

How do multicultural university students define and make sense of intercultural contact? A qualitative study

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Abstract

In a departure from past intercultural contact research, this study examines how culturally different students define, make sense of, and experience intercultural interaction at a multicultural university in the U.S. By employing a qualitative in-depth interviewing method, the author conducts 80 interviews with students over a 3-year period in which they present their own definitions and accounts of intercultural interaction on campus. She finds that multicultural university students have complex and multilayered interpretations of intercultural interaction that are shaped in part by surrounding ideologies of diversity, specific definitions of culture, and perceptions of the nationality, race, or ethnicity of their interactants.

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The multicultural university is a place where students of various cultural backgrounds are presumed to interact with one another. Such a context has been identified as one of the last settings that house individuals from diverse backgrounds together in one place (Halualani, Chitgopekar, Morrison, & Dodge, 2004; Jackman & Crane, 1986). Scholars have become particularly interested in this context with regard to the following questions (Halualani et al., 2004; Salz & Trubowitz, 1997; Sampson, 1986; Smith, 1994): To what extent are culturally different students engaging in intercultural interaction at the multicultural university? What characterizes such intercultural interactional experiences? These questions, while important, cannot be fully answered without posing a more fundamental question: How do multicultural university students define and make sense of intercultural interaction? While there exist a few studies that have examined the frequency of intercultural interaction at the multicultural university (see for e.g., Halualani et al., 2004; Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997), these investigations have presumed that there is a single and widely shared definition and experience of intercultural interaction among students from various cultures. As a result, past intercultural contact studies have failed to notice a very important point: the “what,” “how,” and “why” of intercultural interaction at the multicultural university can never be fully known without asking the students how they define, experience, and interpret such interactions in their own words and in context of their lives.

This essay uses qualitative data to answer this fundamental question surrounding intercultural interaction among multicultural university students. I argue that multicultural university students have complex and multilayered interpretations of intercultural interaction that are shaped in part by societal views of diversity and specific definitions

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of culture. In this study, I employ a qualitative in-depth interviewing method and collect interview data from 80 students of varied backgrounds at a multicultural university and ask them for their own definitions and accounts of intercultural interaction on campus.

Through such means, I find two recurring themes that illustrate these complex definitions and interpretations of intercultural interaction. First, interviewees equate being among or within a demographically diverse campus as engaging in intercultural interaction. Meaning, one's presence in (and proximity to) an area with different cultures is signified as having actual intercultural interaction with these group members. Here students generalize and overestimate the amount of intercultural interactions they have on campus without specifying the actual interactions. They claim that they have so much intercultural interaction that they "forget" or "don't notice" them anymore. Such a generalization of intercultural interaction in terms of campus demographic diversity demonstrates the long reach of the societal construction of diversity and its immediate association with intercultural interaction engagement. Second, interviewees primarily define intercultural interaction to be exchanges between individuals of different national, racial, and ethnic backgrounds but delineate such exchanges to take place completely out of their own personal friendship or social networks. Here intercultural interactions occur between *strangers* in forced settings and are deemed fleeting, rare, and separate from their everyday lives. While they deem intercultural interactions to be exchanges with nationally different students, they deny that their friendships with ethnically, racially, or nationally different persons in their personal social networks are at all intercultural.

This essay begins with a review of the intercultural contact literature in which I discuss the limitations of past research on intercultural contact. More specifically, I argue that extant research fails to uncover how individuals define, construct, and make sense of intercultural interaction in their own words and by their own interpretive logics. Next, I delineate my in-depth interviewing method, sampling procedure for my interviews, and framework for data analysis. An analysis and discussion of the recurring themes that emerge in the interviews with multicultural university students are then presented. Lastly, I present key conclusions and implications that this research yields for future directions regarding intercultural contact and the multicultural university.

1. Intercultural contact research: a review

Intergroup and intercultural contact scholars have amassed an expansive body of research about the conditions upon which culturally different groups interact and perceive each other (see for e.g., Allport, 1954/1979; Amir, 1976; Brewer & Brown, 1998; Cook, 1985; Dovidio, Gaertner, & Kawakami, 2003; Pettigrew, 1986; Stephan, 1987; Stephan & Bingham, 1985; Williams, 1947). The primary focus of this research has been on examining the relationship between intergroup contact, conditions for contact, and prejudice reduction and attitude change. While contributing many valuable insights to our understanding of intergroup relations, this field of work, however, has not yet addressed two major limitations. First, scholars have largely based their research on predetermined and externally imposed constructs of what intercultural contact is, and most notably, on a construct that emphasizes interaction under specific "ideal" conditions. Second, intercultural contact researchers have used methods that investigate intercultural contact primarily in terms of (a) replicable/controlled behaviors (via experiments) and (b) generalized perceptions or attitudes towards a group (via surveys of intergroup/racial attitudes). I discuss these limitations and the need to examine how individuals in real and everyday settings define what intercultural interaction means for them and why.

1.1. Limitation #1: Intercultural contact as idealized and optimal

The majority of intercultural contact research has identified and tested taxonomies of conditions ("contact should be voluntary," "contact should be regular and frequent," "contact should be between individuals of similar socioeconomic status") that help to shape positive intercultural contact (Allport, 1954/1979; Amir, 1969, 1976; Stephan, 1987). These conditions have been analyzed in terms of how, when, and which combinations are necessary in order to achieve the "best" type of contact that would lead to maximum prejudice reduction (Dixon, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2005). As a result of this focus, intercultural contact studies have *overemphasized* only the "right" or "most optimal" conditions for contact. Meaning, researchers have only pursued knowledge about contact that is encapsulated by a set of best possible conditions.

While this stands as an applaudable effort in intergroup research, it, however, can be counter-productive to the aims of the entire field. The goal of identifying conditions, variables, and processes that lead to prejudice

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