (underlined) on the transcribed interview sheet (Worthen & McNeill, 1996). By the end of the step, the descriptions marked could be broken down to various statements of meaning units that were experientially determined by the researcher rather than being definitive meaning units (Giorgi, 2009).

**Step Three: The Essence of the Experiences**

In this step, the meaning units that were identified would be checked for their relevance to the focus of the study (Worthen & McNeill, 1996). Any meaning units that were found to be irrelevant or redundant to the focus of the study would be discarded or grammatically rephrased to better express what the participants meant (Worthen & McNeill, 1996). After this was completed, the integration and articulation of the meaning units were done by the researcher. This process refers to the attempt made by the researcher to translate the participants’ unanalysed meaning units into psychologically relevant meaning units (Worthen & McNeill, 1996). In other words, the terminology used would better reflect the meaning in a more psychological language based on the meaning explicitly and implicitly derived from the participants.

Because of the interpretive nature of the process, peer review became a necessary component in making sure the researcher would correctly interpret the experiences. The peer reviewer would examine a transcript in the study to study the accuracy of the researcher’s interpretation of experiences shared by participants in the study. After that, a
final set of meaning units that reflected the central themes would be finalized into their most “distilled and concise form” (Worthen & McNeill, 1996, p. 27). This step would generally take a long time to process and could not be resolved quickly; thus, several different themes may be written before the desired expression for each individual would be accurately realized (Giorgi, 2009).

**Step Four: Compilation of Meaning Units (Group Analyses)**

This step is the start of the process to look at the similarities and differences between the individual meaning units between all participants and comparing them (Worthen & McNeill, 1996). All shared experiences were identified and compiled when two or more participants shared the same identified themes or meaning units. By the end of the process, only the shared experiences that were shared collectively by the majority of the participants would be kept as the themes for the study.

As Wertz (2005) has put it, “anything that can be ‘verified’ in more than one instance is to some extent ‘general’ ” (p. 173). If there were two or more similar meaning units, it could be assumed that the units could be considered general meaning units and themes for the research, but this may not be true for all cases (Wertz, 2005). Since there were seven participants, as a rule of thumb, at least four shared meaning units among participants would be needed to qualify as a sub-theme for the study.

**Step Five: General Meaning Structure of the Experience**

In this final step, full narrative descriptions for the shared experiences were generated by the researcher based on ideas developed by Worthen and McNeill (1996). This was done based on the shared experiences generated by the individual meaning units.
identified in Step Three and Step Four. The narrative description design would be sequential in nature to better illustrate their lived experiences as international students in the United States. The final description provided a narrative account of the consolidated themes based on the experiences of all seven participants in the study.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is a practice of persuading the researcher and readers that findings generated from the qualitative study are worthy findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In a quantitative study, this refers to the validity of a study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that there are four inquiries that would be useful in trustworthiness: (a) “truth value”—confidence that the study represents the ‘truth’ according to the participant own context, (b) “applicability”—the extent to which the findings represent its applicability for different participants or contexts, (c) “consistency”—the findings of the study would be repeated within the same context or participants, and (d) “neutrality”—the extent to which the findings are free from any biases, perspectives, or motivations of the researcher (p. 290). However, there is still no definitive guide on the amount of trustworthiness techniques needed to ascertain a study’s trustworthiness level. As noted by Collins and Collins (1998), “perhaps the day will arrive when someone will find or coin qualitative research's appropriate equivalent for ‘validity’” (p. 9). The consensus seems to be that more trustworthiness techniques being used promises better credibility level in a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For the purpose of the study, the researcher used four different trustworthiness techniques to improve the credibility of the findings:
(a) bracketing, (b) reflective journals, (c) peer review, and (d) thick description of the phenomenon.

**Bracketing**

Bracketing (or epoché) is the process of allowing a phenomenon to be understood in its own context, not from a biased perspective imposed by the researcher to influence the research findings (Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2002). Various authors such as Giorgi (2009) and Schram (2006) have suggested the importance of remaining subjective from being influenced by biasness and personal experience to increase trustworthiness.

According to Giorgi (2009), bracketing is not focused on forgetting past experiences but rather not letting the researcher’s past experiences become engaged with the present experiences of the participants. In this overview of the bracketing process, the researcher would discuss his personal background and life experiences, how these affected his subjectivity, and how he bracketed his personal beliefs about the research topic.

The researcher was a doctoral candidate at the Counselor Education and Supervision program at Kent State University. He was an international student from Malaysia and had been in the United States for the past three and a half years on an F-1 student visa. He lived in Northeast Ohio for three and a half years before moving back to Malaysia in the July 2016. The researcher’s areas of research interest included multicultural counseling with international students, gerontological counseling, and marriage and family therapy. The researcher was on a government scholarship from the Ministry of Education, Malaysia, and a full-time student at Kent State University. He
would be seeking a position as a counselor educator in Malaysia after completing his doctoral studies.

The researcher became interested in this topic after being a student in the doctoral program for two years. One of the more fascinating ideas for the research arose when he attended a coursework in marriage and family therapy for a semester in Spring 2014. The researcher found it difficult to study the course since most of the theories and techniques are from a Western perspective, with little consideration given to the multicultural aspect of MCFC. This provided the researcher with the idea to do a study on the experiences of international students in an MCFC program as he felt that it would be a struggle for them to attend such program.

It was clear to the researcher that there were some personal investments being made on the topic of international students that could potentially lead to biasness. Descriptive phenomenology was used to alleviate any potential biasness because the focus on phenomenological reduction would help the researcher to bracket his own consciousness and experiences regarding the research topic.

**Reflective Journals**

Reflective journals refers to a diary written by a qualitative researcher on a daily basis to record information that could inform a researcher’s self and method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The self refers to a personal diary to be used by the researcher for reflection and clarity, while method refers to methodological decisions and changes made by the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Groenewald (2004) called this “memoing” in his phenomenological research, and it involves collecting field notes of whatever the
researcher sees or experiences in the study to gain better perspective on the research process. Lincoln and Guba (1985) have noted that reflective journals represent a “broad-ranging application” that could improve all areas of trustworthiness in all qualitative research (p. 327). For the researcher, reflective journaling was used to document his own thoughts and feelings about the experiences of interviewing participants. It helped the researcher to remember key points of each interview and keep track of all their experiences. Keeping a journal helped the researcher to keep track of any potential biases that could arise, which helped in the bracketing process. The reflective journal was dated to help the researcher correlate the reflective journal to the data collected (Groenewald, 2004).

**Peer Review**

Peer review (or peer debriefing) is another commonly used method in establishing the credibility of a qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), peer review refers to a “process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirers mind” (p. 308). In this study, the researcher selected a doctoral student from the Department of Counselor Education and Supervision, Kent State University to act as the peer reviewer in the study. The peer reviewer examined one of the transcripts in the study to check the accuracy of the researcher’s interpretation of the narratives provided by the participant. The coding process and the themes derived from the experiences of the participants were
important markers to review the accuracy of the interpretation being made by the researcher.

**Thick Description of the Phenomenon**

Transferability refers to the applicability of research findings in another similar setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Providing a rich, thick description of a phenomenon has been considered to be a major strategy in improving a study’s transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002). A thick description becomes “necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316). In other words, it is up to the readers to make a judgment about the transferability of a study based on the same settings shared by two different studies (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2002; Rolfe, 2006).

To ensure transferability, the researcher used three strategies. The first strategy was the use of an open-ended phenomenological interview format to ensure a thick, rich description of the phenomenon. The second strategy involved the use of verbatim quotes in Chapter 3 based on themes that were relevant to the study. By using both strategies, it is hoped that readers could be able to transfer the findings of the study to other similar settings and ensure the transferability of the findings. The third strategy was prolonged engagement in the phenomena. According to Merriam (2009), prolonged engagement is achieved in qualitative research by interviewing participants until data saturation on the emerging themes is achieved. The researcher continually interviewed participants until no new themes emerged after his interview with the seventh participant in the study.
Summary of Chapter 2

The chapter focused on an in-depth description of the phenomenological research design for the study. The chapter presents an overview of phenomenological research, specifically the use of descriptive phenomenology based on Giorgi’s (2009) research framework. It also described the use of criterion sampling procedure for the study and a detailed description of the data collection procedures. The chapter ends with a detailed look at the data analysis procedures and methods used to ascertain trustworthiness and credibility of the study.
CHAPTER III

RESULTS

This chapter reports the results of the study on the experiences of international master’s students in MCFC program in the United States to gain insights on: (a) the challenges and struggles of studying MCFC in a different culture, (b) ways of adaptation to the challenges experienced, and (c) the applicability of MCFC knowledge in their own countries of origin.

The phenomenon of interest, international students in CACREP-accredited MCFC programs in the United States was revealed using a phenomenological research analysis. First, meaning units were determined by looking at all relevant experiences provided by participants. The meaning units were compiled into groups and relevant meaning units shared by all participants were compiled into themes. Data analysis revealed three main themes: (a) overcoming learning challenges and obstacles in the United States, (b) gaining sense of belongingness in the adjustment phase, and (c) making meaningful changes to MCFC practice in their country of origin.

Participants

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of international students in MCFC programs in the United States and gain insights on: (a) the learning experiences of international students in studying MCFC in a different culture, (b) ways of adaptation to the learning process, and (c) the applicability of MCFC knowledge in their own countries of origin. Seven participants were chosen in order to study the phenomenon of interest. Participants in the study were students in a master’s-level...
CACREP-accredited MCFC program and had graduated from their respective programs between 2009 and 2014. The participants’ age ranged from 28 to 42 years old when they were interviewed. Five of the participants were female, while two were male. Three of the participants were international students from Malaysia, and four participants came from other Asian countries, one each from China, Japan, Singapore and South Korea. Four of the participants were full-time family counseling practitioners in their respective countries, while three others were academicians. One participant was pursuing her PhD in Counselor Education and Supervision in the United States. Participants were interviewed from the period between June 2016 and October 2016.

Participants were chosen through the criterion sampling procedure. The chosen participants had met the inclusionary and exclusionary criteria set by the researcher, which included having marriage, couple and family counseling experience in their respective home countries. Table 2 summarizes the participants’ demographic information, while Table 3 summarizes their family counseling background.

**Audrey**

Audrey was a 31-year-old Malaysian female who is currently a counselor at a private practice in Malaysia. Audrey studied in a CACREP-accredited master’s program in Marital, Couples, and Family Counseling from 2011 until 2014. Audrey had opened her own family counseling clinic for almost a year, and reported that she enjoyed the challenge of operating a counseling clinic. She stated that her counseling service was doing “well so far”. Audrey admitted that she had initially struggled to find a job after
Table 2

Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Graduation Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audrey</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farah</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

coming back from the United States, but was “happy” since opening her own counseling practice.

Audrey reported great experiences while studying in the United States, stating that it was a “really beautiful place”. Audrey related that having “many” Malaysian students in her college helped her in adapting to college life. Audrey mentioned having a close Malaysian female friend in her college as being “very important” as she was used to having somebody to talk to. Audrey revealed that she had been struggling with speaking and conversing in English initially, but eventually managed to overcome this after improving her command of the language and was able to understand her American friends’ accent.
Table 3

Participants’ Family Counseling Experience Background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Practice Location</th>
<th>Counseling Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audrey</td>
<td>Private practice</td>
<td>2015-current</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>Government counseling center</td>
<td>Part time basis since 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>Private practice</td>
<td>2014-current</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>Private practice</td>
<td>Part-time basis during the weekend 2013-2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>Local counseling service</td>
<td>2011-current</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farah</td>
<td>Counseling center</td>
<td>2015-current</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>Psychology service center</td>
<td>2014-current</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Audrey reported her initial learning experiences as being “stressful”. Audrey commented that she had struggled with the different learning styles, and just mainly listened in the first semester of attending classes. Audrey reported going to internship as the best learning experience that she had, as it allowed her to practice counseling “in a different culture”.

Audrey stated that she befriended other Malaysian students and international students during her time there. Being a Muslim wearing a *hijab* (Muslim female headscarf), Audrey noticed that people were looking at her differently especially when she was outside of campus: “That, maybe because I wear *hijab*, sometimes I get, you know, looks. People look at me, how I say, different, especially when I am outside
campus. On campus, there are other Muslims. So, people don’t look at you (me) much. But, outside campus, it’s different. But, you know, I get used to it”.

Audrey shared her struggles in finding a job when she had first arrived back from the United States. She emphasized on the importance of making proper adjustments when doing counseling in Malaysia, as the counseling practices differ. For example, clients would see counselors as “strangers” in Malaysia; therefore, it would be important to earn their trust. Audrey reiterated the importance of supervision, as she viewed supervision as an aspect not taken seriously in Malaysia. Audrey also added that the collectivistic community in Malaysia would require “better adaptations” to counseling theories for use in Malaysia.

Bella

Bella was a 38-year-old female lecturer at a public university in Malaysia. Bella had been teaching at the university for nine years, and was currently on a paid-leave to pursue her PhD at a local university. Bella studied for her Master of Science in Counseling, specializing in Marriage, Couple and Family Counseling from 2008 until 2011. Bella had practiced family counseling on a part-time basis at a local government-owned counseling services center several years ago.

Bella mentioned that she enjoyed her experiences of studying MCFC in the United States, calling it a “privilege”. According to Bella, well-structured assignments and better use of teaching time were the main differences between the education system in Malaysia and that of the United States. Bella expressed her dissatisfaction with the transferability of the learning content, as theoretical application was limited. Bella also
expressed her dislike of being away from home, as she had enjoyed a close relationship with her family in Malaysia who relied on her for monetary and moral support. Bella mentioned about the difficulty in getting used to the culture in the United States, including the different learning styles and language.

Bella revealed that she was close to her Malaysian friends when she had first started her master’s program, but closer to an American friend after her friends went home following the completion of their studies. Bella described one of her American friends as her “main support”: “She (American friend) was fascinated by people coming to the U.S. to study, would ask me questions all the time, about Malaysia. She (American friend) is not used (does not have knowledge about) to Malaysia, so (she has) have many questions. And, she’s respectful. Not many Americans like her, so made it easier to be close to her”.

According to Bella, doing counseling in Malaysia would be different from the practice in the United States, citing Malaysia as being a more “traditional” culture. For example, seeing a counselor in Malaysia would be seen as “embarrassing”, while counseling would be more of a norm in the United States. Bella mentioned about Malaysian clients seeking advice, confusing counseling as an advice-giving helping process. In transitioning to Malaysia, Bella changed the theories to fit the Malaysian culture, for example using more result-oriented questioning process during counseling. Bella stated that her supervisor helped her in working with many of her counseling cases, citing her as a key figure in her master’s program.
Carol was a 35-year-old counselor who worked at a private counseling practice in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia. She started her MCFC practice at the agency in 2014, and had been working there for almost two years. She received her Master of Science in Marriage and Family Therapy in 2014. Carol cited the high quality counselor education program in the United States as the reason she had chosen to study MCFC in a CACREP-accredited counseling program.

To Carol, the United States would be a good country which had given her a sense of freedom that she had not experienced in Malaysia. Carol did not like the “racism” aspect of life in the United States, stating that she was given the “looks” by Americans for reasons unknown to her. Carol revealed that the life had been “scary” during her first few months as she tried to adapt to life in the United States: “The first few months of my experience was kind of like scary because, because I tried to force myself living there and at the same time adapt. You know, adapt my learning styles over because over there they like to talk a lot in class, so I also want them to hear me talk too, you know. Get your experience, share your thoughts and all that sort of things. I was not comfortable to do that at first, but I was like I worked so hard to get to the US, so yeah, so it took me like at least 5 to 6 months just to get used to that learning style”. She described her adaptation to the learning style as a “long process”, but felt “more calm” after the first six months. Carol admitted that seeking counseling did help her in adapting to life in the United States when she had first arrived in the country. Carol emphasized that her friends among international students helped her cope with life in the United States, and helped
her in academic and personal aspects of life. However, Carol also mentioned that she was close to some American friends and they helped her to understand the American culture through that friendship.

Carol expressed her joy to be back in Malaysia, stating that she was back “where I belong”. She emphasized on the importance of adapting to the counseling practices and theories that she learned during her master’s program, particularly the language used (using simpler words in her sessions), spirituality, and the collectivistic culture in Malaysia. Carol mentioned that the individual person was more important in her MCFC practice in the United States, but the collectivistic goal for the family would be more important in her practices in Malaysia. Carol added that she had to “reread everything” that she learned in the United States to get a different perspective on how to practice in Malaysia. Carol reported some stereotypes usually associated with counseling in Malaysia: “Here, it’s different because when people want to see me, there are stereotypes attached to it. Like, there are rules, if you come to see me, it means your marriage is in trouble”. Carol summed up her entire American experience as being “challenging, but fun”, and helped her to become “more aware of what I’m doing (referring to her counseling practice)”.

**Donna**

Donna was a 33-year-old South Korean doctoral student at a public university in the United States. Donna studied for her Master of Arts in Marriage and Family Counseling from 2010 until 2013. Donna was a faculty member at a private university in
Seoul, South Korea. Donna started her doctoral studies in 2015, and would be expected to finish her studies in 2019.

Donna talked about great experiences while doing her master’s in the United States, stating that her advisors were helpful while her classmates were patient in helping her blend into the program. Donna emphasized that she felt “left out” at times as she did not have any good friends in class. Donna reported enjoying the campus life, and that she had close friends outside of class. She revealed that she had struggled with adapting to the learning environment during the first few months, especially with language and her lack of confidence. Donna admitted that situation eventually improved when she felt more “settled” in the United States (having more Korean friends and living in a better apartment).

Donna reported her adaptation was difficult because she had to make big changes in her life: “Since, it involves moving to a new country. I have to adapt make changes, forced to make the changes. You know, learning and doing new things. Challenging to make changes, when in Korea it was easy because my family is there, and have friends there”. Donna stated her close friend was a South Korean student who shared many similar interests with her (e.g., watching Korean drama).

Donna mentioned that moving back to South Korea was an “adjustment” as she was more used to the American culture after spending a few years there. Donna emphasized the difference in culture as the biggest change between MCFC practice in South Korea and the United States, for example, the respect for elderly women in South Korea. In the United States, Donna felt that the counseling practices were more similar,
but in South Korea understanding the unique family dynamic would be more important as families were more “traditional” in their thinking. For example, parents hold an important influence in their children’s life when compared to the United States.

**Eric**

Eric was a 34-year-old family counselor in Singapore, practicing counseling at a local counseling agency since 2011. Eric did his Master of Education in Marriage and Family Counseling in the United States from 2008 until he graduated in 2011. Besides his counseling practice, he also taught marriage counseling and couples counseling on a part-time basis at a local university since 2013.

Eric viewed the United States as a “great country” and found Americans “friendly and hardworking”. Eric stated that he wanted to pursue his master’s in MCFC because he felt that mental health services in Singapore could be further improved. He was joined by his wife and two children while living in the United States. Eric mentioned that the learning culture, especially the interactive nature of the class in the United States as something he “enjoys”. He was the only participant who spoke English as a first language and did not struggle with the language. Eric added that: “That helped me, as I can see many international students, especially those other Asian countries, would struggle with it. In that regard, I would say I am lucky as communication is not a concern”.

Eric found the adaptation process to living in the United States as “challenging”, so he decided to arrive early to make advanced preparations. Eric shared that he had more American friends because there were not many Singaporean students in the college
he attended. Eric focused on befriending other couples with children so that his children could interact with other children. Eric cited his family as his main support system, and gave him the “extra motivation” to finish his studies. He shared specific racist experiences during his time in the United States, stating that some of his classmates were racist and made stereotypical assumptions about him because of his race and nationality.

Eric admitted that living in a different culture for a prolonged period of time had given him perspective about life. Eric noted that he had taken positive traits which he had seen in Americans such as their willingness to help others. Eric reported he did not make any initial changes to his counseling practices, but soon realized that some of his counseling practices learned in the United States were not transferable to Singapore. Eric stated that he focused on using fast, problem solving methods while practicing in Singapore as his clients preferred it. He realized that people in the United States were more willing to participate in counseling and willing to see changes in a longer run when compared to Singaporeans. Eric admitted of having to be more practical in applying the theories, for example, the use of direct techniques such as scaling questions. Eric looked positively at his training experiences in the United States, stating that it had provided him with “proper foundations” for his MCFC practice.

**Farah**

Farah was a 28–year-old family counselor and research assistant at a local university in Beijing, China. Farah started her Master of Science program in Marriage, Couple, and Family Counseling in 2012, and finished her studies in 2015. Farah was planning to start her doctoral studies at a local university in 2017. Farah practiced family
counseling and other counseling services including individual counseling at a
government-run counseling center.

Farah stated that the United States was a nice place to stay and had always wanted
to travel there. Farah noted that she was unsure about what to expect from her master’s
program in the United States which made her feel uncomfortable. When she had first
arrived in the United States, Farah experienced communication issues (English language
use) and felt her professors did not help her enough. Farah admitted of having to
persevere through the issues and challenged herself by becoming more social with her
classmates and speaking up in class. Farah noted her experience learning in class as
being her best learning experience.

Farah reported feeling homesick as she was close to her parents. She said that she
relied a lot on her parents, and her experience in the United States had helped her become
more independent with her life. Farah revealed that she was close to other Chinese
students as she shared the same language and culture with them. Her best friend was
another Chinese student who helped her a lot in adapting to life in the United States.
Farah reported several cultural shocks, which included lack of understanding of race
relations in the United States and the learning culture.

Farah revealed that she felt happy when she arrived back in China, but missed the
relaxed life in the United States as opposed to the chaotic life in Beijing. Farah noted that
she became a better counselor when she came back from her master’s program. Farah
observed a major difference in practicing MCFC in China as clients preferred counselors
to play an expert role in counseling. Farah stated that she started using a more direct
approach and offered suggestions to some of her clients’ issues because of the demand from her clients. According to Farah, her family counseling approach with parents was done in a more respectful manner as she needed to respect their position as parents. She also described herself as being a more “professional” counselor after her master’s program as she used proper MCFC techniques as opposed to her previous practice of using traditional Chinese methods (e.g., qigong).

George

George was a 42-year-old psychology professor at a local university in Osaka, Japan. He started his Master of Education program in Couples, Marriage and Family Counseling in August 2010 until May 2013. George had two master’s degree, one from the United States and another from a Japanese university, and a PhD from a university in Japan. He had been teaching at a counseling psychology program in Japan for ten years and teaching family therapy since his graduation from the CACREP-accredited master’s program in the United States. George stated that he practiced family counseling at a “local psychology practice” since 2014.

To George, it had always been his dream to study in the United States and he had visited the country as a tourist. George viewed the United States as being different from Japan in its “culture” and “people”. George enjoyed living in a small college town setting, which was a big departure from the big city life in Osaka, Japan. George emphasized that his English skills were good, but admitted some language issues especially in written English. George revealed that he had been struggling in adjusting to
life in the United States initially. After the initial struggle, George made adjustments to his learning strategy by doing assignments earlier and getting help from his classmates.

George reported his adaptation process as being “not bad”. He had close relationships with his Japanese and international students during his master’s program. To George, his family was a strong support system for him and he admitted that he had struggled in the first semester partly because his family had not been with him. George was a family-oriented person and missed his parents and brother in Japan.

George reported of having to change the way he applied MCFC in Japan. For example, using less systems theory and relying more on structural theory that focuses more on family relationships. He mentioned that the Japanese culture was distinctly different to America which made changes to the counseling practice become necessary. For example, Japanese people are not as expressive as Americans, but that does not mean that they do not care about a particular issue. George admitted that learning counseling in the United States had let him to have an open mind on seeing things from a different perspective than previously as he would practice counseling or therapy from a Japanese perspective. It has led him to consider using different approaches when doing counseling in Japan.

**Summary of Participants**

Participants chosen for the study had experience as international students in a MCFC program in the United States. Participants were contacted directly by the researcher, and were asked about their willingness to be participants in the study. Participants had shown great effort in making the data collection process smooth, and
articulated their experiences during the interview process. Data analysis indicated many similar experiences being shared by participants in the study, which helped in determining data saturation during the data analysis phase. The data based on interviews conducted with participants were categorized into three main themes and are discussed in–depth in this chapter.

**International Students’ Experiences in a MCFC Program**

This study used Giorgi’s (2009) descriptive (or transcendental) phenomenological method that is rooted in Husserl’s (1962, 1970) core philosophy of phenomenology. This study focused on how individuals interpreted their own experiences as an international student and what the experiences meant to them. A phenomenological approach fits the criteria for the study (international students in the United States studying MCFC).

The research question for the study was: What are the reflections of the experiences of international students in a CACREP-accredited marriage, couple and family counseling (MCFC) program in the United States, and how do the experiences inform their MCFC practice in their country of origin?. The sub-questions of interest included: (a) What are the learning experiences of international students in a CACREP-accredited marriage, couple, and family counseling program in the United States?, (b) What adaptation occurs in the learning process for international students in a CACREP-accredited marriage, couple, and family counseling program in the United States?, and (c) What similarities and disparities do international students experience in their MCFC practices in the United States and in their country of origin, and how do they resolve that in their MCFC practice in their countries of origin?.
The experiences of the phenomenon were derived by using a phenomenological approach to data analysis described by Giorgi (2009), Wertz (2005), and Worthen and McNeill (1996). A compilation of meaning units derived from individual participants created a meaning structure or general understanding of the phenomenon. Three main themes were derived from the process. The three main themes were: (a) Overcoming Learning Challenges and Obstacles, (b) Gaining Sense of Belongingness, and (c) Making Meaningful Changes to MCFC Practice. Participants also shared various first-hand accounts of their experiences as international students in MCFC programs. These were further organized into nine subthemes from the original three main themes of the study.

**Theme 1: Overcoming Learning Challenges and Obstacles**

The findings of the study have emphasized the unique learning experiences experienced by MCFC international students. The themes exploring learning experiences have shown that participants go through positive and negative experiences in their respective programs. Participants experienced a difficult adjustment period, which included a new environment, different learning styles and English difficulties. One main experience shared was the struggles experienced as they made adjustments to living in the United States. Participants were able to overcome the struggles through sheer will and motivation. Participants felt at ease with the learning environment after they had managed to overcome their initial struggles, feeling at home in their adopted home.

Seven meaning units were developed in data analysis: language difficulty, adjustment to academic life, different learning environment, being positive with challenges, confidence issue, introspection of life, and comfort level. Two of the
meaning units, confidence issue and introspection, were removed because they were redundant with other meaning units (being positive with challenges and comfort level). The five accepted meaning units were categorized under two sub-themes: (a) Unique New Learning Environment, and (b) Overcoming Obstacles.

**Unique New Learning Environment**

Being in the United States was a new environment for all but one of the participants. For Audrey, Bella, Carol, Donna, Eric, and Farah, this was the first time that they had arrived in the United States and had shared their experiences of being in a new environment. For them, while the experience of adjustment to the United States was difficult, they appreciated being in the United States because of its unique environment. For Carol, it was a unique experience for her as it was culturally different to her country of origin. Carol, a Malaysian, came from a collectivistic culture, and stated that being in the United States had given her a sense of freedom and individualism that she had not experienced in Malaysia before. She described the experience in details:

Carol: The United States is a good country. You know, you could be anything that you want. So, that is what I like the most.

I could do anything I want as long as I don’t harm other people. Without, you know, when you do things that you want, you do not have to think about the perspective of the community. And, the people in the America, they are people who likes to encourage other people to be themselves.
Malaysia is more about living in community, you know. Not try to stand out, but to live like others, you know. Like, dressing and everything, not be too loud. But in the United Stated, it’s ok to be yourself.

Participants mentioned that being away from family was a challenge for them, as they were very close to their family members. For example, Bella who was the eldest sibling in her family shared that it was hard for her to be away from her family members as she has a “responsibility” to take care of her parents and siblings. Farah shared that she was close to her parents, especially her mother, and that it was “difficult” for her to be away from them. Audrey described the United States as being “different” than her home country, Malaysia. Eric, who described himself as a well-travelled person, stated that he was surprised to find the United States to be a more “conservative” than Europe and found mental health services in the United States to be more advanced that his home country, Singapore.

This section described the unique new environment that the participants were living in which made their learning experiences difficult. The influence of the new environment is discussed further in the following three sections, which discusses: adjustment to new environment, adjustment to different learning environment, and adjustment to using a different language.

**Difficult adjustment to the environment.** For participants, while the degree of difficulty varies, all agreed that it was a difficult adjustment experience for them. Participants stated that the alien nature of being in a culturally different country made the process difficult. For Bella, a Malaysian with minimal international exposure, she found
that she was “confused” when she had first arrived in the United States as she did not have a lot of experiences abroad before arriving.

Bella: …Confused, for me. It was new. I mean, I have only been to Australia before this, you know. In terms of English country. Not many experience out of Malaysia. Confusing. Like, how do I call home? It was harder back in 2008, no smartphones. My parents’ home, you know, no internet. So, hard to keep in touch. With family, friends back home. Now, maybe easier for many international students. But, before this, no.

For Donna, her time studying in South Korea had always been focused on getting good results during examination. She called her adjustment period “exhausting”: “When you start studying, we have to do many things. I buy a car, so I have to get driver’s license, I have to find a car, find better apartment, find friends, find better food. And also learn to speak more English. Because of everything, hard for me to focus on study during that fall semester. It was…(pause)…exhausting, many things I have to do”.

Farah related several stories about her struggles. One that she shared was the “awkward” experience she had when she was in her first class as she tried to communicate with others around her. Her sense of frustration has led her to feel “alone” at times:

Farah: During first semester is Fall 2008. First class, meeting other students, was, what is it, strange. Or, awkward. You know, I don’t speak English well, and they also don’t understand what I say. So, difficult, yes. No other international
students in class, so difficult. And, my professors, also not helping me. Some helpful but not all. I feel like alone, you know, at times.

**Different learning environment.** Participants mentioned the big difference between the learning environment in their home country and in the United States. Eric was surprised with the class environment, especially with how students conducted themselves in class. Audrey, Carol and Donna struggled with the different learning cultures and styles in the United States. Audrey stated that she had to change herself by becoming more expressive and “talkative” in class. Audrey mentioned that her professors had been helpful to her: “I was the only international student, so it was difficult when there are no other who are like me in the program. Like, for example, there was this one time when I didn’t do so well in one of my assignments. So, before the class starts, he would ask me to talk to him outside of class, and suggest ways for me to improve the assignment. So, he gave me time to improve the assignment, which I think is fair since I not sure about quality of the assignments I wrote”. Carol described the experience as “scary”, and took her five to six months to come to grips with the learning environment. Bella agonized over the prospect of doing counseling in a different culture.

Carol stated that she had struggled in certain classes during her first semester, namely, a course in psychopathology in families. Carol said: “The struggle is with the diagnosis, finding the right diagnosis, to me that was difficult. Because, the family functioning is unique, and to use diagnosis sometimes not fair, you know, for the family”. Eric mentioned that he was surprised with the way some students conducted themselves
in class, as it was an experience he had never encountered in Singapore. Eric talked in detail about this:

Eric: I think it’s the culture for Americans to just speak up, and I think that’s good. But, I think it’s also important to have self-awareness and be more aware of what you are saying as well. Because, in the spirit of fairness, she was not fair to everyone when she didn’t acknowledge the opinion of others, and didn’t give them the opportunity to speak up. So, definitely an interesting experience for me.

(On students speaking up) Never witnessed somebody not backing down in a class setting, that was the first. And, I guess it helped me to be more aware, or, to be more productive in class, not talking just for the purpose of that, but to be more productive, constructive and also standing up to others.

**English difficulties.** For all participants except Eric, difficulty in writing and conversing in English was a common issue during their time in the United States. Eric used English as a first language in Singapore, but other participants used English as a second language and struggled with its use especially when they had first arrived in the United States. While the issues would vary depending on the participants, participants shared some insights into their struggles with the English language, including communicating, writing, and confidence. Farah shared her experience about her struggles with writing in English and how it had affected her during her first semester in the United States.

Farah: Just not used to writing. I have to write assignment, have to find reference, and go to the library for checking grammar, checking my English. Many things to
do for simple assignment, very difficult for me. Yes, first semester, very hard, after that it was better.

Language had an impact on some of the participants’ confidence level. For Carol, she was worried that Americans might view her negatively because of her English deficiencies. This was similar for George, who had first struggled with his English use, but was able to cope by improving his English which helped him in class.

Carol: Just because I may sound, you know, funny to Americans. So, I think, can I talk to Americans. You know, just worry about how I can talk in the USA. Will they understands what I’m saying, will I have friends there, just things.

George: At the start, I struggle. I struggle with writing in English, but, after that it was better, situation improved (and) my English is also better. That helps me in my learning, now I’m better prepared to study than first semester.

Some participants shared specific situations where they had difficulty communicating in English. For example, the experience shared by Audrey: “During orientation, someone ask me a question, and I don’t understand the question. I said, ‘pardon me?’, and repeat many times the same questions. She actually asked me what course I am taking, but the way she asked, or maybe the accent, makes it hard, very difficult to understand her”. According to Donna and Audrey, the different dialects spoken in the United States had made it difficult for them to understand other native English speakers. From Donna: “In (name of place), people speak English different(ly). All people in different states maybe speak English different(ly)”. From Audrey: “…and they speak in, what do you call, accent. Very thick Texan accent, so difficult for me”.
This section has focused on the unique learning environment in the United States (adjustment process, different learning environment and English difficulties). The next section will focus on how participants overcome the different learning environment in the United States.

**Overcoming Obstacles**

Participants shared their experiences of overcoming differences in adjusting to the learning environment in the United States. Participants viewed perseverance, language struggles, hard work, and comfort levels of living in the United States as being important in achieving success. Using their own struggles as a source of motivation and the importance of being comfortable living in the United States will be discussed in-depth in the next two sections.

Participants had their own strategies to overcome any obstacles they faced. For George, he found that assignments and classes became more difficult with every new semester. Therefore, he focused on doing his assignment early: “Just focus on assignment and do it early. Because, assignment get harder, you know. First semester, easier that the second semester. After that, practicum and counseling, so becomes harder after. So, be better prepared”. For Donna and Farah, they familiarized themselves with their surroundings and gained more confidence in their ability as time passed by.

Donna admitted that her first few months had been a difficult time, as she felt “left out” and had to sit “on my own” in class as she didn’t have any close friends. However, she stated her professors were very “understanding” and she had American friends that helped her in class. Donna mentioned that her experience during the second
semester “improve(d)” as she had more confidence because of several factors, including feeling “more settled”.

Donna: Maybe because I am more settled. I live in better apartment, I have friends that I can talk to, more used to university life. And my English is better too since I talk in English everyday, even with Korean friends. That helped me to feel more confident in myself. I feel like I can get more knowledge in second semester, when compared to last semester.

For Farah, it was a challenge during her first semester in the United States. She shared her experience of persevering and was rewarded when she had a better learning experience during the second semester. Farah described her experience during her second semester:

Farah: I like the experience, because of challenge you know. The experience changed my life, because I do the difficult way. Learn new language, new friends, new place. I do family therapy in second language, do internship at school, so all challenge. But I succeed, so I am happy with achievement I have.

Audrey struggled with her learning experiences being in the US, especially in conversing and writing in English. Audrey stated that it was a “dilemma” for her to seek help, as she shared here: “I always welcome help, I don’t understand some things. Asking more questions in class, will make me look bad. So, it’s dilemma”. To minimize this, she took some action on her own: “Just decided that I need to take action, I bring dictionary to class, go to library more. It made me work harder”. Audrey also admitted
that having a good life and work balance helped her cope with many of the stresses attributed to her learning experiences:

Audrey: Knowing when to do assignment, when to socialize, and when to enjoy life in America. Because, I am not just in America to study, but also to learn and travel. What I do, I plan with other Malaysian students where we want to go during university break.

(Doing activities) Doing things to get rid of stress. That’s how I manage to finish my study, have fun when holiday, and work hard when studying.

**Importance of positive thinking.** Participants shared their experiences in always looking at a positive outlook in every learning challenge that they faced. Bella, Carol, Donna, and Eric shared their experiences in building their confidence by positive thinking. For Bella, while practicing counseling sounds like a “scary” prospect, it helped to build her confidence in her ability to become a counselor in the United States.

Bella: Gave me confidence to practice family counseling with American families.

Now, that was, what, frightening, but I managed to do.

I don’t have experience doing counseling in English, I was not confident about doing that. I mean, you know, before going to USA. But, classes have helped me build my confidence, and talking with others have helped me to have confidence to do family counseling. You know, my first clients, think it was a couple, white couple, not sure married or not, but not sure how the session would become. I, you know, expect the worse. Always with negative mindset. But, it went great, I think. So, mostly it’s in my head. The reality, not bad.
Carol and Donna described similar experiences with the adjustment process by changing the way they looked at the situation. Carol revealed that in the first six months, she would get “nervous” very easily. She then managed to learn to calm herself down and not “freak out” when in class after that period: “What I mean is, I am more experienced so I don’t freak out, you know. I know what to do with assignments, with talking in class. So, just more experienced”. For Donna, she went through difficult stages in her learning experiences, describing them as a “roller coaster”, but managed to pull through by strengthening her mentality and believing her own ability.

Donna: Like, a roller coaster, you know. The experience can be easy, but also difficult.

It made me aware that I have limitations. But also, some of my classmates, they also have many difficulty doing internship. I realize it wasn’t just me, I realized that it is a tough program. Being an international student made it tougher, also made me more firm to become successful.

**Importance of being comfortable living in the United States.** Stability and being comfortable in class and living in the United States is a major factor in helping to improve international students’ learning experiences in the United States. Five of the participants mentioned the importance of overcoming obstacles to feel at home in the United States. Audrey shared her experience of feeling “at home” in the United States that made her feel more comfortable being in the United States:

Audrey: I think just the, what you call, environment, I think, I feel at home there, even when I’m far away from Malaysia. The weather is nice, think better than
Malaysia. Malaysia always hot, all the time as you know.

Where to get halal food, where the nearest mosque are. I met my best friend there too, she helps me a lot, and ever since she came back last year, we have talked and see each other a lot in KL. It helps me to have good friends, people who support what I’m doing.

Eric revealed that he did not feel safe when he had first attended classes. Eric admitted that being more “comfortable” with his classmates helped him to become more open about sharing his thoughts in class:

Eric: Helped me to be more comfortable in class. Just assurance that it is a safe place for me to share my opinions and personal experiences in class. Before, I talked, but maybe not as much as I wanted to, or would love to. After knowing my cohort, it felt a more secure place to share those experiences in class.

Being an international student, I have to be more wary, I suppose. In my opinion. It’s similar to being in a relationship, where people are more careful initially, but once you know your significant other more, it naturally feels safer to be more open to her.

**Theme 2: Gaining Sense of Belongingness**

The findings of the study focused on the challenges and adapting to a different country and culture. Participants shared their struggles with adjustment issues such as being away from their family, language, stressors, and racism throughout their stay in the United States. Attaining normalcy is a quality that was strived for by participants.

Participants depended on support from students from their country of origin or other
international students as it was easier to communicate with them and understand the struggles of being away from home. Participants described their unique experiences and encounters with Americans in which they learned more about the culture, language and different patterns of interaction with them. Participants shared their experiences of being marginalized in the United States, which did not help the adjustment process. Participants talked about their struggles to gain acceptance and recognition from their peers, but realized that it was not an important aspect to gain after their struggles.

Analysis of the findings yielded ten initial meaning units: attaining normalcy, feeling comfortable living in the United States, close relationship with people of the same culture, close relationship with international students, getting help from Americans, adjustment issues, discriminatory experience, negative interactions with Americans, and failure to gain recognition. Six meaning units were chosen from the ten initial meaning units. Some meaning units were combined because they were redundant with one another (e.g., close relationship with people of the same culture and with international students) or deleted for being irrelevant (e.g., adjustment issues already discussed in failure to gain recognition and attaining normalcy). The six meaning units were further categorized into four sub-themes: (a) Adjustment to Attain Normalcy, (b) Keeping it Close to Home, (c) Problematic Interactions and Experiences, and (d) Failure to Gain Acceptance and Recognition.

**Adjustment to Attain Normalcy**

Adjusting to the different environment in the United States was a challenge shared by all participants. Participants shared various issues that were related to adjustment,
which included being away from family and friends, coping with stressors, and difficulty in adjusting to the culture and language. Participants stated that they wanted to feel a sense of normalcy in their everyday life in the United States and made adjustments in life to achieve it. This included feeling comfortable living in the United States, which will be discussed thoroughly later in the next section. Bella shared that she had struggled with “everything” as it was difficult for her to make adjustments living in a foreign country.

Bella: Yes. At the start, like I said, difficult. You know, because everything is different. Different language, food. Friends, town. I feel like I have to do things that I, you know, take for granted, in Malaysia all over again.

Just, with maybe everything (adjustment). Using different language more, having to find foods that are halal (permissible to eat for Muslims), finding friends that you can get along with. All things that I take granted in Malaysia. You never think about things like this in Malaysia, but (it) is important when you are away.

Farah and Carol both found it difficult in their adjustment process. Farah shared the difficulty being away from her parents on whom she relied on. Farah stated that she was close to her mother, but her experiences in the United States made her “more independent”. Carol went through a difficult phase when she had first arrived in the United States, and had to seek professional counseling to help her deal with the issues.

Farah: I know how to cook, not good cook. But, there are many Chinese students in (name of college), so we change turns to cook. I am very good at cooking, how to say, noodles, you know, I’m very good at making. So, I would cook noodles, and my friend love it. That is example.
Very good for me (to be more independent), I know I can live without parents and make good friends with others. Very good for social, you know, talking with others, so my skill, social skills became better with others.

Carol: Just I see a counselor over there to, you know, just to help me emotionally because things an be overwhelmed with the learning experience over there. Just being away from family, from friends, and then going to class, just overwhelmed. But, the counseling, counseling is not long, four sessions, but it was helpful.

**Feeling comfortable in the United States.** Participants talked about the importance of being comfortable living in the United States to attain normalcy. Participants also shared different factors in what it meant to be comfortable, from being able to be a part of the community to having all their basic needs being met, for example, being able to socialize or having close friends. Farah stated that having a large Chinese community in her college helped in making her not feel “unhappy”. Donna also shared the same sentiment, stating that having her basic needs met as an important factor in being “adapted” to life in the United States:

Farah: I don’t think one factor, many. Many factors, like my friend Joanna, and also the Chinese people at (name of college). We have big community at (name of college), so I feel not ok most time. Like, we celebrate Chinese New Year, national day together. Even far from home, I still don’t feel, you know, unhappy.

Donna: I’m not really sure, maybe after some time (in) (name of place) (it) already feels like home. Since, I have good friends, good life, I feel settled. Like,
when my basic needs are enough, with foot, place to stay, socialize, it helped me to also become adapted to college life.

Like you know, the Maslow theory. When I have everything settled, it feels good. It feels like home already, as I can do things, like, no limitations. I can leave apartment, and go out and enjoy, not scared.

For George, he had struggled with the adjustment but things improved when his living situation began to improve: “At the start, I struggle. I struggle with writing in English, and away from family, also financial situation. But, after that (the) situation improved. I found a job at the library, my family joined me from Japan, and I live in better apartment. My English is also better. That helps me in my learning, now I’m better prepared to study than first semester. After that, it was excellent experience”.

This section has described the importance of seeking a sense of normalcy for participants, including being comfortable living in the United States. The next section will describe the close relationships and socializing that participants had with people of the same culture and other international students.

**Keeping it Close to Home**

Audrey, Bella, Carol, Donna, Farah, and George stated that they have a close relationship with people from their respective home countries or other international students. Participants described various reasons behind this phenomenon: (a) good emotional support, (b) easier to communicate, (c) share common interests, and (d) easier to trust. Participants disclosed of having close relationships with other international students as they provided good emotional support and shared common interest with them.
Participants also admitted that they had good relationship with supportive Americans, but the relationship was not as good when compared with their relationship with people from their country of origin or other international students. This will be discussed in-depth in the next section.

Bella, a Malaysian, had a close friendship to another Malaysian student from a different program during her time studying in the United States. Donna, a South Korean, stated that she was close to students from her own country and her best friends were other single Korean female friends who studied in the same college. Bella and Donna talked about their close friendship with other students from their country of origin:

Bella: She is a Malaysian student, but she is in a different program. Master’s program. She was already in USA, two years earlier, if I remember. She helped me when I arrived there. And it’s helpful to have somebody who have experience staying there. Because, she knows a lot of things. She has car, so easy to buy groceries. And she is also important as emotional support. So, she was very helpful.

Donna: My best friend, (name of friend). She was doing her master’s in engineering, so she was busy, but we would go out to (name of place) every week. (Name of place) is a big town, so many things to do. She has been in (the) US for two years before me, so she knows the place better. She’s about five years older than me, but we, like get along well. We like Korean music, TV shows. So, she would be downloading all the latest Korean dramas. And, watch it together.
George and Audrey shared the same sentiment, stating that being able to understand and relate to other international students or same country of origin as an added advantage. Audrey shared how her friendship with a student from Saudi Arabia grew because she could relate to her issues. Carol was close to other international students as there were no other Malaysian students at the college she attended. She stated that it helped to be friends with other international students as they shared similar issues with her. George, Audrey and Carol shared their experiences in details:

George: I think, we understand each other. Reason is difficult to translate, but Japanese understand other Japanese better. So, advantage to know other Japanese. I think same for all students, no? Closer to their own people if you are away from your own country.

Audrey: (On her friendship with another international student) Help me to understand her better. To understand people from Saudi better. Because, her English, I think worse than mine. And I keep thinking, must be hard for her, so I put myself in, you know, her place. So, I feel ok when I know that my situation maybe better than others.

Carol: The international students help me a lot because they, you know, all go through most same issues, similar issues. We share the same thing (experience), so since we share the same experience, I don’t feel so alone. I would describe my relationship with them good, great.
In education setting, we always help each other, you know. If I need help on assignment, we can discuss using English. Proper English, so I help them, and they help me.

We also go out to hang out, we visit things that we would not get outside the United States. So we do things together. So, we do things to feel that US is our home, like movie nights, we go outside, exercise, do fun things, they make me feel this is my home.

**Help From Supportive Americans.** Participants in the study mentioned their good relationships with Americans in general. However, the relationships were not as meaningful in comparison to their relationships with people from their country of origin or other international students. Eric stated that it was important to get the “experience” of socializing with Americans. Participants mentioned good relationship with American students, while others talked about having good relationship with members of the faculty or site supervisors.

Bella shared an experience where being close to American students helped her in understanding how they viewed family dynamics, as well as other things including politics. Bella said that her friend asked her about Malaysia all the time as she was not familiar with the country. Carol mentioned that having “close relationship” with American students helped her in understanding the American culture “more”, for example how they celebrated Thanksgiving.

Bella: Helps me to understand their culture better. You know, how they view marriage, relationship, especially in family. It will be harder for me to understand
things from American perspective if I was not close to her. She helped me understand how Americans view relationship, between couple, and children. And also other things, like politics, place to visit, we watch sports together, which I still don’t understand (laugh), so understand America more too. Very helpful.

She was fascinated by people coming to the US to study, would ask me questions all the time, about Malaysia. She is not used to Malaysia, so have many questions. And, she’s respectful. Not many Americans like her, so made it easier to be close to her.

Carol: For me, it’s great to have close relationship with American students because help me understand American culture more. Like, Thanksgiving, see how celebrate, help me understand what it is about, you know.

Donna admitted that she had good relationships with her American friends, but revealed that it had taken her some time before she was entirely comfortable with other Americans. Donna said: “For me, it takes time. When I know more things, and know more people, and learn more words, I am better adapted to living there, you know. Like, lack of trust, when I know more Americans, I become (changed), I can trust them more. Not like first months, but takes time”.

This section has discussed the close relationships that international students had with people of the same culture and other international students. The next section will focus on discriminatory interactions that participants had with their American peers.
Problematic Interactions and Experiences

Donna, Bella, Carol, Audrey, Eric and George shared problematic experiences during their stay in the United States. Some of the experiences shared included the domestic students’ unfamiliarity of the world outside the United States, racist experiences and making stereotypical assumptions. Participants reacted differently to the problematic interactions, some using these for self-reflection while others feeling marginalized by such interactions. Donna, who was from South Korea, shared her frustrations on her American friends’ lack of general knowledge on her country.

Donna: Yes, and changes is very difficult. In Korea, we are aware of many American culture, like movie, the TV shows, and sports. Like, baseball is famous in Korea. But, you know, it is different when you arrive in US. I cannot prepare for everything in Korea, as the changes come when you arrive in the US. Like Americans, only know about South Korea from our cars, and (pause) the smartphones, the Korean war. Some confuse between North and South Korea, (laugh) you know, they ask is South Korea the evil one! So, moving to America, my friends say Americans are, you know, I have to be careful, but most is not true. So, about learning, and adapt to the country. By learning more about America, and how to adapt to changes.

Bella, Audrey and Carol shared their experience of being looked at negatively by others because of the way they dress, religion or ethnicity. Carol mentioned that this happened when she was outside of her college setting. Bella and Audrey shared their bad experiences as people looked at them negatively because they were wearing the Islamic
headscarf (*hijab*). Audrey shared her cultural struggles of being a Muslim in the United States and her experience with other Americans imposing their values.

Carol: I don’t like the racism part of the United States, and I don’t say it to all parts, but to some parts of the United States. Like specifically, specifically outside of the school setting. I was fine in the school, but sometimes when I went outside, you know, the racism is a part of that.

Like, when I go watch the games, I get the look from White Americans…

Like, baseball game, or basketball. Sometimes I get the look from them. I don’t know what, what does that mean by that looking (staring at her). But, you know, but it is as if they are telling me that why am I here, I am not even American. I felt like, I felt like I was not a part of them. I was not part of the people that support the same team.

Bella: In the way that they treat me. But, not all of them. Some of them can be racist, saying that I don’t have to wear *hijab*. I mean, my choice. I can wear whatever I wants to. They talk about freedom of choice, and all freedom this and that, but sometimes I feel like they want me to follow how they live their life.

And that can be sad.

Audrey: Maybe because I look different. I’m a Muslim, I wear *hijab*. I don’t drink, sometimes I can’t eat what they are eating. It makes it difficult, maybe, to be friends, to socialize with them. When I go out with them, sometimes go out for dinner, sometimes we go to, like, small bars, and they drink, and some of them ask me why I don’t drink, why I wear like this, it gets uncomfortable.
But being in a bar, and them asking all those questions, is definitely one that I will remember. But it’s not actually bad experience, I also learned that even Americans can be racist. In Malaysia, as you know, racism happens all the time, so to know that it also happens in developed country like America, it makes me realize that they are not perfect.

Eric and George shared their experiences of Americans making generalized assumptions and stereotypes about them because of their ethnicity and home country. Eric shared his experience of being looked at negatively by Americans because of his background, while George described his experience of others making false stereotypical assumptions about him:

Eric: Just, being accepted for who you are. And, some of the American students look down on me, from my impression. When I said I am from Singapore, some remarked that my English is very good. That left, you know, a bitter taste, as it just reminded me that most Americans have no idea what happens outside of America. To them, maybe Asia is Japan, China, and Korea, but it’s more than that. It’s diverse, and some countries do speak English as a first language. Sometimes, I feel like I need to do more to convince my cohort that I can be good friends with them. I realized that you can’t force the issue, and that was frustrating. Maybe to them there is a barrier, a cultural barrier perhaps. So, frustrating. But overall, my cohort are nice people, it’s just a small minority (who are) less receptive of me.
George: One thing for me though is because I’m Japanese people assume I know a lot about *anime* (Japanese animation).

But I don’t actually watch too much *anime* because I prefer reading books. So, when I say I’m Japanese, many people would talk about how they like *anime*, maybe think I know a lot about *anime*. They talk about Dragon Ball, Naruto, ask me what *anime* I like. But, I don’t know, so.

I’m okay, just maybe little frustrated because they don’t know a lot about Japan. Only know Japan though what they see on TV, and make or assume that Japanese all watch *anime*.

This section has discussed problematic interactions that participants had with the American people, including within their cohort. The next section will discuss the repercussions of the problematic interactions as participants shared their frustrations with their failure to gain acceptance and recognition from their American peers.

**Failure to Gain Acceptance and Recognition**

The responsibility of being an international students in the United States was demanding and gaining acceptance and recognition by their fellow peers, professors and friends was something that participants had to strive. This was not always possible and some participants shared their frustrations with their adaptation process and failure to gain that acceptance.

Audrey and Carol shared their frustrations with some of their friendships and interactions in the United States. For Audrey, she wanted to present herself positively and be proud of her background and ethnicity, but was frustrated when people viewed her
negatively because of her wearing the hijab (Muslim female headscarf). Audrey stated:
“I feel I don’t deserve it. But, you know, I understand it, I guess. It is Texas, and some areas in Texas are not as open-minded about things. I talk to my other Muslimah (Muslim female) friends, (pause) you know, female Muslim, about it, and they agree. Just don’t let it effect you, that is all”.

Carol recounted an experience when she went to her friends’ house for Thanksgiving dinner. Carol mentioned that she had trouble communicating with others, and the experience made her feel invalidated: “See, more frustrate because I want to communicate with people, but also see me as their friends, like we can be talk and no problems doing that. How to say this, they see me like I how I see them. Not Malaysian, but just normal communication”. Carol pointed that it happened because others were insecure: “Disappointed, but it is what it is, you know. They see things that are different, they feel insecure maybe. You know, that happens when you don’t travel much, so also I understand why they are like that”.

Eric talked in-depth about how he felt that he was being marginalized and how it impacted him as he felt like an “outsider”: “I mean, I’m from Singapore, so maybe in their mind I am this foreigner who, I don’t know, just trying to get a green card. They feel, perhaps, maybe they can’t relate to me, so they avoid me. I am ok with everyone, as Singapore is a diverse nation itself, and we get along very well. But, to me, it was definitely the feeling at times that I am an outsider. The program did a fantastic job in helping me feel welcomed, as did my internship site. However, I can’t say the same for
some master’s student. It’s maybe underlying racism, but I’m not sure. I don’t like making assumptions”.

**Theme 3: Making Meaningful Changes to Their Marriage, Couple, and Family Counseling Practice**

The findings of the study focused on the similarities and differences between the MCFC practices in the United States and the participants’ countries of origin. The findings provided information on the difficult transition in moving back to their respective home countries and how it affected their counseling practices with the different cultures and values that their clients would share in a different country. Culture had the most significant impact on their MCFC practices in their countries of origin, as participants changed the way they practiced counseling by localizing different MCFC theories and developing their own ideas into the MCFC process. Participants acknowledged that their training experiences had been beneficial, but maligned their learning experiences as being limited in terms of transferability to their own country/culture. Participants shared their hopes of improvements that could be made to the counseling program, which included getting more input from international students.

Nine initial meaning units were derived during data analysis: difficulty in getting used to culture in the country of origin, difficult initial counseling experience in the United States, cultural difference in counseling practice, different counseling expectations in home country, changes to MCFC theories, significant influence of American training, shared positive experience of American training, increasing student influence, limitations in course content. Seven meaning units were chosen as the final
meaning units for the third theme. One meaning unit (difficult initial counseling experience in the United States) was removed because of its lack of relevancy to the study and one meaning unit (significant influence of American training) was removed for redundancy. The seven meaning units were further categorized into three sub-themes: (a) Challenging Reorientation Upon Returning Home, (b) Major Changes to Counseling Practices, and (c) Insight From Their American Training Experience.

**Challenging Reorientation upon Returning Home**

Audrey, Bella, Carol, Donna, Eric, and George found that going back to respective home countries was a difficult transition. The issues raised by the participants included cultural issue, different rules, and moving out of the United States. For Eric, being outside of Singapore would be the first time where he had been exposed to a “Western culture” for a prolonged period of time. Eric mentioned that people in Singapore were more “selfish”, which would take getting used to after having lived in the United States. Donna remarked that it was a “strange” feeling moving back to her country of origin. For both, moving back to their home country was difficult.

Eric: No, to me it’s more about how it gives me a different outlook on life. You know, living in Singapore, I was never continuously exposed to a Western culture before. And going back, I become more aware of the differences, and some are good, while others are areas that could be improved on.

People are more genuine in helping others. Like some of my classmates, in Singapore you have to rely on your own more, as people are more selfish. When you have others asking about your well being, asking how well you are doing, it
makes me feel more appreciated.

Donna: You know, sad. But, also, how (inaudible) strange feeling. (Be)Cause, I never go back home, from 2010 to 2013, so three years. But, very strange when I arrived in Seoul, you know. Everything was different, the people, rules, weather. For me more getting used to Seoul. Like, listening to others speaking Korean, is strange, cause when I go out everybody talks English. In America, I mean. Then, people speak Korean, so strange.

Being used to the cultural norms in the United States could have an effect once international students return to their home country. George and Bella struggled to adapt to the cultural norms in their home countries after spending a long period of time away from home.

George: Japanese, very respectful of others. Respectful of elders. In America, I don’t see this a lot, so in Japan I forgot about all this. My father said that I am language is more, you know, like harsh. Like, I say bad things, but I don’t. I realize that it is culture, so I have to change that. I don’t notice the difference. Others tell me that I am different, the way I speak is more direct, so I have to also change that.

Bella: Malaysia, more respect for elders. Also, how to say, more traditional. Like, families with parents. But in USA, more people are polite. And, respect privacy. In Malaysia, people talk behind others all the time. Especially close family, and close friends. In front, they are nice, but behind they say bad things.
That, I can’t accept, but have to live with. I guess, just being okay with the differences, no need for comparison.

This section has described the difficult adjustment process when moving back to their respective countries of origin. Participants described feelings such as “strange” in having to re-learn the cultural norms in their respective home countries. The next section will describe the major changes that participants made to their counseling practices once they returned to practice MCFC in their home countries.

**Major Changes to Counseling Practices**

Participants shared their experiences of changing their counseling practice to accommodate the needs of their respective local cultures and norms. While their experiences may vary, participants shared that it was a difficult process having already had extensive MCFC training and counseling experience in the United States. Some of the changes mentioned included language, culture, and different counseling expectations. A more in-depth understanding of the counseling process and its impact on culture, counseling expectations and the different use of theories will be discussed in the next three sections.

Participants shared their experiences of having to make changes to their MCFC practices. Audrey said that her clients saw her as a “stranger” which made the helping process complicated, while Bella mentioned that clients in Malaysia would prefer to be given “advice” rather than talk about their issues. Carol described her experience as a “difficult” transition at first, but would eventually be comfortable to make changes.

Carol: It’s kind of like difficult at first (making MCFC changes). First, because of
the language barrier because I learned in English, so there are certain terms that I used in English that I cannot translate. So, in marriage and family counseling, there are many terms we use that is, cannot be translate(d), so that was difficult to directly translate those terms. Especially when I have to counselor Malaysian people with different educational level, so I have to relearn my own language to fit their language. In other words, I cannot use words that is, you know, bombastic word. So, I have to learn.

**Cultural context on counseling practice.** Participants mentioned that the cultural differences between the United States and their countries of origin had a major impact on their current practice. Participants shared their struggles in changing their practice to suit the different cultural needs. Some participants also mentioned that their training experiences had not helped them much in making changes to their MCFC practice. Donna, Farah, George, and Bella talked in-depth about how the culture in their respective countries of origin dictated the changes that needed to be made to their MCFC practice. To Donna, the female elderly population in South Korea would be a “challenging” population to work with, while Bella felt that Malaysians in general would be more traditional in their ways of thinking which made changes in MCFC practice become necessary. Their experiences were shared in-depth:

Donna: Handling sessions with them (elderly population), the female women especially, challenging, as they can be, how to say, aggressive in defending themselves. In counseling, the elderly women would try to put the blame on others, but not themselves. That it’s the people, how you say, responsibility to
treat them with respect. This was a dilemma, as at the same time I also want to be respectful.

I learned in some ways, that the family works differently in (South) Korea and the US. So, if I am too aggressive to them, then counseling will not work. Instead, I work with them first before I can work with the family.

Give them, how to say, maybe a privilege. Work with the head first before you work on other parts (of the family), in some way. Assuring them that I am here to work with them, rather than against them.

Bella: In Malaysia, the people are more, how to say, close-minded (in their thinking). Or maybe, not open to changes. They believe that male and female have these different responsibilities, you know, traditional. The wife cooks, the husband works. But, the culture, or maybe reality, is changing. Female are more highly educated, sometimes have better jobs when compared to husbands. But, the people not changing with the times. And in counseling, sometimes the male dominate the session. Sometimes, female make fun of husband, saying they earn less. It can be, sometimes like a blaming session. It can be ugly, even counseling is used to solve the issue. You know, some couples fight in couples counseling in USA, but mostly very respectful.

Farah and George shared some of the differences between the cultures.

According to Farah, people in China have “strong family values” which made MCFC in China being practiced differently. Meanwhile, according to George, Japanese values often made it difficult to understand the nuances of what an individual in a family would
be going through. George stated that he relied more on his instinct and understanding of the situation.

Farah: How I practice in America would be different in China (because of cultural differences). Here, the community have strong family values, children are closer to parents, and more influence in life. In America, more individual, so children have more freedom. Some couples also not married, more, you know, significant others. Not married, but significant others. That means, you know, different patterns, different subsystems. Different ways to practice family counseling.

George: (on using instincts) When I am with the family, and see how they are, you just understand. And in Japan, that is important. The client will not say, I am to blame. Or say that other family members are to blame. But, you can see through how they talk or see each other, the relationship patterns. That is what I do more in Japan.

(on trusting instincts) Yes, because I understand the culture. If an American come here, maybe hard to understand. But with Japanese therapist, it is easier for us to understand what is happening.

Different counseling expectations. Participants talked about the different expectations to counseling in their own culture. Some of the examples included their expectations for the role of counselor and the parental influence among family members. Bella stated that in Malaysia, her clients would be more interested in her giving advise during counseling sessions: “(on giving advise) And when I say, ‘I don’t give advice’, they get, you know, confused. Most just prefer me to tell them what they need to do”.
To counter this, she would provide freedom to her clients to make their own decisions and asking the right questions: “Like, ask them be the expert, and not me. And, most of the time, it works. Like, for example, ‘what can you do to help your marriage?’ You know, that type of questions. Asking the right questions is important”.

Participants stated that the different outlook that families have on the counseling process has made the counseling process different. Audrey stated counseling is a “more developed helping process in America”. She argued that while it is an “acceptable practice” in the United States, it is still a new field in Malaysia. Eric shared the same sentiment, stating that counseling was “not considered a norm” in Singapore. He described counseling in Singapore: “Singaporeans are not really exposed to counseling, and have different ideas as to what counseling entails. Some expect quick solutions. One instance, a couple came to me and asked me if they should divorce. Right off the bat. So, they, the couple, see me as a decision maker. But in America, that has never happened, and it seemed to me like they are more willing to work on their issues though the counseling sessions. In Singapore, one of my clients said after the first session, ‘That’s it?’. So, I already explained to her the process earlier in the session, but had to repeat so that she understands the (counseling) process”.

Farah shared her frustrations with doing MCFC in China where parents came to family counseling with certain expectations. She stated that: “Most parents come with expectations. Like, when I do family counseling, parents come and have expectations that I need to correct their children’s behavior. As an example, their children don’t do homework, the parents say please ask him to do. I explained that is not counseling, but
they have that expectation, you know”. She would use her counseling skills to help parents understand the situation: “I explain to them about counseling. Contract, informed consent is very important, tell the clients how counseling is. And, they understand, but not all time. So, during session, I explain how counseling works again. What I do usually, is just use questions. ‘What are your expectations for children?’ Or, ask the child about homework, and get to the problem. To me, rely more on questions to my clients, you know. I let families decide for them, not me”.

**Changes made to marriage, couple, and family counseling theories.**

Participants stated that the application of MCFC theories had to be changed for use in their respective home countries. Participants described MCFC theories learned in the United States as only being applicable in Western countries. Eric described the problem by comparing the use of MCFC theories in Singapore as being similar to “assembling an Ikea table without any instruction manual”. The primary MCFC theory used in the United States is the system theory, but participants described the theory as having little practical significance in their own culture.

Donna and George shared their frustrations on the lack of transferability of MCFC theories that could be used in their own cultures. Donna discovered that not all MCFC theories were applicable in South Korea, but found that theories helped her to conceptualize the family problems: “(on applicability of MCFC theories in South Korea) I don’t think so. No, but the theories help to conceptualize issues in family”. George stated that he never thought that it would be a potential barrier, but would eventually realize it. He found one theory (structural therapy) to be useful in Japan.
George: (On the applicability of MCFC theory in Japan) It’s something I don’t think. When I was in US, I don’t think about transferring theories to culture. So, returning to Japan, yes I cannot use everything because of culture difference.

(on using less systems theory) The reason, because the theory is less emphasis on relationship between me and family. I use structural therapy more, because there is more focus on the relationship.

Audrey revealed that her clients (family members) would usually see her as “strangers”; hence, theories that were more direct would be beneficial. She mentioned the use of counseling tools to aid the process: “Just using more tools, like genograms. Genograms are helpful, it helps them understand the dynamics of the family relationship. When they see, they understand more. Then, we can work from there. How to have more healthy patterns in the relationship”.

For Eric and Donna, different cultures would necessitate the use of different theories. In the United States, systems theory is taught in a master’s-level MCFC program, but as elaborated by Eric, the different family patterns made its application difficult. Donna experienced the same difficulty in South Korea, and felt that a “new counseling theory” would be more beneficial.

Eric: Family systems theory emphasizes on the role of family members, so for example maybe a father who takes on a friend role rather than a parent role. As a counselor, you see that, but how do change that role? Or help the father be cognizant? That is where family counseling in different, as I have to use an approach that is more, well suitable. Okay. So, being more direct helps, so
instead of having the parents becoming self-aware, in an Asian context just being
direct helps out as there is no room for, you know, any ambiguity.

Donna: Then you have systems theory, and for some clients it can get confusing.
Because, it shows why the family is not working, but they don’t really find that a
problems because of the culture. The head of the family assumes power in the
family, and to traditional family that is how, you know, it’s supposed to be only
one solution. Changes are not to system, but only minor changes. So, family
does not change, and assume that counseling does not work. A new counseling
theory could be more better for Korean people.

Farah, Carol and Bella believed that the solution-focused approach would be the
most practical theory that could be used. Farah stated that her clients had given “good
response” to the theory. Meanwhile, Carol and Bella mentioned that it had been working
for their clients as it focused on being result-oriented. Bella however stated that the
theory had to be applied “differently” in Malaysia because of the cultural context. Farah
also used what she described as “suggestions” and psychoeducation in addition to
solution-focused theory. The following is how they described their use of theories:

Farah: (What I do) Is use solution-focused theories in session. A lot of my clients
have good response to that, because I think the sessions are direct, so clients like
that. The families too, prefer quick solutions instead of talking.

(On using suggestions) Offer some solutions to parents to handle their situation
(issue in family). I don’t force them to follow, sometimes they come up with their
own solutions. But, if I can add, maybe more of a(n) expert role in China, where
in America I am more facilitator. So, big difference, you see. Some parents, if they need parenting skills, so I also suggest they attend parenting classes. In this culture, more on psychoeducational. Is important because it gives them idea how to improve, you know. Improve as parent, husband, wife, so yes.

Carol: (On solution focused use in Malaysia) There is not actually many family counselor who use solution focused in Malaysia. Because, Malaysia is a culture that still value tradition. So, it’s not easy for them (to) see and think when they are not used to it. So, with (me) using solution focused, I focused on what works for the client. I mean, solution focused is not just on solving problems all the time, its about you encourage(ing) the client to use things that would work for them. So, here if the clients were, think if they do something that is for the families’ happiness, and it works for them, so I would encourage them to follow it. So, I would apply it if that helps them.

Bella: More (focus) on what changes they want to see. So, more result-oriented questioning. So, miracle question, asked in a more goal perspective. From doing counseling in Malaysia, especially, they like to work on goals. It helps them when they can work on something. So, I don’t know, maybe more structure to the theories. It seems that family counseling here is more structured, more focus on goals, but at the same time can also be very emotional.

In using theory (solution-focused), I used like miracle question with more emotional tone. Like, example, “what would happen to your family?”. It cannot (be) accurate(ly) translate(d), sorry. But, yes, something like that.
This section has focused on the changes that participants had to make to their counseling practices in their home country. The three changes made included:
(a) changes to fit different culture, (b) changes to different counseling expectations, and (c) changes to MCFC theories used. The next section will focus on the significance of their MCFC training, and unique opinions of how to improve the experiences of international students.

**Insight from Their American Training Experience**

Participants mentioned the significance of their training in the United States. Some participants stated that their training had helped them to become a more effective counselor, while others mentioned different aspects of training such as supervision and helping them to gain a new perspective in the counseling process. They viewed the process as being a lesson in improving their counseling practices in their country of origin. Participants also gained a positive insight into their own counseling practices, and hoped that some aspects of the MCFC counseling program could be enhanced for future international students. This will be discussed in-depth in the next two sections.

George admitted that his MCFC training had helped him see things from a different worldview. Bella, who practiced family counseling even before coming to the United States, said that she was able to learn to differentiate between individual counseling and MCFC practice. This is how they described their experiences:

George: My training has helped me to open my mind to new things. Now, reason I say this is being in Japan, I see things from Japanese perspective. You know, learning in different country helps me to understand the different culture in the
world, that helps me to become more aware of my counseling sessions. I can see the different practice, and more aware of changes that can be made to improve counseling session.

Bella: I don’t have many training in family counseling, so just being able to, you know, (name of college) has helped me to learn the right techniques and theories in doing family counseling. Before, if I see couples, it would be similar to doing individual counseling. Just with the right training, I am able to work, you know, more effectively with couples and their children. So, it is more effective counseling.

Positive insight on American MCFC training. Participants shared unique insights on how they viewed their MCFC training in the United States. They shared positive experiences of their MCFC education in the United States. Some participants shared overall positive experiences. For example, Bella described the experience as being “good and bad”, while Eric described his MCFC training as providing him with the “proper foundations” to improve his MCFC practice in his home country.

Bella: You know, there are good and bad experience, I think I learned more from the bad experiences. Struggle with language, struggle with internship, that moment are what I remember. Good experience.

(on reflecting back on her experience) That if I want to succeed, I have to make sacrifices. All the time, it will not be easy always, but if I do my part, then I will be successful.”
Eric: It’s, it was great, in a sense that it was comprehensive, from a hands-on training experience, and good theoretical background, to a systemic approach. So, yes, it was comprehensive, and shaped me become a good family counselor. (On his experience overall) It helped to provide me with the proper foundations for me to build on. I mean, it’s the same practice, but like I mentioned before, there are differences in the approach used.

George, Farah and Carol gained a positive insight by looking at how different the counseling profession in the United States was from the one in their respective home country. For George, learning counseling in the United States helped him gain a new understanding of different counseling practices across cultures and became “more aware of changes that can be made to improve” counseling in Japan. For Farah, the professionalism showed by counselors in the United States had helped in improving her own counseling services and skills. For Carol, the supervision process had a profound impact on her to improve her counseling skills and do proper counseling documentation.

Farah: The way I carry myself, being professionalism. In China, there is lack of professionalism. You know, many of my colleagues, counselors, do counseling but don’t use counseling theories. My program in (name of college) has taught me to become professional family counselor.

(On what she used in counseling) Before, I use traditional Chinese techniques like qigong. It is a relaxation exercise. It use(s) slow movement to reduce stress. So, I still use it, but not as main technique. Now, my focus is more using counseling theories I learned in America.
Carol: (On her best learning experience) Supervision. So, even though I made different changes to my marriage and family counseling now, but my supervision has taught me to document everything that I do now, you know. Sometimes I will seek supervision (from counselors) older than me so that I’m sure I don’t make mistakes in doing counseling.

**Increasing international students’ presence and input.** Participants shared unique opinions on their MCFC training experiences in the form of ways to improve the programs for international students. Participants suggested that an increased presence and input from international students could be beneficial to improve the training program. Participants had different ways in achieving that goal. For instance, Bella suggested that an increase of international students in counseling programs could help in the adjustment process for international students while George suggested that counseling on a more global scale should be discussed in class to help international students in applying counseling in their own country. Meanwhile, George and Audrey recommended that the MCFC course content should be evaluated to include a more global perspective into the curriculum. As for Carol, she suggested the idea of learning counseling practices in different countries and making it part of CACREP requirements. The following excerpts from the interview transcripts present all of these ideas in greater details:

Bella: Maybe take more international students. This is true, not many students in counseling program, but (when compared to) business, engineering, many international students. Having international students in the program will help me, as it is somebody I can talk to when I have problems. The USA students, they
don’t understand sometimes, so having more international students is something for me.

George: My suggestion is maybe more focus on multicultural information, or discussion on course content. So, during theories and techniques in family therapy class, for example can discuss more on how to use theories in international aspect. Reason for that is the class is good class on how to use theories, but not much discussion, no guide on how to use outside of USA.

Audrey: (On improvements that could be made) Maybe, like, update the content, you know. Curriculum, whatever it is called. So, how (to) do counseling in Malaysia will help (international students).

Carol: (On making it part of CACREP) Yes. (On learning MCFC practices in different country) Because I learned Americans way of doing marriage and family, but I was hoping they could learn how to do it in Malaysia too. I mean, they don’t have to apply, but its good to have that knowledge to make a better counselor.

Donna, Eric and Farah suggested that counseling program should take the initiative to get more information from their international students as their input would be considered valuable. Donna stated that professors in counseling programs could provide more help instead of just asking “how you are doing?”. Donna recommended that assigning a faculty member to help international students would be a great way of helping the students while Eric stated that counseling programs could be more helpful, and ask them directly on how it could be a more fruitful experience for international students.
Farah added that better integration to the counseling program would be important as faculty members would usually be busy with their own work that they may abandon their advisees.

Eric: What is important to me, is to understand their (international students) viewpoint. I believe that if all programs actually interview all (their) international students, and ask for areas for improvement, that would be helpful. That would be helpful for counselor educators (input from international students). As, most are US citizens, and don’t travel or teach outside the US often. With international students coming in, asking for their input, opinions, suggestions is helpful. I mean, they have that resources, so using it would be helpful.

Farah: Integrate international student to program. You know, help them when they arrive, and also maybe more attention to international student. My professors, they are helpful, and care, but there are many students. But, difficult to see them, my advisors have many students you know.

Summary of Chapter 3

Chapter 3 provides a detailed presentation of the results of the study. This phenomenological study focused on understanding the experiences of international students in a CACREP-accredited MCFC program. The results revealed three main themes: (a) overcoming learning challenges and obstacles in the United States, (b) gaining sense of belongingness in the adjustment phase, and (c) making meaningful changes to MCFC practice in their respective countries of origin. The results have suggested that international students went through various challenges including learning
issues, adaptation difficulties and having to modify their MCFC approach once they would practice counseling in their respective home countries.
CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

The results of the study revealed three major themes in the experiences of international students studying in a CACREP-accredited marriage, couple, and family counseling program. The three main themes were: (a) overcoming learning challenges and obstacles in the United States, (b) gaining sense of belongingness in the adjustment phase, and (c) making meaningful changes to marriage, couple, and family counseling practice in their country of origin. Their collective experiences as international students offered a glimpse of understanding of their successes, challenges and struggles during their studying years and their MCFC practice in their respective countries of origin.

This chapter focuses on discussing the results as presented in Chapter 3 and its relation to the literature in counseling, marriage and family therapy, and marriage, couple, and family counseling. Its implications on international students and counselor education are discussed. The transferability of the research is shared to improve trustworthiness and recommendations for future research are presented.

Contributions of the Study to Counselor Education

There have been various studies conducted on international students in the United States, but little is understood about their experiences in counselor education specifically MCFC which has been less developed. Results of the present study have indicated pertinent points that help us understand their training experiences especially in how they
applied their training experiences with their MCFC practice in their respective home countries.

This researcher interviewed participants who had gone through a MCFC master’s program in the United States and lent their voices to provide a vivid understanding of their experiences. Their lived experiences produced three main themes that consisted of overcoming learning difficulties, the importance of socializing in adjusting to life in the United States and making significant changes to their MCFC practice in their home countries. Results have suggested positive aspects of counselor education programs (e.g., adequate support by faculty members) and other areas that could be improved on (e.g., course content, applicability of content in different culture). Participants shared positive insights into their MCFC training (e.g., understand MCFC from a different culture/perspective, importance of supervision) but hoped that their voices would be heard to make MCFC training program more suited to their needs.

Results of the study have been consistent with those of previous research. DuPree et al. (2012) have stated that international students and American students share different cultural norms and imposing a westernized practice in a different culture could have detrimental effect on MCFC/MFT practices in their home countries. McDowell et al. (2002) have suggested that faculty members in MCFC/MFT programs should re-evaluate their beliefs and attitudes so that the development of a more culturally sensitive curriculum could be achieved. With this in mind, this study contributes to the literature as an initial attempt in MCFC to improve the students’ well-being and training program for international students.
The Essence of the Experiences of International Students in CACREP-accredited Marriage, Couple, and Family Counseling Programs

The purpose of this study was to understand the essence of the experiences of international students in CACREP-accredited MCFC programs. For this purpose, seven participants were chosen to share the essence of the phenomena. Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide that was designed to elicit their lived experiences. Probing questions were used to obtain further detail of their training experiences and counseling experience in their respective countries of origin.

Three main themes and nine sub-themes emerged from the data analysis process. This section will discuss the main results of the study and compare them with the literature reviewed in Chapter I. The emergent themes will be discussed in the next three sections.

Learning Experiences

This section provides an overview of the unique learning experiences faced by international students, especially the difficult adjustment period to the American learning culture (e.g., language, new environment, new learning style). After the adjustment period, participants overcame their struggles by being more acclimatized to the American learning culture. Two learning experiences were identified: (a) unique new learning environment, and (b) overcoming obstacles.

Transitioning to a different environment was a process that international students had to overcome in their learning experiences. In their comparison between international students and domestic students in the United States, Ng and Smith (2009) have found that
international students have more academic problems than their domestic counterparts. Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) have stated that international students would need more support after their initial arrival to the United States, but the disparity between the culture in their country of origin and the culture of the United States has made the transition process difficult (Ang & Liamputtong, 2008).

Participants revealed that learning in a different culture has been a difficult experience for them. First, participants admitted that adjustment to the new environment was difficult for them. Bella stated that she was “confused” when she had first arrived and Donna referred to the process as “exhausting,” while Farah shared her “awkward” experiences trying to communicate with others around her. As a finding, adjustment to a new environment for international students is supported by various literatures (Mittal & Wieling, 2006; Ng & Smith, 2009). Mittal and Wieling (2006) in their study found that international students in MFT programs had struggled during this phase because of the changes in their way of being, thinking, and talking.

Participants also made known of their struggle with the different learning style in a different culture. A different teaching and learning style that would focus more on interaction could have a negative impact on their learning experiences (Pattison & Robson, 2013). For example, international students are expected to share their concerns and emotions more readily in classes, which is the opposite of what would happen in their respective home countries (Mittal & Weiling, 2006; Pattison & Robson, 2013). Nayar-Bhalerao (2013) has discovered in her study that international students struggle with the different learning expectations, including assignments given and class participation.
Language is a major issue for most international students, as this study has also found. Some of the issues related with language include trouble communicating with faculty and other students, writing in English, and confidence issue. English problems with international students are reported in various literatures (Ang & Liamputtong, 2008; Knox et al., 2013; Ng, 2006a; Ng & Smith, 2009; Sherry at al., 2010; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Sümer et al., 2008). The difficulty in learning and using a second language has made it difficult for international students to adjust to life in the United States (Sato & Hodge, 2009). From this study, it has also been learned that mastery of English would lead to an easier learning process, as shared by Eric (e.g., use English as a primary language) when compared with other participants (e.g., use English as a second language). This finding is supported by Trice (2004) who has indicated that good English proficiency helps international students to ease communication and develop social relationships with American students. Participants also mentioned about the different accents that has made it difficult for them to master English. This result is similar to that of a study conducted by Morris and Lee (2004) who have found that counselors who speak English as a second language have to talk carefully to their American clients to have them understand their English.

Overcoming obstacles became vital for international students. International students respond to the challenges of adapting to the different learning culture by becoming more assertive and talking more in class (Mittal & Wieling, 2006). In this study, it was found that the learning challenges had given participants the extra motivation and drive to succeed in the academic aspect of life in the United States. For
example, Farah stated that her perseverance in continually improving all her perceived limitations had helped her to succeed in her master’s program. The sub-theme for overcoming obstacles is supported by McDowell et al. (2012) who have stated that even though international students work hard to meet all the demands placed by their respective programs, it is also acknowledged that overcoming obstacles is a difficult process.

A study by Mittal and Wieling (2006) indicated that adaptation to the learning challenges could lead to both positive and negative experiences. For example, while students may be better adapted to the American learning environment, it could also lead to international students being uncomfortable with being different than their real selves (Mittal & Wieling, 2006). However, the results in this study have suggested otherwise, as participants in the study reported positive thinking would lead to an extra motivation which could overcome any learning obstacles. The different findings between the studies could be associated with the importance of stability when living in a different country. In the present research, participants in the study indicated the importance of feeling at home before managing to become immersed in the American learning environment. Losing part of their identity (e.g., real self) was not reported by any of the participants in the study.

**Adaptation Experiences**

This section provides an overview of the adaptation challenges of the transition to a different culture. Participants talked about their adjustment process, which included their strong ties with people from their own community and other international students,
and experiences of discrimination in the United States. The researcher refers to this as gaining a sense of belongingness. Four adaptation experiences were found based on analysis of findings: (a) adjustment to attain normalcy, (b) keeping it close to home, (c) problematic interactions and experiences, and (d) failure to gain acceptance and recognition.

The ability to gain a sense of belongingness is important for international students as it provides them with a sense of normalcy in their everyday life. It also helps them to normalize all the negative life experiences that they go through while living in the United States, which include racist and discriminatory experiences. Being close to those from the same culture or other international students would help participants in gaining that sense of belongingness (McDowell et al., 2012; Sawir et al., 2008).

This study has shown that it is important for international students to be close to people of the same nationality/culture. Social support from people of the same culture has been indicated as helping international students to adapt in a different country (Knox et al., 2013). Being close to other international students has been cited in other studies as helpful, as international students prefer social support from other international students as opposed to domestic students because they share the same struggles and could identify better with international students (Rosenthal et al., 2007; Sawir et al., 2008). In this dissertation study, Carol indicated the importance of friendship with other international students as they “share the same experience”.

The results have suggested the relationship between international students and domestic students in their cohort as being nothing more than acquaintances for most of
the participants. This is supported by various literatures (Knox et al., 2013; Nayar-Bhalerao, 2013; Sato & Hodge, 2009). In her study, Nayar-Bhalerao (2013) has found that international students desire to have a social connection with their domestic counterparts, but have instead found social seclusion and have been discriminated against by their cohort. Sato and Hodge (2009) in their study indicated that international students felt marginalized by their cohort as a result of “cultural disconnect” (e.g., domestic students not showing concern with the international students’ academic or personal aspects of life). Knox et al. (2013) have also found that American Caucasian students do not provide much social support to international students as they prefer to socialize among themselves.

Participants have shared their experiences with racism and discrimination. These experiences lead to participants feeling marginalized when they communicate with their American cohort and in their everyday life with Americans. Participants were surprised with the discriminatory experiences they faced. This could happen due to their limited experience being members of a minority group outside their country of origin (Nayar-Bhalerao, 2013). The results of this study have also indicated that participants were being marginalized because of their race or religion. This was a similar result to that of the two studies by Mittal and Wieling (2006) and Beoku-Betts (2004), respectively, which have shown that international students are discriminated against because of their religion (Islam) and background/ethnicity (e.g., graduate students from Africa).

Results of the present study have also indicated that international students wanted to have close relationship with their American peers and were frustrated with their
limited friendship. This was in line with the results in a study by McDowell et al. (2012) who reported on the importance for international students to be valued by other domestic students and faculty members. However, international students have experienced mostly negative interactions with their American peers and saw themselves being viewed as an outsiders by their American peers (McDowell et al., 2012). This has led to international students being more comfortable with other international students who understand their predicament (McDowell et al., 2012; Mittal & Wieling, 2006). The findings of the study by Mittal and Wieling (2006) have indicated that international students’ self-identify as being outsiders for two reasons: feeling inferior when compared to domestic students, and feeling marginalized or insulted during their stay by domestic students or faculty members.

Counseling Experiences

This section focuses on the counseling practices by international students in their home countries. It discusses how different cultures and values have affected their counseling practice once they return home to practice MCFC. Three major counseling experiences were derived based on analysis of findings: (a) challenging reorientation, (b) major changes to counseling practices, and (c) insight from their American training experience.

Results of the study have indicated the big changes that international students made to their MCFC practice in their home country. This is mainly because of the vast cultural differences between the counseling practice in the United States and their respective countries of origin. This is a concern as it has been suggested that
international counselors trained in the United States often fail to apply what they have learned because of its impracticality in a different culture (Norsworthy et al., 2009; Smith & Ng, 2009). Lau and Ng (2012) have discovered that counseling programs do not cater their training program to the needs of international students. This would increase potential challenges once international students return to their respective countries. However, the findings of this study suggested international students made their own changes to their counseling practice to accommodate the local culture. This is similar to a finding by Lau and Ng’s study (2012) in which the process would be known as independent learning (international students having to do their own tweaking to their counseling practice once they practice counseling in their country of origin).

The use of theories in their country of origin is one of the main issues discussed by participants in the study. All participants shared their views that they had to change the way that they would practice counseling in their country of origin, and were not given much training on how to practice it differently. This result has been consistent with that of the previous literature. McDowell (2004) has stated that the Euro-centric focus of MFT programs in the United States has made it difficult for international students to apply their training in their country of origin, and suggested that the teaching practices be evaluated to challenge the westernized focus of MFT programs. Lau and Ng (2012) described the training as being too American-centric with little context from an international perspective.

McDowell et al. (2012) also found similar findings with regards to the use of theories and counseling practices in their home countries. The findings indicate MFT
supervisors are aware of the cultural differences and tried to help international students apply theories in their country of origin, but one participant in the study still felt that his supervisors were still trying to make him a “White therapist” (McDowell et al., 2012, p. 340). Smith and Ng (2009) termed this as “subtle discrimination” (p. 282) because it was found that professors in counseling programs showcased a preference only for issues relevant in an American context. This has been supported by Mittal and Weiling (2006) in which international students mentioned their frustrations with the training they had received in their MFT program as diversity issues were not discussed as much as the respondents were expecting.

The literature suggests that international students have often struggled to study MCFC/MFT in the United States because the curriculum of MCFC/MFT programs was not designed with international students in mind (Kaslow, 2000; Mittal & Wieling, 2006). The present study has yielded similar results as participants stated that they had struggled to practice MCFC in their home country because of the course content. This study has also discovered that international students hoped that faculty members would value their input to improve the MCFC experience for them. In similar vein, a research by Smith and Ng (2009) has also found that international students do not feel valued by their training program because their input was not valued by their own training program.

**Implications of the Study**

CACREP accreditation has been given to MCFC programs since 1992 (Bobby, 2013). However, there is still a lack of literature on international students in CACREP-accredited MCFC programs. Nayar-Bhalerao (2013) has stated that understanding the
difficulties that international students go through and providing them with sufficient support is important for them to meet their academic needs and goals. In this section, the implications of the study will be discussed and divided into three sections, namely, implications for international students, implications for counselor education programs and unique findings from the study.

**International Students**

The results of the study have highlighted the academic and life struggles of studying MCFC in the United States. International students need to be aware of the academic work that they have to do in the United States. International students in the study shared their struggles in this area including language struggles, adjustment to a different learning environment, confidence issue, language struggles, and internship placement. In this study, international students shared their strategies of overcoming their academic struggles. The strategies used included: positive thinking as motivation, gaining stability, taking time to adjust to the different environment, getting help from American friends, and practicing speaking and writing in English. Therefore, it is important for international students to use the different strategies described in this study to help them cope with the different learning environment.

The results have indicated the differences in culture between the United States and other Asian countries. This has led to participants doing a self-reflection of their own experience of being a minority in the United States (e.g., discrimination, racism, etc.). Such reflection offers an opportunity for international students to get a better understanding of their own culture as well as others as they become more aware and
critical of their own culture (Pattison & Robson, 2013; Sato & Hodge, 2009). McDowell (2004) has stated that the experience of being a minority in the United States has made international students become more aware of the struggles that minorities go through in their own culture; therefore, concepts such as oppression take a new meaning for them. As noted by Pattison and Robson (2013), clinical work in the United States aids international students to become more empathetic in their counseling practice as they are working with clients who are going through the same struggles. This helps international students who are doing clinical work to become more confident of their own ability and indirectly improve their confidence level (Pattison & Robson, 2013).

Counselor Education

This study has implications for counselor education programs. Various studies have stressed the importance of faculty in helping international students (Lau & Ng, 2012; Lee, 2010; McDowell et al., 2012; Nayar-Bhalerao, 2013). Results in this study have indicated that faculty could play a bigger role in helping them. Participants suggested faculty members to be more inclusive, by getting direct feedback from internationals students in their program and being more attentive to their needs. This could be done in different methods, for example, having collaborative conversations with them about their needs and expectations for their practice when they return to their respective countries (Mittal & Wieling, 2006). This would help international students to feel more welcome in their respective programs. It would also benefit the MCFC program by expanding the perspective of other students, the MCFC program and faculty itself (Turner-Essel & Waehler, 2009).
The study have also indicated that international students would prefer better integration of their needs as students with the requirements of the program. Some of the needs suggested by international students included: asking international students about what could be helpful for them, better integration with their international needs (e.g., theories and practice), and better mentoring. Some of the examples given by participants included assigning one specific faculty member to help international students for a better mentoring system and the application of certain theories in their country of origin. The researcher suggests that faculty should provide a better mechanism in helping international students, whether it is through mentoring or an advisory capacity. The traditional advisory relationship between American students and faculty would not work for international students as they typically go through more trials and tribulations in their program. Therefore, it is hoped MCFC programs would take this into consideration and find a better way to help their international students as the current system in place in most MCFC programs has not been adequate for participants in this study.

Counselor education programs also need to re-evaluate the contents of their curriculum by including more international perspective in the syllabus. McDowell et al. (2012) have stated that MCFC and MFT program curriculum needs to be revised to include more international perspective (e.g., discussion on the similarities and differences between MCFC practiced outside of the United States). As noted from results of this study, participants struggled with the implementation of MCFC theories in their own country because there was a lack of emphasis in applying the theories in a different culture/country. The researcher suggests that CACREP should re-evaluate its current
standards by adopting a more international perspective. The researcher hopes that CACREP would conduct a review of needs and experiences in CACREP-accredited program prior to forming the next set of standards. The researcher also suggests the inclusion of the following statement for the next set of standards: international factors relevant to MCFC practice, including the use of theories in a different culture/country. The introduction of this standard could also help American students have a more holistic understanding of family life and the impact that global relations could have on individual and family interactions (McDowell et al., 2012).

The researcher proposed two changes to the curriculum of CACREP-accredited MCFC programs in the United States. The first suggestion is the inclusion of a more global perspective in MCFC theories/techniques courses. A more global perspective could be achieved by teaching MCFC students on the application of different theories/techniques according to the different cultures across the globe. For example, teaching the use of structural theory in a collectivistic culture may fit better with the cultural orientation to system support. By doing this, MCFC students could learn about the application of different theories in a different cultural context.

The second proposed change is the inclusion of a section on the applicability of systems theory in a different culture. Systems theory remains a mainstay in MCFC practice in the United States and is one of the major approaches taught in most MCFC programs. The researcher suggests that a section of the course (e.g., Systems Theory in MCFC) include the applicability of systems theory in an international context. The content of the section could include recent research and findings from the literature, and
how it is applicable in a different culture. While it may not help international students in applying systems theory in their country, it would help them in their transition process by looking at different aspects of what may work in their home.

**Unique Findings from the Study**

This section described some of the unique findings from the study. One unique finding from the study is the participants’ frustration with their inability to apply MCFC theories and practices in their country of origin because it is incompatible with their culture. MCFC programs in the United States focused on teaching and training systems theory, but the applicability of systems theory from an international standpoint has been cast in doubt based on the results of the study. Participants stated different theories were more applicable in their home country (e.g., solution focused), and this suggests more research is needed to ascertain which theories that are more applicable in a global context.

Another unique finding from the study is the advice giving aspect of MCFC in an international context. Participants stated that most families in their home country prefer to be given advice on what to do with their familial issues rather than going through the proper counseling process. This family preference has led to counselors having to make changes to their MCFC practice to fit the needs of their clients. The advice giving aspect of counseling practice needs to be looked into by MCFC practitioners internationally as it could have serious repercussions to the profession. The focus needs to be given to improving the use of theories in an international context.

The final unique finding of the study is the significance of the participants’
training experiences in the United States. While all participants gave positive feedback to their training experience, they also shared some feedback on what could further improve their MCFC training. For example, participants stated that they want a more international-focused training curriculum that would meet their needs. An international focus is important as the current transition of practicing MCFC in their home country has been problematic. Implementation of a curriculum that takes into consideration the needs of international students could mitigate the impact.

**Transferability of the Data**

Chapter 2 has described the methods used to ensure trustworthiness of the study. This section focuses on increasing the potential transferability of the study by examining the trustworthiness procedures used in the study. The amount of trustworthiness techniques used in a study ensures better transferability or credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, the measures used to improve transferability included:

(a) bracketing to minimize researcher biasness, (b) purposeful sampling and the use of peer review, and (c) thick description of the experiences shared by international students in the study.

Giorgi (2009) has discussed the importance of remaining subjective from being influenced by biasness and personal experience to increase trustworthiness. The present researcher has gone to great lengths to ensure the research remain subjective throughout the study. Before this study began, the researcher had documented his personal reasons for conducting this study and refrained from making any assumptions to remove any personal intrusion to the results of the study. This has been discussed in Chapter 2.
The researcher had chosen purposeful sampling to improve the transferability of the study. By using inclusion and exclusion criteria for participants, the research had ensured that only participants who experienced the phenomena were chosen for the study. This included international students who were in a CACREP-accredited master’s program in MCFC, had graduated from their master’s program and had practiced MCFC in their respective countries of origin for at least six months. The researcher had also included peer review to ensure no biasness in interpreting the data shared by participants in the study. The data shared by participants were shared in their own words by using an open-ended semi-structured interview guide. This was done to ensure that the participants’ lived experiences were shared in the study.

The study also focused on obtaining a thick description of the phenomena. The participants had extensive MCFC experience in their country of origin and shared the experiences during the data collection process. This included in-depth description of how participants had to change their MCFC practice in their home country to accommodate the local culture. This ensured a thick description of the phenomena that directly answers the research question of the study.

Participants in this study presented unique cultural filters. First, all participants in this study were from the Far East (e.g., Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, China, Japan). Second, six of seven participants in this study spoke English as a second language. Third, all participants stated that this is their first international educational experience as they had all previously studied in their countries. While all these cultural filters may limit the trustworthiness level of the study, the results of the study indicated
similar findings to previous research (Ang & Liamputtong, 2008; Beoku-Betts, 2004; McDowell et al., 2012; Mittal & Wieling, 2006; Nayar-Bhalerao, 2013; Ng & Smith, 2009; Sawir et al., 2008) in their learning and adaptation experiences. The similar results in this study with others provide evidence of the transferability of the study.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This qualitative research was designed to help MCFC programs understand the common challenges experienced by international students and provide suggestions to improve the experience for them. Several recommendations are suggested for future research. The first suggestion involves the use of a variation to this study. This study was a phenomenological study that focused on the experiences of international students. Future research could focus on other aspects of the phenomena related to international students and MCFC. One such research could focus on the practice of MCFC in their country of origin. For example, a study focusing on the theories used by international students in their country of origin. A possible research question for the proposed study can be: How are MCFC theories implemented in your home country?

Further study could be made on the impact of supervision among international students in MCFC programs. Supervision is one of the most crucial aspects of MCFC training; however, the literature in the field is limited. Participants of the study shared their thoughts on supervision during data collection, but this was not the focal point of the study. A future study focusing on supervision in MCFC could provide more understanding of the multicultural supervision process and its impact on international students.
More research could be done on clinical training among international students in MCFC. Results of this study have indicated international students were not entirely satisfied with the clinical training that they had received because of its lack of applicability in their respective home countries. A study focusing solely on this aspect could provide information on areas of the curriculum or course content that needs to be reviewed. This research could help MCFC training programs to be more culturally sensitive to their needs.

Finally, future research could be conducted on the teaching methods used by international student graduates who are teaching MCFC courses in their country of origin. In this research, some open-ended questions were asked about the participants’ experience of teaching MCFC in their home country. However, none of the experiences developed into any meaning units during data analysis. For future research, a grounded theory study on teaching methods used by MCFC graduates teaching MCFC in their home country could be beneficial. Such study would create a substantive theory in the processes involved in teaching MCFC from an international perspective (e.g., course content, curriculum, teaching style, etc.).

**Conclusion**

The primary research questions of the study were: What are the reflections of the experiences of international students in a CACREP-accredited marriage, couple and family counseling (MCFC) program in the United States, and how do the experiences inform their MCFC practice in their country of origin? The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the experiences of international students in MCFC programs in
the United States in order to shed light on: (a) the learning experiences of international students in studying MCFC a different culture, (b) ways of adaptation to the learning process, and (c) the applicability of MCFC knowledge in their own countries of origin.

A phenomenological approach was used as it fits the criteria of understanding the lived experiences of individuals in a specific phenomenon of interest (international students in the United States studying MCFC). Results of the study have indicated that participants went through different challenges in their academic life whilst studying in the United States. Furthermore, they also struggled in gaining a sense of belongingness whilst staying in the United States, and had to make meaningful changes to their counseling practice after going back to their respective countries of origin. Suggestions for future research include using different variations of this study (e.g., focus on supervisory relationship, clinical training, etc.).
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL
IRB Approval

RE: IRB #16-127 entitled “Phenomenological Experiences of International Students In Marriage, Couples, And Family Counseling Program”

Hello,
I am pleased to inform you that the Kent State University Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved your Application for Approval to Use Human Research Participants as a Level II/Expedited, category 6 project. Approval is effective for a twelve-month period: March 21, 2016 through March 20, 2017

Federal regulations and Kent State University IRB policy require that research be reviewed at intervals appropriate to the degree of risk, but not less than once per year. The IRB has determined that this protocol requires an annual review and progress report. The IRB tries to send you annual review reminder notice by email as a courtesy. However, please note that it is the responsibility of the principal investigator to be aware of the study expiration date and submit the required materials. Please submit review materials (annual review form and copy of current consent form) one month prior to the expiration date. Visit our website for forms.

HHS regulations and Kent State University Institutional Review Board guidelines require that any changes in research methodology, protocol design, or principal investigator have the prior approval of the IRB before implementation and continuation of the protocol. The IRB must also be informed of any adverse events associated with the study. The IRB further requests a final report at the conclusion of the study.

Kent State University has a Federal Wide Assurance on file with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP); FWA Number 00001853.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at Researchcompliance@kent.edu or 330-672-2704 or 330-672-8058.

Kent State University Office of Research Compliance
224 Cartwright Hall | Fax 330.672.2658

Victoria Holbrook | Graduate Assistant | 330.672.2384 | vholbroo@kent.edu
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APPENDIX B

EMAIL OF INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH
Appendix B

Email of Invitation to Participate in Research

Dear ………,

I am writing to invite you to participate in a research study toward the fulfillment of my Ph.D. degree dissertation requirements in Counselor Education and Supervision at Kent State University. The study is focused on understanding the experiences of international masters students in CACREP-accredited marriage, couple, and family counseling programs in the United States. This study will emphasize on the learning experiences and how well the training programs have helped international students practice marriage, couples, and family counseling in their country of origin. If you decide to participate, you will be involved in two interview sessions. Prior to the interviews, you will be asked for demographic information, such as age, marital status, academic status, and so forth. The initial interview will be approximately one hour in length and consist of you reflecting and discussing your experiences as an international student and as a marriage and family counseling practitioner in your home country. A week or two following the initial interview, in a second interview (approx. 30 minutes) you will be asked about some of the statements from the initial interview in an effort to clarify meaning and to accurately represent your perspective.

International students who have graduated from a masters-level CACREP-accredited marriage, couples, and family counseling program in the United States since 2009 and have practices marriage, couples, and family counseling in their country of origin are eligible to become participants in the study.

If you are willing to participate or know someone who has an interest in participating, please send me an email at mrahimi@kent.edu or call me at 330-294-8248. My dissertation co-advisors, Dr. Marty Jencius (mjencius@kent.edu) and Dr. Betsy Page (bpage@kent.edu) may be contacted as well.

This study has been approved by Kent State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) #16-127. The IRB may also be contacted at 330-672-2704.

Thank you for your time and potential interest in this study.

Sincerely,
Mohd Khairul Anuar Rahimi
Doctoral Candidate,
Counselor Education and Supervision,
Kent State University
APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT
Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

You are being invited to participate in a research study. This consent form will provide you with information of the research project, what you will need to do, and the associated risks and benefits of the research. Your participation is voluntary. Please read this from carefully. It is important that you ask questions and fully understand the research in order to make an informed decision. You will receive a copy of this document to take with you.

**Purpose**
The study is focused on understanding the experiences of international masters students in CACREP-accredited marriage, couples, and family counseling (MCFC) programs in the United States. This study will emphasize on the learning experiences and how well the training programs have helped international students practice marriage, couples, and family counseling in their country of origin.

**Procedures**
The initial interview will be approximately one hour in length and consist of you reflecting and discussing your co-teaching experiences with the interviewer. Prior to the initial interview, you will be asked for demographic information, such as age, marital status, academic status, and so forth. A week or two following the initial interview, in a second interview (approx. 30 minutes) you will be asked about some of the statements from the initial interview in an effort to clarify meaning and to accurately represent your perspective. All interviews will be recorded for transcription and data analysis purposes.

**Audio Recording**
Audio recordings will be used to capture your response. All recordings and related researcher notes will be discarded in a secure manner at the completion of the study. Pseudonyms will be used to report findings in writings and/or presentations. You have the right to review these recordings, if requested, prior to their use.

**Benefits**
This research will likely not benefit you directly. However, your participation in this study will increase the understanding of the experiences of international students in counseling programs specifically in marriage, couples, and family counseling and the applicability of the learning experiences in their country of origin.

**Risks and Discomfort**
There are no anticipated risks beyond those encountered in everyday life.

**Privacy and Confidentiality**
Your study related information will be kept confidential within the limits of the law. Any identifying information will be kept in a secure location and only the researchers will have access to the data. Research participants will not be identified in any publication or presentation of research results, only aggregate data will be used.
Your research information may, in certain circumstances, be disclosed to the Institutional Review Board (IRB), which oversees research at Kent State University, or to certain federal agencies. Confidentiality may not be maintained if you indicate that you may do harm to yourself or others.

**Compensation**
No financial or other compensation will be awarded for participants in this study.

**Voluntary Participation**
Taking part in this research study in entirely up to you. You may choose not to participate or you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You will be informed of any new, relevant information that may affect your health, welfare, or willingness to continue your study participation.

**Contact Information**
If you have any questions or concerns about this research, you may contact investigator Mohd Kahirul Anuar Rahimi at 330-294-8248. This project has been approved by the Kent State University Institutional Review Board. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or complaints about the research, you may call the IRB at 330-672-2704.

**Consent Statement and Signature**
I have read this consent form and have had the opportunity to have my questions answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that I can print a copy of this consent form for future reference.

                                   Participant Signature  Date
APPENDIX D

AUDIO CONSENT FORM
Appendix D

Audio Consent Form

**Study Title:** PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN MARRIAGE, COUPLES, AND FAMILY COUNSELING PROGRAM

**Principle Investigator:** Marty Jencius, Ph.D.

**Co-Principal Investigator:** Mohd Khairul Anuar Rahimi, M.S.

I agree to participate in an audio-taped interview about the study on the experiences of international masters students in marriage, couples, and family counseling (MCFC) programs in the United States. I agree that Mohd Khairul Anuar Rahimi may audio-tape this interview. The date and time of the interview will be mutually agreed upon.

I have been told that I have the right to listen to the audio recording. If you want to listen to the recording before it is used. I have decided that I:

___ want to listen to the recording  ___ do not want to listen to the recording

Sign now below if you do not want to listen to the recording. If you want to listen to the recording, you will be asked to sign after listening to them.

Mohd Khairul Anuar Rahimi may / may not (mark one) use the audio-tapes of me. The original tapes or copies may be used for:

___ this research project  ___ publication  ___ presentation at professional meetings

_________________________________________  ______________________________
Signature                                      Date
APPENDIX E

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION
Appendix E

Demographic Information

If you are willing to participate in this study, please complete the demographic information necessary for the purposes of the study. Your information is crucial and will be a major source to inform the study.

1. What is your gender?
   _ Male  _ Female

2. What is your current age?
   _ 21- 29 years  _ 30 – 39 years  _ 40 - 49 years  _ 50 years and above

3. What is your highest level of education?
   _ Masters Counseling Student
   _ Doctoral Counseling / Counselor Education Student

4. Relationship Status: ___________________________

5. Please specify your ethnicity: _________________________

6. Please specify your religion (if any): ___________________________

7. What is your country of origin or residency?
   __________________________________________

8. How long have you been / were you in the United States?
   _ 1 to 3 years  _ 3 to 5 years  _ 5 to 10 years  _ 10 years and above

9. How do you identify yourself as an International student?
   _ Nonimmigrant F- 1 Student Visa Status
   _ Dependent Status
   _ Recent Citizen due to wedlock
   _ Other, please specify: __________________________
10. Do you have any relatives or support system available in United States?
   _Parents
       _Siblings
       _Spouse
   _Significant other
   _Other, please specify: ___________________

11. When did you finish your studies as a masters student in a marriage, couples, and family counseling program:
   ____________________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________

12. How long have you practiced marriage, couples, and family counseling in your home country?
   ____________________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________

13. Were there any other international students in your program when you were studying?
   ____________________________________________________________________________

14. Were there any other international students from your home country in your program when you were studying?
   ____________________________________________________________________________

15. Was there a community within the university that you studied with which you could identify culturally with? If so, what was it?
   ____________________________________________________________________________

16. Was there a community in the city or town where you lived in with which you could identify culturally with? If so, what was it?
   ____________________________________________________________________________

Thank you for responding to the above questions. Kindly provide your email address so that I may contact you to set up an interview. Thank you for your assistance.
Contact Number: ________________________________
Email: ________________________________________
APPENDIX F

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Appendix F

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Please describe to me in detail about your learning experiences of being an international student in a marriage, couple, and family counseling program in the United States?
   
a. Could you tell me about yourself?

b. What do you like the most about the United States? Anything you dislike about the United States?

c. What were your initial impressions when you were just about to start your study in the United States? What were you most looking forward to? What scared you the most?

d. Please describe the first few months of your learning experiences? What do you remember the most? Please tell me more about it.

e. Please describe to me about your learning experiences after the first few months in the United States? Has the learning experience changed? Please tell me more about it.

f. How would you describe your overall learning experiences in the United States? Was it good or bad? Please tell me more about it.

g. Have you studied abroad before this? Tell me how it impacts your learning experiences in the United States.
h. What would you describe to be your best learning experiences? Please tell me more about it.

i. Are there any bad/negative experiences that stand out? Please tell me more about it.

j. Could you share any particular experience that stands out the most? Any particular stories in class/outside of class? Please tell me more about it.

2. Please describe to me in detail how you adapted to the challenges of studying MCFC in the United States? Your adaptation to the educational process?

   a. How would you describe the adaptation process? Please share any positive and negative experiences.

   b. How would you describe your relationship with members of your community/religion/ethnicity when you were studying? Please describe the said relationships in detail.

   c. Who would you describe to be your support system? Please tell me more about him/her/them.

   d. What helped you adapt the most? Any stories that you would like to share?

   e. What was the hardest part of adapting to life in the United States? Please tell me more about it. Any stories related to that?

   f. Your impressions of the curriculum? Was there anything in the curriculum that stands out?

   g. What adaptation challenges stands out the most? Any particular stories in class/outside of class that you would like to share?
3. Please describe to me in detail about the disparities and similarities between MCFC practices in the United States and your country of origin and how do you resolve the differences?
   
a. So what was it like coming back? How was it with your colleagues? Any example/stories that you want to share?
   
b. When you arrived in your country of origin, did you make any initial changes to your MCFC practice? Please tell me more about this.
   
c. Any particular incident of practicing MCFC in the United States that stands out for you? Please share a story about it.
   
d. Any particular incident of practicing MCFC in your country of origin that stands out? Are people in your country of origin receptive of your MCFC practice? Please share a story about it.
   
e. How was it like adapting the theories/practice that you learned in the United States in your country of origin? Please tell me more about it.
   
f. How similar are the MCFC practices in the United States and in your country of origin? Please tell me more about it.
   
g. How different are the MCFC practices in the US and in your country of origin? Please tell me more about it.
   
h. Could you describe the changes that you have made to your MCFC practice? Please tell me more about this.
   
i. Please describe how your MCFC training in the United States helps inform your practice in your country of origin?
j. (If applicable) How do you teach MCFC to your colleagues in your country of origin? Please tell me more about it.

k. Please describe your overall American learning experiences? How do you find experiences to be beneficial to your own current practice? What more could counseling programs do to make it a better experience for international students?
REFERENCES


McDowell, T., Fang, S. R., Kosutic, I., & Griggs, J. (2012). Centering the voices of international students in family studies and family therapy graduate programs. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 38*(1), 332-347.


