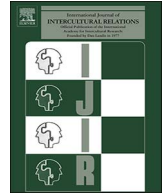


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Intercultural connectors: Explaining the influence of extra-curricular activities and tutor programs on international student friendship network development[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Finding ways to integrate international students into new cultural environments and foster meaningful local relationships is of interest to both international education practitioners and scholars seeking to explain intercultural communication processes. Kim's (2001) integrative cross-cultural adaptation theory provides a framework for understanding the role that interpersonal relationships play for those studying abroad with both long-term and short-term trajectories. The current multi-method investigation focuses on the latter, examining the impact of housing, classroom makeup, extra-curricular activities, and tutor program participation on the friendship network development of 105 students from twenty different countries during one semester in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Findings from prospective panel data combined with in-depth interviews confirm that students had significantly more co-national and multi-national friends than host national friends upon arrival; however, participation in extra-curricular activities and satisfaction with tutor programs influenced increases in host national friendship over the course of the semester. Furthermore, the potential role that *intercultural connectors* play in host national friendship formation offers practical implications for tutor program development and new theoretical insight.

Introduction

One common theme in the international education and intercultural relations literature is the call for educators and administrators to facilitate better environments for international students to develop interpersonal relationships with local students (Bethel, Szabo, & Ward, 2016; Gareis, 2012; Peacock & Harrison, 2009). The positive outcomes associated with such relationships are numerous, well documented, and span several decades (Church, 1982; Kim, 2001; Pruitt, 1978; Rohrich & Martin, 1991; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). However, this body of research is complemented with studies showing that students tend to not create connections or develop friendships with those from the host country (Brown, 2009b; Campbell & Li, 2008; Gareis, 2012; Mittelmeier & Kennedy, 2016). The current investigation looks to fill the gap between studies that describe international students' lack of friendship with those from the host country and studies that cite the positive outcomes of such friendship by analyzing four contexts in which these relationships potentially manifest; the classroom, housing arrangements, extra-curricular activities, and tutor program participation. The ultimate goal is to offer specific directions for international student integration programming while advancing intercultural communication theory in a novel research context, Argentina.

Argentina's university system has the reputation of being one of the best in Latin America and has historically attracted

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international students from throughout the region (Elliot, 1956; Smink, 2013). Argentina's capital, Buenos Aires, is home to a diverse array of Spanish language institutes, study abroad programs, and private and public universities that receive students completing undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, as well as short term exchange students (Giavi, Iglesia, & Iglesia, 2008), and over the last decade has witnessed a surge of students from outside of Latin America, particularly the United States (IIE, 2004, 2016). These factors, coupled with the fact that only a handful of empirical studies exist (Bonafina de Gulias & Falcon, 2007; Castro Solano, 2011, 2013a, 2013b; Isabelli-García, 2006), make Buenos Aires an ideal research location.

In order to identify the factors influencing friendship network development this investigation examines students at two points during the semester and complements this data with in-depth interviews, a methodological strategy recommended by numerous intercultural relations scholars (Church, 1982; Kim, 2001; Rienties, Nanclares, Jindal-Snape, & Alcott 2013). To be sure, there are significant differences between participating in a one semester study abroad program and completing a whole degree in another country (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016). The benefits that students obtain from their experience vary significantly (Dwyer, 2004), while both hosts and students have differing expectations regarding adaptation (Kim, 2001). The current study incorporates Kim's (2001) cross-cultural adaptation theory, a broad, parsimonious theory that emphasizes, explains, and consolidates the many common experiences of those undergoing short-term and long-term adaptation. The first section describes Kim's (2001) theoretical framework and seeks to document friendship formation during the first semester of a study abroad experience. The next section presents four micro-environmental contexts that potentially influence friendship network development. This is followed by a description of the mixed method strategy, an analysis combining quantitative survey and in-depth interview results, a theoretical discussion, implications for international education programming, study limitations, and directions for future research.

Theoretical framework

Friendship development

When international students arrive in a new country they form new social networks composed of unique groups that serve specific psychological functions (Bochner, McLeod, & Lin, 1977). First, friends from one's own country (co-nationals) provide a setting in which ethnic and cultural values can be rehearsed and expressed. Second, friends native to the country where the individual is studying (host nationals) facilitate the academic and professional aspirations of the international student. Third, friends from other countries (multi-nationals) provide companionship for recreational activities (Bochner et al., 1977).

Kim's (2001) integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation suggests that *Host Social Communication*; i.e. interaction with host nationals, provides a means for developing *Host Communication Competence*; i.e. one's ability to relate to the new cultural environment and the principal mechanism driving the adaptation process. Kim's theory presents 21 theorems, the majority of which predict specific relationships between host national and co-national communication with other adaptation variables. Kim stresses the positive outcomes related to communication with host nationals and the current research examines this dimension in great detail.

One common method of assessing an individual's host social communication is by examining the friendships they form in new cultural environments (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011; Kim, 2001; Tanaka, Takai, Kohyama, Fujihara, & Minami, 1997). Countless studies using friendship network variables have shown that international student friendship networks are composed mostly of co-national individuals (Bochner et al., 1977; Brown, 2009a; Furnham & Alibhai, 1985; Maundeni, 2001; Neri & Ville, 2008; Pruiitt, 1978; Sakurai, McCall-Wolf, & Kashima, 2010). In terms of adaptation, researchers argue that this extensive co-national interaction can hinder intercultural interactions with host nationals (Beech, 2016; Kim, 2001; Rienties & Nolan, 2014). However, in a short-term study abroad context co-national friendships ease the transition (Beech, 2016), provide support, and aid in the adjustment process (Pitts, 2009). Through co-national communities students can strengthen perceived acceptance and satisfaction with the university experience (Mittelmeier & Kennedy, 2016). Further, researchers examining social relations of students abroad in the United Kingdom suggest that overemphasizing host national communication is potentially misguided as international student networks can provide key academic and social support (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). In any case, as individuals go through the adaptation process their friendship networks will inherently change over time.

Kim (2001) suggests that an initial homogenate network composed of co-nationals will transform into a network with more host nationals (See Kim, page 127, Fig. 7 .1). Furthermore, Kim (2001) argues that over time individuals will not only incorporate host nationals into their network but will also develop stronger, more intimate relationships with them (See Kim, page 129, Fig. 7.2). Other researchers have indirectly tested these propositions by examining international student friendship network development in the classroom. For example, Erasmus students in Spain increased their host national friends over a 14-week period (Hernández-Nanclares, 2016) and in the UK Confucian Asian students initially mixed well with host national students, however there was a decline in interaction over a three-year period (Rienties & Nolan, 2014). Kim's theory does not establish a specific time frame for friendship transformation; however, these studies suggest that students will begin increasing their host national friends during the initial stages. Kim (2001) also proposes that over time co-national friendship networks will get smaller and their strength will diminish. However, this may not always be the case (Mittelmeier & Kennedy, 2016), and particularly not for those studying abroad on a short-term basis. In order to document friendship development over the course of one semester in a new cultural environment the following hypotheses and research questions regarding host national and co-national friendship composition, strength, and subsequent transformation are posed.

H1. Students will report more co-national friends than host national friends at the beginning of a semester abroad.

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