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When They Lost Their Words: The Impact of Microaggressions and Exclusion on Chinese International Students' Linguistic Capacity and Leadership Emergence

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by

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Abstract

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The Impact of Microaggressions and Exclusion on Chinese International Students' Linguistic Capacity and Leadership Emergence

Kexin Li

Committee Members: Dr. Crystal Hoyt, Dr. Donelson Forsyth, Dr. Melissa Ooten

This research investigates the impact of microaggressions and social exclusion on Chinese international students' English fluency and leadership emergence. We entered a group of Chinese international students into an online study in which they filmed two videos of themselves speaking English before and after being exposed to either an identity-threatening or an identity-safe condition, both presenting an ostensible group they would be joining and with the identity-safe condition added small inclusionary changes. The results demonstrated that Chinese international students speak English more fluently and tend to show more interest in participating in group activities when put into an identity-safe environment. The findings underscore the importance of promoting an inclusive and welcoming environment in academic institutions and point to the fact that small and simple changes can impact how non-native speakers articulate and communicate.

Signature Page for Leadership Studies Honors Thesis

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Thesis presented

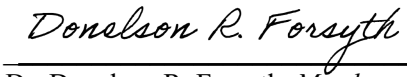
by

Kexin Li

This is to certify that the thesis prepared by *Kexin Li* has been approved by his/her committee as satisfactory completion of the thesis requirement to earn honors in leadership studies.

Approved as to style and content by:

Dr. Crystal L. Hoyt, *Chair*



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When They Lost Their Words

Impact of Microaggressions and Exclusion on Chinese International Students' Linguistic Capacity and Leadership Emergence

Today, higher education institutions in the U.S enroll the largest number of international students in the world, ranking the top for undergraduate and graduate studies destinations (Institute of International Education, 2019). Young people across the world come to the U.S seeking high-quality education, job opportunities, and exposure to cultural diversity. But are the U.S institutions, the host of more than one million international students, fully prepared to welcome these young scholars coming from different cultural backgrounds and to provide them with not only academic rigor but also care and comfort? Do international students in American institutions feel that they are an integral part of the campus community or are they excluded, lonely, and insecure?

Studies show that international students in the U.S. encounter challenges including cultural adaptation difficulty, loss of social support, and lack of social connectedness, all of which lead to potential health issues and academic incapacity (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Language difficulty is a major source for the acculturative stress international students experience, as it not only affects their academic performance but also bars them from interacting with peers speaking another language (Hayes & Ling, 1994). Educators and scholars have spotted this challenge and tried to make amends by suggesting and creating opportunities in the institutions for international students to improve their spoken and written English skills (Sherry et al., 2009). However, the burden of building social interactions should not fall upon international students only. Accounts show that international students oftentimes feel that they are not welcomed or considered as equals by their American peers (Sherry et al., 2009). The loneliness and low self-esteem

produced by this social exclusion can directly affect their success and mental health. While scholars have been successfully addressing both the linguistic challenge and social exclusion experienced by international students and sometimes attributing the former as one of the causes for the latter, few literatures have considered whether being excluded and discriminated against affects one's language proficiency. This is the task goal of our study. In addition to studying language proficiency, we also ask the question whether social exclusion impacts international students' willingness and tendency to arise as leaders in a group.

In order to answer the question more precisely, we focus the study on Chinese international students and recent graduates. Chinese international students take up more than thirty percent of the annual enrollment in today's U.S institutions (Institute of International Education, 2019). They have contributed tremendous wealth to the universities and have shown achievements across the fields. Yet they remain a socially marginalized group subject to stereotypes and discrimination. The current Covid-19 pandemic exacerbates the socially excluded situation they face, making them vulnerable to outright racism and xenophobia (Reny & Barreto, 2020). Our study takes a closer look at the everyday predicament this "model minority group" experiences.

Why might one's linguistic capacity and leadership emergence be impacted by the dynamic of the group? Identity threat theories can help shed some light on this question. Identity threat occurs when one detects that the group to which they belong is devalued (Aronson & McGlone, 2009). Social identity threat derives from the awareness of negative cultural representations and provides a conceptual model for their antecedents and consequences (Major & Schmader, 2018). According to Major and Schmader's study, identity threat triggers involuntary physical and psychological processes which, when repeated, can result in detrimental effects on human health. One example of such detrimental effects was demonstrated in Hunger and his colleagues' study:

they found that when exposed to weight-based social identity threat, the testing subjects experienced an increase in physiological stress and tendency to avoid stigmatizing domains like the gym, and a decrease in self-regulation which contributes to weight gain and cycles of identity threat (Hunger et al., 2015). Another study carried out by Sampasivam's team found that a group of Canadian undergraduates, after reading a threatening passage about Canadians and engaging in a linguistic intergroup bias, had an increase in salivary cortisol, a bio stress maker (Sampasivam et al., 2018).

Under what circumstance does one feel that the threat is in the air? Branscombe's team categorized four major types of identity threat: (1) distinctiveness threat - when the group's distinctiveness is undermined; (2) categorization threat - being categorized against one's will; (3) threats to the value - the group's value is dismissed; (4) acceptance threat - one's position within the group is undermined (Branscombe et al., 1999). The four types of threat are not mutually exclusive. In fact, Chinese international students experience these four types of threat on a daily basis, with their intellect and competence underestimated, themselves stereotyped and tokenized as "Chinese and no more", their cultural values and traditions dismissed, and their voices silenced. Among the rampant identity threats Chinese international students go through, the threats derived from negative stereotypes around Asian/Chinese stands out.

Stereotype threat refers to the situation when someone is concerned about the negative stereotypes associated with their group or identity, they tend to have extra pressure that compromises their performance (Aronson et al., 1998). This "extra pressure" comes in three distinct forms: (1) a physiological stress response that directly impairs prefrontal processing (2) a tendency to actively monitor performance (3) efforts to suppress negative thoughts and emotions in the service of self-regulation, all of which consume and distract executive resources needed

for the tasks (Schmader et al., 2008). One example of stereotype threat is demonstrated in a simulation conducted by Yueng and Hippel: when women controlling automobiles were reminded of the stereotype that female drivers are incompetent, they were twice more likely to run over jaywalking pedestrians than women who were not (Yueng & Hippel, 2008). Margaret Shih and her colleagues examined stereotype threat by putting Asian-American women in math tests and found that these women performed better when their ethnic identity was activated but worse when their gender identity was triggered (Shih et al., 1999). Stereotype threat has been found to impact marginalized groups' academic performance (Steele et al., 2002), decision-making skills (Carr & Steele, 2010), and negotiation strategies (Kray et al. 2002).

Then what stereotypes do Chinese international students or, more broadly speaking, the Asian community face? Asian people in the U.S live under a shadow named "model minority", a "positive" stereotype that links them with intelligence, work ethics, politeness, and math, and assumes that Asians do not suffer from racial discrimination. Yet the connotations in this model minority conception has created a "bamboo ceiling" for Asians, especially Asian women, to rise into leadership roles (Yu et al., 2020). Together with the "positive" assumptions, the "model minority" stereotype also gives Asians "negative" labels including quiet, unpopular, and traditional. These characteristics certainly do not fulfill our current imaginary for executive leaders and end up constraining Asians under the ceiling (Gee & Peck, 2017). The stereotype also assumes that the "polite" Asians would be content with their current job and not be interested in climbing higher. In addition, Asian men are thought to be lacking masculinity for leadership roles and Asian women are perceived to be overly feminine and submissive to hold power (Oguntoyinbo, 2014). The model minority myth, on different levels, limits Asian people's leadership emergence and denies the diversity within the community.

Stereotypes about Asians can be threatening, and this threat often comes in the form of microaggressions. Microaggressions are "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights and insults that potentially have harmful or unpleasant psychological impact on the target person or group" (Sue et al., 2007). According to Sue and her colleagues' study on Asian Americans' experiences with racial microaggressions, the insults are usually directed toward Asian people's ascription of intelligence, identity as alien on one's land, second class citizenship, exoticization of Asian women, and invisibility. Another study carried out by Houshmand's team discovered that Asian international students in North America experience microaggressions in their academic and social life on a daily basis. They constantly feel excluded, avoided, ridiculed for imperfect English, rendered invisible, and their cultural values disregarded (Houshmand et al., 2014). The invisibility, exclusion, and negligence Asian American people and Asian international students encounter everyday make the rise into leadership an extremely challenging task to be completed, or even to be thought of. The microaggressions they experience not only hinder Asian people's professional advancement but also affect their daily well-being. Elevation in daily microaggressions predict increase in somatic symptoms and physical negative effects for the Asian community (Ong et al., 2013). Asian international students are paying tuition and flying a thousand miles to this land and they are being gently killed day by day.

The targets of stereotype threat oftentimes are unaware of the source of threats but they receive situational cues indicating that they might be judged negatively for their identity. These cues can come from (1) prejudiced attitudes detected in interpersonal interactions (2) stereotype-related information and (3) numerical imbalance in a setting (Spencer et al. 2016). For Chinese

international students, walking into a predominantly white classroom where social exclusion and prejudice are in the air triggers all three cues and sets a pre-existing hindrance against their performance. In our study, we look at how identity threat impacts Chinese international students' linguistic fluency and leadership emergence. Some past researchers have already suggested that being in a threat situation compromises one's tendency to rise into leadership positions and language competence.

The effects stereotype threat has on one's leadership emergence are closely linked to implicit leadership theories which point to people's intuitive impressions of leaders and the process of evaluating real-life leaders in reference to such impressions (Forsyth et al., 2008). However, our current notion and impression around leadership are products of social constructions facilitated by an unjust power system. In other words, our traditional expectations for leaders can be biased and can raise the glass ceiling for marginalized groups. In Hoyt and Murphy's work, they discussed the decreases in motivation and engagement for women to rise as leaders, a result of the disparity between stereotypes around women and our notions of leaders (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016). Another study conducted by Burnette and colleagues found that women, after being exposed to stereotype threat, reported lower self-evaluation and believed leadership ability to be fixed instead of malleable (Burnette et al., 2010). Our notions of leadership are not only constituted based on gender disparity, but also on race, national origins, ability levels, and looks. Chinese international students, bearing the stereotypes of "submissive, passive, and quiet", certainly do not fit into the cultural expectation for a strong and outspoken leader.

The impairment of one's performance resulting from stereotype threat sometimes also takes place in the domain of second language competence. In a study conducted by Paladino and colleagues, a group of Italian-speaking people living in a bilingual region (Italian and German)

underperformed in the second language test when reminded of negative stereotypes around their linguistic group (Paladino et al., 2009). However, there have not been many studies dedicated to finding the relationship between identity threat and linguistic competence. We hope our study will contribute insights to this question.

For us who live in a world motivated by stereotypes and divisions, the question is: what does an identity-safe setting look like? Scholars have tried to answer this question on different notes. Hall and colleagues' 2018 study discovered that the perceived bigger representation of women in the STEM field and gender-inclusive policies introduced by the institutions would ease female scientists' identity threat and encourage them to have more positive interactions with their male colleagues (Hall et al., 2018). Another study by Pietri and colleagues found that representation and allyship matter – Black women tend to feel more trust and belonging at a STEM company with a website featuring a Black scientist or a white woman scientist who expressed allyship with Black women (Pietri et al., 2018). Sawir's team studied the isolated experience international students have in Australian universities and concluded that the creation of stronger bonds between international and local students will help international students to better navigate new cultural environments and decrease their social anxiety (Sawir et al., 2007). However, most studies trying to picture an identity-safe setting tend to paint with big brushes, requiring a different demographic or suggesting institutional changes. While systemic changes are essential for addressing identity threat and its impact, we should also ask the question of what can we do under the current climate, in the present room, and with the non-diverse group?

In order to answer this question as well as how exclusion and microaggressions impact Chinese international students' English fluency and leadership emergence, we designed the study to reflect the everyday discomfort Chinese international students experience due to stereotype

threat and to observe their conscious and subconscious responses to the threat. In contrast to the stereotype threat setting, we also designed an identity safe condition to find if participants' linguistic fluency and leadership emergence will be encouraged and boosted in a comfortable and inclusive environment.

Method

Participants

For the study, we recruited 50 Chinese international students studying or recently studied at higher education institutions in English-speaking and white dominant countries. We recruited via personal connections and campus advertisements. We incentivized participants by offering 10 fifty-dollar gift cards to randomly selected participants. Among the participants, we had 40 self-identified females and 10 self-identified males. Undergraduate students take up the majority of the participants (70%) and postgraduate students take up 12% percent. 9 out of 50 of them have graduated and started working full-time. 38 participants received their education in the United States, 1 of them went to the United Kingdom for their degree, 7 were enrolled in Canadian institutions, 1 went to Germany, and 3 went to Australia.

Procedure

The study was distributed in the form of a web-based survey. The survey contained five main steps. See Figure 1 for an overview of the procedure. In the first section, we collected participants' basic personal information including their age, occupation, self-identified gender, and self-described personality traits. We also asked participants to report their leadership experiences in both Chinese and English settings, as well as their English learning and speaking experiences, in order to take into account individual differences' impact on results. In the second step, we asked participants to verbally answer simple questions in English to test their linguistic

competence in a threat-free and stressless condition. The video responses collected from this step will be referred to as baseline videos. For the third step, we randomly and equally assigned participants to either an identity-threatening scenario or an identity-safe scenario in the form of watching a video of an ostensible group they would be joining. Then we asked them to film another video talking in English after experiencing the condition. We refer to videos collected in step four as task videos. In the last section, participants answered self-report questions assessing their interest and anxiety in joining the group and their inclination to rise as leaders under the two different conditions. They also had an option to film themselves again and discuss their responses verbally.

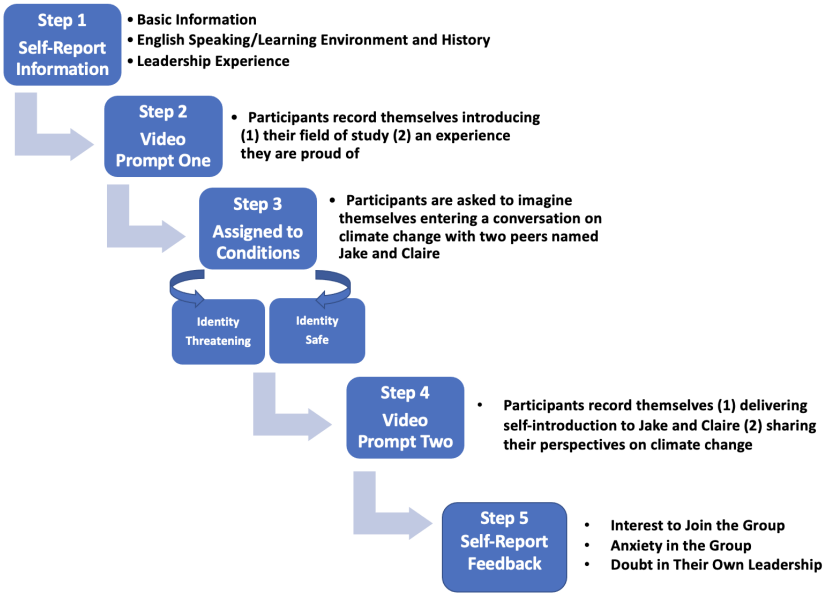


Figure 1. Procedural Overview

The specific procedure and condition set-ups are as follows: participants first consented to take part in the study named "Social Dynamics on College Campuses." They were aware that the study targeted Chinese international students but they received no cues or information around linguistic competence or leadership. As they entered the survey, they were asked to provide their preferred name, self-identified gender, class year or working experience in case of recent

graduates, and the country where they studied abroad. Aware of how individual differences impact one's spoken English skills and inclination to participate in leadership, we also asked participants to self-report their English learning history, self-identified personality traits, and leadership experiences in both Chinese and English settings. Participants then were asked to film a video introducing themselves to the research team. In the video, they answered two prompts: tell us about your field of study and share a project or an experience that you are proud of. We instructed participants to speak for at least 90 seconds and no more than 4 minutes. They were allowed to take time to organize their speech but we asked them not to verbally rehearse before recording. However, many of them did shoot multiple videos. To ensure that we study their English competence level in daily conversational settings, we only saved their first complete take. After finishing the first section, participants entered the manipulated conditions. They were prompted to imagine that they were about to join a group conversation with two peers. The language we used is as follows:

> "Now please imagine that you are about to enter an online group discussion with two peers. The discussion will be focused on climate change. Jake and Claire are your discussion group members. The three of you were asked to record a short self-introduction before the discussion. Jake and Claire happened to meet each other in another program and they filmed their introductions together. Please click on the video on the next page to watch their introductions while keeping in mind that you are going to join them soon".

Participants then were randomly and equally assigned to one of the two conditions described below. Script for each condition and links to the two videos can be found in the Appendix.

Identity Threatening Condition (Length: 4:21)

In the threatening video, participants see a white male student (Jake) and a white female student (Claire). They also hear the voice of a white young moderator whose video is off. The video starts with Jake and Claire already engaging in a conversation around their shared frustration with the global pandemic and the fact that their fraternity and sorority have been unable to hold parties. About one minute into their conversation, the moderator interrupted politely and invited them to deliver self-introductions to each other and the third discussant (participant) who will ostensibly be joining them. They were asked to introduce their name, class year, hometown, and a fun fact. The two interacted quite well during each of their introductions. The conversations pressed heavily on topics including Greek life, Boy/Girl Scouts, and football, all of which international students might find unfamiliar with. Around three minutes into the video, Claire showed interest in the third discussant and asked the moderator to provide them with the discussant's information. The moderator disclosed that the third discussant (participant) is likely from China. After receiving this information, Jake and Claire went on to continue their conversation about a frat social event they are both attending without showing interest in the third discussant again.

Identity Safe Condition (Length: 5:08)

For the identity safe condition, instead of presenting a conversation that is drastically different from the threatening scenario and removing all threats, we explore what can be done by the two peers to mitigate the social exclusion already created. In other words, we study if threats can be undone by genuine care and curiosity. Afterall, Jake and Claire (presented by the same two actors in the threatening video) are just talking about their life. In this video, Jake and Claire had identical conversations and introductions with those in the threatening scenario. The lines in

the first 3.5 minutes in both videos are exactly the same. The difference shows when Jake and Claire were informed about the incoming discussant being Chinese, instead of skipping this piece of information and continuing their conversation about Greek Life, they showed interest in this person's culture, potential perspective on the discussion topic, and personal life. They exhibited excitement for the third discussant's participation. The specific lines are as follows:

C2: Oh cool! I heard China has been putting out some nice actions to eliminate gas emission. I'd be really interested to hear this person's perspective on the topic.

C1: Yeah me too. One of my friends was studying abroad in China last year and he told us a lot about the country and the economy. He also loved the food.

C2: I bet. I'd love to go there myself sometime in the future.

C1: I'm just gonna ask that person to recommend some good Chinese restaurants.

C2: I bet they'll give you solid suggestions. I just can't imagine being so far from home in a different culture and have to manage everything. I can't do it. I have respect for all the international students.

C1: Right. And the flight is so long. What, is it 10 hours?

C2: I think it's more. One of my Chinese friends said it's 16 hours.

C1: Damn. wow. And I heard the pandemic is making it harder to even get on a flight.

C2: Yeah right. I wonder if this person got to go home at all this summer?

C1: It would really suck if they didn't. Well, got another question to ask them.

The moderator then interrupted them politely and thanked them for their time. While saying goodbye, Jake and Claire mentioned the frat party they were both attending, as they did in the threatening scenario.

After watching the video of either scenario, the participants were asked to video-record themselves again to deliver a self-introduction to Jake and Claire (they were reminded once again that Jake and Claire would be watching their introductions and that they were about to join the group). We asked participants to introduce their name, class year, majors and minors, hometown, a fun fact, and their perspectives on climate change.

Lastly, participants completed a range of self-report questions which collect information regarding three areas: interest to join the group, anxiety in the group, and doubt in their potential leadership in the group. A complete list of scale questions can be found in the Appendix. Participants were then also given a chance to verbally talk about their feelings toward the group in another video prompt.

Fluency Measures

To assess each participant's English fluency level before and after condition, one researcher watched and coded all video responses condition-blindly and to the same standard. Each video was evaluated in the following eight areas and was scored from 1 to 10, with 1 being highly unsatisfactory and 10 being highly satisfactory. The final fluency score of each speech is the average number of all eight scores. The measures for both the baseline video ($\alpha = .92$) and the task video ($\alpha = .91$) were highly reliable.

Overall Fluency	First Impression of the speaker's delivery in terms of fluency.
Argument/Logic	Does the speech contain itself in a logical way? Does the speaker transit smoothly between arguments and reasonings? Has the speaker answered all the questions and provided useful content to support their responses?
Smoothness	Are there many pauses in the speech? Does the speaker use a lot of connection words? Does the speaker deliver in words/segmented phrases or sentences? Does the speaker make any mistakes and tend to correct themselves by repeating a word or a phrase?

Automaticity	Does the speaker instantaneously and effortlessly to retrieve units of speech, including words, prefabricated phrases and/or whole clauses? Is it obvious that the speaker is formulating the speech as they deliver it?
Clearness	Has the speaker delivered a clear enough speech that the rater can effortlessly understand their message?
Speed	Does the speech sound too slow or too fast? For this measure, 10 stands for a speed of talking that is both comfortable and engaging. 1 stands for speed that is either too slow or too fast.
Overall Confidence	First impression of the speaker's delivery in terms of their presented confidence and comfort level
Engagement	Does the speaker's tone show their interest in engaging in the discussion with either the research team or Jake and Claire? Does the speech sound like a monologue or a conversation opener?

Self-Report Measures

Participants responded to all items using a 1-5 scale that ranged from *completely false* to *completely true*. We categorized the items into the three measures below to collectively reflect and predict leadership emergence.

Interest. Participants responded to 10 items assessing their interest in joining the group. Sample items include: "I am excited to join the group", "I wanted to join the group", and "I would like to have regular meetings with this group". The scale was reliable (α =. 90).

Anxiety. Participants indicated their anxiety to join the group on 8 items. Sample items include "I am nervous to join the group", "I am anxious to join the group", and "I would prefer to join another group". The scale was reliable (α = .85).

Leadership Doubt. Participants indicated the extent to which they believed the group would accept them as a leader on 6 items. Sample items include: "I do not think the group will see me as a leader", "I would rather be listening than contributing to this group", and "I do not

think the group will accept me as a leader." Scale scored such that higher values indicate greater doubt the leader will accept them. The scale was reliable (α = .81).

Results

See Table 1 for correlations amongst study variables.

These correlations reveal that greater interest to join the group is associated with lower levels of leadership doubt. Greater levels of anxiety also predict greater leadership doubt. We also found that greater levels of baseline fluency were associated with smaller fluency changes and that the more interest one has in joining the group, the bigger a fluency change can be expected.

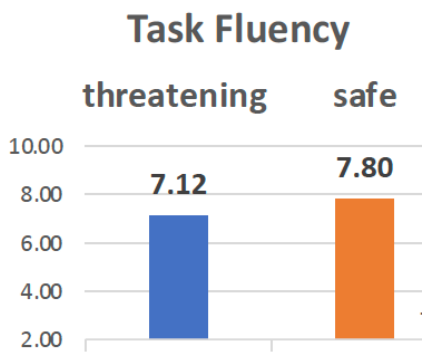
Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Interest		-.229	-.394**	-.252	.036	.314*
2. Anxiety			.523**	-.080	.010	.098
3. Leadership Doubt				-.305*	-.211	.120
4. Base Fluency					.584**	-.474**
5. Task Fluency						.438**
6. Fluency Change						

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. , directional tests.

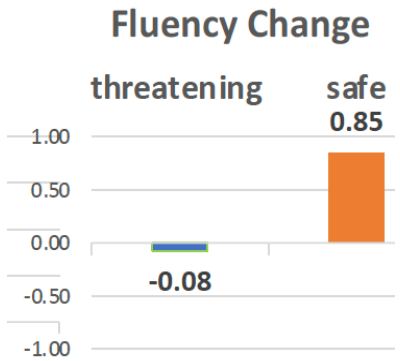
Table 1. Correlations Amongst Study Variables

Hypothesis Part 1: An identity-threatening situation will compromise participants' English fluency level while an identity-safe situation will help boost fluency.

To test our hypothesis on fluency, we conducted a Univariate Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) testing the effect of experimental condition on task fluency, controlling for baseline fluency. The ANOVA revealed a main effect for experimental condition, $F(1, 44) = 13.34$, $p = .001$, $h^2 = .23$, such that participants in the identity-threatening condition reported less fluency ($M = 7.12$, $SD = 1.09$) than those in the identity-safe condition ($M = 7.80$, $SD = .93$). These effects controlled from the effect of baseline fluency on task fluency ($F(1, 44) = 33.99$, $p < .001$, $h^2 = .44$). An ANOVA that does not control for baseline fluence, similarly reveals participants evinced greater fluency in the identity-safe condition relative to the identity-threatening condition $F(1, 44) = 5.21$, $p = .027$, $h^2 = .10$)



Bar Graph 1. Task Fluency in Two Conditions



Bar Graph 2. Fluency Change in Two Conditions

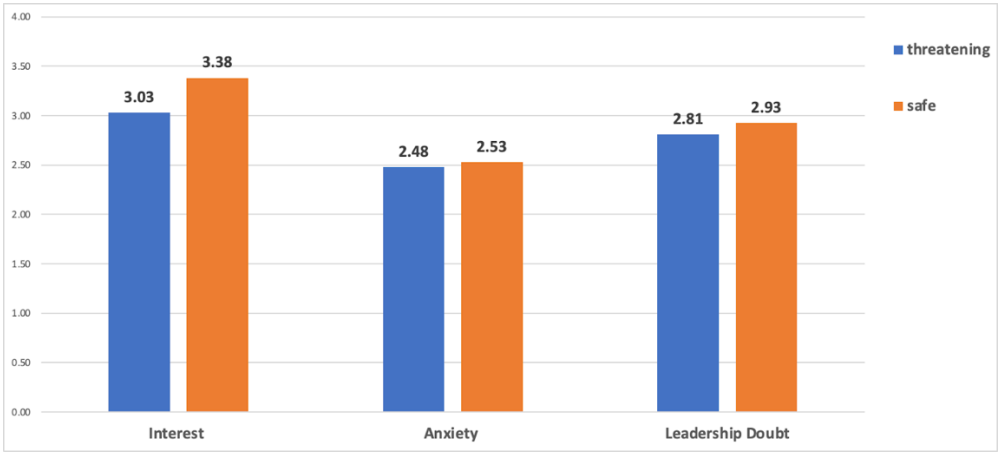
In another approach to testing this hypothesis, we compute and examine a fluency change measure, subtracting baseline fluence from task fluency. We conducted an ANOVA on this change score. As predicted, there was a main effect for experimental condition, $F(1, 44) = 13.20$,

p = .001, h^2 = .23, such that participants in the identity-threatening condition has a slightly negative fluency change (M = -.08, SD = 1.06) and those in the identity-safe condition has an increase in fluency from baseline (M = .85, SD = .59).

In sum, both approaches to testing the predictions have confirmed that participants' task fluency depended on whether they were situated in an identity-safe or identity-threatening condition. Participants in the identity-safe condition demonstrated greater fluency in their videos relative to those in the identity threatening condition.

Hypothesis Part 2: An identity-threatening situation will lower participants' tendency to emerge as leaders while an identity-safe situation will encourage leadership emergence.

To test the hypothesis, we conducted a Multivariate ANOVA on the three self-report variables: interest to join the group, anxiety to join the group, and concerns that the group will accept them as leader.



Bar Graph 3. Self-Report Variables in Two Conditions

The three variables each and collectively signal one's leadership emergence. Results show that overall there was no multivariate main effect for experimental condition (Wilks' λ

= .90, $F(3, 43) = 1.55$, $p = .216$, $\eta^2 = .10$). However, given the small sample size we examined the univariate ANOVA tests and there was a marginal effect of experimental condition on interest $F(1, 45) = 3.04$, $p = .088$, $h^2 = .06$, such that participants in the identity-threatening condition reported less interest (M = 3.03, SD = .72) than those in the identity-safe condition (M = 3.38, SD = .66).

Discussion

The foremost objective of our research was to study the link between an exclusive and micro-aggressive environment and non-native speakers' English fluency. The results have shown that Chinese international students demonstrated greater task fluency in an identity-safe environment compared to those put into an identity-threatening condition. The other aspect of the research was to explore how Chinese international students' leadership emergence differs in an inclusive setting and an exclusive one. Though two of the three measures we used to signal leadership emergence (anxiety and leadership doubt) did not demonstrate significant relation with conditions, we found a marginal effect of condition on Chinese international students' interest to join the group. Given the small sample size in this study, we argue that this marginal effect on interest presents a tendency of greater leadership emergence in an identity-safe setting. This research has two important implications for the identity threat theories. Firstly, its results stand in line with the assumption that experiencing identity threat compromises one's performance. More importantly, the findings add to the currently limited studies around the link between identity threat and second language competence. A few studies before us have demonstrated that stereotype threat has a negative impact on second language performance, as represented by the 2009 research conducted by Paladino and colleagues (Paladino et al., 2009). However, Paladino's study assessed participants' second language competence through written

tests focusing on vocabulary and grammar. Our study provides another insight into the assessment methods by evaluating participants' verbal presentation and fluency in a group setting with two white peers. Both the setting and task in our study imitate the day-to-day academic and social interactions and expectations experienced by Chinese internationals students on most U.S. college campuses. Given the daily-like and verbal features of the study, our findings shed lights on how Chinese international students truly move around and through social exclusion and identity threat every day in their lives abroad.

It is important to note that the fluency-regarding findings in our research diverged slightly from our preliminary prediction which stressed on the decrease in fluency in identity-threatening conditions. Though a slight negative fluency change was found in the threatening condition, the positive fluency change in the identity-safe condition was more significant. The explanation we propose for such a result is that the identity-threatening condition we designed was not so dramatically or extraordinary threatening. Rather, it was a replay of daily scenes encountered by Chinese international students living and studying on a white-dominant and socially segregated campus. In other words, the identity threat and exclusion have become academic and social norms to which the Chinese students have learned to adapt and found no surprise in. It was the inclusive and welcoming setting that the participants would find rather odd and novel. But such novelty in setting eased the stress and self-awareness of the participants and encouraged them to more freely and articulately express themselves. It is worth noting that we predicted the results to be under the influence of practice effect and that a positive fluency change might be spotted across conditions due to the fact that participants got to practice and adapt to the filming process after the first video response. Moreover, the prompt of the second video response partly overlapped with the first video response, both asking the participants to

introduce themselves first, which means the content of the two speeches may overlap to some extent. Yet a slight decrease in fluency was still found in identity-threatening conditions, pointing to the overwhelmingly negative impact an exclusive and unwelcoming environment has on our participants despite the practices. This finding of ours brings a serious interrogation to what the current exclusive and xenophobic climate is doing to Chinese international students' academic performance and social engagement. We wonder how much potential and growth of Chinese international students have been hindered by the so-called social norms on college campuses which are truly grounded in a white-supremacist system.

The second implication of our research points to the construction of an identity-safe environment. Many prior studies have contributed important suggestions in designing and redesigning an inclusive and welcoming academic community. However, most proposed solutions either stress on structural changes that could take long to implement like increasing representation of traditionally marginalized groups and practicing inclusive policies (Hall et al., 2018) or only provide an after-fact vision, like creating better bonds among social groups (Sawir et al., 2007), without giving instructions on how to get there. Our research suggests small, fast, and simple changes in daily interactions can have significant effects on non-white international students' English fluency and social involvements. As introduced earlier in the paper, the difference between the designed identity-threatening and the identity-safe condition was not a dramatic one: the two actors in the safe condition, who also played in the threatening one, simply had a short additional conversation to the threatening script to show interest to the participant and their culture. In this additional conversation, the two actors showed concern to the participant's physical and mental wellness as an international student during the Covid-19 pandemic and showed interest in the participant's potential intellectual contribution to the group

discussion. When filming the identity-safe condition, we intentionally had the two actors to maintain the gestures, facial expressions, and tones from the threatening condition. That is to say that the majority contents and personalities across the two conditions are identical. It was only the additional conversation that was at play yet this 45-second conversation had a significant impact on participants' task fluency. This finding aligns with our initial intentions and predictions in creating an identity-safe condition: we do not ask the privileged to drastically change their lifestyles, interests, and social involvements. Instead, we ask them to be aware of other equal presences in the room and show genuine curiosity and care to others like they do to each other. Such changes in behaviors are effortless and simple, and can bring about more engaging conversations beneficial for all. While systemic and structural changes are vital to uplift marginalized groups' voices and welfare, daily and small acts should be and can be made during this meant-to-be long and exhaustive process.

Limitations and Future Directions

We would now like to address several limitations in this research in order to provide directions for future studies. The limitations mainly lay in three areas of our study: sample size, coding system, and online survey design.

Despite the hard efforts put into recruiting participants, we had a small and unbalanced sample size, with 80 % female presence and only 20% male participants. Due to this contrasting gender representation, it is difficult to study whether gender plays a role in one's fluency and leadership emergence across conditions. Though we had a female-majority sample, we feel hesitant to conclude that our results are more accurate on female international students since gender identity was not part of the condition manipulation. The small sample also partly hindered us from finding significant relations between condition and the three leadership

emergence measures. A marginal significance was found on interest to join the group which leads us to predict that significant relations can be shown on these three measures in a bigger sample. In an effort to recruit more participants, we expanded the initial pool of Chinese international students studying in U.S. colleges to Chinese students studying or studied in any western English-speaking higher education institutions. The diversification brought us 12 participants from Canadian, Australian, British, and German institutions. However, we recognize that international students' experiences and campus cultures vary across countries and suggest future research to focus on one region in order to study the more accurate impact of white dominance and social exclusion on marginalized student groups.

The second limitation of our study lies in the fluency coding process. We only had one coder for all the collected speeches. Having a single coder brings the advantage of maintaining the same standard for all speeches. However, the coding might not reflect comprehensive or all-applying impressions of the speeches. Moreover, the coder in our study is a Chinese international student herself whose English is not her first language. Thus, the coding was not done from a native-speaker's perspective and that scores connected to grammar, tone, and naturality might not be the most accurate. Depending on individuality, a single non-native speaker coder might score their fellow international students' speeches more strictly or tolerantly due to personal biases. We suggest future research to include multiple coders blind to each other's coding and equally distributed between native English speakers and those whose English is not their first language. Future research should also consider the age and occupation of the coders in order to assess fluency in more specific and tailored settings.

Though we have benefited from conducting an online experiment which allowed us to recruit participants located around the world, the survey system (Qualtrics as the main survey

site and Pipe as the inserted video response collector) and the online setting posed a few challenges and limitations to the study. Firstly, our participants were able to record themselves multiple times for each of the two video prompts and to rehearse before they started to record. In the survey, we have specifically asked participants to not rehearse and to only film one video for each prompt, knowing that the system would allow them to do so. However, most participants neglected this request and utilized the opportunity to practice and to film more than one video. Most participants filmed two to three tries for each prompt. We also had participants filmed up to 25 tries. To ensure the results suffered from the least practice effect, we chose only the first complete video response of each participant's to code for fluency. But it was out of our control if the participants spent much time before the first try practicing and even writing up a script. This limitation could be avoided if the study is conducted in an in-person lab setting where the researcher could monitor participants' practice time and number of tries. It is worth noting, however, that the choice to practice and write scripts and the large number of filming tries can reflect one's nervousness and self-awareness of speaking English in front of the two white peers which can be further studied in future research by looking closely at how long one takes to prepare and how many times one re-films themselves. Secondly, the participants were able to see themselves while recording and to re-watch the video after they finished. We suspect that this feature of the online survey prompted and encouraged many participants to re-film their responses as self-awareness was increased by being able to see oneself. Thirdly, the online setting allowed participants to choose to not show their faces while filming. We had participants who blocked their camera while speaking or filmed the surroundings instead of themselves. We recognize that the variation in facial presence may have caused different levels of comfort and security which may have impacted one's fluency. Lastly, we would like to point out that our

participants had different knowledge levels regarding the topic of climate change which is the main prompt of the second video question. Those who have studied or read about climate change were generally more fluent and confident. We suggest future research to consider topics that would, to the biggest extent, eliminate the individual differences of knowledge and experience that could impact one's fluency.

Conclusion

By entering 50 Chinese international students into an online experiment and studying their speeches before and after being exposed to either an identity-threatening or an identity-safe condition, we found that Chinese international students speak English more fluently in an inclusive, welcoming, and identity-safe environment. They also tend to show more interest in joining group activities with their white English-speaking peers in such a setting. The design of the identity-threatening condition in our study mimics the every-day social and academic scenarios international students of color encounter in which their white and English-speaking peers neglect their presence and overlook their potential contribution to the group. In creating an identity-safe condition, we only added small changes to the threatening condition to have the white English-speaking peers show genuine interest and pay attention to the presence of a Chinese international student. The findings of this study underpin the importance of creating an inclusive and welcoming environment in academic institutions in order to support the growth and flourish of international students of color. The findings also have discovered that small and simple changes in daily interactions, such as asking how one and their family have been and showing curiosity to one's intellectuality and culture, can have great impact on creating an inclusive environment. This study was conducted during the global Covid-19 pandemic where countless Asians were targeted, assaulted, and silenced. The violence has also spurred resilience

from the community in the form of the Anti-Asian Hate movement in which Asian people have stood up and spoken out for themselves. They are taking the lost words back from a long history of white supremacy and xenophobia. This study stands firmly with and within the movement to believe that we can and will speak louder and better.

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Appendix

1. Script for Conditions

Identity-Threatening Condition

(Confederate 1 and 2 are already engaging in a conversation as the video starts)
C1: Yeah it really sucks. My fraternity hasn't had a party in like forever. I was networking with someone from the national and he told me several chapters at other schools had to be shut down. Things during Covid are just HARD.
C2: Well my sorority is basically inactive at this point. We didn't disband but it's almost the same.
C1: Yeah I'm sorry to hear that. There's just pushback from so many sides.
C2: Exactly. But I'm living at a house with my sorority sisters this year. And we are having fun. You know. Sometimes we invite friends over to have a smaller party. It's not like socials or lodges. But you know, we are coping with it.
C1: Good good. I'm doing the same with my frat brothers. But we've been living off-campus since my sophomore year. It's really nice.
C3 (Video Off): Ok I think we are good to go. Are we ready to shoot the introductions?
C2: Sure!
C1: Sounds good.
C3: Thank you Jake and Claire for spending time after this meeting to record your self-introductions. There will be one more person joining you in the discussion and you will be able to watch their introduction sometime soon. What I'll need you to include in your introduction is your name, school year, hometown, and a fun fact about you. Whoever is ready can go first.
(During the introductions, C1 and C2 show active listenings and give feedback to each other through facial expressions and body languages)
C2: I can go first.
C1: Good cause I'll need some time to come up with the fun fact.
C2: I got you.
C2: Hi! I'm Claire Smith. I'm a junior at the University of Richmond. I'm from Branchville, New Jersey. I'm a PPEL major with a marketing minor. And my fun fact is that my two sisters and I are all record breakers in selling girl scout cookies in our town.
C1: That's impressive.
C2: Thanks! My younger sister is the record keeper now.
C1: How many did she sell?
C2: Three hundred and fifty five. She was really good.
C1: She really was. My parents are big fans of girl scout cookies. We buy a bunch every year.
C2: Really? I love them too. What's your favorite flavor?
C1: Shortbread. But they are all tasty.
C2: Oh I love shortbread. My favorite is S'mores.

C1: Which one? Crunchy or crispy?
C2: Crispy. Can't get enough of it.
C1: Valid. Valid. Ok I think I'm gonna do mine.
C2: Go ahead.
C1: Hey I'm Jake Anderson. Junior at U of R. I'm majoring in Business Administration and Economics. I'm from Lake View, New York. Umm… My fun fact, I guess, is that I've had two concussions playing football in high school.
C2: Oh wow. I'm sorry Jake. Are you still playing?
C1: Nah. Not since college.
C2: Ok. My cousin is playing in his high school team. They are really good. Which position did you play?
C1: I played defense. Tackling.
C2: Yeah that sounds about right. It is a dangerous position.
C1: I mean all of them kinda are.
C2: You are right. (Ask C3) Well can we know who is joining us? I really look forward to the discussion.
C3: (Pretending to find the third participant's information) What I have here only says their last name. I'm not sure if you'll know them since we have participants from other colleges as well. But based on their last name, they should be a Chinese or Chinese American student.
C2: Ok cool thank you. Right, Jake, are you coming to the social next weekend? I think we are co-hosting with your frat.
C1: I am! My girlfriend is actually in your sorority. Sucks it's gonna be virtual.
C2: Oh my god really? Who's your girlfriend?
C1: Blaire Johnson.
C2: Oh my god Blaire! I love that girl! I didn't know you guys are dating.
C1: Yeah we started to date this summer.
C2: That's so sweet. Well then I'll see you next weekend, with Blaire!
C1: Yep. She's helping me pick an outfit.
C2: She'll do a fantastic job.
C3: Ok thank you Jake and Claire for giving your introductions and allowing me to record you. This will be it. And I'll see you soon in our discussion.
C2: Sounds good. Thank you for having me. Bye Jake!
C1: Thanks! Bye Claire.

Identity Safe Condition

(Previous conversation is the same as in the threatening scenario)

C2: Yeah that sounds about right. It is a dangerous position.
C1: I mean all of them kinda are.

C2: You are right. (Ask C3) Well can we know who is joining us? I really look forward to the discussion.
C3: (Pretending to find the third participant's information) What I have here only says their last name. I'm not sure if you'll know them since we have participants from other colleges as well. But based on their last name, they should be a Chinese or Chinese American student.
C2: Oh cool! I heard China has been putting out some nice actions to eliminate gas emission. I'd be really interested to hear this person's perspective on the topic.
C1: Yeah me too. One of my friends was studying abroad in China last year and he told us a lot about the country and the economy. He also loved the food.
C2: I bet. I'd love to go there myself sometime in the future.
C1: I'm just gonna ask that person to recommend some good Chinese restaurants.
C2: I bet they'll give you solid suggestions. I just can't imagine being so far from home in a different culture and have to manage everything. I can't do it. I have respect for all the international students.
C1: Right. And the flight is so long. What, is it 10 hours?
C2: I think it's more. One of my Chinese friends said it's 16 hours.
C1: Damn. wow. And I heard the pandemic is making it harder to even get on a flight.
C2: Yeah right. I wonder if this person got to go home at all this summer?
C1: It would really suck if they didn't. Well, got another question to ask them.
C3: Ok thank you Jake and Claire for giving your introductions and allowing me to record you. It seems the both of you are really excited about this discussion. You will get to meet the other participant very soon. But this will be it for now.
C2: Sounds good. Thank you for having me. And Jake, I think I'm gonna see you at our social next weekend? My sorority is co-hosting with your frat.
C1: Yep. I'm Blaire's date.
C2: Right! I forgot that the two of you started dating this summer. You guys are so cute.
C1: Thanks. I need to run for my next class. See you soon! Thank you!
C2: Bye Jake! Thank you!

2. Self-Report Measures

Please rate the accuracy of the statement below from 1 to 5 to reflect your own situation after watching the video, 1 being completely false and 5 being completely true.

a. I am excited to join the group.
b. I am nervous to join the group.
c. I would prefer to join another group.
d. I think the group will be welcoming to me.
e. I wanted to join the group.
f. I think my input will be valued and appreciated by other members in the group.
g. I think everyone, including myself, will contribute equally to the group discussion.
h. I think my input might be neglected by other members in the group.
i. I would feel comfortable and supported in this group.
j. I would want to have regular meetings with this group on other topics as well.
k. I think I can make friends in this group.
l. I feel anxious to join the group.
m. I wish to join more groups like this one.
n. I would like to lead the conversation in this group.
o. I would like to facilitate the conversation in this group.
p. I don't think I can become a leader in this group.
q. I would rather be listening than contributing in this group.
r. I do not think the group will see me as a leader.
s. I do not think the group will accept me as a leader.
t. I would feel left out and awkward in the group because I did not introduce myself and interact with the other two participants as they did.
u. I would feel left out and awkward in the group because the two other participants seem to have relationships outside the research.
v. I would feel left out and uncomfortable in the group because of my race or nationality.
w. I would feel left out and uncomfortable in the group because of my insufficient English skills.
x. I would feel left out and uncomfortable in the group because I lead another social life compared to the two other participants.

3. Condition Videos

Identity Threatening Condition:
https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Uv4y1f7oH?from=search&seid=14360628228780184329

Identity Safe Condition:
https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Ny4y127M6/?spm_id_from=333.788.recommend_more_video.-1