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A Study of Microaggressions Toward International Students from the Perspective of International Exchange Experts

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Abstract

This study aims to understand microaggressions directed toward international students from the perspective of international exchange professionals, who tend to be in relatively close contact with international students. This study targeted professionals who directly advise and support international students at university international exchange centers in J and G cities. The data were collected by conducting focus group interviews with seven participants in two groups from 25 May to 8 June 2023. Data were collected by conducting focus group interviews of seven participants in two groups from 25 May to 8 June 2023. After analyzing the interview data using thematic analysis, two themes emerged: the experiences of international students and the perspectives of international exchange professionals. The experience of international were further categorized into three sub-themes: differences in cultural context, academic discrimination, and discrimination due to lack of information. The perspectives of international exchange professionals were further categorized into three sub-themes: limited access to infrastructure, different perspectives depending on the level of the country, and consideration as a barrier. It is hoped that the findings of this study, obtained by exploring the microdiscrimination faced by international students at universities, will facilitate the development of different systems and policy recommendations to improve the experiences of international students.

Keywords: International exchange experts, International students, microaggressions, microdiscrimination

1. INTRODUCTION

Due to the increase in international mobility and the demand for higher education, the number of international students worldwide has been consistently increasing, resulting in the explosive growth of the study abroad market [1,2]. In the past, the study abroad market was concentrated in certain countries for the purpose of educating elites. However, in recent years, the study abroad market has changed owing to changes in market factors such as technology levels and national brands and images [3]. This trend can be observed in the higher education market, where global competence - the ability to communicate and collaborate with different countries and cultures - is an important issue [4]. At the same time, local universities report difficulties in recruiting students due to a decline in the school-age population and a preference for metropolitan

universities [5], and to solve this problem, they see attracting foreign students as a breakthrough by relaxing admission standards for foreign students [3].

With the increasing number of foreign students in Korea, research regarding these students is being actively conducted. Several of these studies focus on Korean language education for international students [6,7] and their adjustment to university life [8-10]. However, most of these studies are quantitative studies, involving surveys. and literature reviews. Research on international students has shown that even if they experience difficulties in academics and life after enrollment, they often drop out or become illegal immigrants due to the lack of systems and policies to help them [1]. Therefore, it is necessary to establish various convenience systems in proportion to the increase in the number of foreign students.

A significant barrier to international students' adjustment to life in Korea is the exclusionary attitudes or discrimination faced by foreigners in Korean society, which can be stressful for international students. This can lead to psychological and emotional maladjustment, which can threaten their study abroad experience [11]. These discriminatory characteristics are often related to microaggressions. Microaggressions refer to unintentional, non-malicious comments or behaviors that are a common occurrence in everyday life and can make a person feel uncomfortable [12]. Compared with overt discrimination, microaggressions are expressed in more subtle ways and can include actions that are not intended to be offensive but are hurtful. Since microdiscrimination is based on the experience of the involved parties, it is impossible for nonparticipants to determine whether an incident involves microdiscrimination.

Currently, microdiscrimination research in Korea focuses on sexual minorities [13], gender discrimination [14], and migrant workers and migrant women [15]; however, no research has been conducted on microdiscrimination faced by foreign students in Korea. Microdiscrimination research regarding international students has been conducted in several other countries [16]. Thus, it is necessary to begin microdiscrimination research on international students in Korea, where the number of international students has been consistently increasing in recent years. Therefore, it is important to explore the microdiscrimination situation in Korea from the perspective of international exchange professionals, who tend to be in relatively close contact with international students, to examine microdiscrimination from the perspective of international students.

Therefore, this study aims to explore cases of microdiscrimination against international students through the experiences of international exchange professionals and provide recommendations for future changes in institutions and policies.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study involves a qualitative analysis of data collected via focus group interviews to understand the microaggressions faced by international students from the perspective of international exchange professionals.

Participants

Table 1. General characteristics

No	Gender	Age	Career	Current employment
1	Female	26	1year 2 Month	S University
2	Female	29	5 years	S University
3	Male	43	7 years 3 Month	J University

4	Male	30	1 Month	J University
5	Female	36	11 years 7 Month	J University
6	Female	33	6 years 5month	J University
7	Female	30	1 years	J University

The study participants included seven professionals who directly counsel and support international students at various university international exchange centers in J and G cities. The general characteristics of the study participants and their work places are shown in Table 1. These professionals are fluent in foreign languages and have practical experience in supporting international students. To select the participants, the researcher obtained permission from the team leader in charge of international students at each university's international exchange center and recruited voluntary participants. To elicit their experiences in advising international students and their perceptions regarding microaggressions, the participants were recruited using a purposive sampling survey method. Subsequently, focus group interviews were conducted with participants who consented to be interviewed. The participants were provided with an informed consent form explaining the following information: study purpose and methodology, voluntary participation, withdrawal from the study, and compensation. Finally, the interviews were conducted after obtaining the participants' written consent.

Data Collection

The data for was obtained by conducting focus group interviews with seven participants in two groups from 25 May to 8 June 2023. The interviews utilized an open-ended and semi-structured question format to allow participants to freely discuss their experiences. The main interview questions were as follows: "How long have you been working with international students?"; "What have been the challenges of working with international students?"; "What are some of the challenges that international students face in school?"; "Have you heard of any experiences of discrimination that international students have complained about?"; "What do you think are the determinants of multicultural microaggressions in the country or university?" ; "Are there any aspects of your university's culture or system that you would like to see changed for the benefit of international students?"; and "If you have anything else you would like to add, please feel free to do so."

During the interviews, the participants' behaviors, facial expressions, and tone of voice were carefully observed. The main contents of the interviews, including the participants' nonverbal expressions and questions, were recorded in an observation journal. The interview contents were recorded according to the contents of the explanation and consent form provided to the participants. After the interview, the interviews were transcribed in the participants' language and anything that was unclear was checked against the transcriptions. Subsequently, we compared the interviews between participants, stopping when no new concepts emerged.

Data Analysis Method

The contents of the transcripts of the participants' in-depth interviews were analyzed using the thematic analysis method [17]. First, the participants' interviews were transcribed, and each researcher underlined statements that they considered meaningful. In the second step, codes were extracted for each statement. These generated codes were compared with the transcribed data to verify that the data's meaning was reflected accurately. The third step involved identifying relevant themes, wherein each code was grouped with similar concepts and checked for consistency with a particular theme and themes that supported other themes.

Inconsistent themes were compared across researchers until their respective meanings were saturated. A total of 18 subthemes emerged from this process, and the interview transcripts were reviewed to confirm the point of data saturation. The fourth step involved revisiting the themes and ensuring that the final six themes were not too abstract or specific. In the fifth step, the themes were clarified and named, and the researchers continually compared the themes that emerged, identifying those that were consistently clear and distinct from the others. With input from the participants, clear definitions of the themes were established to reduce the number of categories for each theme finding. The final analysis was presented to two participants to ensure that the themes and interpretations of the data were valid and that there were no misunderstandings or misinterpretations. Finally, the sixth step was the report writing stage, wherein we quoted verbatim the statements implied by each theme and explained their meaning.

Rigor of the study

To ensure rigor, this study was evaluated according to Lincoln and Guba's proposed criteria specified as follows. First, to enhance credibility, the entire research process was documented so that other researchers could easily verify the analysis. The researchers interviewed a sufficient number of participants to eliminate distorted or biased data. Second, to ensure transferability, i.e., the extent to which the findings can be applied to other settings or populations, the data were analyzed until saturation was reached utilizing repeated participant statements. Third, to ensure verifiability of the study, the data were collected and analyzed by the researchers themselves. The results were then revised based on the advice of a professor of multicultural education. Additionally, the data were shown to two participants to check for any misunderstandings or interpretations. Finally, for verifiability, the researcher performed a judgmental suspension via the process of parenthesizing the researcher's existing knowledge and biases to understand the described data from an objective and neutral position

Ethical considerations

To protect the human subjects, written consent to participate in the study was obtained from individuals who had expressed interest in participating in the study. Additionally, the confidentiality of the participants, the recording of the interviews for data analysis, and the confidentiality and use of the interview results were explained to the participants. The rights of the research subjects were protected by explaining that the participants had the right to refuse to participate in the study even during data collection and by providing detailed information about the data collection process. Furthermore, each of the subjects who participated in the study were provided with a small gift certificate.

3. RESULTS

The analysis of the interview data revealed two themes and six sub-themes as shown in Table 2. After analyzing the content of the participants' interviews, it was possible to identify two themes: international students' experiences and the perspectives of international exchange professionals. International students' experiences were further categorized into differences in cultural context, academic discrimination, and discrimination due to the lack of information. The perspectives of the international exchange professionals were further categorized into the following sub-themes: limitations of accessible infrastructure, different perspectives depending on the level of the country, and my consideration is a hindrance.

Table 3. Analyzing the Contents of Participants' Interviews

	Differences in cultural context
Covert Forms of Discrimination	Discrimination in academic affairs
	Discrimination due to lack of information
Views of International Exchange Professionals	Lack of accessible infrastructure
	Different perspectives according to country level
	My consideration is more of a hindrance

Covert Forms of Discrimination

There are subtle forms of discrimination, known as microaggressions, that can be experienced by foreign students in school and everyday life in Korea. International students reported that even everyday greetings and remarks could be perceived as microaggressions for people from certain cultures or religions, depending on the time of day. Additionally, even in academic settings, behaviors that are viewed as considerate due to language difficulties may be perceived as discriminatory by international students.

Differences in Cultural Context

In Korea, vegetarians and Muslims are still minorities despite the increase in their numbers. Consequently, there are not many places that cater to their special diets or menus, and understanding is low. For example, even the phrase "I ate," which is considered a greeting in Korea, may not be considered a greeting to a Muslim who is observing Ramadan (no food during sunlight hours). Moreover, international students living in dormitories may perceive them as places where they can feel comfortable since it is their primary residence in Korea. However, when repairs are needed, behaviors of the maintenance staff, such as arbitrarily opening the door and making repairs, may be perceived by international students as discrimination to foreigners. Some of the participants stated the following:

"If I ask my close friends, "Have you eaten?" and they answer, "It's Ramadan," I might feel bad and think that they don't really care about me." (Participant 2)

"All the teachers in the dormitory don't speak English, so the person who is supposed to fix it is supposed to notify the student and go into the room, but they just go into the room without notifying the international student. We have an overwhelming number of international students who are girls, but the teachers who fix it are all men... The teacher doesn't know that this is not your house, but I'm from another country, so I always say, 'This is my house.'" (Participant 2).

Academic Discrimination

Academic discrimination refers to arbitrary exclusion from assignments and problems with academic administration, According to an international exchange specialist, international students must know a certain level of Korean when they enter a university; however, it is not easy for them to speak the language at the same level as native speakers. Consequently, they complain about the difficulty of being excluded from team projects out of consideration for Korean students. Some of the study participants explained that, as foreign

students, they have less opportunities to learn from Korean students.

"My degree is given by the professor, my salary is given by the professor, and I have to follow everything the professor says, but I can't accept too much, it's too hard, and when I complain that it's hard, they say, 'You do that in Korea,' and that was a big hurt for me." (Participant 1)

"Korean students unilaterally exclude foreign students in this way, so Korean students submit reports among themselves, and put only your name. From the foreign students' point of view, they want to fulfill their roles in the same team, but from the Korean students' point of view, they feel that the moment they add a child, they have more work, so they automatically consider these friends in a way that says, 'I'll just add you so you can leave it out,' but from the foreign students' point of view, it's not considerate." (Participant 3).

Discrimination due to lack of information

Students require various types of information to adjust to university life. As such, announcements and related notices are posted at prominent places within universities. However, in many cases, there are not enough notices for international students, and even when there are, they are often placed in remote rather than prominent areas, making it difficult for foreign students to find them. In this regard, international exchange specialists often have to remind universities to make important information available to international student. For example, one respondent stated the following:

"Even in the dorm, they don't give me 100 percent of the information. Even in case of quarantine, they just announce it on the radio. .... They said there is a bulletin board for foreign students where they post notices... So I asked them where it was, and I saw it with them during the monthly inspection, but it was in a corner, so even I couldn't find it when I told them to check it." (Participant 1)

Views of International Exchange Professionals

According to international exchange professionals, there is limited infrastructure in terms of accommodating the needs of international students in their daily lives. Moreover, they felt that the reactions of Koreans to international students varied depending on their country of origin both within and outside the university. Furthermore, they reported that behaviors they viewed as considerate when dealing with international students could actually be a source of conflict in their relationships with international students.

Lack of Accessible Infrastructure

International students experience many of the same emotional challenges faced by Korean students, e.g., adjusting to school life. The participants confirmed that their universities do not possess the infrastructure to provide counselling services to international students. In other words, there are limited resources available to help international students when they experienced emotional difficulties. Additionally, the participants reported that universities are unable to provide international students with any practical help. Furthermore, they stated that Korean society was not "friendly" to international students, noting that interpretation difficulties could make it difficult to seek treatment for illnesses. In this regard, a few participants stated the following:

"The school has a counseling center for Korean students, and I once asked them if a foreigner who is very fluent in Korean could go to that program... At that time they said, "Only Koreans are allowed." So I thought

a little bit, 'Why can't foreigners who speak Korean well use it?'" (Participant 7).

"The university hospital is also part of our university, so it would be good to recommend it, but I don't think there is a department that provides assistance in English. So foreigners feel uncomfortable when they go to our university hospital, and I told them to go to other university hospitals in our area because there is a service that provides interpretation. .... There are not many foreigners in our area, but I think the medical support system is not well organized." (Participant 5).

Different perspectives according to country level

In the process of attracting and managing foreign students, the participants talked about the process of communicating with external organizations and using foreign students as models when producing various promotional materials for universities. In this regard, the participants discussed the different treatment and behaviors of international students depending on their country of origin and ethnicity as well as their appearance and attitudes.

"Especially we came from the Philippines, Bangladesh, and India to get our Master's and PhD., and even to be a professor, so in those countries we are really high and maybe even better than me, but when we come to Korea, we are often discriminated against because we look a little different..." (Participant 2).

"In the U.S., when we go to the immigration office, the staff has a different attitude. If a white, blue-eyed person, who looks a little Western, comes in, the staff is a little more friendly, so there is a little prejudice. Then people will not work illegally, and they can relax and stay in Korea legally. People who think like that and seem to be from Southeast Asia, aren't they in a strange place again, not talking and not working?" (Participant 5)

My consideration is more of a hindrance

Participants reported that they tended to be cautious when dealing with international students because they felt that they had to respond to them in a culturally sensitive way, even if they did not say anything. Moreover, they stated that they were Korean and that their reactions could sometimes be perceived by international students as microaggressions. Additionally, they were concerned about the extent to which they should be considerate and the limits to which they should go.

"I'm Korean, I've lived this way, and I try to be considerate, but the consideration itself is perceived differently by the person... When you ask if they have eaten, you are asking with the feeling of caring for the person, but from the person's point of view, in the case of a country that is highly individualistic, they may think that you are invading their territory." (Participant 2).

"When we went to the cultural experience, we had a whole day of cultural experience. Islam also has prayers, so there were some students who went to pray in the morning with permission, so even then it was a topic exam or something, so they went out during the exam break and prayed and went in, and anyway they observe Ramadan a lot, so it's hard to accommodate all that diversity. We said we're being considerate but we're giving them the best option to be respectful, but it can't be 100% satisfactory." (Participants 1).

4. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the microdiscrimination faced by foreign students by interviewing international exchange professionals who work with foreign students at various universities. The results of the interviews were divided into two categories: subtle forms of discrimination and the views of international exchange professionals. Subtle forms of discrimination included differences in cultural context, academic discrimination, and discrimination due to the lack of information. Meanwhile, the views of international exchange professionals included constraints in terms of accessible infrastructure, different views depending on the level of the country, and my consideration was a hindrance. Before conducting the interviews, the researcher sought to identify cases of microdiscrimination in Korea. However, while analyzing the interview transcripts, it was found that cases of microdiscrimination and the experiences (perspectives) of Korean international exchange professionals were different; accordingly, the themes in this study were divided into these two categories.

In this study, a number of subtle forms of discrimination were identified. Microaggressions may arise due to different cultural contexts and different levels of understanding. Depending on the country, there may be cultural or religious differences, and these differences may manifest as microaggressions. When people understand or judge others, they are basically thinking in terms of their own experience or knowledge. For this reason, individuals may not possess a sufficient understanding of situations or cultures that they have not experienced and may find them unfamiliar or unacceptable. For example, in the past, people who ate alone were perceived as having no friends or poor interpersonal skills; however, in recent years, this has changed to a culture where people "choose" to eat alone for various reasons. The most prominent examples of cultural context in the interviews are Muslim international students. Islam has many characteristics, such as the way to dress and eat, that distinguish it from other religions. It is difficult to estimate the exact number of Muslims in South Korea because Islam is not listed as a religion in the national census [18]. It is estimated that there are about 150,000 foreign Muslims in Korea. However, most Koreans are likely to be unaware of their cultural characteristics. Although Muslims tend to have different characteristics depending on their countries and regions, such as their preference for clothing, such as the niqab and hijab, or the length of Ramadan, there is often a lack of understanding regarding these differences in Korean society. This lack of cultural understanding is likely to lead to microaggressions.

Microaggressions can also be observed in learning situations. In this study, the participants reported that, despite their desire to actively participate, international students face behaviors, such as exclusion from team projects, and other types of discrimination in this regard. Oh [19] reported that international students experience a lack of interaction with professors and recognition in the academic process. Considering these aspects, it is likely that international students experience difficulties in interacting with Korean students and professors in the academic process, leading to their exclusion from team projects. Moreover, the participants also highlighted the lack of information available to international students. According to Oh [19], many of the factors for effective support are related to service provision, including access to services and service specialization and differentiation. This reflects the possibility that, compared with other students, international students may not have sufficient information about different academic programs and related infrastructure.

Regarding international exchange professionals' perspectives, international students face limitations in terms of accessible infrastructure. While international students feel that they experience a lack of sufficient information, Korean international exchange professionals feel that they do not have enough resources to provide the infrastructure that can help international students. Participants report that even when foreign students they go to hospitals for treatment, they are unable to receive proper treatment due to difficulties with interpreting services, or they are restricted from counseling services because they are foreigners even though they are students at the university. This situation can be attributed to the fact that, while policies to attract foreign students are actively being implemented, there is not enough discussion on measures or policies to support international students living in Korea [20]. Moreover, foreign students may be perceived as temporary residents who will return to their home countries after completing their studies, rather than as long-term

residents like migrant workers or migrant women, and consequently, there is not enough infrastructure support for them. In fact, according to the Ministry of Education [3], only 6.5% of students come to Korea to work, which is less than a third of Japan's 18%. This can be attributed to the changing times and the need for globalization; however, it is clear that Koreans are not ready to accept diversity. Understanding diversity requires understanding other cultures. It is expected that microaggressions will decrease when this understanding is achieved. Additionally, according to a study by Kim et al. [21], there are still differences in the treatment of foreigners in Korea owing to perceived racial differences, such as the perception of Americans as more attractive than Chinese and Southeast Asians. These perceived differences can lead to discriminatory attitudes towards foreigners, which are also observed in universities.

Finally, the international exchange professionals felt that their consideration toward international students was often viewed as more of a hindrance than a help. They report that they tend to be cautious since they do not know and understand the cultural characteristics or context of each country. In their experience, being considerate or showing interest in a person based on their own characteristics is perceived as inconsiderate behavior by international students. A participant reported that, during the month of Ramadan, she was told, "It's Ramadan," when she asked a student if she had eaten. From these examples, we can see that international students perceive consideration as a problem caused by individuals not caring enough about them.

In the past, research on international students has mostly focused on school adjustment, language use, and mental health [19, 22]. However, the microaggressions experienced by international students have not been studied in Korea. With the increasing number of international students and the influence of the paradigm of international students on immigration policy, international students are a part of the community that Koreans need to work with in the long run. As much as international students are satisfied with their university experience [23], it is important to understand the microdiscrimination faced by international students in Korea and have systems in place to intervene and prevent them. This, in turn, may help foreign students to develop positive perceptions of Korea in the future. However, since this study did not directly interview any international students, the cases that can be obtained may be limited, and because it was conducted among international exchange professionals at universities in a single region, there may be limitations to generalization. However, this study is meaningful in that it analyzed cases of microdiscrimination by interviewing international exchange professionals who can vividly understand the difficulties of foreign students in the field, and it is meaningful in that such a study has not yet been conducted in Korea and serves as a meaningful basis for improving the system for foreign students in the future.

5. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to understand the microaggressions faced by international students in Korea through the eyes of international exchange professionals. Based on the international students' experiences, it is evident that they experience microaggressions in both the cultural context and learning environment in an unfamiliar country, and face difficulties such as lack of information in their daily lives. From the perspective of international exchange professionals, there were infrastructure constraints, differences in perception in Korea depending on country or race, and their consideration was viewed as a hinderance due to cultural differences. This study only focused on international exchange professionals at universities in one region, which may make it difficult to generalize the findings. However, since this study explored the experiences of international students at universities and microdiscrimination, it is hoped that it will be helpful in recommending various systems and policies to improve the lives of international students in the future.

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