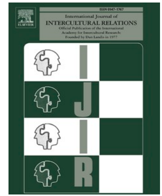
International Journal of Intercultural Relations 98 (2024) 101908

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Intercultural Relations

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijintrel



Intercultural experience facilitates majority-group acculturation through ethnocultural empathy: Evidence from a mixed-methods investigation in Japan

Soyhan Egitim [a,*], Plamen Akaliyski [b]

[a] *Faculty of Global and Regional Studies, Toyo University, Tokyo, Japan*
[b] *Department of Sociology and Social Policy, Lingnan University, Hong Kong*

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Ethnocultural empathy
Intercultural experience
Majority-group acculturation
Japanese teachers
Asylum-seekers

ABSTRACT

The present two-phased sequential exploratory mixed-methods study investigated majority-group members' acculturation through pre-tertiary Japanese teachers' experiences with children of Kurdish asylum-seekers in school settings. In Study 1, we employed an interpretative phenomenological analysis to understand and make meaning of the personal experiences of nine Japanese pre-tertiary teachers from a majority-group acculturation perspective. The qualitative data suggested a link between the participants' intercultural contact experience, ethnocultural empathy, and receptiveness to majority-group acculturation. Furthermore, the acculturative changes experienced by the majority-group members appeared to influence institutional changes. Subsequently, we tested these relationships in quantitative analysis with a sample of 110 Japanese school teachers in Study 2. We used a survey informed by the works of Wang et al.'s (2003) *Ethnocultural Empathy* scale and Kunst et al.'s (2023) *Majority-Group Acculturation* scale. The results confirmed the positive association between intercultural contact experience, ethnocultural empathy, and majority-group members' acculturation. We conclude that promoting multiculturalism in school settings may have long-term benefits for both majority and minority group members within the Japanese context despite potential adversities involved in regular intercultural contact.

Introduction

International migration has become a significant part of modern life due to economic pressures, demographic changes, and rapid urbanization (De Haas et al., 2019). As immigrants continue to move to new territories, they have been expected to integrate into majority-group cultures. Hence, most research has focused on acculturation strategies for minority-group members (Berry, 2018; Sam & Berry, 2016; Ward & Geeraert, 2016).

However, in recent years, a growing number of researchers have argued that successful integration is only possible if majority-group members also participate in the acculturation process (Kunst et al., 2021a, 2021b, 2023a; Lefringhausen et al., 2021; López-Rodríguez et al., 2014).) defined majority group members' acculturation as "the cultural and psychological changes that current or former majority-group members experience and the cultural styles they adopt as a result of contact with people self-identifying as

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: soyhanegitim@gmail.com, soyhan@toyo.jp (S. Egitim).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2023.101908
Received 26 January 2023; Received in revised form 31 October 2023; Accepted 1 November 2023
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immigrants or ethnic minority-group members living in the same society" (p. 486). These changes may include learning each other's languages, food preferences, and other cultural attributes of each group.

Thus far, research on the majority-group members' acculturation has primarily focused on Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) contexts where migration has long been the focal point for socioeconomic transformation (Kunst et al., 2023b). On the other hand, acculturation has been understudied in non-WEIRD societies such as Japan where immigration is still considered as a new phenomenon.

Being a developed industrial nation with an aging population and declining workforce, Japan has become more receptive to immigration in recent years (2; Murayama & Nagayasu, 2021). Therefore, the country has experienced a steady growth in its foreign population (3). Increasing immigration in Japan has meant long-term intercultural contact between the majority and minority group members. However, the implications of these interactions for acculturation, particularly focusing on changes among the majority group, are not yet fully comprehended and thus, warrant further research in this emerging destination for immigrants.

Currently, an estimated 2000 Kurdish asylum seekers are located in Kawaguchi city of Saitama prefecture, northwest of Tokyo (Hiraoka & Tauchi, 2022). Most of them arrived in Japan from Turkey to eventually gain refugee status. After they make their application, they are given a provisional release status. As each case is subject to a long-lasting investigation, they are provided with short-term temporary visas. Therefore, most Kurds end up staying in Japan for many years either on short-term visas or without a visa as they continue to seek asylum in the country.

Long-term residency has meant that their children would also go to local schools with their Japanese peers. Currently, several public elementary schools in Kawaguchi host a large number of children whose parents moved to Japan as asylum-seekers. Research is limited on acculturation in school settings where ample intercultural interaction takes place between majority and minority group members (Sidler et al., 2022). Particularly, no majority-group acculturation research has explored the experiences of teachers as majority-group members and their interactions with children of asylum-seekers within Japanese school settings.

Previous studies indicate that teachers with long-term intercultural experience tend to adopt culturally inclusive pedagogies, which help them work in diverse cultural settings (Cacciattolo et al. 2020; Cacciattolo & Aronson, 2023). However, intercultural experience alone may not be sufficient to trigger an acculturative response. A skill that includes "feeling, understanding, and caring about what someone from another culture feels, understands and cares about" (1, p. 8) is essential for teachers to not only understand the perspectives of children from underrepresented backgrounds such as asylum seekers but also, empathize with them. In the current literature, this skill is described as "ethnocultural empathy" (Cacciattolo & Aronson, 2023; Kapıkıran, 2023; Rasoal et al., 2011). Teachers who possess ethnocultural empathy not only think beyond ethnocentric values and norms (Cacciattolo & Aronson, 2023) but also become more receptive to recognizing other cultural values and norms different than their own (7). However, we suspect that ethnocultural empathy does more than merely recognizing minority-groups' cultural values and norms. It may potentially trigger an acculturative response from majority-group members.

In order to address the gaps in the literature and gain a deeper understanding of ethnocultural empathy and acculturation in school settings, we investigated the acculturative changes experienced by Japanese pre-tertiary teachers through their long-term intercultural contact with Kurdish asylum-seekers' children in school settings. The research questions we examined for this study include:

1. How do majority-group Japanese teachers make sense of the acculturative changes they experienced during long-term intercultural contact with asylum-seekers' children?
2. Does teachers' ethnocultural empathy facilitate majority-group members' acculturation through long-term intercultural contact?

We performed a two-phased sequential exploratory mixed methods design. First, we gained a baseline understanding of the factors influencing majority-group members' acculturation through a qualitative study and then we tested the associations between those factors through a quantitative study.

Literature review

Majority-group members' acculturation

Acculturation is "a dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members" (Berry, 2018, p. 697), which entails "cultural changes to the original culture patterns" resulting from interactions between groups of individuals who are from different cultural backgrounds (Sam, 2006, p. 11). Berry (2018) argued that the successful co-existence of these groups in the same physical and social space depends on the adaptive outcomes they achieve.

Since majority and minority groups interact with one another in the same physical and social space, the cultural influence is expected to be reciprocal (a; Lefringhausen et al., 2021; López-Rodríguez et al., 2014). Majority-group members can influence the acculturation strategies of minority-group members, who in turn can also influence aspects of majority-group culture (López-Rodríguez et al., 2014). This process involves "the genuine incorporation of aspects of minority-group culture into majority-group members' default cultural repertoire and ultimately leads to changes in the mainstream culture at the societal level" (Kunst et al., 2021b, p. 486).

Kunst et al. (2021b) measured the extent to which majority-group members adopt elements of various minority-group cultures and/or maintain their national culture due to living in the same country. Their findings indicated that certain personality traits, such as openness, influenced the acculturative changes in majority-group members. Although the relationship was considered indirect, the

association between personality traits and intercultural sensitivity was also highlighted by Bennett in his developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS) (7). An individual's openness was found to be an indicator of their ethnorelativism and ranked them higher in the DMIS.

Other studies also linked majority-group members' intercultural sensitivity with cultural changes they experienced during their exposure to minority-group cultures (Dandy et al., 2018; Dandy et al., 2023; Lefringhausen and Marshall, 2016; Montreuil & Bourhis, 2001). Dandy et al. (2018) found that Australian majority-group members, who valued diversity in intercultural contact showed a positive attitude towards adopting different aspects of minority-group cultures. These findings were also supported by a recent study from Australia where intercultural sensitivity predicted mutual acculturation outcomes for majority group members (Dandy et al., 2023). Consistent with these findings, Lefringhausen and Marshall's (2016) study associated multicultural adaptation with intercultural sensitivity and suggested that intercultural contact with people from diverse cultural backgrounds may lessen acculturative stress and increase intercultural sensitivity leading to mutual adaptation.

Intercultural sensitivity was also linked with ethnocultural empathy (Bennett, 2017; Hua, 2020), described as culturally specific empathy that emerges when individuals develop their readiness and capacity to participate in the shared experiences of people from different racial and ethnic groups (3). For this, majority-group members need to "unlearn their biases and stereotypes while being intentional about learning new information, perspective taking, reflexivity, and awareness of injustices and inequities" (Valdez et al., 2023, p. 373). This metacognitive process would not only help them recognize the feelings of people from other ethnic and cultural backgrounds but also closely relate to them (Cacciattolo & Aronson, 2023; Moffit et al., 2022; Hua, 2020). Especially, in school settings, where majority and minority-group members frequently engage in intercultural interactions, ethnocultural empathy can be an effective tool cultivated through the regular practice of self-reflection.

Acculturation in school settings

According to António and Monteiro (2015), "Acculturation attitudes neither exist nor are formed in an empty and aseptic environment" (p. 426). These attitudes are developed through continuous negotiation and response to the social context. In the case of children and adolescents, the school environment sets circumstances for such negotiations to take place between the majority and minority group members as it positions them to engage in long-term intercultural contact (2). Through repeated intergroup interactions, children from both groups learn about the cultural orientations of their peers as they develop their own orientations. Hillekens et al. (2019) emphasized adolescence as a crucial period "where acculturation orientations evolve in line with intergroup inequalities and asymmetries in society" (p. 8). Given that adolescents spend most of their time at school, the way schools manage intercultural interactions between majority and minority-group members can have a profound influence on their "belonging and educational outcomes" (2, p. 1512).

Schools carry the responsibility to promote the positive social and psychological adjustment of both majority and minority groups for their mutual integration (Birman et al., 2007; 2). When schools treat acculturation as an interactive and dynamic process where both majority and minority groups act as interconnected and interdependent parts, intercultural contact can result in mutual integration (Landis & Bhawuk, 2020; Pfafferott & Brown, 2006; Sidler et al., 2022). In this dynamic, both majority and minority-group members are positioned as the recipients and change agents.

The process of acculturation is also influenced by context (Castro & Murray, 2010; Makarova et al., 2019). According to Makarova et al. (2019), children of ethnic minority-group members face developmental challenges as they try to balance the majority-group culture in the school context and the heritage culture in the home context. In this dynamic, teachers as majority-group members represent and introduce the new culture to children. While doing so, they influence "conditions of acculturation" in school settings which has implications on children's "psychological adjustment (i.e., their well-being, life satisfaction, health vulnerability, and psychosomatic complaints), their behavioral adjustment (i.e., at-risk behaviors, rule violation, use of tobacco, alcohol or drugs) as well as their achievement-related outcomes (i.e., academic engagement, achievement, and aspirations)" (Makarova et al., 2019, p. 450).

Given that teachers are direct influencers of acculturation conditions in school settings, engaging in regular self-reflection by putting themselves in the place, space, and worldview of their students (Hua, 2020), not only helps them move away from ethnocentric norms and values but also develop their readiness and capacity to participate in the shared experiences of students from different racial and ethnic groups. As noted, the more an individual becomes a part of the shared experiences of others from different racial and ethnic groups, the more likely they are to express empathy towards individuals from those groups. Hence, engaging in the practice of self-reflection and empathy may help teachers recognize the significance of their role in acculturation conditions in school settings and view acculturation as a reciprocal process.

In this regard, the present mixed-methods study investigates the association between ethnocultural empathy and acculturative changes experienced by majority-group Japanese teachers during their long-term interactions with asylum-seekers' children within Japanese school settings. We used a two-phased sequential exploratory mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2013). In study 1, we gained a baseline understanding of the factors contributing to majority-group members' acculturation through a qualitative study. After analyzing our findings, we formulated a hypothesis around the emergent variables of intercultural contact experience, ethnocultural empathy, majority-group members' acculturation in school settings. In study 2, we collected data from 110 Japanese school teachers and tested these associations through a quantitative analysis.

Our qualitative and quantitative findings provided insights from different angles. The former offered deeper participant perspectives, while the latter allowed testing the relationships emerging through those perspectives. Therefore, the results complemented each other and provided a more comprehensive outlook of the associations between different variables in relation to majority-group acculturation.

Study 1: Qualitative analysis

Methods

We obtained the first set of data through qualitative interviews with pre-tertiary Japanese teachers who engaged in regular intercultural contact with children of asylum-seekers in school settings. We analyzed the qualitative data using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith & Flower, 2009). We focused on understanding the essence of the majority-group members' personal experiences and how they made sense of these experiences in and outside of their school environment. IPA is performed based on a detailed analysis of information produced by a small sample size of between six and nine participants (Smith et al., 2009). We used a purposive sampling strategy and relied on our own judgment when selecting participants (Denzin, 2006). We chose majority-group members who were of interest and had knowledge and experience in teaching elementary-level children of Kurdish asylum-seekers in a school environment. The first author paid preliminary visits to the elementary schools in Kawaguchi district where a large number of children of Kurdish asylum-seekers are enrolled. During the preliminary visits, the researcher explained the purpose of the study, which was to understand the acculturative changes the teachers experienced through intercultural interactions with Kurdish children in and outside the classroom. The interviews with the principal and two teachers from one of the schools were held on the school premises while other interviews were held in a café around the nearest train station.

At the time of the study, all majority-group participants had taught Japanese and other subjects to these children in Kawaguchi City for a minimum of three years. Acculturation is a long-term process and thus, a minimum of three years of interaction was set as a selection criterion (Murray et al., 2014). All participants except the school principal had intercultural experiences through their exposure to other languages and cultures and speak a second or a third language (see Table 1). It is important to note that none of the participants had the experience of studying Turkish before they began to interact with the children in school settings.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with nine pre-tertiary Japanese teachers in different locations in Kawaguchi. During the interviews, we asked the participants open-ended questions to gain a deeper understanding of their interactions with Kurdish children in and outside the classroom environment, the sociocultural and psychological challenges the children experienced in their daily lives, the acculturative changes the participants experienced through those interactions, and the institutional changes they had observed in their schools after hosting a large number of children from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. As part of the human subject protection protocol, we allowed the interviewees to withdraw at any time without reason, yet all participants remained in the study. We held the interviews in Japanese and recorded them on a smartphone device. Each interview lasted approximately an hour. Prior to the interviews, we provided the participants with the background and the study objectives emphasizing that the study focuses on majority-group members' acculturation.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Cuba (1985) designed the four dimensions criteria to assess the rigor of qualitative research: "credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability" (as cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 244). According to Creswell (2013), researchers need to clarify at least two of these criteria to achieve trustworthiness in qualitative results.

To ensure credibility and transferability, the interview questions were revised according to feedback from two acculturation experts. Initially, the instrument focused on both minority and majority-group members' adaptation through the majority-group members' perspectives. The experts' suggestions helped to ensure the instrument primarily focused on majority-group members'

Table 1
Participant Information (N = 9).

Participants	*Gender*	*Age*	*Origin*	*Profession*	*Workplace*	*Period*	*Foreign Languages*	*Intercultural Experiences*
Participant 1	Female	60 s	Japan	Japanese Language Teacher	Night Schools	Since 2016	English, Turkish	Worked with Swedish people in an architecture firm. Interacted with foreign moms in her children's daycare.
Participant 2	Female	50 s	Japan	Japanese Language Teacher	Elementary School	Since 2016	English	Has American relatives Worked as an English teacher.
Participant 3	Male	50 s	Japan	School Principal	Elementary School	Since 2019	None	None except family vacations.
Participant 4	Female	50 s	Japan	Homeroom Teacher	Elementary School	Since 2019	English, Turkish	Study abroad in the US and Mexico.
Participant 5	Male	60 s	Japan	Japanese Language Teacher	Night Schools	Since 2013	German	Majored in German intercultural contact with Germans.
Participant 6	Female	60 s	Japan	Japanese Language Teacher	Elementary School	Since 2013	Turkish, English	Went to Canadian mission high school where she studied Christianity.
Participant 7	Female	30 s	Japan	Japanese Language Teacher	Elementary School	Since 2015	English, French	Study abroad in France and England
Participant 8	Male	40 s	Japan	Japanese Language Teacher	Elementary School	Since 2016	Turkish, English	Study abroad in France and served as NGO in Nepal.
Participant 9	Male	40 s	Japan	Japanese Language Teacher	Private School	Since 2016	Turkish, English	Study abroad in the U.S.A. and lived in Turkey.

acculturation through their personal experiences and its implications on their institutions. Based on the suggestions from the experts, follow-up questions and prompts were also added to each question to obtain thick descriptions. As prompts were constructed, leading questions were avoided to ensure the results were not influenced by predetermined assumptions.

Before conducting the qualitative interviews, the first author spent sufficient time (more than 30 h until all the interviews were completed over a four-month period) with the majority-group members in and outside of the school settings to deepen his understanding of the culture, social setting, or phenomenon of interest. During these exchanges, he developed rapport and trust with the participants through his affiliation with a major Japanese university as a researcher, his high-level spoken and written Japanese language proficiency, and his in-depth understanding of Turkish and Japanese cultures. The trust and rapport facilitated understanding and co-construction of meaning with the majority-group members during the interviews. The researcher wrote a positionality statement (see section below). The researchers also ensured the results were transferable to other studies by including thick descriptions of the participant narratives and direct quotes in the findings (3).

Qualitative data analysis

We used Smith et al.'s (2009) seven-step analysis. First, we transcribed and reviewed the recorded data. Then, we sent each transcript to their respective participants for validation. After obtaining their validation, we translated the Japanese transcripts into English and had them proofread by a bilingual native Japanese speaker. Then we reviewed and reread the transcripts and took initial notes by regularly referring to the original text. We used open coding which allowed for the identification of distinct concepts and themes for categorization. After the open coding, we categorized the initial codes based on common characteristics. Next, we identified repeated patterns through the codes and clustered them as emergent themes. For instance, a lack of Japanese language ability, interactions with Japanese peers, and a lack of parental support were repeatedly mentioned by the participants and thus, identified as repeated patterns through the codes and clustered under the emergent theme of sociocultural adversities experienced by children of Kurdish asylum-seekers. Finally, we shared the results with the participants for further validation and contributions.

Positionality statement

The study is co-authored by two researchers one of whom is originally from Turkey. The first author's experiences and background knowledge of Turkey and his affiliation with a major Japanese university allowed him to gain the trust of the school personnel and identify participants who engaged in regular intercultural contact with Kurdish asylum-seekers' children at elementary schools in Kawaguchi. During the data collection and analysis process, his positionality has been an advantage in navigating, processing, and making sense of the participants' words through his in-depth understanding of social realities and intercultural relations in Turkey and Japan. However, as a person of Turkish descent with a privileged position in Japanese society, he also recognizes his limitations in viewing the world through the lenses of underprivileged children of Kurdish asylum seekers. As the second author was not involved in any stages of the qualitative research (Study 1), we found it unnecessary to include a positionality statement for him.

Results

Three major themes emerged through the qualitative analysis: *Sociocultural Adversities Experienced by Children of Kurdish Asylum-Seekers*, *Majority-Group Acculturation at the Individual Level*, and *Majority-Group Acculturation at the Institutional Level*.

Sociocultural adversities experienced by children of Kurdish Asylum-Seekers

The first theme emerged through the personal experiences of the teachers during their daily interactions with Kurdish asylum-seekers' children. According to the participants, most children arrive in Japan without the Japanese language ability and some of them immediately start school due to Japan's compulsory education. Despite their lack of Japanese ability, the children are placed in classrooms with their Japanese peers where they follow the same curriculum.

However, several participants noted that foreign children, who need Japanese support, are separated from their Japanese peers, and placed in a Japanese language support class during the hours their Japanese peers attend regular Japanese language classes. In addition, the newly arrived children also go to night schools called *Yakan* from 5 am to 10 pm where they are taught Japanese to catch up with their Japanese peers.

When we asked the participants about the Kurdish and Japanese students' relationships, several participants noted that building meaningful relationships with Japanese children is a challenge. One of the reasons was Japanese children's busy schedule with "extracurricular activities such as piano and ballet lessons, or cram school." Therefore, Kurdish children tend to play with other Kurdish children with whom they speak Turkish or Kurdish. A participant noted, "Most Japanese parents do not engage in communication with Kurdish parents due to the language barrier and cultural differences" (Participant 9).

When we asked the participants about bullying at the elementary school, they mentioned specific incidents of bullying in the form of "hiding Kurdish children's school items," and verbal assaults, such as "You deserve to die," or "You stink." Sometimes "when Kurdish children tried to speak with their Japanese peers, they were ignored." Two participants shared a joint account where "A Kurdish girl was restrained into a school toilet by Japanese children and was not let out during the entire lunch break" (Participant 1 and Participant 6).

The participants also emphasized that Japanese elementary schools demand "considerable support and engagement from parents." Since many Kurdish parents "lack Japanese language proficiency," they often "neglect school requirements," leaving children without the necessary parental support. A participant noted, "I have met children who did not say words for more than six months…Perhaps, it was due to excessive psychological distress" (Participant 3).

It was also mentioned that most parents are not able to "read their children's grades" and "teachers' comments" due to "their lack of Japanese language proficiency." Therefore, some parents remain unaware of the school requirements for several years. A participant noted, "Our school adjusted to those parents by having teachers write grades in *Hiragana*" (Participant 3), which is the simple form of writing Japanese, that all first-graders can read after completing their first month of study. Another participant said, "I translate the grades into Turkish for those parents whose children have yet to read *Hiragana*" (Participant 4).

Some teachers voluntarily visit certain homes to offer guidance due to the mothers' inability to read. According to one participant, homeroom teachers at the elementary school were puzzled by Kurdish children neglecting their regular health and dental check-ups despite numerous letters from the school. When the teachers contacted one participant, who was also a child welfare council member at the city hall, they discovered that those families and their children were excluded from the healthcare system due to their provisional release status. Therefore, they had no choice but to skip the annual health and dental check-ups that all children in Japan were granted for free. A participant who knew about this incident noted,

> Asylum-seekers are deprived of the basic human rights Japanese people take for granted such as free healthcare [referring to children here] or free interstate travel. Many homeroom teachers were shocked by this reality when they heard that in our human rights education workshops (Participant 6).

Majority-group acculturation at the individual level

The second theme that emerged in the participants' reflection was the acculturative changes they experienced through their long-term intercultural contact with the children of Kurdish asylum-seekers. Several participants mentioned that their intercultural interactions with various minority groups including Kurdish children helped them develop "empathy." A participant noted, "Being with the children every day and witnessing their struggle made me want to help them" (Participant 8).

The participants noted that teaching the Japanese language to children without any Japanese ability posed a major challenge. For this reason, two of the participants decided to study Turkish. One of the participants learned the language through "TV dramas, news articles, and other online resources" (Participant 1) while the other one "worked part-time for a real estate specialized in finding apartments for asylum-seekers," which created opportunities to interact with Kurds and helped her improve her Turkish language ability (Participant 7). After learning Turkish, both teachers became an integral part of the current support system for the children. A participant elaborated on her feelings about teaching Japanese to Kurdish children:

> I didn't use to grasp the children's true feelings especially when they experienced hardship in their social environments, but I started to learn Turkish and realized I was able to understand and make sense of their true feelings. This mutual understanding helped them open up to me…I spent years with some of these children, from elementary school first grade to jr. high school third grade. I witnessed their growth. They are experiencing hardship and sorrow in society, yet they can't communicate their problems to their parents, who don't have a clear sense of what their children are experiencing. Also, it is difficult to convey subtle meanings of Japanese words in Turkish or Kurdish languages when children have negative experiences in school. So, when I act as the person to whom they can open up, I feel empowered (Participant 1).

Another participant also emphasized the impact of learning the minority-group members' language and culture:

> Understanding their language, even to a certain degree, and knowing where they originally came from has given me a clear perspective on the challenges the children are experiencing in Japan. I was not aware before I studied Turkish and learned more about Turkey. Now, I am viewing each of them as individuals rather than members of a certain community in Japan (Participant 4).

Some of the participants learned how to cook "Kurdish food" from the children's mothers. One participant noted that she often invited Kurdish mothers to her home and held "cooking events" for the neighboring Japanese people, "The cooking classes help Japanese members of the community recognize the positive aspects of the Kurdish culture through food, music, and dance" (Participant 6).

Another participant mentioned that she developed an interest in "world history" as she engaged in continuous interactions with Kurdish children (Participant 4). She studied the history of Europe and the Middle East, with a particular interest in Turkey, as well as Turkey's constitution and laws. Another participant also mentioned that she studied the geography of Turkey including "the places the children came from" and "their lifestyles before moving to Japan" (Participant 1). Several participants emphasized that these children are in Japan not by their own choice; grasping this reality increased teachers' empathy, which played a role in embracing the minority culture.

A participant noted, "I learned basic conversational Turkish that I could use to communicate with students who completely lack Japanese language ability." He became interested in the "*saz*," a string instrument used for Turkish folk music. By teaching Japanese to Kurdish children, he developed "tolerance and cross-cultural understanding" which also made him want to rent out rooms in his house to "international students" from different parts of the world and embrace the cultural differences they brought (Participant 6).

Majority-group acculturation at the institutional level

The third theme emerged through the participants' reflections on the acculturative changes their institutions experienced after hosting a large number of asylum-seekers' children. In April 2016, one of the participants was resting in a local park in Kawaguchi. She saw a boy playing alone during school time. She wondered why the boy was not at school. She went to the same park the next day and the boy was there again. The boy approached her and asked if they could play together. She kindly joined him. When she asked him

why he was not at school, the boy told her "I am not allowed to go to school." The participant was confused by the boy's response and reported the situation to the authorities as Japan mandates a nine-year compulsory education for all children (Participant 7).

An investigation revealed that the school refused to admit the boy due to his inability to understand Japanese. However, with support from some of the participants in this study, the boy was admitted to the school. Over the years, an increasing number of minority-group children were accepted into the schools in the district and thus, those schools made certain educational and administrative adjustments. One participant noted that some schools began to include "Halal food options" as the number of Kurdish, Syrian, and Afghan children increased (Participant 8). Another participant also mentioned, "Our school serves Turkish food on international food days…Before the pandemic, we used to have Kurdish mothers come to our school and cook Kurdish food on certain occasions. However, due to the pandemic-related restrictions, we had to stop these events" (Participant 3).

When we asked them about other acculturative changes, several participants also emphasized that the elementary schools in Kawaguchi offer a class called "Global Understanding." During this class, teachers introduce the cultural and geographic features of various countries from around the world with an emphasis on the places the minority-group children came from. A participant noted that "this class helps Japanese children learn about the places their foreign peers came from" (Participant 8). Japanese students are often "curious" about their Kurdish peers and share information they learned such as "the names of dishes, cities, and greeting phrases."

Since most Kurdish parents lack Japanese language proficiency to read letters from the schools, one of the participants, who studied Turkish, "translates important letters into Turkish" (Participant 2). Furthermore, her school, which hosts a large number of Kurdish students, recently started to invite a Turkish-speaking Japanese member of a multicultural association when they held school meetings. The representative hears the issues in the meetings and acts as a liaison between the Kurdish parents and homeroom teachers to help bridge the communication gap. Since this project has been successful, the school will continue its efforts to maintain communication channels.

Due to the major bullying incidents at one of the elementary schools, where a large number of Kurdish children are enrolled, the school began to hold "human rights education workshops" where one of the participants introduced Kurdish culture as well as other minority-group cultures to the school personnel (Participant 6). Through these workshops, homeroom teachers gain insight into the difficulties facing asylum-seekers in Japan, such as the concept of "provisional release, children's exclusion from free healthcare, and the risk of detention and deportation." As a result, the school personnel also started to empathize with the children and their parents and thus, invited a representative from the Kurdish community to give "cross-cultural understanding seminars" on the positive aspects of Turkish/Kurdish culture to children and their parents to create a more inclusive educational environment.

Preliminary discussion

The participants elaborated on the acculturative changes they experienced through long-term intercultural contact with Kurdish asylum-seekers' children. The first theme highlights the sociocultural and psychological adversities experienced by the children of Kurdish asylum-seekers. By being an integral part of the children's lives in and outside the school environment, the teachers became active participants in children's shared experiences. The second theme highlights the acculturative changes the teachers experienced as the majority-group members. Based on the participants' responses, ethnocultural empathy emerged as a critical variable facilitating the acculturative changes the teachers experienced. The third theme focused on the teachers' observations of the acculturative changes the schools underwent since they began to host a large number of minority-group children.

The findings of Study 1 revealed the potential role ethnocultural empathy played in majority-group members' acculturation in school settings through the participants' personal experiences. Furthermore, Study 1 also showed that long-term intercultural exposure may be needed for majority-group members to develop ethnocultural empathy. Although the findings that emerged through Study 1 were insightful, given that they had never been studied in school settings in a non-WEIRD society, it was not possible to reach general conclusions due to the limited sample size and the subjective nature of qualitative findings. We hypothesize that ethnocultural empathy, a skill that can be learned through intercultural exposure (Cacciattolo et al. 2020; Cacciattolo & Aronson, 2023; Rasoal et al., 2011), facilitates majority group members' acculturation in school settings. In order to statistically confirm what had emerged through the qualitative findings, we tested the found associations between the factors—intercultural experience, ethnocultural empathy, and majority-group members' acculturation—with a larger sample size through a quantitative design in Study 2.

Study 2: Quantitative analysis

To provide formal tests of our hypothesis we proceeded with the quantitative part of our analysis. We reached out to Japanese school teachers to fill in a short questionnaire measuring their intercultural experience in various domains, their level of ethnocultural empathy and their acculturation attitudes in four distinct domains, namely Own Culture Maintenance, Other Culture Adoption, Own Culture Adoption Expectations, and Other Culture Maintenance Expectations. We expected that intercultural experience might be associated with a preference for acculturating to other cultures (other culture adoption). More empathetic respondents may also have more lenient expectations regarding immigrants adopting Japanese culture *and* leaving their traditional culture behind. However, considering the multidimensional nature of acculturation, we acknowledge that the two effects may not co-occur. Respectively, we remain more agnostic as to the expected effect on own culture maintenance as the adoption of foreign cultures would not necessarily imply abandoning their own Japanese culture.

Methods

Data were collected from 110 pre-tertiary Japanese teachers in the Greater Tokyo Area. The number of male and female participants were almost evenly balanced (52.7 vs. 47.3%, respectively). The respondents' age varied between 21 and 75 with an average of 44.9 (see Table 2). There are minimum educational requirements for being a teacher in Japan which meant that our respondents had at least a vocational or junior college degree (6.7%), while most had an undergraduate degree (65.7%) and 27.6% a graduate degree. The data were obtained by using *Google Forms*. A link was created for the survey questionnaire and sent out to a representative from each school. Then, the representatives shared the link on the joint platforms where the participants could access the link and fill out the survey by the deadline we set. The entire questionnaire including exact question wording and possible responses is presented here: https://osf.io/hrq7d/.

Intercultural experience

We built an intercultural experience scale consisting of the following components: traveling experience (i.e., "frequency of traveling abroad in five categories"), teaching experience (i.e., "frequency of teaching children from different ethnic and/or cultural backgrounds"), cultural learning (i.e., "learning about another culture through school, contact with foreigners, traveling abroad, etc.") interactions experience (i.e., "frequency of interactions with asylum-seekers, including children, parents, acquaintances, and strangers"), and language proficiency in English and another language ("five categories from no knowledge to native"). The scale combining these seven measures had acceptable reliability with an alpha of.76.

Ethnocultural empathy

We used a shortened version of Wang et al.'s (2003) ethnocultural empathy scale, originally consisting of 31 items. We selected eight items that related most closely to our particular focus. Three of these items were from the Empathic Feeling and Expression subscale (e.g., "I express my concern about discrimination to people from other racial or ethnic groups"), three from the Empathic Perspective Taking subscale (e.g., "I know what it feels like to be the only person of a certain race or ethnicity in a group of people"), and two from the Empathic Awareness subscale (e.g., "I am aware of how society differentially treats racial or ethnic groups other than my own"). Respondents could choose as many of these eight statements as applied to them. The scale reliability was high with an alpha of.84.

Majority-Group acculturation

We borrowed Kunst et al.'s (2023a) Majority-Group Acculturation scale consisting of four parts, each of which is measured by six items. *Own Culture Maintenance* measures how important it is for respondents to maintain their own (Japanese) culture, traditions, values, and way of life and to belong to Japanese culture (alpha =.92). *Other Culture Adoption* measures how important it is for Japanese respondents to participate in and live in accordance with immigrants' and minority groups' culture, traditions, values, as well as to feel connected to and have contact with them (alpha =.93). *Other Culture Adoption Expectations* refers to the respondents' expectations of immigrants and minority-group members to adopt mainstream Japanese culture, traditions, and values, as well as to belong and be connected to Japanese culture (alpha =.96). Lastly, *Own Culture Maintenance Expectations* measures how important it is for respondents that immigrants and minority-group members maintain their ethnic culture, traditions, and values, and feel that they belong to and are connected to their ethnic group (alpha =.85).

Analytical strategy

As we were interested in the potential mediating effect of ethnocultural empathy on the relationship between intercultural experience and majority-group acculturation, we performed mediation analyses. For that purpose, we used the *SEM* command in Stata 18 (StataCorp., 2023) which uses Structural Equation Modeling. We fitted four such models where intercultural experience and ethnocultural empathy remained the same, but the outcome variable changed between the four majority-group acculturation subscales. The models estimated the relationship between ethnocultural experience and ethnocultural empathy (path a in Fig. 1), that

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics.

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
Intercultural Experience	104	1.70	0.64	0.5	3.33
Ethnocultural Empathy	110	.46	.34	.13	1
Majority-Group Acculturation					
Own Culture Maintenance	110	4.61	1.39	1.83	7
Other Culture Adoption	110	4.35	1.22	1	7
Own Culture Maintenance Expectations	110	4.62	1.29	1	7
Other Culture Adoption Expectations	110	4.14	1.15	1.33	7
Socio-demographic variables					
Gender	110	1.47	0.50	1	2
Age	110	44.9	13.21	21	75
Number of children	110	1.11	1.01	0	3
Level of education	105	2.20	0.54	1	3
Household size	109	2.77	1.21	1	6

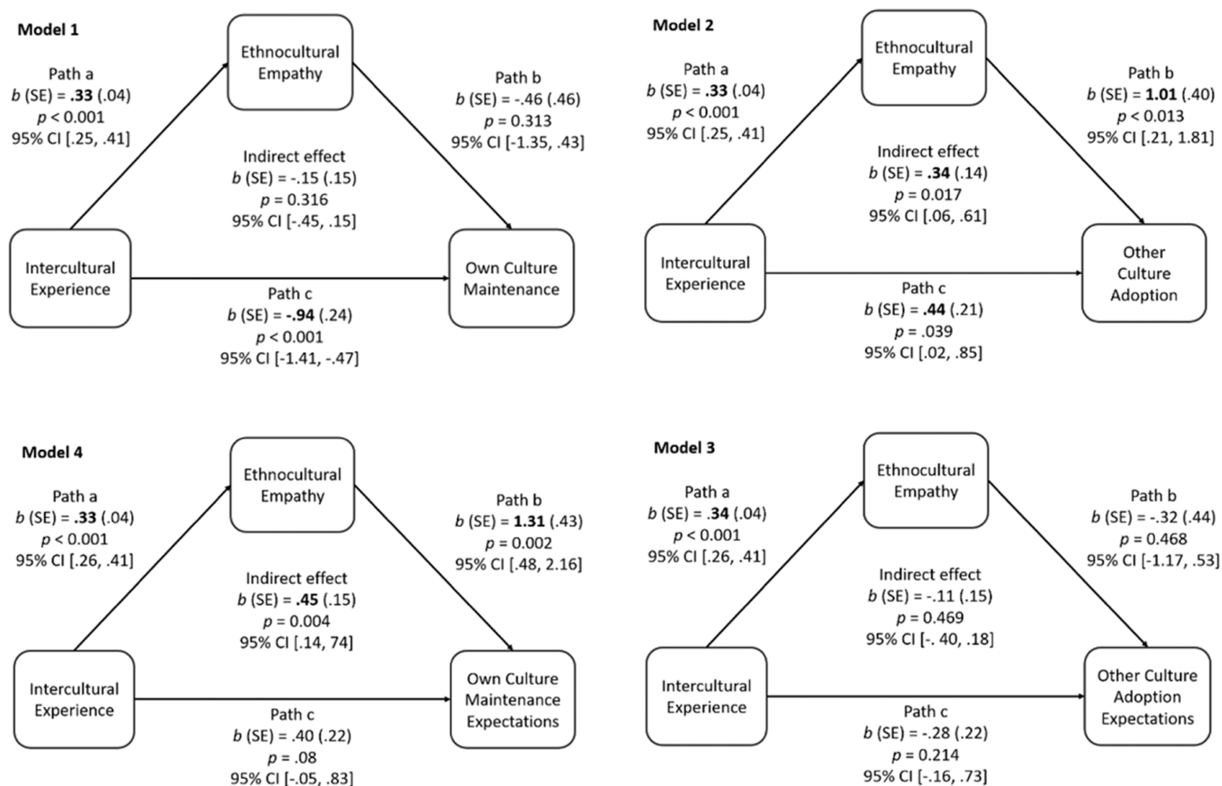

Fig. 1. *Mediation Models with Unstandardized Regression Coefficients, Standard Errors, P-values and Confidence Intervals. Note.* Sample size: Model 1 $N = 103$, Model 2 $N = 104$, Model 3 $N = 102$, Model 4 $N = 103$.

between ethnocultural empathy and each of the four acculturation scales (path b), as well as the direct association between intercultural experience and each of the four acculturation scales (path c). In addition, the strength of the indirect effect (from intercultural experience to acculturation through ethnocultural empathy) and the total effect of intercultural experience to acculturation through both pathways were reported, which allows the estimation of the share of the total effect that is mediated through intercultural empathy. The entire dataset and a Stata do file can be found here: https://osf.io/hrq7d/.

Results

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics about our data and variables. Fig. 1 presents four mediation models with each of the four majority group acculturation subscales. Evidently, intercultural experience is associated with two of the acculturation scales in what could be perceived as expected direction: negatively with own culture maintenance (Model 1), and positively with other culture adoption (Model 2). Intercultural experience is also positively associated with ethnocultural empathy. Ethnocultural empathy is in turn positively associated with other culture adoption (Model 2) and own culture maintenance expectations (Model 3). Statistically significant mediations were respectively found for these two subscales but not for own culture maintenance and other culture adoption expectations. Forty-four percent (44%) of the association between intercultural experience and other culture adoption was mediated by ethnocultural empathy (the indirect effect of.34 divided by the total effect of.77 times 100), while for own culture maintenance expectations, the share of mediation was 54% (the indirect effect of.45 divided by the total effect of.83 times 100).

Preliminary discussion

Study 2 supported our hypothesis that the relationship between intercultural experience and majority group acculturation is at least partially mediated by ethnocultural empathy. However, this is not regarding each of the four acculturation subscales. More empathetic respondents were more in favor of adopting and participating in immigrants' cultural life yet, they also found it unnecessary to abandon their own culture and traditions. The respondents were also more likely to support the maintenance of immigrants' own traditions, values, and cultural way of living as opposed to expecting them to assimilate into Japanese culture. Importantly, however, more empathetic respondents were not less likely to believe that immigrants should adopt Japanese traditions, values, cultural way of living as well as having contacts with majority group members and feeling a sense of belonging to Japanese society. These differences in the effects underline the multidimensionality of acculturation.

General discussion

The main goal of our investigation was to provide insights into the role of pre-tertiary Japanese teachers' ethnocultural empathy in mediating their acculturation in Japanese elementary school settings. In Study 1, we used interpretative phenomenological analysis to understand how majority-group Japanese teachers made sense of the cultural and psychological changes they experienced during their interactions with Kurdish asylum-seekers' children. We found that engaging in long-term intercultural contact gave the participants the opportunity to witness the sociocultural adversities experienced by the children, and thus, triggered an empathetic response (3). As the participants put themselves in the place, space, and the worldview of the children (Zhu, 2011), they engaged in their shared experiences on a deeper level (Wang et al., 2003).

Based on our qualitative analysis, the teachers reported studying the Turkish language and culture, learning to cook Turkish/ Kurdish food, practicing traditional dance, and listening to authentic Turkish music. Learning the minority language and culture created opportunities for both the majority and minority-group members to deepen their relationships and made the participants realize that acculturation is a reciprocal process where members of both groups adopt different aspects of each other's culture (Berry, 2018; a; Lefringhausen et al., 2021).

Furthermore, as the participants deepened their relationships with the children and their families, they started to influence the policies and approaches of the elementary schools in the area. Hence, the schools also underwent changes, such as preparing Turkish translations of all letters and documents, offering global understanding and human rights workshops, and holding cultural events such as Turkish/Kurdish food days. The changes at the institutional level were initiated by the majority-group members who experienced those acculturative changes.

The survey results from Study 2 also validated these findings, thus supporting the relationships between majority-group members' intercultural experience, ethnocultural empathy, and acculturation. We confirmed the positive association between pre-tertiary Japanese teachers' intercultural experience and ethnocultural empathy. Furthermore, their ethnocultural empathy was associated with a preference for adjusting to immigrants' culture, which confirms our expectation in terms of empathy's association with majority-group acculturation, but this is not necessarily accompanied by a desire to abandon Japanese culture. In addition, we found that ethnocultural empathy is also positively associated with expectations of immigrants to maintain their own traditions, values, and cultural way of living.

However, we did not find a statistically significant association between empathy and the expectation of Japanese culture adoption, meaning empathetic respondents believe that the maintenance of immigrants' culture can go hand in hand with their adaptation to Japanese culture. Intercultural experience had no direct association with other culture adoption expectations. In other words, neither the experience of other cultures nor feeling sympathy towards other culture's struggles influenced the perception of Japanese teachers that immigrants need to adapt to and integrate into Japanese society. Noteworthy, at a mean of 4.14 on a scale from 1 to 7, this desire was only moderately high.

Intercultural experience was previously associated with majority-group members' positive attitudes towards adopting different aspects of minority-group members' culture in WEIRD contexts (Dandy et al., 2018; 3; Lefrinhausen & Marshall, 2016). By unveiling the mediating role of teachers' ethnocultural empathy in majority-group members' acculturation, the present study makes a unique contribution to the current acculturation research in school settings. Furthermore, the associations we found show that it is possible for teachers as the majority-group members to experience cultural changes towards minority-group children in school settings. Especially, the uniqueness of the context could present untapped research opportunities for majority-group acculturation in Japan, a country that continues to see growing intercultural interactions due to increasing immigration (Komisarof, 2022; 1; Park et al., 2023).

Especially, as indicated in Study 1, the teachers' position to influence institutional changes has the potential to offer a new direction in majority-group acculturation research in terms of bridging the gap between individual and institutional level acculturation in school settings. Furthermore, teachers as the influencers of acculturation conditions (Makarova et al., 2019) need to be paid more attention in acculturation research. Gaining a deeper understanding of teachers' ethnocultural empathy could unveil different underlying factors behind their motivation to perceive and treat acculturation as a reciprocal process and help researchers identify new ways of promoting mutual integration in non-WEIRD school settings.

Finally, schools play an important role in influencing interactions between majority and minority group members (Sidler et al., 2022). Therefore, we recommend that creating intercultural contact opportunities should be the focal point of policymakers and school administrators in Japan. As reported in this research, inviting minority-group members to school environments in the form of cultural events such as cooking, traditional dance and music, and cultural workshops can give majority-group members the opportunity to learn different aspects of minority-group cultures and traditions and reflect on their experience. Furthermore, exposure to minority-group cultures could enhance majority-group children's cross-cultural understanding and tolerance and promote more meaningful interactions with minority-group children.

At present, there is little research on how majority-group members' acculturation on an individual level influences institutional acculturation. Although our participants' anecdotes from the qualitative analysis hinted at this association, larger-scale empirical research is warranted to establish a stronger link between majority-group acculturation at the individual and institutional levels. Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of the data did not allow us to determine the direction of causality. Even though our quantitative analysis confirmed the expected associations between the variables that emerged from the qualitative analysis, a reciprocal relationship is also plausible, e.g., more empathetic respondents may be more likely to engage in intercultural experiences. Future studies using longitudinal design may be better equipped to determine the causal relationships between our variables of interest. Finally, one of the limitations of this study was the small sample size. We believe that the evidence found in this study warrants larger-scale research to further test the link between intercultural contact experience, ethnocultural empathy, and majority-group members'

acculturation through the perspectives of both majority and minority group members.

Acknowledgements

We sincerely thank the special issue editors, the reviewers, and Dr. Adam Komisarof for taking the time to review our manuscript and providing constructive feedback and valuable suggestions. Futhermore, we would like to extend our sincere appreciation to all the participants for giving their time to participate in in-person interviews and surveys to contribute to this research study.

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