



Broadening the mind: Beneficial effects of sojourn experiences and contact with visiting international students on prospective teachers' motivation to avoid prejudiced behavior



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ABSTRACT

Opportunities for intergroup contact are particularly important for prospective teachers because they bear responsibility for an ethnically diverse student population. Using data from a sample of 330 students inscribed in Austrian university colleges of teacher education, we investigated the long-term effects of international student exchange on prospective teachers' motivation to avoid prejudiced behavior (MAPB). Both sojourning and domestic students' friendships with visiting international students (VIS) were evaluated as potential instances of naturally occurring intergroup contact that can affect students' MAPB. Sojourning students had an increased MAPB even nine months after returning to their home country. No effect was found for domestic students' friendships with VIS. Possibly, the quality of these friendships was insufficient to result in long-term prejudice reduction. Implications of these results are discussed, and the need to advance interventions that are appropriate to improve domestic students' contact with VIS is ascertained.

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1. Introduction

Studies consistently indicate that many Europeans hold ethnic prejudices (Zick, Pettigrew, & Wagner, 2008). Prejudices affect individuals' social behavior; for instance, their social distances from prejudiced persons and discrimination against outgroup members (Fischer, 2011). Teachers with prejudices establish low expectations for minority students and thus may place them at a disadvantage (Kunda & Spencer, 2003; Bergh, Denessen, Hornstra, Voeten, & Holland, 2010). Considering that recent refugee flows will further increase ethnic heterogeneity in the student population of many European countries, it is of the utmost importance to reduce prospective teachers' prejudices toward ethnic minorities during their education. Allport's (1954) contact theory maintains that contact with individuals from an outgroup is a means to reduce prejudice. Many college campuses have ethnically heterogeneous student populations and offer vast opportunities for interethnic contacts (Fischer, 2011). However, the two teacher education colleges participating in this study are characterized by a

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strongly ethnically homogenous student body.¹ Therefore, we focused on opportunities for intergroup contact that are available to students in campuses with little ethnic heterogeneity: sojourning and domestic students' friendships with visiting international students (VIS). Specifically, we examined whether intergroup contact arising through sojourning can help to improve students' motivation to avoid prejudiced behavior (MAPB).

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Prejudice reduction through intergroup contact

Building on early prejudice reduction research, which concerned such subjects as relationships between blacks and whites in the Marines and in public housing, Allport (1954) developed the contact theory and proposed four conditions that he deemed essential for the reduction of prejudices: individuals' relatively equal statuses, intergroup cooperation, shared objectives, and the explicit support of intergroup interactions by superiors and prevailing social norms. The effectiveness of intergroup contact in prejudice reduction and the facilitating effect of Allport's conditions have been demonstrated in numerous empirical studies (see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006 for a review). Extending Allport's work, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) claimed that authority sanction and friendship potential, the opportunity for repeated and extensive contact, are particularly relevant conditions for prejudice reduction. Critics of contact theory have noted that its practical value depends on the generalizability of prejudice reduction to the entire outgroup and to other outgroups as well as the temporal persistence of contact effects (Binder et al., 2009). Past research limited concerns regarding the generalizability of prejudice reduction, finding that a reduction in prejudice transfers to other outgroup members, particularly when the contact is repeated and extensive. Studies examining long-lasting effects of intergroup contact are, however, still rare, and the longevity of prejudice reduction needs to be corroborated by further research (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; White, Abu-Rayya, & Weitzel, 2014).

Longitudinal studies indicate that the association between intergroup contact and prejudice is reciprocal, with intergroup contact affecting prejudice and prejudice having an impact on contact behavior. For the evaluation of causal effects of intergroup contact, it is therefore important to control for preexisting prejudice (Binder et al., 2009). Because only a few studies have addressed the longevity of contact effects, it is not clear how long these effects last when friendships break down or become distant, such as when people finish their university studies and move to a different place. Particularly scarce is research in real-life settings with follow-up studies assessing effects more than half a year after the intervention (White et al., 2014).

The teacher education colleges participating in the present study have rather ethnically homogeneous student populations and therefore offer their students only a few opportunities to establish friendships with ethnically diverse fellow students. Opportunities for intergroup contact arise, however, from international student exchange. The highly popular pursuit of sojourning presents students – both those who go abroad and those who do not leave their native country – with opportunities to get in contact with individuals from different ethnic groups (Brunton & Jeffrey, 2014; Soria & Troisi, 2014). Students' sojourn experiences and domestic students' contacts with VIS bring them face to face with unfamiliar cultures, which may accordingly challenge students' ethnocentric worldviews and foster students' empathy for immigrant students (Ochoa, 2010). Because sojourning and the presence of VIS offer opportunities for repeated and extensive intergroup contact, the condition of friendship potential is satisfied. The research findings about the quality and quantity of social contacts associated with international student exchange are mixed, however. While some studies found that sojourning students are likely to form several supportive international relationships, both with host students and with other sojourners (e.g., Zimmermann and Neyer, 2013), other authors report that sojourners find it hard to get in contact with host students and often stick together solely with other exchange students (e.g., Brunton & Jeffrey, 2014; Williams & Johnson, 2011). Such differential findings are possibly related to the cultural distance between students' home and host countries, which can have an impact on the contact behavior of both visiting and domestic students (Jang & Kim, 2010; Soria & Troisi, 2014). Whatever the reasons, past research shows that the friendship potential arising from international student exchange often remains untapped and that the effects of intergroup contact realized in the course of sojourning may be limited.

2.2. The motivation to avoid prejudiced behavior

Various outcomes, such as social distance, color-blind racial attitudes, support of affirmative action, and feelings of commonality, have been used to assess the effects of intergroup contact. In the present study MAPB was used as the outcome measure. MAPB refers to deliberate efforts to conduct unbiased evaluations of and engage in unbiased behaviors towards outgroup members. It moderates the extent to which prejudices (affective evaluations) and stereotypes (cognitive evaluations) result in actual behavior (Dunton & Fazio, 1997; Kunda & Spencer, 2003). Individuals who are motivated to control their prejudices can, at least to some extent, prevent their prejudices from resulting in biased behavior. Indeed, the higher an individual's MAPB is, the lower are their open and subtle racism, sexism, and negative attitudes towards homosexual-

¹ In 2011, 9.1 % of the students enrolled in the teacher education colleges where the present study was conducted stated that they had migration backgrounds. At the same time, migrants constitute 20.4% of Austria's population, a proportion that has been strongly increasing of late (Statistik Austria, 2015).

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