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Do you think like me? Perceived concordance concerning contact and culture maintenance on international students' intentions for contact with the host-society

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ABSTRACT

An experimental study was conducted to analyse if perceived concordance on intergroup contact and culture maintenance might influence the attitudes and behavioural investment of international students toward the majority members. The mediating role of metastereotypes and some intercultural communication factors (self-disclosure, contact avoidance, and certainty) were investigated. The participants were 114 international students in Italy (mean age = 22.83), who were categorized into different levels of concordance with respect to culture maintenance and intercultural contact. Our findings showed that perceived concordance with respect to culture maintenance influenced international students' desire for contact with majority members. Conflict avoidance mediated the relationship between concordance with respect to culture maintenance and behavioural investment. No other mediational relationships were statistically significant. This research is one of a small number of studies examining how concordance of acculturation preferences can influence the intergroup attitudes and intentions of international students. Specifically, the most positive outcomes were produced when majority members were perceived as sharing ideas concerning culture maintenance with international students. Interventions that aim to improve majority–minority relations should consider not only the preferences of minority members with respect to acculturation, but also the way minority members perceive the expectations of majority members and, more notably, the interplay between preferences and perceptions.

Introduction

The number of people who choose to study abroad has increased in recent years (OECD, 2015). International students represent a great resource for the host country; nevertheless, the decision to study abroad brings many potential challenges. Compared to local students, international students have fewer resources to cope with difficulties, and they experience more significant adaptation problems (Brisset, Safdar, Lewis, & Sabatier, 2010; Ozer, 2015; Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timini, 2004). Studying in a different environment can be challenging for students in terms of understanding and of coping (Matera, Nerini, Baroni, Merli, & Stefanile, 2016). Indeed, international students experience unfamiliar teaching and learning styles, as well as new disciplines and

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content areas, and they have to socialize with classmates from different cultural backgrounds (Leong, 2015). As a consequence, they are likely to experience acculturative stress and adjustment problems (for a review see Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

With the growing globalization of higher education, the acculturation of international students is an increasingly pressing issue, and many studies have investigated the difficulties international students face within the host country. It has been established that acculturation attitudes are crucial in determining the behaviours of international students in different contexts (Shafaei, Nejati, Quazi, & von der Heide, 2016). Nevertheless, only a few studies have tried to apply the dominant models of acculturation to the case of international students (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). The present study aims to add to this literature by analysing how the degree of perceived concordance between the acculturation preferences of host members and international students can influence the nature of their relationships, in terms both of intergroup attitudes and of behavioural intentions.

Social psychology research on acculturation has been dominated by Berry's framework (Berry, 1980, 1997). According to Berry, cultural minorities (which can include both immigrants and sojourners) can hold preferences as to whether to maintain or relinquish their heritage culture (the Culture Maintenance dimension), and can desire to have extensive or minimal contact with the host members (the Intercultural Contact dimension). By combining these two dimensions, we can obtain four acculturation strategies: *integration*, when ethnic minorities desire both to maintain their culture and to have contact with the majority; *assimilation*, when they favour contact but not culture maintenance; *separation*, when they want to maintain their heritage culture and do not desire to be in contact with the host majority; and *marginalization*, when they refuse both culture maintenance and intercultural contact.

Following Berry's proposals, a number of acculturation models have been developed and debated in order to capture the perspectives on acculturation not only of ethnic minorities, but also of host members. These include the Interactive Acculturation Model (IAM) (Bourhis, Moïse, Perreault, & Sénécal, 1997) and the Concordance Model of Acculturation (CMA) (Piontkowski, Rohmann, & Florack, 2002). According to these models, acculturation orientations endorsed by host community individuals may be concordant or discordant with those held by members of specific immigrant communities, leading to different relational outcomes. In line with the predictions of these models, Zagefka and Brown (2002) showed that a mismatch between hosts and immigrants in preferred acculturation orientations increased perceived ingroup bias and discrimination and decreased the quality of intergroup relations for both groups. In different sociocultural contexts, Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind, Horenczyk, and Schmitz (2003) found that conflictual outcomes were more likely among those immigrants whose personal acculturation preferences were most in conflict with those of the host majority. Oerlemans and Peeters (2010) showed that discordance in acculturation orientations between the host community and immigrant workers were related to a poorer quality of intergroup work relations.

Interestingly, Piontkowski and her colleagues (2002) pointed out that the best predictor of intergroup outcomes is not the match between the *real* attitudes of both groups, but the match between one group's desires and their *perception* of what the other group wants (Horenczyk, Jasinskaja-Lahti, Sam, & Vedder, 2013). Similarly, according to studies led by Horenczyk (Horenczyk, 1996; Horenczyk et al., 2013), it is the discrepancies between the immigrants' own acculturation attitudes and their *representations* of those held by majority members that can hamper the well-being of the immigrants. In other words, discrepancies between what host majority members *expect* (the ideal domain) and what they *perceive* (the real domain) concerning the acculturation process of immigrants might be the best predictor of conflictual intergroup outcomes (Navas et al., 2005). Recent empirical studies have explored how the degree of concordance between acculturation attitudes of host members and their perception of immigrants' acculturation strategies might affect the nature of subsequent relationships between the two groups. Those studies have shown that perceived discrepancies between the attitudes that minority members are imagined to hold, on the one hand, and the attitudes of members of the host society, on the other hand, may lead to less favourable outcomes than if concordances had been perceived (Matera, Stefanile, & Brown, 2015; Navas Luque, Rojas Tejada, & García Fernández, 2011; Pfafferott & Brown, 2006; Piontkowski et al., 2002; Roccas, Horenczyk, & Schwartz, 2000; Rohmann, Florack, & Piontkowski, 2006; Rohmann, Piontkowski, & van Randenborgh, 2008).

Nevertheless, empirical evidence has highlighted some differences between concordance concerning *culture maintenance* and concordance regarding *contact* (Piontkowski et al., 2002). For instance, Rohmann et al. (2006) found that discordance concerning culture and contact predicted different types of threat. Matera, Stefanile et al. (2015) showed that discrepancies on the intercultural contact dimension were more important than discrepancies on the cultural maintenance dimension in determining the attitude of the majority members toward immigrants. Specifically, concordance on the contact dimension affected the attitudes of majority members by enhancing positive metastereotypes—the stereotypes a person believes an outgroup holds about his/her own group (Vorauer, Main, & O'Connell, 1998)—and by reducing symbolic threat.

Although these studies draw a useful distinction between concordance concerning contact and concordance concerning culture maintenance, their limitation is that they overlook the perspectives of the minorities themselves. Thus, they almost entirely fail to explore the role of concordance/discordance with respect to the attitudes of minority members toward majority members. The present study aims to bridge this gap by examining how agreement between the acculturation orientation of a specific minority group (i.e., international students) and the acculturation orientation of the majority members might influence the attitudes of the minority group toward the majority members through functions of metastereotypes and intercultural communication.

Metastereotypes

Stereotypes that relate to both the ingroup and the outgroup are likely to be shared among people who belong to the same group (Matera, Giannini, Blanco, & Smith, 2005). The same can be said with respect to metastereotypes. Intergroup interactions and social relations can be affected not only by the stereotypes that each group holds about the other, but also by how these stereotypic beliefs are perceived. As a result, the concept of metastereotypes has become a crucial issue for researchers (Frey & Tropp, 2006; Gómez, 2002; Kamans, Gordijn, Oldenhuis, & Otten, 2009; Lammers, Gordijn, & Otten, 2008; Matera, Dalla Verde, & Meringolo, 2015;

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