

Chinese International Students' Ingroup Bias and Collective Self-esteem

Qiwen Zheng^{1,a,*}

¹*Department of psychology, University of Exeter, Exeter, EX1 2FW, The United Kingdom*
a. zhengqiwen2021os@163.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: This study explores the influence of studying abroad on ingroup bias and collective self-esteem among Chinese international students in the US. Given the cultural differences between the two countries, Chinese students may face challenges and even discrimination when socializing with the host nationals. From the social identity perspective, such negative experiences can intensify feelings of being an outsider, leading to stronger adherence to their familiar group. In addition, to strengthen their social identity they may emphasize the positive attributes of the ingroup they belong to, which also enhances collective self-esteem. The present study hypothesizes that Chinese international students will exhibit higher ingroup bias and collective self-esteem related to their nationality than domestic Chinese students. Using a minimal group paradigm, the research aims to determine if overseas experiences heighten ingroup bias and collective self-esteem even without real-context comparisons. The findings provide insights into the complexities of cross-cultural interactions and the psychological impacts of studying abroad.

Keywords: ingroup bias, collective self-esteem, minimal group paradigm, international students

1. Introduction

The number of Chinese international students in the United States has been increasing for over a decade. Currently, China is the top country of origin for international students in the U.S. [1]. Given the significant cultural differences between these two countries, Chinese international students in the US often find themselves in unfamiliar and sometimes challenging environments. In Western educational contexts, East Asian international students, including those from China, often face challenges in socializing with host nationals' people due to the cultural disparities [2]. Furthermore, previous study has discovered that international students from nations with non-predominantly white populations experience more difficulty adjusting to their new culture and have a larger sense that they are not being treated equally compared to domestic counterparts [3]. Yakaboski et al. [4] further proved that students from non-Western nations experience heightened discrimination in college.

From a social identity perspective, experiencing discrimination can make an individual feel like an outsider or part of a marginalized group [5]. Such perception can lead international students to believe that the host country's residents form an exclusive group, pushing them to avoid interactions with locals and have stronger inclination to adhere to their own cultural background [6]. This differentiation between "us" (ingroup) and "them" (outgroup) simplifies interactions, with

assumptions that ingroup members have shared values and behaviours. Conversely, outgroup members are viewed as unpredictable with diverse motivations. There's a natural tendency to emphasize similarities within the ingroup and differences with the outgroup, subconsciously favouring the ingroup to alleviate perceived threat [7]. Furthermore, a study comparing Dutch students' attitudes towards countries perceived as competitive versus those perceived as non-competitive threats, suggests that perceived competition can also amplify ingroup bias [8]. In addition, another study using real context shows that fans of a losing team may experience threats to their identity and exhibit higher levels of ingroup bias [9]. Consequently, the emergence of bias is associated with the hostility towards the dominant outgroup when there's a perceived threat to the status of a minority group. When African-American students perceive unequal treatment in various contexts, they may develop more negative evaluations of the mainstream Caucasian majority and align more closely with their own minority group [10]. In such instances, ingroup bias not only accentuates one's group membership but also leads to increased reliance on the ingroup to establish a positive self-concept. This phenomenon has been corroborated in other minority groups as well. For instance, a longitudinal study shows Asian students tend to favour more co-nationals in their social networks [2]. Similarly, among international students from other countries, when interacting with students from the host nation, their status as international students place them in a minority group, leading to heightened identification [11]. Moreover, this study indicates that the occurrence of ingroup bias does not necessarily require the presence of outgroup discrimination. The aforementioned ingroup bias occurs under explicit identity recognition, such as nationality or ethnicity. The minimal group effect [12] suggests that such ingroup bias can still manifest even when group boundaries are essentially irrelevant and without historical intergroup conflicts. Consequently, this study seeks to investigate whether the overseas experiences of Chinese international student in the US influence the outcomes of the minimal group paradigm, leading to heightened ingroup bias even in the absence of tangible outgroup comparisons and threats.

Moreover, research suggests that self-esteem serves as a psychological buffer for international students when interacting with individuals from the host country [13]. Specifically, this refers to positive collective self-esteem, an individual's valuation of the group to which they belong [14], and such pride in one's identity can moderate the adverse effects of racial discrimination [15]. Studies also indicate that ingroup members who experience personal racial discrimination might generalize that all outgroup members hold similar negative beliefs, potentially exacerbating difficulties in interactions with outgroup members [15]. Furthermore, individuals tend to establish positive distinctiveness for their ingroup to bolster social identity, which further enhance their collective self-esteem as ingroup members [16]. For students studying abroad, affirming their national identity can shield their sense of self-worth from potential threats. Perceptions of competition or threats from outgroup members might amplify ingroup bias. However, the majority of existing research has predominantly focused on individual self-esteem, and present study we focus on changes in collective self-esteem related to nationality. Consequently, this research aims to explore whether the overseas experiences of students studying in the US lead to heightened ingroup bias under minimal group paradigm and elevated collective self-esteem associated with their Chinese nationality.

2. Hypothesis

The present study aims to compare ingroup bias and collective self-esteem of Chinese international students and domestic Chinese students. We propose two hypotheses:

1. Compared to non-international students, higher ingroup bias will be observed among Chinese international students.
2. Compared to non-international students, international students will exhibit higher collective self-esteem related to their Chinese nationality.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The present study's participants will be randomly recruited from different universities in the United States and China. To reduce the influence of confounding variables of language fluency, the experiences of studying abroad should be over two years for international students.

3.2. Procedures

Participants from international backgrounds undertook the study in the English language, while those without international affiliations utilized Mandarin for their participation. The study was conducted online, employing a questionnaire-based format. The participants will first be informed that the test's purpose is to find out whether individuals with different artistic preferences also have differences in other domains. Then they will be asked to indicate which of the two art images they prefer and assigned to the Green and Blue teams based on their choice. This method is similar to the classic art preference task used by Tajfel et al. [17]. To foster a sense of affiliation with their respective teams, participants were informed of distinct cognitive styles characterizing each team. Participants then completed the following measures: (a) ingroup versus outgroup identification, (b) ingroup versus outgroup resource allocation, (c) collective self-esteem scale, and (d) demographic information.

3.3. Measures

3.3.1. Group identification

Participants filled out an identification questionnaire with the ingroup and outgroup, modified from an 18-item questionnaire previously used in studies on the minimal group effect [18]. Examples include the question, "To what extent do you feel strong ties with the Blue group?" They will be rated from 1 (not very much) to 7 (very much) on a Likert scale.

3.3.2. Resource allocation

The participants will be instructed to imagine they are eligible for money allocation. The participants were then asked to choose one of the seven options for payment allocations: gave more to the ingroup, three that gave more to the outgroup, and one that gave the same amount to each group. This measure has been utilized in previous research on the minimal group effect, and it has been demonstrated that when money is involved, it is more sensitive to intergroup discrimination [19, 20].

3.3.3. Collective self-esteem

This study utilizes an adapted version of Luhtanen and Crocker's [21] collective self-esteem scale to measure collective self-esteem to China nationality. Examples are "I feel good about my Chinese nationality" and "In general, others respect China, which I belong to." Each item was rated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), with greater scores indicating a higher collective sense of self-worth. Cronbach's α for the present study will be retested to ensure reliability.

4. Results

It is hypothesized that international students will exhibit more significant ingroup bias and collective self-esteem about their Chinese nationality than domestic students. A comparative analysis, such as t-tests will be performed. The statistical significance will be set at $p < .05$.

4.1. Group identification

Subtracting outgroup identification from ingroup identification will yield the desired result. A t-test will be used to compare the mean values of the two groups' scores for the differences in ingroup bias. We assume they both displayed ingroup bias, but this preference was greater for international students than domestic students.

4.2. Resource allocation

The seven allocation options will be identified as an ordered categorical variable with three possible outcomes: (a) favor the outgroup, (b) equal distribution, and (c) favor the ingroup. An ordered logistic regression will be used to show that studying abroad is a significant predictor of resource allocation and that international students demonstrated more ingroup bias.

4.3. Collective Self-esteem

The second hypothesis predicts greater collective self-esteem for those who studied overseas. The t-test will be performed to compare the scale scores between international students and non-international students. It is hypothesized that there will be a significant difference, with international students demonstrating higher collective self-esteem related to their nationality.

5. Discussion

The present study investigates whether studying abroad influences ingroup bias under the minimal group paradigm and affects collective self-esteem related to one's nationality. Previous research indicates that cross-cultural interactions are inherently intricate, requiring heightened effort to prevent misunderstandings [22]. Factors such as the absence of shared cultural touchpoints and fears of unintentional offense act as obstacles in interactions between domestic and international students [23]. For instance, one of the most pronounced disparities in Chinese students getting along with locals is between individualist and collectivist societies. The US is characterized by its individualistic culture, which is distinct from the collectivist cultures prevalent in many Asian countries. Consequently, Chinese international students in the US might exhibit increased ingroup bias when interacting with domestic students from individualistic backgrounds, favoring those from familiar backgrounds. Such tendencies have already been observed in international students from predominantly collectivist cultures studying in individualistic countries [24]. Furthermore, a longitudinal study revealed that international students who exhibited strong ingroup bias in their freshman year subsequently had even fewer interactions with outgroup members in subsequent years [25]. This indicates a reinforcing cycle where initial ingroup bias can further curtail cross-cultural interactions. Evidence also suggests that heightened ingroup bias in real-world scenarios can amplify collective self-esteem, as the ingroup's positive distinctiveness is emphasized through comparative evaluations [26]. However, it also posits that self-esteem and intergroup discrimination might be linked only in contexts where intergroup relations are evaluatively significant [26]. Our study, focusing on transient groups without historical ties, suggests that qualitative research designs are needed to delve deeper into the reasons behind elevated collective self-esteem.

Additionally, this study is open to alternative interpretations. Prior research has underscored that individuals from traditionally disadvantaged or developing countries might exhibit preferences for outgroups, especially those from developed nations. One study has observed such outgroup favoritism that Chinese individuals may prefer US culture [27]. Such favoritism can alter attitudes, potentially reducing ingroup identification and esteem [28]. This situation might introduce bimodal tendencies in the results, necessitating a more nuanced analysis. Moreover, the minimal group paradigm involves

abstract groups where participants have no prior acquaintance. East Asians might be more hesitant to trust unfamiliar individuals, leading to reluctance to identify with a new ingroup [29]. Given that all participants in this study come from China, such factors can be controlled, but the overall effect size might be diminished.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study provides insights into the effects of studying abroad on ingroup bias and collective self-esteem. Given the cultural differences and potential challenges faced by these students, it was hypothesized that they would exhibit heightened ingroup bias and collective self-esteem related to their nationality, even in the absence of real-context comparisons. However, due to the potential confounding effects of individuals' pre-existing outgroup preferences on the results, further research is essential to elucidate the underlying causes of the observed phenomena.

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