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Protective or Harmful? Exploring the Ambivalent Role of Social Identification as a Moderator of

Intergroup Stress in Sojourners

Abstract

Living outside one's home country may be stressful, and having strong social ties should help deal with this stress. However, social ties may be protective or harmful depending on whether the social group they evoke belongs to the host- or the home country context. The current study examines how social identification with different groups may either buffer or aggravate the negative effects of two stressors (perceived discrimination and symbolic threat) on sojourner adaptation. Two hundred and twenty international students sojourning in nine different countries responded to an online questionnaire. As expected, adaptation was negatively predicted by both stressors. Moreover, high identification with the group of international students attenuated the negative effects of perceived discrimination on psychological adaptation, while home country identification aggravated the negative effects of symbolic threat on sociocultural adaptation.

Keywords: International Students, Cross-cultural Adaptation, Ingroup Identification, Perceived Discrimination, Intergroup Threat

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    Living outside one's home country may be stressful. Some major stressors that sojourners

confront arise from experience with members of the host society, with its unfamiliar cultural

norms and not always friendly attitudes toward foreigners. Perceiving the host society as in some

way forbidding is detrimental to sojourner adaptation and functioning in the new cultural

environment (e.g., perceiving discrimination; Wilson, Ward, & Fischer, 2013). Moreover, such

perceptions may prevent a sojourner from realizing his or her potential while abroad. For

example, they may indirectly affect work (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2005;

Hechanova, Beehr, & Christiansen, 2003) or academic outcomes (Hwang, Wang, & Sodanine,

2011; Tsang, 2001), and lead to early return to the home country.

    One major source that may buffer stress amongst sojourners is their social capital. For

instance, the social context provides the sojourner with a sense of social identification and other

social ties which, one could expect, should be empowering and facilitate dealing with the stress

of intercultural transitions. The reality, however, appears to be more complex with evidence

suggesting that social capital may be either beneficial or devastating to sojourner adaptation

depending on what group provides it (cf. Geeraert, Demoulin, & Demes, 2014; Hendrickson,

Rosen & Aune, 2011; Kashima & Loh, 2006; Berry, Phinney, Sam & Vedder, 2006). The current

study explores this ambiguity and investigates the moderating role of two sources of

identification, the co-national group and the group of fellow foreigners, in cross-cultural

adaptation of international students.

Perceived Discrimination and Intergroup Threat as Sources of Sojourner Stress

Cross-cultural adaptation, often defined in terms of the amount of stress or degree of comfort associated with sojourning abroad (Bhaskar-Shrinivas at al., 2005), may be viewed as a process of coping with the stressors present in international transitions (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001; see also Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2014). The literature distinguishes between socio-cultural (sojourner social functioning within the host culture) and psychological adaptation (sojourner well-being). While both dimensions are empirically related and predicted by similar stress-related factors (e.g., perceived discrimination; see Wilson et al., 2013; Zhang & Goodson, 2011), the stress and coping perspective has generally been used to predict psychological adaptation rather than socio-cultural adaptation.

Stressors are broadly defined as "events impinging on the person" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 12). An international transition not only constitutes such an event in itself (Ward et al., 2001), but is also accompanied by a number of more specific stressors due to changing one's cultural environment. For instance, after moving to a new country a sojourner interacts with locals, and this interaction often takes the form of intergroup contact in which the foreignness of the sojourner is salient. Such contact may be stressful, especially when it involves perceived discrimination. The experience of discrimination causes individuals to perceive a hostile social environment, which leads to increased stress and undermines psychological health in minority members (Meyer, 2003).

Irrespective of how much it corresponds to actual unequal treatment based on group membership (e.g., being denied a job or housing because of one's foreign nationality), the appraisal of discrimination towards one's national, cultural or ethnic group as such is detrimental for people's social functioning and well-being, considering it threatens one's social identity and leads to feelings of rejection that are harmful to people's self-esteem (Branscombe et al., 1999).

There is robust meta-analytical evidence from various minority samples, including sojourners and migrants, that perceived discrimination is indeed negatively associated to well-being (Schmitt et al., 2014) and sojourner socio-cultural adaptation ($r = -.50$; Wilson et al., 2013).

Symbolic threat, or the discrepancy between the norms, values, or beliefs of one's native culture and the host culture, is another potential social difficulty for sojourners (Stephan, Ybarra, & Bachman, 1999; Stephan & Stephan, 1996, 2000; Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2014). For example, people moving from a secular occidental country to a religious state may appraise the predominance of religion in social life as a threat to their own cultural identity associated with values such as freedom of conscience. People moving in the opposite direction may perceive the secular culture as threatening because its liberalism is perceived as incompatible with their country's moral norms. Given that most sojourners are exposed to the host culture on a daily basis, such symbolic threats may result in high levels of stress, translating into poor adaptation.

While there is some work associating symbolic threat with unfavorable individual-level outcomes (see Hofhuis, Van der Zee, & Otten, 2013, for one example), this earlier work has not included adaptation. At the intergroup level, symbolic threat has been consistently linked to negative outcomes (e.g., increased prejudice; Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006). These may translate into increased intergroup tension which, similarly to discrimination, is likely to contribute to a hostile and stressful social environment that undermines sojourner adaptation (see Meyer, 2003).

Ingroup Identification as a Coping Resource

In the present study, we assume that the extent to which perceived discrimination and intergroup threat will affect cross-cultural adaptation is determined by the effectiveness of

coping responses, both psychological (i.e., dealing with the emotions triggered by intercultural encounters, relevant to psychological adaptation) and behavioral (i.e., adapting one's behavior to the new socio-cultural context, relevant to socio-cultural adaptation; Ward et al., 2001; Masgoret & Ward, 2006). The acculturation literature views coping as a critical moderator between stressors faced by migrants and their adaptation to the host society, and a process profoundly shaped by the social context of acculturation (Kuo, 2011, 2014).

Coping depends heavily on the availability of resources (Hobfoll, 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Access to coping resources reduces the negative impact of stress in general (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll, Johnson, Ennis, & Jackson, 2003), and in intercultural situations in particular (e.g., Van Erp, Van der Zee, Giebels, & Van Duijn, 2013). One powerful example of a coping resource related to social interactions is social support, which has been shown to facilitate coping in general (Hobfoll, 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; see Taylor, 2011, for a more recent review, and Thoits, 2011, for a theoretical elaboration) and in cross-cultural contexts (Copeland & Norell, 2002; Lee, Koeske, & Sales, 2004; Podsiadlowski, Vauclair, Spiess, & Stroppa, 2013; Stroppa & Spieß, 2010; Wang et al., 2012). Since the effects of support are extensively documented, we consider that they should be controlled for when examining the role of the social context in sojourner adaptation.

Social identification has also been studied as a coping resource (e.g., Phinney, 1990; Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone, & Zimmerman, 2003; Gaudet, Clément, & Deuzeman, 2005; Haslam et al., 2006; Outten, Schmitt, Garcia & Branscombe, 2009; see also and Haslam, Jetten, Postmes & Haslam, 2009, for a review). However, in this case findings are more ambivalent. Work on intergroup relations tends to view identification with one's minority ingroup, such as the co-ethnic group, as beneficial (see Haslam et al., 2009, for a review) and associate it with

favorable individual level outcomes (e.g., well-being and life satisfaction, Outten et al., 2009; self-esteem, Phinney, 1990; less depressive symptoms, Gaudet et al., 2005; less psychological distress, Sellers et al., 2003). Moreover, minority group identification is seen as a buffer against intergroup stressors. For instance, according to the well-known rejection-identification model (Branscombe et al., 1999; Giamo, Schmitt, & Outten, 2012; Schmitt, Spears, & Branscombe, 2003), identifying with one's minority group (e.g., co-ethnic group, sexual minority, etc.) enhances a feeling of belonging and being accepted, which facilitates coping with perceived discrimination. This also applies to sojourners. In a study among international students in the USA, Schmitt and colleagues (2003) found that social identification with the minority group of foreign students (but interestingly not the co-national minority group) buffered the effect of perceived prejudice from locals, resulting in increased well-being and self-esteem. Finally, minority group identification increases a person's sense that they and their group can effectively cope with perceived discrimination, which results in higher levels of well-being (Outten et al., 2009).

At the same time, there is evidence suggesting that social identification may lead to either positive or negative outcomes depending on what social group one identifies with. Studies on acculturation show that strongly identifying with the heritage culture and rejecting the host national group (i.e., the acculturation strategy of separation) is associated with less favorable outcomes than identifying with both groups (i.e., integration), but still more favorable than rejecting both groups (i.e., marginalization) (Berry, 2006; Yoon et al., 2012). Berry, Phinney, Sam and Vedder (2006) report that minority members who strongly endorse their ethnic identity (i.e., have an "ethnic profile") are characterized by poor socio-cultural adaptation, although their well-being does not seem to suffer. Focusing mostly on migrants (Bierwiaczonek & Waldzus,

2016), acculturation research considers a combination of identification with the host- and co-national group, but not with other groups that could be relevant for short-term sojourners (e.g., the international student group). Although the possible buffering or aggravating effects of identification are definitely not a focus of acculturation research, this research supports our assumption that identifying with one's minority group may not always be beneficial for the sojourner.

In sum, while social identification appears to be highly relevant to sojourner adaptation, its role is ambivalent and needs to be clarified. Previous research makes us suspect that whereas local sources of identification favor adaptation, the sources that tie sojourners to the home country context may keep them from adapting to the host culture. It appears, moreover, that this distinction is not limited to the co-national vs. host-national group. For instance, the group of fellow international students might be assumed to be a group strongly associated with the host country context and thus be of particular relevance for adaptation (Schmitt et al, 2003; Kashima & Loh, 2006).

With the aim at clarifying the ambivalence of the role of identification in the adaptation context, the current study investigates the effects of two minority groups sojourners may potentially identify with: the co-national group, that is, the group related to the home context and the heritage culture (home country identification) and the international student group, which is related to the host country context but not the host country culture (identification with international student group; see also Kashima & Loh, 2006). In line with the stress and coping approach to adaptation, we suggest that ingroup identification should serve as a coping resource and therefore have positive effects on adaptation. However, different from previous research, we also suggest considering the different sources of identification as moderators of the effects of

cross-cultural stress. More precisely, we propose that the degree to which sojourners identify with a minority group should attenuate the detrimental effects of perceived discrimination and intergroup threat on adaptation, except if the group they identify with is strongly associated with the home culture (home country identification). In the latter case, identification with such a group should aggravate the negative influences of perceived discrimination and intergroup threat.

As such, we hypothesized as follows (see also Figure 1):

H1. *Higher levels of (a) perceived discrimination and (b) perceived symbolic threat among sojourners are associated with poorer adaptation.*

H2. *Higher levels of social identification are associated with higher levels of adaptation.*

H3. *The negative effects of perceived discrimination and perceived symbolic threat are moderated by social identification. More specifically, the negative association between these two stressors and adaptation is weaker for participants reporting higher levels of identification with the group of international students (H3a). In contrast, the negative association between stressors and adaptation is aggravated by home country identification (H3b).*

[Figure 1 about here]

The Present Study

We tested our hypotheses in an online questionnaire study on a sample of international students. This population is known to be relatively well immersed in the host society and relatively highly motivated to adapt (Ward et al., 2001). Whereas international students may come from countries which have a higher or lower level of economic development than their

host country, their own socio-economic status is relatively high, especially when compared to some migrant groups.

As dependent variables, we measured two dimensions of cross-cultural adaptation: psychological and socio-cultural adaptation. As predictors, we assessed perceived discrimination, symbolic threat, home country identification and identification with the group of international students. This latter source of social identification was chosen for its high relevance for international students (Schmitt et al., 2003; Kashima & Loh, 2006) and for its interesting feature of belonging to the local context without being part of the host culture, a possibility that has not been studied under the acculturation framework. Because social identification may be interrelated with sojourner perceptions of social support, we also assessed this latter factor as a control variable. This study design allowed us to compare sources of social capital that evoke the home country context and culture (home country identification), and that do not evoke any specific culture, despite clearly belonging to the host country context (identification with international students).

Methods

Sample and Procedure

Emails requesting assistance with the recruitment of participants were sent to the International Offices of ten European universities from the list of the top 100 institutions receiving Erasmus students (European Union, 2013), one top university per country. Because this strategy turned out to be insufficient, we additionally emailed 15 different universities from the three European countries with the greatest number of international students (Germany, United Kingdom, France; UNESCO, 2014). Four universities agreed to email the link to our online survey to their current international students, and two other universities published it on

their social media profiles. Four hundred and thirty students opened the link and 248 completed the questionnaire, resulting in a 42% dropout rate. This number is high yet comparable with the usual dropout rate in online studies (Galesic, 2006).

Twenty-eight participants were not international students and were not included in the data analysis. Of the 220 participants retained for further analysis, 29% were male, 69% female, and 3% did not indicate their gender. The average participant age was 22.39 years. These numbers were similar in the overall population of Erasmus students in 2012/2013, where 61% were female, and the mean age was 22 years (European Union, 2014). In our sample, 45 countries were represented, most of them European (including Germany, 12%; Spain, 8%, Czech Republic, 5%; Italy, 5%; Portugal, 5%; UK, 5%, and other countries with less than 5%). Among non-European countries, students from the USA were the most numerous (10% of the overall sample). Participants were sojourning in eight European countries (Denmark, 38%; Slovenia, 27%; Germany, 18%; France, 11%; Czech Republic, 4%; Spain, 1%; The Netherlands, one case, and UK, one case) and one non-European country (Canada, one case). Most participants (65%) were Bachelor students, 29% were Master students, 4% PhD students, and 3% studied toward other degrees, which is comparable to the overall Erasmus student population (67% Bachelor, 29% Master, 1% PhD in 2012-2013; European Union, 2014). In our sample, the majority of students majored in social sciences (28%), followed by languages (20%), humanities and arts (14%), exact sciences (13%), medicine and health sciences (9%), technology and engineering (7%), law (5%), business (4%) and sports (less than 1%). Most participants (91%) reported a length of sojourn in the host country between one and four months at the time of measurement, 3% reported less than one month, 3% between four and 24 months, and another 3% more than 24 months.

Assessment Instruments

All measures were administered in English and relied on 5-point Likert scales to assess the variables of interest. Scale reliability reported below refers to the current sample.

Adaptation measures. *Psychological Adaptation* was measured using the Brief Psychological Adaptation Scale (BPAS; Demes & Geeraert, 2014; Cronbach's α = .82). This 8-item scale is, to our knowledge, the only measure of psychological outcomes specific for the cross-cultural context. Although recent, it has been validated on a large sample of sojourners (*N* = 1,929) and shown to correlate in expected directions with constructs typically used in research to operationalize psychological adjustment (stress, anxiety, self-esteem, and satisfaction with life; see Demes & Geeraert, 2014). Sample items are: "In the last 2 weeks, how often have you felt excited about being in your host country?" (+) and "In the last 2 weeks, how often have you felt out of place, like you don't fit into the host country's culture?" (-).

Socio-cultural Adaptation was assessed with a 18-item version (α = .87) of the Socio-cultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). SCAS has been widely used and validated in various samples of sojourners, including international students (Wilson et al., 2013). Participants were asked how difficult it was for them, compared to the locals, to deal with everyday matters in the host country (e.g., "Making friends", "Getting used to the pace of life", "Understanding what is required of you at university"). In this study, reversed coding was used so that higher scores indicated better adaptation.

Predictor measures. *Perceived Discrimination* was measured with a 5-item scale adapted from the International Comparative Study of Ethno-cultural Youth (ICSEY; Berry et al., 2006; see also Ward, Stuart, & Kus, 2011). The items assess perceptions of being mistreated because of one's foreign nationality (e.g. "I have been teased or insulted because of my foreign

background"). Initially, we also considered *Perceived Prejudice* as a distinct variable. Whereas perceived discrimination refers to sojourner perceptions of host nationals' actual discriminating behaviors, perceived prejudice refers to sojourner perceptions of host nationals' overall negative attitudes toward sojourners' ingroup (Allport, 1954). In practice, these variables are often confounded, and we did not find any scale that would correspond with Allport's definition. As such, this construct was assessed with one self-developed item: "From your experience, how do local people usually feel toward people of your nationality?" with answers ranging from "very negative" to "very positive". An exploratory factor analysis with maximum likelihood estimation performed on all the six items of these two measures extracted one factor only (all loadings > .50) explaining 47.90% of variance. Therefore, the six items were averaged into one scale, with greater scores indicating more perceived discrimination ($\alpha = .84$).

Symbolic Threat was assessed with five items adapted from Stephan, Ybarra, and Bachman (1999). Their intergroup threat measure in its original form includes, besides symbolic threat, two other subscales: realistic threat and intergroup anxiety. However, we considered that the former one, with items referring to economic competition between groups, is rather inadequate for international students, while the latter one, tapping into emotional reactions to the outgroup, is excessively similar to our outcome measures. As such, only items referring to symbolic threat were used. This measure was previously used in several studies (Stephan & Stephan, 2000; see also Riek et al., 2006). A sample item is: "The values and beliefs of local people regarding moral and religious issues are not compatible with the beliefs and values of most people in my country" ($\alpha = .75$).

Social Identification was measured with five items from the ingroup identification scale developed by Leach and colleagues (2008). The full scale is composed of 14 items and two

higher order components: Self Investment (with subscales for Solidarity, Satisfaction and Centrality), and Self Definition (with subscales for Individual Self-Stereotyping and In-Group Homogeneity). We selected the items that we considered most relevant for the cross-cultural setting: two items from the Solidarity subscale, two items from the Satisfaction subscale, and one item from the Centrality subscale. The same items were used to assess home country identification (e.g. "I feel a bond with people from my country", $\alpha = .89$), and identification with international students (e.g., "I feel a bond with other foreign students", $\alpha = .77$).

Social Support. The 12-item Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS, Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988; Zimet, Powell, Farley, Werkman, & Berkoff, 1990). This scale has already been used in cross-cultural contexts (e.g., Jibeen & Khalid, 2010, Tonsing, 2013). It it assesses three dimensions of social support (support from the family, from friends and from a significant other), but because in this study social support was only a control variable, we opted for using the overall scale ($\alpha = .90$). Sample items were: "I get the emotional help and support I need from my family", "My friends really try to help me" and "There is a special person who is around when I am in need".

Sociodemographic questions. Finally, we asked participants about their gender, age, host and home country, length of stay in the host country at the time of measurement and intended length of stay, host university, studied discipline and study level. [1]

Results

Correlation Analyses

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[1] We also measured sociometric status, relative social status, intercultural personality traits and the amount of cross-cultural contact at the university and outside the university. However, these variables are not reported here because their exploration would go beyond the goals of this particular paper.

Descriptive statistics and correlations are shown in Table 1. Correlations between predictor variables did not exceed .50, revealing no serious multicollinearity issues. Correlations of Perceived Discrimination and Symbolic Threat with all outcome variables were significant and in the expected direction, offering preliminary support to H1a and H1b. H2 was also partially supported as Identification with International Students was positively correlated with both outcomes. However, no significant correlations with outcome measures were found for Home country identification (all ps > .26). None of the correlations between predictors and outcomes was strong (all rs < .37). Finally, none of the four sociodemographic variables included in the correlation analysis yielded significant positive correlations with any of the outcomes (all ps > .07). The remaining correlations with outcome measures were non-significant (all ps > .27).

[Table 1 about here]

Regression Analyses

Our hypotheses were tested in a series of hierarchical multiple regressions. The results of these analyses are reported in Table 2. Because the Shapiro-Wilk test was significant ($p < .001$) for Psychological Adaptation, indicating deviations from the normal distribution, we used bootstrap with 5000 samples and bias-corrected accelerated confidence intervals.

When examining multiple interactions, it is recommended to enter all of the moderator effects in a single step after all of the predictor and moderator variables (Frazier, Tix, & Barron, 2004). We followed this procedure. Predictor variables and their interactions were entered in two blocks (see Table 2): Perceived Discrimination, Symbolic Threat in Step 1, Identification with International Students and Home country identification in Step 2, Social Support in Step 3, and interaction terms for Perceived Discrimination and both moderators and for Symbolic Threat and both moderators in Step 4. The same hierarchical regression was repeated for both outcome measures. All predictors were mean-centered. For significant interactions, separate regressions were performed to analyze simple slopes at 1 *SD* below the mean of the moderator, at the mean level of the moderator, and 1 *SD* above the mean of the moderator.

Testing H1: Relations of Perceived Discrimination and Symbolic Threat with Indicators of Adaptation. We hypothesized that Perceived Discrimination (H1a) and Symbolic Threat (H1b) have a negative effect on cross-cultural adaptation. Indeed, the overall model with the two predictors (Step 1) was significant for both outcome variables. Perceived Discrimination was negatively related to both dimensions of adaptation. Symbolic Threat was negatively associated with Socio-cultural Adaptation, but not with Psychological Adaptation. Overall, H1 was partially supported.

[Table 2 about here]

Testing H2: Relations of Social Identification and Social Support with Indicators of Adaptation. Adding Social Identification to the model only improved prediction significantly for Psychological Adaptation. Social Identification with International Students was positively related to Psychological Adaptation even when controlling for Social Support (Step 3), but not to Socio-Cultural Adaptation. Home country identification was unrelated to Socio-Cultural Adaptation and even negatively related to Psychological Adaptation. Therefore, only partial support for H2 was found.

Testing H3: Interactions of Perceived Discrimination and Symbolic Threat with Identification and Support. For interactions between the variables, we expected either negative or positive moderation effects depending on the source (H3). As Table 2 (Step 4) shows, adding interactions to the model improved prediction for both outcomes.

Significant effects for the interaction between Perceived Discrimination and Identification with international students were found for Psychological Adaptation, but not for Socio-cultural Adaptation. For this interaction, the unstandardized simple slopes at the mean level of identification (B = -.32, SE = .06, $p < .001$) and 1 SD below the mean were significant (B = -.51, SE = .08, $p < .001$), while the simple slope at 1 SD above the mean was not ($p > .05$). In other words, participants who identified more strongly with the group of international students were less affected by perceived discrimination from locals in their psychological adaptation than low-identifiers (see Figure 2).

Another significant moderation effect, but in the opposite direction, was found for the interaction between Symbolic Threat and Home country identification when predicting Socio-cultural Adaptation. In this case, the three simple slopes were significant (B = -.27, SE = .07, $p < .001$ at 1 SD above the mean of Home country identification; B = -.23, SE = .05, $p < .001$ at the

mean; $B = -.19$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$ 1 SD below the mean). Students who identified strongly with their home country were more affected by symbolic threat than low-identifiers in terms of their socio-cultural adaptation (Figure 3).

Discussion

Overall, our results support the hypothesis that cross-cultural adaptation is negatively related to perceiving discrimination (all adaptation outcomes) and symbolic threat (Socio-Cultural Adaptation). Moreover, social identification with the group of fellow international students was positively associated with Psychological Adaptation, supporting the idea that identification may serve as a coping resource in the cross-cultural adaptation context. Most importantly, however, we found different patterns of influence depending on the source of identification. On the one hand, identification with international students attenuated the negative relation between perceived discrimination and adaptation. On the other hand, home country identification aggravated the effect of threat.

For Socio-cultural Adaptation, adding interactions to the model improved its predictive power way more than adding main effects of identification, and for Psychological Adaptation nearly as much as adding main effects. This shows that it is worthwhile to consider identification as a moderator rather than a simple predictor of adaptation.

Minority group identification plays a twofold role in sojourner adaptation of international students. On the one hand, strong identification with international students facilitates adaptation and our moderation analysis shows that this is probably the case because it protects against the negative influences of perceived discrimination. On the other hand, strong identification with one's national group undermines adaptation, and the reason seems to be that it aggravates the

negative effect of perceived symbolic threat from the host society. The former finding is in line with what large part of the intergroup literature (e.g., Haslam et al., 2009; Outten et al., 2009; Gaudet et al., 2005; Giamo et al., 2012; Schmitt et al., 2003), and the rejection-identification model in particular (Branscombe et al., 1999) would suggest, confirming that identification may act as a coping resource for individuals who deal with intercultural transitions.

However, the latter finding indicates that this is only true for identification with some minority groups. Identification with the home country may actually prevent an individual from adapting and render symbolic threat even more harmful. In some way, this aggravating effect corresponds with findings from acculturation research. For instance, Berry and colleagues (2006) showed a negative association between an "ethnic profile", characterized by a strong identification with one's heritage culture, and socio-cultural adaptation, but not with psychological adaptation. Similarly in our study, socio-cultural and academic adaptation suffered most from the negative influence of home country identification.

These results add to what was found in previous research. For instance, Schmitt and colleagues' (2003) study conducted with a similar sample in the American context found a protective effect of identification with the group of international students, but no effect for identification with co-nationals. The authors argued that membership in a specific national group and its collective experience was not relevant to participants' experiences with discrimination, whereas the group of international students was. In their view, participants faced discrimination as foreign students, and not as nationals of a specific country, and identification with the group of international students was protective because that category was relevant in this context.

While this explanation may be valid in our case as well, it must be considered that the context of our study is different. First, our participants were overwhelmingly European and

sojourning in other European countries. Most student exchange within Europe is covered by the Erasmus program, and participating in the program is highly regarded. Hence, the Erasmus students group is attractive. Although this may not entirely protect Erasmus students against discrimination, it is also unlikely that the membership in this group would have a particular association with discrimination. We are inclined to think that in this specific case, the group of Erasmus students is the relevant group not because, as Schmitt and colleagues argued, it is discriminated, but because membership connects the individual to the local context of the host country. This group is the one Erasmus students interact with in their day-to-day life abroad, share similar experience and similar intercultural challenges with, and form friendships within. It is, therefore, the feeling of belonging to a valuable and meaningful social group present in the host country and available on a daily basis, which has a protective function.

Second, similar to Schmitt and colleagues (2003), we did not find any main effects of home country identification. We found, however, that a high identification with one's national group indeed makes adaptation more difficult when the host culture is perceived as threatening and incompatible with one's native culture. Similarly, van der Zee, Atsma and Brodbeck (2004) reported that identification with one's cultural background had a negative effect on well-being in student groups characterized by high cultural diversity, which could also be associated with symbolic threat. In contrast to the student group, the national ingroup is not associated with the local context of the host country, but it represents a cultural reality that participants have temporarily left behind. It seems that it is the feeling of belonging elsewhere, to a distant cultural reality, that undermines well-being and adaptation. The more the ties with that distant culture are valued, the more difficult it becomes to handle the perceived dissimilarity of the host culture.

Moreover, the differential effects of co-national identification and identification with international students on adaptation may be interpreted in terms of the availability of the two groups as sources of social support. Compared to the group of international students, co-nationals may be less available and thus less likely to be considered as a primary source of support. Consequently, identifying with the student group may be more efficient in protecting one's well-being against perceived discrimination (as predicted by the rejection-identification model). In contrast to that, when one's identification with the heritage culture is strong and perceived as threatened, one may cope with it by diminishing identification with, or cross-cultural adaptation to, the majority culture, as suggested by the rejection-disidentification model (Jasinskaya-Lahti, Liebkind & Solheim, 2009).

Finally, it is also worth noting that the buffering role of identification with the group of international students and the aggravating role of identification with the home country were consistent across most outcomes (except Academic Adaptation for the former factor and Psychological Adaptation for the latter factor). Thus, identification appears to be a relevant factor for a broad scope of dimensions and contexts of adaptation.

Taken together, our findings demonstrate the importance of specific features of the minority group one identifies with. They speak in favor of the argument that having strong social ties within the local context of the host country, but not necessarily with the host-national group, is a coping resource, while having strong social ties with the home country context is counter-adaptive. Going beyond a simple replication of the negative effects of heritage culture identification suggested by previous research (Berry, 2006; Berry et al., 2006; Yoon et al., 2012), our study sheds some light on the mechanism behind these effects showing that high levels of

home country identification may make cultural differences and social difficulties encountered by the sojourner even more insurmountable.

Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into the twofold role of social identification for sojourners, it has several limitations. One of them is its cross-sectional character, which does not allow for grasping the causal relations between the examined factors. As a consequence, the processes behind our findings remain speculative. While experimental studies might be difficult in the real life context of actual cross-cultural adaptation, longitudinal studies in particular are necessary to clarify the directionality of these relations.

Second, because international samples are difficult to access, and it is even more difficult to obtain any data that would go beyond self-reports, our study was conducted online and relied on self-reports to guarantee that a sufficient number of observations would be collected. This may not be without influence on the validity of our findings, although it corresponds with the usual way of proceeding in adaptation research.

Third, while our results are consistent with our moderation hypothesis, it must be noted that we did not find significant effects on all subscales of adaptation. Moreover, the effect sizes of the main and interaction effects of perceived discrimination and identification with international students were much larger than the effects of threat and home country identification. Yet, these latter effects are still theoretically and practically relevant and deserve to be addressed by future research.

Finally, this study focused on a sample composed mainly of students from Western countries and sojourning in Western countries. One could argue that probably these students suffered relatively little discrimination and were threatened by the host culture to a relatively

small extent. Indeed, the means of these variables in our sample were rather low and there was little variation in their scores ($M = 1.70$, $SD = 0.66$, and $M = 2.32$, $SD = 0.79$, respectively). The fact, however, that even in such circumstances we were still able to detect main and moderation effects for both factors offers additional support for the relevance of these effects for the international student population. Still, it would be worthwhile to address this issue in future research by testing whether the patterns remain the same for sojourner samples with higher levels and stronger variation of perceived discrimination and intergroup threat.

Conclusions and Implications for Research and Practice

In conclusion, this study brings at least two novel contributions with several implications for both research and practice. The first contribution consists of clarifying that if strong ties (identification) with home country groups are associated with worse adaptation outcomes (as shown by previous research; Berry, 2006; Berry et al., 2006; Yoon et al., 2012), it is probably because a strong sense of connection with the home culture translates into a greater difficulty in dealing with the potentially threatening norms and values of the host culture (symbolic threat). The second contribution consists of a step toward conciliating two literatures: research on social identification that has emphasized the positive implications of strong ties with one's minority ingroup, and acculturation research that has suggested that strong ties with the national group may have negative effects for acculturating individuals if they prevail over ties with the host national group (separation; Berry, 2006; Yoon at al., 2012). Our results show that indeed, minority group identification is positive and may serve as a coping resource as long as the group at stake does not evoke the home country context.

However, it remains an open question whether ties with social groups only support adaptation when these groups belong to the local context, or the lack of association with the

home country context is sufficient. Future research could further explore the protective or aggravating role of social ties with different groups and check whether the results vary when a context to which they belong is specified (e.g., host-national friends, co-national friends) or unspecified (e.g., friends). It should also look more closely at other possible contexts and conditions that determine if a protective or a counter-adaptive effect is obtained.

This study also has implications for policymakers and authors of insertion programs at institutions hosting international students, and possibly other international groups (e.g., companies with international employees, organizations working with recent migrants). Since, as we have shown, identification with social groups within the new cultural context is protective and facilitates adaptation, interventions aiming at promoting foreigners' inclusion in such groups could be an effective way to support their adaptation process.

Such interventions should focus on similarities rather than national differences, but they do not necessary need to target groups belonging to the mainstream culture. As our findings suggest, the actual presence of the group within the new cultural context is enough to provide the foreigner with a feeling of belonging to this context. Ideally, such a group should represent to foreigners what the international students group represented to our participants: a shared experience, availability on a daily basis, friendship ties, etc.

Interestingly, such groups emerge spontaneously. For example, clubs for expatriate employees sojourning in specific locations (e.g., InterNations with their branches in a number of locations, IamExpats for expatriates in the Netherlands, Costa Women for female expatriates in Spain, etc.) have members of diverse nationalities who engage in common online and offline activities. Whereas these are formed out of the need of their members, it may be possible to stimulate and support the creation of similar groups based, for example, on common interests

(music, sport) or common causes (working for local communities, ecology, taking care of senior

people), by policy and strategic initiatives undertaken by organizations working in the field of

immigration.

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Tables

Table 1.

Descriptive statistics and correlations between study variables.

		M	SD	Min	Max	1	2	3
1	Sociocultural Adaptation	3.67	0.59	2.06	4.88			
2	Psychological Adaptation	3.82	0.63	1.38	5.00	.57**		
3	Perceived Discrimination	1.70	0.67	1.00	4.00	-.37**	-.34**	
4	Symbolic Threat	2.33	0.79	1.00	4.40	-.29**	-.27**	.48**
5	Home Country Identification	3.62	0.95	1.00	5.00	.08	-.03	-.10
6	Identification - Students	4.01	0.67	1.80	5.00	.18**	.22**	-.07
7	Social Support	4.10	0.74	1.00	5.00	.25**	.18**	-.26**
8	Lenght of Stay					.12	.03	.08
9	Intended Lenght of Stay					-.05	.01	.03
10	Gender (Male)					.04	.09	.02
11	Age	22.49	3.23	19.00	43.00	-.04	-.02	-.06

Note. Spearman's rank correlation coefficients are reported. Descriptive statistics are not provided for interval and categorical data (variables 8 – 10). Cases with missing data deleted pairwise ($216 < n < 220$).

Table 1 *continued*

		4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	Sociocultural Adaptation							
2	Psychological Adaptation							
3	Perceived Discrimination							
4	Symbolic Threat							
5	Home Country Identification	-.01						
6	Identification - Students	-.03	.25**					
7	Social Support	-.18**	.15*	.18**				
8	Lenght of Stay	.14*	.02	.00	.01			
9	Intended Lenght of Stay	.13*	-.07	-.06	-.09	.26**		
10	Gender (Male)	-.08	-.06	-.19**	-.22**	.10	.10	
11	Age	-.03	.01	-.02	-.01	.02	.04	.12

Note. Spearman's rank correlation coefficients are reported. Descriptive statistics are not provided for interval and categorical data (variables 8 – 10). Cases with missing data deleted pairwise (216 <n<220).

Table 2.

Hierarchical Regressions with All Predictors and Moderators.

	Socio-cultural Adaptation					Psychological Adaptation				
	B	*SE*	*p*	*CI_low*	*CI_high*	*B*	*SE*	*p*	*CI_low*	*CI_high*
Step1										
Constant	3.67	0.04	.00	3.59	3.74	3.81	0.04	.00	3.73	3.89
Perceived Discrimination	-0.25	0.06	.00	-0.37	-0.13	-0.28	0.08	.00	-0.43	-0.11
Symbolic Threat	-0.12	0.06	.04	-0.23	0.00	-0.11	0.07	.11	-0.23	0.02
	$R^2_{adj.} = .14$***					$R^2_{adj.} = .13$***				
	$F(2, 211) = 17.65$					$F(2, 211) = 17.31$				
Step 2										
Constant	3.67	0.04	.00	3.60	3.73	3.81	0.04	.00	3.74	3.89
Perceived Discrimination	-0.24	0.06	.00	-0.35	-0.12	-0.29	0.08	.00	-0.43	-0.14
Symbolic Threat	-0.12	0.05	.03	-0.23	-0.01	-0.10	0.06	.11	-0.22	0.02
Home Country Identification	0.02	0.04	.73	-0.07	0.10	-0.11	0.05	.04	-0.21	-0.01
Identification - Students	0.13	0.07	.08	-0.01	0.27	0.23	0.07	.00	0.09	0.38
	$\Delta R^2 = .02$					$\Delta R^2 = .07$***				
	$R^2_{adj.} = .15$***					$R^2_{adj.} = .20$***				
	$F(4, 209) = 10.38$					$F(4, 209) = 13.91$				
Step 3										
Constant	3.67	0.04	.00	3.60	3.73	3.81	0.04	.00	3.74	3.89
Perceived Discrimination	-0.21	0.06	.00	-0.33	-0.09	-0.26	0.08	.00	-0.40	-0.11
Symbolic Threat	-0.11	0.05	.04	-0.21	0.00	-0.09	0.06	.12	-0.21	0.03
Home Country Identification	0.01	0.04	.91	-0.08	0.09	-0.12	0.05	.02	-0.23	-0.01
Identification - Students	0.11	0.07	.13	-0.03	0.25	0.22	0.07	.00	0.09	0.36
Social Support	0.11	0.06	.08	-0.01	0.24	0.03	0.05	.51	-0.06	0.11
	$\Delta R^2 = .02$*					$\Delta R^2 = .01$				
	$R^2_{adj.} = .16$***					$R^2_{adj.} = .20$***				
	$F(5, 208) = 9.36$					$F(5, 208) = 11.39$				

Step 4

	B	SE	p	LL	UL		B	SE	p	LL	UL
Constant	3.67	0.04	.00	3.60	3.74		3.82	0.04	.00	3.74	3.90
Perceived Discrimination	-0.21	0.06	.00	-0.32	-0.10		-0.27	0.07	.00	-0.41	-0.14
Symbolic Threat	-0.10	0.05	.05	-0.21	0.01		-0.09	0.06	.15	-0.21	0.05
Home Country Identification	0.01	0.04	.80	-0.07	0.09		-0.10	0.05	.04	-0.20	-0.01
Identification - Students	0.11	0.07	.10	-0.03	0.25		0.23	0.07	.00	0.10	0.37
Social Support	0.12	0.07	.08	-0.01	0.25		0.06	0.05	.25	-0.04	0.17
Perceived Discrimination X Home Country Identification	0.07	0.06	.24	-0.05	0.24		0.01	0.09	.88	-0.16	0.23
Perceived Discrimination x Identification - Students	0.12	0.09	.16	-0.06	0.29		0.33	0.11	.00	0.11	0.55
Symbolic Threat x Home Country Identification	-0.11	0.06	.04	-0.23	-0.03		-0.10	0.09	.28	-0.26	0.04
Symbolic Threat x Identification - Students	0.07	0.05	.17	-0.03	0.16		-0.01	0.06	.84	-0.13	0.08

$\Delta R^2 = .04*$ $\Delta R^2 = .06**$

$R^2_{adj.} = .19***$ $R^2_{adj.} = .25***$

$F(9, 204) = 6.52$ $F(9, 204) = 8.75$

Note. Non-standardized regression coefficients are reported. Missing data deleted listwise ($n = 213$).

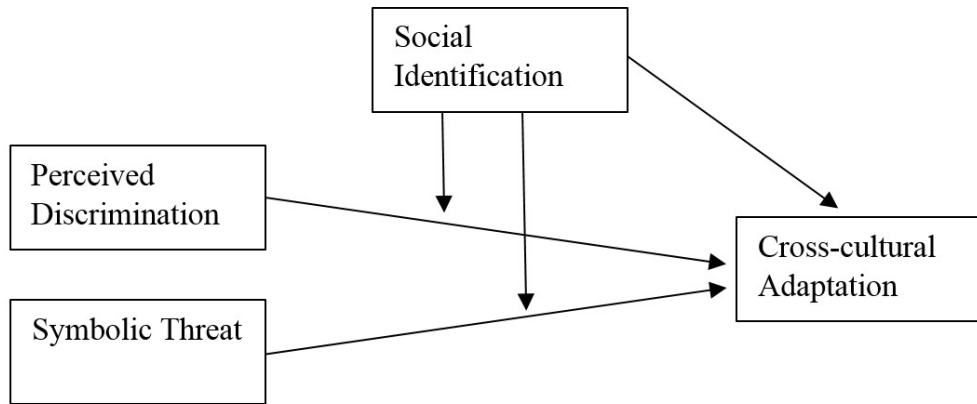Bootstrap with 5000 samples, bias-corrected accelerated 95% confidence intervals.

Figures

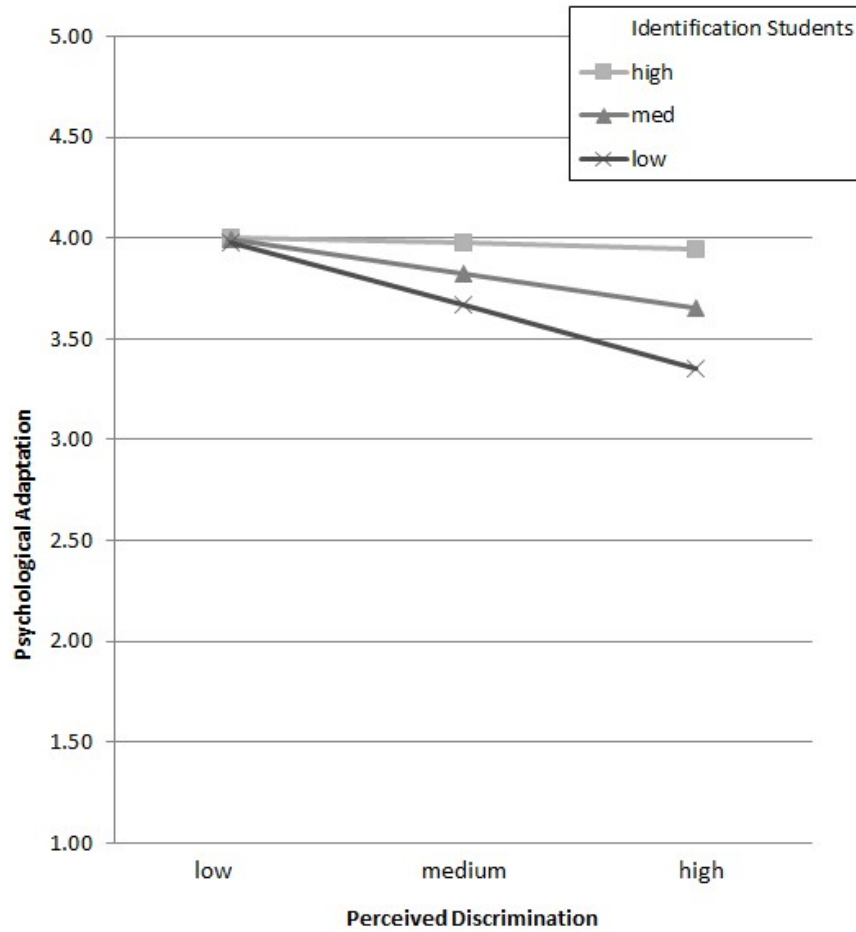Figure 1: Hypothesized relationships between variables

Figure 2: Interaction between Perceived Discrimination and Identification with International Students for Psychological Adaptation
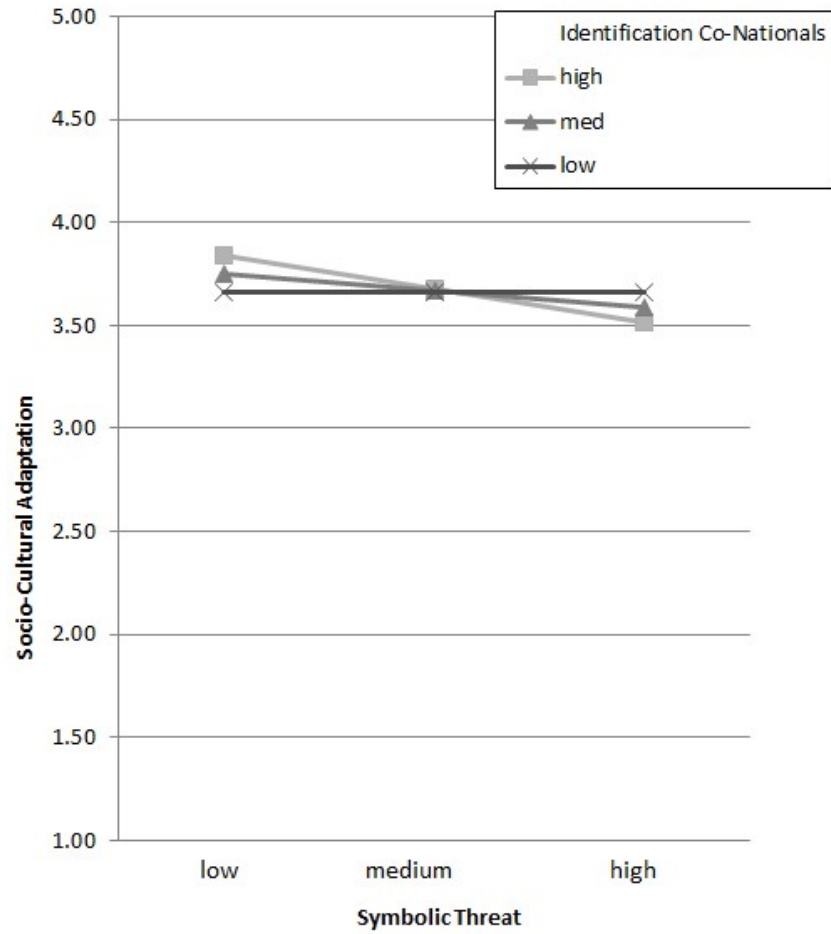
Figure 3: Interaction between Symbolic Threat and Home Country Identification for Socio-Cultural Adaptation