



Thematic Review

Intercultural relationship development at university: A systematic literature review from an ecological and person-in-context perspective

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ABSTRACT

For more than four decades, issues pertaining to the development of intercultural relationships between international and domestic students in university settings have received scholarly attention. However, there appears to be lack of research exploring the extent to, and the manner in which the individual and environmental dimensions interact with one another to co-create this development. This review addresses this gap by scrutinising English-language refereed journal articles from an ecological and person-in-context perspective. The review, involving a constructionist thematic analysis of systematically searched and screened papers, identified the few empirical studies from that perspective, the vague operationalisation of intercultural relationship development, and the methodological limitations of the empirical work. It also generated content-related themes of the individual–environmental interactions in the development of intercultural relationships. The review concludes by suggesting multiple areas of inquiry that warrant further empirical investigations, and by calling for the amplification and refinement of the research methodologies.

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1. Introduction

In recent years higher education institutions around the world have espoused, as an educational goal of internationalisation, the value of developing intercultural and global competences in students through education abroad, or on culturally diverse home campus (Knight, 2008). In this context, many studies have stressed the importance of interaction between international and domestic students¹ (hereafter, intercultural interaction), because this is assumed to facilitate positive academic and sociocultural adjustment of international students (Schartner, 2015), and intercultural learning for both groups of students (Jiang, 2008; Jon, 2013). The benefits of intercultural interactions can hypothetically also be considered, if not empirically grounded, from the viewpoint of strengthening diplomatic relations and international friendships, and the integration of international students into a host society as future skilled workers or immigrants.

However, a growing body of literature has persistently shown that, irrespective of host nation, domestic and international students do not interact spontaneously (De Vita, 2002), and any kind of consolidated relationships, such as friendship, is difficult to develop (Gareis, 2012). The domestic–international student divide is widely documented, with evidence of international students cherishing cosmopolitan friendships among themselves (Sovic, 2009), or residing in close-knit conational friendship groups (Brown, 2009). Further, a recent literature review on ‘internationalisation at home’ highlighted a tendency among domestic students to resist intercultural group work and generally avoid contact with international peers (Harrison, 2015). These findings stress the importance of developing coherent institutional policies and strategies that promote intercultural interactions (cf. Kudo, 2016; Leask, 2009). In addition, there is a growing recognition across the higher education sector of the need to conduct studies that explore students’ agency, self-determination, goals and motivation, *in dynamic interactions* with the environment (Volet & Jones, 2012). Such a perspective is considered necessary since studies with a restricted focus on either the individual (psychological) or environmental (educational) dimensions of intercultural interaction, and paying limited attention to the ways in which these two dimensions interact and influence each other, can only lead to a partial understanding of the vexed relationship between domestic and international students.

Accordingly, this review scrutinised academic articles reporting empirical studies that addressed the development of intercultural relationships between international and domestic university students, with a specific focus on the dynamic relations between the individual and environmental dimensions. To acknowledge the inherently interactive nature of intercultural relationship development, this review adopted a conceptual framework grounded in Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1986, 2005) ecological model of human development overlaid with Volet’s (2001) person-in-context perspective. This framework, which is elaborated below, provided a unique conceptual lens through which to explore and examine the extent and manner in which existing empirical studies have examined or interpreted intercultural relationship development at the dynamic interface (Volet, 2001) of the individual and environmental dimensions of intercultural interactions.

In the last few decades a number of literature reviews related to aspects of intercultural relationship development between international and domestic students have been conducted. These reviews have addressed: international students’ adjustment (Church, 1982) and acculturation (Smith & Khawaja, 2011); the adaptation and transformation of students and teachers in cultural transitions (Volet & Jones, 2012); transformational and cosmopolitan learning (Marginson & Sawir, 2011); and internationalisation at home (Harrison, 2015), including the roles of formal and informal curricula to stimulate relations (Leask, 2009). However, to date no systematic literature review of empirical studies has examined intercultural relationship development from a combined ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986, 2005) and person-in-context perspective (Volet, 2001).

Before presenting the conceptual framework and the research questions that guided this systematic literature review, the foci of recent research that explored intercultural interactions, and the limitations of previous empirical work, are examined in turn.

¹ Here the distinction between ‘international students’ and ‘domestic students’ is arbitrary and operational. Considering the increasing immigration and intermarriage and, increasing cultural diversity of domestic populations in many countries as a result of ongoing cross-border mobility and hybridisation, it is too naïve to assume the clear-cut distinction between the two student groups and the cultural homogeneity of domestic as well as international students.

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