Demonstrate Cultural Competence, A Sensitive Partnership

Cross-Cultural Friendships


Why can’t we be friends?: Multicultural attitudes and friendships with international students

Christina T. Williams and Laura R. Johnson

Introduction

International students in the U.S. undertake a life changing endeavor that offers benefits and presents challenges, including a loss of social support. While studies suggest friendships with host country nationals are important for a successful experience, forming friendships with U.S. American students is challenging and rare. Difficulties establishing friendships are exacerbated when the context of adjustment is marked by prejudicial attitudes or a history of problematic intercultural relations. In this study, we sought to understand the lack of cross-cultural social reciprocity from U.S. students at a mid-size Southern university known for its racial divisiveness. We explored how students with and without international friendships differed on multicultural personality characteristics, intercultural attitudes, and multicultural experiences, such as participation in study abroad. Differences related to gender and membership in a sorority or fraternity were explored, as were amount of contact and closeness of the friendships. Students with international friendships had higher scores on open-mindedness and lower scores on intercultural communication apprehension. We discuss the findings and their implications for promoting international and U.S. student friendships.

1.1. International student adjustment in the U.S.

The United States has more international students than any other country in the world (McMurtrie, 2001). In the 2007–2008 academic year, the number of international students enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions reached a record high of 623,805 (Open Doors, 2008). Despite the high numbers, international students face many difficulties adapting to U.S. culture and academic life. In addition to language and
cultural differences, developing a social support network and in particular, forming cross-cultural relationships with U.S. students, can be a challenge (Bulthuis, 1986). Research indicates that international students desire these interactions and that cross-cultural friendships are associated with psychological, social, and academic benefits.

Having a domestically based social support system is important for easing the acculturation process and for the successful adaptation of international students to their host culture (Hayes and Lin, 1994 and Yeh and Inose, 2003). While developing friendships with someone of the same ethnicity provides critical social support and is an effective and beneficial acculturation strategy, using a bicultural or multicultural strategy is more adaptive (Berry, 1997a, Berry, 1997b, Berry, 1998, Johnson and Sandhu, 2007, Roysircar, 2004, Sodowsky and Lai, 1997, Ward and Kennedy, 1994 and Ward and Kennedy, 1996). For example, studies have found that international students who feel connected to a host country's social network are less likely to experience symptoms of acculturative stress, and also that social connections lead to successful adjustment (Coelho et al., 1962, Ingman, 2003 and Yeh and Inose, 2003). Other studies indicate academic benefits as international students with U.S. student friends may have higher grades and retention rates, as well as higher ratings of satisfaction with their academic and nonacademic experiences than those without these relationships (Kleinberg and Hull, 1979, Lulat and Altbach, 1985, Perrucci and Hu, 1995 and Westwood and Barker, 1990). Conversely, not having American social support can be detrimental to international students. Limited social contact with members of the host country contributes to symptoms of acculturative stress (Hayes and Lin, 1994 and Yeh and Inose, 2003) and is related to feelings of anxiety, depression, and alienation in international students (Chen, 1999, Hull, 1978 and Schram and Lauver, 1988).

1.2. Host national perspectives

As countries around the world become more culturally diverse and demographics begin to shift, increasing attention is being paid to intergroup relations and multicultural attitudes, including perspectives of majority or host nationals towards acculturating groups (Bourhis et al., 1997 and Ward and Rana-Deuba, 2000). Still, most research has been conducted from the viewpoint of the acculturating group (e.g. international students) with little information about the perspectives of host students or those within the receiving community (Ward, 2001). In one survey of U.S. American students, 83% said they did not interact with international students outside of the college setting (Shabahang, 1993). What contributes to the U.S. American students’ lack of interest in international student relationships is not well understood.

1.3. Context of adjustment

Although close relationships with U.S. students enhance cultural adjustment, trends show that international students tend to keep social contact to those of their own ethnicity or other international students
Moreover, with the rise in xenophobia that occurred in the U.S. after September 11, the challenges facing international students have been maximized (e.g. increased reports of racism and harassment among international students, particularly those from Islamic, Middle Eastern and Asian countries). Indeed, contextual factors associated with the receiving society are important contributors to the acculturation process and outcomes for immigrants and other acculturating groups, including international students.

Berry, 1997a and Berry, 1997b stresses that the climate and attitudes of the host national population are important as they provide a context, either favorable or not, in which acculturation processes play out and relations are developed. If the dominant society insists on assimilation of minority groups or is intolerant of cultural diversity, then the stage is set for less successful relationships and more conflictual interactions. For international students, the context of acculturation would include not just the country, but region, academic setting, and ‘college culture.’

The University of Mississippi, a mid-size university, in a small, Southern town is well known for its history of racial tensions, including violence and a military intervention during integration when the first African American student, James Meredith, entered its doors. Until today, it is common to have racial incidents and conflicts over symbols imbued with racist ideology and meaning, including an ongoing problem with football fans yelling “The South will rise again!” during games and a recent and highly publicized visit by the KKK. Another contextual factor that may impact host and international student relations is the strong and pervasive influence of the Greek system (fraternities and sororities) on the campus, as research indicates that membership in such organizations is associated with more closed or negative attitudes towards diverse others (Sidanius, Van Laar, & Levin, 2004).

1.4. Multicultural attitudes and experiences

Although the context of adjustment is clearly important, variability remains in whether or not individuals will befriend international students. Thus, researchers have begun to focus on underlying motivations and interests of host nationals. Tropp and Bianchi (2006) state that these emerging perspectives on intergroup contact encourage researchers “to look beyond conditions of the contact situation” and examine subjective features, such diversity attitudes, that guide intergroup experiences. Research from cross-cultural relations suggests that personality characteristics, intercultural attitudes, and life experiences may be beneficial to consider. Multicultural personality characteristics, identified by Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2000) include: cultural empathy, open-mindedness, social initiative, emotional stability and flexibility. These attitudes are expected to enhance one’s success adjusting to a different cultural environment. Other intercultural attitudes, including racism (McConahay, Hardee, & Batts, 1981) and intercultural communication apprehension (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997) have also been identified as important features.
in understanding inter-group relations. Past experiences with, and exposure to, other cultures may also serve as a predictor of future intercultural behaviors. Although contact alone may be insufficient, research indicates that frequent contact with individuals of a different culture can lead to decreased intergroup anxiety and increased positive intercultural attitudes between majority and minority groups (Ward & Masgoret, 2006).

Discussion

The participants with international friends had higher levels of open-mindedness than those without friendships. Findings support Arthur and Bennett's (1995) statement that the trait of open-mindedness is crucial for successful cross-cultural interactions. Findings are also consistent with literature stating that people who are more open-minded are also less inclined to distance themselves from individuals of a different ethnicity (Hello, Scheepers, & Sleegers, 2006). The concept of open-mindedness is derived from social–psychological theory and is hypothesized to be an important determinant of intolerance and prejudice (Hello et al., 2006). Arthur and Bennett (1995) identify open-mindedness as a critical relational characteristic involved in cross-cultural interactions. Van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee define open-mindedness as an “open and unprejudiced attitude towards out-group members and towards different cultural norms and values” (Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2002). U.S. American students high in open-mindedness would thus be expected to view the out-group population of international students in a non-prejudicial manner and perhaps be willing or “open” to interact with them. Inversely, those less open to interacting with people of a different nationality may harbor feelings of racism or may behave in discriminatory ways. Evidence of this trend may be seen in earlier research done by Rokeach (1960) that indicates that closed-minded personalities tended to also be high in ethnic prejudice and individuals with open-minded personalities turned out to be low in ethnic prejudice. Therefore, those who are more open-minded are in turn less inclined to distance themselves from individuals of a different ethnicity (Hello et al., 2006). It is important to note, however, that open-mindedness is not a static trait, but an attitude or stance which can be cultivated with appropriate education and experiences.

The lack of findings regarding other multicultural attitudes (i.e. cultural empathy, social initiative, emotional stability, and flexibility) was surprising and may be due to the fact that a majority of participants reporting friendships also reported moderate to little contact with these friends and
moderate to low ratings of “closeness” to these friends. However, bivariate correlations between ratings of closeness and contact were not significantly related to multicultural attitudes.

Regarding levels of intercultural communication apprehension, results support the second hypothesis that participants with international friendships reported lower levels of apprehension in intercultural settings than those without international student friendships. In other words, participants who reported having more experiences in intercultural settings (i.e. international student friendships) reported less anxiety in these situations. These findings are consistent with the Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory that posits that anxiety and uncertainty are associated with communication avoidance of strangers of a different culture (Kim & Gudykunst, 1988). Neuliep and Ryan (1998) further support this theory by stating that unfamiliar intercultural contact causes the possibility for significant stress and anxiety, and thus avoidance of these contexts. Furthermore, Lin and Rancer (2003) found that intercultural communication apprehension is inversely correlated with a measure of “intercultural willingness-to-communicate.” Therefore due to higher levels of intercultural communication apprehension, participants without international friends may be avoidant of interacting with international students and therefore have no friendships with them.

While differences in levels of multicultural experiences between the groups were not statistically significant, the percentages of students in each group were directionally as expected in each case. For instance, participants having international student friends reported attending more multicultural events, more time spent abroad, and study abroad participation. These findings suggest that students with international student friendships, whether sought intentionally or happenstance, are provided with opportunities, venues, motivations, and/or a need to interact with international populations. At The University of Mississippi, several opportunities for multicultural interactions are available, yet reports of U.S. student attendance are low.