

Social Distance Dynamics among Papuan and Local Students at Sriwijaya University

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p-ISSN: 2808-9529 (Printed)
e-ISSN: 2808-8816 (Online)

Jurnal Ilmu Sosial Indonesia (JISI)
<http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/jisi>
VOL. 6, NO. 1 (2025)

Page: 65-76

Recommended Citation (APA Style):
Social Distance Dynamics among Papuan and
Local Students at Sriwijaya University.
(2025). Jurnal Ilmu Sosial Indonesia (JISI),
6(1), 65-76

<https://doi.org/10.15408/jisi.v6i1.53340>
Available at:
<https://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/jisi/article/view/53340>

Article History:
Received: January 27, 2025
Accepted: June 25, 2025
Available online August 19, 2026

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Abstract. This study aims to analyze the dynamics of social distance between students from Papua and local students from South Sumatra (Palembang, Lubuk Linggau, Prabumulih, and Pagar Alam) at Sriwijaya University. The study employs a qualitative approach using the case study method to understand patterns of social relationships within a multicultural campus environment. Data was collected through non-participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation involving students from Papua, local students, and supporting informants. Data were analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña model through data condensation, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. Analysis using Emory S. Bogardus's social distance theory indicates that social distance remains evident across four dimensions: affective, normative, interactive, and cultural. Cultural differences, language, communication patterns, stereotypes, and low interaction intensity are the primary factors influencing intergroup relations. Nevertheless, social integration is beginning to develop through academic activities, student organizations, and daily interactions that enhance social acceptance and cultural adaptation. Based on a synthesis of the empirical patterns identified during data analysis, the researcher formulated the Gradual Social Integration Model as a theoretical-analytical construct. This model maps the process of social distance reduction through six stages identified in the data: initial stereotypes, group exclusivity, academic contact, the formation of social trust, two-way cultural adaptation, and social integration. Thus, the contribution of this research lies in the formulation of a data-driven conceptual model that expands the application of Bogardus's social distance theory. These findings also provide insights for universities in creating a more inclusive campus environment.

Keywords: Social Distance, Papuan Student, Social integration

Abstrak. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis dinamika jarak sosial antara mahasiswa asal Papua dan mahasiswa lokal asal Sumatera Selatan (Palembang, Lubuk Linggau, Prabumulih, dan Pagar Alam) di Universitas Sriwijaya. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi kasus untuk memahami pola hubungan sosial dalam lingkungan kampus multikultural. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi nonpartisipan, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi yang melibatkan mahasiswa asal Papua, mahasiswa lokal, serta informan pendukung. Data dianalisis menggunakan model Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña melalui kondensasi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Analisis menggunakan teori jarak sosial Emory S. Bogardus menunjukkan bahwa jarak sosial masih tampak dalam empat dimensi, yaitu afektif, normatif, interaktif, dan kultural. Perbedaan budaya, bahasa, pola komunikasi, stereotip, dan rendahnya intensitas interaksi menjadi faktor utama yang memengaruhi hubungan antarkelompok. Meskipun demikian, integrasi sosial mulai berkembang melalui aktivitas akademik, organisasi kemahasiswaan, dan interaksi sehari-hari yang meningkatkan penerimaan sosial serta adaptasi budaya. Berdasarkan sintesis pola empiris yang ditemukan selama analisis data, peneliti merumuskan Model Integrasi Sosial Bertahap sebagai konstruksi teoretis-analitis. Model ini memetakan proses reduksi jarak sosial melalui enam tahapan yang teridentifikasi dalam data, yaitu stereotip awal, eksklusivitas kelompok, kontak akademik, pembentukan kepercayaan sosial, adaptasi budaya dua arah, dan integrasi sosial. Dengan demikian, kontribusi penelitian terletak pada perumusan model konseptual berbasis data yang memperluas penerapan teori jarak sosial Bogardus. Temuan ini juga menjadi masukan bagi perguruan tinggi dalam membangun lingkungan kampus yang lebih inklusif.

Kata Kunci: Jarak Sosial, Mahasiswa Papua, Integrasi Sosial

1. INTRODUCTION

As members of the academic community, students play a vital role in fostering inclusive social relationships within the university environment. Social interactions among students from diverse cultural, ethnic, and regional backgrounds are a crucial part of the social integration process on campus. However, differences in social identity often create barriers in social relationships, especially when there are prejudices, stereotypes, and difficulties in adaptation between groups. According to Bourdieu (1991), language and dialect not only function as a means of communication but can also serve as linguistic capital, the value of which is shaped by power relations within a linguistic market. Language forms considered legitimate tend to confer greater authority and recognition on their speakers, whereas language variations or accents deemed inferior can affect social status and acceptance. In the context of students from Papua, this indicates that differences in language, accent, physical traits, and cultural identity can give rise to communication barriers, stereotypes, and discriminatory treatment. These conditions can limit acceptance and closeness between students from Papua and local students from South Sumatra, thereby reinforcing social distance as described by Bogardus (1925). In the context of a multicultural university, these conditions pose a unique challenge for students studying away from home, including those from Papua who are pursuing their education at Sriwijaya University. As a minority group, they often face a challenging process of social adaptation due to differences in culture, language, and communication styles compared to local students.

The phenomenon of social exclusion faced by Papuan students in higher education settings remains an ongoing social issue in Indonesia's multicultural society. Globally, racial discrimination and social exclusion against minority groups are critical issues in education, social development, and human rights, as they can limit social participation, access to equitable education, and the process of social integration (UNESCO, 2020; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2016). In the Indonesian context, a number of studies and reports indicate that students from Papua who pursue their education outside their home region experience negative stereotypes, social rejection, discriminatory treatment, and racially motivated actions. These experiences can affect their social relationships, adaptation processes, and academic and social integration both on campus and within the

broader community (Kapisa, 2023; Simbolon et al., 2023; Wulandari & McKeown Jones, 2022). These conditions indicate that diversity in culture, language, skin color, and ethnic identity has not yet been fully accepted as part of an inclusive social reality; in fact, reports indicate that indigenous Papuans still face discrimination in education, employment, and social life in various regions across Indonesia (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Empirical findings show that social distancing toward students from Papua is evident not only in overt rejection but also in everyday interactions. In Yogyakarta, students from Papua experience ridicule, exclusion, negative stereotypes, and difficulties finding housing (Simbolon et al., 2023; Kapisa, 2023). At several universities in Java, stereotypes, language barriers, and institutional support also influence their academic and social integration (Wulandari & McKeown Jones, 2022). A quantitative study in Surabaya also indicates that intergroup anxiety mediates the relationship between social identity and prejudice toward students from Papua. Frequent contact alone does not necessarily reduce prejudice if it is not accompanied by positive beliefs (Meliana & Tondok, 2023). These findings underscore that shared spaces do not automatically lead to acceptance; the quality of interactions and a sense of safety between groups also determine social closeness.

In addition to prejudice, differences in language, accents, customs, and nonverbal communication can lead to misinterpretations. Fitrianti and Riyandani (2023) found that communication barriers faced by students from Papua are related to differences in culture, perceptions, experiences, and nonverbal cues. Muhajir and Anismar (2021) demonstrated that adaptive communication strategies help students build acceptance in a new environment. In the context of Sriwijaya University, Nurhaliza et al. (2024) found that limited understanding of the Palembang language can hinder academic and social communication. These findings are important, but the discussion still centers on the ability of students from Papua to adapt. In fact, intercultural relationships are reciprocal, as the openness of local students and campus support also play a key role in fostering closeness.

A study at Sriwijaya University has provided insights directly related to this topic. Yolanda et al. (2020) mapped the associative and dissociative relationships between students from Papua and non-Papuan students. Group work, tolerance, and

empathy served as drivers, while difficulties in adapting, a tendency toward social withdrawal, and prejudice acted as barriers. Susanti (2020) specifically examined the social distance between students of Papuan ethnicity and students from Palembang using Bogardus's framework, particularly in terms of background as well as forms of acceptance and rejection. Both studies demonstrate that this issue has been researched at Sriwijaya University. Therefore, the novelty of the current study does not lie in the claim that this context has never been examined, but rather in the expansion of its scope and the in-depth analysis of the process of change in these relationships.

Based on this review, there are three research gaps (literature gaps). First, previous local studies limited the comparison group to students from Palembang or used the broad category of "non-Papuan," so the variety of experiences among local students from various regions in South Sumatra has not been depicted in detail. Second, most studies have focused only on mapping the nature of relationships, communication barriers, prejudices, or conditions of social distance; in other words, the mechanisms of the shift from stereotypes toward acceptance have not been extensively explained as a sequential process. Third, studies on adaptation more often emphasize the adjustment of students from Papua, while changes in the attitudes of local students and the role of the academic space in fostering two-way adaptation have received insufficient attention. These gaps form the basis for examining social distance as a dynamic relationship, rather than a static state.

To address this gap, this study places the experiences of students from Papua and local students from South Sumatra—specifically Palembang, Lubuk Linggau, Prabumulih, and Pagar Alam—within a single analytical framework. Emory S. Bogardus's (1925) theory of social distance is used to map the degree of acceptance between groups. In this study, the concept of social distance is examined through four dimensions: affective, normative, interactive, and cultural. Bogardus's framework helps explain how close or distant intergroup relationships are, but it does not specifically account for the sequence of changes in social distance in everyday interactions.

The Gradual Social Integration Model is positioned as an analytical extension that complements existing theories rather than replacing them. Unlike Bogardus's social distance theory, which emphasizes the degree of acceptance, this

model explains how relationships evolve from stereotypes and group exclusivity toward integration. This model overlaps with Allport's (1954) theory of intergroup contact, which explains that contact is more effective at reducing prejudice when it occurs under conditions of equal status, shared goals, cooperation, and institutional support. Pettigrew (1998) expands on this explanation through the processes of learning about other groups, behavioral change, the formation of emotional bonds, and the reassessment of one's own group. Nevertheless, contact theory focuses more on the conditions and mechanisms of successful contact, whereas this research model maps the empirical sequence of changes in relationships within a campus context.

This model also differs from Esser's (2001) framework of social integration. Esser views integration through four dimensions: cultural competence (culturation), social placement, interaction, and identification. That framework maps the elements of individual engagement in the social system, whereas the Staged Social Integration Model explains the transition pathways between stages. Based on a synthesis of empirical patterns, these pathways consist of initial stereotypes, group exclusivity, academic contact, the formation of social trust, two-way cultural adaptation, and social integration. The model's theoretical contributions lie in three areas: linking levels of acceptance, contact mechanisms, and integration processes; positioning adaptation as a reciprocal process between students from Papua and local students; and demonstrating that new academic contact reduces social distance as it evolves into trust, two-way adaptation, and repeated interaction. Because it was formulated within a single campus context, this model is contextual in nature and still requires testing at other universities.

Based on this argument, this study aims to analyze the dynamics of social distance between students from Papua and local students from South Sumatra at Sriwijaya University. The analysis focuses on three aspects: the factors that shape social distance; the forms of acceptance and group boundaries in academic activities, organizations, and daily life in residential settings; and the processes that drive the transformation of relationships from awkwardness or prejudice toward trust. This focus allows the study not only to describe the state of these relationships at a single point in time but also to explain how they evolve through shared experiences.

Theoretically, this study offers a data-driven conceptual model rather than a new universal theory. The model explains changes in relationships within the context of a multicultural campus by linking social distance, intergroup contact, trust, mutual adaptation, and integration. Empirically, this study presents an up-to-date picture of the relationships between students from Papua and local students from several regions in South Sumatra, following an initial study at Sriwijaya University in 2020. Practically, the study's findings can serve as a basis for universities to design mentoring programs, collaborative projects, cross-cultural dialogues, and organizational activities that bring students together on an equal footing and in a sustainable manner.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study design. This design was chosen to understand the experiences, meanings, and processes underlying the formation of social distance between Papuan students and local students from South Sumatra at Sriwijaya University. The analysis focuses on intergroup relations within the context of a multicultural campus, including the evolution of these relations from initial stereotypes toward social acceptance. This approach is suitable for examining phenomena tied to specific contexts that require an in-depth understanding of informants' perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study was conducted in 2026 at Sriwijaya University's Indralaya Campus in Ogan Ilir Regency, South Sumatra. The location was selected purposefully because this campus admits students under the affirmative action program from Papua and brings together students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Data collection took place in lecture halls, student organization activities, the dormitory environment for Papuan students, and their residential areas. These settings were selected because they serve as venues for academic and social interactions between Papuan students and local students from Palembang, Lubuk Linggau, Prabumulih, and Pagar Alam (Maxwell, 2013). All primary data in this article were collected in 2026 and differ from the data in the author's 2020 study. The previous study served as a foundation for expanding the scope of informants, updating the empirical conditions, and analyzing the process of changes in social distance in greater depth.

Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their involvement and experience

in the intergroup relationships under study (Patton, 2015). This study involved 15 informants, consisting of 12 primary informants and three supporting informants. The primary informants included six students from Papua—five men and one woman—and six local students from South Sumatra—three men and three women. Supporting informants consisted of two men and one woman who were student organization leaders or other parties familiar with the interaction patterns between the two groups. The criteria for primary informants included being active students at the Indralaya Campus, having completed at least two semesters of coursework, having had direct interactions with the other group, being willing to be interviewed, and being able to describe their experiences. Anonymous codes were used to protect the informants' identities and distinguish between the two groups. The characteristics of the informants are presented in Table 1. Data collection was halted once repeated information and additional interviews no longer yielded relevant themes, in accordance with the principle of data saturation (Saunders et al., 2018).

Table 1. *Characteristics of Research Informants*

Informant Code	Group	Gender	Semester	Interaction Experience
MP-01	Student from Papua	M	≥ 2	Direct interaction with local students in academic or social contexts.
MP-02	Student from Papua	M	≥ 2	Direct interaction with local students in academic or social contexts.
MP-03	Student from Papua	M	≥ 2	Direct interaction with local students in academic or social contexts.
MP-04	Student from Papua	M	≥ 2	Direct interaction with local students in academic or social contexts.
MP-05	Student from Papua	M	≥ 2	Direct interaction with local students in academic or social contexts.
MP-06	Student from Papua	F	≥ 2	Direct interaction with local students in academic or social contexts.
ML-01	Local student from South Sumatra	M	≥ 2	Direct interaction with students from Papua in academic or social contexts.
ML-02	Local student from South Sumatra	M	≥ 2	Direct interaction with students from Papua in academic or social contexts.
ML-03	Local student from South Sumatra	M	≥ 2	Direct interaction with students from Papua in academic or social contexts.

Informant Code	Group	Gender	Semester	Interaction Experience
ML-04	Local student from South Sumatra	F	≥ 2	Direct interaction with students from Papua in academic or social contexts.
ML-05	Local student from South Sumatra	F	≥ 2	Direct interaction with students from Papua in academic or social contexts.
ML-06	Local student from South Sumatra	F	≥ 2	Direct interaction with students from Papua in academic or social contexts.
IP-01	Supporting informant	M	Not available	Observed interactions involving both groups in organizational activities.
IP-02	Supporting informant	M	Not available	Observed interactions involving both groups in organizational activities.
IP-03	Supporting informant	F	Not available	Observed interactions involving both groups in organizational activities.

Note. MP = student from Papua; ML = local student from South Sumatra; IP = supporting informant; M = male; F = female. The semesters of the primary informants are listed as ≥ 2, in accordance with the minimum criterion of two semesters. Semester information for the supporting informants was not available.

Data was collected through nonparticipant observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and documentation. During observations, the researcher observed patterns of communication, closeness, grouping, cooperation, and forms of acceptance or rejection in academic and non-academic activities without directly participating in the informants' activities. The interviews explored the experiences of both groups based on four dimensions of analysis operationalized from Emory S. Bogardus's social distance theory: affective, normative, interactive, and cultural. Questions were kept open-ended so that informants could describe their experiences in their own words and the researcher could explore new themes that emerged (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Documentation was used to supplement and verify information from observations and interviews.

Before the interviews were conducted, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and sought the informants' consent. Participation was voluntary. The researcher maintained the confidentiality of the informants' identities by using codes or pseudonyms. Interviews were recorded after obtaining permission from the informants. Informants were also given the freedom to refuse to answer certain questions or to stop the interview.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which includes data condensation, data presentation, and the drawing and verification of

conclusions. Data condensation was carried out through transcription, repeated reading, coding, and grouping codes into categories. Subsequently, the data were presented in thematic descriptions based on the four dimensions of social distance as well as themes that emerged from the field. Conclusions were drawn and verified by comparing findings across informants and across data collection techniques. This analytical process was also used to formulate the six stages of the Gradual Social Integration Model: initial stereotypes, group exclusivity, academic contact, the formation of social trust, two-way cultural adaptation, and social integration. The credibility of the findings was ensured through source triangulation, methodological triangulation, member checking, and the researcher's reflective notes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presented the results and discussion in an integrated manner based on the three research questions. The first research question examined the factors that shape social distance. The second focus explained the manifestations of acceptance and group boundaries in lectures, student organizations, and residential environments. The third focus described the process of changing relationships from prejudice to trust. Findings from interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation are interpreted using Emory S. Bogardus's theory of social distance, Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of language and symbolic power, and previous research.

3.1 Factors Shaping Social Distance

Research findings indicated that social distance is shaped by the interplay of easily recognizable differences, stereotypes, personal doubts, communication barriers, and the comfort of remaining within one's own group. During initial encounters, accents, physical traits, habits, and cultural backgrounds serve as markers that influence how students assess other groups. These markers do not always result in overt rejection, but they can create a sense of awkwardness and hesitation to initiate communication.

A local student said, "I actually want to be close friends with them, but sometimes their accent makes me feel a little uncomfortable. Even so, once I got to know them, they turned out to be kind and fun" (local student, interview, 2026). This quote shows that differences in speech create a distance at the beginning of an encounter. However, direct

experience gives the informant the opportunity to judge friends based on their behavior, not just on impressions of the group.

From the perspective of Papuan students, initial barriers emerged in the form of feelings of inferiority and fears of not being accepted. One informant said, "I felt like they didn't want to be friends with me because I have dark skin, curly hair, and a face that isn't as pretty as other girls'" (Papuan student, interview, 2026). The informant held back from approaching others because she feared her physical traits would be judged negatively, even though she hadn't always experienced direct rejection.

Observations in the classroom revealed differences between structured and unstructured situations. Cross-group communication occurred more easily when the instructor formed groups or assigned tasks requiring collaboration. During free time, some students returned to sitting and chatting with friends they already knew. This pattern suggests that even a few voluntary interactions can make first impressions last longer.

These findings could be explained through Bogardus's (1925) four dimensions of social distance. Feelings of awkwardness and fear of rejection reflect the affective dimension. The comfort of being with peers from the same region reflects the normative dimension. Limited communication outside of formal activities reflects the interactive dimension, while differences in accents and customs reflect the cultural dimension. These four dimensions influence one another. Differences that remain misunderstood give rise to stereotypes, while limited interaction makes it difficult to correct these stereotypes.

Bourdieu's (1991) concept of language and symbolic power clarifies the role of dialect in this process. A language variety considered standard makes it easier for its speakers to enter conversations and gain recognition. Conversely, a different accent can mark someone as an outsider to the dominant group. Physical characteristics also function as symbolic boundaries when Papuan students limit themselves based on assumptions about others' judgments, even before any actual rejection occurs.

These findings support the work of Fitrianti and Riyandani (2023), Hpar et al. (2024), and Mubarroq et al. (2025) on barriers to intercultural communication. In the context of Sriwijaya University, Nurhaliza et al. (2024) highlight the

limitations of Papuan students in understanding the South Sumatran dialect. This study expanded on that explanation by showing that local students also need to adjust their word choice, clarify the meaning of their speech, and accept dialectal diversity. Social distance is thus formed through the interactions between the two groups, not solely through the adaptive abilities of Papuan students.

The inclusion of local students from Palembang, Lubuk Linggau, Prabumulih, and Pagar Alam fills the first gap in previous research. Susanti (2020) focused on students from Palembang, while Yolanda et al. (2020) used a broad "non-Papuan" category. The data from this study show that the responses of local students are not uniform. Direct experience and the intensity of interaction are more decisive factors in openness than regional origin alone. Thus, the first research focus is addressed through the relationship between stereotypes, linguistic and physical differences, personal doubts, group norms, and limitations on interaction.

3.2 Manifestations of Acceptance and Group Boundaries in the Classroom, Organizations, and Residential Settings

Social acceptance and group boundaries emerge simultaneously in three spheres of interaction. In the classroom, acceptance is evident through academic assistance and a willingness to cooperate. A student from Papua explained, "I still have good friends in class. They often help me with my assignments" (student from Papua, interview, 2026). The informant interpreted this assistance as both academic support and a sign that he was accepted into the group.

In student organizations, opportunities for participation exist, but they are not always accompanied by the confidence to take advantage of them. A student from Papua stated, "I want to be part of the Student Executive Board (BEM), but I don't yet have the confidence to join" (student from Papua, interview, 2026). This quote suggests that low participation does not always stem from rejection by the organization. Uncertainty about how other members will respond can also prevent students from expanding their social networks. Documentation of organizational activities shows that opportunities for cross-group interaction exist, but the involvement of Papuan students has not been uniform.

In residential settings, group boundaries are evident in the choice to live and socialize with peers from the same region. A local student remarked,

“Papuan students prefer to live with fellow Papuan students because they feel more comfortable” (local student, interview, 2026). This statement reflects how local students perceive the internal closeness among Papuan students. From the perspective of Papuan students, these regional bonds provide emotional support, practical assistance, and a sense of security during the process of adjusting to a new environment.

Observations in the residential community indicate that clustering based on region of origin is still evident. Nevertheless, cooperation, friendships, and mutual assistance continue to take place (non-participant observation, 2026). These findings confirm that closeness to one’s home group cannot be directly interpreted as rejection of local students. Such closeness provides a sense of security, but it can become a barrier when cross-group relationships fail to develop.

The differences among these three spaces indicate that acceptance varies depending on the context of interaction. The classroom is the most consistent space for acceptance because instructors, assignments, and shared goals create structured contact. However, the relationships formed in class do not always continue once academic obligations are fulfilled. These findings align with those of Wulandari and McKeown Jones (2022), who found that college experiences influence the academic and social integration of Papuan students.

Student organizations provide opportunities to expand one’s network, but the availability of such spaces does not automatically lead to participation. Hesitation to join the Student Executive Board (BEM) reveals a psychological barrier stemming from uncertainty about acceptance. Therefore, it is not enough for universities to simply provide access to these organizations. Organizations must offer clear, equal, and safe roles so that students feel confident enough to get involved.

In residential settings, closeness to peers from the same region serves a protective function. This finding aligns with Warmasen et al. (2023) and Romadhoni et al. (2024), who found that networks among peers from the same region aid the adaptation process for Papuan students. However, this protective function can turn into a normative barrier when cross-group relationships fail to develop. Local students may interpret the choice to live with peers from the same region as a sign of exclusivity, while Papuan students may perceive the local students’ hesitation as a sign of rejection.

Both interpretations create a cycle of social distance because each party waits for the other to initiate communication. The findings of Meliana and Tondok (2023) help explain this situation. Frequent contact does not necessarily reduce prejudice when interactions are still accompanied by anxiety or negative beliefs. The data from this study support the explanation that the quality of contact is more important than the number of encounters. Contacts that provide a shared purpose, a balanced division of roles, and positive experiences are better able to soften group boundaries.

The second focus is addressed through the differences in the nature of relationships within each social space. Acceptance is most clearly evident in the classroom. Within organizations, boundaries emerge through hesitation to participate. In residential settings, boundaries are evident through regional groupings. Integration does not require students to abandon their internal solidarity. Integration requires expanding one’s network so that regionalities can coexist with cross-cultural relationships.

3.3 The Process of Transition from Prejudice to Trust

Changes in relationships most often begin through academic interactions. Class discussions, group work, and completing assignments consistently bring the two groups together. A local student said, “At first I was curious, so I deliberately sat near them in class. After getting to know them, I found out they were nice” (local student, interview, 2026). This experience gave the informant the opportunity to test their initial judgment through direct interaction.

In group work, students share common goals and have a clear division of responsibilities. Observations show that mutual assistance in completing tasks and repeated communication form the initial foundation of trust. Evaluations, which initially focused on ethnic identity, later shifted toward individual abilities, responsibility, and attitudes. However, the intensity of communication tends to decline once academic needs are met. Some relationships remain limited to formal collaboration and do not develop into friendships outside of class.

The trust that begins to form creates space for mutual cultural adaptation. A student from Papua explained, “Cultural differences mean we have to learn to adapt. After interacting frequently, we began to understand each other’s customs” (student from Papua, interview, 2026). Observations revealed the

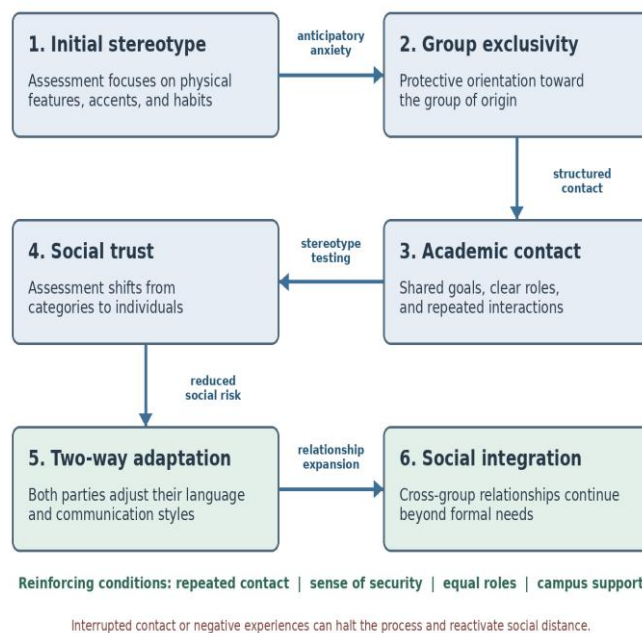
use of language that was easier to understand, a willingness to clarify the meaning of conversations, and changes in how people responded to differences. These adjustments occurred in both groups.

A cross-source data analysis reveals six stages of relationship development. The first stage is characterized by category-based assessments of physical traits, accents, and habits. The uncertainty that follows these assessments leads to a protective orientation toward one's home group as the second stage. The third stage emerges when class assignments and discussions facilitate structured academic interactions. If these interactions are repeated, equal, and result in positive experiences, the focus of evaluation shifts from group identity to individual traits and abilities, leading to the formation of social trust in the fourth stage. Trust reduces social risk and enables two-way cultural adaptation in the fifth stage. When this mutual adjustment continues beyond academic needs and extends to friendships, organizations, or neighborhoods, the relationship enters the stage of social integration.

These findings are consistent with those of Muhajir and Anismar (2021) and Azman and Suryandari (2022) regarding the role of cross-cultural communication in the adaptation process. The difference is that this study does not view adaptation as the sole responsibility of students from Papua. Local students also reevaluate stereotypes, adjust their communication styles, and learn to understand differences in accents and customs. This reciprocal process addresses the third gap in the literature review.

This study addresses the second gap by linking stereotypes, categorization, academic contact, trust, and adaptation into a single process. This sequence is formulated as the Gradual Social Integration Model. This model is an analytical construct derived from recurring patterns in interviews, observations, and documentation, rather than a chronological sequence that every informant must follow identically. The term "gradual" refers to a fundamental shift in assessment from group categories toward personal experience, as well as the expansion of relationships from formal contact toward voluntary relationships. The data show uneven progress. Some relationships stop at academic cooperation, some develop into trust and adaptation, while established relationships may become distant again following negative experiences. The following pattern summarizes the stages and mechanisms of this transition.

Pattern 1. Gradual Social Integration Model in Reducing Social Distance



Source: The researcher's analysis based on interviews, observations, and documentation.

Inter-Stage Transition Mechanism

The model in Pattern 1 is interpreted through the transition mechanism, not merely through the change in stage numbers. A transition occurs when the fundamental basis of the relationship changes and that change is consistently reflected in behavior. The mere presence of two groups in the same space does not yet indicate a transition. New contact becomes an integrative mechanism when it provides opportunities to collaborate, assess individuals based on experience, and reduce uncertainty regarding the other group. The previous stage does not disappear immediately either. Solidarity with the original group, for example, can persist as students begin to build cross-group relationships.

Transition from Stage 1 to Stage 2: self-protection mechanisms. During initial meetings, physical differences, accents, and habits are interpreted through familiar categories. This assessment triggers anticipatory anxiety because students do not yet know whether they will be accepted. Statements by students from Papua regarding skin and hair color, as well as the discomfort felt by local students toward accents, reflect this uncertainty. To reduce social risks, students sought closeness with peers from the same region or with people they already knew. Group exclusivity in this model does not necessarily imply open rejection. The term refers to a protective orientation that limits the willingness to initiate

cross-group communication. A shift occurs when stereotypes begin to influence social choices, not merely when students become aware of differences.

Transition from Stage 2 to Stage 3: Mechanisms for Structured Contact. Ties within one's home group provide a sense of security but can limit opportunities to get to know other groups. Group assignments, class discussions, and instructor guidance break down these barriers by providing legitimate reasons to interact. Shared goals, division of responsibilities, and reliance on members' contributions reduce the burden of initiating communication. The transition to the academic contact stage occurs when students begin to exchange information and work toward a shared outcome. Simply being present together without collaboration is not enough. This explains why some students may communicate during assignments but return to their original groups once the class is over.

Transition from Stage 3 to Stage 4: the stereotype-testing mechanism. Academic contact evolves into trust when collaboration yields repeated positive experiences. Accuracy in completing tasks, a willingness to help, and predictable responses provide evidence for evaluating others as individuals. Local students' accounts of how their classmates turned out to be kind once they got to know them indicate a shift from category-based judgments toward personal experiences. Trust is built through reciprocity and consistency, not merely through the number of encounters. A single brief interaction, an unequal division of roles, or a negative experience can cause the relationship to remain at the level of formal cooperation and fail to reach the stage of trust.

Transition from Stage 4 to Stage 5: mechanisms for reducing social risk. Trust alleviates concerns that linguistic errors or cultural ignorance will be immediately viewed negatively. Both parties then feel more confident to ask questions, clarify their intentions, and resolve misunderstandings. The use of more easily understood language, a willingness to explain terms, and changes in how differences are addressed serve as indicators of two-way adaptation. Adaptation in this model is not assimilation, nor is it a burden borne solely by students from Papua. The transition occurs when adjustments are made voluntarily and repeatedly by both groups without requiring either party to abandon their cultural identity.

Transition from Stage 5 to Stage 6: mechanisms for expanding relationships. Two-way

adaptation evolves into integration when relationships are no longer dependent on academic tasks. The adjustments that initially took place in the classroom extend to friendships, organizations, and the neighborhood. Indicators include voluntary communication, ongoing support, a willingness to share roles, and more equal access to social networks. Integration does not mean the loss of differences or regional solidarity. Integration means that both groups can maintain their identities while building stable cross-cultural relationships. Data show that this stage has not yet been achieved uniformly, as some relationships still end once academic interests are no longer relevant.

Mechanisms of halting and regression. This model is process-oriented and can move forward, halt, or regress. Disrupted contact, negative experiences, unequal role distribution, and new stereotypes can reactivate anxiety and a focus on the home group. Conversely, repeated contact, a sense of security, equal roles, and campus support reinforce transitions between stages. Institutional support works through the formation of inclusive groups, the assignment of clear roles within the organization, and meeting spaces that allow interactions to continue after tasks are completed. The sequence of stages therefore reflects a dominant pattern in the data, not a single path. Positive contact from the outset can shorten the exclusivity stage, while negative experiences during the trust or adaptation stages can push relationships back to a greater distance.

Theoretically, the Gradual Social Integration Model expands Bogardus's concept of social distance from a mapping of acceptance levels to an explanation of the process of change. Academic contact serves as an institutional bridge; trust transforms group judgments into individual judgments; and two-way adaptation links trust to integration. Contact reduces social distance only if it is repeated, equal, safe, and sufficiently positive to correct stereotypes. This model distinguishes integration from assimilation because cross-group relationships develop without erasing cultural identities.

The third focus is addressed through self-protection mechanisms, structured contact, stereotype testing, trust, reciprocal adaptation, and the expansion of relationships. This model is an analytical proposition specific to the context of Sriwijaya University. Research on other campuses and groups is needed to test the sequence of stages, reinforcing conditions, and patterns of regression.

4. Conclusion

This study shows that the social distance between Papuan students and local students from South Sumatra at Sriwijaya University is dynamic. Social distance is shaped by stereotypes regarding physical characteristics and accents, differences in customs, communication barriers, uncertainty about acceptance, and the comfort of staying within one's home group. This situation manifests more often as a sense of awkwardness, hesitation to initiate communication, grouping based on region, and limited relationships outside of formal activities rather than as open rejection. Within Bogardus's framework, these findings encompass the affective, normative, interactive, and cultural dimensions, which reinforce one another when cross-group interactions remain limited.

The nature of acceptance and group boundaries varies across different interaction settings. In lectures, academic support, class discussions, and group work, acceptance is most evident because these settings provide a shared goal and relatively equal roles. In student organizations, opportunities for participation are available, but doubts about acceptance still limit the involvement of Papuan students. In residential settings, ties with fellow Papuans provide support and a sense of security but can limit the expansion of relationships when interactions with local students do not develop. Thus, acceptance and social boundaries can coexist.

The shift from prejudice to trust occurs through repeated contact, positive experiences, equal role-sharing, and two-way cultural adaptation. This process is outlined in the Gradual Social Integration Model, which includes initial stereotypes, group exclusivity, academic contact, social trust, two-way cultural adaptation, and social integration. The model demonstrates that the reduction of social distance does not occur automatically or in a linear fashion. Relationships can drift apart again when interactions are interrupted or negative experiences arise. The contribution of this study lies in its explanation of the process of relationship change and its affirmation that adaptation is the responsibility of both groups. Local students also need to reevaluate their prejudices, adjust their communication, and understand cultural differences.

Theoretically, the Gradual Social Integration Model extends Bogardus's social distance theory—moving beyond the mere mapping of acceptance levels to explain the mechanisms driving changes in

intergroup relations. The model demonstrates that structured academic contact serves as an institutional bridge; trust shifts evaluations from group categories to individuals; and two-way adaptation links trust to integration without requiring cultural assimilation. It also highlights the non-linear nature of integration. Advancing through stages requires repeated contact, a sense of security, equal roles, and institutional support, whereas negative experiences can cause relationships to revert to a state of greater social distance. Thus, social distance is understood not merely as an individual attitude, but as a process shaped by the design of interactions within higher education institutions.

In practical terms, administrators at Sriwijaya University and other multicultural higher education institutions can utilize the six-stage model as a framework for mapping issues and designing interventions. At the stereotyping and exclusivity stage, university leadership and student affairs units should incorporate anti-prejudice and cross-cultural communication materials into student orientation, establish cross-regional peer mentoring, and provide safe channels for reporting discrimination. At the academic contact and trust stage, study programs and faculty members need to form heterogeneous study groups, assign equal roles, and design recurring collaborative tasks to ensure interactions extend beyond a single activity. At the adaptation and integration stage, organization advisors, student government bodies (BEM), and dormitory managers should foster cross-group committees, cross-cultural dialogues, and joint activities outside of academic coursework. Implementation should be evaluated each semester based on the level of involvement of Papuan students in organizations, the frequency of voluntary cross-group interactions, survey results regarding safety and trust, and the effectiveness of handling discrimination reports.

These implications must be interpreted within the study's limitations—specifically, that it was conducted at a single higher education institution and drew upon the experiences of specific informants—meaning the findings do not necessarily represent the entire student population from Papua or local students from South Sumatra. Future research should examine the Phased Social Integration Model through multi-site and longitudinal studies to assess the consistency of the stage sequence, reinforcing conditions, and potential regression within more diverse contexts.

5. References

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