How You See Us Hurts Me! Influences of Metastereotypes That International Students Hold on Their Self-disclosure, Loneliness and Depression

Tatsuya Imai

To cite this article: Tatsuya Imai (2017) How You See Us Hurts Me! Influences of Metastereotypes That International Students Hold on Their Self-disclosure, Loneliness and Depression, Journal of Intercultural Communication Research, 46:4, 385-399, DOI: 10.1080/17475759.2017.1361463

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17475759.2017.1361463

Published online: 24 Aug 2017.
How You See Us Hurts Me! Influences of Metastereotypes That International Students Hold on Their Self-disclosure, Loneliness and Depression

Tatsuya Imai
Department of British and American Studies, Nanzan University, Nagoya, Japan

ABSTRACT
This article examines the influences of international students’ beliefs of how their compatriots are evaluated by host nationals (i.e. metastereotypes). Modified labeling theory was used to predict how international students’ metastereotypes are associated with their self-disclosure, loneliness, and depression. One hundred and forty-six international students in Japan were asked to rate their metastereotypes, amount of self-disclosure, loneliness, and depression. The results showed that metastereotypes were positively associated with the amount of self-disclosure and negatively associated with loneliness and depression. A structural equation model further indicated that metastereotypes were indirectly associated with depression through loneliness. Theoretical and practical contributions are considered.

On January 27 2017, the United States president Donald Trump signed an executive order restricting the entry into the U.S. for citizens from seven Muslim-majority countries. This order affected not only immigrants, but also international students in the United States. The news reported that some international students from those affected countries (some of whom had studied in the United States for years) were detained and sent home (e.g. Kamenetz, 2017). After watching the news, some international students may have concluded that international students were unwelcome by Americans. Such people’s beliefs of how ingroup members are perceived by outgroup members are called metastereotypes.

Negative metastereotypes have been found to have negative influences on those having metastereotypes such as immigrants (Kamans, Gordijn, Oldenhuis, & Otten, 2009) and Black people (Sigelman & Tuch, 1997). International students tend to associate their identity with their ethnicity (Koehne, 2005), so in their minds the distinction between ingroup members (i.e. compatriots) and outgroup members (i.e. host nationals) is salient (Brisset, Safdar, Lewis, & Sabatier, 2010; Schmitt, Spears, & Branscombe, 2003). Therefore, beliefs that their compatriots are negatively evaluated by host nationals might have a significant negative impact on them, but there has been little research on the effect.

CONTACT Tatsuya Imai imatatsu@nanzan-u.ac.jp
© 2017 World Communication Association
The current study investigates how metastereotypes that international students hold influence their communication and psychological well-being. Participants in this study are not those studying in the United States, but instead those studying in Japan, which is the country with the seventh largest population of international students. Despite its popularity as a host country, past studies have shown that international students in Japan often experience being stereotyped by host nationals, with one of the reasons for this being related to the homogenous culture of Japan (Iwao & Hagiwara, 1988; Maruyama, 1998). Therefore, this study chose Japan as a target country in which metastereotypes could play a significant role in influencing international students’ behavior and well-being.

In the following section, the literature on metastereotypes will be reviewed. Next, modified labeling theory will be explained as a theoretical framework to analyze associations between international students’ metastereotypes and their communication and psychological well-being.

**Metastereotype**

Vorauer, Main, and O’Connell (1998) define metastereotypes as people’s beliefs of how their ingroup members are evaluated by outgroup members. They argue that negative metastereotypes have a negative effect on intergroup interaction. For example, Dutch Moroccan teenagers in the Netherlands who believed that they were negatively evaluated by the Dutch and developed antipathy toward that outgroup legitimized negative behavior toward the Dutch (Kamans et al., 2009). Japanese people who believed that Korean nationals negatively perceived Japanese people had negative attitudes toward Korean nationals (Kim & Oe, 2009). Metastereotypes have been investigated in various contexts such as those of blacks and whites (Sigelman & Tuch, 1997), men and women (Marcus & Miller, 2003), believers and non-believers (Saroglou, Yzerbyt, & Kaschten, 2011), and normally hearing people and people with deafness (Matera, Verde, & Meringolo, 2015).

Past studies suggest that some international students have negative metastereotypes; that is, they believe that their compatriots and home country are negatively evaluated by host nationals. Lewthwaite (1996) conducted interviews with international students in New Zealand and found that some of them were worried that host nationals looked down on them. One of the participants noted that, “I feel that most New Zealanders underestimate us … and have superior, patronizing views of [my country] … this is an unspoken attitude … Kiwi’s feel they are better in everything …” Hanassab (2006) analyzed responses to open-ended survey questions to 640 international students in the United States and the results showed that some of them felt that their compatriots and home country were negatively perceived by Americans in various contexts such as when interacting with professors, university staff, and classmates. A Turkish student remarked, “I cannot call it prejudice, but they (Americans) have wrong knowledge and all kinds of misconceptions about my country and culture.” Participants in those studies were concerned about how negatively their compatriots and home country were perceived by host nationals. In other words, international students do suffer from negative metastereotypes.

However, there is little research on how the negative metastereotypes that international students have influence them. Considering the negative effects of negative metastereotypes in various contexts (e.g. Kamans et al., 2009; Kim & Oe, 2009), research should examine possible negative influences of the negative metastereotypes on international students. For
instance, if American international students studying in Japan believe that Japanese people have negative impressions about Americans, the feelings and behaviors of the American students toward Japanese people might be negatively affected. In this study, modified labeling theory is used to analyze the possible negative influences of metastereotypes.

**Modified Labeling Theory**

Modified labeling theory (MLT) was developed to predict the process of how being labeled as mentally ill influences those with mental illness (Link, 1982; Link, Cullen, Struening, Shrout, & Dohrenwend, 1989). This theory proposes five steps in the process, but the current study focuses on the four steps relevant to this study. First, people internalize social conceptions of what it means to be labeled as mentally ill. For instance, if people watch the TV news showing a criminal who has a health record of a mental illness, they may expect that mentally ill people are dangerous and so they want to distance themselves from mentally ill people. They may also believe that mentally ill people are devalued and socially rejected.

At the next step, if people who embrace the negative images of mentally ill people become mentally ill, they realize that the negative evaluation may be applicable to themselves. Third, after being labeled as mentally ill, people tend to engage in the following behaviors: first, they may conceal their illness from others to avoid rejection, a behavior known as secrecy. Second, they may engage in withdrawal, that manifests as limiting social interaction to those who are aware of and accept their health condition. As for the third behavior, called education, they may share their mental illness with others in hopes of enlightening them so as to ward off negative attitudes. At the final, fourth step, because of those behaviors, mentally ill people are likely to suffer from negative consequences such as an increase in depressive symptoms (Link, Struening, Rahav, Phelan, & Nuttbrock, 1997) and having low self-esteem (Link, 1987). The current study uses MLT in the context of international students (Figure 1).

Link, who is the founder of MLT, and Phelan (2001) suggest that MLT can be applicable to other stigmatized statuses, remarking, “While this theory [MLT] has been most thoroughly examined with respect to mental illnesses, the process is probably much more

![Figure 1. Theoretical model of effects of metastereotype.](image-url)
general.” Therefore, using MLT to examine the process of how metastereotypes perceived by international students influence their behavior and psychological well-being is reasonable. Also, the perception that mentally ill individuals have at the second step shown above is conceptually very similar to perceived negative metastereotypes. At the second step, mentally ill individuals perceive that mentally ill individuals (i.e. ingroup members) are negatively evaluated by those without a mental illness (i.e. outgroup members). MLT specifically predicts that such a perception leads to mentally ill individuals’ behaviors such as secrecy and withdrawal and those behaviors result in negative psychological well-being.

Some international students may develop such a perception that compatriots (i.e. ingroup members) are negatively evaluated by host nationals (i.e. outgroup members) and the perception is consistent with negative metastereotypes. For instance, a Chinese college student in China may read articles on the Internet showing that some Japanese people have negative impressions towards Chinese people. Even after starting to live in Japan as an international student, he or she may have experiences in which Japanese people negatively perceive Chinese people. Those experiences cause international students to develop a perception that host nationals negatively evaluate their compatriots; that is, negative metastereotypes are generated.

How would the perception influence international students’ behavior and psychological well-being? Based on the above theoretical accounts, MLT would be useful to answer the question. This study specifically investigates the influence of metastereotypes on international students’ self-disclosure, depression, and loneliness.

**Self-disclosure**

Self-disclosure is defined as any information exchange that refers to the discloser’s thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979). Past studies reveal that self-disclosure plays a key role for international students to develop friendships in the host country (Chen, 1993; Gudykunst, Nishida, & Chua, 1986; Kudo & Simkin, 2003). For Asian international students in the United States, the more honestly they disclosed themselves, the less difficulty they experienced in forming and managing interpersonal relationships (Chen, 1993). Step three of MLT indicates that people who believe that outgroup members hold negative impressions of ingroup members tend to conceal their identity (i.e. secrecy). Additionally, literature on coping with stigma suggests that people who believe that their ingroup is negatively evaluated by the outgroup may hesitate to talk about themselves (Major & Gramzow, 1999; Miller & Major, 2000). Miller and Major (2000) argue that to protect themselves from being devalued by others, people may conceal their own information that is especially associated with stereotypes. These theoretical accounts help predict that international students who have negative metastereotypes do not disclose themselves to host nationals to avoid further devaluation. Consequently, the following hypothesis is formed:

**H1:** International students who believe that host nationals negatively evaluate their compatriots are less likely to disclose themselves to host nationals than those who believe that host nationals positively evaluate their compatriots.

**Loneliness**

When people perceive a discrepancy between their relationship standards and the actual quantity and quality of existing relationships, they feel lonely (de Jong Gierveld, van Tilburg,
Loneliness has been researched as an important factor associated with international students’ adjustment to a host country (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). A study in which 200 international students in Australia were interviewed regarding their experiences of being lonely revealed that two thirds of them reported they experienced problems of loneliness and isolation (Sawir et al., 2008). According to step three of MLT, people who expect ingroup members to be negatively perceived by outgroup members tend to feel lonely. MLT specifically suggests that mentally ill individuals who believe that those with mental illness are socially devalued tend to withdraw themselves from social contacts (Link, 1982; Link et al., 1989). The reason for the withdrawal is that they are afraid of being rejected by others due to the negative stereotypes associated with the ingroup. These theoretical accounts lead to the following hypothesis:

**H2**: International students who believe that host nationals negatively evaluate their compatriots are more likely to feel lonely than those who believe that host nationals positively evaluate their compatriots.

Depression

The extent to which international students feel depressive is the critical indicator to measure their psychological well-being (for a review, see Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Zhang and Goodson (2011) reviewed 33 studies on international students’ psychological adjustment to life in the United States and found that any discrimination that international students experience from host nationals is a significant predictor of psychological distress such as depression and depressive symptoms. Being discriminated against can be defined as perceptions of receiving negative behavioral responses from outgroup members based on the unjustified use of category information (Schneider, 2004), so being discriminated against and having negative metastereotypes are conceptually different. However, metastereotypes, a person’s beliefs regarding the stereotype that outgroup members hold about his or her own group (Vorauer et al., 1998), can be a preliminary condition leading to the experience of being discriminated against. Taken together, metastereotypes that international students hold could be associated with depression:

**H3**: International students who believe that host nationals negatively evaluate their compatriots feel more depressed than those who believe that host nationals positively evaluate their compatriots.

Mediating Roles of Self-disclosure and Loneliness

Steps three and four of MLT suggest people who expect that ingroup members are negatively perceived by outgroup members may develop depressive symptoms through three behaviors: secrecy, withdrawal, and education (Link, 1982; Link et al., 1989). In other words, MLT predicts that the three behaviors mediate the association between metastereotypes and negative consequence such as being depressive. Applying the theoretical accounts to the current study, metastereotypes would be indirectly associated with depression through self-disclosure and loneliness as Figure 1 depicts. Self-disclosure and loneliness may be promising mediators considering that previous studies showed that self-disclosure (Wei,
Russell, & Zakalik, 2005) was negatively correlated with depression and showed that loneliness (for a review, see Segrin, 2001) was positively correlated with depression. Thus, the following hypotheses are posed:

\[ H4: \text{Metastereotypes are indirectly associated with depression through self-disclosure.} \]

\[ H5: \text{Metastereotypes are indirectly associated with depression through loneliness.} \]

**Method**

International students studying in Japan participated in this study via an online survey in which they answered questions of metastereotypes, self-disclosure, loneliness, and depression.

**Participants and Procedures**

One hundred and forty-six international students studying in Japan (men = 78 (53%); women = 68 (47%)) participated in this study. Their ages ranged from 19 to 42 and the mean age was 27. As Table 1 shows, most participants were from the United States \((n = 24, 16\%)\), followed by China \((n = 20, 14\%)\), India \((n = 12, 8\%)\), Indonesia \((n = 7, 5\%)\), England, Korea, Singapore, Philippines \((n = 6, 4\%)\), Canada, Taiwan \((n = 5, 3\%)\) and other countries \((n = 49)\). The lengths of stay in Japan for the participants were as follows: 0–1 year \((4.1\%)\), 1–2 years \((17.8\%)\), 2–3 years \((17.1\%)\), 3–4 years \((11.6\%)\), 4–5 years \((13.7\%)\), 5–10 years \((30.8\%)\), and more than 10 years \((4.8\%)\).

Participants were recruited in two ways. First, most participants participated in this study through a company for which they registered themselves as possible research participants who participate in studies as requested. The participants received monetary incentives from the company for completing the research. Second, snowball sampling was used to recruit other participants. The researcher asked international students in Japan he knew to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The United States</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Kyrgyz</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Luxembourg</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Macedonia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Moldova</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Swiss</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Dual nationality</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
participate in this study and also asked them to introduce this study to other international students. In either case, participants completed an online survey in which they answered questions regarding various aspects of their communication and psychological adjustment to life in Japan.

**Measures**

The questionnaire contained measures assessing participants’ belief of how positively or negatively host nationals evaluated their compatriots, how much they disclosed themselves to host nationals, and any loneliness and depression. The reliabilities, means, and standard deviations for each of the aforementioned measures as well as correlations among the variables are shown in Table 2. The survey also contained items asking about sex, age, home country, and lengths of stay in the host country. None of the demographic information was correlated with metastereotypes except for the negative correlation between metastereotypes and age ($r = -.17, p = .038$). There was no statistically significant difference in metastereotypes between Asians ($n = 81, M = 3.67$) and Westerners ($n = 65, M = 3.71$), $t = .38 p = .702$.

**Metastereotype**

A scale of intergroup evaluations was modified to assess metastereotypes that international students hold (Matera, Stefanile, & Brown, 2011). Participants were asked to report how positively or negatively Japanese people perceive international students whose nationality is the same as them using nine semantic differentials (e.g. nice–awful, pleasant–unpleasant, enjoyable–unenjoyable), measuring on 5-point scales. Higher scores indicated higher perceived evaluations. The Cronbach’s $\alpha$ was .90.

**Self-disclosure**

A seven item survey adapted from the self-disclosure scale developed by Wheeless (1976) was used to investigate the amount of participants’ self-disclosure to host nationals. Example items are “I usually talk about myself for fairly long periods at a time” and “I often talk about myself.” A 5-point Likert scale was used ($1 = $strongly disagree$,$ 5 = $strongly agree$), with higher scores indicating more amount of self-disclosure. The Cronbach’s $\alpha$ was .75.

**Loneliness**

The 10-item University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996) was used to assess participants’ experience of being lonely in a host country. Example items are “How often do you feel that you lack companionship?” and “How often do you feel left out?” A 4-point Likert scale was used ($1 = never,$ 4 = always), with higher scores indicating more loneliness. The Cronbach’s $\alpha$ was .82.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Correlations among variables.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>$a$</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Metastereotype</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Self-disclosure</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>.23**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Loneliness</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>-.30**</td>
<td>-.19**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Depression</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>-.29**</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.40**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$p < .05$; $**p < .01$. 

Downloaded by [Nanzan University Library] at 00:22 19 September 2017
**Depression**

The 10-item version of The Center for Epidemiologic Studies–Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977) was used to examine depression. Example items are “I had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing” and “I felt that everything I did was an effort.” A 4-point Likert scale was used to assess how frequently participants experienced each statement (1 = rarely or none of the time, 4 = most or all of the time). Higher scores indicated more depression and the Cronbach’s α was .81.

**Results**

As Table 2 shows, most variables are significantly correlated with each other in predicted ways except for no statistically strong correlation between self-disclosure and depression (\(r = -.01, p = .955\)). Hypothesis 1 predicted that participants who believe that host nationals negatively evaluate their compatriots are less likely to disclose themselves to host nationals than those who believe that host nationals positively evaluate their compatriots. As predicted in H1, a correlation analysis indicated that the more negatively participants believed that their compatriots were evaluated by host nationals, the less they disclosed themselves to host nationals (\(r = .23, p = .005\)).

Hypothesis 2 predicted that participants who believe that host nationals negatively evaluate their compatriots feel lonelier than those who believe that host nationals positively evaluate their compatriots. As predicted in H2, a correlation analysis indicated that the more negatively participants believed that their compatriots were evaluated by host nationals, the lonelier they felt (\(r = -.30, p = .000\)).

Hypothesis 3 predicted that participants who believe that host nationals negatively evaluate their compatriots feel more depressed than those who believe that host nationals positively evaluate their compatriots. As predicted in H3, a correlation analysis indicated that the more negatively participants believed that their compatriots were evaluated by host nationals, the more depressed they felt (\(r = -.29, p = .000\)).

Relationships among variables expected by Hypotheses 4 and 5 were analyzed simultaneously by structural equation modeling (SEM) as shown in Figure 2. SEM was conducted through the use of Mplus 5.2 (Muthén & Muthén, 2010). Age, sex, and lengths of stay in Japan were included in the model as controlling variables. The model including metaste-roteypes as a predictor, self-disclosure and loneliness as mediators, and depression as an outcome indicated an acceptable fit: \(\chi^2 (1) = 1.826, p = .18, CFI = .987, RMSE = .076\) (90% CI = .000; .250), SRMR = .018.

H4 predicted that metastereotypes would be indirectly associated with depression through self-disclosure. As the model indicates, there was not a statistically significant correlation between self-disclosure (i.e. mediator) and depression (i.e. dependent variable; \(\beta = .07, p = .336\)). Thus, contrary to H4, self-disclosure did not mediate the effect of metastereotypes on depression.

H5 predicted that metastereotypes would be indirectly associated with depression through loneliness. A mediation analysis with 5000 bootstrap samples revealed that metastereotypes were associated with loneliness that in turn resulted in depression, \(\beta = -.13\) (95% confidence interval [CI] = [−.207, −.042]). There was no value of zero within its interval, so the indirect effect was considered to be significant. Further, the Sobel test was performed to assess the significance of the indirect effect and the result showed, \(z = 2.74, p = .006\),...
indicating the significant indirect effect. Even when taking into consideration the indirect effect, there was still a significant direct association between metastereotypes and depression ($\beta = -0.20, p = .009$). Thus, loneliness did not completely mediate the association between metastereotypes and depression. Taken together, metastereotypes were both directly and indirectly associated with depression.

**Discussion**

International students often feel that host nationals negatively evaluate their compatriots (Hanassab, 2006; Lewthwaite, 1996) and such impressions people think others have of them are called metastereotypes (Vorauer et al., 1998). Whereas previous studies pointed out negative influences of metastereotypes (e.g. Kamans et al., 2009; Kim & Oe, 2009), the influences on international students have received little attention. Therefore, this study investigates the effects of metastereotypes on self-disclosure, loneliness, and depression of international students, all of which have been found to play critical roles in their adjustment to life in a host country (Chen, 1993; Sawir et al., 2008; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). The results showed that the more negatively participants believed that host nationals perceived their compatriots, the less they disclosed themselves to host nationals. Also, the more negatively the participants expected that host nationals perceived their compatriots, the lonelier and more depressed they felt. A structural equation model further indicated that metastereotypes were directly and indirectly associated with depression through loneliness. These findings are discussed in further detail below.

The results regarding Hypothesis 1 showed the positive relationship between metastereotypes and self-disclosure; that is, if international students believe that host nationals negatively view their compatriots, they will be reluctant to talk about themselves. This study used MLT to explain why negative metastereotypes may make people reluctant to talk about themselves, but other theories may help explain the results further. For example, disclosure decision-making model (Greene, 2009) suggests that anticipated negative reactions from recipients of self-disclosure make people reluctant to disclose themselves. Negative metastereotypes include negative expectations regarding how outgroup members
behave and communicate toward ingroup members (Gómez, 2002). Taken together, people who believe that outgroup members devalue ingroup members might be afraid of negative reactions from the outgroup members if they disclose themselves to the outgroup members. Even though in this study self-disclosure was not associated with depression (Hypothesis 4), international students’ self-disclosure has been found to play a significant role in developing intercultural friendships (Chen, 1993; Gudykunst et al., 1986; Kudo & Simkin, 2003). Thus, more studies are necessary to investigate the relationship between metastereotypes and self-disclosure such as why negative metastereotypes make international students reluctant to disclose themselves.

As Hypothesis 2 predicted, the more negatively participants perceived that host nationals evaluated their compatriots, the lonelier they felt. The results are consistent with theoretical ideas predicted by MLT. As an additional theoretical framework, intergroup anxiety model (IAM) developed by Stephan and Stephan (1985) may help explain the results further. An argument in IAM is that negative experiences with outgroup members or negative expectations for interaction with outgroup members lead to intergroup anxiety. The anxiety may make people avoid outgroup members, leading to social isolation and loneliness. Some participants in the current study believe that their compatriots are negatively evaluated by host nationals (i.e. negative metastereotypes). Such negative perceptions might have them expect that they will be treated poorly and the expectations may lead to an avoidance of the host nationals. The lack of friendship with host nationals has been found to be associated with loneliness among international students (Gareis, Merkin, & Goldman, 2011). However, this study did not assess participants’ anxiety of intergroup interaction with host nationals. Future research should examine variables such as anxiety that could explain why negative metastereotypes are associated with loneliness.

As Hypotheses 3 and 5 predicted, metastereotypes and depression were associated in two ways. First, metastereotypes and depression were directly correlated. The more negatively participants perceived that host nationals evaluated their compatriots, the more depressed they felt. Past studies revealed that receiving negative evaluations from others is associated with depressive symptoms (Dobkin et al., 2011; Nepon, Flett, Hewitt, & Molnar, 2011). International students who have negative metastereotypes are not the immediate targets who receive negative evaluations, but beliefs that their compatriots receive negative evaluations are associated with their depression according to the results of this study. Social identity theory suggests that people’s identity is closely linked with social groups they belong to (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and in fact the main component of international students’ identity is their ethnicity (Brisset et al., 2010; Koehne, 2005; Schmitt et al., 2003). That is, international students who are acutely aware of their ethnicity might feel depressed if they believe that host nationals have negative impressions of their compatriots.

The results also revealed that metastereotypes were indirectly associated with depression through loneliness. The findings are consistent with MLT arguing that people’s beliefs that ingroup members are negatively perceived may isolate them from society, in turn leading to depression. Segrin (2001) reviewed past research on loneliness and depression and found that the correlation between the two variables typically fell in the $r = .40-.60$ range, so the two variables go hand in hand. Leary (1990) also specifically argued that feelings of being socially excluded is a significant determinant of depression. In fact, international students often experience both loneliness and depression while studying abroad (Oei & Notowidjojo, 1990; Sawir et al., 2008). The current study further extends these findings by showing that
metastereotypes are indirectly associated with depression through loneliness. The indirect association implies that even if international students have negative metastereotypes, they might not feel depressed if they do not feel lonely. The implication is further discussed in the following section.

**Practical Implications**

As this study indicates, some international students are worried that their compatriots are negatively evaluated by host nationals (i.e. negative metastereotypes) and such concerns may make them reluctant to talk about themselves with the host nationals and lead to them feeling lonely and depressed. To counteract the negative effect of metastereotypes, educational institutions accepting international students such as a university should incorporate programs helping them have positive metastereotypes, which are beliefs that their compatriots are welcomed by host nationals. For example, educational institutions could provide with them opportunities in which they could interact with host nationals who have positive impressions of the culture and people of the country from which the international students originate. Such positive interaction has been effective in reducing negative stereotypes (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) and may help international students have expectations that their country and compatriots are favored by host nationals. Hopefully, the positive metastereotypes will help international students expect positive reactions when they talk about themselves with host nationals. Also, such positive metastereotypes would help international students feel accepted by the host country and nationals, in turn hopefully improving their psychological well-being.

It should be noted, however, that correcting stereotypes is not easy (e.g. Cotton-Huston & Waite, 2000; Hill & Augoustinos, 2001), so correcting negative metastereotypes may also be difficult. However, this study suggests if international students’ loneliness can be alleviated, their psychological well-being could be improved. To help international students cope with loneliness, Sawir et al. (2008) proposed three types of coping strategies based on past studies. First, international students could employ reflexive strategies such as appreciating the fact that loneliness allows for contemplation, self-exploration, and self-awareness. The second strategy includes actively developing social relationships by participating in extracurricular activities. As for the third strategy, international students could seek the help of a professional such as a counselor in the educational institution. However, the current study revealed that international students who have negative metastereotypes tended to be reluctant to talk about themselves, so simply encouraging them to participate in extracurricular activities or seeking professional help may be ineffective. Thus, support specially tailored for the students who have negative metastereotypes and cannot be open with host nationals should be developed to help them adjust to life in a host country.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

Some limitations on this study deserve comment. The first limitation of the present study regards the issue of causality. Based on ideas of MLT, some relationships among variables in this study are hypothesized to be causal. For example, in the mediation analyses, metastereotypes are expected to cause loneliness, that may result in depression. However, this correlational study cannot determine such causality. For example, those with depressed
symptoms may tend to perceive that host nationals negatively evaluate their compatriots (i.e. depression inducing metastereotypes) because of depressed individuals’ negative cognitive style (Teasdale, 1983). To address this limitation, experimental studies manipulating metastereotypes should be conducted to determine whether metastereotypes cause outcomes such as loneliness and depression.

This study measured self-disclosure and loneliness assuming those variables play similar roles to secrecy and withdrawal of MLT, respectively. Specifically, loneliness has been found to influence international students’ psychological well-being (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002; Sawir et al., 2008; Smith & Khawaja, 2011), so including loneliness in the analyses of this study is meaningful. Loneliness is a perception associated with a discrepancy between relationship standards and actual relationships (de Jong Gierveld et al., 2005). On the other hand, withdrawal is the behavior MLT expects stigmatized individuals to engage in, so loneliness and withdrawal are different constructs. Even though the results regarding the mediating role of loneliness are consistent with MLT, it would be valuable for future studies to assess constructs that are more similar to secrecy and withdrawal of international students to extend MLT.

Other types of communication besides self-disclosure should be investigated in relation to the metastereotypes of international students. For example, intercultural communication competence (ICC) might be another important communication variable that could mediate the association between metastereotypes and depression. High ICC has been found to be effective in helping international students adjust to life in a host country (Bradford, Allen, & Beisser, 2000; Redmond & Bunyi, 1993). Taken together, metastereotypes might prevent international students from making use of their ICC because of their fear of rejection from host nationals. The weakened ICC may make the students vulnerable to acculturation stress, in turn leading to depression. Future studies should investigate various aspects of communication including ICC in relation to metastereotypes of international students.

Lastly, the generalizability of the participants in this study to international students in other regions is limited. For example, metastereotypes Chinese international students in Japan have might be different from metastereotypes Chinese international students in European countries have. Such differences might be related to international relations. For instance, some Japanese people have negative impressions of Chinese people (e.g. Ogawa & Ishimori, 2007) and Korean people (O & Matsumoto, 2013) due to political issues between Japan and those countries. International students from those countries may develop negative metastereotypes while studying in Japan, but they would not do so while studying in other countries. In order to test the generalizability of the results of this study, future research should examine influences of metastereotypes that international students in other countries have.

Conclusion

Despite the significant effect of metastereotypes in various contexts, the effect on international students has gone unexplored. Consistent with ideas of MLT, the results showed that international students who believed that host nationals negatively evaluated their compatriots were less open with host nationals, felt lonelier, and experienced more depressive symptoms than those who believed that host nationals positively evaluated their compatriots. Further, metastereotypes were directly and indirectly linked with depression through
loneliness. This study offers theoretical contributions to theories of intergroup stereotypes, and provides practical implications to help international students adjust to life in a new culture.

Note

1. Iwao and Hagiwara (1988) found out that Asian international students in Japan felt more stereotyped than those from Western countries. On the other hand, Maruyama (1998) revealed that Western international students in Japan were more treated as “foreigners” than Asian international students. However, this study did not find any difference in perceived metastereotypes between Asian international students and Western international students. Thus, all the participants were included in the analyses.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This research is supported by Nanzan University [Pache I-A-2 grant].

Notes on contributor

Tatsuya Imai (Ph.D. in Communication Studies, The University of Texas at Austin) is an assistant professor in the Department of British and American Studies, Nanzan University, Japan.

References


