



Comparative effects of belongingness on the academic success and cross-cultural interactions of domestic and international students

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ABSTRACT

To advance resilience-based models of acculturation, we used structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the buffering effects of a sense of belongingness on cross-cultural interaction and academic success, where belongingness refers to a sense of connection with one's university, a strong support network, and a balance of academic challenge and support. We analyzed a stratified random sample of international ($n = 415$) and domestic ($n = 816$) undergraduates at eight research universities in the United States who responded to the Global Perspective Inventory (GPI). International and domestic students who took courses involving intergroup dialog or multicultural content reported more cross-cultural interaction, but not a greater sense of belongingness. A sense of belongingness increased cross-cultural interaction between international and domestic students, and it substantially enhanced international students' average grade earned. Cultural events, leadership programs, and community service enhanced a sense of belongingness, buffered the effects of racism, and provided a secure base for the exploration of cross-cultural relationships. Similarities and dissimilarities in how belongingness contributes to international and domestic students' cross-cultural relationships and academic success are considered. We discuss implications for resilience-based models of acculturation and propose interventions to enhance a sense of belongingness for all students.

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1. Introduction

International students generally express satisfaction with their academic experience; however, they tend to express less satisfaction with their social experience (Council for International Education, 2006; Schweitzer, Morson, & Mather, 2011). The lack of meaningful contact between international and domestic students continues to be a principal concern among international educators (Brandenburg & de Wit, 2011). Domestic and international students often live in parallel social worlds, shut off from meaningful interaction with one another (Gareis, 2012). Meaningful cross-cultural interaction requires a social context that enables domestic and international students to explore cross-cultural relationships. Educational psychologists advance *belongingness* as a means to understand human interpersonal behavior (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), where belongingness refers to the extent to which students felt “part of the campus community,” “member of the campus community,” and “sense of belonging to campus community” (Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008, p. 260). A sense of belongingness has practical benefits for all students: belongingness is one of the most frequently cited factors for college

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students' academic success (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Osterman, 2000), and belongingness creates a secure base to explore cross-cultural relationships (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006).

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to test a model of the buffering effects of belongingness on the cross-cultural interaction and academic success of international and domestic students enrolled in eight US research universities. While much of the previous work has examined international students or domestic students independently, researchers are only beginning to understand how a sense of belongingness may contribute similarly or differently to domestic and international students' academic success and cross-cultural interaction. Most studies have examined single factors, single institutions, or solely international students (Zhang & Goodson, 2011); few studies have analyzed the interaction of multiple factors and the sources of between-group variation that may exist between international and domestic students.

2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses of the study

2.1. Resilience-based models of acculturation

A growing body of acculturation research has used resilience-based models to explore the lives of international students for whom academic success and positive cross-cultural interaction have been documented (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011; Pan, Wong, & Chan, 2007; Pan, Wong, Chan, & Joubert, 2008). Research from the last two decades documents the multiple risks international students face while attending American universities, linking stress, lack of social support, and language proficiency to academic difficulties and poor psychosocial adjustment (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Multiple studies highlight the deleterious effects of loneliness on international students (Russell, Rosenthal, & Thomson, 2010; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2007) and the buffering effects of peer support on depression and stress (Crockett et al., 2007; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Rather than focusing on risk factors alone, resilience-based models place particular emphasis on identifying protective factors that support international students' resilience (Pan, 2011).

Our study extends resilience-based models by examining the direct and indirect effects of risk, protective, and promotive factors in predicting the academic success and cross-cultural interaction of international and domestic students. Educational psychologists have utilized the constructs of risk, protective, and promotive factors to examine their interactive effects on the academic and social trajectories of adolescents (e.g., Gutman, Sameroff, & Cole, 2003). *Risk factors* (e.g., discrimination, financial stresses, language difficulties, and immigration problems) are defined by their positive relationship to a negative outcome such as low academic performance, marginalization, or negative affect. *Protective factors* (e.g., meaning-in-life and belongingness) buffer the effects of risk factors on individuals despite the presence of risk factors (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). *Promotive factors* exert direct effects on positive outcomes, such as high academic performance, cross-cultural interaction, and positive affect; additionally, they also fortify protective factors that buffer the effects of risk factors. Promotive factors are experience-dependent; therefore, they vary by the affordances of the social context in which the person is situated. In testing a resilience-based model of acculturation, we attempt to determine if risk, protective, and promotive factors impact students' academic success and cross-cultural interaction in the same way for domestic students and international students attending US research universities. The following subsections review empirical research on each factor's relationship with the academic success and cross-cultural interaction of both international and domestic students.

2.2. Risk factors

The negative relationship between racial prejudice and college students' academic success and sense of belonging is well-documented (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Locks et al., 2008). International students who experience verbal insults, negative stereotypes, or detect discrimination tend to feel more depressed (Jung, Hecht, & Wadsworth, 2007) and lonely (Sawir et al., 2007). Non-European international students experience amplified acculturative stress; depressive symptoms have been linked with a crisis of identity prompted by explicit acts of discrimination (Jung et al., 2007) and more generalized stress of lacking culture-specific knowledge necessary to make sense of social situations (Markus & Kitayama, 2003). Interview research provides evidence of neo-racism (i.e., culture or country of origin, rather than color, is used as a pretense for discrimination) toward non-European students (Lee & Rice, 2007), particularly students from Eastern Asia, Middle Eastern, and African countries (Gareis, 2012; Hanassab, 2006). Recognizing and making meaning of racism is a significant developmental task for minority college students (Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004; Torres & Hernandez, 2007). Noncognitive variables, including the capacity to identify and respond to racism, have demonstrated validity in predicting the grades and retention of minority students, and the retention of non-minority students in higher education (Sedlacek, 2004). Several studies cite the role of a strong social support network in moderating the effects of racism (Chen, Mallinckrodt, & Mobley, 2002; Noh & Kaspar, 2003; Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timimi, 2004). Therefore, as discriminatory experiences are expected to exert a direct negative effect on belongingness for all students, belongingness is expected to buffer the effects of discriminatory experiences on cross-cultural interaction and academic success.

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