

“A Close Neighbor is More Valuable than a Distant Relative:”

Kyrgyz International Students’ Lived Experiences of Social Support in the United States

Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the

Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Kelsey “Maria” Lammy, M.A.

Graduate Program in Educational Studies

The Ohio State University

2025

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Darcy Haag Granello, Advisor

Dr. Noelle W. Arnold

Dr. Morgan Y. Liu

Copyright

Kelsey M. Lammy

2025

Abstract

This hermeneutic phenomenological study explored and described Kyrgyz international students' lived experiences of receiving social support in the United States. Students from Kyrgyzstan face many psychological and acculturation stressors when adjusting to American life, and Kyrgyz culture places a high value on social relationships and exchanges of support to ensure survival through difficult periods. Social support is widely recognized to buffer against stress and can serve an important role in stabilizing international students through the study abroad experience. In this study, Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological approach was utilized to elicit narratives of receiving social support from Kyrgyz international students studying at one midwestern U.S. university. Van Manen's reflective writing and hermeneutic follow-up interviewing techniques were used for analysis, and Relational Cultural Theory provided a conceptual lens for understanding the role of mutuality in students' social support experiences. The four thematic findings of the study uncovered that social support provides relational, temporal, spatial, and corporeal stability as students navigate acculturation through the following strategies: *Seeing Self-in-Other*, *Forming Family-like Bonds through Reciprocity*, *Utilizing Connections as Sources of Effective Guidance*, and *Proximity and Shared Activities Improve One's Emotional State*. The findings indicate that empathy, social comparison, and reciprocity allow this population to gain self- and social knowledge, developing their identities, goals, and relational bonds through social support. Kyrgyz students in this study demonstrated preferences for informational aid from trustworthy sources and physical proximity to support givers, even when support was implicit during social companionship. Through social support, Kyrgyz students increased their awareness of and connection to their local community, which strengthened their well-being and optimism about humanity and the future. The implications of

the study can help counseling, university staff, and Kyrgyz community members improve clinical treatment methods, campus programming, and community support for this population. Further research on remote support, different international student populations, or varying generations of Kyrgyz people in the U.S. was recommended to investigate if variations in social support experiences and preferences would exist for different groups.

Dedicated to Tyler John Briggs, who lost his life before this project was completed.
Your friendship and caring acts taught me the value of social support in our darkest times.

Acknowledgments

Above all, thanks be to God, in whose strength all things are possible.

Thank you to my spouse, Paul, for your patience, love, endless support, and perpetual faith in my ability to succeed. Your beautiful heart and sacrifices for me are perfect examples of the transformative power of social support.

Thank you to my spiritual community for your guidance, inspiration, and love.

Thank you to my family, without whom I could not have achieved all I have done.

Thank you to my advisor, Dr. Darcy Haag Granello, my Counselor Education colleagues, and all the amazing Ohio State faculty who have taught and encouraged me over the years to reach this life-changing opportunity.

Heartfelt thanks to Dr. Morgan Y. Liu for providing extensive feedback and ongoing mentorship throughout the dissertation process, which helped me to develop my thinking and scholarship.

Thank you to the Kyrgyz students who made this research study possible with their willingness to share their stories with me. You have opened my eyes to new perspectives on life and relationships.

Thanks to my co-workers and supervisors for their flexibility and support of my research project.

Thanks to all the friends and loved ones I have encountered across the world for all the lessons you have taught me.

DBL, thanks for getting me started.

Vita

2008.....Napoleon High School

2011.....B.A. English, The Ohio State University

2016.....M.A. Clinical Mental Health Counseling, The Ohio State University

2016 – 2021.....Licensed Professional Counselor, License # C.1600595

2015.....Counselor Trainee, Gahanna-Jefferson School District, Gahanna, Ohio

2015 – 2016..... Counseling Intern, Ohio Dominican University

2023 – Present....Director of International Student Support Services, National Louis University

2015 – 2019.....Graduate Administrative Associate, Suicide Prevention Program, The Ohio
State University

2015 – 2019.....Graduate Administrative Associate, Student Wellness Center, The Ohio State
University

2020.....Student Services Advisor, UIC Global, Shorelight Education

2021 – 2022.....International Enrollment Specialist, National Louis University

2022 – 2023.....International Student Services Specialist, National Louis University

2016.....Recipient, Outstanding Master’s Student in Clinical Mental Health Counseling,
The Ohio State University

2018.....Recipient, Outstanding Doctoral Student in Clinical Mental Health Counseling,
The Ohio State University

Fields of Study

Major Field: Educational Studies

Specialization: Counselor Education

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Dedication	iv
Acknowledgments	v
Vita	vi
Table of Contents	vii
List of Tables	xii
List of Figures	xiii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
1.1 Background.....	2
1.2 Statement of the Problem	4
1.3 Purpose of the Study	5
1.4 Research Questions	6
1.5 Definition of Terms	7
1.6 Conceptual Framework	8
1.6.1 Van Manen’s Hermeneutic Phenomenology	9
1.6.2 Mutuality and Relational Cultural Theory	11
1.6.3 Social Support Types and Cultural Variations	13
1.7 Assumptions.....	16
1.8 Limitations	17
1.9 Significance of the Study	17
1.10 Summary	18
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	20

2.1 International Students' Interpersonal Needs	20
2.2 Kyrgyz Students in Transtion.....	24
2.2.1 Cross-cultural Influences and Education in Kyrgyzstan	25
2.2.2 Relationships in Kyrgyz Culture	29
2.3 Social Support	32
2.3.1 Model of Social Support Types	33
2.3.2 Cultural Variations in Social Support	34
2.3.3 Mechanisms of Social Support	37
2.3.3.1 Mechanisms Dependent on Influence and Behaviors of Others.....	39
2.3.3.2 Mechanisms Dependent on One's Self-Concept.....	41
2.4 Researching Lived Experiences of Social Support.....	43
2.5 Summary	48
Chapter 3: Methodology.....	49
3.1 Purpose of the Study and Research Questions	49
3.2 Research Design and Rationale	51
3.3 Researcher Role	53
3.4 Participants and Sampling	55
3.5 Instrumentation	57
3.5.1 Interview Protocol	59
3.6 Data Collection	62
3.7 Data Analysis	62
3.7.1 Uncovering Thematic Aspects	63
3.7.2 Isolating Thematic Statements	63

3.7.3 Composing Linguistic Transformations	64
3.7.4 Hermeneutic Conversational Interviewing	65
3.7.5 Determining Incidental and Essential Themes	65
3.8 Qualitative Rigor and Validity	66
3.9 Summary	68
Chapter 4 Results.....	69
4.1 Statement of the Problem and Research Questions	69
4.2 Setting and Participant Demographics	70
4.3 Data Collection	72
4.4 Summary of Data Analysis.....	72
4.4.1 Uncovering Thematic Aspects and Isolating Thematic Statements	73
4.4.2 Composing Linguistic Transformations	75
4.4.3 Hermeneutic Conversational Interviewing	76
4.4.4 Determining Incidental and Essential Themes	78
4.5 Discussion of the Research Questions	78
4.5.1 Sub-question 1	79
4.5.2 Sub-question 2	81
4.5.2 Sub-question 3	84
4.6 Findings	86
4.6.1 Barriers and Benefits of Securing Social Support in the U.S.	88
4.6.1.1 Challenges in the American Environment	88
4.6.1.2 Need Increases the Impact of Support	91
4.6.2 Relationality: Seeing Self-in-Other	92

4.6.2.1 Shifting Identities in Migration	95
4.6.2.2 Social Comparison as Indirect Social Support	97
4.6.3 Temporality: Forming Family-like Bonds through Reciprocity	100
4.6.3.1 Reciprocity in Relationships and Society	102
4.6.4 Spatiality: Utilizing Connections as Sources of Effective Guidance	105
4.6.5 Corporeality: Proximity and Shared Activities Improve One's Emotional State...	108
4.6.6 Social Support Provides Enduring Hope	110
4.6.7 Phenomenological Description of Experiencing Social Support	111
4.7 Summary of Findings.....	113
Chapter 5 Discussion.....	115
5.1 Research Questions	115
5.2 Related Literature.....	116
5.3 Methodology	118
5.4 Interpretation of Findings	119
5.4.1 Seeing Self-in-Other	119
5.4.1.1 Relational Identity	120
5.4.1.2 Mutual Empathy	122
5.4.1.3 Social Comparison	123
5.4.2 Forming Family-like Bonds through Reciprocity	124
5.4.3 Utilizing Connections as Sources of Effective Guidance	126
5.4.3.1 Seeking Trustworthy Sources of Support	127
5.4.3.2 Preference for Informational Social Support	128
5.4.4 Proximity and Shared Activities Improve One's Emotional State	128

5.4.5 Transcending Self through Relational Knowledge	131
5.5 Implications and Recommendations	133
5.5.1 Counselors and Counselor Education Faculty	133
5.5.2 University Administrators and Advisors	135
5.5.3 Kyrgyz Students, Community Members, and Families	138
5.5.4 For Times of Political Instability	139
5.6 Limitations	140
5.7 Suggestions for Further Research	141
5.8 Reflection	142
5.9 Summary	144
5.10 Conclusion	145
References.....	147
Appendix A: Recruitment E-mail	154
Appendix B: Informed Consent	155
Appendix C: Interview Questions	157

List of Tables

Table 1. Participant Demographics.....	71
Table 2: Thematic Aspects in Participant Interviews.....	74

List of Figures

Figure 1. Model of Four Types of Social Support.....	34
Figure 2. Essential and Salient Themes.....	87

Chapter 1: Introduction

In this chapter, I argue for the relevance of my phenomenological study with international students from Kyrgyzstan and their experiences of receiving social support in the United States. The argument for this study draws on two bodies of academic literature: international student research and scholarship on Kyrgyz culture and relational ties. Through the discussion of both topics, I aimed to demonstrate that a phenomenological study of Kyrgyz international students' experiences of social support (1) fills a meaningful gap in the social science literature on Kyrgyz international students, where no research on this specific population in the U.S. exists, and also (2) contributes to a conversation with existing literature on Kyrgyz people's use of relational ties as a means to survival amidst hardship and transition. The meeting of these two bodies of literature through my study firstly provides relevance to Western academic aims of understanding and supporting the international student experience. Secondly, this study contributes to Central Asian scholarship on a transitioning Kyrgyz culture by presenting a phenomenological account of the experiences of a Kyrgyz migrant population (students) in the United States. I argue that my phenomenological study, which elucidates the essence of social support as a phenomenon that is meaningfully experienced in human life, can provide the in-depth descriptive and thematic data that will be particularly well-suited to filling this gap in the literature. Phenomenological inquiry on this specific population is especially needed due to the variations in social support effectiveness that have been found across cultures as well as the complexity and importance of relational ties within Kyrgyz culture (Chen et al., 2012; Gullette, 2010; Kim et al., 2008; Provis, 2013).

1.1 Background

This study focuses on social support in the lived experiences of international students from Kyrgyzstan who have moved to the United States to pursue their higher education. These students migrate amidst a complex global backdrop, as political and economic instability in the Central Asian region following the dissolution of the Soviet Union has drawn in international institutions and NGOs, whose influence has dominated Kyrgyzstan's socio-cultural and educational development and whose cultural values are at times in conflict with Kyrgyz traditions and values (Aisarakunova, 2010; Borbieva, 2010; de la Sablonnière et al., 2010; Kirmse, 2010). Despite serving as a "symbolic resource of hope," education in Kyrgyzstan has also faced many obstacles corresponding with the political challenges of the transition period (Amsler, 2009, p. 1189). Amidst such regional transitions and cross-cultural influences, the maintenance of strong social ties has remained nuanced and critically important within Kyrgyz culture, with traditional customs of reciprocally exchanging goods, assistance, and hospitality generating bonds of mutual dependence that aid their collective survival through challenging periods (de la Sablonnière et al., 2010; Gullette, 2007, 2010). Some Kyrgyz youth, increasingly exposed to American culture in Kyrgyzstan, have assimilated American culture at the expense of losing some of their identification with Kyrgyz culture (de la Sablonnière et al., 2010). De la Sablonnière et al.'s study of university students in Kyrgyzstan found that the students perceived that American culture has a legitimately and relatively higher status than Kyrgyz traditional culture due to the economic success of the United States. Motivated by the unstable economic conditions of Kyrgyzstan and the perceived economic and educational opportunities of the United States, Kyrgyz students leave behind their strong relational ties in search of a better future.

Hundreds of Kyrgyz students join the over one million international students that come to study in the United States despite the myriad challenges and stressors inherent to the relocation and acculturation process (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2023). In particular, a major and sometimes unexpected difficulty for international students is their increased risk of psychological distress as a result of several mental health stressors, such as acculturation and language difficulties, discrimination, homesickness, financial concerns, and other academic problems (Lértora, 2022). Despite the increased psychological risks and stress experienced by international students, these students have significantly lower rates of psychological service utilization than their domestic counterparts (Liu et al., 2019). Mental health counselors and university support staff thus face a considerable challenge in discovering alternate approaches to help mitigate the psychological distress that many international students experience.

One possible approach that could serve this role for international students is to strengthen social support, which is widely evidenced to buffer against stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Thoits, 2011). More understanding of how social support may effectively function for specific populations of international students is needed due to cultural variations in the effectiveness and understandings of social support (Chen et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2008). Kyrgyz students in the United States are a meaningful population to study given the lack of existing social support literature on this population and the particular complexity and importance of relational ties and assistance within their culture (Gullette, 2010; Provis, 2013). My hermeneutic phenomenological study explores Kyrgyz international students' lived experiences of receiving social support in the U.S. and benefits Kyrgyz youth and their families with insight into the lived experiences and role of social support for other Kyrgyz students who have already made the move to study in the U.S. The study provides rich descriptive and interpretive data on the essential qualities of the students'

experiences of social support that strengthened their sense of interpersonal connection with the giver of support that university administrators and psychological practitioners can use as a basis for developing strategies to foster effective social support with this population.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Kyrgyz international students face various challenges and psychological stressors as they transition to life in the United States. These students come from a cultural context in which mutually supportive social ties have served as a means for collective survival. This hermeneutic phenomenological study gathered data through interviews on these students' lived experiences of social support in the United States in order to produce a rich descriptive, thematic analysis of the essential characteristics of effective social support for this specific population. The evidence from previous research of cultural variations in effective social support underscores the relevance of a phenomenological study specifically focused on Kyrgyz international students in the U.S., as there is a gap in the literature for this population. Interviews with Kyrgyz university students in this study provided some of the first data on their experiences in the U.S. to the academic discourse. By utilizing van Manen's hermeneutic interviewing method in the follow-up interviews, the reflective analysis process involved the voices of the participants in determining the essential qualities of effective social support for this population. This phenomenological inquiry has provided a greater understanding of what social support is like during their transition and the essential qualities of support that they experience as strengthening their social connection, which can inform psychological research and practice and provide a basis for future research on Kyrgyz relationships.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to illuminate Kyrgyz international students' lived experiences of receiving social support in the United States, describing their experiences of social support and interpreting the essential qualities of effective social support for these students. By interviewing undergraduate Kyrgyz international students at a midwestern American university, the researcher described and interpreted according to van Manen's thematic analysis the lived experiences of receiving social support in the United States of these students. Initial interviews took place on zoom and lasted 60-90 minutes with the primary aim of obtaining pre-reflective narratives of receiving social support. In addition to the initial interviews that elicited narratives of receiving social support, follow-up interviews with some participants utilized van Manen's hermeneutic interviewing to ensure participants' own perspectives clarified initial interview data and contributed to the interpretive analytical process. Follow-up interviews took place on zoom and lasted 30-45 minutes with the primary aim of clarifying previous statements and assessing the accuracy of the researcher's initial interpretations through hermeneutic discussion. Additionally, the researcher recorded her reflections and phenomenological insights in her researcher journal throughout the study. The sample size of this study was predicted to be between 10-15 students, and the final sample size was 11 participants when data saturation was achieved.

The researcher is the director of the international office at this university and provides acculturation support and non-academic advising to students. The researcher implemented a recruitment strategy through email, WhatsApp, or posted flyers through the university's international office mailing list and bulletin boards. Recognizing that international students perceive university administrators as holding power over their academic future, the researcher

made clear to participants that the research study will have no impact on their academic or other standing at the university, and refusal to participate in the study would not result in any form of penalty or discrimination against the student. Informed consent and allowing voluntary withdrawal from the study at any time were also important safeguards to protect participants from any abuse of power.

This research study could bring value to the Kyrgyz community, the field of mental health counseling, university support staff, and social science researchers. Firstly, Kyrgyz youth and their families can gain valuable insight about how social support could impact their educational journey abroad as they prepare to study in the United States. Mental health professionals and university support staff who work with Kyrgyz international students can use the results of this study to help inform strategies to guide students into more supportive social relationships while they are in the United States. Additionally, this study provides social science researchers with phenomenological data as a basis for further studies on this population and their relationships. The question, *What are Kyrgyz international students' lived experiences of receiving social support in the United States?* is the primary focus of this phenomenological study.

1.4 Research Questions

My study on Kyrgyz international students' lived experiences of social support in the United States contributes to the previously discussed literature on international students' social needs and the existing scholarship on Kyrgyz relationships. This study used van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenological approach to uncover the essential qualities of social support as a "lived experience" for the participants. The primary research question of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was:

What are Kyrgyz international students' lived experiences of receiving social support in the United States?

As this was a phenomenological study, the research was aimed at describing the experiences of the Kyrgyz students and interpreting the essential themes of what it is like to experience social support as a Kyrgyz student in the U.S. The first two sub-questions of this study were based on a model of social support types that will be described in the next section on Definition of Terms. These sub-questions provided a framework for eliciting narratives during the interviews and were as follows:

(1) What are the lived experiences of receiving emotion-focused (esteem or emotional) support in the United States for Kyrgyz students?

(2) What are the lived experiences of receiving problem-focused (instrumental or informational) support in the United States for Kyrgyz students?

The final sub-question of the study was concerned with understanding the essential qualities of experiencing relational connection (mutuality) fostered by the reception of social support:

(3) What is it like to experience mutuality when receiving social support as a Kyrgyz student?

All sub-questions were used to refine and support the focus of the primary phenomenological research question. A definition of terms will be provided next to clarify the focus of these research questions.

1.5 Definition of Terms

The key concepts that will be used in this study will be defined in this section.

- “Kyrgyz international students” will refer to undergraduate students who are citizens of Kyrgyzstan, enrolled at an American university, and living in the United States.

- “Lived experiences” are defined in van Manen’s phenomenology as one’s perceptions of the *lifeworld*: “the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it” (van Manen, 1990, p. 9).
- “Social support” is defined based on the conceptual framework of van Manen’s hermeneutic phenomenology and Relational Cultural Theory as *assistive acts (1) experienced as supportive by the recipient and (2) simultaneously experienced as strengthening the sense of connection between the persons involved* (Jordan, 2017; van Manen, 1990)
 - “Emotion-focused social support” includes esteem support, such as encouragement or praise, and emotional support, such as nurturing, love, or comfort (Chen et al., 2012)
 - “Problem-focused social support” includes informational assistance, such as advice, and instrumental aid, such as physical labor, tangible items, or money (Thoits, 2011; Chen et al., 2012)
- “Mutuality” is defined as a sense of interpersonal connection that involves empathic attunement and responsiveness from both individuals (Jordan, 2017).

Further explanation of the conceptual framework behind the definition of these terms will follow.

1.6 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study integrated the philosophy of van Manen’s hermeneutic phenomenology, the conceptual lens of Relational Cultural Theory, and a conception of social support models and culture based in social science literature. Van Manen’s phenomenology provides a philosophical argument for the study of lived experiences, rather than only empirical data, in human sciences. The phenomenological approach is useful for allowing

researchers to investigate and describe the human experience as it is meaningfully lived by subjects. Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) provides a theoretical and critical argument that relationships are central to humans' psychological well-being and growth. RCT also introduces the concept of *mutuality* in relationships, which refined the focus in this study to supportive acts that produce stronger relational connection. Next, an established model of social support was used to identify two broad categories of social support, emotion-focused and problem-focused, that provided a basis for developing an interview protocol to elicit narratives of lived experiences of social support. However, a discussion of the varied ways in which different cultures may experience effective social support served as a caution against presuppositions of how Kyrgyz students experience social support in their lives. Remaining true to the purpose of phenomenological inquiry, the researcher remained open to understanding the phenomenon as it presented itself in the data and able to depart from previous models of social support that did not accurately describe these students' experiences.

1.6.1 Van Manen's Hermeneutic Phenomenology

The core philosophical aim of this current research study is to explore how Kyrgyz international students experience social support in the lifeworld and to elucidate the meaning and significance that social support has for these participants. Rather than using empirical routes of inquiry, I argue that this study was best suited for a phenomenological approach, because phenomenology allows the researcher to describe the meaning and actual experience of participants as they live them. Additionally, this methodology can account for the complexity of Kyrgyz social ties and maintain openness to understanding the unique characteristics that social support may have for my specific research population. Van Manen, in accord with Gadamer, argued that objective methods are "antithetical to the spirit of human science research" (1990, p.

3). Empirical methods that aim to solve problems may distance the researcher from understanding the depth and significance of the consciously lived experiences of phenomena that are truly meaningful to human existence. In hermeneutic phenomenology, research questions do not “problem solve” but rather are *meaning questions* of lived human experience: “They ask for the meaning and significance of phenomena” to the person experiencing it (p. 23). Therefore, this research examined *lived experiences of the phenomenon of social support* in an effort to describe and interpret the meaning of these experiences for Kyrgyz students.

This phenomenological approach was primarily interested in revealing the essential qualities of the phenomenon of social support in the lifeworlds of Kyrgyz students in the United States. Drawing on Husserl, van Manen defined the *lifeworld* as “the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it” (p. 9). Therefore, participants in my study were asked to provide narratives of their pre-reflective lived experiences of social support in initial interviews, rather than asked to make meaning of those experiences. Van Manen’s phenomenology is interested in understanding the essences and experiential meanings of phenomena as they present themselves to consciousness, before we reflect on or conceptualize them. Van Manen proposed that the *essence* of a phenomenon is a linguistic construction that describes the phenomenon in a novel and insightful way. For van Manen, “the aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence” (p. 36). The writing and re-writing process is crucial to van Manen’s method for reflective analysis, as he argues that this linguistic process is what facilitates the discovery of thematic essences in the data. Phenomenological inquiry requires openness to understand the phenomenon as it presents itself rather than adhering to preconceived ideas about the phenomenon that can bias the findings. For this reason, continually applying phenomenological

epoché (bracketing) and reduction throughout the study were important parts of the reflective (analysis) process. As the crux of this study rests on the importance of social support in human relationships, the next section highlights one of the four existential themes which van Manen proposed to “pervade the lifeworlds of all human beings:” *lived human relation* (relationality or communality) (p. 101).

1.6.2 Mutuality and Relational Cultural Theory

This study uses the concept of *mutuality* to refer to a qualitative state of experiencing mutual human connection. The primacy of this human connection, called *mutuality* in Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) and *relationality* by van Manen, is the unifying concept behind this study’s focus on social support that strengthens one’s connection to others (Jordan, 2017; van Manen, 1990). While van Manen’s concept of *relationality* can include a neutral relation toward another, this study primarily uses the concept of *mutuality* to focus inquiry on a positive and mutual connection between two individuals. Van Manen stated that it is through this *relationality* to others that one can “develop a conversational relation which allows us to transcend our *selves*” (1990 p. 105). This concept is complemented by social support research that has found that through the presence of supportive relationships, individuals can be buffered against stress (Thoits, 2011)—thereby somewhat transcending limitations of their individual psychological capacity to tolerate stress through human connections. Beyond just seeking to transcend one’s limitations, van Manen proposed that humans have existentially “searched in this experience of the other, the communal, the social for a sense of purpose in life, meaningfulness, grounds for living” (1990, p. 105). The purpose and meaningfulness that individuals experience through social relations could potentially contribute to the increased resilience against stress that social support produces.

Van Manen's emphasis on relationality as an existential human experience corresponds with the primacy of human relationships in Relational Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2018). Because this study focuses on Kyrgyz international students who are a minority within the American environment, Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) provides a conceptual framework that incorporates sociocultural context and the importance of relationships for women and minoritized groups. RCT contributes a feminist critical lens to this study that resists the Western patriarchal biases likely to influence the analytic assumptions of the researcher, who was trained as a counselor educator at an American university. RCT proposed that psychological well-being and human development arise from growth based in *mutuality*—a paradigm shift away from the prevailing Western psychological theories of the 1970s, which supported an individualistic-competitive cultural concept that “self-interest was a primary driving force at the core of human nature” (Jordan, 2017, p. 233). Traditional Western theories of psychology had held that individuation, separation, and autonomy were the markers of emotional maturity and psychological health (Comstock, 2008). In contrast, RCT asserted that not autonomy but rather *mutuality* is the key to psychological thriving through the creation and maintenance of growth-fostering relationships (Jordan, 2017). *Mutuality* is a sense of connection characterized by mutual empathy that involves empathic attunement and responsiveness from both individuals and is central to sustaining mutually-growth-fostering relationships. RCT argued that individuals engaged in mutually-growth-fostering relationships will experience “the five good things”—positive outcomes indicative of psychological well-being—which are increased (1) zest and energy, (2) feelings of worth and value, (3) desire to engage in more healthy relationships, (4) understanding of oneself and the other, and (5) creativity for action (p. 235). My research design

and questions are conceptually grounded in this theory that emphasizes the importance of social support and mutuality.

1.6.3 Social Support Types and Cultural Variations

Through my study of the lived experiences of Kyrgyz students, I aimed to elucidate how the phenomenon of social support distinctly manifests within their lifeworld. For the purposes of operationalizing this study, social support was defined as assistive acts (1) experienced as supportive by the recipient and (2) simultaneously experienced as strengthening the sense of connection between the persons involved (Jordan, 2017; van Manen, 1990). The model of social support used for the sub-questions in this study utilized two overarching categories of assistive functions: emotion-focused support (i.e. encouragement, comfort, love) and problem-focused support (i.e. advice, instrumental aid) (Chen et al., 2012; Thoits, 2011). Emotion-focused support can include *esteem* support, aimed to increase the confidence or self-esteem of the person in need, or *emotional* support, intended to promote positive feelings or provide comfort and care to the individual in need. In the case of international students transitioning to life in the U.S., students may need emotional-focused support to buffer against the emotional stress of homesickness, loneliness, discrimination, or feeling overwhelmed. Problem-focused support includes *instrumental* aid, such as the provision of money, tangible items, or physical assistance, and *informational* aid, such as advice or instructions. An international student may often need problem-focused support as they adjust to unexpected cultural differences, communication challenges, and independent living. Although my research aimed to maintain the openness to the phenomenon as experienced in the lifeworld that phenomenology requires, the data collection involved eliciting experiential accounts of such emotion-focused support and problem-focused support as defined in this model of social support.

One justification for the need of such phenomenological openness in this study was that the effectiveness of different social support types and the response to receiving different types of social support varies according to one's cultural context. Students from Kyrgyzstan may not experience social support in the forms that are traditionally expected by American researchers, so the phenomenological openness to how social support manifests for this population is crucially important. Meanings and functions of problem- or emotion-focused support differ across cultures, especially when comparing the individualistic American culture with more collectivistic Asian cultures, where preserving group harmony is more highly valued. In some cases, individuals who feel that soliciting help or discussing problems could burden their loved ones or weaken closeness in those relationships may avoid seeking social support (Thoits, 2011). The preference to preserve harmonious relations may be why Asians and Asian Americans have reported that social support is unhelpful and shown resistance to seeking it (Taylor et al., 2007). This evidence suggests that maintaining closeness is prioritized over receiving support across some cultures and provided further justification for my study's focus on social support that promotes mutuality (social connection) in particular. Kyrgyz students may be disinclined from seeking social support that they perceive as damaging to their relationships, but this study is valuable in that it reveals which types of social support are perceived as effective and as enhancing interpersonal connection for this population.

Although this study was designed to elicit narratives of emotion-focused and problem-focused support that are explicit, the researcher remained attuned to any variations in participant's narratives that indicated more subtle or implicit forms of receiving support. When distinctions are made between 'explicit' and 'implicit' social support, more evidence emerges to demonstrate differing cultural preferences for receiving support. Explicit social support can be

defined as “seeking and using advice and emotional solace,” and implicit social support is “focusing on valued social groups” (Taylor et al., 2007, p. 831). Asians and Asian Americans exhibit higher signs of biological stress, such as heightened cortisol levels in saliva, when experiencing explicit support. Conversely, European Americans had lowered cortisol levels when utilizing explicit social support. Therefore, explicit forms of social support increased stress in Asians but lowered stress in European Americans. When engaging in implicit social support, however, Asian Americans experienced more biological and psychological benefit, while European Americans benefitted less from implicit than explicit social support. Therefore, culturally inappropriate styles of social support can exacerbate stress (Kim et al., 2008). One’s preference for implicit versus explicit support and the amount of benefit they derive from each type of support can be highly dependent on their culture. By utilizing a phenomenological approach, my study remained open to how the phenomenon of social support manifests in the lifeworld of the Kyrgyz international students in light of the potential variations in how social support is experienced across cultures.

Social support mechanisms are also impacted by the changing cultural contexts in which international students experience their relationships. Thoits proposed seven potential mechanisms by which social support could be producing positive psychological and health outcomes (2011). Three proposed mechanisms—belonging, social influence/comparison, and social control—seem to be dependent on the influence and behavior of others. As an international student moves to the United States, the new social norms and behaviors of the host culture could alter the positive effects that social support had in the student’s home country. The other four mechanisms of social support—*mattering*, self-esteem, sense of control, and perceived social support—are arguably more dependent on one’s own perception and self-concept. By

entering a new culture, the international student may experience changes in their social roles, sense of efficacy, or perceived social status that could decrease the positive effects of social support. Therefore, an awareness of these potential mechanisms of social support were beneficial to gaining deeper insight during the reflective process of data analysis.

1.7 Assumptions

Although my following assumptions are grounded in the scientific literature, I needed to utilize bracketing to ensure that I have the openness required for true phenomenological inquiry. One assumption, based on evidence of cultural variations in the effectiveness of social support, is that Kyrgyz students experience social support in a distinct way from other cultural groups. Additionally, the categorizing of social support as emotion-focused support and problem-focused aid assumes that social support is experienced in these forms by my participants. Van Manen's method of continual bracketing through the reflective writing process will be crucial in ensuring openness to understanding the phenomenon as it presents itself.

Furthermore, Van Manen's methodology recognizes that the researcher is a human with a personal relationship to the phenomenon they study (1990). As a university administrator, I am interested in this research as a means to better understand the international student experience, and I hold the belief that social support is integral to a successful transition to American life. I am also oriented to this study as a counselor and psychological researcher, and, as a result of this orientation, I am interested in social support due to its potential implications for improving mental health. One assumption underpinning this study is that social support influences and is integral to healthy relationships and well-being. This assumption is grounded in the Relational Cultural Theory that mutually-growth-fostering relationships produce the "five good things" indicative of psychological thriving (Jordan, 2017, p. 235). RCT proposed that individuals

engaged in mutually-growth-fostering relationships will experience increased (1) zest and energy, (2) feelings of worth and value, (3) desire to engage in more healthy relationships, (4) understanding of oneself and the other, and (5) creativity for action. Therefore, I assumed that social support that strengthens mutuality would increase the likelihood of such positive psychological outcomes for my participants.

1.8 Limitations

As a phenomenological study focused on Kyrgyz international students at a midwestern American university, the results of this research were highly qualitative and not likely to be widely generalizable to other populations, especially considering the evidence of cultural variations in social support effectiveness. Additionally, many of my participants were non-native speakers of English and were not able to express all aspects of their experiences in English. Finally, as an American who has not visited Kyrgyzstan to directly experience the native culture, environment, and customs of Kyrgyzstan, my American cultural expectations of social support could easily bias my interpretation of the data. To mitigate this bias, I employed van Manen's method of hermeneutic interviewing to include participants in the reflective analytical process as a follow-up to initial interviews.

1.9 Significance of the Study

This study is significant for its exploration of how social support functions and is experienced as meaningful, and the study is founded upon the existential need for social connection and assistance experienced by all people and described as *relationality* by van Manen (1990). My research focused specifically on Kyrgyz students' experiences of receiving social support in the U.S., but this study revealed how social support could be used as a strategy to buffer against stress through the relational interactions that are inherent to all human life. In

particular, the findings of this study have implications for international education and cross-cultural social support research. As increased numbers of international students arrive in the United States each year, a greater understanding of how these students receive social support can inform mental health professionals on the role that healthy relationships may play in students' experiences in the United States. Additionally, university administrators and advisors can organize effective support for fostering relationships among international students that may have potential to promote more meaningful interpersonal connections. As this is one of the first studies on Kyrgyz international students in the U.S., Kyrgyz youth and their families could benefit from learning about the lived experiences and role of social support for other Kyrgyz students who have already made the move to study in the U.S. Finally, this study can provide insightful phenomenological data to underscore the value of research that places relational ties as central to understanding human experience, especially when studying marginalized populations.

1.10 Summary

This chapter began by positioning my study of Kyrgyz students' experiences of social support in the United States within two bodies of literature: social science research of international students and Central Asian cultural studies. I introduced background information from both disciplines to demonstrate how phenomenological research on social support is relevant. In my statement of the problem, I argued that a study of social support as experienced by Kyrgyz international students in the United States fills a meaningful gap in both bodies of academic literature. I stated the purpose of my study to describe and interpret the essential qualities of the phenomenon of social support for Kyrgyz international students. I presented my primary research question, *What are Kyrgyz international students' lived experiences of receiving social support in the United States?*, along with three supporting sub-questions. Through my

conceptual framework, I explained the philosophical underpinnings of van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology that have shaped this study and introduced *mutuality* as a unifying concept across phenomenology, Relational Cultural Theory, and social support literature. I also proposed a functional model for categorizing types of social support while emphasizing the evidence for cultural variations in social support that warrants phenomenological openness. The assumptions and limitations of the study were discussed alongside methodological approaches for minimizing bias in the phenomenological research process. The chapter concluded with the significance of this study of Kyrgyz international students' lived experiences of social support in the United States for counseling and future research. Chapter two will provide more in-depth discussion of the literature from international student social science research, Kyrgyz and Central Asian studies, and social support research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter reviews the relevant academic literature to justify the need for my hermeneutic phenomenological study on Kyrgyz international students' lived experiences of receiving social support in the United States. Literature on the challenges and interpersonal needs of international students in the United States are presented, as well as research on the value of relationships in Kyrgyzstan's transitional context. An analysis of social support variations and mechanisms will provide a framework for how social support is conceptualized in this study. Finally, a theoretical exploration of van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology and Relational Cultural Theory will clarify the current study's focus on lived experiences of social support.

2.1 International Students' Interpersonal Needs

The increasing number of international students studying in the United States and the complex contexts which shape their educational journeys warrant further academic study into their lived experiences. As global markets expand and economic competition increases, American institutions of higher education have made greater efforts to attract international students (Prieto-Welch, 2016). Despite several restrictions on international travel in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States continues to attract the largest number of international students in the world. Over one million international students from more than 200 places of origin studied at U.S. higher education institutions during the 2022-2023 academic year, and international student enrollment in the United States continues to increase (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2023). International student mobility has increased particularly in Asia where this economic competition is at a peak. Some proposed motives for Asian students' willingness to study abroad are a desire to avoid the hyper-competitive systems in their native countries, the pursuit of an overseas degree in higher education as an 'easy option,' resulting in

moderate prestige, and an expectation of more updated content and teaching in Western countries (Choi & Nieminen, 2013; Shafaei & Razak, 2018). Personal motives for pursuing a university degree in the U.S. may vary, but many economic, geopolitical, social, and professional factors influence students from diverse global regions to journey to the U.S. in search of an advantageous education. Despite the potential advantages of foreign study, the acculturation process for international students includes significant stress related to language barriers, loneliness and homesickness, discrimination, financial concerns and academic challenges (Lértora et al., 2017; Lértora et al., 2022). As acculturation stress increases the psychological risks for this population, research on social support, which has been demonstrated to buffer against adverse outcomes of stress, could contribute valuable insights for scholars and practitioners working with international students (Cohen et al., 2000; Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017; Thoits, 2011).

International students in the U.S. encounter many acculturation stressors, and they often leave behind the social support networks needed for well-being and buffering against stress. Counselors and university administrators are posed with the challenge of supporting international students in finding methods to mitigate this increased stress, and increasing social support in their host country has potential for being an effective solution. A meta-analysis of eight studies on social support and acculturative stress for international students concluded that social support does play a major role in reducing international students' stress (Kristiana et al., 2022). In particular, one study of East Asian international students in the U.S. found that social support was significantly negatively correlated with acculturative stress (Ra & Trusty, 2017). Kristiana et al.'s analysis of this study found that the subscales of social support from "family and old friend" and "new friend in the U.S." were more significantly associated with decreased acculturative

stress than the social support subscale for “universities and colleges,” revealing that personal relationships may offer more effective social support than institutional services (Kristiana et al., 2022, p. 8). This comparatively lower support obtained from institutional sources is further evidenced by low utilization rates of counseling services by international students (Liu et al., 2019). Therefore, a study on the lived experiences of social support for international students in the United States would provide valuable insight for universities into how these students may be finding effective sources of social support in their personal networks.

Multiple studies have found that international students rely on support from social sources outside of institutional settings. For example, one phenomenological study of undergraduate Chinese international students in the U.S. found that these students tended to rely on other co-national students or international studies university staff for socioemotional support (Lértora & Sullivan, 2019). Li and Zizzi’s five-month case study of two graduate international students in the United States found that these students relied primarily on friends as a source of social support in their host countries (2018). This primary reliance of friends and peers for support is also evidenced in Brown’s (2009) study of graduate international students in England and Bochner’s (1977) study of 30 international students at the University of Hawaii. The source from which students obtain support can impact the effectiveness of the received support. Lee and Goldstein’s (2016) study of 636 ethnically diverse college youth in the U.S. found that the stress-buffering role of social support against loneliness varies depending on its source, and social support from friends provides a more significant buffer against loneliness than support from relatives or significant others. These studies demonstrate that across cultures and locations, college students often rely on friends and peers as a top source of support.

My research study focused on Kyrgyz international students' experiences of social support within the U.S., because the effectiveness of close versus distant support can be varied. Zheng and Ishii's (2023) study of Chinese international students in Japan (n=172) and the United States (n=118) investigated the effects of (geographically) close versus distant sources of support as well as instrumental versus emotional support seeking by asking participants to complete online surveys. The study found that both close emotional support seeking and distant emotional support seeking alleviated loneliness for the participants. In addition, the study found that host-culture orientation was more strongly correlated with close support seeking and native-culture orientation was more strongly associated with distant support seeking. Therefore, a student's identification with their host versus native culture could determine their preference for seeking nearby or distant sources of support. In Zheng and Ishii's study, distant emotional support seeking negatively predicted the Chinese student's adaptation to their host culture, which reveals that the source of social support can also impact the acculturation process. Unexpectedly, instrumental support seeking (as opposed to emotional support seeking) was not found to influence psychological adaptation. My phenomenological study contributes more qualitative insight into how Kyrgyz students utilize and experience different types of social support, such as instrumental and emotional support.

Due to the significant role that social support has in the acculturation processes and well-being of international students, more research on how international students experience social support in the United States would be helpful for clinicians and university administrators who serve this population. More understanding of how social support may effectively function for *specific* populations of international students is especially needed due to evidence of cultural variations in the effectiveness of social support in different populations, which will be discussed

later in this chapter (Chen et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2008). My phenomenological study focuses specifically on the lived experiences of social support for international students from Kyrgyzstan in the U.S. and will contribute to a more qualitative understanding of how interpersonal relationships provide support to this specific population. Kyrgyz students in the United States are a relevant population to study, given the lack of existing social support literature on this population and the particular complexity and importance of relational ties and assistance within their culture (Gullette, 2010; Provis, 2013).

2.2 Kyrgyz Students in Transition

Hundreds of Kyrgyz international students enter the United States each year amidst a context of transnational movements that have placed strain on Kyrgyz traditions and identities. A lack of research on Kyrgyz international students necessitates a better understanding of the lived experiences of this population in the United States. Kyrgyz students arrive in the U.S. having already been exposed to a unique mixture of cross-cultural influences, and many of these students are highly motivated by the promise of education abroad. International students with Kyrgyzstan listed as their country of origin totaled 977 in 2023-2024 academic year, up 38.6% from the previous year (IIE, 2024). According to these figures, about 20% of Kyrgyz students (191) in the U.S. are currently studying at one university in a major city in the Midwest region, where this research took place. Due to the global position and cultural context of Kyrgyzstan, international students from this country are a particularly meaningful population to investigate regarding the impact of cross-cultural influences on their social and transitional experiences in the United States. Kyrgyz international students arrive in the United States due to transnational forces amidst the historical and economic instability of the Kyrgyz Republic, the national

emphasis on education as the hope for a better future, and the perceived higher status of American culture over traditional Kyrgyz culture in a steadily globalizing country.

2.2.1 Cross-cultural Influences and Education in Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan is a land-locked, mountainous country in Central Asia with a population of around seven million people. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the newly independent Republic of Kyrgyzstan entered a destabilizing period of transition. Out of all the former Soviet Central Asian republics, Kyrgyzstan was the country that most liberalized its politics, economy, and society. However, the country has performed poorly economically due to underdeveloped industry, limited resources, lack of global demand for its products, poor institutions, and difficult transportation connections due to its mountainous geography (Pomfret, 2019). These economic problems prompted movements of migration out of Kyrgyzstan, and the country's largest export is now its labor force as Kyrgyz citizens seek out an income to send to family back home (Liebert, 2010). Alongside this domestic exodus, international influences are increasing within Kyrgyzstan. Historically, Kyrgyzstan experienced cross-cultural traffic by means of the Silk Road trading route, and contemporary Kyrgyzstan continues to host a variety of transnational actors, images and goods (Kirmse, 2010). For a few decades, American and international institutions, in addition to Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), carried their influence into the Central Asian region and dominated Kyrgyzstan's socio-cultural and educational development (de la Sablonnière et al., 2010). The United States government sponsored the creation of the American University of Kyrgyzstan in Bishkek and pays for exchange programs that send students and NGO leaders to the United States (Smith, 2005). Additionally, the city of Osh hosts Islamic and Christian missionary centers and international NGO-funded 'youth spaces' where students can encounter political, religious, and capitalist

values from various global origins (Kirmse, 2010). The exposure to transnational influences prior to arrival in the U.S. may prime Kyrgyz students to be more open-minded to the diversity of American society. In his 2010 study, Kirmse highlights male students' engagement with an "unprecedented range of cultural repertoires, from 'true Islam' and Christian messages to global capitalism and Russian rap music" in Kyrgyzstan (p. 389). Kirmse proposed that Kyrgyz male youth at the forefront of these cross-cultural influences construct a *bricolage* of identities in response to globalization, accepting diverse interests, often with little distinction for or discrimination of their cultural origins. These youth seem to accept such consequences of global flows as part of daily life in Kyrgyzstan.

Older Kyrgyz citizens are not always as eager to embrace forces of globalization, which may threaten the historical traditions, values, and beliefs of their people. For example, the Kyrgyz people have managed to preserve their traditional Muslim identity despite the strict ban of the religious establishment during the Soviet period¹ (Zholalieva & Koylu, 2022). Additionally, Aisarakunova argued that the Western world, through missionaries, UN volunteers, businessmen and student exchange programs, has continuously tried to impose Christianity on Kyrgyz Muslims to convert them from their traditional religious values (2010). Aisarakunova argued that Islam has been "destroyed and humiliated" by these Western pressures (p. 8). Local people may especially believe that missionaries seek to promote their own cultures and to change the values of locals. In addition, Western reactions to the Kyrgyz practice of bride kidnapping ("Ala kachuu") have changed perspectives of some, but not all, traditional Kyrgyz people by increasing awareness of human rights issues (p. 5). Although global influences continually

¹ Approximately 90% of the population of Kyrgyzstan identify as Muslim (Zholalieva & Koylu, 2022).

challenge Kyrgyz traditional culture, the perspectives of Kyrgyz youth are shaped by their nation's historical context and the influx of new foreign ideas and values.

In recent decades, the citizens of Kyrgyzstan have begun to explore education as a method for building a brighter future, and education is again framed by a global context. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the first president of the newly independent Republic of Kyrgyzstan, Askar Akayev, announced that education would be a key component of his globalization strategy (DeYoung, 2010). Kyrgyzstan has more universities per head than countries with similar populations and has been host to more than 40% of all international students in Central Asia (Sabzalieva, 2015). This flourishing higher education sector demonstrates the country's substantial investment in education. The expansion of higher education is viewed as a strategy for entering the global market economy, and Kyrgyz youth are identified as a valuable resource for building economic growth and prosperity (DeYoung, 2010). Amsler argued that education has become an *idée-force*— ‘an idea which has social force’— in Kyrgyzstan, where the articulation and conceptions of education have significantly shaped the people's imagination of their country's future (2009, p. 1189). Kyrgyz youth likely also share in the dreams for a brighter personal and communal future through their education.

Despite serving as a “symbolic resource of hope,” education in Kyrgyzstan has faced many challenges corresponding with the political challenges of the transition period (Amsler, 2009, p. 1189). The former Soviet coordination, funding, pedagogy, and educational policy have not been replaced with any uniform approach to produce high quality university education in a now independent Kyrgyzstan (Sabzalieva, 2015). Specialisms previously taught in each country have become disaggregated from local needs due to the loss of central educational coordination. The quality of secondary education and the demand for skilled, professional labor have

decreased in Kyrgyzstan (DeYoung, 2010). High costs of higher education with relatively little public expenditure and a rise in a private market for higher education have led to lower salaries for faculty despite a high demand for higher education (Sabzalieva, 2015). Importantly, universities in Kyrgyzstan are known to be corrupt, and bribes could purchase good grades (Merrill, 2016). Although the American University of Central Asia (AUCA) is known to be less corrupt and is widely considered the best in the country, obtaining admission is difficult, which may lead some students to pursue quality education abroad. These challenges of Kyrgyz education and the lowering quality of higher education result in eager, but often unskilled, youth becoming disenchanted with formal instruction at the local universities where they enroll.

Kyrgyz students are also affected by the quality of interpersonal relationships at the university. In a study of 221 Kyrgyz university students, the participants' perceptions of the relationships among students and between students and university staff/faculty had a significant effect on their satisfaction with their education. Students who perceived these relationships to be friendly were more likely to express satisfaction with the quality of their education at university when compared to students who perceived the relationships as neutral, with the mean difference .319 (p -value <0.05) (Momunalieva et al., 2020). Additionally, a 2008 study of 711 first-year Kyrgyz university students in Bishkek found that concern about not being able to find a good job in the future was the top source of anxiety regarding their education for 38.9% of participants (Ari, 2008). Kyrgyz youth who have the economic opportunity to study at colleges and universities in the United States may feel more confident that their quality of education will better prepare them for (and help them to gain access to) professional roles in the international market. Kyrgyz students and their families could perceive American higher education as an

optimal route to a better professional and economic future, despite the costs and difficulties incurred by pursuing education in the United States.

Another factor of globalization that is motivating Kyrgyz youth to study in the United States is a preference for American cultural identity and values. As the internet and international organizations provide Kyrgyz youth with more exposure to American culture, the students may not only perceive economic advantages of studying abroad but also begin to develop an identification with American culture at large. Three studies of university students in Kyrgyzstan found that the integration of American culture diminished Kyrgyz youths' identification with traditional Kyrgyz culture (de la Sablonnière et al., 2010). The researchers argued that the United States is perceived as a more opportunistic and prestigious country than Kyrgyzstan due to its economic resources, such as a much higher average salary, that confirm its higher relative status. Comparing Kyrgyz students at a westernized university versus those at a traditional Kyrgyz university, researchers found that students "who identified more with Americans and saw them as having a high and legitimate relative status had higher levels of identity integration, lower levels of Kyrgyz identity and Kyrgyz collective esteem" (p. 17). Kyrgyz youth are enticed by the social prestige and perceived advantages of American culture in addition to the value of American education and professional opportunities. This shift away from identification with traditional Kyrgyz culture and values may also lead to changes in how Kyrgyz students obtain social support while studying in the United States, as the students are distanced from the strong relational norms embedded in Kyrgyz culture.

2.2.2 Relationships in Kyrgyz Culture

Kyrgyz students in the United States are a relevant population to study, given the lack of existing social support literature on this population and the particular complexity and importance

of relational ties and assistance within their culture (Gullette, 2010; Provis, 2013). In his 2010 chapter on Kyrgyz culture in *Stable Outside, Fragile Inside?*, Gullette asked, “how is such global turbulence changing relationships and creating a different kind of everyday politics in Central Asia?” (p. 68). Due to this study’s interest in understanding acts of social support that strengthen interpersonal bonds, recognition of the complex and changing nature of Kyrgyz social relations amidst global instability is crucial. Gullette’s chapter responds to Collins’ earlier research on the political influence of clan-relations in Central Asia, which highlighted the societal impact of traditional tribal networks within the region in creating stability *and* instability (2002). Breaking away from previous scholars’ heavy emphasis on the role of tribal networks in Kyrgyz society, Gullette contested the contemporary importance of clan- or tribe-relations for the local people when such relations did not meet their economic need (2007). Gullette argued for the necessity of a “much closer examination of everyday social experiences,” and phenomenological research into the everyday social experiences of Kyrgyz people, such as this dissertation study, could provide this type of close examination (p. 373). Gullette’s proposed analytical approach of *everyday politics* “examines the strategies people deploy to meet daily challenges. The proposition is that personal and family relationships are used and impinged upon in order to cope, especially in a time of economic difficulties” (2010, p. 56). Several of Gullette’s anecdotal examples demonstrated how Kyrgyz people rely upon social support from personal or family relationships in order to survive the challenging economic conditions of their nation, underscoring the prominent role of social support within Kyrgyz culture. My study uncovered how social support in the United States serves a similar survival function for Kyrgyz students.

Social support and relationships provide an important means of surviving everyday challenges for Kyrgyz people, and relationships are maintained through acts of social

significance. In her research on Central Asian politics, Schmitz used the Russian term *privyazannost* to describe the central role of relationships among the political elite in Kazakhstan, which was also a former republic of the Soviet Union. Schmitz defined *privyazannost* as “personal bonds that have been developed through shared biographies, common social and regional identities, and have been nurtured through long-term collaboration, shared knowledge and mutual dependencies” (2003, p. 599). *Privyazannost*, in the way it is defined by Schmitz, highlights the complex historical, collaborative, and mutually dependent nature of social relations in the Central Asian region. The bonds between Kyrgyz people are layered with a long history of exchanges of assistance. In Kyrgyzstan, relationships are sustained through the exchange of gifts of tangible items (like clothes), assistance (labor), and hospitality, and the obligatory reciprocation of gifts is understood to strengthen social cohesion (Borbieva, 2010; Provis, 2013). As students arrive in the United States, leaving many of their closest relationships behind, they need to establish local networks of social support to meet the challenges associated with the acculturation process. One Kyrgyz idiom states that “a close neighbour is more valuable than a distant relative,” which emphasizes the value of having local relationships for social support (Provis, 2013, p. 126). The significance and assistive utility of Kyrgyz interpersonal ties, especially amidst so many changing global influences, warrants further qualitative investigation. My study contributes to the wider literature on Kyrgyz relationships by phenomenologically exploring the lived experiences of social support for Kyrgyz international students in the United States.

When focusing specifically on relationships of Kyrgyz students in the U.S., the contrast between American relational norms and Kyrgyz traditional norms is even more relevant. International students form new social ties in the U.S. to supplement their primary social ties that

have been weakened by geographical distance. While beginning to form new social ties, students from Kyrgyzstan can find the norms governing social relationships in the U.S. to be different from the relational norms back home. In particular, Borbieva has argued that Kyrgyz people have moral systems governing relatedness and exchange that differ from the “free market morality” of the capitalist West, which functions through transactional monetary exchange (2010, p.182). Borbieva highlights examples in which Kyrgyz people demonstrate relational intimacy through hospitality and exchange of resources with the expectation of a continued reciprocal exchange. This expectation is contrasted by Western visitors to Kyrgyzstan who reciprocate through one-time payments of money. On both sides, individuals understand that gifts and services require reciprocity. Borbieva asserts that the expected method and duration of reciprocation in social relationships differs between Kyrgyz and Western cultures. Kyrgyz students could have differing expectations than their American peers regarding the extent and form of exchange that is obligatory to maintain social ties. For example, individualistic American students may be more comfortable with non-committal or short-term friendships than Kyrgyz students may be. The influence of cultural norms on the Kyrgyz students’ experiences of social support in the United States is illustrated by my hermeneutic phenomenological study.

2.3 Social Support

This phenomenological study aimed to deeply explore the phenomenon of *social support* as it is experienced by Kyrgyz international students in their daily lives. The phenomenological researcher acknowledged the need to remain open to how social support may uniquely manifest for these students in the United States, but a definition of the phenomenon is needed to clarify the focus of the study. One currently established definition of social support is the assistive “functions performed for the individual by significant others” (Thoits, 2011, p. 146). This study

is structured around (1) examining assistive acts as described by research participants and (2) recognizing the *relationality* the recipient has to the giver of support. Van Manen defined *relationality* as the “lived relation we maintain with others in the interpersonal space that we share with them” (1990, p. 104). In this study, I use both van Manen’s term “relationality” and Relational Cultural Theory’s term “mutuality” to refer to the sense of interpersonal connection one feels to another person, and these terms will be further discussed later on in the section of this chapter on “Researching Lived Experiences of Social Support.” Based on the existing literature regarding social support, as well as a conceptual framework developed from van Manen’s hermeneutic phenomenology and Relational Cultural Theory, I have defined social support in this study as *acts experienced as supportive by the recipient and simultaneously experienced as strengthening the sense of connection between the persons involved*. The discussion of social support in this chapter will examine the literature on types of social support, cultural variations, and mechanisms by which it may buffer against stress.

2.3.1 Model of Social Support Types

Social support can include a variety of assistive acts provided from an individual or social group to a relationally significant other (Thoits, 2011). Types of social support are commonly divided into emotion-focused support (i.e. encouragement, comfort, love) and problem-focused support (i.e. advice, tangible aid) (Chen et al., 2012). These two categories are further divided into appraisal support and emotional support as two forms of emotion-focused support and instrumental aid and informational aid as two forms of problem-focused support (see *Figure 1*). *Esteem* support is aimed to increase the confidence or self-esteem of the person in need, while *emotional* support is intended to promote positive feelings or provide comfort and care to the individual in need. Examples of *instrumental* aid could include the provision of money, tangible

items, or physical assistance, and examples of *informational* aid could include giving advice or instructions to fix a problem.

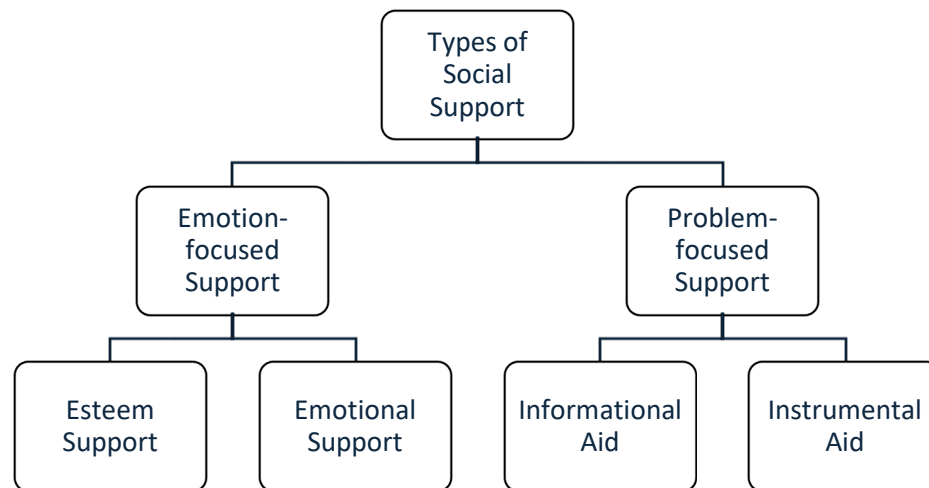


Figure 1: Model of Four Types of Social Support

In the case of international students transitioning to life in the U.S., students may need emotional-focused support to buffer against the emotional stress of homesickness, loneliness, discrimination, or feeling overwhelmed. Additionally, an international student may often need problem-focused support as they adjust to unexpected cultural differences, communication challenges, and living independently. While problem-focused support and esteem support are often very explicit forms of social support, emotional support may at times be more implicit, such as in cases of spending time together when one's friend is lonely. My study will allow Kyrgyz students to describe the types of social support they experience in the U.S. and will elicit narratives of experiencing social support based on this model of social support types.

2.3.2 Cultural Variations in Social Support

This study was designed to focus on one specific population, Kyrgyz students in the U.S., due to existing evidence of significant variations in how social support is provided and its effectiveness in different cultural groups. Currently, there is a lack of research to understand what

types of social support Kyrgyz students would prefer, and this population is influenced by a variety of multicultural and multi-national influences. This study aimed to fill that gap in the literature through phenomenological inquiry that maintains openness to the unique experiences of research participants and how they may deviate from previously studied populations. Still, existing research on other populations is useful to consider as the effectiveness of different social support types and the response to receiving different types of social support have been demonstrated to vary according to one's cultural context and background (Chen et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2007).

Meanings and functions of supportive acts differ across cultures, which is especially apparent when comparing the individualistic American culture with more collectivistic Asian cultures where preserving group harmony is more highly valued. Chen et al.'s (2012) study of female college students in the United States (European American, n=99) and in Japan (n=91) found that European Americans reported providing more instances of support than the Japanese students reported. Chen et al. proposed that this finding complements prior research that Asians seek less social support than European Americans do (Kim et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2007). When identifying what type of social support participants tended to provide, European Americans reported providing more emotion-focused support (66%) than problem-focused support (31%), and Japanese reported providing more problem-focused support (64%) than emotion-focused support (31%) (Chen et al., 2012). The researchers' follow-up study of 78 undergraduate European American students and 156 Japanese undergraduate students found that, when providing social support, the European American students were motivated by a goal of closeness and increasing self-esteem of the recipient, whereas Japanese students were motivated significantly only by a goal of closeness. In summary, the frequency of, type of, and motivations

for the social support provided varied significantly between the European American participants and the Japanese participants in this study.

When distinctions are made between ‘explicit’ and ‘implicit’ social support, a clearer picture of different cultural responses toward social support emerges. Taylor et al.’s (2007) study compared the effectiveness of implicit and explicit support for 41 Asian and Asian American undergraduate students and 40 European American students. Explicit social support was defined as “seeking and using advice and emotional solace,” and implicit social support is “focusing on valued social groups” (p. 831). Participants in the study were exposed to various stressors, such as the Trier Social Stress Task and preparing a speech. After this stress exposure, participants were randomly assigned to writing tasks intended to replicate an implicit-support condition, and explicit-support condition, or a no-support condition. The Asian and Asian American participants exhibited higher signs of biological stress (heightened cortisol levels in saliva compared to baseline) when experiencing explicit support, while European Americans had lowered cortisol levels. Therefore, explicit forms of social support were found to increase stress in Asians while lowering stress in European Americans. Conversely, Asian Americans experienced more biological and psychological benefit when they engaged in implicit support in the study. European Americans, on the other hand, benefitted less from implicit than explicit social support. These findings suggest that culturally inappropriate styles of social support can exacerbate stress (Kim et al., 2008). One’s preference for implicit versus explicit support, as well as the amount of benefit they derive from each, can be highly dependent on their culture. This research was particularly foundational for my study, because the evidence of cultural variations in social support effectiveness justifies more qualitative research into how specific cultural groups may uniquely experience social support.

Phenomenological research methods allow for an openness to exploring the phenomenon as it presents itself in the data, but there are important contextual factors to recognize regarding Kyrgyz culture. Kyrgyz students come to the U.S. from a more collectivistic nation with a strong social exchange norms. Traditionally a nomadic society, Kyrgyz people place a great emphasis on long-lasting exchanges of hospitality and resources, which have often helped their people to survive difficult conditions (Borbieva, 2010). Across various cultures, the exchange of tangible resources may be the ultimate way to convey trustworthiness and interconnectedness (Chen et al., 2012). Exchanges of instrumental aid, and the sense of obligation they entail, may prove to be a significant finding in my study of how Kyrgyz students experience social support. Additionally, as Kyrgyzstan has received a significant amount of influence from Russian culture as a former Soviet Republic, it is noteworthy to mention that Russians tend to give advice (informational support) over other forms of social support. Chentsova-Dutton and Vaughn's (2012) study of 124 Russians living in Russia, 73 Russian Americans, and 83 European Americans found that Russians in Russia gave more frequent advice than European Americans, and Russian Americans reported a frequency of advice giving between these two groups. The researchers proposed that Russians may have developed a reliance primarily on informational support as a means to survive tumultuous political and historical upheavals. Based on the varied preferences and types of social support across cultures, I maintained a phenomenological openness during the reflective analysis process to the uniqueness of Kyrgyz students' experiences of social support in the U.S.

2.3.3 Mechanisms of Social Support

The importance of social support for international students—both its ability to buffer against psychological stressors inherent in migration, and the distress caused by the weakening

of significant social bonds with those loved ones left back home—was foundational for my research. This study explored how Kyrgyz students experience social support, which has been highlighted as an important factor to buffer against psychological stress (Cohen et al., 2000; Thoits, 2011). Cohen and Wills' (1985) stress-buffering theory proposed that strong social support can reduce the impact of life stress on adverse psychological and health outcomes, and this theory has been supported by several studies in the decades since its publication (Cohen et al., 2000; Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017; Thoits, 2011). Examining the phenomenon of social support within the lived experiences of a specific cultural group, Kyrgyz international students, can provide researchers and clinicians with greater insight into how effective social support may function for this population.

As a phenomenological study, my research provides more qualitative insight into how different types or sources of social support are experienced by Kyrgyz students and which types are experienced as strengthening interpersonal connection. Therefore, an analysis of theorized mechanisms for social support stress-buffering is useful to explore. Some social scientists have theorized that the most effective social support occurs when the type of support matches the distressed person's situational *need* or stressor (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Cutrona et al., 2007). Examples of support that matches the recipients' need/stressor would be providing empathetic comfort (emotion-focused support) when a friend is grieving a loss or providing financial aid (problem-focused support) when a child is struggling to pay their rent. Conversely, Thoits has proposed that match between the *source* of the support with the type of support provided may be more predictive of positive wellness outcomes (2011). For example, a Kyrgyz student may prefer to receive advice on navigating his American university (problem-focused support) from an experientially similar peer, such as an older Kyrgyz student in the U.S., rather than from a parent

back home. As I analyzed the participants' narratives of social support, I considered if Kyrgyz students preferred to receive a support type that matches their need or preferred to receive certain types of support from particular social sources.

The following discussion will utilize Thoits model of mechanisms proposed to link social ties and support to improved mental and physical health to consider how international students' changing contexts and relationships could alter the effectiveness of social support (2011). These proposed mechanisms are (1) belonging/companionship, (2) social influence/comparison, (3) social control, (4) "mattering"/purpose, (5) self-esteem, (6) sense of control/mastery, and (7) perceived social support. I propose that the first three mechanisms are dependent on the influence and behaviors of others, while the other four are dependent upon one's subjective self-concept and perception. These mechanisms provided analytical considerations for my research on Kyrgyz students' lived experiences of social support in the United States, but there are important cultural factors to consider that could modify how each of these mechanisms influence mental health outcomes in my participants. As students journey to the U.S., they cross into new social ecosystems, forming new relationships and changing certain identities. As I will argue, these altered relationships will greatly affect the first three mechanisms, while students' newfound relational identities will affect the function of the latter mechanisms.

2.3.3.1 Mechanisms Dependent on Influence and Behaviors of Others

Three proposed mechanisms of social support are dependent on the influence and behaviors of those with whom one has social ties. Firstly, one's sense of belonging is dependent on being accepted and included by others (Thoits, 2011). Companionship—having others with whom to share social activities—follows belonging to a social group or familiar relationship. International students, who have left many primary relationships back home, may require a

significant amount of time to feel a true sense of belonging in their new social relationships in the U.S., and they may lack companions with whom to share social activities until new friendships have been solidified. Rather than experiencing a buffer against stress, international students may find that loneliness and a lost sense of belonging increase their psychological distress. Therefore, it is crucial to identify how these students may find new sources of social support during this transition. This proposed mechanism is supported by research that social support from friends, who can accompany students during activities in the U.S., provides a more significant buffer against loneliness than support from relatives (Lee & Goldstein, 2016).

Secondly, social influence and social comparison are highly dependent on regular exposure to one's social group, whose behaviors and guidance can push one toward healthy or unhealthy behaviors (Thoits, 2011). One can learn how to maintain her own physical and emotional well-being from significant others. Additionally, one can model behaviors by comparison to those of one's social group. Social norms around mental and physical health can vary by culture. As international students enter a different cultural environment and new peer groups, they may experience the stress of deciding which behaviors of their new social group to adopt. If, for example, a student's family life in Kyrgyzstan consisted of healthy meals and exercise in nature, these health-promoting behaviors could be challenged if a new American peer group encourages the student to eat unhealthy foods or engage in a more sedentary lifestyle. New social ties that do not promote mental and physical health can be detrimental to an international student's well-being. Kyrgyz students may be particularly accustomed to experiencing social comparison when growing up in Kyrgyzstan, as is evidenced in Kyrgyz idioms dictating proper social interactions. One such idiom states: "Do not show closeness to the unworthy, do not show enmity towards the worthy" (Abdraeva, 2021, p. 492). Through this idiom, one can understand

that Kyrgyz culture may dictate social separation from others according to one's perceived unworthiness.

Thoits' third mechanism, social control, is a more explicit attempt to encourage, monitor, or pressure a person to adopt practices that promote health, which can also discourage risky behaviors (2011). Like social influence (though more pronounced), social control has the power to drive an international student toward certain behaviors. Importantly, Thoits pointed out that one's physical health, such as diet, sleep, avoidance of drugs/alcohol, has a direct impact on one's psychological well-being, as these behaviors can affect mood, anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses. As American culture is more individualistic, it is likely that Kyrgyz students will experience a greater degree of independence from social control while studying abroad and need to develop more personal initiative in maintaining their wellness. The quality of the new social networks formed in the U.S. could significantly impact an international student's well-being while abroad.

2.3.3.2 Mechanisms Dependent on One's Self-Concept

Next, I will discuss the four social support mechanisms that I deem to be dependent on one's subjective self-concept and perception. Thoits described the first of these mechanisms as behavioral guidance, purpose, and meaning, or, simply, "mattering" (2011, p. 148). This mattering is an implicit form of social control that arises out of one's relational roles. Each role, such as friend, child, student, or spouse, carries implicit rights and responsibilities. As international students move to the U.S., their roles and the obligations of those roles may change. The sense of purpose one feels in the role of a highly cared for child may be lessened as the international student shifts into the role of an independent adult living alone. The relational roles one assumes impact his health, because he may feel obligated to avoid risky behaviors as he

considers the significant others for whom he is responsible. International students who feel less connected to the primary relationships that give them meaning and purpose could experience less willingness to restrain bad behaviors as their relational roles change while abroad.

Another mechanism by which social ties and support are linked to positive health outcomes is self-esteem, which can decrease symptoms of mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety (Thoits, 2011). Thoits proposed that self-esteem is derived from our subjective evaluation of our role performance. For example, one may judge oneself to be an obedient child or a poor student. Closely linked to self-esteem, the mechanism of sense of control or mastery is also derived from one's self-evaluation. Each relational role carries with it certain obligations and tasks that must be performed, and Thoits argued that one feels a sense of mastery when successful in the completion of their role obligations. Both self-esteem and sense of control could shift dramatically as an international student adjusts to new identities and responsibilities. For example, a student who may have felt competent as a secondary school student in Kyrgyzstan can feel inept if they struggle to perform well in their American university. Far from the familiar roles and responsibilities that gave them meaning, self-esteem, and mastery at home, the Kyrgyz students must discover how to adapt to new relational roles and obligations in the American context. The students' ability to find new social ties that bring them purpose and a sense of self-efficacy could greatly impact the effects of social support on their psychological well-being.

Finally, Thoits emphasized the distinction between perceived social support and actual measured support as mechanisms linked to improved health. One's perception that social support is readily available is more frequently and positively associated with good mental and physical health outcomes and is therefore the better option to measure for the purposes of study as a

buffer against stress. My study focuses specifically on Kyrgyz students' lived experiences of social support, and Thoits made several nuanced distinctions regarding this mechanism that are important to include in relation to my research. Thoits proposed that "everyday" supportive actions, which tend to be less obvious as they occur commonly in our daily routines, have more health benefits than situation-specific support. Thoits stated: "Generalized perceptions of support should have greater predictive power than specific supportive behaviors that are performed in a delimited situation or time period" (2011, p. 150). Furthermore, highly visible or apparently deliberate support can produce negative reactions in recipients, who may feel too indebted or incompetent. Perhaps the most effective form of social support for reducing psychological distress is that which is unsolicited and effectively invisible. This position aligns with the previously mentioned findings that individuals from Asian cultures prefer implicit social support rather than explicit support (Chen et al., 2012). My study attended closely to discerning the types of social support that Kyrgyz students described as well as their experiences of different forms of support received.

2.4 Researching Lived Experiences of Social Support

This section will discuss the conceptualization of lived experience, relationality, and social support in this study that has been developed from van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenology and Relational Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2018). As a phenomenological study, this research examined *lived experiences* (also referred to as the "lifeworld" by van Manen). Drawing on Husserl, van Manen defines the *lifeworld* as "the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it" (p. 9). A phenomenological study of the lifeworld is an appropriate framework for investigating the Kyrgyz students' raw experiences of social support and their American environment. Therefore,

narratives of social support elicited in this study did not require initial reflection or categorization on the part of the participants. Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology is interested with the human scientific study of lived experience and the study of essences and experiential meanings of phenomena as they present themselves to consciousness. For van Manen, "the aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textural expression of its essence" (p. 36). Regarding essences, van Manen states that these are "the very nature of a phenomena, for that which makes a some-"thing" what it *is*—and without which it could not be what it is" (p. 10). In van Manen's methodology, the writing and re-writing process is crucial to thematic analysis and understanding the essence of a phenomena, though he acknowledges that no hermeneutic description can ever be the final and absolutely definitive understanding of an aspect of the human lifeworld.

Despite an inability to reach fully definitive understandings of phenomena, the phenomenological approach is very practical in that it allows researchers to investigate and describe the human experience as it is meaningfully lived by subjects. Continually applying phenomenological epoché (bracketing) and reduction are important parts of the reflective (analysis) process to investigate the lifeworld. Epoché brackets out any claims about the external world, so the researcher can describe the subject's actual experience as it is intended or experienced by that subject. Eidetic reduction allows the researcher to identify the shared features that emerge out of the phenomenon. Through application of van Manen's methodology, I seek to understand the essential qualities and experiential meanings of social support and mutuality within the *lifeworld* of Kyrgyz international students at one university.

Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology provides the philosophical framework for this study and will be accompanied by a Relational-Cultural Theoretical (RCT) lens (Jordan, 2018).

The primacy of human connection, called *relationality* by van Manen and *mutuality* in Relational Cultural Theory is the unifying concept that also suits the method for exploring the unique relational experiences of Kyrgyz people (Jordan, 2017). Van Manen described human connection through his concept of *relationality* as the “lived relation we maintain with others in the interpersonal space that we share with them” (1990, p. 104). RCT described *mutuality* as a sense of interpersonal connection that involves empathic attunement and responsiveness from both individuals (Jordan, 2017). Both terms refer to the relation between individuals, though mutuality specifies a relation characterized by mutual empathy and meaningfulness. This study focused on supportive acts that are experienced by participants as strengthening mutuality between themselves and the giver of aid. A phenomenological investigation into the nature of social support that fosters mutuality, as experienced in the lifeworlds of Kyrgyz international students, can elucidate the essential qualities that constitute this phenomenon of lived human experience.

Lived human relation (also referred to as relationality or communality by van Manen) is one of the four existential themes which van Manen proposed to “pervade the lifeworlds of all human beings:” (1990, p. 101). Van Manen stated that it is through this *relationality* to others that one can “develop a conversational relation which allows us to transcend our *selves*” (p. 105). This theory is complemented by social support research that has found that through the presence of supportive relationships, individuals can be buffered against stress (Thoits, 2011)—thereby somewhat transcending limitations of their individual psychological capacity to tolerate stress through human connections. Beyond just seeking to transcend one’s limitations, van Manen proposed that humans have existentially “searched in this experience of the other, the communal, the social for a sense of purpose in life, meaningfulness, grounds for living” (1990, p. 105).

Perhaps the purpose and meaningfulness that individuals experience through social relations contributes to the increased resilience against stress that social support produces.

Van Manen's emphasis on relationality as an existential human experience corresponds with the primacy of human relationships in Relational Cultural Theory (RCT). RCT contributes a feminist critical lens to this study that resists the Western patriarchal biases likely to influence the analytic assumptions of the researcher, who was trained as a counselor educator at an American university. RCT proposed that psychological well-being and human development arise from growth based in *mutuality*—a paradigm shift away from the prevailing Western psychological theories of the 1970s, which supported an individualistic-competitive cultural concept that “self-interest was a primary driving force at the core of human nature” (Jordan, 2017, p. 233).

Traditional Western theories of psychology had held that individuation, separation, and autonomy were the markers of emotional maturity and psychological health (Comstock et al., 2008). In contrast, RCT asserted that not autonomy but rather *mutuality* is the key to creating and maintaining growth-fostering relationships (Jordan, 2017). Mutuality is proposed as a sense of connection characterized by mutual empathy that involves empathic attunement and responsiveness from both individuals and is central to sustaining Mutually-Growth-Fostering Relationships. Such empathic attunement and responsiveness manifested in the relational experiences of my participants.

Identifying the essential characteristics of social support that promotes mutuality was a key aim of this study. When narrowing the specific phenomenon for one's study, van Manen recommends searching idiomatic phrases or tracing the etymological origins of words that may “put us in touch with an original form of life where the terms still had living ties to the lived experiences from which they originally sprang” (1990, p. 59). The etymological origins of the

word *support* are in the Latin prefix *sub-*, meaning *under*, and the Latin *portare*, meaning *to carry* (Merriam-Webster, 2024). From this meaning *to carry from under* we recognize why idiomatic expressions such as “carried me through it” reflect the emotionally lifting and sustaining qualities of assistive support. One can derive a sense of carrying a tangible or intangible burden or weight at the root of the word *support*. The etymological origin of the word *social* is the Latin *socialis* or *socius* meaning *companion, ally*. The term *social* implies that an alliance or bond of companionship exists between the individuals, and when one shares in carrying the burdens of the other through that relational bond, there exists the original etymological sense of *social support*. Some researchers have defined social support as the “emotionally sustaining qualities of relationships,” a definition that remains broad enough to capture the various ways that relationships themselves may emotionally sustain us (Umberson & Montez, 2011, p. 56). Through my study of the lived experiences of Kyrgyz students, I aimed to elucidate how the phenomenon of social support distinctly manifests within their lifeworld.

For the purposes of this study, social support is defined as *assistive acts (1) experienced as supportive by the recipient and (2) simultaneously experienced as strengthening the sense of connection between the persons involved*. The model of social support used for the sub-questions in this study utilized two overarching categories of assistive functions: emotion-focused support (i.e. encouragement, comfort, love) and problem-focused support (i.e. advice, instrumental aid) (Chen et al., 2012; Thoits, 2011). Emotion-focused support can include *esteem* support, aimed to increase the confidence or self-esteem of the person in need, or *emotional* support, intended to promote positive feelings or provide comfort and care to the individual in need. Problem-focused support can be divided into *instrumental* aid, such as the provision of money, tangible items, or physical assistance, and *informational* aid, such as advice or instructions. While my research

aimed to maintain the openness to the phenomenon as experienced in the lifeworld that phenomenology requires, the data collection involved eliciting experiential accounts of such emotion-focused support and problem-focused support as defined in this model of social support. Data collection was further refined by eliciting narratives of social support that were experienced specifically as increasing the participants sense of connection or *mutuality* with the giver of aid.

2.5 Summary

Kyrgyz international students in the United States are likely to have greater levels of acculturation stress and unmet interpersonal needs, and social support research can help clinicians and university support staff to better understand how potentially stress-buffering interpersonal connections are experienced by this cultural population. Kyrgyz students come to the U.S. from a nation, society, and educational system destabilized by significant transition, and relationships hold significant value in Kyrgyz culture to collectively survive adverse conditions. Social support has potential to reduce the negative impact of stress for this population, and types of social aid may vary for this cultural group as compared to other populations. Therefore, my study into the lived experiences of social support for Kyrgyz international students, specifically social support that strengthens their sense of mutual connection, can contribute to an important gap in the literature regarding this population. The following chapter outlines the methodology for how this hermeneutic phenomenological study was carried out.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter will provide a methodological overview for this hermeneutic phenomenological study on Kyrgyz international students' lived experiences of receiving social support in the United States. First, the purpose of the study and research questions will be stated. The rationale for and application of van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology as the research method will be discussed. Ethical and methodological concerns regarding the role of the researcher will be considered alongside the application of *epoché-reduction*. Criteria, sampling and recruitment of participants will be detailed. The phenomenological technique of conversational and hermeneutic interviewing will be described, and the semi-structured interview protocol will be outlined. The procedure and timeline of data collection will be presented, and an exposition of the reflective process of data analysis will also be given. Finally, the researcher will address how the study design ensured qualitative rigor.

3.1 Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

This study used van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenological approach to elucidate the essential qualities of the lived experiences of receiving social support for Kyrgyz students in the United States. Many research studies have evidenced that social support can buffer against psychological stress (Cohen et al., 2000; Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017; Thoits, 2011), and international students are at risk of increased psychological distress during the acculturation process (Lértora et al., 2022). Furthermore, Kyrgyz people have used relationships and reciprocal exchange as a means of collective survival during the nation's tumultuous periods, including the recent decades of political instability (Borbieva, 2010; Gullette, 2010; Provis, 2013). Targeted research into how the phenomenon of social support manifests in the lived experiences of Kyrgyz students in the United States is necessary due to the existing evidence of

significant cultural variations in the types and effectiveness of social support in different populations (Kim et al., 2008). This hermeneutic phenomenological study can provide unique and rich qualitative insights into how social support is experienced in the lifeworlds of Kyrgyz international students in the United States that will fill a meaningful gap in the existing social science and academic literature.

The primary research question of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is:

What are Kyrgyz international students' lived experiences of receiving social support in the United States?

As this is a phenomenological study, the research is aimed at describing the experiences of the Kyrgyz students and interpreting the essential themes of what it is like to experience social support as a Kyrgyz student in the U.S. The first two sub-questions of this study will provide a framework for eliciting narratives during the interviews and are as follows:

(1) What are the lived experiences of receiving emotion-focused (esteem or emotional) support in the United States for Kyrgyz students?

(2) What are the lived experiences of receiving problem-focused (instrumental or informational) support in the United States for Kyrgyz students?

The final sub-question of the study is concerned with understanding the essential qualities of experiencing relational connection (mutuality) fostered by the reception of social support:

(3) What is it like to experience mutuality when receiving social support as a Kyrgyz student?

The study was focused on lived experiences that involve the reception of support that strengthens one's sense of connection (*mutuality*) with the giver. Therefore, any experiences of social support that did not contribute to mutuality were not part of the phenomenon of inquiry. All sub-

questions were used to refine and support the focus of the primary phenomenological research question.

3.2 Research Design and Rationale

This research study utilized van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenology as the methodological approach to explore Kyrgyz international students' lived experiences of the phenomenon of social support in the United States. I interviewed undergraduate Kyrgyz international students at a midwestern American university in order to apply van Manen's thematic analysis to elucidate these students' lived experiences of receiving social support in the United States. In addition to the initial interviews that elicited narratives of receiving social support, the follow-up interviews utilized van Manen's hermeneutic interviewing to ensure participants' own perspectives contributed to the interpretive process. This study aimed to provide social science researchers with a unique phenomenological text as a basis for further studies on this population and their relationships.

This research study is deeply interested in the unique way that social support manifests and becomes meaningful within the lives of Kyrgyz international students in the United States, because relationships have long been a means of collective survival throughout the transitions experienced by the Kyrgyz people. The hermeneutic phenomenological method can uncover the essential qualities of social support as it is uniquely experienced by Kyrgyz students, because "phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences" (van Manen, 1990, p. 9). Van Manen highlighted that, in contrast to other qualitative methods of research, "phenomenology makes a distinction between appearance and essence" (p. 184). Phenomenological research derives scientific knowledge from lived experience and can elucidate for others the meaning of a lived experience that is usually hidden

or veiled in our pre-reflective experience. In hermeneutic phenomenology, research questions do not “problem solve” but rather are *meaning questions* of lived human experience: “They ask for the meaning and significance of phenomena” to the person experiencing it (p. 23). In contrast, objective scientific methods are “antithetical to the spirit of human science research” (p. 3). Empirical methods that aim to solve problems may distance the researcher from understanding the depth and significance of the consciously lived experiences of phenomena that are truly meaningful to human existence, and such methods were not appropriate for the aims of the current study.

Van Manen’s hermeneutic phenomenology provided the philosophical framework for this study and was accompanied by a Relational-Cultural Theoretical (RCT) lens. The primacy of human connection, called *relationality* by van Manen and *mutuality* in Relational Cultural Theory, is the unifying concept that also suits the method for exploring the unique relational experiences of Kyrgyz people. One of the four existential themes which van Manen proposed to “pervade the lifeworlds of all human beings” is *lived human relation* (relationality or communality) (1990, p. 101). Van Manen stated that it is through this *relationality* to others that one can “develop a conversational relation which allows us to transcend our *selves*” (p. 105). Van Manen’s emphasis on relationality as an existential human experience corresponds with the concept of *mutuality* in Relational Cultural Theory (RCT). RCT described *mutuality* as a sense of interpersonal connection that involves empathic attunement and responsiveness from both individuals (Jordan, 2017). Both *relationality* and *mutuality* refer to the relation between individuals, though mutuality specifies a relation characterized by mutual empathy and meaningfulness. Based on this philosophical framework, social support is defined in this study as *assistive acts (1) experienced as supportive by the recipient and (2) simultaneously experienced*

as strengthening the sense of connection between the persons involved. This phenomenological investigation into the nature of social support that fosters mutuality, as experienced in the lifeworlds of Kyrgyz international students, produced insightful descriptions that reveal the function and manifestation of social support within human connections.

3.3 Researcher Role

Van Manen's phenomenological approach recognizes that the researcher is a human with a personal relationship to the phenomenon they study (1990). Van Manen stated that "phenomenological research does not start or proceed in a disembodied fashion. It is always the project of someone: a real person, who, in the context of particular individual, social, and historical life circumstances, sets out to make sense of a certain aspect of human existence" (p. 31). As the researcher, I am both an observer and a participant in the process of phenomenological inquiry. One way a researcher brings herself into the research process is through methodological techniques such as interviewing. The researcher participates in the lifeworld of the person she is studying with "an attitude of assuming a relation that is as close as possible while retaining a hermeneutic alertness to situations that allows us to constantly step back and reflect on the meaning of those situations" (p. 69). Another way that a researcher becomes a participant in the research is through the inevitable introduction of her identities, assumptions, and theoretical preferences on the reflective process. To reduce the influence of researcher bias, van Manen advised that the researcher first "make explicit our understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories" in order to later hold back these assumptions during the reduction process (p. 47). I explicated my roles as both a university administrator and a counseling researcher to discuss the application of phenomenological *epoché-reduction* in my research.

Currently, I am the director of the international office at the university where the study will take place, and at my job I engage in regular supportive interactions and university events with the student population I am studying. However, one disadvantage of my professional relationship with my participants is the potential for abuse of power. As a university administrator and advisor, I am a primary service provider to international students. Although I have no authority over the academic outcomes of the students, I am professionally obligated to report on formal student advising sessions to my supervisor. Therefore, I have made my supervisor aware of the research I conducted with students, so confidentiality of the interview content was ensured. Given my role as a university staff person, ensuring confidentiality of the research participants and the information shared was crucial to protecting the welfare of participants at all costs. Additionally, I am oriented to this study as a counselor and psychological researcher, and, as a result of this orientation, I am interested in theoretical models of social support and its potential implications for improving mental health. I reduced the impact of my researcher bias on the analytical process by conducting hermeneutic follow-up interviews with participants (which will be discussed in the instrumentation section of this chapter) and by continually applying the phenomenological method of *epoché-reduction* throughout the research process.

Van Manen regarded *epoché-reduction* as the fundamental method for phenomenological research and defined this method as a researcher's "reflection on the unique meaning of the phenomenon that one is studying to gain an eidetic grasp, fundamental understanding, or inceptual insight into the phenomenological meaning of a human experience" (2017, p. 819). Van Manen proposed that the researcher "needs to overcome one's subjective or private feelings, preferences, inclinations or expectations that would prevent one from coming to terms with a

phenomenon or experience as it is lived through” by means of phenomenological reduction (1990, p. 185). For example, as a university administrator, I may be inclined to view data on student relationships with an interest in how social support impacts retention or academic outcomes, which could affect my interpretation or descriptions of students’ experiences. By applying the technique of reduction, I approached the data with a willingness to see a wider view of the phenomenon and an openness to the emphases on aspects of experience given by the participants. Furthermore, van Manen stated that reduction requires the researcher to “strip away the theories or scientific conceptions and thematizations which overlay the phenomenon one wishes to study, and which prevents one from seeing the phenomenon in a non-abstracting manner” (p. 185). Throughout my analytical process, I continually bracketed my theoretical expectations that are based on previous models of social support in order to better interpret the essential qualities of the lived experiences of my participants.

3.4 Participants and Sampling

Participants in this study satisfied certain eligibility criteria. Firstly, all participants were of Kyrgyz national origin (citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic), currently enrolled in an undergraduate degree program at an American university, and resided in the midwestern city where the research took place. Participants have been studying in the United States for no less than 3 months and no more than 4 years. Participants of any gender identity could be included in the study. All participants had to be over the age of 18. Therefore, the approach to sampling was purposive, and only students meeting these criteria were invited to voluntarily participate in the study.

In phenomenological research, “the phenomenon calls for how it is to be studied,” so the researcher must determine a sample size that is relative to the phenomenon under investigation

(Vagle, 2018, p. 82). My study involved data collection through initial conversational interviews and follow-up hermeneutic interviews with participants. Through these collection methods, I estimated that data saturation could be reached with around 10-15 interview participants, and data saturation was determined to be reached at 11 participants. Data saturation rather than number of participants was the primary goal in this approach to sampling.

Participants were recruited by the researcher through her job as director of the international office. Students were recruited for the study when they visited the international office, engaged in international student events at the university, or via email or WhatsApp messages. Acknowledging that participants may have perceived the recruiter as holding a position of power, all discussions of study participation were clearly stated that participation is optional and confidential, the study would not have any impact on their academic or other standing at the university, and that students could refuse without any penalty or negative perception of their decision. A simple recruitment flyer or message included this text: “Are you an international student from Kyrgyzstan studying at [university]? Share your experiences of *social support* with us by participating in our research study. Your participation is voluntary, confidential, and will not have any negative impact on your academic standing at [university]. Participants will be invited to 1-2 interviews to discuss how they have experienced social support in the United States. You must be 18 or older to join this study. Contact [email] for more information on how to participate.”

All students who agreed to participate in the study were provided with an informed consent document that explained these points of optional participation in writing. The informed consent document was explained in detail by the researcher, and participants had time to ask questions about the consent form and their participation in the study. The informed consent

explained the purpose of the study, the voluntary basis of participation, and the confidentiality of the data collected. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without needing to provide a reason for withdrawal. Participants were also informed at this stage to select a pseudonym for themselves that was used during the research process to ensure their identities were kept confidential. Recruitment for the study began in late 2024 after IRB approval.

3.5 Instrumentation

Hermeneutic phenomenology has been referred to as the “science of examples,” and van Manen stated that “phenomenological examples are usually cast in the practical format of lived experience descriptions: anecdotes, stories, narratives, vignettes, or concrete accounts” (van Manen, 2017, p.181). This phenomenological study included two primary methods of collecting experiential material: initial interviews and hermeneutic follow-up interviews. This study involved initial interviews (60-90 minutes) as well as a hermeneutic follow-up interview (30-45 minutes) when needed for clarification purposes. Both interviews were conducted and recorded on zoom. In van Manen’s hermeneutic phenomenology, the conversational interview is “used as a means for exploring and gathering experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon” (p. 66). My initial interviews with participants served this aim of collecting experiential narratives of receiving social support in the United States. The follow-up interviews were intended to contribute to the reflective, analytic process and had “develop[ed] a conversational relation with a partner (interviewee) about the meaning of an experience” (p. 66). During the follow-up interview, the researcher highlighted unclear or important sections of the transcripts to show to participants while asking clarifying questions about those statements. Then, the researcher discussed her

initial interpretations of the data with the participant to request their insights on the accuracy of those interpretations. This two-stage approach to interviewing ensured that narratives of pre-reflective lived experiences of social support were gathered in the initial interviews, while hermeneutic conversations about the meaning of those lived experiences were reserved for the follow-up interviews after the researcher had performed preliminary analysis of all initial interviews. The latter interview strengthened the research findings by turning the interviewees “collaborators of the research project” (p. 63). These interviews took place several weeks apart so the researcher had sufficient time for preliminary data analysis before beginning the follow up interview stage of the study.

In van Manen’s hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the interview is often an unstructured or semi-structured conversation, so the researcher must “be oriented to one’s question or notion in such a strong manner that one does not get easily carried away with interviews that go everywhere and nowhere” (p. 67). Before conducting interviews, I had worked to develop a clear and precise research question to ensure that relevant narratives of social support were obtained through these semi-structured conversations with participants. For the purpose of this study, I defined social support as *assistive acts (1) experienced as supportive by the recipient and (2) simultaneously experienced as strengthening the sense of connection between the persons involved*. Current social support literature defines two broad types of social support: emotion-focused support (i.e. encouragement, comfort, love) and problem-focused support (i.e. advice, instrumental aid) (Thoits, 2011; Chen et al., 2012). I utilized this existing model of types of social support for interview protocol development in order to elicit specific narratives from participants, but this model was bracketed during the data analysis so as to avoid imposing theoretical presuppositions on the interpretation of the experiential material.

3.5.1 Interview Protocol

I used a semi-structured approach to the interviews, while maintaining the conversational style prescribed in van Manen's phenomenological method. The interview protocol presented below for the initial interview served as a general guide for the conversation, but the deeper exploration of the narratives and anecdotes provided by the participants were through unstructured prompting for further description, reflecting back previous statements, and, at times, waiting patiently for participants to share more details (van Manen, 1990). These interview questions were developed to elicit experiential narratives and are based on an existing model of four types of social support: emotional support and esteem support as two forms of emotion-focused support and instrumental aid and informational aid as two forms of problem-focused support (Thoits, 2011; Chen et al., 2012). Questions relating to mutuality were developed from the conceptual framework of Relational Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2017). Importantly, the initial interview was only used to elicit pre-reflective narratives of lived experiences, and any interpretation of these experiences did not occur until the data analysis or follow-up hermeneutic interview stages. The interview questions were reviewed by a Kyrgyz graduate student and by the researcher's proposal committee to ensure clarity and appropriateness to the topic and academic discipline. The researcher had also conducted a practice interview with an international graduate assistant at the university to test the clarity of the wording and flow of the interview.

Here was the semi-structured interview protocol for initial interviews:

1. Introduction and discussion of informed consent, selection of pseudonym
2. Background questions to build rapport and gather contextual data: Can you tell me about what daily life is like where you grew up in Kyrgyzstan? How did you begin considering studying in the United States? What (or who) finally convinced you to study in the

United States? What has your experience of adjusting to life in the United States been like for you?

3. Core questions on receiving social support: Think for a moment about one of the first times you needed help after arriving in the United States. Can you describe more about the situation and what you needed help with? How did someone help you with [problem]? What was it like to receive their assistance? How did you feel about the person who helped you? How has that relationship changed since then?
4. Further prompts for additional narratives of social support: Can you tell me about a more recent time when someone (else) helped you in the United States? Are there other examples of moments when you received help or support in the U.S. that you feel are important to share with me?
5. Eliciting emotion-focused support narratives: Can you recall a time when you needed *emotional* support in the U.S.? How did someone support you then? Has there been a time when someone provided you with *emotional comfort*? Has there been a time when someone *praised* you or increased your confidence?
6. Eliciting problem-focused support narratives: Can you describe a time when you faced a serious *problem* in the U.S. and someone helped you? Was there any helpful *information* or *tangible assistance* (money, physical labor, items, etc.) that the person gave to you?
7. Further prompts to explore *mutuality/relationality* (asked at the end of each narrative): How did you realize [person] wanted to help you? What about this person made you willing to receive their help? How did receiving this support affect your friendship/relationship with [person]?

8. Wrap-up questions and thanking the participant: Looking back on your experience, how do you feel that these moments of social support have affected the closeness of your relationships in the United States? I'm very grateful for your time and all the stories you shared with me today.

After the initial interviews, the researcher transcribed the interviews from the recordings and then began preliminary analysis. During the initial interviews, the researcher was gathering only narratives of pre-reflective lived experience. Therefore, participants were not prompted to engage in interpretation or meaning-making of their experiences during the initial interviews.

The follow-up hermeneutic interviews were used to clarify information and to refine the preliminary interpretations drawn from the initial interviews. During the hermeneutic interview, the researcher "dialogue[d] with the interviewee about the ongoing record of the interview transcripts" (van Manen, 1990, p.63). This follow-up interview was also a semi-structured conversation, with clarifying questions developed from the initial interviews. The participant was invited to revise or add to any previous statements. For example, to check that the researcher had grasped the meaning of a participant's narrative correctly, the researcher asked the following type of question: "When your mentor advised you to seek medical help, it sounded like you decided to follow his advice because you felt a lot of respect for him. Did I understand that correctly, or is there more you want to explain about it?" The participant then corrected any misunderstandings the researcher had about their statements. Finally, the researcher proposed some initial interpretations of the narrative and asked the participant to share their opinions about the meaning. For example, "In several of the experiences you described, you seemed to develop more trust after someone had helped you. Do you think that my interpretation is accurate, or is there more you would add?" During this stage of the follow-up interview, the researcher clarified

which types of social support were preferred or seen as enhancing mutuality most for the participants. The semi-structured interview protocol for these follow-up interviews were specific to each participant, but general interpretations of essential themes are presented to all interviewees as a means of seeking collaborative reflection on the phenomenon of social support.

3.6 Data Collection

After IRB approval, recruitment for the study began in late 2024 at the midwestern university where the researcher is employed. The researcher used purposive sampling to invite qualified Kyrgyz students to participate in the study through direct conversations with students in the international office, university events, or email and WhatsApp. The informed consent was discussed thoroughly with each participant before the initial interview began, and participants selected their pseudonym at that time. Initial interviews lasted for 60-90 minutes. Interviews took place and were recorded on zoom, because most students commute to campus and find the zoom format more convenient for their schedules. The interview protocol for initial interviews was outlined in the previous section of this chapter. The researcher checked and corrected the interview transcriptions from the zoom recordings. Participant recruitment stopped when the researcher reached data saturation. Follow-up hermeneutic interviews of participants occurred a few weeks later, after some preliminary data analysis occurred. These follow-up interviews lasted 30-45 minutes and also took place on zoom. The researcher again transcribed these interviews from the zoom recordings. After all follow-up interviews concluded, the researcher moved into the final stage of data analysis.

3.7 Data Analysis

In van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology, "the insight into the essence of a phenomenon involves a process of reflectively appropriating, of clarifying, and of making

explicit the structure of meaning of the lived experience” (1990, p.77). Phenomenological inquiry requires the application of *epoché-reduction*: bracketing one’s own presuppositions in order to engage in open reflection on the textual data from interviews (van Manen, 2017). In order to achieve the final goal of textually representing a meaningful description of the phenomenon, the researcher must begin with an analysis of themes that circles between and compares the parts and the whole. This method also involves a process of writing and rewriting one’s interpretations of the phenomenon in order to linguistically delve deeper toward its essential qualities. Throughout the study, I reflected on and interpreted interview transcripts by applying the following analytical techniques prescribed by van Manen (1990).

3.7.1 Uncovering Thematic Aspects

Through a review of the experiential accounts gathered from interviews, I began the reflective process outlined by van Manen to uncover thematic aspects of the phenomenon of social support. In van Manen’s approach, themes are not singular statements, such as a concept or category. Rather, the researcher should uncover thematic phrases which can indicate the “structure of a lived experience” (1990, p. 92). Phenomenological themes are considered as “only fasteners, foci, or threads around which the phenomenological description is facilitated” (p. 91). Importantly, “a thematic phrase only serves to point at, to allude to, or to hint at, an aspect of the phenomenon” (p. 92). By revealing thematic aspects of the phenomenon, the researcher grows closer to understanding the essential qualities and structure that make this lived experience unique from other phenomena in life.

3.7.2 Isolating Thematic Statements

Van Manen proposed three approaches to isolating thematic aspects in order to uncover the recurring themes within the lived-experience descriptions one has gathered. Firstly, one can

apply the “wholistic or sententious approach” by attending to the text as whole and formulating a sententious phrase that can capture the fundamental meaning or main significance of that whole text (1990, p. 92). Secondly, one can apply the “selective or highlighting approach” to highlight phrases or statements that seem particularly revealing or essential about the experience being described (p. 93). Thirdly, one can apply the “detailed or line-by-line approach” to examine every sentence or sentence cluster and determine what that sentence reveals about the phenomenon being described (p. 93). After utilizing these three approaches, the researcher can return to the whole of the descriptions collected to identify which experiential themes recur as commonalities across the various descriptions. Finding these recurring themes allows one to move closer toward determining the essential themes of the phenomenon. Through this process, the researcher is continually comparing the parts and the whole to isolate thematic statements common across the experiential accounts.

3.7.3 Composing Linguistic Transformations

After gathering the various themes through these analytical methods, van Manen proposed that the researcher should “capture the thematic statements in more phenomenologically sensitive paragraphs” (1990, p. 95). The writing process and linguistic analysis is central to phenomenological reflection in this method. Van Manen stated that the process of writing and reflective rewriting is the only way to reach more profound phenomenological insights (2017). The phenomenological narrative must explicate themes while “remaining true to the universal quality or essence of a certain type of experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 97). The researcher must approach the composition of linguistic transformations of preliminary themes as a “creative, hermeneutic process” and avoid mechanicalness in one’s reflection (p. 96). Therefore, I creatively engaged in reflective writing and rewriting to

synthesize recurring themes into phenomenologically sensitive paragraphs at this stage of analysis.

3.7.4 Hermeneutic Conversational Interviewing

After composing thematic paragraphs, I commenced follow-up hermeneutic interviews to engage research participants in the interpretive process. Van Manen specified that the researcher must “keep the question (of the meaning of the phenomenon) open” while performing a hermeneutic interview with the participant (1990, p. 98). Additionally, the interpretive “conversation is structured as a triad;” there is a relation between the speakers (researcher and interviewee) and also a conversational relation between the speakers and the phenomenon being discussed (p. 98). The hermeneutic conversational interview must remain “oriented to sense-making and interpreting” of the phenomenon (p. 96). The collaborative quality of a hermeneutic conversation with my participants aided my reflection on the meaning of the phenomenon and allowed more clarity and openness to identifying the essential themes in light of the original phenomenological question.

3.7.5 Determining Incidental and Essential Themes

Finally, I began the process of writing my phenomenological text that described the essential themes of Kyrgyz students’ lived experiences of receiving social support in the United States. Van Manen advised that when “attempting a more full-fledged phenomenological textual description, we need to determine the themes around which the phenomenological description will be woven” (1990, p. 106). The goal in determining the essential quality of a theme is “to discover aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is” (p. 107). Separating incidental themes from the universal themes unique to a phenomenon is a difficult but necessary analytical task. Van Manen proposed

the method of “free imaginative variation in order to verify whether a theme belongs to a phenomenon essentially (rather than incidentally)” (p. 107). This imaginative process occurs when the researcher asks herself if the phenomenon would remain the same or lose its fundamental meaning if she imaginatively changes or deletes that theme. After determining through this method that a theme is essential to the lived experience, the researcher can “develop narrative elaborations of the lived meaning” of the phenomenon (p. 109). These narrative elaborations mediate the lived experience and offer interpretative descriptions of the phenomenon to the reader. As stated by van Manen, “creating a phenomenological text is the object of the research process” (p. 111). My final text attempted to elucidate what receiving social support in the United States is like for Kyrgyz international students.

3.8 Qualitative Rigor and Validity

According to van Manen, the goal of hermeneutic phenomenology is to “construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld, and yet to remain aware that lived life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal” (1990, p. 18). While acknowledging the limitations of phenomenological research’s attempts to convey an essential meaning about some aspect of a lifeworld so complex, van Manen argued that the true value and rigor of a phenomenological human science text is precisely its “courage and resolve to stand up for the uniqueness and significance of the notion to which it has dedicated itself” (p. 18). Therefore, an important qualification of the rigor of my study, according to this view, was my strong and oriented relation to my research question throughout each stage of the research process. Van Manen stated, “To be oriented as researchers or theorists means that we do not separate theory from life, the public from the private” (p. 151). Rather than engaging in theoretical abstraction, a rigorous phenomenological researcher should always come back to the

lived experiences and experiential accounts of the phenomenon to discover what essential qualities hold true. The researcher notebook was continuously used throughout the study to record all phenomenological insights and to engage in researcher reflexivity. The continual application of *epoché-reduction* by acknowledging and bracketing my biases and theoretical pre-suppositions was essential for ensuring trustworthiness of my study, so these assumptions were explicitly reflected on throughout my writing process. The final phenomenological text I produced in the study was rich and deep, providing unique phenomenological insights, to qualify as rigorous according to van Manen's standard.

Gathering data from multiple sources, such as initial interview and follow-up hermeneutic interviews in which participants contributed to the interpretive process, increased the credibility of my study. However, phenomenological researchers, like Vagle, have questioned the applicability of triangulation as a means for increasing validity in phenomenological research in that it may make the analysis too mechanistic (2018). The phenomenological researcher should be able to recognize deep and rich insights that emerge from the data, even if that meaningful statement is made by only one participant. Van Manen referred to the "validating circle of inquiry" to explain that "a good phenomenological description is collected by lived experience and recollects lived experience—is validated by lived experience and it validates lived experience" (1990, p. 27). Therefore, a rigorous phenomenological text will be recognized by the reader as valid if it uncovers an insightful and meaningful aspect of their lived experience. Involving participants to reflect on the preliminary themes that I have identified during the follow-up hermeneutic interviews was an important stage in determining the validity of the results.

3.9 Summary

This chapter provided a methodological overview of my hermeneutic phenomenological study on Kyrgyz international students' lived experiences of receiving social support in the United States. This study was intended to produce a phenomenological text to elucidate the essential qualities of social support in the lives of Kyrgyz students and was based on research that Kyrgyz people have long used relationships and reciprocal exchanges of assistance as a means of collective survival. The researcher's role as a university advisor to the participants was discussed as a means of strengthening her involvement as both an observer and participant in the study. A description of participant sampling, recruitment, and informed consent was provided. Additionally, this chapter discussed the data collection process and instrumentation, including an initial interview protocol and follow-up interviews. The stages of data analysis according to van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological approach were explained. Finally, I discussed how qualitative rigor of my study would be determined. Chapter four will present the results of this phenomenological study.

Chapter 4: Results

In this chapter, the research findings of my study on Kyrgyz international students' lived experiences of receiving social support in the United States are presented to illustrate how social support is used by participants as a survival strategy across the four existential domains of the lifeworld: relationality, temporality, spatiality and corporeality. The participant demographics and data collection process of the study are described. A summary of the data analysis process according to van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological methodology is explained. The themes of the study are introduced in relation to the research question and three sub-questions. Finally, a detailed presentation of the study's thematic findings in relation to van Manen's four existentials and a phenomenological description of experiencing social support as a Kyrgyz international student in the United States are presented.

4.1 Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

Kyrgyz international students are likely to experience increased psychological distress as part of the acculturation process when studying in the United States. Social support has been proposed as an effective buffer against stress in multiple research studies, but the effectiveness and types of social support have been found to vary across different cultures (Chen et al., 2012; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Kim et al., 2008; Thoits, 2011). Kyrgyz people have relied on networks of social support for their collective survival across difficult periods in their history, so social support may be particularly helpful to Kyrgyz international students as they face challenges in a new country. The current literature lacks specific studies on Kyrgyz international students' experiences in the United States and how social support may be utilized to navigate life abroad. This hermeneutic phenomenological study addressed the research question:

What are Kyrgyz international students' lived experiences of receiving social support in the United States?

The first two sub-questions of the study were:

(3) What are the lived experiences of receiving emotion-focused (esteem or emotional) support in the United States for Kyrgyz students?

(4) What are the lived experiences of receiving problem-focused (instrumental or informational) support in the United States for Kyrgyz students?

The final sub-question of the study was:

(3) What is it like to experience mutuality when receiving social support as a Kyrgyz student?

The results of the study in relation to the research question and the three sub-questions are discussed in this chapter.

4.2 Setting and Participant Demographics

The setting of this study was a mid-sized university (about 5,000 students) in a midwestern American city. About 10% of the university's students are international, and approximately one-third of this international student population is from Kyrgyzstan. Many Kyrgyz students choose to study at this university due to the guidance of educational agencies in Kyrgyzstan or through the recommendation of friends who already study here. This university has very limited on-campus housing, so the majority of students study online or commute to campus only a few days each week. Due to the large number of Kyrgyz people living in this particular city, most of the Kyrgyz international students are able to secure off-campus housing through their interpersonal connections. While the university offers extra-curricular programming for students, many students only spend time on campus for classes.

All eleven participants in the study were citizens of Kyrgyzstan and current undergraduate students at the same university in the midwestern American city where the study took place. Six females and five males participated in the study. Participants' ages ranged from nineteen years to twenty-five years, and their time spent living in the USA ranged from one year to five and a half years. All the participants were unmarried and did not have any children. Most participants were from Bishkek, the capital city of Kyrgyzstan, but a few grew up in Osh, Jalal-Abad, or Issyk-Kul. The demographic breakdown of each participant is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants' Demographic Data

Participant	Age	Gender	Time in USA	Cities Lived in Kyrgyzstan
P1: Victoria	19	Female	2 years	Bishkek, Osh
P2: Moriarty	20	Male	3 years	Bishkek, Osh
P3: Bobby	20	Male	3 years	Jalal-Abad
P4: Taigan	22	Male	2.5 years	Issyk-Kul region
P5: Daphne	22	Female	5.5 years	Bishkek, Osh
P6: Peter	25	Male	1.5 years	Bishkek
P7: Mia	20	Female	3 years	Bishkek, Issyk-Kul
P8: Alex	20	Male	3 years	Jalal-Abad
P9: Giselle	20	Female	3 years	Bishkek, Osh
P10: Daya	19	Female	3 years	Osh
P11: Jane	19	Female	1 year	Bishkek

4.3 Data Collection

The eleven initial interviews took place over zoom in January 2025. All participants selected their own pseudonyms and reviewed the consent document with the researcher before the interviews began. Two participants consented to only audio recording over zoom, while the remaining nine participants consented to video and audio recording. Each initial interview lasted between sixty to ninety minutes. Data saturation was determined to have been reached after eleven interviews. Four follow-up hermeneutic interviews were conducted in February 2025 over zoom, and each follow-up interview lasted between 30-45 minutes. Two male participants (P2 and P6) and two female participants (P5 and P10) were purposively selected for follow-up interviews due to differing ages, length of time in US, and distinct insights generated in their initial interviews.

4.4 Summary of Data Analysis

The analytical process followed van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological method involving the uncovering of thematic aspects, the reflective writing and re-writing process, and hermeneutic interviews to identify essential themes (1990). Additionally, van Manen stated that phenomenological reflection requires the continual application of *epoché-reduction*: bracketing one's own presuppositions in order to engage in open reflection on the textual data from interviews (2017). To bolster her application of *epoché-reduction* in this study, the researcher maintained a researcher journal throughout the data collection and analysis process to identify her reactions and biases that could be impacting her interpretations. The follow-up hermeneutic interviews were important for ensuring that the researcher's interpretations truly aligned with participants' lived experiences. These follow-up interviews allowed the researcher to apply Van Manen's "validating circle of inquiry" to confirm if her phenomenological descriptions were

validated by the Kyrgyz students' lived experiences (1990, p. 27). The stages of the data analysis process utilized in this study will be described in the following sections.

4.4.1 Uncovering Thematic Aspects and Isolating Thematic Statements

During the first phase of data analysis, the researcher listened to interview recordings and read interview transcripts to uncover thematic aspects of Kyrgyz students' experiences of social support in the United States. On the first reading of each transcript, the researcher used a wholistic approach to formulate a few sentences that captured the fundamental significance of social support within that interview. For example, one sententious phrase derived from the interview with Moriarty (P2) was, "Emotional support comes from just talking with loved ones." This phrase contributed to identifying the theme that proximity or activities together can contribute to emotion-focused social support.

Next, the researcher relied on van Manen's "selective or highlighting approach" to identify narratives that were particularly essential to the lived experience of social support (van Manen, 1990, p. 93). One example can be found in the interview with Bobby (P3) when he stated, "These professors... I can be open. I can talk about like with any like things—anything about life even, and I like it. I love it more, because when you're open with people, you will believe these people" (p. 9). This statement allowed the researcher to identify the theme that social support feels sincere and open. Finally, the researcher then utilized van Manen's "line-by-line approach" to determine what each highlighted sentence cluster revealed about the phenomenon of social support (van Manen, 1990, p. 93). Through this process, the researcher identified fifteen thematic aspects that were conceptualized as "thematic phrase[s]" in accordance with van Manen's phenomenological method (p. 92). The fifteen thematic phrases determined in the initial analysis were:

1. Social support is impactful when needed.
2. Social support inspires.
3. Social support feels sincere and open.
4. Social support involves seeing self-in-other.
5. Social support impact endures across time and generations.
6. Social support feels as if one has incurred an undefined debt that compels reciprocity.
7. Social support in the United States empowers one's independence.
8. Social support is receiving effective advice and expertise.
9. Social support involves utilizing interpersonal connections.
10. Social support results in improving one's emotional state.
11. Social support develops in relationships that become like family bonds.
12. Social support can be intuitive and offered freely.
13. Social support occurs through proximity and shared activities.
14. Social support occurs when there is rivalry and the desire to match another's achievements.
15. Social support is comfortable when there are shared identities or common values.

The thematic aspects found in the participants' interviews are listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Thematic Aspects in Participant Interviews

Theme	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11
Impactful when needed	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Inspires	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X
Sincere and open	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Seeing self-in-other	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Endures across time/generations	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
An undefined debt, reciprocity	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Empowers one's independence	X			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Effective advice and expertise	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Utilizing connections	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Improving one's emotional state	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Becoming like family, bonding	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Intuitive and offered freely		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Proximity/activities together	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Rivalry, matching achievements	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	
Sharing common values/identities		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

4.4.2 Composing Linguistic Transformations

After the thematic statements were isolated, the researcher proceeded to the phase of reflective analysis that involved composing phenomenologically sensitive paragraphs about the essential themes of social support for Kyrgyz international students. Van Manen's phenomenological method relies primarily upon the writing and rewriting process as a means of uncovering the essential characteristics of a lived experience. Through this process, several themes were discovered to be fundamentally similar or related to one another. The researcher used the reflective writing stage to compose synthetic thematic paragraphs, such as the following:

Effective social support occurs when one has a deep familiarity with the giver of support. One feels a strong family-like bond with the other and can intuit their needs without being explicitly asked for help. The giver and recipient feel an openness with each other that allows for support to be received more fully and perceived as more sincere. Due to the understanding of each other cultivated through shared experiences across time, the giver of support can intuitively provide a form of support that will be effective for the needs of the recipient. This support is understood as being given freely, without

expectation of repayment, as the familial bond is the primary motivation of the supportive act.

This paragraph explored how the themes of “becoming like family,” “intuitive and offered freely,” and “sincere and open” are descriptive of a deeper essence of social support relationships characterized by its familial closeness, openness, and intuitive understanding of needs. The final phase of composing linguistic transformations resulted in five phenomenologically sensitive paragraphs describing distinct essential qualities of social support in the lived experiences of Kyrgyz international students in the United States.

4.4.3 Hermeneutic Conversational Interviewing

To better reflect on the accuracy of the essential themes of social support identified by the researcher, four follow-up interviews were conducted with purposively selected participants to engage in hermeneutic conversations about the five synthesized themes. During follow-up interviews, the researcher presented the themes she had identified from initial analysis and encouraged the participants to share their honest assessment of these descriptions of social support. The four participants in the follow-up interviews largely agreed with the researcher’s descriptions of social support. In her follow-up interview with Daphne, for example, the researcher posed the thematic description, *Receiving the help we need inspires us to improve ourselves, so we can give back by being able to help others in the future*. Daphne agreed with this description and provided a narrative to support this theme:

Absolutely. After the bus [incident when the driver paid my fare], first, because I had to walk how many miles every week, every time. When I, after I got a car, every time I see someone walking at night by themselves, I always ask, like, ‘Do you need a ride?’ [...] So far I think I dropped off like over ten people at their houses just because they were

walking by themselves outside. I still feel bad every time I see someone outside. I remember myself, so I'm like, 'I should help them, because someone helped me before.' It kind of, like, sticks with you. (p. 3)

All four participants in the follow-up interviews added additional narratives from their experiences that supported the researcher's phenomenological descriptions.

Importantly, the follow-up hermeneutic interviews allowed the researcher to refine her initial understanding of the phenomenon, because each participant was able to provide more specific feedback that clarified their experience. In one example, the researcher posed the following thematic statement to Peter (P6) during the follow-up interview: *Impactful social support remains in one's memory and influences one's future intentions*. Peter challenged that the memory will not be the aspect of social support that endures across time, but rather the emotional impact of the support:

I don't think so, that is going to be remain like over a long time, but I think it's just going to be like... for example, in future when I'm going to help someone, I have this feeling, someone helped me. And I will try just to provide this feeling to another one, you know. Maybe with just different words, or maybe even with the same words. (p. 13)

Based on Peter's response, the researcher incorporated the endurance of an emotional impact of social support in her thematic description. Through the follow-up discussions, the researcher was able to obtain more nuanced feedback about the effectiveness and impact of social support for the Kyrgyz international students, which allowed her to determine the final thematic descriptions of the phenomenon.

4.4.4 Determining Incidental and Essential Themes

The researcher was able to determine which themes of social support were essential and which were merely incidental by analyzing the transcripts and recordings of the initial and follow-up interviews and engaging in van Manen's reflective writing process. As an example, the researcher's initial analysis produced the thematic statement: *Social support in the United States empowers one's independence*. This theme was largely based on participants' comments that American professors or friends provided opinions or advice without restricting the recipients' choice of how to believe or act, thus respecting their autonomy. However, upon further analysis, the researcher discovered that many of the participants' remarks about developing their independence were referencing experiences in which others denied support and left the students to find a solution on their own. Therefore, the theme of empowering one's independence was determined to be incidental to Kyrgyz students' experiences of social support in the United States rather than essential, and this theme was not included in the final phenomenological description. By following this analytical approach to the data and confirming findings in hermeneutic interviews, the researcher narrowed down the essential themes that were described in her final phenomenological description.

4.5 Discussion of Research Questions

The findings of the research study will be discussed in relation to the research question and sub-questions. This study's primary research question was: *What are Kyrgyz international students' lived experiences of receiving social support in the United States?* This study revealed that Kyrgyz international students utilize social support as a survival strategy to adapt to their new American environment. Each of these four thematic findings of the study represent different ways that Kyrgyz international students are using social support to overcome the challenges of

life abroad: *Seeing Self-in-Other, Forming Family-like Bonds through Reciprocity, Utilizing Connections as Sources of Effective Guidance, and Proximity and Shared Activities Improve One's Emotional State*. All themes uncovered in this study addressed this research question, and the phenomenological description of social support developed by the researcher summarized the essential qualities of these Kyrgyz students' experiences of social support in the United States. An expanded description of the themes in relation to the primary research question will follow in the subsequent section on the study's findings. Firstly, however, each of the themes will be introduced in relation to the three sub-questions below to demonstrate how interview data led to the identification of these themes.

4.5.1 Sub-Question 1

What are the lived experiences of receiving emotion-focused (esteem or emotional) support in the United States for Kyrgyz students? To address sub-question 1, the researcher asked participants to share narratives about receiving emotional support in the United States. The need for nearby companions quickly became an apparent theme in the participants' narratives of emotion-focused support. For example, when describing her experience of receiving emotional support at her first school in the U.S., Mia (P7) discussed the times spent together with her classmates:

*Me and my friend, other girl, we used to live together, and other four students, boys, lived on the other side of the building. So whenever we got free time, we spent together. [...]
We start learning, like studying together. It was a small town. We used to go to the lake, and we used to spend time on there. We used to go to the other restaurants on the weekends. (p. 10)*

Companionship, even when problems were not explicitly discussed, was frequently described as emotional support by participants.

Several participants provided narratives of shared activities with nearby support givers that significantly improved emotional distress or sadness. Giselle (P9) described how her roommates were able to improve her negative emotional state by inviting her to different activities that distracted her from loneliness and depression:

They [roommates] were just bothering me all day, so I wouldn't think about negative emotions. Like when you have time to think about something, and when you have, let's say, depression, the only feel that you can only think about is just loneliness or maybe it's some sort of burden, as if you're not good enough, as if you're not valued enough that people don't even care about you at all. So of course, my roommates, they were so worried about me, that they say, 'Hey, let's do this. Let's go there. Let's go walk together, go to the beach, swim, eat some watermelons, enjoy the nightfall or something.' So they're just offering me so many things that I didn't have time to think about something negative. (p. 16)

Another student who had experienced feeling depressed, Daya (P10), explained how companionship and shared activities with her nearby friends was a way she could improve her depressed mood:

I feel like going out and going out surrounding again yourself with the people that bring you joy helped me a lot. It's like, when you're having depression, I feel like when a person has a depression in general, he or she gets to the point where you cannot see life in a positive way. Everything you see as an individual part of me, a negative way. There have to be people next to you who are going to be like, 'Hey, come on, let's go out. The world

isn't like that gray as you see it. Let's go and have an ice cream, or let's go for a little walk and talk for a while, like talk to me.' And talk, to me, does, have help me a lot. I feel like even having fun, even it was temporary, you know, you're going out, you're having fun, you're feeling good, and then you're getting back to health. (p. 12)

Narratives such as these descriptions of companionship in the U.S. formed the initial basis for one of this study's themes, *Proximity and Shared Activities Improve One's Emotional State*, which will be elaborated on in the findings section.

4.5.2 Sub-Question 2

What are the lived experiences of receiving problem-focused (instrumental or informational) support in the United States for Kyrgyz students? To address sub-question 2, the researcher asked participants to share narratives about receiving help when they faced a problem in the United States. In relation to the experience of receiving problem-focused social support, the utilization of interpersonal connections for effective guidance and information was a dominant theme across all eleven (11) participants' interviews. Narratives about problem-focused support usually began with descriptions of utilizing connections to navigate the daily life processes of the United States as a foreigner. For example, Bobby (P3) described feeling overwhelmed by complex American procedures to obtain housing compared to a more informal reliance on interpersonal connections in Kyrgyzstan:

I can say in America, also, like when I was first time here, it was really tough to find even apartment here. Like if you don't have any social security number, you don't have like credit score... these things was new for me because in Kyrgyzstan we don't have such a thing. You can just go pay money and just live there. You don't need even like fill out any documentations. You will not wait like for three or four days, like one week. You know,

you will just go there, pay money. You will just call them because everybody know there each other. Maybe you know this guy, maybe this guy might be relative to my friend or such and such kind of thing. But here is completely like different. I tried to find apartment, but when I would go there, they say, "Give me your SSN. Give me your this thing." And I was like, "What's that?" And after that, it was hard to find apartment and I was like living in a motel someday. But after I find some Kyrgyz guys, they're was not student, they're was like student-aged people, they helped me to live there. So that was like a social help I think. (p. 4)

Bobby's narrative depicts how he struggled to adapt to a complex American process for obtaining basic needs such as housing. Eventually, he relied on interpersonal connections with the local Kyrgyz community in the U.S. to provide him with informal support to obtain housing, which was a more familiar process that he would have followed in Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyz students relied heavily on the advice of others to orient themselves to American life. When asked about a time she experienced problem-focused support in the U.S., Mia (P7) described receiving guidance on university processes from advisors when she reached her first American university, which had been located in another state: "So we fly to Minnesota and then we start. There was also advisors over there who help us, how everything gonna work, how you need to register for classes and what files you need to fill out" (p. 8). Narratives such as these descriptions of receiving guidance from trusted sources in the U.S. formed the initial basis for one of this study's themes, *Utilizing Connections as Sources of Effective Guidance*, which will be elaborated on in the findings section.

The effectiveness of the advice or the expertise of the advice giver was frequently highlighted in narratives of receiving problem-focused support. Victoria (P1) expressed how the

effectiveness of the personal advice she received from professors and mentors was empowering for her to make changes:

After trying all those methods, that really helped me. I realized that when you're sincere with person, because my professors, they were like really open with me. They were telling the try things they used before when they got this situation. I think that was the key for me to change inside. (p. 13)

Another participant, Jane (P11), described how she often relies on her brother-in-law for professional advice and connecting with other people who can provide support:

So anytime I can just call him and just ask, like, for example, I have these kinds of issues. I have to go there, here, do you have someone who knows or who can help? And he always has connections, and he can always offer me. And like, when he talks about like IT trends, what's happening here, what will happen, and in the nearest future, I always feel like I'm the one that, like about in other people, he is like professional, so I would say that I'm getting the biggest support from them. (p. 16)

Daya (P10) also mentioned a reliance on friends in the tech industry who can offer advice and motivation:

If I want to ask some particular questions that I'm struggling with in life, then I have to address that question to the person who knows the best about this issue. So I have been calling my friends and sisters who are working in that field and asking for their support, and asking my questions about, like, tech from them. And they were the ones who had been telling me more about it, motivating me and saying, 'Hey, you can do this. We have been doing this. That is all right. It's not this hard, and things are going to be better.' They were the ones who gave me that support that I had been needing. (p. 15)

Every participant shared narratives of instances when they had relied on other people to provide them with advice or useful information while studying in the United States. Participants often identified trusted individuals through the recommendations of their social networks when seeking guidance to solve problems. Some well-recognized individuals who had proved their expertise in certain areas or with certain problems seemed to have established a powerful social reputation through their offerings of social support, which was affirmed during follow-up interviews. This theme demonstrates that a common form of effective problem-focused support for Kyrgyz international students is receiving advice from trusted social connections.

4.5.3 Sub-Question 3

What is it like to experience mutuality when receiving social support as a Kyrgyz student?

To address sub-question 3, the researcher asked participants to describe how their closeness in the relationships had been affected by receiving social support. The themes of *Seeing Self-in-Other* and *Forming Family-Like Bonds through Reciprocity* were most closely associated with this sub-question. Firstly, many of the participants' narratives expressed the sentiment of relating to one's similar experience or identity, which led to empathetic identification with the recipient of support, which formed the basis of the theme *Seeing Self-in-Other*. For example, Daphne (P5) explained how the shared experience of surviving as students in the United States created an empathy and similar identity with her Kyrgyz classmate:

I think I feel like the same as like going to army together, and then you just like become a veteran, but you still remember that lifelong friend you went, you fought war, or something like this, the same feeling, someone who had the same experience as in America. [...] When someone tells you these stories, you kind of feel that, but it's still not

the same as someone who lived together the same experience, so it's good to have someone like this. (p. 9)

This finding aligns with the mutual empathy that is proposed as a characteristic of *mutuality* in Relational Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2017). Supporting and empathizing with each other through difficult times developed into a strong relational bond over time.

Consequently, many participants described experiencing family-like bonds with the individuals who provided them with support, indicating the strengthening of *mutuality* in those relationships. These bonds were developed through (often reciprocal) exchanges of social support over time that increased familiarity and understanding of each other and led to the thematic finding of *Forming Family-Like Bonds through Reciprocity*. Most participants used familial language to describe their connections to the support providers, such as brother/sister, mother, etc. Daya (P10) described how her female friends supported each other with sincere kindness, treating each other as siblings:

Even though we're not siblings, we just try to treat each other like siblings, because we know that there are not a lot of us in here and we all need support. So that what keeps us together. [...] There were so many things that they have done for us, which I'm really grateful for. And like, they don't really try to take an advantage, do something in advantage, you know. They're just being purely kind and doing all the things from the bottom of their heart, which just makes me feel really grateful for all the things that they're doing. (p. 6)

Similarly, Moriarty (P2) described that his friends had become like brothers, and he felt that they shared a reciprocal commitment to supporting each other in times of need:

Looks like, I don't know, brotherly kind of thing, bonds. [...] So like I trust these guys, like I know that if I need support over here, and if they need support, I'll be there, too. (p. 12)

Moriarty's statement demonstrates the stability felt from a long-term supportive bond with his close friends in the U.S. The themes of *Seeing Self-in-Other* and *Forming Family-Like Bonds through Reciprocity* will be expanded upon in the following findings section.

4.6 Findings

This section will present the findings of this study in order to answer the primary research question: *What are Kyrgyz international students' lived experiences of receiving social support in the United States?* As Kyrgyz international students arrive in the United States, they are confronted with the challenges of acculturation stress and often experience culture shock. These students come from a nation where long-standing traditions of social and communal support have empowered the Kyrgyz people to survive periods of instability and hardship. When entering the American context, Kyrgyz students seek to again employ social support as a survival strategy, while adapting the sources, forms, and meaning of social support to the new conditions of American life. The significant need experienced when facing unexpected or overwhelming situations in the U.S. increases the importance and value of social support for these students. The four thematic findings of the study represent different ways that Kyrgyz international students are using social support to overcome the challenges of life abroad: *Seeing Self-in-Other*, *Forming Family-like Bonds through Reciprocity*, *Utilizing Connections as Sources of Effective Guidance*, and *Proximity and Shared Activities Improve One's Emotional State*.

Kyrgyz international students rely on social support as a means of apprehending their new identities as foreigners, making progress toward future goals, navigating an unknown environment, and forming local relationships to compensate for the distance from loved ones

abroad. When feeling existentially lost or disoriented, students seek to find a mirror of themselves in others in the U.S. that can serve as a reaffirmation of their own identities and goals. In order to ensure survival and success in the future, students form family-like bonds through reciprocity in their relationships and in the community. Students identify new sources of social support who are trustworthy and can provide reliable guidance for overcoming obstacles in the U.S. environment. On a personal level, students spend time with local support givers to relieve emotional distress through companionship and shared activities. Each of these four strategies will be examined in this chapter to demonstrate how social support serves as a survival strategy in all of van Manen's lifeworld existential domains: relationality, temporality, spatiality, and corporeality (1990). The essential thematic findings will be prefaced with an exploration of the salient themes regarding the contextual background of acculturation and followed by an examination of the long-term impact of social support for this population of international students. The essential and salient themes are depicted in Figure 2.

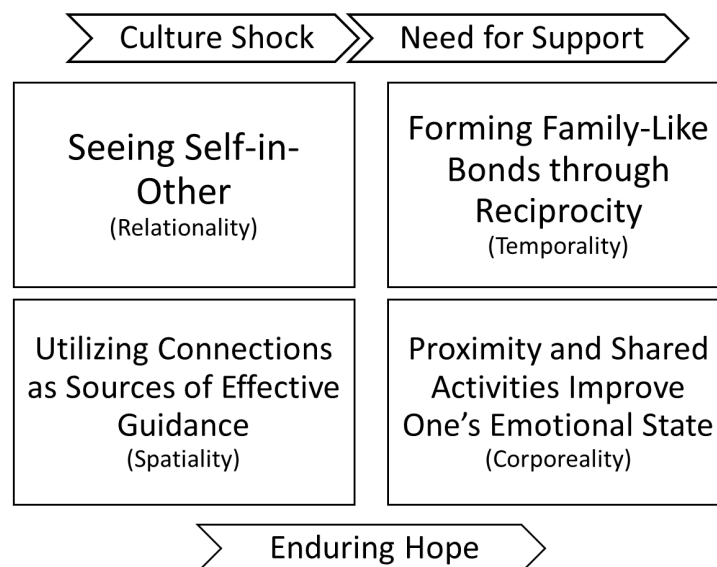


Figure 2: Essential and Salient Themes

4.6.1 Barriers and Benefits of Securing Social Support in the U.S.

Interviews with participants in this study revealed how Kyrgyz international students utilize social relationships as a means to cope with daily challenges in the United States. However, establishing effective networks of social support in their new environment is one of the first obstacles students must overcome. Newly arrived Kyrgyz students struggle to reconcile their expectations of American life with reality, leading to culture shock and difficulty integrating into American society. Many participants responded to this challenge by relying on the large local Kyrgyz community in their city whom they perceived as more likely to share their values, but participants also shared stories of receiving meaningful social support from non-Kyrgyz people in the U.S. Regardless of the national origin of the support provider, Kyrgyz students expressed experiencing a greater long-term impact when receiving social support during a time of great need or vulnerability.

4.6.1.1 Challenges in the American Environment

In this study, participants' accounts depicted the cultural strain placed on social relationships due to their new American context. During hermeneutic follow-up interviews, all four participants remarked on differences between their Kyrgyz cultural norms and their perceived values of American society. These differences highlight the psychological stress that Kyrgyz international students can experience while trying to socially adapt to life in the U.S. Daya (P10) expressed feeling a severe culture shock upon arriving to the U.S. when her expectations turned out to be different from the reality of American life:

"I know a lot of Kyrgyz students think that America... it's very easy. Even though moving out from your parents and starting your own life a very huge experience [...] Yeah,

because for me personally, I think I've had the pink glasses that U.S. isn't, you know, for... I just thought that things would be much easier than they were in reality.” (p. 7)

In addition to describing the unexpected challenge of adapting to life in the U.S. away from her family, Daya (P10) also expressed feeling that the worldviews of Americans were very different from her own perspectives: “When I started having American friends and when I’ve tried to understand their background and their worldview and the way that they perceive things, it’s just so interesting. It just feels like a whole other world” (p. 11). Daya’s statements reveal how the difficulty of leaving behind her supportive family relationships back home was intensified by the need to learn the contrasting worldviews of her American friends.

Students’ perceptions of cultural differences between their former Kyrgyz customs and the American mindset may explain why most participants relied primarily on local Kyrgyz relationships for social support. Two of the follow-up interview participants, Peter and Moriarty, described a social segregation from Americans. Peter (P6) emphasized that the lack of integration with the local Americans created a sense of isolation and confusion:

“In our university, our Kyrgyz people are not like, we are not communicating a lot with like local students, with American students in our university. [...] We are not being friends with American people, with American guys. So that’s why I guess we’re feeling isolated, because we don’t know where to go.” (p. 5)

Experiencing a lack of social support from Americans is likely to intensify the psychological stress of Kyrgyz students who have relied so heavily on social guidance back in Kyrgyzstan. Moriarty (P2) noted a lack of integration with American society and highlighted that people in the U.S. do not seem to provide as much advice or help as Kyrgyz people do. When asked if he

believed that social support involved helping people who are in a similar situation that one has experienced in the past, Moriarty responded:

“I think that's completely true. Even though, like... I don't know why, but in the U.S., I haven't experienced it that much. When people went through the same thing together and they're like, ‘Hey, I've been through that. You're going to be fine.’ Like they don't give elaborative uh details or like help. But in my in my country, like especially in Kyrgyz students here at [university], I've seen it a lot. We help each other. We have our own little group.” (p. 2)

These variations in social norms of the United States and Kyrgyzstan seemed to have made social adaptation particularly difficult for the Kyrgyz students in the U.S. who are experiencing an increased need of social support alongside heightened difficulty with forming new, reliable social relationships with Americans.

Perceptions of American values as inferior to Kyrgyz moral values may also contribute to these Kyrgyz students' lack of social integration. One participant, Daphne (P5), linked some of the variations in cultural expectations to a generational divide that has been taking place in Kyrgyzstan: “The older generation, they grew up as a Soviet like rules and stuff, and in Kyrgyzstan we grew up with like, more like a western type of like ideals and stuff” (p. 5). Daphne mentioned a time when a conflict arose after she said, “no” to helping her older Kyrgyz relatives with whom she lives in the U.S. Daphne described that her relatives criticized her by comparing her to Americans: “Like, ‘Oh, you came to America and you're already like becoming like American like them, you're like selfish.’ That's not selfish, just like self-respect. I can't say yes to you all the time” (p. 6). Daphne's experience highlights how the more individualistic values of Americans could be perceived as selfish according to some Kyrgyz social expectations,

which may foster some reluctance to rely on Americans for social support. Nonetheless, when Kyrgyz students do receive effective social support in the U.S., the impact of this support demonstrates how highly valued this support is regardless of the nationality of the support provider.

4.6.1.2 Need Increases the Impact of Support

Due to the psychological strain of acculturation, participants greatly valued the social support that they received in the United States. All eleven (11) participants' interviews demonstrated that social support was particularly impactful when it was needed, and most participants (9) expressed feelings of motivation or inspiration about having received support at a time when it was particularly needed. One's state of vulnerability or need increased the value they placed on the support received and the long-term emotional impact of the support on the recipient. One participant, Peter (P7), described how even a worker's smile at his local grocery store was significant, because he was feeling depressed at that time:

When I went to Trader Joe, I saw that someone, when someone is smiling to you, that's really great. It just kind of help you to deal with your depression, etc., because you're, I don't know why, but you're feeling like some kindness from other. And you see that, just, life is going on, it's not just life is stopped, and you don't do anything. So that's really good, really good stuff for me. I guess that was the one moment, even the cashier in the Trader Joe can make the difference to you. (p. 16)

Peter's narrative reveals how small social exchanges can have a meaningful effect on one who is in psychological pain.

Similarly, Victoria (P1) explained how the support of her international advisor (the researcher) gave her the motivation to remain in the United States despite her feelings of loneliness and depression at the time:

And I'm so thankful for you that you really influence in my personal life, because maybe without your support, I wouldn't stay here. Maybe I would just stay like two months and just come back to Kyrgyzstan, just give up. But you gave me the light to like staying here, because when you were like inviting me for some meetings at that time, I was feeling myself depressed, lonely. But after I came to your office or other places that you invited us, I was so happy. I was excited. And I think those moments really like helped me, and now I feel myself being a part of something. (p. 17)

Feeling socially supported in the U.S. brings strength to Kyrgyz international students to endure emotionally difficult periods of their educational journey. The students' experiences of receiving support at a vulnerable time revealed that social support is particularly impactful and appreciated when one is in need. Further, this impactful support can lead to a long-term emotional change in the recipient and inspire a willingness to provide support to others in the future. As Kyrgyz international students try to establish their social footing in an American environment, discovering their identity and values, as well as new sources of social support, is critical to obtaining the benefits of social support.

4.6.2 Relationality: Seeing Self-in-Other

The first of van Manen's existential themes of the lifeworld is relationality. Because social support is deeply embedded into one's lived human relations, all of the themes in this study's findings penetrate the relational aspect of the participants' lifeworlds. However, the theme of *Seeing Self-in-Other* is perhaps the most illuminating for understanding how the

Kyrgyz international students relate themselves to others in a distinct way while adjusting to life in the U.S. Participants experienced a deep empathy through identifying their present, past, or future self with either the giver or recipient of social support. Through this use of empathy, participants demonstrated how Kyrgyz students are able to reorient themselves to their new identities and life goals in an American context.

Seeing self-in others is a relational strategy that Kyrgyz international students employ to navigate the unknown social terrain of American society. Ten (10) participants described a sense of empathy or a recognition of similar identity with the recipient of social support, which I argue served as a psychological tether to others. Recognizing empathy in support givers allowed participants to feel more trusting and open to receiving their assistance, as they perceived mutual understanding from similar experiences. Many participants described feeling that the provider of social support perceived a younger version of themselves when they offered assistance. One participant, Bobby (P3), described how he felt very welcomed by older Kyrgyz men after arriving in Chicago. Bobby believed these men supported him because they identified their younger selves' aspirations with his journey as a student:

They just told me they will always support me, 'Oh, if you are a student, I will help you definitely.' Because they're also saying their own story, that they want to be a student but because of some issues, they couldn't be students. So they just work. And to become their dreams come true, they will help me. So they say this thing and there was always a welcome. They even like give me some food, like show me the city, show me downtown, like give me like more motivation so I could like get more motivated and study more. And these guys helped me. From when I was first here, they was really welcome. And they saying, like saying we will help you anyway. (p. 5)

Recognizing shared experiences with the giver of support led some participants to see potential to emulate the support giver in the future. Mia (P8) described a link between past, present, and future in her relationship with the elder Kyrgyz women who had helped her in the United States:

I think they do this for reason, like for reason is future, because so the, I know one sister telling that they also came back in 2010 or 2009, 2013, they also came as U.S., like students. [...] So they said that it was really hard for them to find support, social, emotional support. Yeah, and for this reason, I think they want us to... let's see. They want us to be more like, they don't want us to live U.S. [life] that they lived back in the, yeah, that for this reason they helped us. [...] And also, I also wanted to, in the future, when I become like financially stable, I also wanted to help people, or help specific, like students. (p. 15)

A few other participants echoed Mia's aspiration of giving help to others in the future, imagining how it would feel to be one who has the means to provide support to students. The motivation to achieve positive goals in the future also gives them resolve to succeed despite challenges in U.S.

Reciprocity was an important relational consideration of social support exchanges as students sought to understand the motivations of their support providers. Moriarty (P2) similarly described how an older Kyrgyz man gave professional portfolio advice to younger Kyrgyz students while possibly expecting future reciprocity:

He said, like, 'I see myself in you guys and like I want to build a stronger generation.'
From how I see it, like he knows, he sees potential, and he wants to make like owe him one in the future. (p. 19)

In each case, empathy was recognized through the sense that the other person had a similar identity or experience as oneself, whether in past, present, or future. This empathic relation with

support gives allows Kyrgyz students to reengage with their identity development in the American context and to formulate appropriate future goals for themselves based on their relationality with others.

4.6.2.1 Shifting Identities in Migration

Many participants in this study sought to identify shared values, customs, or experiences with others as a means of understanding their own identities in their new environment. Most of the participants in the follow-up interviews remarked on the experience of identity reflection during their adjustment to life in the United States. For Daya (P10), connecting with the Kyrgyz community in the U.S. who provided her with social support was crucial to preserving her sense of identity through shared Kyrgyz values:

I really think that having people that are, that do share same traditions maybe or that are from the same country or that are sharing maybe some point of same worldview really helps you to be grounded. And... I think to be much stronger because you kind of start remembering where you are coming from and that kind of helps you to stay stronger. [...]
Because I feel like a lot of people feel lost when they move on, move into a new country. Everything is new. Friends are new and you try to get that, you know, reputation that you had in your own like your country, back in your country. And I think remembering what kind of person you were back in those days also helps you to stay stronger. And the qualities that you have in the like in that country. (p. 3-4)

Daya described that her sense of identity was tied to the person she was in Kyrgyzstan, and staying connected to the Kyrgyz community in the U.S. allowed her to maintain self-continuity during her acculturation period.

For Moriarty (P2), coming to the United States provoked a change in his character. In his initial interview, Moriarty expressed that he had grown more identified with his Kyrgyz culture after moving to the U.S. and experiencing social support from his Kyrgyz friends there:

Just staying with Kyrgyz people makes me more Kyrgyz, I feel like. If I stick with the American people, if I became more American-ish, I would have felt like... I would have felt I'm betraying Kyrgyz people. That's what I think right now. I haven't done it. I didn't know. That's what I think would feel like. Because I would... In our country, there's a really strong, strong belief in shame, 'That's shameful. Don't do that. Everyone will think differently.' And the opposite side, America does the opposite: 'You can do whatever you want. I am not going to say anything.' (p. 13)

Moriarty reaffirmed this belief in his identity change during his follow-up interview when he stated,

I think I've changed it a lot since I came here. Because before this, I was more egoistical. [...] After I came here, I saw people like struggling myself. And they all just started changing and like they were trying to help me sincerely. So that was like, yeah, if they do that, why can't I do that? So that really impacted me and like that make me change here, like be more open-minded, like be more open to people and sincere. (p. 8)

In both Moriarty's and Daya's statements, they expressed a reassessment of their sense of identity after arriving in the U.S. In both cases, the students felt that connection with their Kyrgyz community brought them strength to overcome challenges due to similar values and identities. After developing stability in their new identities as international students, many Kyrgyz students again look to relatable others to determine appropriate goals to achieve success in the U.S.

4.6.2.2 Social Comparison as Indirect Social Support

Multiple interview participants described how social comparison to other Kyrgyz people in the U.S. can motivate not only students but also those in the wider Kyrgyz community to improve themselves. The identification of oneself with the other through social comparison is aptly summed up in this commonly repeated phrase from participants: “If he can do it, why can’t I?” Kyrgyz students felt comfortable identifying themselves with similar others and imagining brighter futures for themselves that would emulate others’ successes. Daphne provided perhaps the clearest example of this indirect form of social support when she described the gradual explosion of programming boot camps in the Kyrgyz community:

In Kyrgyz community, there's like saying, 'If he can do it, why can't I?' And then I experienced this like firsthand when I just came here. Most of the Kyrgyz people were either like truck drivers, restaurant workers, like some of them were teachers, but most of these kind of jobs... And then someone started the course, like boot camp for computer science. And then they took like 10 people. They taught them how everything works, and then they found like job within six months. So, and it was like really high paying jobs, maybe \$150,000, \$200,000. And they just went to boot camp. And then other people start seeing it and like they did it. And then there's like a very strong comparison like, that person went to school with me and they were not even good at math, but now they're working in computer science. It started a huge chain that every other Kyrgyz started going to boot camps and then now maybe just from the people that I know from that time, like six years ago, over 50 people got job was in like one year. So and now there is like a strong computer science community within Kyrgyz people. It not only affected the community here, but then now Kyrgyz people see it. Let's say everyone has relatives in

America, let's say brother, sister, cousin or and they're like, 'Oh, they went to boot camp or they went, they studied computer science and they're making really good money.' And now they're applying for computer science. I forgot the word here, like even probably you have like the list of Kyrgyz students and maybe 80% of them are computer science majors because of this. It wasn't like a thing maybe seven and eight years ago, but it's just started after one person just opened a bootcamp and then showed everyone that they can do. So even when I see the videos of like people working at Google or like Facebook, I'm like, 'They did it, why can't I?' It has like a really good driving power for you to do better. It also helps the community because now it's like even the level of like people are rising. They're not like a dishwashers or restaurant workers anymore... all of them are like educated not only in computer science, but like they're now taking different fields. It's like it's motivated or showed them there's like a way to do different stuff. There's stuff that you want, so now everyone is like motivated to do what they are like. (p. 9-10)

In Daphne's example, the wider Kyrgyz community was positively impacted to overcome challenges in the U.S. by one person's decision to begin a tech boot camp course. Daphne described how she was also strongly driven on an individual level by comparing herself to others' professional success.

Daya and Moriarty both found social comparison to be a way to identify achievable goals for oneself. Daya explained how her sense of shared identity with other Kyrgyz people gave her hope that she can achieve the same accomplishments:

I feel like when you see a person, particularly Kyrgyz person, who has achieved something, you just see that not as a competition but more of an inspiration and hope... Oh, okay. That person has come from the same place that I've been growing, that I've

been grown from, the same community, from the same nationality, the person who shares, you know, same worldview again. And I think pretty much same opportunities... It just gives you that hope that if those things were same, then possibly you can do it too. Because you can do it, your starting points were kind of similar and it just brings you the hope that, oh, okay. If that person could do that and we have the same starting point then it more likely that I can do it too. (p. 8)

Moriarty expressed a similar sentiment regarding the motivation he feels from social comparison:

There is a saying that like if you're friends with five millionaires, you're going to be the sixth millionaire. That's the whole point of this. So let's say if my friends get a car like in my friend group I will be also striving to get a car, you know? So that kind of level, like if they get a good IT job or like they get a really, really good house, I'll be also... It's going to be like, I will be thinking, 'Hey, I can do that too. So why not do that?' So like, that's going to be my milestones or like, achievable goals. (p. 1-2)

Kyrgyz students can benefit both personally and collectively through the indirect social support experienced through social comparison.

Keeping abreast of one's friends' achievements may also be important for creating and maintaining beneficial social relationships. As Peter expressed, a more successful friend can bring shared benefits to the relationship rather than burdens:

Even if it's going to be your friends who is not like your family, they're interested in you to being successful too because they want to be friends with you like for the whole of your life, for the whole life. And if they're going to be a millionaire and you're just going to be like, somewhere middle stuff like plateau or something like person then it means that

they're not going to be interested to be friends with you anymore because they have a lot of problems by themselves. So that's why I think they want to be, for example, I have my friend. He's working as a delivery guy, and he is working like that like for almost three or four years and I'm really interested because I know he's talented. He has a lot of skills, but he's lazy. So that's why I'm interested to be him like more successful because I know that if I will go, if I will find some job, then I will pay a lot for him too. For example, we'll go to some restaurants I will have to pay for him because I know his situation. And I'm also interested for him to be successful because I don't want to pay for him a lot. I want to split the bill. (p. 8)

Through Peter's description, one can recognize the need to compete with others in order to secure or maintain a certain social standing through one's interpersonal connections and to avoid becoming burdensome to others. On an individual, relational, and community level, the ability of students to find empathetic connections and to relate themselves to others' identities was a valuable strategy for surviving and thriving in the new social landscape of the United States.

4.6.3 Temporality: Forming Family-like Bonds through Reciprocity

Van Manen's second existential theme of the lifeworld is temporality, and Kyrgyz international students utilize reciprocity of social support as a strategy to ensure long-term survival. Ten participants described forming close, family-like bonds with the providers of support through multiple exchanges, which led to the study's thematic finding, *Forming Family-like Bonds through Reciprocity*. Bobby (P3) explained the sense of closeness he feels with his roommates, whom he describes as being like brothers. After spending years together, he described how they can intuitively understand each other's needs and offer assistance without needing to ask anything:

Even I will not ask anything, they will help me. Like, for example, they will feel me, and if I'm like suffering, they will feel me. They will not saying, 'Do you need my help?' They will not ask like this. They will just go and help me. Like, they will not say a lot of words. And if they need some help, I will not ask, 'And do you need help?' I will just go and help him. I will not even like ask him, because I know them and know what he feels. [...] So we are not like counting how many times I help you and how many times you should help me. Yeah, like doing it from our real heart. From my heart, I'm helping you, and they will help me from his heart, too. So it's more than friends, I can say. It's more than like... we are like brothers, I can say. We're like a family, let's say. So we are not like counting our, what we did to each other. (p. 19)

The same type of unsolicited support was described by Alex (P8) when his friend fixed his car without expecting any payment in return:

I have my friend, he also knows that mechanic things, you know, how to repair the cars. For example, my car was broken like two days ago, and he's just repaired for me without any words. (p. 33)

Giselle (P9) also mentioned how her roommates are able to intuit her emotional needs and offer their support, even when she avoids asking for help:

And like even the slightest change in my emotions, they can feel it. Even if I don't say anything, they can see it and feel it, and say, 'Hey, I know you're not feeling well, so you better tell me now. (p. 15)

Although support was unsolicited in many cases, students expressed feeling positively about the help that was provided and implied that this continuous offering of support was an inherent quality of the family-like relationships they had with their support providers. This theme

evidences that exchanges of social support that persist over time increase the sense of mutuality between individuals and serve as a support for overcoming challenges in the U.S. context.

4.7.3.1 Reciprocity in Relationships and Society

One shared relational strategy that all participants expressed in the interviews was reciprocity, which participants utilized to maintain strong social bonds with familiar others across time and ensure collective Kyrgyz survival in the U.S. Moriarty (P2) described how reciprocation can lead to familiarity and a greater long-term impact on the other:

If you need to receive a help and you feel like you owe something like that's that person, you, like at first you might think, 'Yeah, I owe him something, so like maybe I should invite him for a dinner or a lunch.' And while doing that, you will get to know that person say like invite him to the dinner, say, 'Hey, thank you so much.' You will know more about the person like how did he come up with this, like what did he go through? And through that, you will feel more connected, more familiar with him. And you will appreciate him more. And he will start to impact your life even more. (p. 5).

Daphne (P5) asserted a similar outlook in her explanation of how mutual reciprocation over time increased familiarity with each other, creating a community that facilitated collective survival in the U.S.:

I think if you help them long enough, not like one time, if you help them long enough, maybe like a couple of times. It kind of creates a bond between you even like when you don't know what kind of bond there is, let's say it's not about strangers though, like you the person that you know here you help them one time, two time. And then they help you back like you need something and they help you and when it's done like long enough maybe two three times like it was, it was like really impactful help, like in a larger scale

you already feel like they're like part of your family, not like part of your family, you're kind of like when that person's name is mentioned, you kind of feel like they're close to you. So if it goes long enough, it creates like a friendship and then like maybe lifelong relationship, so it just can start like from help. (p. 10)

In these cases, the participants believed that showing appreciation for someone's help and reciprocating is important for building supportive relationships after receiving an initial act of assistance, especially during times of duress. Furthermore, Peter (P6) explained that returning a friend's help should be done with one's heart to maintain a long-term connection:

But if one of your friends is helping you and you know that you're going to be friends with this guy like for a long time, I think you're going to repay him. For example, and you have to do it like, you know, not just like to just to repay for him, you have to do it like from your bottom of your heart. (p. 6)

In all of these examples, one sees that not only reciprocity of social support but also a sincere interest in forming a more familiar relationship with the other is crucial for developing long-term support. These efforts to develop empathic and mutually beneficial relationships demonstrate how mutuality is desired and valued in the relationships of Kyrgyz students acculturating to the U.S.

Beyond a relational level, the participants also described reciprocity in more general terms as a social norm or moral principle that reinforces social support across time and generations. Daya (P10) expressed that reciprocating help or paying it forward to others is a moral obligation:

I think... Receiving the help... And then, again, feeling that responsibility to help others too. I think it's just unfair when you are the only one who's receiving help and then in the

future you see a person who's going through the same hard times as you are, but you were back in those times did have help and did have those kind people. But you aren't being one for others. I think it's a little bit unfair and it just stays in your heart. So I do have this feeling when I do receive help and I'm like... You know, I do feel this feeling of owing this help to other people. (p. 10)

A remark in Daphne's follow-up interview echoed this sentiment: "Every time I see someone outside, I remember myself, so I'm like, 'I should help them because someone helped me before.' It kind of like sticks with you" (p. 3). Daphne's enduring empathy for others who are in need demonstrates how social support can spread even beyond familiar relationships and into the community. Similarly, Peter described feeling an increased motivation to help others due to the appreciation he felt for the help he had received:

I feel willingness to help these people, to help these men in the future. For example, you helped me, you provided me with the good words that I needed to hear in that exact time and you gave me. So I have to, and I want—it's not like I have to, I want to give it back to you in the future. For example, I want to buy something really best for you, because you helped me. I really value it. (p. 15)

In these cases, the students felt a persistent moral obligation to help others in need across time, because they had been helped previously. These examples of empathy and appreciation illustrate how reciprocity is used to cultivate long-term mutuality in students' relationships.

When the expectation of support and reciprocity becomes widespread, as it is in the local Kyrgyz community, the impact on the individual can be varied. Daphne explained that helping others can build a strong Kyrgyz community: "When you help them, it creates like a bond between people, and if like... more, enough people do it, it has a, it can build a strong

community” (p. 4). Daphne (P5) described how the supportive acts of her employers inspired herself and other employees to reciprocate their efforts, despite having difficult working conditions:

Even the work is hard, when they do these kind of things to you, you want to go and then work there and you want to do some things for them. (p. 20)

Despite often feeling an intrinsic motivation to help others, Daphne expressed criticism of the community-level pressure to help others:

Like help, I'm not sure if it's like social support, but also should have its limitations until like... You should help others if it feels comfortable to you. Not like forcing because in Kyrgyz people's situation in general, I think it's like more of a toxic side because you feel obligated to. (p. 6)

According to Daphne, the social norm that promotes supporting others can create a positive community value, yet the social pressure can push one to help others out of social obligation to avoid shame or damage to one’s reputation. Therefore, while social support and reciprocity serve as a very effective long-term strategy to find stability and hope through relational attachments, some students can feel resistance to the shame and pressure associated with obligatory social exchanges. This opposition underscores the earlier points made by participants that reciprocation of social support must be sincere and from one’s heart in order to be effective for establishing more familiar and long-term bonds.

4.6.4 Spatiality: Utilizing Connections as Sources of Effective Guidance

Van Manen’s third existential theme of the lifeworld is spatiality, and Kyrgyz international students’ journey to a new country demands a survival strategy to adapt to a new geographical space. Participants’ narratives illustrated how students cultivate a new social

support network in the U.S. to obtain information about local processes, which led to this study's thematic finding, *Utilizing Connections as Sources of Effective Guidance*. All participants mentioned utilizing interpersonal connections in the U.S. to obtain advice when facing problems, and this theme was the most recurrent across interviews. This finding suggests that Kyrgyz international students have a preference for informational support when facing problems. The participants in my study repeatedly placed importance on utilizing one's interpersonal connections as a means of obtaining helpful guidance and expertise for responding to local challenges.

Kyrgyz international students make significant efforts to establish reliable sources of social guidance after arriving in the United States. Peter explained how Kyrgyz students seek out helpful social connections to resolve their problems in the U.S.:

We have to remember that students are still kids here. They're like 17, 18 years old and when they're coming to the United States, they are facing problem for the first time in their life as adult and they don't know who to ask. Because in Kyrgyzstan, they will go to their parents and tell them like, 'Okay, I have this kind of problem. What should I do?' And their parents is going to guide them to the right people, you know. And here, when you're facing... okay, say there was people who can provide you, and there's people who can give you wrong information. And information is really kind of stuff that some information works, and some information doesn't work. So that's why I think people trying to find bright connections, I mean, who can then rely on. (p. 4)

Due to the obstacles they face in a new environment, Kyrgyz students are especially keen to find reliable and trustworthy people who can provide them with effective guidance for navigating American life.

All participants mentioned the reliance on social connections in the local community for support in their follow-up interviews. Daya described how Kyrgyz students often refer each other to community members with a strong reputation as reliable support providers:

In our Kyrgyz community, I think there are again sisters whose social power is, I mean, very, very big. Because they have a very big impact on new student girls who are arriving. And I think just because, I think just because... I crave help and I go to her and she helps me. And I go to other girl who's also who also needs help, and I just say, 'You know, that Kyrgyz woman had helped me, and I think that you are going to be able to get help from her too.' I think this is like a chain that creates that social power of reputation and does boost that person's social power. (p. 10)

A person's social reputation can be built over time through offering support and guidance that is effective. Similarly, Moriarty described how Kyrgyz students value a referral from a friend whom they find to be trustworthy:

For example, let's say like theoretically, I helped someone like from the first freshman or for someone. And they recognize me, and they say, 'Yeah, thank you so much and stuff.' And after that, it's not going to be done just on him. He will tell others, 'Hey, he helped me, like he's a cool guy, you can rely on him. I trust him.' So like that, he will share, and like my social status among them is going to be higher. And the same thing with others. Let's say I have a brother who helped me out, and when one of my friends they have a similar problem, I always say, 'Yeah, I can solve this. I can help you solve this problem. Here's my brother. I trust him.' (p. 4)

Through these social recommendations, students can find new connections in the United States whom they rely on for guidance in solving problems, which is a critical strategy for adaption and

survival in an unknown territory. Establishing local relationships is essential for receiving not only assistance in dealing with problems but also emotional support.

4.6.5 Corporeality: Proximity and Shared Activities Improve One's Emotional State

The final existential theme of the lifeworld is corporeality, and Kyrgyz international students experience greater emotional support when they are physically sharing space with the support givers. In relation to the experience of receiving emotion-focused social support, all eleven (11) participants described how physical proximity and shared activities together were important for supporting their emotional needs, which led to this study's thematic finding of *Proximity and Shared Activities Improve One's Emotional State*. Multiple participants mentioned periods when they were feeling emotional distress and often described their states at that time as feeling lonely, depressed, anxious or homesick. For example, Mia (P7) explained how a Nepalese girl whom she befriended at her first school in the U.S. was a primary social support provider when she felt homesick: "Emotional support, I think, I get it from her [Nepalese friend], because I used to cry a lot because I missed my parents" (p. 12). Ultimately, though, Mia decided to change universities and cities to have closer proximity to a larger Kyrgyz community:

I felt lonely. Also, the reason I would say I transferred back to this city is I think for this reason, like there was no other people there who could support. And in this city, I think you hear it or not, like a lot of Kyrgyz people. (p. 12)

Mia's narrative demonstrates the importance she places on having multiple support providers nearby to decrease her negative emotions when adapting to city life in the United States.

Similarly, when asked to describe a time when he received support in the U.S., Taigan (P4) described feeling heartbroken and wanting someone nearby to give support:

I go through a breakup, I mean, I think a lot of people understand how particularly heartache may come up. And those kinds of times you need to talk to someone then [...] Like especially when you're far away from your home, far away from your friends, like, you need someone like who is close to you, who is right next to you, and like who's right in understanding, who can relate to your situation. (p. 9)

In Taigan's discussion, he expresses a need for physical proximity in addition to a need for a support giver who can understand and relate to your situation—a person who can empathize. This need for an empathetic support giver also relates to the thematic finding of *Seeing Self-in-Other*. In many cases, the themes of social support intersected one another across the narratives and research questions in this way.

Spending time together talking or engaging in shared activities was a frequent theme across participants in relation to feeling emotional support that improved their negative psychological states. Notably, participants remarked that conversations did not need to focus on any topic in particular in order to improve their moods. Merely spending time together chatting or enjoying activities was experienced as supportive. Jane (P11) explained why she preferred to have nearby support givers rather than relying on family back home:

I would say that I found a lot of good people. And they really helped me in my hard, like, periods of my life when I need friends, when I need support. Of course, I have support, but for example, my sister she's living in another state. My aunt, she's busy with their family, with her family. My parents, they can just listen to me, but they can't understand truly because they had never lived in America. And I will just give them just additional stress and additional thoughts about like concerns about myself. So I just don't want to... I just don't want them to be like more stressed or concerned about myself. So I understand

that I need support in real life, in real time, so like those times my friends in this city, like Kyrgyz friends, they give me a lot of support. We do a lot of activities (by the way they are from [same university]) and we do a lot of extra activities like summer we go to Lake Michigan, we do like picnics. I don't know, they like boys they are playing volleyball outside of their house, of their buildings. We even go to Wisconsin, like do like barbecue. We just do car things. You just do um them to know in a museum [...] this summer we did with my friends and recently, they just went to Wisconsin as well to skiing to celebrate the birthday of the one of the Kyrgyz person. So we are really like connected, I would say I think our community is really cool. We are just living and like enjoying our like student young life. (p. 16-17)

This narrative suggests that *implicit* social support can be effective for Kyrgyz international students, rather than explicit social support that specifically discussed the students' emotional struggles. Follow-up interviews provided additional clarity that this companionship gave students the feeling that they were connected to other people, demonstrating that physical nearness of support givers is particularly effective in providing emotional grounding and stability when Kyrgyz students feel distressed.

4.6.6 Social Support Provides Enduring Hope

Participants all affirmed the lasting emotional impact of effective social support and the hope this support gives one to believe they will have social backing should they encounter future difficulties. Daphne explained that the hope generated from receiving support can be more important than the help one received: "It gives hope, because when you're in a really bad situation, you're like so bad. And then the help is not about like helping you, but it's more about giving you hope" (p. 1). Moriarty emphasized the hopefulness gained through strong social

connection: “It feels like you're family, so I think being in a community, like having a lot of connections, brings you hope, and like, peace, peace of mind” (p. 6). The peace and hope mentioned by Moriarty indicate a sense of security provided by perceived social support, which can give one the belief that they will be able to endure future difficulties in the U.S. through their social connections. Peter described this hopefulness as a sort of “magic” wish for Kyrgyz international students:

I guess it's kind of thing when that we are looking for some magic. We think that someone is going to solve our problem. [...] In the beginning, you're really hoping that someone is going to give you like some advice and after this advice you're going to be a millionaire, you know, something like that. I guess, a lot of people are searching for that. (p. 6)

Kyrgyz students feel hopeful about the future, because they believe that they can overcome obstacles with a supportive social network. This finding recalls a Kyrgyz proverb mentioned by Moriarty in his initial interview: “They say if you're going to be one, you're going to be broken easily. If you're going to be forty, it's going to be unbroken” (p. 2). This proverb underscores the Kyrgyz belief that individuals are stronger in a collective group, which may be why social relationships are deemed as so important to Kyrgyz international students working to overcome the challenges of life in the United States.

4.6.7 Phenomenological Description of Experiencing Social Support

To experience impactful social support, one is, firstly, in a state of vulnerability and openness to another’s strengthening influence. The particular form or magnitude of the support offered is not as significant as the act’s appropriateness and effectiveness at serving one’s need in that moment. For Kyrgyz international students, effective social support is that which makes them feel hope, security, and confidence during a time of vulnerability. One experiences social

support as a guiding light in darkness. Social support fills one with the warmth of human connection. Social support is experienced as an anchor back to life and to oneself when one feels lost. Social support is grounding and stabilizing. At the same time, social support is liberating—giving inspiration that one can transcend one’s limitations and weaknesses. The impact of social support endures emotionally as one feels hope that others will offer a helping hand when life becomes difficult again.

Reciprocating the social support that one receives demonstrates that the support is valued and invites further familiarity. An exchange of social support between individuals across time can build a family-like bond. One feels the warmth of closeness when thinking of or mentioning a familiar other. In this long-term supportive relationship, one feels relief and expresses oneself openly and sincerely. An intuitive understanding can develop to a level in which one can anticipate and meet the other’s needs. One prioritizes the needs of the other and gives support freely from one’s whole heart. One treats the welfare of the familiar other as being linked to one’s own welfare. The future benefit of one’s familiar others will be a shared blessing; the future problem of one’s familiar others will be a shared burden. Social support is experienced as being stronger together than apart. One feels encouraged by the other’s successes and strives to achieve the same outcomes, seeing a future possibility for oneself through one’s identification with the familiar other.

When one experiences impactful social support, one feels a willingness to support others and to “pay it forward” in the future. One’s offer of support is motivated by empathy when one sees another experiencing a similar situation. One often sees one’s past self in the person one is supporting. When receiving support, one can see one’s future self in the giver if one wishes to imitate their supportive acts for others. Through social support, one can see oneself in many

others in the world. By supporting others in one's community, the welfare of one's community is improved. Social support transcends the limitations of selfhood by connecting with one's society. By supporting the younger generation, the older generation perpetuates a communal norm of supporting others. Social support transcends time by inspiring future reciprocity and faith in one's community. When social support among Kyrgyz people endures in the United States, social support transcends geographical borders and expands its reach. Social support empowers the individual to overcome the limitations of time, space, and selfhood by the strength of the collective.

4.7 Summary of Findings

The findings of this hermeneutic phenomenological research study on Kyrgyz international students' lived experiences of receiving social support in the United States reveal how social support serves as a stabilizing influence to ensure survival through stressful experiences such as the acculturation period. This study found that culture shock can fracture students' cultural and self-continuity and that the students' heightened need for social support increases the impact and meaningfulness of the care that they receive. Kyrgyz international students utilize social support in unique ways to create a buffer against stress: relationally, temporally, spatially, and corporeally. The first theme of the study, *Seeing Self-in-Other*, described how Kyrgyz students utilize their relationality to others as a means to understand their identities and determine achievable goals for their lives in the U.S. through comparison with others. The second theme of the study, *Forming Family-like Bonds through Reciprocity*, demonstrated how social support functions temporally to develop strong, mutual relationships that ensure long-term benefit. The third theme of the study, *Utilizing Connections as Sources of Effective Guidance*, revealed how Kyrgyz students orient themselves to a new environment by

establishing networks of social support in the U.S., creating a spatial sense of stability through sources of guidance and aid. The fourth theme of the study, *Proximity and Shared Activities Improve One's Emotional State*, uncovered how Kyrgyz students experienced emotional grounding corporeally through physical nearness to support givers. Experiences of social support bring students hope in their relationships, community, and future that eases the acculturative stress as they adapt to American life. Next, chapter five will discuss the significance of these research findings in relation to existing literature.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This hermeneutic phenomenological dissertation explored the lived experiences of receiving social support in the United States of Kyrgyz international students. These students arrive in the U.S. seeking a brighter educational and economic future, but they leave behind a culturally embedded social support network that has bolstered the collective survival of Kyrgyz people through periods of change and instability (Amsler, 2009; Borbieva, 2010; de la Sablonnière et al., 2010; Gullette, 2010). Universities and professionals tasked with supporting international students through the stressful acculturation experience should improve understanding of effective social support for this population, as cultural variations in social support preferences and types have been found in prior research (Chen et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2007). The study's findings illuminated how need, mutuality, and empathy increase the long-term impact of social support for this population. This study also identified Kyrgyz student social support type preferences for companionship and informational aid. In this chapter, the findings will be interpreted in relation to the existing literature, and recommendations and implications will be discussed.

5.1 Research Questions

This study used van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenological approach to uncover the essential qualities of social support for Kyrgyz international students in the U.S. The primary research question of this study focused on exploring the participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon of social support:

What are Kyrgyz international students' lived experiences of receiving social support in the United States?

As a hermeneutic phenomenological study, the goal of the research was describing the experiences of the Kyrgyz students and interpreting the essential themes of what it is like to experience social support in the U.S. To support the collection of relevant data during interviews, two sub-questions of this study were based on a theoretical model that divided types of social support into emotion-focused and problem-focused (Chen et al., 2012). While striving to maintain phenomenological openness throughout the study, the researcher utilized these two sub-questions as a framework for eliciting relevant narratives during the interviews:

(1) What are the lived experiences of receiving emotion-focused (esteem or emotional) support in the United States for Kyrgyz students?

(2) What are the lived experiences of receiving problem-focused (instrumental or informational) support in the United States for Kyrgyz students?

The final sub-question of the study was concerned with understanding the essential qualities of experiencing mutually empathic connection (mutuality) when receiving social support. The third sub question was:

(3) What is it like to experience mutuality when receiving social support as a Kyrgyz student?

All sub-questions were used to refine and support the focus of the primary phenomenological research question, so the primary research question remained the main objective of this study. However, findings were interpreted in relation to the primary and sub-questions to clarify the broader discussion and impact of this study.

5.2 Related Literature

Through its phenomenological exploration of social support and Kyrgyz international students' lived experiences, this dissertation study contributes to the scholarly literature on

international student wellness and Central Asian studies. When arriving in the U.S. as international students, Kyrgyz students encounter myriad acculturation stressors related to language barriers, loneliness and homesickness, discrimination, financial concerns and academic challenges that can lead to psychological distress (Lértora et al., 2017; Lértora et al., 2022). Due to the increased psychological risks for this population, this study's findings on effective social support for Kyrgyz students contributes valuable insights for scholars and practitioners who seek to help these students develop relationships that can buffer against adverse outcomes of stress. Kyrgyz students depart from a nation that has often been destabilized by geopolitical transitions and cross-cultural influences (Borbieva, 2010; de la Sablonnière et al., 2010; Kirmse, 2010). The maintenance of strong social ties, perpetuated by traditional customs of reciprocally exchanging goods, assistance, and hospitality, has been critically important to Kyrgyz collective survival through challenging periods (de la Sablonnière et al., 2010; Gullette, 2007, 2010). Therefore, Kyrgyz students seem inclined to establish social bonds in the United States as an effective means to overcome the challenges of acculturation.

This dissertation study also builds upon prior literature regarding social support and mutuality. Social support is widely acknowledged to buffer against stress and to improve physical and mental health outcomes (Cohen et al., 2000; Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017; Thoits, 2011). Due to cultural variations in social support preferences and types that have been found in prior research, this study focused only on Kyrgyz international students' experiences of effective social support (Chen et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2007). This dissertation study utilized a theoretical model of social support types, divided into emotion-focused and problem-focused support, to elicit relevant narratives from participants and to explore their experiences of receiving various forms of social support in the U.S. (Chen et al., 2012). Thoits' proposed social

support mechanisms for producing health benefits were utilized during the final interpretation to consider how mechanisms of social comparison, companionship, and perceived social support operate for this population (2011). Additionally, the concept of mutuality in Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) was integral to exploring how empathy and mutually growth-fostering relationships could increase the impact of social support for Kyrgyz international students.

5.3 Methodology

The current study adds to this body of literature by contributing phenomenological insights regarding the lived experiences of social support for Kyrgyz students in the U.S. Participants in this study were recruited using purposive sampling methods, and all participants were Kyrgyz undergraduate students enrolled at the same midwestern American university. A call for participants was sent through the international office's email list to all Kyrgyz international students at the university, and a total of eleven (11) participants were included in the study.

This study was designed using van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenological approach, and data were collected through two zoom interviews. Initial interviews were semi-structured and elicited pre-reflective narratives of receiving social support in the U.S. from all eleven participants. The researcher began analysis and identified initial themes before composing linguistic transformations of the phenomenological themes. Four participants were then selected for hermeneutic follow-up interviews as suggested in van Manen's method to clarify the researcher's initial interpretations of the study. The final themes and phenomenological description were generated after the hermeneutic interviews were analyzed through the reflective writing process.

5.4 Interpretation of Findings

As a phenomenological study, this research has provided qualitative insights into the unique lived experiences of Kyrgyz international students—a population which had not yet been specifically studied in the United States. Building on Gullette’s (2010) analytical approach of *everyday politics*, which examines Central Asian peoples’ relational strategies to survive difficult socioeconomic conditions, this study found that Kyrgyz international students utilize social support in various ways as a survival strategy in the American context. The four themes of the study, *Seeing Self-in-Other*, *Forming Family-like Bonds through Reciprocity*, *Utilizing Connections as Sources of Effective Guidance*, and *Proximity and Shared Activities Improve One’s Emotional State*, illustrate how Kyrgyz international students use social support across to buffer against stress in the four existential domains of relationality, temporality, spatiality, and corporeality (van Manen, 1990). The findings of this study have helped to clarify strategies and preferences for receiving social support among this cultural population when acculturating to the U.S. This section will discuss how findings on Kyrgyz students’ lived experiences of social support in the U.S. respond to prior research.

5.4.1 Seeing Self-in-Other

The first thematic finding of this study, *Seeing Self-in-Other*, revealed that Kyrgyz international students perceive a (present, past, or future) version of their own selves in others when receiving or providing social support. This act of “seeing self-in-other” begins with empathetic connection during exchanges of social support through recognition of similar experiences, values, and identities. Interestingly, this identification of oneself with another in one’s social sphere provides added acculturation support to Kyrgyz students by serving as a guidepost to reestablish their identities in a new context and to determine appropriate goals for

their life in the U.S. As a stress-buffering strategy, “seeing self-in-other” provides Kyrgyz students with relational grounding and orientation during their challenging acculturation experience. This strategy operates through the mechanisms of relational identity, mutual empathy, and social comparison.

5.4.1.1 Relational Identity

Kyrgyz international students use social support to bolster their sense of identity and psychological stability during acculturation through the process of *seeing self-in-other* to maintain cultural and self-continuity. As international students in the United States, the participants of this study grappled with many of the acculturation stressors that have been previously identified in international student research. Firstly, the majority of participants experienced culture shock accompanied by feelings of isolation, depression, anxiety and homesickness. This study’s finding of *Seeing Self-in-Other* revealed how Kyrgyz students relate themselves to the identities of others in the American environment as a relational strategy to anchor and orient themselves in a new social landscape. Participants relied heavily on the local Kyrgyz community for guidance and social support, and some participants expressed how reestablishing a connection with their Kyrgyz identity and community gave them strength and helped them to orient themselves in American society when they felt lost. Students used the strategy of *Seeing Self-in-Other* to maintain self-continuity as their former identity from life in Kyrgyzstan became tenuous. Additionally, some participants found that maintaining cultural continuity with Kyrgyz traditions and values through the local Kyrgyz community was essential to maintaining their own psychological integrity.

This need for self-continuity and cultural continuity can extend previous research by Chandler and Proulx on marginalized aboriginal youth in Canada by demonstrating similar

themes with the Kyrgyz international population that is marginalized in the United States (2006). Chandler and Proulx found that most aboriginal youth in their study relied on “relational” or “narrative” strategies to preserve their sense of identity over time, rather than the essentialist strategies often employed by the mainstream Canadian participants (p. 131). This narrativist strategy to preserve self-continuity is characterized “by concentrating attention on what are held out as being functional relations or narrative connections between admittedly different moments or time-slices in one’s unfolding identity” (p. 131). In the current study, two participants, Daya and Moriarty, described that their sense of identity was shaped by their relationships with the Kyrgyz community in the U.S. despite initial feelings of fragmentation and alienation. One particular statement from Daya underscores how her self-continuity was fractured by moving to a foreign country:

Because I feel like a lot of people feel lost when they move on, move into a new country. Everything is new. Friends are new and you try to get that, you know, reputation that you had in your own like your country, back in your country. And I think remembering what kind of person you were back in those days also helps you to stay stronger. And the qualities that you have in the like in that country. (p. 4)

Daya’s statement shows how leaving behind the social reputation she had developed in Kyrgyzstan caused her to feel lost. She felt strengthened by remembering the qualities she had in her home country while in her new environment, which demonstrates how self-continuity plays an important role in the acculturation experience of this population.

Further, Chandler and Proulx argued that cultural continuity was a potential protective factor against suicide risk in the midst of dramatic cultural changes and marginalization—another finding that may extend to the Kyrgyz international student population. The findings of

this current study demonstrate that cultural continuity is a stress-buffering factor through experiences of acculturation for international students. Daya described how reconnecting with her Kyrgyz community and culture in the U.S. brought her psychological stability and a continuity with her cultural origin:

I really think that having people that are, that do share same traditions maybe or that are from the same country or that are sharing maybe some point of same worldview really helps you to be grounded. And I think to be much stronger because you kind of start remembering where you are coming from and that kind of helps you to stay stronger. (p. 3)

Daya's statements validate how one's sense of identity can be founded in social relationships and cultural context, which are disrupted by migration. Kyrgyz international students often conceptualize their identities relationally and experience a loss of identity during their migration to the U.S. The sense of cultural continuity provided by seeing oneself and one's values in the local Kyrgyz community provides students with emotional strength and orientation needed to survive the acculturation challenges.

5.4.1.2 Mutual Empathy

Social support increases Kyrgyz students' empathy and facilitates the development of new relationships in the United States that are needed for navigating the acculturation journey. Empathy plays a dual role in social support for Kyrgyz international students; empathy arises during the students' experiences of receiving social support and also motivates them to offer help to others. As a cause of social support, a students' perception of their past/present self in another who is experiencing a similar situation that the student has experienced often inspires a willingness or sense of moral obligation to provide help to the person in need. Empathy can

result from social support when a student recognizes that the support giver has “been in their shoes” in the past, or when a student imagines his future self in the position of the support giver, mirroring the help he has received. One participant, Jane, emphasized the importance of empathy in support providers who have shared similar experiences as oneself:

I understand like, only people from your, with like, with your culture and everything, only they can truly, truly understand your situation, your concerns. And especially when you know that they had walked with the same shoes as you did. (p. 16)

Jane’s statement demonstrates how empathic recognition allows for greater understanding and trust with the support provider.

The thematic finding of *Seeing Self-in-Other* as a mechanism of social support corresponds with Relational Cultural Theory’s (RCT) proposition that *mutual empathy* is a crucial feature of healthy relationships (Jordan, 2017). Kyrgyz students’ experiences of *Seeing Self-in-Other* during exchanges of social support demonstrate the cultivation of *mutuality*: a meaningful interpersonal connection that involves empathic attunement and responsiveness from both individuals and is central to sustaining mutually-growth-fostering relationships. This theme illustrates how social support is an effective way to increase empathy and strengthen healthy relationships for Kyrgyz international students as they adapt to the U.S. This theme also demonstrates the value of using relationship-focused theories such as RCT to better understand the experiences of international students in counseling and educational settings.

5.4.1.3 Social Comparison

Participants in this study also experienced the theme of *Seeing Self-in-Other* through an indirect form of social support: social comparison. Previous scholarship by Thoits described the function of social comparison as a mechanism for providing psychological support: “Individuals

assess the appropriateness of their own attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors against standards that are avowed and/or modeled by reference group members, usually shifting their own to match those of the group” (2011, p. 147). Social comparison, rivalry, and competition were mentioned by nine participants in the initial interviews and were reconfirmed as important social motivators by all four of the follow-up interview participants. Thoits framed social comparison as an often inhibitive and preventative mechanism of indirect social support by increasing a sense of shame in relation to unhealthy behaviors—a function of social comparison which also rings true to an extent with Kyrgyz students—but, surprisingly, social comparison is also a more liberating and motivational source of support for this population than may be anticipated by Thoits’ model. The impact of social comparison was found to be beneficial on an individual level, as students could imagine their present or future selves in the object of comparison. Through this identification, participants could recognize achievable goals for themselves and felt motivated to reach them due to a feeling of similar identity with successful friends or members of the local Kyrgyz community. Furthermore, participants asserted that social comparison improved the wider Kyrgyz community by motivating each other to reach equivalent levels of accomplishment. The ability to see oneself in others through the mechanism of social comparison empowers Kyrgyz students to strive for success and provides them with models and strategies for overcoming challenges of the acculturation journey.

5.4.2 Forming Family-like Bonds through Reciprocity

The second thematic finding of this study (*Forming Family-like Bonds through Reciprocity*) revealed that Kyrgyz international students use reciprocal exchanges to develop close, family-like relationships that can provide support across time. This type of mutually beneficial relationship that is described by participants is coined in Relational Cultural Theory

(RCT) as a “mutually growth-fostering relationship,” characterized by empathic attunement and responsiveness from both individuals (Jordan, 2017). Students described that these family-like relationships inspired long-term, sincere offerings of social support, often stating that such support of close others is given “from one’s whole heart.” One participant, Bobby, described this type of mutual relationship in his narrative about his Kyrgyz roommates in the U.S.:

Even I will not ask anything, they will help me. Like, for example, they will feel me, and if I'm like suffering, they will feel me. They will not saying, 'Do you need my help?' They will not ask like this. They will just go and help me. Like, they will not say a lot of words. And if they need some help, I will not ask, 'And do you need help?' I will just go and help him. I will not even like ask him, because I know them and know what he feels. [...] So we are not like counting how many times I help you and how many times you should help me. Yeah, like doing it from our real heart. From my heart, I'm helping you, and they will help me from his heart, too. So it's more than friends, I can say. It's more than like... we are like brothers, I can say. We're like a family, let's say. So we are not like counting our, what we did to each other. (p. 19)

Bobby’s narrative captures the mutuality and generalized reciprocity of his close relationships, which provide him with deeply meaningful social support. Building upon RCT, this finding demonstrated how mutuality can be a result and characteristic of effective social support. Forming mutual relationships is a crucial means of long-term survival in the Kyrgyz students’ new American environment and is facilitated by repeated reciprocal exchanges of social support.

This study also found that reciprocity extended beyond the relational level to shape the interactions of the local Kyrgyz community. Kyrgyz students described experiencing personal benefit through long-term exchanges of support, as this reciprocity allowed them to increase

familiarity and social bonds with valued others. Multiple participants expressed a willingness to help others as they had been helped due to a feeling of moral or social obligation, which corresponds to Borbieva's assertion about exchange norms in Kyrgyzstan: "By creating obligation, exchange builds community and sustains social groups. It strengthens affection and deflates ill-will" (2010, p. 167). Participants in the current study described that this social obligation to reciprocate is usually maintained by the local Kyrgyz community, but some friction has developed in the U.S. context. One participant, Daphne, expressed intrinsic motivation to offer help but personal resistance against the social pressure to reciprocate or be shamed by the Kyrgyz community: "You should help others if it feels comfortable to you. Not like forcing because in Kyrgyz people's situation in general, I think it's like more of a toxic side because you feel obligated to" (p. 6). Daphne described how pushing back on the social obligation to continually provide support to others can lead to conflict with older Kyrgyz relatives who view a refusal to help as characteristic of a "selfish" American attitude. Through Daphne's situation, one can see how the American context has loosened the social obligation that was dominant in Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyz international students feel some degree of flexibility to resist pressure to continually reciprocate support in the U.S., indicating a slight departure from the strong exchange norms that Borbieva described as prevalent in Kyrgyzstan.

5.4.3 Utilizing Connections as Sources of Effective Guidance

The third thematic finding of this study (*Utilizing Connections as Sources of Effective Guidance*) revealed that Kyrgyz international students strategically utilize interpersonal connections to establish a new social network in the U.S. to guide them through the practical challenges of acculturation. Although some support providers mentioned by participants were non-Kyrgyz individuals, multiple participants described difficulty with integrating into American

society due to conflicting cultural norms and values. When experiencing the pressure of life in a new country, most participants relied primarily on the local Kyrgyz community for social support in order to overcome daily problems. The students' reliance on the local Kyrgyz community likely stems from both perceived trustworthiness and a culturally-embedded preference for informational social support.

5.4.3.1 Seeking Trustworthy Sources of Support

Participants frequently sought out sources of support that had established a reputation of trustworthiness and expertise in the Kyrgyz community. This tendency could have its roots in a wider socioeconomic survival strategy in Central Asia, as mentioned by Liu in his discussion on trust and informal power in Central Asia: “ethnicity stands available as a basis for delineating the boundaries of trust for a common purpose” (2021, p. 263). One interpretation is that shared ethnicity is a convenient and expedient way that students attempt to identify a potentially trustworthy person in a new, overwhelming American environment. This interpretation is supported by this participant, Alex, as he explained that relying on the Kyrgyz community is more comfortable for him than seeking out Americans for support:

If I need help, I'm going to the Kyrgyz people. If I need something, also Kyrgyz people [...] I don't know what should I do, you know, to connect with Americans. [...] With Kyrgyz, it's like, it's faster and comfortable, yeah. It's faster. (p. 10)

Alex's statement underscores how shared norms within the Kyrgyz community increase a sense of trust and comfort, making this community the students' preferred source of guidance for navigating the challenges of life in the U.S. The assumption of common cultural values and social norms leads Kyrgyz international students to rely more often on their local Kyrgyz community over the wider American society.

5.4.3.2 Preference for Informational Social Support

This finding of *Utilizing Connections as Sources of Effective Guidance* also revealed that Kyrgyz students have a preference for informational aid when dealing with problems in the U.S. Types of social support are commonly divided into emotion-focused support (i.e. encouragement, comfort, love) and problem-focused support (i.e. advice, tangible aid) (Chen et al., 2012). These two categories are further divided into appraisal support and emotional support as two forms of emotion-focused support and instrumental aid and informational aid as two forms of problem-focused support. Regarding problem-focused support, the participants relied heavily on informational aid from their social networks in the U.S. Participants described how they frequently sought out advice and social connections with well-established expertise or trustworthiness in the community when they encountered practical problems. The students' comfort in relying on advice may indicate that advice-giving is a culturally embedded behavior, as was similarly discussed in Chentsova-Dutton's (2012) research on Russians who relied more on advice than European Americans. In a related article, Chentsova-Dutton and Vaughn (2012) described how Russians and Russian Americans rely on informal and diffuse advice networks to solve practical problems. Similarly, Kyrgyz students seek to establish informal, trustworthy informational networks in the U.S. to overcome the practical challenges of acculturation, utilizing this informational social support as a survival strategy in their new environment.

5.4.4 Proximity and Shared Activities Improve One's Emotional State

The fourth thematic finding of this study (*Proximity and Shared Activities Improve One's Emotional State*) revealed that Kyrgyz international students have a preference for local over distant social support when experiencing emotional distress. When examining the findings of emotion-focused support in this study, many participants emphasized the importance of having

physical proximity and shared activities with support providers. One participant, Taigan, explained how he needed someone physically close to him when experiencing emotional pain such as heartbreak: “You need someone like who is close to you, who is right next to you, and like who’s right in understanding, who can relate to your situation” (p. 9). Taigan’s sentiment was echoed in several other participants’ narratives; Kyrgyz students most often turned to local support providers when feeling depressed, anxious, homesick or lonely. This finding can be compared to a 2023 study conducted by Zheng and Ishii that found that both (geographically) close emotional support seeking and distant emotional support seeking alleviated loneliness for Chinese international students in Japan and the United States. Because this dissertation study focused on social support received within the U.S., the additional impact of remote support being received from support providers abroad or through social media could not be fully assessed. However, this study’s results can expand on Zheng and Ishii’s finding that geographically close emotional support seeking alleviates loneliness for international students by affirming this effect in the Kyrgyz student community.

Another noteworthy finding in this study was that participants seemed not to require explicit emotional support, but rather they often benefitted from the implicit support of spending time with familiar others. One participant, Giselle, described how her roommates were able to improve her negative emotional state by inviting her to different activities that distracted her from loneliness and depression:

My roommates, they were so worried about me, that they say, ‘Hey, let’s do this. Let’s go there. Let’s go walk together, go to the beach, swim, eat some watermelons, enjoy the nightfall or something.’ So they’re just offering me so many things that I didn’t have time to think about something negative. (p. 16)

Multiple participants described how engaging in fun activities with others in this way improved their negative emotional states, even when problems were not discussed. This finding may correspond with Taylor et al.'s (2007) findings that Asian Americans experienced more biological and psychological benefit when they engaged in implicit support than European Americans by indicating a similar effect in the Kyrgyz international student community in the U.S. However, further investigation to compare the effects of implicit versus explicit support would be needed to substantiate if this preference is significant.

Two of Thoits' (2011) proposed mechanisms by which social support could buffer against stress and bring psychological benefit, *companionship* and *perceived social support*, are also affirmed by this thematic finding, *Proximity and Shared Activities Improve One's Emotional State*. Companionship is defined by Thoits as having others with whom to share social activities, and all participants in this study described feeling emotional benefit from the companionship of shared activities with local friends and family. Multiple students remarked that companionship anchored them back to society when they were feeling lost or depressed. One participant, Moriarty, described this feeling in his follow-up interview:

When you're having an anxiety attack, and you're like just lost in the moment. They just like stop you. Like they say, 'Hey, yeah, stop. Life is not going to end right now.' You get that kind of feeling. You know, like they anchor you to those, to the bottom, like so that you won't be lost. Even if it's like temporary, like you will get your directions back. (p. 10)

Moriarty's statement highlights the value of companionship with support providers and also reveals how perceived social support—one's belief that others who will support them are readily available—can bolster Kyrgyz students' emotional stability. Thoits argued that this perceived social support is more frequently and positively associated with good mental and physical health

outcomes. In this current study, most participants expressed feelings of hope and security when reflecting on those who provide them with social support, indicating that perceived social support can improve a Kyrgyz student's present mood as well as their future outlook. Social companionship and the belief that others will help one if a future need arises both inspire optimism for Kyrgyz international students in a new and challenging American environment. These findings reveal Kyrgyz students' different uses of social support to cope with challenges of the acculturation process and can inform future strategies for supporting Kyrgyz international students in the U.S.

5.4.5 Transcending Self through Relational Knowledge

The findings of this study have revealed how social support is used by Kyrgyz international students to find stability through the disorienting acculturation process, and these social support experiences have revealed the possibility of transcending one's limitations through our interpersonal connections. Van Manen described how through this *relationality* to others, one can "develop a conversational relation which allows us to transcend our *selves*" (p. 105). Each of the essential themes of this study's findings demonstrates how social support can be used to buffer against the stress that would wear down the lone individual. The first theme of the study, *Seeing Self-in-Other*, described how Kyrgyz students develop and understand their own identities through mutual empathy and a relational mirror with those around them. This self-knowledge increases their recognition of their place in the social world and increases their agency to deal with challenges.

In addition to self-knowledge, experiences of social support allowed Kyrgyz students to develop social knowledge that facilitated their development of mutually growth-fostering relationships with others. The second theme of the study, *Forming Family-like Bonds through*

Reciprocity, revealed how these students use reciprocal exchanges of support to increase their understanding of and familiarity with their strongest support givers. Through their continual investment in these familiar relationships, Kyrgyz students increase their comprehension of the value that social support has for long-term benefit across time, but especially in challenging periods of one's life. Due to increased confidence in their social competencies, students use social support as a method to increase their social impact on their friends, families, and communities—again transcending themselves through their relational influence.

Finally, this study has demonstrated how social support can provide one with a sense of stability in a new, overwhelming environment through knowledge of the role of one's community for personal well-being. Kyrgyz students utilized informal networks of informational support to create a sense of spatial security in their new American surroundings, as was demonstrated in the third theme of the study, *Utilizing Connections as Sources of Effective Guidance*. Additionally, the fourth theme of the study, *Proximity and Shared Activities Improve One's Emotional State*, revealed how spending time in physical proximity to support givers can reduce one's emotional distress on a corporeal and psychological level. Participants' experiences revealed that an appreciation of one's local community arises when one receives useful guidance and physical companionship from the people nearby—a degree of support that is not always as effective across significant geographical distance. One's recognition of how social participation in one's local community can improve one's personal well-being empowers one to strengthen themselves through unity with the collective. As one participant, Moriarty, stated in reference to a Kyrgyz proverb: "They say if you're going to be one, you're going to be broken easily. If you're going to be forty, it's going to be unbroken" (p. 2). We can transcend our individual weaknesses through

our participation in a wider social community and through the social and self-knowledge that we develop in experiences of social support.

5.5 Implications and Recommendations

In this section, recommendations for counselors, university staff, and Kyrgyz community members are provided based on the implications for effectively supporting Kyrgyz students in the U.S. Firstly, I argue that counselors and counseling faculty must utilize therapeutic approaches for this population that prioritize relationship-focused treatment and cultural competencies. Secondly, I suggest a variety of programming and advising strategies that university staff can use with this population based on the students' preferences for companionship, social comparison, and informational guidance. Thirdly, I recommend practical ways that Kyrgyz students, community members, and families can improve the acculturation experience for current and future Kyrgyz students. A final note on recommendations for students during times of political instability considers the the current situation of international student policies in the U.S. and opportunities for social support to provide an important sense of stability for these students.

5.5.1 Counselors and Counselor Education Faculty

The primary recommendation for counselors and counselor educators based on this study's findings is to maintain a relational and cultural focus in therapy for Kyrgyz international students. Culturally sensitive and relationship-focused theoretical approaches, such as Relational Cultural Theory (RCT), are vital for comprehensive conceptualization and treatment planning with these clients. The themes of "seeing self-in-other" and "forming family-like bonds through reciprocity" illustrate that social relationships are central to Kyrgyz students' acculturation strategies in the U.S. Therefore, a relationship-focused approach to counseling is more suitable

than individual-focused approaches when working with Kyrgyz international students.

Counselors can utilize techniques of RCT to support Kyrgyz international students in developing and maintaining mutually growth-fostering relationships. Through RCT, counselors can discuss the students' relationships in the U.S. and assist students "in evaluating the degree of mutuality possible in each relationship. When there are imbalances, people are encouraged to find stronger, mutual relationships" (Jordan, 2017, p. 235). RCT provides counselors with an analytical framework to identify relational power imbalances or relationships lacking mutual empathy and responsiveness when working with Kyrgyz students. Counselors should also provide RCT-based psychoeducation for these students to learn about the qualities of mutually growth-fostering relationships that may produce the most beneficial social support. Increasing mutually supportive relationships would have significant psychological benefit for this population during their acculturation process.

In addition to emphasizing the value of relational approaches in therapy, counselor educators have a critical role in training future counselors on multicultural competence. This study's discussion of the role that relational identity and cultural continuity can play during the acculturation process could have important implications for conceptualizing the experiences of migrant populations in the United States. When feeling overwhelmed in their new environment, Kyrgyz students relied on connection with the local Kyrgyz community to find a sense of orientation and shared identity. Common language, ethnicity, diet, and social norms provided by the Kyrgyz community were emotionally grounding and seemed to counteract some of the acculturative stress experienced by participants. Multicultural competence is essential for new counselors to comprehend the impact of culture on their clients' mental health outcomes.

Counselor educators must continue to provide training on multicultural counseling to ensure that future counselors understand the dynamics of culture and marginalization when working with diverse populations, such as Kyrgyz international students. For example, American counselors who are accustomed to the individualistic values of U.S. society might not understand the centrality of relationships for a Kyrgyz student who is coming from a much more communal society. Multicultural counseling coursework should emphasize the necessity for counselors to recognize their own biases and to exert efforts to plan treatment according to the perspectives and values of clients from different cultural backgrounds. This multicultural training should require counseling students to conduct an analysis of their own cultural identities and expose them to different cultural groups and perspectives. Further, counselors must be educated on the contemporary and historical obstacles for minority groups and migrant populations in the U.S. in order to develop treatment that accounts for the effects of marginalization and systemic oppression on clients' mental health. In the case of Kyrgyz international students, this study demonstrated that cultural continuity is crucial for students to preserve their sense of identity within the American context. Understanding the role of cultural origins and community in bolstering identity integrity for Kyrgyz international students can help counselors provide culturally sensitive interventions that buffer against acculturative stress. Counselor educators and counselors should utilize therapeutic approaches, such as RCT, that prioritize relationships and culture when working with the Kyrgyz international student population.

5.5.2 University Administrators and Advisors

Based on this study's findings, university administrators and advisors can develop strategic student programming to increase beneficial social support and also recognize how to use effective guidance to build trust with this population. University programming to support

Kyrgyz international students in their acculturation journey should account for the students' preferences for companionship, social comparison, and networks of informational aid. Firstly, companionship in shared activities emerged in this study as a preferred form of emotion-focused support for these students, especially when support was implicit and students were not obligated to explicitly discuss their challenges. Based on this finding, university programming should incorporate fun activities that foster social connection through time spent with friends, as Kyrgyz participants in this study found this companionship to improve their mood when feeling depressed, anxious, or isolated. Based on their preference for implicit support, Kyrgyz students are likely to derive greater emotional benefit from shared activities that do not require explicit discussions of the emotional difficulties that they are experiencing. Therefore, university programming should minimize workshops and facilitated conversations focused on discussions of acculturation stress and implement more events focused on enjoying the local attractions together or playing games while forming social connections on campus. This shift in programming is likely to increase the engagement of Kyrgyz students on campus while increasing effective emotional support.

Secondly, university administrators and advisors should also develop programming based on this study's finding that social comparison is a motivating and beneficial source of social support for Kyrgyz international students. Thoits proposed social comparison as a social support mechanism in which individuals assess and adjust their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors through comparison to others in the reference group (2011). Kyrgyz students in this study used social comparison to identify achievable goals and career pathways in their new American context. Participants in this dissertation study described that learning about or knowing successful people in the Kyrgyz community brought motivational benefit to the individual student and the wider

Kyrgyz community. Therefore, guest speaker events that feature the stories of how other Kyrgyz individuals or international students have overcome challenges in the U.S. and achieved successful outcomes would provide Kyrgyz students with inspiration and a template for facing common obstacles. Even passive outreach campaigns, such as informational videos, flyers, or emails that feature success stories of Kyrgyz students, leaders, or entrepreneurs, would be engaging and encouraging for current students. Additionally, peer mentors with a similar identity would be highly effective for supporting this population's educational journey. Peer mentors would provide new Kyrgyz students with role models for excelling in academics and provide guidance on utilizing resources in American university life. Guest speakers, informational campaigns, and peer mentor programs are strategies for university staff to maximize the supportive benefits of social comparison for Kyrgyz international students.

Thirdly, university administrators and advisors can provide networking opportunities and practical guidance to Kyrgyz international students to support this population's reliance on expertise and guidance from a network of trusted individuals in the U.S. To help students establish wider networks of social support, university programming should involve networking events that feature guests who are knowledgeable in areas of interest to Kyrgyz students. For example, many participants discussed their reliance on advice from mentors in their desired professional fields, so Kyrgyz students are likely to value opportunities to connect with individuals who can help them to build a future career. Kyrgyz students are likely to utilize personal connections over educational resources such as websites or handbooks to obtain guidance for solving their problems or achieving their goals. Therefore, universities should consider investing resources in training advisors on providing practical guidance to these students rather than developing online or print resources. University advisors for Kyrgyz

students should prepare to frequently offer authentic and accurate guidance on handling daily life processes in the U.S. Through the provision of effective advice, these advisors can cultivate a reputation of trustworthiness among the Kyrgyz student community that will lead to greater student engagement with advising services. Establishing a reputation of trustworthiness and reliable guidance will be critical for university staff to maximize their support with this student population. In summary, university staff should prioritize programming based on companionship, social comparison, and networking opportunities to effectively support the emotional well-being, academic success, and acculturation process of the Kyrgyz students at their schools.

5.5.3 Kyrgyz Students, Community Members, and Families

This study's findings on how social support impacts the acculturation experiences of Kyrgyz international students in the U.S. also has implications for Kyrgyz students, community members, and families. Firstly, current Kyrgyz students who are motivated to help others can create video or written testimonials about their experiences in the U.S. and how they overcame various difficulties. These stories would utilize the impact of social comparison to help other current or future students to prepare for different obstacles in the acculturation journey while modeling that success is possible for them. Kyrgyz student leaders can also volunteer to serve as peer mentors or create student organizations to provide more guidance to incoming students. Creating a student organization would have the additional benefits of sharing fun activities together and providing social networking opportunities for students. These strategies would bolster a supportive student community that would mitigate the negative effects of acculturative stress for Kyrgyz international students.

Secondly, local Kyrgyz community members and families abroad can work together to improve the acculturation experience for new Kyrgyz students in the U.S. This study's finding

that participants received the majority of their social support from other Kyrgyz individuals underscores the crucial role that the local Kyrgyz community has in supporting this population. Kyrgyz community members should continue to provide practical guidance and community events that help new students to establish themselves in the U.S. environment. Cultural celebrations, networking events, and community meals are all effective strategies to engage new students with the local Kyrgyz community. Recognizing the impact of this local community, Kyrgyz families should seek to establish connections within the Kyrgyz community in the U.S. to ensure that students have supportive contacts in place before arriving in the U.S. Families can contact the local Kyrgyz community through online groups or by working with educational consulting agencies that support students from Kyrgyzstan in the university enrollment process. Kyrgyz families and their students should also consider how having a nearby Kyrgyz community could reduce acculturative distress when selecting a location for university study in the U.S. In summary, Kyrgyz students, community members, and families can leverage social support strategies to increase social connections and improve the acculturation experience for Kyrgyz international students in the U.S.

5.5.4 For Times of Political Instability

At the time that interviews were taking place in early 2025, President Trump's new administration began making major policy changes that affected not only the individuals living in the United States but also diplomatic relations with foreign nations. As part of Trump's plan to increase deportations of non-citizens, the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency began to revoke the F-1 visas of hundreds of international students. Students whose visas were revoked had their legal status in the U.S. terminated in SEVIS and were required to depart the U.S. immediately. The international student community entered a period of great uncertainty

and anxiety as students could not anticipate how future policy changes or visa revocations could change their living situation in the U.S. overnight. During this time of political instability and psychological distress, international students should rely more than ever on the support of their local community and close relationships in the U.S. to find comfort, stability, and guidance. Counseling professionals, university staff, and local community members all have the opportunity to provide the empathy, guidance, and companionship that this study has found to be so beneficial for international students during difficult experiences. By recognizing the power of social support to help individuals overcome obstacles and stress, we can utilize the supportive strategies discussed in this study as a means of collective fortification despite the unpredictable changes and events that often occur on the national or global stage.

5.6 Limitations

As a phenomenological research study, the first limitation of this study is a reduced generalizability of findings due to a small sample size. This study had only 11 participants who were all Kyrgyz international students at the same university, so the findings may not be generalizable to a broader population. However, working with a phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to achieve qualitative depth in her findings, which can be tested through future quantitative or qualitative research on other populations.

Another limitation of the study was the researcher's dual relationship with the participants. As the director of the international office at the university where this study was conducted, the researcher had already established advising relationships with participants through her professional role before this research began. This pre-existing relationship with the Kyrgyz student population at the university could have affected the study recruitment, data collection, and analysis processes. Firstly, when the recruitment email was sent to all Kyrgyz

international students from the international office, students who already had a positive relationship with the researcher may have been more inclined to respond and participate in the study. Secondly, when interviews were conducted, participants may have been more inclined to speak positively about their interactions with the researcher or their experiences at the university in order to maintain a favorable reputation and relationship with the researcher. Thirdly, the researcher's prior professional interactions with participants and other Kyrgyz students at the university would have influenced her analysis of the interviews. To mitigate these effects, the researcher utilized a researcher journal and engaged in reflexive writing about her biases and interpretations throughout the research study.

5.7 Suggestions for Further Research

Future phenomenological research with Kyrgyz international students should explore the experiences of social support in different geographical locations and across generations. Kyrgyz students who live in different U.S. cities are less likely to have the support of a large local Kyrgyz community, so they may find social support in new ways. Additionally, Kyrgyz international students in other countries could have different social support experiences. Future research in different geographical locations could help to uncover how Kyrgyz international students adapt their social support strategies in different environments. Furthermore, research on Kyrgyz individuals of different generations who lack a university affiliation could also contribute a deeper understanding of the Kyrgyz diaspora in the U.S. Some participants in this study mentioned how different generational expectations shape Kyrgyz perceptions of social support, so more research on social support in the U.S. across different age groups may increase understanding of that generational context.

This study limited its focus on local support received in the U.S., so more research should be conducted to examine how Kyrgyz international students may receive social support remotely. Multiple participants in this current study mentioned communication and calls with loved ones in their home country that brought them support. By examining both local and remote social support, researchers can generate a more holistic understanding of the social support of Kyrgyz international students in the U.S. The inclusion of social media in this type of study would also be illuminating, as participants in the current study made references to using apps, like WhatsApp or Instagram, as methods for obtaining (primarily informational) social support.

The current study uncovered several culturally unique strategies for social support with Kyrgyz students, suggesting there is also value in examining the lived experiences of social support for different international student or migrant populations to identify other cultural variations. This study's findings aligned with previous research that variations in cultural preferences and forms of social support exist (Chen et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2007). Exploring experiences of receiving social support with international students of different national origins could produce insightful knowledge of their social support strategies and preferences. A better understanding of the social support experiences and preferences of different migrant populations can improve culturally sensitive counseling approaches and support strategies.

5.8 Reflection

Phenomenological inquiry allows one to reveal the essential qualities of human experience that are often “taken for granted” in daily life. Perhaps the best way to frame this study's findings on social support is by first reflecting on what human existence would be like without a sense of interpersonal mutuality. In his seminal 1890 text, *The Principles of*

Psychology, William James described man's psychological need for social connection and the pain one feels when deprived of meaningful relationships. James poignantly wrote:

No more fiendish punishment could be devised, were such a thing physically possible, than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof. If no one turned round when we entered, answered when we spoke, or minded what we did, but if every person we met 'cut us dead,' and acted as if we were non-existing things, a kind of rage and impotent despair would ere long well up in us. (p. 293)

In contrast to James' declaration, which described the psychological suffering caused by social rejection and isolation, this dissertation study has described the stability, hope, and mutual connection that social support can bring to individuals in times of distress. My hope is that these phenomenological findings will enlighten for us the tremendous value and utility of social support that may have been "taken for granted" previously.

The process of creating and conducting this study was eye-opening and valuable for me. I greatly appreciate the participants' willingness to open a doorway into their experience of life and social relations, which widened my ideas about how relationships and communities can impact individual well-being. The students' sense of closeness, trust, and hope that was created through their social interactions inspired me that the help we each contribute to those in need can build a brighter world. As a university administrator working with a large population of Kyrgyz students, I feel much better equipped to support this population in the future, and I hope that other professionals who work with the Kyrgyz community will similarly benefit from the insights gained. On a more personal note, the findings of the study caused me to reflect more deeply on the support I receive from loved ones in my life and to feel greater appreciation for our

interconnectedness. This new understanding has empowered me to provide and receive social support with more intentionality to foster greater personal growth for myself and those loved ones around me.

5.9 Summary

The intent of study was to illuminate Kyrgyz international students' lived experiences of receiving social support in the United States. Acknowledging cultural variations in social support types and effectiveness, I selected van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological approach in order ensure openness to the unique manifestation of the students' lived experiences of social support. This approach allowed me to describe and interpret the essential qualities of meaningful social support for these students. The findings indicate that Kyrgyz students utilize a variety of social support strategies to navigate the challenges of acculturation. Firstly, through the process of "Seeing Self-in-Other," Kyrgyz students' experiences of mutual empathy and social comparison revealed how their highly relational identities affect their responses to the U.S. environment. Secondly, the study's theme of "Forming Family-like Bonds through Reciprocity" demonstrated how cultural norms of reciprocal exchange are utilized in the American context to develop mutually growth-fostering relationships and ensure long-term support. Thirdly, Kyrgyz students' strategy of "Utilizing Connections as Sources of Effective Guidance" revealed how informal support networks of informational guidance are a primary source of social support for Kyrgyz students in the U.S. Finally, the theme of "Proximity and Shared Activities Improve One's Emotional State" highlighted Kyrgyz students' preferences for physical proximity, companionship, and implicit support to effectively cope with emotional distress. I hope that university staff and mental health service providers can better support Kyrgyz students through this increased understanding of how social support contributes to their study abroad journey.

Based upon the study's findings, I proposed various social support strategies that university staff, counseling professionals and faculty, and Kyrgyz community members can employ to bolster social support for Kyrgyz students during the study abroad experience. University programming for this population should include shared activities, exposure to success stories of individuals with similar identities as the students, networking events with experts in relevant areas, and guidance on handling practical needs in the U.S. Counseling professionals should utilize RCT techniques to assist Kyrgyz students with evaluating the dynamics of their current relationships and to build more mutually growth-fostering relationships that boost the beneficial impact of social support. Finally, Kyrgyz students, community members, and families can prepare guidance and connections with the local Kyrgyz community to facilitate an easier adjustment period for Kyrgyz international students in the U.S. Each of these strategies can help Kyrgyz international students to receive more effective social support as a buffer against the stressors inherent in the study abroad experience.

5.10 Conclusion

Most importantly, the findings of this study on Kyrgyz international students' experiences of social support in the U.S. can teach all of us how developing our relational knowledge and agency through social support allows us to transcend our self-limitations. When one experiences destabilizing periods or situations, comparable to the instability caused by acculturative stress for my participants, one can utilize social support to develop the self-knowledge, social knowledge, and understanding of one's community to increase one's stability and psychological well-being. Through our relational empathy and comparisons, social support provides us with mirrors to understand and build our own identities. Reciprocal exchanges of support teach us how to strengthen our relational bonds through social understanding and awareness of others' needs—

increasing our capacity to thrive socially over time. Utilizing and providing social support helps us to establish our connection to a community of local caregivers and to feel confident in our impact on our social environment. Impactful experiences of social support can change our beliefs about humanity and the future, increasing our sense of optimism that people who are willing to help others will always be in the world to support us when times become difficult. Social support makes self-transcendence a reality as we recognize that we each have the power to change the lives of others in positive ways, just as our support givers have helped us in valuable ways throughout our lives. As we have learned from the Kyrgyz students in this study, social support can build a stronger individual, stronger relationships, stronger community, and, with time, a stronger world.

References

- Abdraeva, A., Zulpukarova, A., Madaminova, D., Sabiralieva, Z., Abytova, G., Mapaeva, N., Temiralieva, T., Shaimkulova, A., Karaeva, N., Murzubraimova, D., & Abdullaeva, Z. (2021). Reflection of interpersonal relationships in cognitions of Kyrgyz imperative paremias. *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics*, 11(03), 484–496.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/ojml.2021.113036>
- Aisarakunova, A. (2010). Globalization and Kyrgyz traditional culture. *Central Asiatic Journal*, 54(1), 1-11. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/stable/41928528>
- Amsler, S. (2009). Promising futures?: education as a symbolic resource of hope in Kyrgyzstan. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 61(7), 1189-1206.
- Ari, A. (2008). Some educational sources of anxiety in Kyrgyz youth. *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal*, 36(5), 577-584.
- Bochner, S. (1977). Friendship patterns of overseas students: A functional model. *International Journal of Psychology*, 12(4), 277-294.
- Borbieva, N. O. (2010). Troubled relations: Mobility and exchange in post-soviet Kyrgyzstan. *Ethnology*, 49(3).
- Brown, L. (2009). An ethnographic study of the friendship patterns of international students in England: An attempt to recreate home through conational interaction. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 48(3), 184-193.
- Chandler, M., & Proulx, T. (2006). Changing selves in changing worlds: Youth suicide on the fault-lines of colliding cultures. *Archives of Suicide Research*, 10(2), 125–140.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13811110600556707>

- Chen, J. M., Kim, H. S., Mojaverian, T., & Morling, B. (2012). Culture and social support provision: Who gives what and why. *Personality Social Psychology Bulletin*, 38(1), 3-13.
- Chentsova-Dutton, Y. E. & Vaughn, A. (2012). Let me tell you what to do: Cultural differences in advice-giving. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 43(5), 687-703.
- Choi, S. H. & Nieminen, T. A. (2013). Factors influencing the higher education of international students from confucian east Asia. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 32(2), 161-173. <https://10.1080/07294360.2012.673165>
- Cohen, S., & Wills, T. A. (1985). Stress, social support, and the buffering hypothesis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 98(2), 310-357. <https://10.1037/0033-2909.98.2.310>
- Cohen, S., Underwood, L. G., & Gottlieb, B. H. (2000). *Social support measurement and intervention: A guide for health and social scientists*. Oxford University Press.
- Collins, K. (2002). Clans, pacts, and politics in central Asia. *Journal of Democracy*, 13(3), 137(16). <https://osu.on.worldcat.org/oclc/4318493545>
- Comstock, D. L., Hammer, T. R., Strentzsch, J., Cannon, K., Parsons, J., & Salazar, G. (2008). Relational-cultural theory: A framework for bridging relational, multicultural, and social justice competencies. *Journal of Counseling Development*, 86(3), 279-287.
- Cutrona, C. E., Shaffer, P. A., Wesner, K. A., & Gardner, K. A. (2007). Optimally matching support and perceived spousal sensitivity. *Journal of Family Psychology: Journal of the Division of Family Psychology of the American Psychological Association (Division 43)*, 21(4), 754-8.
- de la Sablonnière, R., Amiot, C. E., Sadykova, N., Cardenas, D., & Gorborukova, G. L. (2010). Identity integration challenges in Kyrgyzstan: A subtractive process. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*,

- DeYoung, A. J. (2010). Embracing globalization: University experiences among youth in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. *Central Asian Survey*, 29(4), 421-434.
- Gullette, D. (2007). Theories on central Asian factionalism: the debate in political science and its wider implications. *Central Asian Survey*, 26(3), 373-387. <https://10.1080/02634930701702589>
- Gullette, D. (2010). The problems of the “clan” politics model of Central Asian statehood: A call for alternative pathways for research. In E. Kavalski (Ed.), *Stable outside, fragile inside?: Post-soviet statehood in Central Asia* (pp. 53-69). Ashgate Pub.
- International Institute of Education. (2024). IIE open doors: Fast facts. *IIE Open Doors / Fast Facts*. Retrieved at www.opendoorsdata.org/fact_sheets/fast-facts/
- Jordan, J. V. (2018). *Relational-cultural therapy* (Second edition). American Psychological Association. <http://content.apa.org/books/2017-49267-000>
- Jordan, J. V. (2017). Relational-cultural theory: The power of connection to transform our lives. *The Journal of Humanistic Counseling*, 56(3), 228-243.
- Kim, H. S., Sherman, D. K., & Taylor, S. E. (2008). Culture and social support. *The American Psychologist*, 63(6), 518-26.
- Kirmse, S. B. (2010). In the marketplace for styles and identities: Globalization and youth culture in southern Kyrgyzstan. *Central Asian Survey*, 29(4), 389-403.
- Kristiana, I. F., Karyanta, N. A., Simanjuntak, E., Prihatsanti, U., Ingarianti, T. M., & Shohib, M. (2022). Social support and acculturative stress of international students. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(11)

- Lee, C-Y. S. & Goldstein, S. E. (2016). Loneliness, stress, and social support in young adulthood: Does the source of support matter? *Journal of Youth and Adolescence: A Multidisciplinary Research Publication*, 45(3), 568-580.
- Lértora, I., & Sullivan, J. (2019). The lived experiences of Chinese international students preparing for the university-to-work transition: A phenomenological qualitative study. *The Qualitative Report*, 24(8), 1877–1896.
- Lértora, I., Sullivan, J. M., & Croffie, A. (2017). *They are here now what do we do? Recommendations for supporting international student transitions. VISTAS 2017*. American Counseling Association.
- Lértora, I., Herridge, A. S., Smith, N. L., & Croffie, A. L. (2022). Lesbian, gay, and bisexual international students' transitions conceptualized using relational-cultural theory: A phenomenological study. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 17(4), 426-442.
- Li, S., & Zizzi, S. (2018). A case study of international students' social adjustment, friendship development, and physical activity. *Journal of International Students*, 8(1), 389-408. <https://osu.on.worldcat.org/oclc/7585373964>
- Liebert, S. (2010). The role of informal institutions in U.S. immigration policy: The case of illegal labor migration from Kyrgyzstan. *Public Administration Review*, 70(3), 390-400.
- Liu, C. H., Stevens, C., Wong, S. H. M., Yasui, M., & Chen, J. A. (2019). The prevalence and predictors of mental health diagnoses and suicide among U.S. college students: Implications for addressing disparities in service use. *Depression and Anxiety*, 36(1), 8-17. <https://10.1002/da.22830>
- Liu, M. Y. (2021). Trust and informal power in central Asia. *Current History*, 120(828), 262–267. <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2021.120.828.262>

- Merrill, M. C. (2016). Kyrgyzstan: Quality assurance—do state standards matter? *International Higher Education*, 85, 27–28. <https://doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2016.85.9247>
- Momunalieva, A., Urdaletova, A., Ismailova, R., & Abdykeev, E. (2020). The quality of higher education in Kyrgyzstan through the eyes of students. *Quality in Higher Education*, 26(3), 337-354.
- Pomfret, R. W. T. (2019). *The Central Asian economies in the twenty-first century: Paving a new Silk Road*. (pp. 151-180) Princeton University Press.
<https://www.degruyter.com/doi/book/10.23943/9780691185408>
- Pietromonaco, P. R., & Collins, N. L. (2017). Interpersonal mechanisms linking close relationships to health. *The American Psychologist*, 72(6), 531-542. <https://10.1037/amp0000129>
- Prieto-Welch, S. L. (2016). International student mental health. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2016(156), 53-63. <https://10.1002/ss.20191>
- Provis, R. (2013). Gifting as an alternative window into Kyrgyz social relations. *Вестник Академии Государственного Управления При Президенте Кыргызской Республики*, (18), 121-127.
- Ra, Y., & Trusty, J. (2017). Impact of social support and coping on acculturation and acculturative stress of east Asian international students. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 45(4), 276-291. <https://10.1002/jmcd.12078>
- Sabzalieva, E. (2015). Challenges in contemporary higher education in Kyrgyzstan, central Asia. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 19(2), 49-55.
- Schmitz, A. (2003). Elite change and political dynamics in Kazakhstan. *Orient*, 44, 579–600.

- Shafaei, A., & Razak, N. A. (2018). What matters most: Importance-performance matrix analysis of the factors influencing international postgraduate students' psychological and sociocultural adaptations. *Quality & Quantity: International Journal of Methodology*, 52(1), 37-56. <https://10.1007/s11135-016-0418-y>
- Smith, C. (2005). *U.S. helped to prepare the way for Kyrgyzstan's uprising*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/30/world/asia/us-helped-to-prepare-the-way-for-kyrgyzstans-uprising.html>
- support. 2024. In Merriam-Webster.com. Retrieved April 20, 2024, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/support>
- Taylor, S. E., Welch, W. T., Kim, H. S., & Sherman, D. K. (2007). Cultural differences in the impact of social support on psychological and biological stress responses. *Psychological Science*, 18(9), 831-837.
- Thoits, P. A. (2011). Mechanisms linking social ties and support to physical and mental health. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 52(2), 145-161.
- Umberson, D., & Montez, J. K. (2010). Social relationships and health: A flashpoint for health policy. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 51 Suppl, 54. <https://10.1177/0022146510383501>
- Vagle, M. D. (2018). *Crafting phenomenological research*. Routledge.
- van Manen, M. (2017). Phenomenology in its original sense. *Qualitative Health Research*, 27(6), 810-825.
- van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. State University of New York Press.

Zheng, S., & Ishii, K. (2023). Cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese international students: Effects of distant and close support-seeking. *Frontiers in Psychology, 14*.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1133487>

Zholalieva, Z., & Koylu, M. (2022). Religious education at public schools of Kyrgyzstan. *British Journal of Religious Education, 44*(3), 403–409.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2022.2046547>

Appendix A: Recruitment E-mail

SUBJECT: Invitation to Participate in Research Study

BODY: Are you an international student from Kyrgyzstan studying at NLU?

Share your experiences of social support with us by participating in our research study.

Your participation is voluntary, confidential, and will not have any negative impact on your academic standing at National Louis University. Participants will be invited to 1-2 interviews to discuss how they have experienced social support in the United States. You must be 18 or older to join this study.

Contact Maria at mlammy1@nl.edu for more information on how to participate.

Appendix B: Informed Consent

Informed Consent to Research Study: Kyrgyz Students' Lived Experiences of Receiving Social Support in the United States

You are invited to participate in a **research study** on Kyrgyz international students' experiences of receiving social support and assistance in the United States. Participants in this study will be asked to describe instances when they received help or support from other people while living in the United States. The purpose of this study is to better understand how social support is uniquely experienced by Kyrgyz international students.

You will be asked select a pseudonym (fake name) prior to beginning your research participation. You will be asked to complete a brief demographic survey and to participate in a 60-90 minute interview on zoom with video recording. Some participants will also be asked to join a 30-45 minute follow-up interview on zoom with video recording a few weeks later to clarify their initial interviews.

TIME INVOLVEMENT: Your participation will take approximately 60-90 minutes for the first zoom interview. If you agree to participate in a follow-up zoom interview a few weeks later, your participation will include an additional 30-45 minutes for that second interview.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: The risk associated with this study is potential psychological distress recalling and describing past events when you experienced problems and needed help. If you experience distress from this study, you are encouraged to utilize the university's free counseling services by contacting counseling@nl.edu. Study data will be stored securely, in compliance with Ohio State University standards, minimizing the risk of confidentiality breach. The benefits which may reasonably be expected to result from this study are potential increase in awareness of your social support network and preferences and the contribution of knowledge to understanding the experiences of the Kyrgyz community in the United States. We cannot and do not guarantee or promise that you will receive any benefits from this study. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your grades in school or visa status.

PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS: If you have read this form and have decided to participate in this project, please understand your **participation is voluntary** and you have the **right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. The alternative is not to**

participate. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. The results of this research study may be presented at scientific or professional meetings or published in scientific journals. Your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

In accordance with scientific norms, the data from this study may be used or shared with other researchers for future research (after removing personally identifying information) without additional consent from you.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Questions: If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this research, its procedures, risks and benefits, contact the principal investigator, Dr. Darcy Granello, at Granello.1@osu.edu.

Independent Contact: If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your rights as a participant, please contact the Ohio State University Office of Responsible Research Practices to speak to someone independent of the research team at 614-688-8457, or email at hsconcerns@osu.edu

Indicate **Yes** or **No**:

I give consent to be audio recorded during this study.

___ Yes ___ No

I give consent to be video recorded during this study:

___ Yes ___ No

The extra copy of this signed and dated consent form is for you to keep.

SIGNATURE _____ **DATE** _____

Print name of participant _____

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Please share the following:

- Pseudonym
 - Age
 - approximate time studying in USA
 - city where you lived most of your life before USA
1. Background questions to build rapport and gather contextual data: How did you begin considering studying in the United States? What (or who) finally convinced you to study in the United States? What has your experience of adjusting to life in the United States been like for you?
 2. Grand Tour Questions: What does receiving support mean to you? What are you looking for when you form a supportive relationship with a person in the US?
 3. Core questions on receiving social support: Think for a moment about one of the first times you needed help after arriving in the United States. Can you describe more about the situation and what you needed help with? How did someone help you with [problem]? What was it like to receive their assistance? How has that relationship changed since then?
 - a. Further prompts to explore mutuality/relationality (asked at the end of each narrative): How did you realize [person] wanted to help you? What about this person made you willing to receive their help? How did receiving this support affect your friendship/relationship with [person]?
 4. Further prompts for additional narratives of social support: Can you tell me about a more recent time when someone (else) helped you in the United States? Are there other

examples of moments when you received help or support in the U.S. that you feel are important to share with me?

- a. Further prompts to explore mutuality/relationality (asked at the end of each narrative): How did you realize [person] wanted to help you? What about this person made you willing to receive their help? How did receiving this support affect your friendship/relationship with [person]?
5. Eliciting emotion-focused support narratives: Can you recall a time when you needed emotional support in the U.S.? How did someone support you then? Tell me about a time when someone provided you with emotional comfort? [what does emotional comfort mean to you?] Has there been a time when someone praised you or increased your confidence?
 - a. Further prompts to explore mutuality/relationality (asked at the end of each narrative): How did you realize [person] wanted to help you? What about this person made you willing to receive their help? How did receiving this support affect your friendship/relationship with [person]?
6. Eliciting problem-focused support narratives: Can you describe a time when you faced a serious problem in the U.S. and someone helped you? Was there any helpful information or tangible assistance (money, physical labor, items, etc.) that the person gave to you?
 - a. Further prompts to explore mutuality/relationality (asked at the end of each narrative): How did you realize [person] wanted to help you? What about this person made you willing to receive their help? How did receiving this support affect your friendship/relationship with [person]?

7. Wrap-up questions and thanking the participant: Looking back on your experience, how do you feel that these moments of social support have affected the closeness of your relationships in the United States? I'm very grateful for your time and all the stories you shared with me today.

Possible question to add if need for more narratives:

8. Who are the 3 most supportive people for you in the U.S.? Tell me about a time when [person] helped you.