



“I’m not sure how she will react”: Predictability moderates the influence of positive contact experiences on intentions to interact with a host community member



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ABSTRACT

The present research examines the role of positive contact with a host family for exchange students in intercultural encounters. We assumed that positive contact with a host family can facilitate the willingness to interact with unknown host community members in the new cultural environment and that this impact is moderated by the predictability of the unknown host community members' behavior. In detail, we hypothesized that the importance of positive contact experience increases when the predictability of a possible interaction partner decreases. In a study with Swiss exchange students, we measured contact with the host family and the willingness to interact with an unknown host community member. The predictability of the behavior of the unknown host community member was manipulated (high vs. low). As predicted, positive contact with the host family predicted the intention to meet an unknown host community member in the condition with a poorly predictable host community member, but not in the condition with a well predictable host community member.

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Imagine an exchange student who is studying abroad in a new country and an unknown culture. There are many different ways to experience such a stay. The student, for example, can build new relationships with people from the host culture and participate strongly in the life of the new culture. It is also possible that the student is less interested in building relationships with unknown people, but focuses more on the relationship with friends from the own culture at home during the stay. The situation in another country is full of possibilities for new experiences and unknown situations. Will he or she take opportunities to interact with an unknown host community member? Will positive contact with host community members influence the intention to meet an unknown host member? Does the predictability of the behavior of an unknown person influences these decisions?

In the present paper, we analyzed the role of positive contact experiences with the host family for an exchange students' intention to meet a member from an unknown culture in a poorly predictable situation. We assume that positive contact experiences with the host family could provide exchange students with a promising starting point that facilitates further contact in particular when the exchange students have difficulties to assess the behavior of their possible interaction partner. We tested our assumptions in a real life context with exchange students who were asked to indicate their willingness to

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engage in contact with a host community member. We varied the degree to which the exchange students experienced the possible interaction partner as predictable.

1. Theoretical background

There are many different reasons why people leave their homeland to live in another country. For example, some flee out of fear of violence, others go abroad to work or study for a period of time, and still others travel to discover foreign cultures (cf. [Van Oudenhoven & Hofstra, 2006](#)). In this paper, we focus on exchange students who visit a new country for a limited time to study, and who live in a host family during their stay. Exchange students may experience a high level of uncertainty in their host country because they encounter new problems and because they cannot rely on their usual sources of informational and emotional support ([Farh, Bartol, Shapirco, & Shin, 2010](#)).

Like any kind of acculturation experience, visits of limited duration can have different outcomes already during an early stage of acculturation. The exchange students might, for instance, experience excellent contact with the host family and a regular and vivid exchange with members from the host country. But they might also spend most of their time in isolation and have trouble getting in touch with members from the host country. An important question concerns the consequences of such good or bad early contact experiences. One basic assumption of this paper is that intensive positive contact during an early phase of the stay in a new country is a good base for further contact with other host community members, in particular, if such other host community members are difficult to assess. Approaching host community members and establishing contact with them in the country of visit is a challenging task for exchange students. We assume that the experience of positive contact with the host family helps exchange students to manage the resulting uncertainty ([Gudykunst, 2005](#)).

Numerous studies on intergroup contact have shown that positive contact can reduce prejudice ([Brown & Hewstone, 2005](#); [Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006](#); [Pettigrew, Christ, Wagner, & Stellmacher, 2007](#); [Pettigrew, 2008](#)). Important mediators that have been identified are the enhancement of knowledge about the outgroup, the reduction of anxiety and the increase of empathy and perspective taking ([Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008](#)). A further stream of research originated from attachment theory supports the notion that individual contact can serve as source of security that facilitates the exploration of the environment and reduces negative reactions to strangers ([Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001](#)). This research shows that personal relations across the whole lifespan have an important influence on the openness for contact with other individuals ([Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001](#); [Zilcha-Mano, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2012](#)). [Mikulincer and Shaver \(2001, Study 3\)](#), for example, asked participants to think about a person who accepts and loves them, or, in a control condition, to think about a person who lives in the neighborhood, but does not know them. Participants then indicated how threatened they felt by Russian immigrants. They found that participants rated the Russian immigrants more positively when they thought about a person who accepts and loves them compared to the control condition.

The above review of the literature indicates that positive relations with other individuals are a good starting point for the establishment of further contact. One aspect of such positive relationships that may particularly contribute to this importance of positive relationships is that they provide adjustment-facilitating informational and emotional support ([Farh et al., 2010](#)). For exchange students who live in a host family during their stay, the host family may provide such adjustment-facilitating informational and emotional support. Positive relations with the host family may help exchange students to experience the security that is needed to cope with the challenges of establishing additional contacts in the host country, and to develop schemas to assess other individuals and forecast the outcome of contact with other individuals in the context of the host culture. Furthermore, positive contact with host family members might represent an opportunity to gain more knowledge about how to act in the new culture and provides the possibility to ask questions about situations that are difficult to interpret. However, even if the contact to the host family is at least to some degree inevitable, the quality of contact with the host family may vary considerably and is not intensive and positive in any case. Therefore, we suppose that the positivity of contact with the host family shapes the openness for contact with other host community members, in particular. In detail, we propose that if the relationship with the host family has a good quality, the willingness to explore the environment and get to know new people from an unknown cultural group should be higher than if the relationship with the host family has a lower quality. Based on [Gudykunst's \(2005\)](#) anxiety and uncertainty management theory, we assume in addition that positive contact with the host family is particularly important when exchange students perceive interaction partners to be unpredictable. In the anxiety and uncertainty management theory, Gudykunst proposed that uncertainty in intercultural encounters leads to avoidance of intercultural contact when individuals feel unable to manage uncertainty. In line with this assumption, [Samochowiec and Florack \(2010\)](#) found that participants in an experimental study were more likely to avoid the interaction with an unpredictable interaction partner when incidental anxiety was induced compared to when it was not induced. Importantly, the incidental anxiety was unrelated to the interaction partner. Interestingly, incidental anxiety had no effect on the avoidance of a potential interaction partner when participants perceived the potential interaction partner as predictable. Accordingly, we assumed that the contact of exchange students with the host family is of greater importance in the case of intercultural contact with an unpredictable interaction partner. The study of [Samochowiec and Florack \(2010\)](#) did not test this assumption. The participants were neither exchange students or immigrants nor were relations to a host family studied.

Because previous research did not study the role of positive contact with host families for the determination of contact with other host community members under conditions of high and low predictability, we tested the following hypotheses in the present study. First, we hypothesized that positive contact with the host family leads to an increased willingness to

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