Competence matters! Understanding biculturalism in ethnically diverse adolescents.

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Abstract

The importance of bicultural competence in negotiating diversity was explored longitudinally with 228 bicultural British females. Bicultural competence predicted social-psychological adaptation and intergroup attitudes. It also mediated the effects of ethnic identity and perceived similarity on acculturation preferences. Implications for research on adolescents growing up with diversity are considered.

Keywords: bicultural competence, negotiating diversity, adolescence, ethnic identity, acculturation, minority youth

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Bicultural children and adolescents - second or higher generation migrants or mixed-ethnicity individuals - are of specific interest when considering the impact of diversity on development, because diversity is much more than an experience to them: it is an integral part of their selves (e.g., Verkuyten & Pouliasi, 2002). From an early age, bicultural individuals negotiate their ethnic identity formation alongside a growing consciousness of belonging to more than one sociocultural group. Unlike other (monocultural) individuals, their whole development is therefore intrinsically linked with acquiring bicultural competence (BCC) relevant to their ethnic group(s) and society as a whole (Oppedal, 2006).

Research has shown that bicultural identification, or integration, is the most successful acculturation strategy for immigrants and their offspring in terms of psychological development (e.g., Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006) yet bicultural identity achievement is typically delayed and only occurs in late adolescence or adulthood (e.g. Phinney & Alipuria, 2006). It is therefore important for social and developmental psychologists to understand the emergence of BCC during adolescence and how its promotion can support psychological well-being and societal cohesion in diverse social contexts.

Nonetheless, there is very little work that expressly considers bicultural competence in adolescence. BCC refers to a youth's ability to function effectively in multi-ethnic, pluralistic environments by displaying an understanding of the varying social norms of, and observable behavioural flexibility with regard to, at least two cultural groups (Rotheram-Borus, 1993). Importantly, BCC does not necessitate cultural identification. In an extensive literature review, LaFromboise, Coleman and Gerton (1993) concluded that successful achievement of bicultural identification and adaptation may depend on an individual first gaining BCC. Such competence includes awareness and knowledge of the history, institutions, rituals and everyday practices of a given culture (knowledge), the belief or confidence that one can live effectively within two groups without compromising one's sense of cultural identity

(bicultural efficacy), the ability to communicate ideas and feelings to members of a given culture and to develop culturally appropriate behaviours or roles (role repertoire), and having a well-developed support system (social support).

Similar individual dimensions relevant to identification and acculturation have been discussed (e.g., Phinney & Alipuria, 2006), but there is no published, empirical research that considers a detailed model of bicultural competence. Little is known about how BCC connects to other developmental and inter-group processes relevant to children growing up with diversity. Therefore, this longitudinal study explored whether dimensions of BCC predict children's social-psychological adaptation (their self-esteem and peer acceptance) and their positive inter-group attitudes (the desire to engage with ethnic groups other than their own) over time. We also considered the importance of BCC for achieving bicultural identification or integration. In the acculturation literature integration is often conceptualised as a desire for cultural maintenance paired with a desire for out-group contact. Past research has shown that ethnic identification is predictive of the former (e.g., Berry et al., 2006), while perceived similarity may aid the latter (e.g., Stathi, Cameron, Hartley, & Bradford, 2014). Based on the outlined theoretical rationale, we would expect these known relationships to be influenced by an individual's BCC. We therefore tested our BCC dimensions as mediators of the relationship between ethnic identification and the desire for culture maintenance on the one hand and the relationship between perceived similarity and desire for out-group contact on the other hand.

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Method

Participants, Measures and Procedure

228 bicultural female participants (aged 11 to 17, $M = 13.08$, $SD = 1.47$, with a time of stay in the UK from 9 to 17 years, $M = 12.87$, $SD = 1.56$ at Time 1) living in London, UK, completed a questionnaire in group sessions during lesson time at two measurement points

(six months apart). At both measurement times participants received an introduction and scale practice, then completed demographic information and the following measures: 1.) *Bicultural competence* (see Appendix) including *cultural knowledge (British and ethnic), bicultural efficacy, role repertoire and social support.* 2.) Preferences for immigrant *culture maintenance* and *contact* (Zagefka & Brown, 2002). 3.) Phinney's (1992) *multigroup ethnic identity measure* and 4.) *Other group orientation scale*. 5.) *Perceived similarity* between own and other groups (Piontkowski et al., 2001). 6.) The *Rosenberg self-esteem scale* (1965) and 7.) *Peer group acceptance* (Asher & Wheeler, 1985). Scale properties are provided in Table 1.

Results

Social-psychological and intergroup consequences of bicultural competence.

Figure 1 depicts a structural equation model testing BCC at Time 1 (modeled as a single latent factor underlying cultural knowledge, bicultural efficacy, role repertoire, and social support) as a predictor of peer-group acceptance and self-esteem (as markers of socio-psychological adaptation) and other-group orientation at Time 2. This model, which indicated significant positive relationships between BCC and the three outcomes, fits the data well, $\chi2$ (16) = 23.08, p = .11; *CFI* = .95; TLI = .92; *RMSEA* = .04.

Bicultural competence and acculturation preferences.
We simultaneously investigated the mediating effects of our five BCC dimensions on a) the relationship between ethnic identification and cultural maintenance preferences and b) the relationship between perceived similarity and desire for outgroup contact using bootstrap analyses with 50,000 samples to test the significance of indirect effects in Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro for SPSS. The first mediation model (Figure 2) accounted for 9% of the criterion variance, $R^2 =$ .09, F(6, 202) = 3.50, p = .003. The original direct effect of ethnic identification (b = .22, 95% CI [.06, .39]) was reduced to non-significance (b = .01, 95% CI [-.20, -.22]), while the total indirect effect of BCC on the relationship between ethnic identification and culture

maintenance was significant ($b = .21$, 95% CI [.05, .39]) and was based on the specific

indirect effect via ethnic knowledge ($b = .21$, 95% CI [.05, .39]).

The second mediation model (Figure 3) accounted for 14% of the criterion variance,

$R^2 = .14$, $F(6, 212) = 5.79$, $p < .001$. The direct effect of perceived similarity ($b = .21$, 95% CI

[.04, .38]) was reduced to non-significance ($b = .16$, 95% CI [-.01, .33]). The total indirect

effect of BCC on the relationship between perceived similarity and contact was non-

significant ($b = .05$, 95% CI [-.04, .11]), but there were small and significant specific indirect

effects via British knowledge ($b = .06$, 95% CI [.01, .12]), bicultural efficacy ($b = .03$, 95% CI

[.003, .07]), and role repertoire ($b = -.03$, 95% CI [-.07, -.001]).

Discussion

Given the limited research in this area, our findings provide a genuinely explorative

insight into consequences and role of bicultural competence in adolescents growing up in a

diverse context. Nonetheless, our findings do complement and extend current research and

theorizing. Specifically, we uncovered a well-fitting model where ethnic and British

knowledge, bicultural efficacy, role repertoire and social support underlie a latent BCC factor

that positively predicted social-psychological adaptation and other-group orientation. This

supports the assertion that gaining BCC along several dimensions is beneficial to minority

youth, because it facilitates adaptation and positive inter-group attitudes.

Our mediational analyses suggest that BCC is indeed an important precursor of an

integration preference (and, by extension, bicultural identification). The full mediation of the

relationship between ethnic identification and culture maintenance by ethnic knowledge

highlights the close relationship of knowledge and identification in early adolescence and is in

line with research on ethnic identity formation at this age (e.g., Phinney & Alipuria, 2006).

This finding suggests that BCC may be a particularly meaningful and informative concept in

early adolescence before individuals develop deeper insights of ethnic identification. Our

finding that knowledge about Britain, bicultural efficacy, and role repertoire mediated the

effect of perceived similarity on contact preferences also showed that BCC is relevant when examining intergroup relations in early adolescence. Together these analyses highlight the potential of BCC in helping young adolescents successfully negotiate the diversity they are faced with in their daily lives.

Given the exploratory nature of this study and its limitations, such as the single sex sample and reliance on self-report measures, we do not want to overstate the generalizability of our findings or their interpretation. Nonetheless, we do believe that our findings indicate that BCC is a construct that merits further consideration especially in early adolescence. This interest is not just limited to bicultural minorities, who are negotiating diversity in their surroundings and within themselves. It is likely that majority children also have the opportunity to develop (bi-)cultural competence, especially where they find themselves in multicultural contexts. In light of the benefits of BCC for social-psychological adaptation and intergroup attitudes suggested in our analyses, one might even posit that *all* children would equally benefit from acquiring BCC in culturally diverse societies. Future research should also consider the impact of parents, educators and peers in transmitting and fostering cultural competence. Understanding more about when and how cultural competence matters would add to the emerging field and complement our knowledge of the psychological, situational and societal factors that improve social cohesion and integration in diverse communities.

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Table 1.

Scale properties and correlations between scales.

| | Time 1 | | Time 2 | | Correlations | | | | | | | | | | | |
	M (SD)	α	M (SD)	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Ethnic Knowledge	5.34 (1.12)	.88	5.49 (1.14)	.90	**.63***	.23*	-.07	.14*	.33*	.25*	.02	.65*	.14*	.08	.18*	.17*
2. British Knowledge	5.35 (1.04)	.85	5.54 (1.07)	.90	.24*	**.67***	.21*	.30*	.20*	.04	.27*	.10	.17*	.40*	.29*	.19*
3. Bicultural Efficacy	4.82 (1.07)	.57	4.99 (1.13)	.60	.04	.20*	**.51***	.41*	.18*	.09	.13	-.09	.23*	.14*	.13	.13
4. Role Repertoire	5.43 (0.92)	.69	5.58 (0.87)	.64	.16*	.27*	.41*	**.50***	.32*	.04	-.01	.04	.26*	.15*	.26*	.17*
5. Social Support	5.30 (1.13)	.76	5.38 (1.14)	.82	.24*	.25*	.11	.28*	**.51***	.13*	-.04	.36*	.12	.16*	.46*	.38*
6. Culture Maintenance	4.74 (1.22)	.78	4.62 (1.31)	.81	.30*	.03	.10	.13	.01	**.43***	.18*	.32*	.20*	.01	.18*	.08
7. Contact	4.68 (1.22)	.65	4.73 (1.32)	.70	.14*	.26*	.17*	.08	-.07	.25*	**.49***	.03	.08	.28*	.17*	.12
8. Ethnic Identity	4.84 (1.08)	.90	4.89 (1.05)	.90	.64*	.07	.01	.05	.20*	.20*	.13	**.74***	.21*	-.05	.14*	.14*
9. Other Group Orientation	5.59 (0.98)	.71	5.65 (0.99)	.72	.21*	.25*	.27*	.45*	.18*	.07	.15*	.21*	**.35***	.10	.21*	.20*
10. Perceived Similarity	4.18 (1.05)	.78	4.36 (1.23)	.86	.06	.33*	.14*	.18*	.15*	.02	.21**	.01	.14*	**.47***	.16*	.10
11. Self-Esteem	5.17 (1.02)	.83	5.22 (1.09)	.87	.26*	.20*	.13*	.27*	.39*	.12	.04	.22*	.22*	.05	**.71***	.49*
12. Peer Acceptance	5.96 (1.05)	.83	6.05 (0.89)	.78	.17*	.20*	.04	.11	.31*	.02	.04	.14*	.12	.04	.38*	**.62***

Note. All scales were presented on 7 points from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) and are coded so that high values indicate high agreement to the construct. Autocorrelations (Pearson's *r*) are presented in bold on the diagonal (Time 1 below/Time 2 above the diagonal).
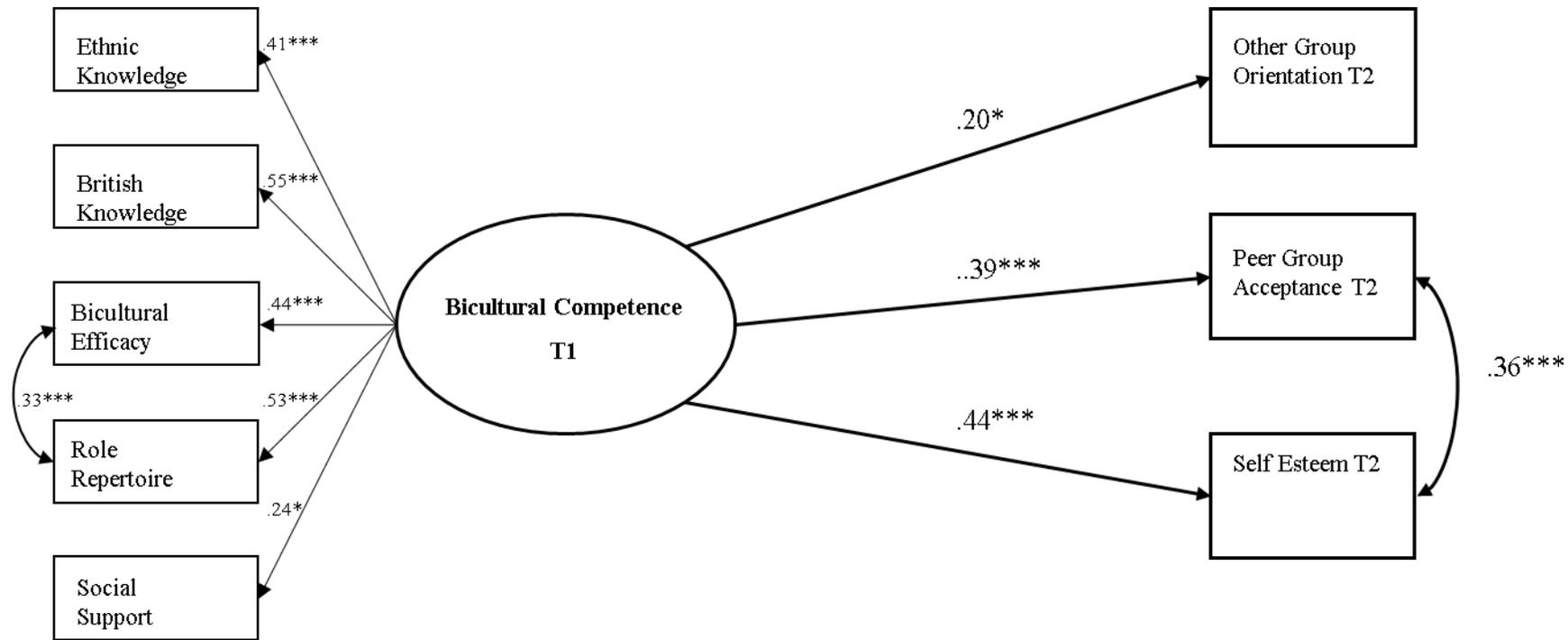*$p < .05$

Figure 1. Prediction of social and psychological adjustment (other group orientation, peer group acceptance and self-esteem) at Time 2 from bicultural competence at Time 1.
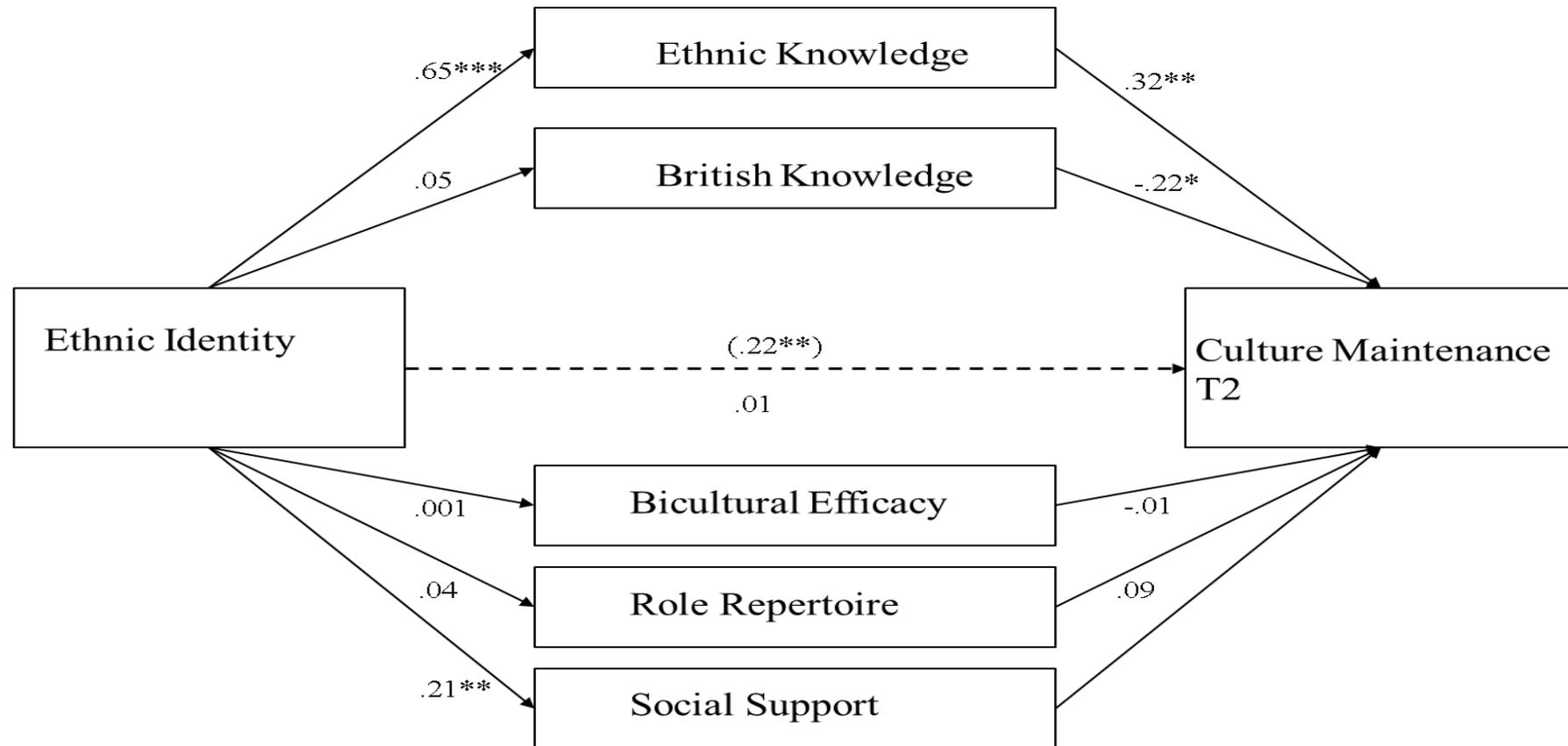*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Figure 2. Multiple mediation model of the relationship between ethnic identity (Time 1) and culture maintenance (Time 2) mediated by facets of bicultural competence (Time 1). Bootstrapped standardized regression coefficients (*b*) are provided (unmediated effect in parentheses).
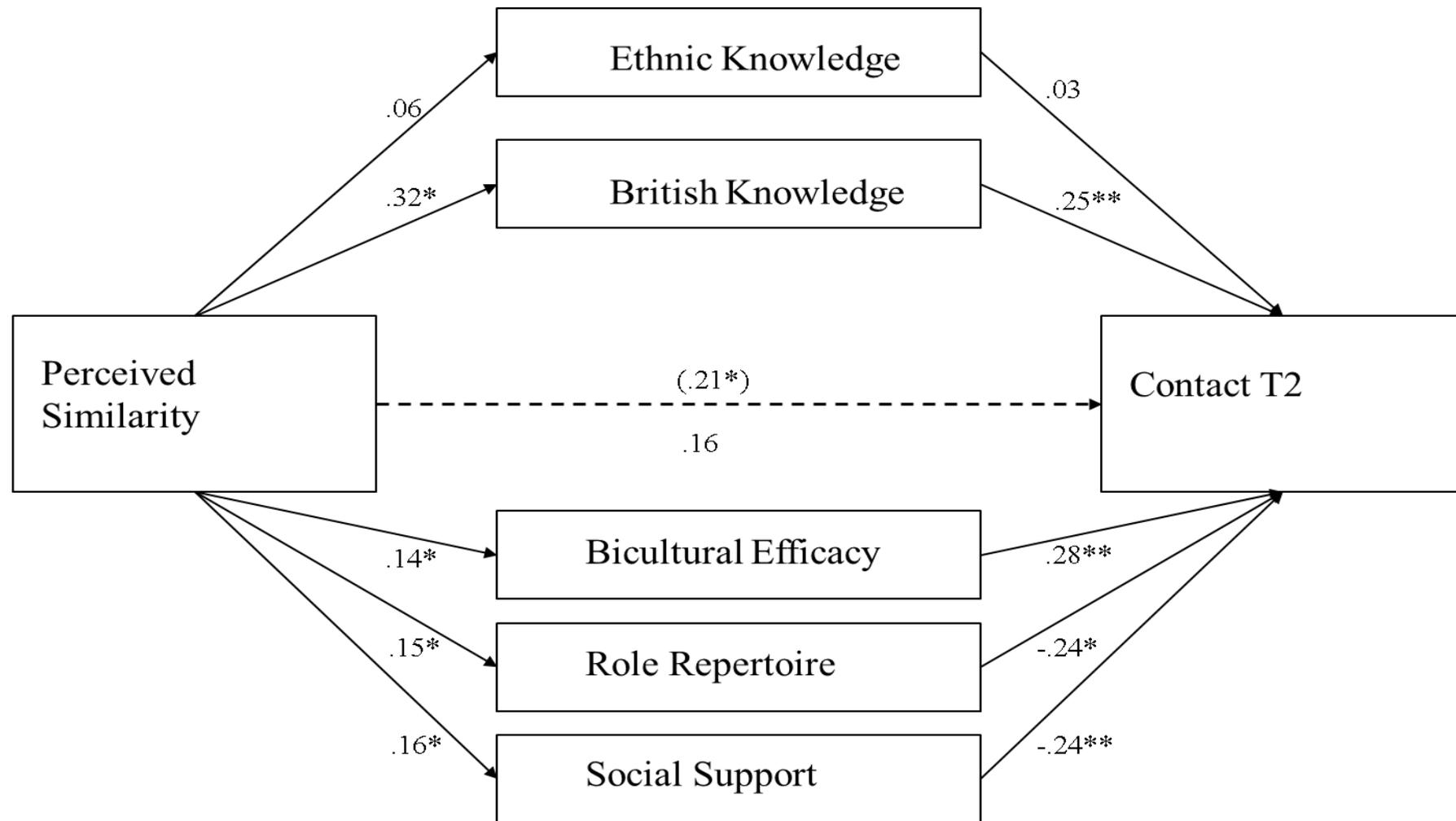*p* < .05. **p* < .01. ***p* < .001.

Figure 3. Multiple mediation model of the relationship between perceived similarity (Time 1) and preferences for contact (Time 2) mediated by facets of bicultural competence (Time 1). Bootstrapped standardized regression coefficients (*b*) are provided (unmediated effect in parentheses).
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Appendix 1

Bicultural Competence Items

Ethnic Knowledge
The next section covers various questions that ask for the strength of your knowledge about aspects of your ethnic group. Please indicate your answer by circling the number that reflects your knowledge best. **In this case "your ethnic group" refers to the general group you and your parents belong to rather than your individual ethnic identity.**
1 = very poor, 2 = poor, 3 = somewhat poor, 4 = neutral, 5 = somewhat good, 6 = good, 7 = very good

My grasp of the traditions of my ethnic group is…
My comprehension of the important institutions (e.g. religious, political and social) of my ethnic group is…
The understanding I have of my ethnic group's customs is…
The knowledge I have of my ethnic group's food is…
The comprehension I have of my ethnic group's history is…
My familiarity with the music of my ethnic group is…
My knowledge of the values that my ethnic group supports is…

British Knowledge
The next section covers various questions that ask for the strength of your knowledge about certain aspects of Britain. Please indicate your answer by circling the number that reflects your level of knowledge best.
1 = very poor, 2 = poor, 3 = somewhat poor, 4 = neutral, 5 = somewhat good, 6 = good, 7 = very good

My grasp of British history is…
My knowledge about the important (e.g. religious, political and social) institutions in Britain is…
My familiarity with British music is…
The knowledge I have about British food is…
My understanding of British values is…
The knowledge I have of British customs is…
My understanding of British traditions is…

All others
The following section covers various questions that ask for the strength of your agreement to a statement. Please indicate your answer by circling the number that reflects your opinion best.
1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3 = disagree somewhat, 4 = neutral, 5 = agree somewhat, 6 = agree, 7 = strongly agree
Where appropriate "your ethnic group or ethnicity" refers to the general group you and your parents belong to rather than your individual ethnic identity. Wherever culture(s) are not specified please consider the impact of **ALL** cultures that have an influence on your life (e.g. possible culture(s) of origin, as well as British culture).

Role Repertoire
I can relate to people from different cultures.
I only feel familiar dealing with my own culture. (reversed)
I have no problem relating to people from different cultures.
I do not find it easy to interact with people from different cultures. (reversed)
I believe I can fit in with all cultural groups.
I empathize with other peoples cultural experiences.

Bicultural Efficacy
I think it is possible for me to participate in two or more cultures.
Adapting to more than one cultural group is not an effective way to live my life. (reversed)
It is necessary to decide on one culture that is most important in my life. (reversed)
It is desirable to achieve a bi- (or multi-) cultural identity.

Social Support
When I need suggestions on how to deal with a personal problem, I know someone I can turn to.
I feel that there is no one I can share my most private worries and fears with. (reversed)
There are many people I can talk to about the issues surrounding my cultural beliefs and values.
There is someone I can turn to for advice about handling problems with my family.
There aren't many people who help me resolve cultural conflict. (reversed)

In a family crisis it would be difficult to find someone who could give me good advice about how to handle it. (reversed)