

CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS FROM FATA AND BALOCHISTAN STUDYING IN SOUTHERN PUNJAB, PAKISTAN

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Abstract

The concept of cultural adjustment is an essential component of the study of students' relocation in regional and cultural contexts within the same country, and it is one aspect that is frequently overlooked. The students from Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Balochistan have their unique sociocultural, linguistic and psychological issues when they move to Universities in southern provinces of Punjab. The present study was designed to see the correlation between the new culture and psychological adjustment of undergraduate male students of The Islamia University of Bahawalpur. A quantitative cross-sectional correlational design was used, and data were gathered from male students drawn using purposive sampling technique of 202 students, through Cultural Distance and Acculturation Orientation Scale (CDAOS) and Brief Adjustment Scale-6 (BASE-6). The correlation analysis showed a slight negative relationship between adopting a new culture and students' adjustment which was not statistically significant. A new culture also had a small effect on Student adjustment as shown in regression analysis. Overall cultural-adoption scores were not a good predictor of psychological adjustment in this sample, as students found cultural transition to be challenging overall. The findings call for further sub-dimensional research (examining language, food, climate and social-network variables independently and with moderators like social support) to examine the mechanisms that explain the relationship between the various dimensions of cultural adaptation and domestic migrant students in Pakistan.

Keywords: Cultural adjustment, Psychological Well-Being, Undergraduate Students, Sociocultural Adaptation, FATA, Balochistan, Pakistan.

1. Introduction

The cultural adjustment is one of the most psychological challenging adjustment an individual could ever have to undergo (Ward & Geeraert, 2016). The experiences of international students studying in another country has received a considerable amount of research attention, while relatively little has focused on domestic migrant students who move within their own nation from one country to another with a significant cultural and linguistic difference (Riaz et al., 2025). It is noted that students from FATA and Balochistan who take admission at the universities of southern Punjab for higher education in Pakistan are an underrepresented group from the cross-cultural adjustment literature (Riaz et al., 2025). In addition to differences in language, food, climate and social norms, these students also experience the psychological upsets of the loss of family support and their broken social networks (Berry, 2005).

There are many different conceptualizations of cross-cultural adjustment, both psychological and sociocultural (Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Psychological adjustment is emotional health and life satisfaction in the new culture while sociocultural adjustment is the ability to operate successfully in the host culture (Searle & Ward, 1990). Research has always shown that higher levels of acculturative stress and poorer adjustment are associated with higher levels of cultural

distance between the home and host cultures (Berry et al., 2006; Malay et al., 2023). Aljaberi et al. (2021) found that acculturative stress due to difficulties associated with the acculturation process has been linked to negative mental health outcomes, such as depression and anxiety, as well as poorer academic performance.

One of the most cited challenges to cross cultural adjustment is language proficiency (Ali et al., 2021). So, students with communication problems in the dominant language of the host culture tend to report higher levels of feelings of isolation, lower academic performance and decreased psychological well-being (Ali et al., 2021). Language issues are further complicated by the fact that students coming from FATA and Balochistan are not only facing linguistic differences in their own primary language (Pashto, Balochi and Brahui) but also with the environment of southern Punjab which is dominated by Saraiki and Urdu language (Riaz et al., 2025). In addition to language, sociocultural factors, such as food habits, clothing and dress norms, religious expression, and social interaction patterns are other dimensions of cultural distance that affect adjustment (Ward & Geeraert, 2016).

Acculturation theory, proposed by Berry (2005), is an approach to cultural adaptation that is considered to be a process of change that occurs following a prolonged interaction of two culturally distinct groups. People who adopt an integration approach (both preserving the heritage cultural connection and building cultural connections to the host culture) report the best adjustment outcomes, while those experiencing marginalization report the greatest amount of acculturative stress (Berry et al., 2006). The present study is based on Berry's acculturation model and Ward's Affect, Behavior, and Cognition (ABC) model on cross-cultural adaptation, which covers the affective, behavioral and cognitive aspects of cross-cultural adaptation (Zhou et al., 2008).

2. Literature Review

Although there has been an increase in literature on international student adjustment, there is a lack of literature about the migration of Pakistani students for further studies in Pakistan (Riaz et al., 2025). The Higher Education Commission (HEC) scholarships have expanded the enrolment of FATA and Balochistan students in universities, but the psychological and sociocultural adjustment issues of students from FATA and Balochistan have not been methodologically studied in Pakistan (Ali et al., 2021). According to research done by Parray et al. (2020) and Kristiana et al. (2022) issues with language, homesickness and social support are the common adjustment barriers among transition students but no researcher had studied these barriers in the context of domestic migrant students in Pakistani public universities. The present study thus fills this gap by exploring the link between new culture adoption and psychological adjustment of FATA and Balochistan students at The Islamia University of Bahawalpur.

The cultural adjustment of students moving across cultural boundaries is voluminous in the international student literature (Ward & Kennedy, 1993; Berry et al., 2006). Bastien et al. (2018) explored some of the factors that predict academic adjustment among international students in a mid-sized American university, and concluded that acculturation strategies and cultural distance were major predictors of both psychological and sociocultural adjustment. Students who indicated high level of cultural distance had higher acculturative stress and lower academic performance (Bastien et al., 2018). In line with this, Gasser (2005) showed that there was a significant relationship between successful sociocultural adjustment and the participants' level of intercultural self-efficacy and host contact among Asian overseas students in the United States, which is consistent with this study's finding that interpersonal resources are important factors in the acculturation process.

Ali et al. (2021) conducted a study in the Pakistani context to explore the psychosocial factors that influence the adaptation of international students in Pakistan; language proficiency, social

support, and cultural distance were found to be significant factors in the adaptation of international students in Pakistan. Riaz et al. (2025) also showed that a mental health perspective on acculturation that is culturally relevant for the Pakistani context needs to consider the structural and interpersonal aspects of the acculturation process. The results suggest that adjustment processes of international students should be studied not only in the case of international students, but also in the case of domestic migrants who cross a great cultural distance within the same country, which is not given much attention in the scholarly literature (Riaz et al., 2025).

Social support has regularly been found as a buffer to acculturative stress (Kristiana et al., 2022). Kristiana et al. (2022) found that international students who had suitable social support experienced significantly less acculturative stress and had better adjustment results. Likewise, it was discovered that cultural intelligence and social support significantly influenced cultural distance's relationship with adjustment in higher education students by Li & Middlemiss (2022). In a systematic review and meta-analysis, Aljaberi et al. (2021) found that intervention programs that focused on the social integration and language support of culturally migrant students were effective in reducing acculturative stress and improving adjustment outcomes, highlighting the need for institutional responses to the difficulties of culturally migrant students.

Although psychologically and socioculturally related, these types of adjustment are not the same (Searle and Ward, 1990), and are influenced by different factors. The study conducted by their self on Malaysian and Singaporean students' adjustment in New Zealand found that life changes, extraversion and satisfaction with social relationships were the most important factors in predicting psychological adjustment, while cultural distance and expected difficulty were the most important factors in predicting sociocultural adjustment (Searle & Ward, 1990). Recently, Malay et al. (2023) showed that adjusting was predicted beyond the perceived cultural distance by cultural intelligence. Moreover, by examining the relationship among the four types of integration acculturation strategies, student sojourners' academic adjustment scores, and their scores on the social support subscales, Mao et al. (2024) showed that models of cross-cultural adjustment must include both individual-level resources and contextual factors.

2.1 Rationale of the Study.

This work comes from two gaps in the existing literature. Firstly, while there has been a considerable amount of research on acculturation and adjustment in the past 40 years, the prevailing majority of studies has been conducted on students from abroad in western context as compared to students from home in the context of Pakistan (Riaz et al., 2025). Second, in Pakistan, students from FATA and Balochistan who attend universities in different provinces constitute a group of unique students who have to deal with culturally different challenges, both within Pakistan and internationally, linguistic, dietary, climatic, social and others, which are qualitatively similar and, so far, have not been studied in detail. Given that the well-being of students is the responsibility of the higher education institutions (HEIs) of Pakistan who are expected to ensure the academic and mental health of every student, the challenges highlighted in the study are directly pertinent. The current research study thus offers an empirically grounded description of the challenges of adapting to college of this underserved population of students and the foundation for evidence-based institutional interventions.

Hypothesis

H1: There will be a significant negative relationship between cultural adjustment and psychological well-being among undergraduate students from FATA and Balochistan.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

For the present study, quantitative cross-sectional correlational design was used to study the relationship between introducing a cultural adjustment and psychological well-being of undergraduate students. A non-experimental approach was determined to be suitable for this study since the purpose was to examine relationships among study variables, rather than manipulate them (Berry et al., 2006).

3.2 Participants

Sample size was 202 Male undergraduate students from The Islamia University of Bahawalpur using purposive sampling. The participants were all from FATA or Balochistan and were all undergraduate students. The age range of the participants was from 18 to 27 years. Questionnaires were voluntary and those with incomplete responses were discarded. The demographic characteristics are included in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Profile ($n = 202$)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Age	18–20 years	72	35.6
	21–23 years	77	38.1
	24–27 years	53	26.2
Locality	Rural	158	78.2
	Urban	44	21.8
Family System	Combined	155	76.7
	Nuclear	47	23.3
Socioeconomic Status	Low	27	13.4
	Medium	153	75.7
	High	22	10.9

Note. n = Frequency, % = Percentage.

3.3 Instruments

Cultural Distance and Acculturation Orientation Scale (CDAOS). Adopting a new culture was measured by the Cultural Distance and Acculturation Orientation Scale, based on Brief Sociocultural Adaptation and Perceived Cultural Distance Scale (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). The scale consists of 3 subscales: Acculturation Orientation (8 items), Psychological Adaptation (10 items), and Sociocultural Adaptation (12 items) that are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ($SD = 1$; $AG = 7$). The internal reliability coefficient for the scale in its original validation ranged from .84 to .91 (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). The higher the score the more problems with sociocultural adjustment. In this current study, subscale scores were not analyzed separately, only the total composite score. It should be noted that the Psychological Adaptation subscale within this measure conceptually overlaps with the outcome construct measured by the BASE-6 (see Section 6, Limitations) – using only the composite of this subscale as was done here helps to reduce this conceptual overlap but does not eliminate it. The scale has been shown to have acceptable structural equivalence and good reliability in various languages and cultural contexts (Demes & Geeraert, 2014).

Brief Adjustment Scale-6 (BASE-6): Psychological adjustment was evaluated with the six-item self-report measure of general psychological adjustment, the BASE-6 (Cruz et al., 2020), a

brief validated alternative to the Outcome Questionnaire-45 (OQ-45.2). Items are marked on a 7-point scale. The BASE-6 demonstrated good internal consistency across three validation samples, ranging from .87 to .93 (Cruz et al., 2020). Scores higher than this are regarded as representing less psychological adjustment. The BASE-6 has good psychometric characteristics in a variety of populations and has been shown to be valid for tracking psychological adjustment in community and student samples.

3.4 Data Collection

Prior to starting data collection, the department's authorization letter was secured to conduct the research. Permission was also obtained from the original authors of the Cultural Distance and Acculturation Orientation Scale and Brief Adjustment Scale-6 (BASE-6) to be used in the present study. Afterwards a request was made to the administration of The Islamia University of Bahawalpur to meet with the eligible students for its participation in the study. With permission of the respective departments, the researcher went to the selected departments and contacted the participants. The purpose, objectives and value of the study were explained to the students and informed that it was a voluntary study. All the participants were informed and agreed to participate in the questionnaires beforehand. It was also noted to the participants that their responses would be private and for research only. This data was collected with purposive sampling technique from male undergraduate students aged 18-27 years and who have originally come from FATA or Balochistan and are enrolled in undergraduate program in The Islamia University of Bahawalpur. The participants were asked to complete the research instruments: Cultural Distance and Acculturation Orientation Scale (ACOS), Brief Adjustment Scale-6 (BASE-6), and a demographic information sheet. What they were expected to answer to each item was clearly explained to participants. Questionnaires were completed in a supervised, paper and pencil format in order to ensure the respondents gave accurate answers. Completed questionnaires were removed and checked for completeness then sorted for subsequent statistical analysis; questionnaires with incomplete responses were rejected. The data collection process was conducted following all ethical protocols such as confidentiality, volunteer principles and absence of physical and psychological harm.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data collected were coded and analyzed using statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) version 27.0. To check the internal consistency of both instruments, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used. Demographic characteristics of participants and the main study variables were summarized using descriptive statistics. To test H1, a Pearson product-moment correlation was used to explore the relationship between cultural adoption and psychological adjustment. A linear regression analysis was then used to further investigate the predictive relationship of cultural adoption with student adjustment.

4. Results

The descriptive statistics and correlation results of the study variables are shown in Table 2 below. The variance in scores on the acculturation-challenge rating was relatively low ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 0.28$) and the variance in scores on the student adjustment rating was also relatively low ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.51$).

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations (n = 202)

Variable	M	SD	α	1	2
1. Adopting New Culture	4.35	0.28	0.85	—	-.055
2. Student Adjustment	4.12	0.51	0.88	-.055	—

Note: M= Mean, SD= Standard Deviation, α =Cronbach's Alpha

Table 2 shows the results of the reliability analysis, which revealed that both scales had good internal consistency in the present sample, with Cronbach's alpha of .85 for the Cultural Distance and Acculturation Orientation Scale, and .88 for the Brief Adjustment Scale-6 (BASE-6). The correlation of adopting a new culture and student adjustment was weak and negative ($r = -.055$, $p = .437$), and this was not significant. Within the current sample, however, overall cultural-adoption scores were not a good linear predictor of psychological adjustment scores, which did not support Hypothesis 1. Practical in this sense, students who experienced a more challenging cultural adjustment were not always the same students who also experienced a poorer psychological adjustment, and the reverse was also true; there was not a consistent relationship between the two types of adjustment across students.

Table 3

Regression Analysis: Adopting New Culture as Predictor of Student Adjustment

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	4.56	0.56	—	8.15	.000
Adopting New Culture	-.100	.128	-.055	-.78	.437

Note. B = Unstandardized Regression Coefficient, SE = Standard Error, β = Standardized Regression Coefficient, t = t-statistic, p = Significance Value.

This pattern was confirmed by regression analysis (Table 3) that showed that adopting a new culture did not significantly predict student adjustment ($\beta = -.055$, $R^2 = .003$, $F(1, 200) = 0.61$, $p = .437$). The model explained $< 1\%$ of the variance of the adjustment scores. That is, the cultural-adoption score gave very little information in predicting a student's psychological adjusting to the country score.

5. Discussion

The objectives of this study were to find out the relationship between the adoption of a new culture and psychological adjustment among the students of the Islamia University of Bahawalpur in FATA and Balochistan. The relationship between cultural adoption and psychological adjustment was negative but not significant and cultural adoption was not a significant predictor of psychological adjustment in the regression analysis. Hence, H1 was not supported in this sample.

This null finding differs from a large number of international studies finding strong relationships between cultural distance and adjustment. For instance, Bastien et al. (2018) showed that cultural distance and acculturation strategy were the main factors predicting adjustment difficulties among international students studying in the United States, while Berry et al. (2006) found that the higher the cultural distance, the higher the level of acculturative stress and the lower the psychological well-being among international students. Similarly, Riaz et al. (2025) and Ali et al. (2021) found that some key factors related to adjustment of international and domestic students in Pakistan context, respectively. The lack of a significant relationship in the current sample may be a result of methodological limitations and/or contextual considerations, not that no actual effect exists.

A reasonable explanation is that the scores in the adopting-new culture subscale of this sample were rather uniformly distributed, thus reducing the impact of correlation coefficient when there is a true correlation. The cultural distance between their home and host country is a real distance, but small and potentially less variable than the distance encountered by international sojourners, making the overall statistical power to identify a linear association between the two potentially lower. This interpretation is similar to that of Searle and Ward (1990) who said that cultural distance was not the only factor that was important for adjustment outcomes, but

multiple factors such as personality and quality of social contact were also important; and to that of Li and Middlemiss (2022), who stated that social support and cultural intelligence are the better predictors for adjustment rather than cultural distance per se.

Furthermore, although perceived cultural adaptation was perceived to be difficult at group level, those who did perceive it as difficult did not necessarily score the highest on the composite measure of cultural adaptation, suggesting that other factors beyond the scope of the present study, such as social support, language skills and personality may have influenced the experience of cultural adaptation, as noted by Mao et al. (2024) and Aljaberi et al. (2021). Overall, these findings indicate that a broad composite measure of cultural adoption may not be sensitive enough to capture the effects of cultural adjustment within the internal migrant population of Pakistan, and that a more fine-grained approach that examines the effects of distinct indicators of cultural transition (language, food, climate, and disruption of social networks) would be required before definitive statements can be made about the specific aspects of cultural transition that have the greatest impact on Pakistani migrant students.

6. Limitations

There were some limitations with the present study. Firstly, the sample consisted of male students in one institution only making the results difficult to generalize for female students and students in other institutions. Studies should be conducted in the future using women and a multi-institutional sampling design. Second, because of the cross-sectional design, it is not possible to make causal statements; and third, because there are no longitudinal designs, it would be more likely to be able to draw causal conclusions concerning the directionality of the relationship between cultural adoption and adjustment (Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Thirdly, the amount of variance explained by the regression model (R^2) was relatively small and insignificant, and thus, other variables like social support, cultural intelligence, acculturation strategies and personality factors should be incorporated in future studies (Malay et al., 2023). Fourth, because of the use of self-report instruments, there is a possibility for socially desirable responding. Fifth, the study failed to examine the time participants had resided in Bahawalpur since it can moderate the association between cultural adoption and adjustment. Sixth, the present analysis used a single composite cultural-adoption score, and did not test the correlations for language, food, social norms, climate, and homesickness as separate predictors; the limited range of scores on this composite measure may have dampened the observed correlation. With respect to the conceptually similar Psychological Adaptation subscale of the Cultural Distance and Acculturation Orientation Scale, as noted in Section 3.3, future studies should either have a separate measure of cultural distance or formally model the overlap between the two measures, to guard against possible conceptual confounds. Future studies should examine each subscale separately, and provide greater variance in scores for each of these sub scores to further assess each of these dimensions of adjustment.

7. Conclusion

The present study aimed to explore the relationship between adaptation of a new culture with psychological adjustment among the undergraduate students from FATA and Balochistan of The Islamia University of Bahawalpur. Overall cultural-adoption scores were not found to be a statistically significant predictor of psychological adjustment, thus H1 was not supported. The findings suggest that the connection between cultural transition and student adjustment in a domestic migration context does not always follow a linear path and that other factors (not measured in this study) like social support, language skills, or cultural distance might influence the relationship between cultural transition and student adjustment. Institutional sensitive support systems like orientation programs, peer mentorship and language assistance might be beneficial for domestic migrant students and future research could utilize sub-dimensional,

longitudinal, and multi-institutional designs to better isolate the predictors of adjustment among the domestic migrant students in Pakistan.

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