



Measuring intercultural contact and its effects on intercultural competence: A structural equation modeling approach



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ABSTRACT

This study utilizes a structural equation modeling approach to construct a scale to measure Chinese college students' intercultural contact and to explore the pathways from intercultural contact to intercultural competence and their significance. Through exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis, the study conducted a series of reliability and validity analyses. The results indicate that the intercultural contact scale for Chinese college students has good reliability and validity. Moreover, a path analysis with the structural equation model was performed and reveals that the pathways of intercultural contact are beneficial for improving Chinese college students' intercultural competence. In terms of direct contact, domestic social media is the most important, whereas for indirect contact, cultural products are relatively more important than multimedia and courses. The implications for the theoretical development of intercultural contact could be significant for scholars engaged in intercultural communication as well as for planning international education training programs.

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1. Introduction

Increasing interaction between China and other countries has provided a wealth of new opportunities for Chinese college students to participate in international communication and intercultural contact; various types of pathways from their intercultural contact are involved. However, little research on intercultural contact has actually been performed, especially research exploring intercultural contact from the perspective of intercultural competence (ICC). On the one hand, the previous literature includes a series of studies on intercultural contact that were mainly limited to artificial and laboratory environments (e.g., Allport, 1954; Amir, 1969; Desforges et al., 1991; Gaertner, Mann, Dovidio, Murrell, & Pomare, 1990; Halualani, 2008; Smith, 1994). On the other hand, the majority of research on intercultural contact overemphasizes “correct” or “optimal” contact conditions (e.g., “contact should be voluntary”, “contact should be regular and frequent”, “contact should occur among individuals of similar socioeconomic status”). This suggests that most studies only focused on the contact that appeared in the context of optimal conditions. Thus, such studies may not adequately reflect everyday contact existing in groups and individuals' actual lives (Amir, 1969; Bramel, 2004; Dixon, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2005; Ellison & Powers, 1994; Halualani, 2008; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000). Moreover, investigations on idealized intercultural contact may have neglected

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groups and individuals' intercultural contact in complex, real-life situations (Connolly, 2000; Dixon et al., 2005; Halualani, Chitgopekar, Morrison, & Dodge, 2004; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000).

More recently, a considerable amount of research has focused on the effects that intercultural contact has on international students' attitudes in study-abroad contexts through interaction with the host country residents (Campbell, 2012; Harrison, 2012; Kormos, Csizér, & Iwaniec, 2014; Mak, Brown, & Wadey, 2014), and the relationship between intercultural contact and language learning motivation (Csizér & Kormos, 2008; Dörnyei & Csizér, 2005; Dunne, 2009, 2013; Matera, Stefanile, & Brown, 2012).

Apart from those studies on intercultural contact, scholars such as Hu (1999) have suggested that direct spoken contact with native English speakers or direct contact through learning of their culture was one of the most effective ways to improve ICC (Hu, 1999, p. 45). In addition, Kormos and Csizér (2007) emphasized that intercultural contact can be investigated from the perspective of foreign language learning. They note that intercultural contact can help develop students' ICC, which entails not only direct and indirect contact with native speakers in the target language but also intercultural encounters through some cultural artifacts (e.g., electronic or print media) (Kormos & Csizér, 2007). Thus, based on their intercultural contact theory, the present study aims to construct the scale of Chinese college students' intercultural contact from the perspective of ICC and to investigate how Chinese college students' intercultural contact affects their ICC, which provides an important theoretical basis for ICC scholars and for planning international education training.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. *The origin and development of intercultural contact theory*

Intercultural contact theory first appeared after World War II. Some scholars, such as Allport (1954), first systematically proposed the intergroup contact theory, also called the contact hypothesis, and explored effective solutions to reduce intergroup prejudice (Allport, 1954). The basic theme of this theory involves discussion on how to reduce intergroup prejudice based on intergroup contact. In addition, various factors influencing intergroup contact were considered in four favorable conditions: (1) equal status, (2) common goals, (3) intergroup cooperation, and (4) mutual support of authorities, laws and customs (Allport, 1954; p. 537). This contact hypothesis gained more attention among scholars because of its sociopsychological foundation in which contact can change the attitudes and behaviors of groups and individuals toward one another; in turn, these changes will influence subsequent contact between them (Kormos et al., 2014).

Following Allport's (1954) contact theory, many researchers have developed valuable ideas on intercultural contact and have sought to identify the aspects of the contact situation in which issues were widely investigated with respect to how intergroup contact can help reduce intergroup prejudice under certain conditions. From their findings, direct intergroup contact has been considered a "shortcut" to reduce prejudice and intergroup conflict (Halualani, 2008). Thus, previous studies have analyzed the conditions, effects, and consequences of intercultural contact and have revealed the factors affecting the intergroup contact process. In addition, there has been a large number of studies on the relationship of intergroup contact, conditions of intergroup contact, prejudice reduction and attitudinal shift; these studies have also provided a broad theoretical base for intercultural contact (Allport, 1954; Amir, 1976; Dovidio, Gaertner, & Kawakami, 2003; Halualani, 2008; Pettigrew, 1986; Stephan, 1987).

While Allport's (1954) hypothesis has its sociopsychological attributes, it can also be broadly applied to language learning. Contact as one part of motivation first appeared in Clément's (1980) contact model, which was tested by Clément and Kruidenier (1983); the results showed that frequent and pleasant contact can enhance the confidence of the language learners and positively influence motivation. Similarly, some scholars such as Dörnyei and Csizér (2005) devoted themselves to studying the effects of intergroup contact and travel experience on attitude and learning motivation toward language. From language learning, Kormos and Csizér (2007) conducted one study relating to intergroup contact's influence on language learning in a foreign language environment based on Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis to explore types of intercultural contact that Hungarian students possibly experienced. In their study, they defined intercultural contact from the perspective of language learners in a foreign language context as "For the majority of students, intercultural contact includes not only direct and indirect contact with native speakers of the target language but also contact with cultural products (electronic or printed)" (Kormos & Csizér, 2007; p. 244). Their findings revealed the relationship between intercultural contact and ICC, and proved that intercultural contact can enhance the development of students' ICC, increase their learning motivation with respect to language and reduce anxiety against language (Clément & Kruidenier, 1983; Kormos & Csizér, 2007). From language learning in the context of intercultural communication, they noted that intercultural contact involves two parts. One is direct contact, i.e., direct spoken contact and direct written contact, including the language interaction with native speakers in a target language; the other is indirect contact, i.e., indirect interpersonal contact and indirect cultural products contact including those with various cultural products in a target language (e.g., TV, internet, books, films, magazines and newspapers) (Clément & Kruidenier, 1983; Kormos & Csizér, 2007).

2.2. *Intercultural competence*

The concept of ICC has been given numerous definitions in a wide variety of disciplines, contexts, approaches and paradigms in the literature over the last five decades; however, the consensus among ICC researchers is that ICC is often

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