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Intercultural Sensitivity and Prosocial Behavior towards South Asians in Hong Kong: Mediating Mechanisms of Warmth and Stigma

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Declarations

Ethics Approval

The present study has been approved by ethics committee at The Education University of Hong Kong (Ref: T-18-15) and has been conducted in accordance with the ethical standards in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments.

Consent

Prior to the administration of the study, written informed consent was sought from all participants.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Data, Materials and/or Code availability

The dataset analyzed in this article is not publicly available. Requests to access the dataset should be directed to rymcheung@eduhk.hk.

Abstract

Previous research shows that intercultural sensitivity is associated with a myriad of positive outcomes. However, few studies have examined the mechanisms for why and how it is related to positive experiences. To fill the gap in the literature, the present study tested the mediating roles of warmth and stigma between intercultural sensitivity and prosocial behaviors towards South Asians in Hong Kong. A total of 151 Chinese university students in Hong Kong (107 female, 70.86%), ranging in age from 18 to 26 years (M = 21.31; SD = 1.77), completed a self-report questionnaire that assessed the variables under study. Structural equation modeling was conducted to investigate the mediation model. The findings revealed that intercultural sensitivity was related to greater warmth towards South Asians. Greater warmth was, in turn, related to lower stigma, which was then associated with greater prosocial behavior towards South Asians in Hong Kong. Bootstrapping analysis further showed that warmth and stigma were mediators between intercultural sensitivity and prosocial behavior. The present study adds new evidence to the literature by demonstrating the correlates of intercultural sensitivity. Specifically, the findings demonstrated the mediating roles of warmth and stigma between intercultural sensitivity and prosocial behavior towards ethnic minorities in Hong Kong. As a practical implication, this study calls for policies to increase positive intercultural encounters in the public and across service sectors in the society. To holistically understand and enhance positive intercultural encounters, it is therefore crucial to examine both positive and negative correlates between ethnic groups.

Keywords: ethnic minorities, Hong Kong, intercultural sensitivity, prosocial behavior, stigma, South Asians, warmth

Intercultural Sensitivity and Prosocial Behavior towards South Asians in Hong Kong: Mediating Mechanisms of Warmth and Stigma

Hong Kong is a multicultural city with a total of 584,383 ethnic minority residents, constituting 8% of total population, with a majority from South Asia or Southeast Asia (Census and Statistics Department, 2017, p.7). According to the local government, South Asians include people from Indian, Pakistani, Nepalese, Bangladeshi and Sri-Lankan heritages, whereas Southeast Asians include people from Filipino, Indonesian, and Thai heritages (Census and Statistics Department, 2017, p.21). The South Asians represent 14.5% of the total ethnic minority population (Census and Statistics Department, 2017, p.21). The poverty rate for South Asians is higher than that of the whole population (Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2018, p. 17). A quarter of all South Asians are living below the poverty line while half of all Pakistanis are poor (Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2018, p. 17). Thus, some South Asians, if not all, are marginalized and vulnerable. Although the ethnic minority population in Hong Kong has increased by 70.8% from 2006 to 2016, ethnic minorities continue to encounter discrimination in various areas, including transportation, accommodation, medical support, and educational opportunities (Bhowmik & Kennedy, 2016; Kwan et al., 2018; Valenzuela-Silva & Cheung, 2016). Inequalities in employment also take various forms. For example, some ethnic minorities face difficulties in accessing many jobs due to Chinese language requirements (Kapai, 2015). Some ethnic minorities who are already employed encounter unfair treatments

including “longer working hours, unfair dismissal, greater workload compared to colleagues, lower wages, lack of opportunities for promotion etc.” (Kapai, 2015, p.1). As a marginalized group, ethnic minorities in Hong Kong are also deemed stereotypically “deficient” (Jackson, 2017) and having a low level of education (Vandan et al., 2020). To understand why ethnic minorities are stigmatized in Hong Kong, this study tested a model of stigma and warmth as mediators between intercultural sensitivity and prosocial behavior towards South Asians.

According to Hammer et al. (2003), intercultural sensitivity refers to an ability to experience and be sensitive to cultural differences, such that people can behave and think appropriately in intercultural settings. Previous research suggests that intercultural sensitivity is associated with positive cognitive, affective, and behavioral change towards outgroups (Bennett, 2017). It is related to a myriad of outcomes including greater compassion, as reflected by more kindness, engagement, mindfulness, and perceived commonness in humanity, and lower indifference and separation (Arli & Bakan, 2018). Intercultural sensitivity is also related to greater empathy (Üzar-Özçetin et al., 2020), worldmindedness (Hammer et al., 2003), socialization with people from other cultures (Paige et al., 2003), and lower intercultural anxiety (Hammer et al., 2003). These findings suggest that intercultural sensitivity fosters positive encounters, such that people are warmer, more empathic, and more compassionate towards ethnic minorities. The positive experiences, in turn, may further facilitate prosocial behavior (Pittinsky & Montoya, 2016).

Previous research conducted in Hong Kong suggests the importance of promoting intercultural sensitivity, particularly in education (Grossman & Yuen, 2006; Yuen, 2016).

When people are interculturally sensitive, they are more capable of attuning to intercultural encounters by monitoring automatic thoughts (e.g., stereotypes) and reactive behavior (Devine, 1989) associated with stigma. Although existing studies focus primarily on intercultural sensitivity and positive attitudes or dynamics (Üzar-Özçetin et al., 2020), the link between intercultural sensitivity and stigma has also been documented. Notably, intercultural sensitivity inversely predicted ethnocentrism (Dong et al., 2008), which was indirectly associated with more discriminatory behavior (Perreault & Bourhis, 1999). People with greater open-mindedness, flexibility, and empathy during intercultural encounters also had lower prejudice and discrimination (Nesdale et al., 2012). Thus, the positive attitudes and emotions fostered by intercultural sensitivity may be associated with lower stigma towards devalued groups (Varas-Díaz et al., 2016). With lower stigma, people may be more likely to engage in prosocial behavior by virtue of actions that benefit ethnic minorities (Pryor et al., 2009).

The Present Study

Extant studies have gravitated towards a mediational approach to understand intercultural encounters (Cheung et al., 2020; Perreault & Bourhis, 1999). Consistent with the approach, this study hypothesized that greater warmth and lower stigma would mediate between intercultural sensitivity and prosocial behavior towards South Asians. To investigate alternative models, supplementary analyses were conducted with (a) warmth and stigma as parallel and independent mediators and (b) reversed direction of effects between warmth and stigma.

Method

Power analysis was conducted based on root mean square error of approximation (MacCallum, Browne & Sugawara, 1996). Specifically, when alpha = .05, *df* = 29, desired power = .80, null RMSEA = .10, and alternative RMSEA = .05, power analysis indicated that the minimum sample size was 144. A total of 151 Chinese university students residing in Hong Kong (107 female), ranging in age from 18 to 26 years (*M* = 21.31; *SD* = 1.77), were recruited through flyers advertised at the authors' institution and mass emails sent from the authors' institution. A total of 120 (79.47%) participants reported that they were born in Hong Kong. The remainder (20.53%) of the participants were born in Mainland China and had spent an average of 19.74 years (*SD* = 3.79) in Hong Kong. Most participants (*n* = 147) reported that Cantonese was the most frequently used language in their everyday lives. Thirty participants reported having spent time outside the Chinese context for over 3 months. Participants who were born in the Mainland China did not differ from those who were born in Hong Kong for all the variables under study, *p*s < .05.

Procedure

The study was approved by Human Research Ethics Committee of the authors' institution. Participants completed an online survey individually in a quiet room. Informed consent was sought prior to participation. All data were kept in strict confidentiality. Upon completion, participants received a restaurant coupon of HK$25 (~US$3.21).

Measures

Following the back-translation procedures (Bartram et al., 2018), the measures were translated from English to Chinese by two independent research assistants proficient

in Chinese and English. Discrepancies were resolved by the authors upon follow-up discussions.

Intercultural Sensitivity. A 24-item Intercultural Sensitivity Measure (Chen & Starosta, 2000) was used to assess intercultural sensitivity on a 5-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The measure had five subscales including interaction engagement, respect for cultural difference, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness. Sample items included "I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures" and "I often appreciate different views raised by people from different cultures." The scores of each subscale were averaged, with higher scores indicating greater intercultural sensitivity. Previous research indicated adequate reliability of this measure (Cronbach's alpha = .86; Chen & Starosta, 2000). In this study, Cronbach's alpha = .86.

Warmth. A one-item thermometer measure was created for this study. A similar one-item thermometer measure has also been used in previous research (Zestcott et al., 2017). Participants responded on a 0-100 scale to indicate how warm they felt towards South Asians. Higher scores indicated greater warmth.

Stigma. The 25-item Generic Stigma Scale (Mak et al., 2019) was used to assess stigma towards South Asians on a 6-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*), with three subscales including Emotions, Behavior, and Cognitions. Sample items included, "I am afraid of South Asians", "I avoid social interactions with South Asians", and "I believe South Asians should be segregated". The scores were averaged, with higher scores indicated greater stigma. In this study, Cronbach's alpha = .96.

Prosocial Behavior. Participants completed a one-item measure to indicate, hypothetically, the percentage of income they would like to donate to non-government organizations providing services to assist South Asians in Hong Kong. This measure was adapted from Piff et al. (2010), in which participants indicated their willingness for charitable donation by reporting the percentage of annual salary that they would like to allocate to charitable donation. A greater percentage indicated a bigger donation.

Data Analyses

Correlations, means, and *SD*s were examined as preliminary analyses. Structural equation modeling was conducted using Mplus 8.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2017) to examine warmth and stigma as mediators between intercultural sensitivity and prosocial behavior. No missing data were recorded for the study variables.

Results

Table 1 shows the correlations, means, and *SD*s of the variables. Men and women did not differ on the variables, *p*s > .05, except for warmth, with men rating significantly lower warmth (M = 34.61; SD = 24.53) than women (M = 44.18; SD = 24.13), $t(149) = 2.20$, $p < .05$.

The structural equation model fit adequately to the data, $\chi^2(29) = 49.26$, $p = .01$, CFI = .97, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .07 (see Figure 1 and Table 2). Intercultural sensitivity was related to warmth ($\beta = .25$, $p < .01$) and stigma ($\beta = -.37$, $p < .001$). Warmth was inversely related to stigma ($\beta = -.45$, $p < .001$) and positively related to prosocial behavior ($\beta = .28$, $p < .01$). Stigma was inversely related to prosocial behavior ($\beta = -.24$, $p < .05$). The mediating roles of warmth and stigma were tested via bootstrapping based on 10000 bootstrap samples with replacement. The 95% confidence interval [CI]

indicated that the indirect effects did not included a zero [CI: (.07, .31)]. Consistent with the hypothesis, warmth and stigma towards South Asians mediated between intercultural sensitivity and prosocial behavior.

Supplementary Analyses

In the supplementary analysis, warmth and stigma were entered as parallel and independent mediators between intercultural sensitivity and prosocial behavior. However, the model fit poorly, $\chi^2(30) = 83.87$, $p < .001$, CFI = .91, TLI = .87, RMSEA = .11, thereby ruling out warmth and stigma as parallel mediators.

When the direction between warmth and stigma was reversed (see Figure 2), the model fit was adequate, $\chi^2(29) = 49.26$, $p = .01$, CFI = .97, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .07. Intercultural sensitivity was inversely related to stigma ($\beta = -.49$, $p < .001$). Sigma was, then, inversely related to warmth and prosocial behavior ($\beta = -.54$, $p < .001$; $\beta = -.24$, $p < .05$). Warmth was positively related to prosocial behavior ($\beta = .28$, $p < .01$). Based on 10000 bootstrap samples with replacement, the 95% CI indicated that the indirect effects did not included a zero [CI: (.08, .33)], suggesting stigma and warmth mediated between intercultural sensitivity and prosocial behavior.

Discussion

This study examined a mediation model between intercultural sensitivity and prosocial behavior towards South Asians in Hong Kong by identifying warmth and stigma as mediators. Consistent with the hypotheses, intercultural sensitivity was associated with greater warmth and lower stigma, both of which were then related to prosocial behavior. Advancing existing relations between intercultural sensitivity, compassion (Arli & Bakan, 2018), and empathy (Üzar-Özçetin et al., 2020), the study

reveals that intercultural sensitivity was associated with greater warmth towards South Asians. As indexed by respect and interaction engagement, confidence, enjoyment, and attentiveness, greater intercultural sensitivity was also related to a lower level of stigma (Nesdale et al., 2012). As such, people who were interculturally sensitive were warmer and less stigmatized towards South Asians. These positive experiences were further linked to prosocial behavior, as indicated by the monetary donation amount towards needy South Asians in Hong Kong. As a practical implication, intercultural sensitivity is relevant to positive intercultural encounters including greater warmth, lower stigma, and greater prosocial behaviors towards ethnic minorities. This importantly calls for intercultural policies to inform the public and service sectors to build a more inclusive society.

In line with previous research showing the link between positive emotions and lower stigma towards devalued groups (Varas-Díaz et al., 2016), this study reveals that people with greater warmth towards South Asians also had a lower level of stigma towards them. Given that warmth and stigma were moderately related (*r*s = -.51 to -.45), they were, indeed, related though distinct constructs. Future longitudinal research is necessary to tease apart the relation and directionality of effects between warmth and stigma, as both the hypothesized model and the alternative model with a reversed directionality of effects showed good fit in this study. Interestingly, when warmth and stigma were entered to the model as independent and parallel mediators, the model fit was poor, suggesting that warmth and stigma might potentially be serial instead of parallel processes between intercultural sensitivity and prosocial behavior. To understand

the roles and temporal sequence of warmth and stigma in intercultural encounters, it is therefore crucial to further the investigation through a longitudinal design.

Finally, it is important to note that in this sample, women reported greater warmth towards South Asians than did men. This is consistent with previous studies showing that women reported greater warmth towards ethnic minorities (e.g., Highland et al., 2019). Given this sample consisted primarily of women, even though men and women from this sample did not differ on most of the variables under study, future studies should recruit a gender-balanced sample to further investigate the role of gender. Additionally, a small number of participants had living abroad experience (n = 30), and independent t-tests indicated that those who had lived abroad had greater interaction engagement (M = 3.85; SD = .39) than those who had not (M = 3.65; SD = .49), $t(148) = -2.09$, $p < .05$, whereas the other subscales of intercultural sensitivity did not differ. Given the small number of participants and potentially varying duration of living abroad, we were unable to examine whether the degree of exposure to other cultures was related to the variables. Thus, future studies could include a larger sample with participants having varying degrees of intercultural contact and exposure to other cultures.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

The study has several strengths and contributions, including the examination of multiple mediators underlying intercultural sensitivity and prosocial behavior, the use of novel assessments such as the thermometer measure, and the study of the model in Hong Kong, considering that the extant findings were based primarily on Western societies (e.g., Nesdale et al., 2012). However, several limitations should be noted. First, the cross-sectional design precluded us from identifying the temporal sequence or causal

relationship between variables. Therefore, longitudinal or experimental designs are necessary in the future. Second, this study relied on self-report, with two one-item measures and one newly developed measure (Mak et al., 2019). Although similar one-item measures had been used in previous research (Zestcott et al., 2017), other validated measures consisting of multiple items can be used in future studies to strengthen these constructs. In particular, participants may have different interpretations of the hypothetical income donation measure, since a donation of 20% of total income is unrealistically high. Future research could, instead, ask participants how much of HK$50 they would donate, in order to have a more direct and meaningful measure. Other than financial assistance, prosocial behaviors in everyday life towards the target group may be examined, for example, through reactions in interpersonal scenarios or judgments in job applications. Additionally, future studies should utilize multiple measures such as peer-report, observational data, and physiological data to minimize biases. Third, this study involved only university students. Future studies should generalize the findings to other populations. Fourth, participants who were affluent might have domestic helpers from diverse ethnic backgrounds, thereby affecting their attitudes toward ethnic minorities. Future studies should include socioeconomic status and experiences with ethnic minorities as covariates. Also, participants who were less affluent might have greater financial demands. Thus, they might have been less likely to donate their money to organizations, including those providing services for South Asians in Hong Kong. Finally, 79.47% reported that they were born in Hong Kong, with the remainder in Mainland China. Although the participants born in Mainland China had spent 19.74 years

(*SD* = 3.79 years) on average in Hong Kong, future studies may focus on a locally born sample to speak more directly about the situation in Hong Kong.

Conclusion

This cross-sectional study lends support to warmth and stigma as mediators between intercultural sensitivity and prosocial behavior towards South Asians in Hong Kong. As a take-home message, intercultural sensitivity is linked to greater positive dynamics between ethnic groups. The examination of longitudinal mechanisms through which intercultural sensitivity promotes positive dynamics merits future research investigation.

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