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Are people really strange when you're a stranger? A longitudinal study of the effect of intergroup contact on host-country identification

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ABSTRACT

Due to the ever-increasing trend in globalization and the importance of gaining international experience, the number of students seeking academic and cultural experiences abroad continues to grow every year. The present study longitudinally examines contact with host-nationals, changes in cultural identity, and sojourners' identification with their host country. To that end, four waves of data ($n = 157\text{--}198$) were collected among German students who spent a semester abroad in Indonesia. Over time, these students had more contact with host-nationals and experienced changes in their cultural identity. Lagged structural equation models reveal that contact with host-nationals was positively related to identification with the host country and that this relationship was mediated by changes in individuals' cultural identity. Host-country identification was, in turn, related to students' overall satisfaction with their stay abroad. This study underscores the importance of engaging in contact with locals when staying in a foreign country and contributes to literature by investigating the role of cultural-identity change as an underlying mechanism in the relationship between intergroup contact and host-country identification.

Introduction

In today's globalized world, international study, work, and cultural experiences are increasingly important. With expanding globalization and the decreasing salience of world trade barriers, companies must often break into foreign markets to remain competitive. This rising international trade leads to increased demand for expatriates who can perform well on complex international assignments. Managers' international experience plays a key role in shaping global business strategies and has already become an indispensable attribute in the executive suite (Carpenter, Sanders, & Gregersen, 2001; Daily, Certo, & Dalton, 2000; Piaskowska & Trojanowski, 2014). According to proponents of international education, studying abroad presents one of the greatest opportunities for gaining international experience (Mohajeri Norris & Gillespie, 2009). Many students have already acknowledged the positive impact a semester abroad implies for their career opportunities and personal development. There has thus been a remarkable worldwide increase in foreign-going students for many years (UNESCO, 2015).

Although studying abroad is clearly associated with several positive elements, it should be noted that stays abroad do not all confer the same benefits (e.g., Chen, Kirkman, Kim, Farh, & Tangirala, 2010; Kohonen, 2008; Paige & Vande Berg, 2012). This fact raises an interesting question: What exactly makes a study-abroad experience fruitful? Different variables have been found to

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influence the value of stays abroad. One of the most important factors might be an individual's willingness and ability to become immersed in a unique foreign culture. In addition to this general willingness, other requirements – such as students' ability to reflect on their intercultural experiences – are also essential (Paige & Vande Berg, 2012). Furthermore, contact with members of the local community plays a key role in predicting cultural adaptation (e.g., Leszczensky, 2013). A considerable amount of research on the importance of intergroup contact for psychological adjustment and cultural adaptation among immigrants already exists. A fewer amount of studies have also investigated this relationship among international student sojourners or expatriates and their limited time abroad. However, more studies are needed that examine this relationship among sojourners in more detail, especially considering the ever-growing number of international students and assignments. The aim of the present study is therefore to contribute to the literature by exploring the relationship between intergroup contact and sojourners' identification with their host country.

The results of this study are important for several reasons. First, they supplement the findings of existing studies on the relevance of intergroup contact for cultural and psychological adjustment by using comprehensive quantitative longitudinal data. Furthermore, the results highlight the fact that intergroup contact is also critical for sojourners' identification with their host country as their time abroad is limited, in contrast to that of immigrants. Moreover, to the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first study to quantitatively examine the mediating role of changes in sojourners' cultural identity using a multi-wave design. Additionally, the results highlight the relevance of host-country identification for students' satisfaction with their stay abroad, which has not yet gained much attention in the literature. Finally, the results contain helpful information for individuals who conduct or supervise stays abroad – such as human resources managers or study-program managers – and make suggestions regarding how to foster intergroup contact.

Theoretical background

Intergroup contact and friendship patterns

It is natural for people to tend to categorize themselves into groups (Turner, 1987). A basic approach of categorization is the classification into ingroups and outgroups (Allport, 1954; Tajfel, 1969), or, in other words, in “we”s and “they”s (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2007). According to this classification, intergroup contact reflects the interactions between members of different groups.

Intergroup contact plays a meaningful role in intercultural relations. Contact between groups can impart knowledge about the outgroup, which can foster a better understanding of specific behaviors that might differ from what people would expect based on their own cultural backgrounds. Allport's Contact Hypothesis, one of the most influential work on intergroup contact theory, describes the optimal conditions under which contact reduces prejudices (Allport, 1954). Several studies have shown that positive intergroup contact is linked with more positive attitudes towards the outgroup (e.g., Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Results also reveal that behavioral aspects of friendship, such as time spent together, could be identified to be most effective for changes towards outgroup attitudes and, in particular, impact affective attitudes, such as emotions towards the outgroup (Davies, Tropp, Aron, Pettigrew, & Wright, 2011). Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) believe that familiarity (triggered by intergroup contacts and friendships) could be one of the underlying mechanisms behind the relationship between intergroup contact and outgroup attitudes because familiarity facilitates liking. Furthermore, intergroup contact can provide cultural knowledge (Kashima & Loh, 2006; Van Vianen, De Pater, Kristof-Brown, & Johnson, 2004) and is an important source of informational and emotional support from locals (Farh, Bartol, Shapiro, & Shin, 2010), which, in turn, enables sojourners to adapt their behavior with respect to local customs.

In the context of studying abroad, friendships have been found to be one of the most important predictors of satisfaction, acculturation, and academic success in overseas students (Kashima & Loh, 2006; Kudo & Simkin, 2003; Ying, 2002). Most studies have found that international students primarily make friends with students from the same country of origin (also termed co-nationals) as opposed to with host-nationals (Kashima & Loh, 2006; Neri & Ville, 2008; Sakurai, McCall-Wolf, & Kashima, 2010). However, it is known that although many students have more co-national friends, they actually prefer close contact and friendships with host-nationals (Hayes & Lin, 1994; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Van Maele, Vassilicos, & Borghetti, 2016). Furthermore, there is evidence for a positive relationship between international students' contact with host-nationals and their satisfaction with life (Rohrlich & Martin, 1991) and their academic program abroad (Perrucci & Hu, 1995).

Identity and identification

First, it is important to note that the terms identity and identification often cause confusion. The existing literature offers various concepts and theories regarding identity and identification that pursue different research objectives (e.g., Cole & Bruch, 2006; Schulz & Leszczensky, 2016). For the aim of the present study, identity is seen as a comprehensive construct, whereas identification with the host country reflects a specific part of one's identity.

Social and cultural identity

For a better understanding of the underlying mechanisms in cross-cultural contact and their outcomes regarding one's identity, a brief description of the most prevalent perspectives on identity is needed. Initially postulated in the 1980's, Tajfel's and Turner's Theory of Social Identity (SIT) is still one of the most prominent theories on identity. In general, social identity can be described as the part of a person's self-concept that is mainly derived from memberships in certain peer groups (Turner & Oakes, 1986). Consequently, cultural identity can be seen as a certain facet of social identity that mainly becomes salient in the presence of intergroup contact (Sussman, 2011; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). According to SIT, individuals search for a positive social identity because this is crucially associated with well-being (e.g., Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009). Comparisons with other groups

shed light on one's own social identity and lead to an evaluation of one's own identity. If this evaluation is negative, individuals usually try to change this aversive state. One of the discussed strategies to overcome a negative social identity is changing group memberships, if possible (Haslam et al., 2009).

Based upon the theoretical foundation of SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and Self-Categorization Theory (Turner, 1987), Gaertner and Dovidio (2000) postulated an integrative approach termed the Common Ingroup Identity Model (CIIM). Following the CIIM, intergroup contact can lead to a recategorization of one's own social identity and, consequently, to more favorable outgroup attitudes. Based on this recategorization, a new common identity is created, and former subgroups become part of one superordinate ingroup through recategorization (Dovidio et al., 2007). Recent research also reveals that it is not necessary to give up a native identity in order to develop a superordinate identity (Dovidio et al., 2007; Munniksma, Verkuyten, Flache, Stark, & Veenstra, 2015).

Cultural-identity change

When crossing borders, individuals are likely to experience a personal transformation in terms of changes in their cultural identity (Berry, 1997; Sussman, 2002). An important prerequisite for this process to happen is extensive contact with people who hold different values and beliefs (Berry, 1997). Thus, not all individuals who go abroad experience changes in their cultural identity, but it is well known that the vast majority of foreign-going individuals seek close contact with locals (e.g., Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011). Therefore, cultural-identity change is an important concept in describing changes that students may experience when abroad.

Recent literature on cultural-identity change among expatriates and sojourners suggests different types of changes: assimilation, integration, and disintegration. It should be noted that there are different but overlapping models whose terminology varies across different studies. Assimilation implies that individuals strongly adapt to their host country, which is usually accompanied by a significantly weaker home-culture identity (Berry, 1997; Mao & Shen, 2015). Integration means that individuals adapt to the host culture without giving up their home-culture identity, or, simply put, develop a bi-cultural identity (Mao & Shen, 2015). Another strategy is disintegration, whereby individuals adopt a multicultural view by disengagement from any particular cultural identity (Cox, 2004). In order to investigate the relationship between cultural identity and repatriation experiences, Sussman (2002) formulated the Cultural Identity Model (CIM), which contains four major postulates: First, cultural identity is a latent but critical facet of the self-concept; second, cultural identity becomes salient during cultural transitions; third, cultural identity is dynamic and might shift while living abroad; and fourth, cultural identity can serve as a mediator. Following the CIM, these shifts can either be subtractive, additive, or global (often referred to as intercultural). A subtractive cultural-identity change implies that individuals feel a sense of estrangement in terms of a weakened national identity with their home country (e.g., Germans feel less German) compared with before their transition. This is one of the facets individuals usually feel when experiencing assimilation. If the change is additive, individuals develop a national identity with their host country by feeling more connected to the host nationality than they had before going abroad (e.g., Germans in Indonesia feel more Indonesian). This additive change can be divided into two sub-categories: hybridization and biculturalism (Sussman, 2007). Hybridization implies forming a (new) unique set of behaviors and thoughts with elements from the home- and host identity, whereas biculturalism describes switching between the two identities depending on the particular situation (Sussman, 2007). As this additive shift implies an identity gain, it corresponds mostly to what Mao and Shen (2015) consider integration but could also be one facet of assimilation. A global shift implies an identity shift that is not associated with a particular country but rather describes a change at a more general level in terms of feeling more cosmopolitan and international (Sussman, 2007). This global identity shift corresponds to disintegration. Mao and Shen (2015) recently theoretically explored the concept of cultural-identity change from a social-network perspective. They propose assert that cultural-identity change mediates the relationship between social network characteristics and expatriation adjustment. The authors suppose that cultural identity shifts (either assimilation, integration, or disintegration) are positively related to expatriation adjustment. This formulation is in line with the findings of other authors who have shown that individuals who experience assimilation or integration display better cultural adaptation and psychological adjustment (Chen, Benet-Martinez, & Bond, 2008; Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997).

Host-country identification

In the literature, different terms are used to describe this phenomenon, including host society identification, cultural identification, and even national identification among immigrants. Furthermore, identification with a host country is strongly related to other concepts, such as psychological and sociocultural adjustment. The research on this topic includes many similar concepts that are labeled differently. In some studies, the operationalization of host-country identification is closely related to psychological adjustment in terms of well-being and satisfaction (e.g., Schulz & Leszczensky, 2016). In other studies, however, the focus lies on a deeper cultural adaptation like being proud of the country's history (Nesdale & Mak, 2000). One cause of this variety might be the different research objectives among different target groups such as immigrants or sojourners. Considering these greatly different groups, it is obvious that host-country identification cannot be the same for both groups. For sojourners whose time in a host country is limited by definition, identification logically cannot be as profound as for immigrants who left their home in order to permanently remain in a new country. Therefore, it is sensible to view host-country identification in the context of sojourners in the sense of cultural embeddedness, which is defined as "the degree to which individuals feel socially connected to a particular national culture" (Mao & Shen, 2015, p. 1537).

Different variables – such as ethnic- and home-country identification (Schulz & Leszczensky, 2016), cultural distance between the home and host country (Searle & Ward, 1990), personality variables (Harrison, Chadwick, & Scales, 1996), previous experience abroad (Cui & Awa, 1992), and the time spent abroad (Amiot, Doucerain, Zhou, & Ryder, 2017; Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Van Horn, 2002; Zhang & Goodson, 2011) – have been found to influence this adjustment. Furthermore, it has also been shown that attitudes towards the host society are strongly related to host society identification (Munniksma et al., 2015). Since

it is well known that intergroup contact is, in turn, strongly associated with positive outgroup attitudes (e.g., Davies et al., 2011; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), it should be considered a key variable in predicting host-country identification and is therefore described in greater detail later. There is no doubt that identification with a host country is an important concept when staying abroad because it reflects being embedded in the host culture, which is associated with feelings of satisfaction (e.g., Angelini, Casi, & Corazzini, 2015), mental health and self-esteem (Phinney, 1991). Intercultural research has also come to the conclusion that social integration may facilitate adaptation in the field of employment in a foreign country (Kanas, van Tubergen, & van der Lippe, 2009).

The relationship between intergroup contact and host-country identification

There is empirical evidence to demonstrate that intergroup contact and friendships are positively related with host-country identification. Contact with natives is proposed to be the most important determinant of host society identification for immigrants (Leszczensky, 2013). Schulz and Leszczensky (2016), for example, have been able to show that young immigrants in Germany with a higher share of German friends identified more strongly with Germany. Similar patterns have been found among pupils in Flanders (Agirdag, Van Houtte, & Van Avermaet, 2011). Nevertheless, both results rely on cross-sectional data and therefore do not allow for any causal inferences. There are currently only a few longitudinal studies that have examined the direction of influence, and the results found are inconsistent: One study that used longitudinal data on students with an immigrant background in the Netherlands was recently conducted by Munniksma et al. (2015). The results reveal that students with strong ties to Dutch peers at an earlier point in time showed greater identification with the host society later than did students who were primarily committed to their ethnic ingroup. Interestingly, this greater identification at a later date was also related to more friendships with Dutch students. However, Leszczensky, Stark, Flache, and Munniksma, (2016) could not find support for their hypothesis that having many native friends increases immigrants’ host-country identification.

Findings that underscore the importance of being friends with locals have not only been found in the context of migration but also for international students: Hendrickson et al. (2011) could show that international students with proportionately more host-national friends than co-national friends felt less homesick and reported higher levels of satisfaction and contentment during their stay abroad. Yang, Noels, and Saumure, (2006) demonstrated that contact with host-nationals is positively associated with international students’ psychological adjustment and lower social difficulties and that this relationship is mediated by language self-confidence. Moreover, Kashima and Loh (2006) found a positive relationship between social ties with locals and psychological adjustment among Asian students at an Australian university. Furthermore, qualitative data also support the idea that personal connections with locals enhance engagement with the host culture (Li, 2015). These findings are similar to those described in a literature review by Zhang and Goodson (2011): Social contact with Americans was the most frequently reported predictor for international students’ sociocultural adjustment in the United States.

Taken together, there is broad empirical evidence for the positive relationship of intergroup friendships and host-country identification among immigrants as well as some evidence regarding the causality whereupon more intergroup contact leads to a higher identification with the host country. For sojourners with limited time abroad, such as international students and expatriates, there is also support for the positive relationship between close contact with locals and sojourners’ satisfaction and adjustment abroad. However, only very few studies have longitudinally investigated the relationship between intergroup contact and host-country identification among sojourners.

Present study and hypotheses

In the following section, the concept and aim of this study are introduced and hypotheses are derived in light of the existing literature. This study longitudinally investigates the relationship between intergroup contact and host-country identification among German students spending a semester abroad in Indonesia. Since intergroup contact itself can be either positive or negative and the quality of the contacts is relevant (Jackson, 2011), it is important to note that this study primarily focuses on positive facets of intergroup contact, such as friendships with locals. Moreover, the study investigates whether changes in ones’ cultural identity mediate the relationship between intergroup contact and host-country identification and whether students’ identification with the host country is related to their overall satisfaction with their stay abroad. For an overview, the basic study model is depicted in Fig. 1.

H1. This study investigates the time-lagged effects of students’ contact with local people and this contact’s impact on host-country

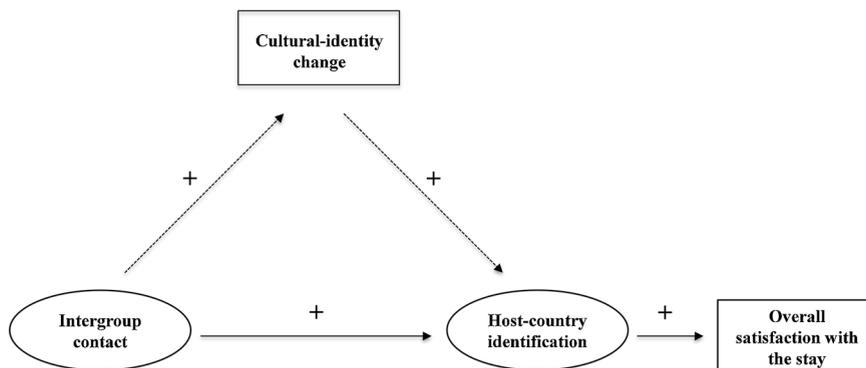


Fig. 1. Overview of the study model. Latent variables are represented by circles, observed variables by rectangles.

identification. Different studies have already shown a positive correlation between intergroup contact and host-country identification among immigrants (Leszczensky, 2013; Maliepaard & Phaet, 2012; Munniksma et al., 2015; Schulz & Leszczensky, 2016). There is already some evidence suggesting that international students with higher shares of host-national friends report higher levels of satisfaction than do those with more native friends (Hendrickson et al., 2011). Furthermore, Kashima and Loh (2006) have been able to demonstrate that having close social ties with locals facilitates psychological adjustment among international students. Based on longitudinal findings among immigrants and some indications for this relationship among sojourners, it can be assumed that (positive) intergroup contact should have a positive impact on students' identification with the host country.

H1. Intergroup contact positively influences host-country identification.

H2. The existing literature suggests that intergroup contact creates similarities between members of different groups (Stark & Flache, 2012). These similarities can weaken the salience of group boundaries, which leads to more inclusive groups and, in turn, can strengthen host society identification (Munniksma et al., 2015). Furthermore, there is broad empirical evidence to suggest that similarities promote liking and well-being (e.g., Lee, 2001). Since the operationalization of cultural-identity changes (here in terms of the German students' increased feelings of being Indonesian) implies such similarities regarding cultural identity, there should be a positive relationship between intergroup contact and cultural-identity change on the one hand and between this identity change and host-country identification on the other hand. Based on these theoretical reflections, H2 postulates the mediating role of cultural-identity change. The existing literature describes different types of cultural-identity change (e.g., subtractive, additive, and global) that individuals may experience. This study focuses on additive change, which occurs when individuals develop a national identity in addition to that of their host country, meaning that the visiting German students feel increasingly Indonesian while staying abroad. This additive change was selected because it is most suitable for the aim of this study and is also compatible with recent research on dual identity, which suggests that it is not necessary to give up one's original cultural identity in order to develop a new one (Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Dovidio et al., 2007). The idea that cultural-identity change may act as a mediator between expatriates' social network characteristics and expatriation adjustment has already been proposed by Mao and Shen (2015). However, to the best of the authors' knowledge, this has not yet been statistically investigated.

H2. Cultural-identity change (additive) mediates the relationship between intergroup contact and host-country identification.

H3. Since host-country identification implies positive feelings regarding the host country, it should correlate with students' satisfaction with their stay abroad. A positive relationship between embeddedness and satisfaction with life has already been found among immigrants (Angelini et al., 2015). It is thus likely that students who identify strongly with the host country are *summa summarum* more satisfied with their stay abroad. To the best of the authors' knowledge no study currently exists that has investigated longitudinally the relationship between identification with a host country and students' satisfaction with their stay abroad.

H3. Host-country identification is positively related to students' overall satisfaction with their stay abroad.

Method

Design and procedure

This questionnaire-based longitudinal study is based on four waves of panel data and was conducted in cooperation with an arranged study abroad program at an Indonesian university. The data collection took place during September and December. The first wave (T1), including the demographic variables, took place immediately after the beginning of the semester, and the last wave (T4), including the overall satisfaction with the stay, took place at the end of the semester. The distance between two waves was about three to four weeks.

Participants

All 236 students enrolled in the program were invited to take part in the survey. In order to enhance the motivation to take part in the study, raffles with little prizes (e.g., vouchers for a cycling tour) were provided as incentives. The inclusion criteria for each time point were a fully completed questionnaire. The final response rates were high but declined over time as follows: T1: 84% ($n = 198$); T2: 74% ($n = 175$); T3: 69% ($n = 164$); T4: 67% ($n = 157$). The final dataset included responses from 220 students, who had each completed at least one questionnaire; 104 students participated in all four waves of data collection. The students' ages ranged from 20 to 31 years, with $M = 23.63$ and $SD = 2.21$; 56% of the respondents were male and 44% were female. Eight percent of the students reported having an immigration background and 55% had already had previous international experience in terms of at least one longer stay abroad.

Measures

To avoid confusion with the response format, all scales (except the overall satisfaction with the stay and the control variables) were based on a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 ("does not apply at all") to 5 ("fully applies").

Intergroup contact

Intergroup contact was measured with three self-designed items referring to the contacts' quantity and quality. In order to consider the contact's quality, two items explicitly included the term "friends," which has a strong positive meaning. These items are: "I have a lot of contact with locals," "I undertake things with new Indonesian friends," and "I am getting to know many new Indonesian friends." The scale's reliability ranged between $\alpha = 0.85$ (T4) and 0.90 (T1).

Host-country identification

The identification with the host country was initially measured with five self-designed items. Taking students' limited time abroad into account, host-country identification was mainly operationalized as participants' feelings of belonging to Indonesia and their well-being while living there. Thus, this operationalization is closely linked to that of cultural embeddedness and psychological adjustment. Similar items have been used in other studies (e.g., Schulz & Leszczensky, 2016). The final scale consisted of the following four items: "I identify well with Indonesia," "I enjoy living in Indonesia," "Indonesia is a good fit for me," and "I feel connected to Indonesia." The scale's reliability ranged between $\alpha = 0.81$ (T2) and 0.88 (T3).

Cultural-identity change

In order to capture an additive change in students' cultural identity, the following single item was used: "I feel more and more Indonesian." This item was used in a similar manner in a previous study by Nan Sussman (2002). As both types of additive identity changes (hybrid and bi-culturalism) are positively related to intercultural adaptation (Sussman, 2007), this study does not distinguish between these two sub-categories.

Overall satisfaction with the stay

At the end of the semester, the students were asked to evaluate their stay abroad *summa summarum*. For this purpose, the item "How did you like your stay in Indonesia altogether?" was used. The possible answers to this question ranged from "not at all" to "somewhat" and "very much."

Control variables

The study also examined whether age, gender, immigration background, or previous experience are related to intergroup contact or host-country identification. A yes-or-no question was applied for immigration background. To capture previous experience abroad, the students were asked to answer the following question: "How many long-term stays abroad (longer than usual holidays) have you already undertaken?" Possible answers included "one," "two," and "three or more." The analyzed control variables did not affect the postulated effects and were for reasons of parsimony excluded in the final model. The fact that prior experience abroad has no significant effect on intergroup contact or host-country identification differs from the authors' expectations as the literature assumes that previous experience abroad facilitates intercultural adaptation (e.g., Cui & Awa, 1992). One explanation might be that living in a foreign country does not automatically produce interculturality (Jackson, 2008). The Georgetown Consortium found a similar pattern and commented: "This finding supports the study's hypothesis that many students do not learn interculturality simply through being physically present in another culture" (Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige, 2009).

Analytical strategy

First, some pre-analyses at T1 were conducted: Exploratory factor analyses (EFA) were run to test the dimensionality of the scales host-country identification and cultural-identity change. The pre-analyses confirmed the one-dimensionality of both scales and the distinctness between cultural-identity change and host-country identification. To determine the quality of the measurement models, the reliability (indicator and construct) was assessed. Based on the results of these pre-analyses, one item of the five initial items on the host-country identification scale was removed because it did not fit the common requirements.¹ After this exclusion, the pre-analyses generally showed high reliability for intergroup contact and host-country identification. The descriptive results were analyzed by using IBM SPSS. In a second step, whether the means differed in a statistically relevant manner was tested with paired T-tests (one-tailed).

To test the hypotheses structural equation models (SEM) were conducted using IBM SPSS Amos. Therefore, intergroup contact and host-country identification were entered as latent variables. The single items of cultural-identity change and overall satisfaction with the stay were treated as manifest variables. The results presented in Fig. 2 are based on the full dataset with $n = 220$.² In dealing with missing data, the Full Information Maximum Likelihood approach was used. In so doing, missing data are directly replaced by the estimation of parameters. Furthermore, confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were conducted to evaluate the validity and reliability of the final measurement models. The indicators' reliabilities for the latent variables ranged from 0.37 to 0.85. Additionally, the factor reliabilities (0.81–0.91) were computed using the corresponding formula (e.g., Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). In order to test the mediation hypothesis, the Baron and Kenny (1986) was applied. According to this, a variable is considered a mediator when X significantly predicts Y , X significantly predicts M , and M significantly predicts Y controlling for X . The level of significance was set at $p = .05$ for all analyses.

Alternative models

As there is some evidence to suggest a bidirectional relationship between intergroup contact and host-country identification, we also estimated a model that considered this bidirectional relationship. The data found no support for this relationship, and the χ^2 difference test for the comparison of alternative models was not significant ($\Delta\chi^2 = 1.67$; $\Delta df = 2$; $p = .436$). As the bidirectional relationship did not improve the model and due to reasons of parsimony this relationship was not considered further.

¹ The results revealed that the item "I like to tell my friends I am staying in Indonesia" has weak discriminatory power (ITC = .47) and commonality (.36).

² In addition, all analyses were also run with the subgroup that completed all four questionnaires ($n = 104$) to test the stability of the effects. In so doing, the fit indices and regression weights changed, but the postulated effects remained stable.

Table 1
Descriptive Results of Longitudinal Variables for each Wave.

Variables	n	M	SD	α
Intergroup contact T1	198	2.41	1.02	.90
Intergroup contact T2	175	2.52	0.83	.83
Intergroup contact T3	164	2.66	0.87	.87
Intergroup contact T4	157	2.66	0.87	.85
Host-country identification T1	198	3.20	0.75	.85
Host-country identification T2	175	3.20	0.68	.81
Host-country identification T3	164	3.07	0.80	.88
Host-country identification T4	157	3.07	0.84	.86
Cultural-identity change T1	198	2.31	1.00	
Cultural-identity change T2	175	2.62	0.94	
Cultural-identity change T3	164	2.66	1.01	
Cultural-identity change T4	157	2.53	1.01	

Results

Descriptive results and changes over time

The reliabilities and all other descriptive results for each point of time are listed in Table 1. The descriptive results reveal a growth for intergroup contact from T1 to T3. Between T3 and T4, contact remained steady. The increase between T1 and T4 was statistically significant with $t(143) = 2.98, p = .002$. By contrast, identification with the host country decreased over time. The decline between T1 and T4 was also statistically significant with $t(143) = -1.97, p = .026$. Cultural-identity change increased from T1 to T3 but declined from T3 to T4. However, despite the decrease in the last wave, the increase from T1 to T4 was still significant with $t(143) = 2.71, p = .004$.

Hypotheses testing

The diagram depicted in Fig. 2 reveals a standardized covariance of .50 ($p < .001$) between the two exogenous variables of intergroup contact and host-country identification at T1. The direct influence of intergroup contact on host-country identification as well as the relationship between intergroup contact and cultural-identity change became stronger over time, whereas there was no continuous strengthening regarding the relationship between cultural-identity change and host-country identification.

The time-lagged effects show no direct effect of intergroup contact T1 on host-country identification T2 ($\gamma = -.02, p = .774$). But the effects show that contact at T1 was significantly related to cultural-identity change at T2 ($\gamma = .26, p < .001$), which, in turn, was significantly related to host-country identification at T2 ($\beta = .21, p < .001$). The direct influence of intergroup contact at T2 on host-country identification at T3 ($\beta = .16, p = .023$) was also significant. Both the relationship between intergroup contact at T2 and cultural-identity change at T3 ($\beta = .27, p = .002$) and between cultural-identity change T3 and host-country identification at T3 ($\beta = .15, p = .013$) were significant. A similar pattern can be found for intergroup contact at T3 and cultural-identity change at T4 ($\beta = .37, p < .001$) as well as for cultural-identity change at T4 and host-country identification at T4 ($\beta = .22, p = .001$). The results also show a significant direct influence of intergroup contact at T3 on host-country identification at T4 ($\beta = .20, p = .008$). Host-country identification at T4 was significantly related to students' overall satisfaction with their stay ($\beta = .34, p < .001$).

The model fit the data: $\chi^2(451) = 1028.70, CIM/DF = 2.28, RMSEA = .076, TLI = .81, CFI = .84$.

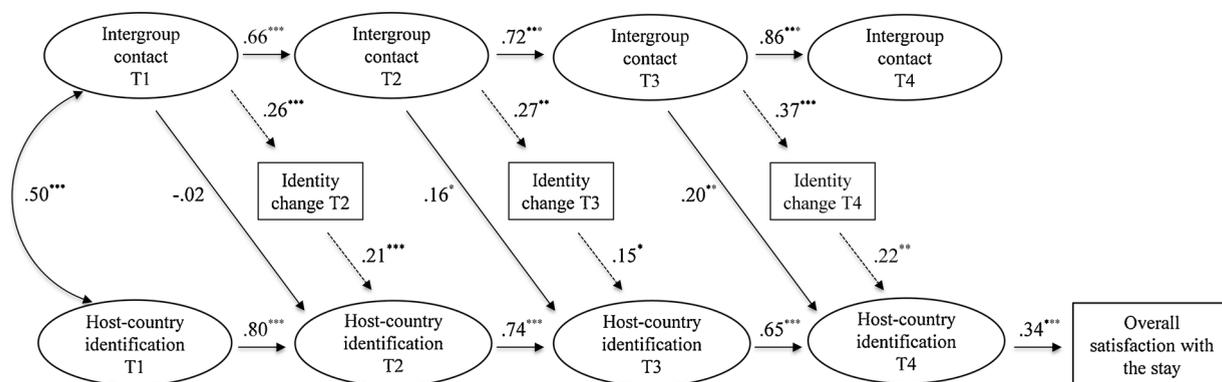


Fig. 2. Lagged structural equation model predicting cultural-identity change by intergroup contact and host-country identification by cultural-identity change and intergroup contact as well as the prediction of the overall satisfaction with the stay by host-country identification. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Discussion

Summary and interpretation of the findings

This longitudinal study investigated the relationship between intergroup contact and host-country identification in a group of German students spending a semester abroad in Indonesia. Although intergroup contact increased over time, the scores for contact were below the mid-point for each wave of data collection, which means that the students generally had limited sustained contact with host-nationals. This finding is not surprisingly as many studies have shown that international students primarily make friends with co-nationals as opposed to with host-nationals, even if they claim to prefer close contact with host-nationals (e.g., [Kashima & Loh, 2006](#); [Van Maele et al., 2016](#)). With ongoing time abroad students had more contact with locals, which was to be expected because of the general assumption that already-existing contacts usually facilitate further contacts and remove obstacles to making friendships with locals, such as language deficits, diminish over time.

Interestingly and contradictory to previous findings of similar studies on this topic (e.g., [Amiot et al., 2017](#); [Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002](#); [Zhang & Goodson, 2011](#)), host-country identification did not increase over time. One explanation for this result might be a kind of ceiling effect. It is not possible to rule out the possibility that students' identification with the host country plateaued after the first half of their semester abroad. For example, it is conceivable that students got used to their lives in Indonesia within the first two months and would have needed further stimulation (e.g., beyond that of a typical student's life) to immerse themselves deeper in their host culture and strengthen their identification with the host country. The idea of a ceiling effect after a certain amount of time has already been reported for students' intercultural learning ([Vande Berg et al., 2009](#)). As described earlier in the theory section of this article, there is no consistent understanding or operationalization of host-country identification, which might also represent an explanatory approach for the results found in this study: In this study, host-country identification was related not only to feelings of connectedness but also to the well-being associated with the country. There is evidence from other studies to suggest that well-being declined from pre- to post-transition ([Cemalcilar & Falbo, 2008](#)). The literature focusing on the phenomena of culture shock, in particular, has found that initial fascination is often followed by disillusion and feelings of depression ([Oberg, 1960](#)). It is, for example, conceivable that students' initial euphoria regarding life in the tropics might be attenuated by the more difficult elements associated with life in an emerging country. With particular regard to the study sample, the typical semester cycle may also provide an explanation: The beginning of the semester is usually associated with less stress and is therefore more relaxed than the end of the semester, which is accompanied by final exams. As host-country identification in this study also contained aspects of well-being, these examples could also be explanatory factors for the decrease of host-country identification in the second half of the semester. However, it should be noted that identification with the host country had the highest scores compared with the other variables. Interestingly, host-country identification is the only construct with scores above the theoretical midpoint of the scale.

Students' cultural-identity change increased within the first three waves of data collection but decreased from T3 to T4. The fact that T4 was measured at the end of the semester, immediately before most of the students returned home, could be an explanatory approach. Knowing that it is almost time to leave and having to mentally and physically prepare for departure, the German students' may have slowly begun to detach themselves from their semester abroad and remembered their home culture and identity more strongly. This possibility might represent an unconscious protective reflex as additive shifts in individuals' cultural identity are associated with high repatriation distress ([Sussman, 2002](#)). As the semester ended in the middle of December, this fact might also be relevant in light of the upcoming Christmas festival, a strong marker of home culture for the Germans. There is evidence suggesting that (bicultural) individuals shift their identity in response to cultural cues in their social environment ([Cheng, Lee, & Benet-Martínez, 2006](#)). It is therefore conceivable that the Christmas season represents such a cultural cue.

Furthermore, this study examined whether cultural-identity change mediates the relationship between intergroup contact and host-country identification, and whether host-country identification is related to students' satisfaction with their stay abroad. The results provide support for the postulated hypotheses. As the postulated hypotheses are causal, it should be noted that causality and its assessment are often matter of debate (e.g., [Bagozzi & Yi, 2012](#)). Accordingly, [Bagozzi & Yi \(2012, p. 23\)](#) suggest that it is important "to think about a causality continuum, marked by relatively strong (experiments) and relatively weak (surveys) labels as endpoints, and longitudinal surveys somewhere in between strong and weak." However, longitudinal study designs with time-lagged effects are usually said to allow for causal conclusions even though they should be interpreted with caution ([Weiber & Mühlhaus, 2014](#)). The measuring instruments used were high in reliability, and the inferential statistical quality criteria *RMSEA* indicated a proper model fit. However, the incremental fit indices are weak which might be caused by the longitudinal study design.

H1 postulated a positive effect of intergroup contact on host-country identification. Regarding the time-lagged effects, with exception of the first path, the results provide support for this hypothesis. It is worth noting that the direct influence of contact on identification is relatively weak despite being statistically significant for two out of three relationships. One explanation for this finding might be that the time-lagged design may have attenuated the effects. The non-significant relationship between intergroup contact at T1 and host-country identification at T2 could furthermore be a statistical issue due to the high covariance between the two exogenous variables. However, the results clearly reveal that the strength of relationship between contact and identification increased continuously, meaning that the influence of intergroup contact on host-country identification became stronger over time. The results of the present study are mainly in line with those of similar studies among immigrants which have already found that individuals who have had close contact with locals identify more strongly with the host country than do individuals who have been only loosely connected to the local community (e.g., [Agirdag et al., 2011](#); [Munnikma et al., 2015](#); [Schulz & Leszczensky, 2016](#)). Interestingly, another recently conducted longitudinal study among young immigrants did not find support that having many native friends influences host-country identification ([Leszczensky et al., 2016](#)). Moreover, the present study contributes to the existing literature with

a causal analysis of this relationship among the group of sojourners based on multi-wave longitudinal data. Explanations for this direct positive influence of intergroup contact on host-country identification might be that locals can offer guidance in terms of country-related issues, such as first-hand cultural knowledge (Kashima & Loh, 2006; Li, 2015; Van Vianen et al., 2004) or informational support (Farh et al., 2010). In addition to these cognitive aspects of assistance, locals also provide emotional support (Farh et al., 2010). As cross-cultural transitions are psychologically challenging (e.g., Molinsky, 2007; Sussman, 2011), this emotional component of support might be particularly important. As a consequence, cognitive as well as emotional support provided by locals is likely to facilitate sojourners' adjustment and identification with the host country.

With respect to H2, there are also significant positive relationships between intergroup contact and cultural-identity change on the one hand and between cultural-identity change and host-country identification on the other hand which provide support for the mediating role of cultural-identity change. To the authors' knowledge, this mediating role of cultural-identity change has not yet been tested statistically. Mao and Shen (2015) have recently explored the role of cultural-identity change in a theoretical manner and proposed that cultural-identity change mediates the relationship between expatriates' social-network characteristics and expatriation adjustment. As identification with a certain host country reflects successful expatriation adjustment, the results of this study strongly support Mao and Shen's proposition. Other empirical studies have found that individuals experiencing assimilation or integration have shown better cultural and psychological adjustment than have non-shifters (e.g., Chen et al., 2008; Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997). At this point, both strategies (assimilation and integration) should be considered to imply additive changes to one's cultural identity (Mao & Shen, 2015). The results of this study are therefore in accordance with those of similar studies. Furthermore, the findings contribute to the existing literature by providing first quantitative support for the idea that cultural-identity change may act as a mediator between intergroup contact and identification with a certain host country.

Close contact and time spent together with others usually goes hand in hand with shared experiences, and these joint experiences are likely to give rise to feelings of togetherness. Moreover, research has even found that intergroup contact and shared experiences can create similarities between groups (Stark & Flache, 2012). Such feelings of togetherness may also create a new group identity based on shared experiences. These considerations are also supported in the existing literature which has found intergroup contact to trigger the development of a common superordinate identity (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). This superordinate identity goes hand in hand with the perception of belonging to an inclusive group, which, in turn, means that group boundaries become less salient (Munniksmas et al., 2015). Considering these findings, it seems logical that feeling more Indonesian fosters the German students' psychological adjustment and identification with their host country. This conclusion is also supported by different studies that have shown that familiarity as well as similarities foster liking and well-being (e.g., Lee, 2001).

H3 postulated that host-country identification is positively related to students' overall satisfaction with their stay abroad. The results demonstrate this relationship, which means that students who identified strongly with Indonesia were more satisfied with their stay than were those who showed less identification with their host country. To the authors' knowledge, this has not been tested before. Considering that host-country identification is predicted by contact with locals, the results are in accordance with those of Perrucci and Hu (1995) who found a positive relationship between students' contact with host-nationals and their satisfaction with the academic program. Since host-country identification reflects feelings of well-being associated with the host country, the finding of the present study is fully in line with the authors' expectations.

Practical implications

As the number of individuals traveling abroad continues to increase, it is important to think about measures that help to make stays abroad more fruitful. Since it seems to be difficult to directly influence host-country identification, this section focuses on possibilities to facilitate intergroup contact, which has been found to predict cultural-identity change and host-country identification, which, in turn, are associated with students' higher overall satisfaction regarding their stay abroad. In the next section, recommendations for action are given for the group of student sojourners. Of course, these suggestions are not written in stone and can be modified with respect to the requirements of different target groups and can also be useful for other types of sojourners after appropriate modification.

Several studies have already shown that most students who travel abroad would like to build close contact and friendships with locals (e.g., Hayes & Lin, 1994; Hendrickson et al., 2011). A recently published study has even found that students view personal development and social ties as the most and second-most essential factors, respectively, in a successful semester abroad. Interestingly, academic advantages are considered to be less important (Van Maele et al., 2016). The results found in the present study support the importance of having contact with locals for students' identification with the host country and for their overall satisfaction with their stay. As the existing literature has already revealed some impediments to intergroup friendships, the reduction of these hindrances may be a good starting point for practical-solution approaches. Poor proficiency in the host language is one of the major impediments to contact between international students and host-nationals (e.g., McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Trice, 2007). Furthermore, there is also some evidence that the predominance of friendships and strong social ties with co-nationals while staying abroad might be debilitating for cultural adaptation and identification with the host country (e.g., Sakurai et al., 2010; Trice, 2007; Ward & Searle, 1991). But what exactly can be done to overcome these known obstacles in making friendships with locals and to facilitate positive intergroup contact and host-country identification?

There are two different approaches: First, arrangements can be organized by the study-abroad program and the local university, and second, arrangements can be self-initiated by the students. Concerning the first point, the university should provide host-language courses that place special emphasis on everyday conversation and therefore enable students to get in touch with the local community. As most of the exchange students probably did not have any knowledge of the Indonesian language prior to their travels, it also might be useful to establish preparatory courses before the beginning of the semester. Furthermore, the university could

establish a kind of “buddy system” in which each overseas student has a local student as his or her buddy. The local buddy could, for example, offer guidance on university-related issues. There is already some evidence for the usefulness of such peer-pairing programs among international students (Westwood & Barker, 1990). Moreover, the university could try to make classrooms more international by offering courses designed for both international and local students alike. Vande Berg et al. (2009) found that classes featuring a mixture of students of the same ethnicity, local students, and other international students lead to the greatest gain in intercultural development. Moreover, local universities or study abroad programs should aim to foster international students’ reflection on their cultural experiences, which has been found to be essential in making a semester abroad fruitful in terms of intercultural development (Vande Berg et al., 2009). One effective method of fostering reflection is to offer a cultural mentoring program in which mentors with strong intercultural skills foster students’ discourse on their intercultural experiences and provide them with adequate feedback (Paige & Vande Berg, 2012).

Even though there are different measures that could be undertaken by the local university to facilitate intergroup contact, it should be kept in mind that the students or expatriates themselves can actively manage their social networks. Interestingly, this proactive role of sojourners in shaping their socio-cultural environment has not gained much attention in the existing literature (Mao & Shen, 2015). In order to close this gap, this study also places focus on students’ self-initiated arrangements. As the results have shown that contact in early periods influences later contact, students should try to get in contact with locals as soon as possible. This might be especially important when considering students’ already-limited time abroad. Therefore, students should try to establish some contacts with locals before their transition. Social media, for example, could be an important tool for making contacts pre-transition. These pre-transition contacts could serve as first-contact persons and might also be helpful in answering the students’ questions in their preparation phase. Regarding housing, students should also carefully consider the type of accommodation they wish to choose. Instead of sharing a house with co-nationals, living in a homestay or staying in a dormitory together with locals could be a good alternative. These types of accommodations would ensure close contact with locals in daily life situations and therefore be a good opportunity for authentic intergroup contact. Another possibility to foster intergroup contact is traveling. Even though it has been found that students who travel have mostly only superficial contact with host-nationals, traveling was found to contribute to their intercultural development (Gmelch, 1997). Students have to solve daily life problems and deal with many unfamiliar situations, especially when traveling on their own, which can in turn strengthen their self-confidence. To get the most out of their travels, Gmelch (1997) recommends that students travel alone which should enhance the likelihood of their interaction with locals and minimize the risk of the diffusion of responsibility. Furthermore, students should think about charity activities or volunteer work in the host country. The existing literature suggests a broad range of positive outcomes associated with volunteering abroad, such as personal development, increased language skills, and better intercultural understanding (Sherraden, Lough, & McBride, 2008). Students, for example, could try to become involved in a local non-government organization (NGO). In doing so, they would have the opportunity to establish contacts beyond the context of the university. Moreover, an NGO would present the students with the opportunity to gain intercultural work experience and to give something back to the host country.

Limitations and outlook

There are four limitations that should be addressed concerning this study. First, as a questionnaire-based study, it relies on self-reported data, which are connected with several difficulties, such as individuals’ ability for introspection, image management, and social desirability. Regarding the longitudinal study design, the ability for introspection might be particularly relevant: The time-frame of data collection and the time lags between two waves might be relatively short to enable the perception and detection of changes in identity and identification. This issue may have affected the accuracy in measurements of participants’ self-perceived changes. The appropriate length of time between the waves is a crucial issue in longitudinal studies, and adequate rules of thumbs do not exist (Taris & Kompier, 2014). As only very few multi-wave studies in this field of research currently exist that could offer solid grounds for appropriate time lags, this study followed Taris and Kompier’s recommendation to use a design with relatively short time intervals between the waves (2014, p. 5). However, further research should consider different time intervals in order to investigate the reasonableness of the time lags in this area of research.

Second, the model fit is relatively weak. Although the absolute fit indices fulfill the common requirements, there is room for improvement regarding the incremental fit indices. This observation could be explained by the fact that the study focused on time-lagged effects. Therefore, not all pathways were specified (e.g., the relationship between the constructs at one time). Furthermore, the incremental fit indices rely on a worst-fitting (null) model, which is usually the independence model. The null model is an appropriate independence model for many applications; however, the independence model does not usually represent an adequate null model for longitudinal data (Little, Preacher, Selig, & Card, 2007). This fact is likely the explanation as to why the model displays proper absolute fit indices but weak incremental fit indices.

Third, as described in other studies on related topics, diffuse constructs such as cultural identity and host-country identification are tricky to capture with quantitative data (e.g., Sussman, 2002). On the other hand, it would be even more difficult to capture these feelings with behavioral or physiological measures. Another point of criticism might be the use of single items because they create some psychometric difficulties, such as the lack of internal consistency (Nagy, 2002). However, further studies on this topic should also try to complement quantitative data with qualitative measures, such as interviews or diaries.

Fourth, the sample investigated in this study is almost homogenous in terms of the students’ cultural background. On the one hand, a homogeneous sample usually provides high internal validity; on the other hand, it might restrict the generalizability of the results. For example, existing literature suggests that cultural distance between the home and host country (e.g., Searle & Ward, 1990) and the host society’s openness towards foreigners (Mao & Shen, 2015) are also important factors in explaining psychological

adjustment and should be considered in further research. Therefore, research with additional populations and more culturally diverse samples is needed.

Furthermore, the study revealed an interesting and surprising finding, which should be investigated more thoroughly in further research. The fact that cultural-identity change declined at the end of the stay needs to be re-tested, and future research should also aim to shed light on underlying processes of psychological detachment as well as external factors that might explain this unexpected finding.

Conclusion

With increasing time abroad, the German students had more contact with Indonesian host-nationals and experienced shifts in their cultural identity. Contact with host-nationals led to changes in the sojourners' cultural identity, which, in turn, fostered their identification with the host country. Stronger identification with the host country was positively related to students' overall satisfaction with their stay abroad. The present research underscores the importance of having contact with host-nationals while staying in a foreign country and contributes to the existing literature by considering an underlying mechanism that may explain this phenomenon.

Declaration of interest

None.

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