Exploring motivations for intercultural contact among host country university students: An Irish case study

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ABSTRACT

This article is concerned primarily with university students' motivations for voluntarily seeking out intercultural contact on campus. It is based on a larger qualitative research project conducted in an Irish university. This project used a grounded theory approach to explore intercultural relations among students specifically from the perspective of the host culture student cohort. The findings indicate that host students' decision to engage in intercultural contact is based primarily on a perceived utility associated with such contact, which is based on an informal cost–benefit analysis. Other, less prevalent motivational drivers, such as concern for others and the idea of having a shared future are also identified. Although the study focuses on a higher education environment, many of the ideas and theories discussed and questions raised may be applied to broader intercultural environments. In particular the article aims to highlight the current gap in literature relating to motivations for engaging in intercultural contact and also seeks to highlight the potential value of social exchange theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) to understanding the dynamics of intercultural contact. It also emphasises the relevance of the concept of 'homophily' (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954) to the field of intercultural studies. As such, the article seeks to combine empirical data with extant theory in order to gain a deeper understanding into the dynamics of intercultural contact.

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1. Introduction

Within the literature relating to both intercultural contact and the internationalisation of higher education, there is an abundance of references to the potential benefits which can be fostered by interaction with cultural diversity. As Volet (2004: 4) remarks;

> Diverse university student populations provide unique social forums to foster intercultural development (Volet, 1999), reciprocal tolerance (Horne, 2003) and the development of multicultural individuals (Adler, 1974).

Cantor (2004) argues that student diversity brings a variety of perspectives to a given dialogue and in doing helps students identify new possibilities for both themselves and their environment, while Nussbaum (1997) contends that in order to solve the global problems which face the modern world, it is imperative that solutions stem from cooperative dialogue between diverse national, cultural and religious groups. Other scholars highlighting the potential benefits of student diversity include McBurnie (2000) and Luo and Jamieson-Drake (2009), who found that students who experienced relatively greater levels of interaction with diverse peers in higher education had higher levels of skills development in seven areas, including

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developing awareness of social problems, having creativity in relation to idea generation and problem-solving, being able to independently acquire new skills and knowledge, and relating well to people of different races, nations, or religions. Focusing specifically on the host culture cohort, Bruch and Barty (1998) point out that student diversity can benefit host students by broadening their cultural horizons and promoting international understanding and cross-cultural sensitivity. Indeed, Harrison and Peacock (2009: 878), in discussing the concept of 'internationalisation at home', point out that the presence of international students is argued to promote host students' intercultural communication skills and "seed intercultural learning". Additional arguments and findings in favour of student diversity can be found in the work of Chang, Denson, Sáenz, and Misa (2006), Denson (2009), Denson and Bowman (2013) and Gacel-Ávila (2004), while Shaw (2009) reviews evidence from research conducted both in the United States and the United Kingdom relating to the value of diversity to excellence in higher education.

1.1. The challenge of operationalising culture

As regards approaches to operationalising the term 'intercultural'–or perhaps more specifically the term 'culture' – for research purposes, the challenge to identify a universally satisfactory way to do this remains unresolved, as all approaches have drawbacks. As Bennett and Bennett (1994: 145) suggest, "It is not an accident that most of the literature on cultural differences on campuses glosses over precise definitions of its subject". In the vast majority of studies on intercultural contact in higher education, including research by Bird and Holmes (2005), Gareis (2000), Kashima and Loh (2006) and Ujitani (2006), the concept of 'culture' is operationalised based on students' nationality. This implies that contact between students of different nationalities is designated as intercultural contact. Despite the efficiency of this 'passport approach', it must be acknowledged that this does not factor in the complex and nuanced nature of culture and largely ignores the reality that cultural diversity exists within, as well as outside, a given national population. Indeed, such *intra*national diversity is increasingly common given the level of human mobility in the 21st century and the phenomenon of globalisation (Castles, 2002), a phenomenon which leads Haigh (2009: 272) to conclude:

> Frequently the cultural gap between a local community and its minorities is greater than that between them and its 'international' learners, who often come from other Western nations or Westernised elites.

As such, it is important to recognise the drawbacks of operationalising culture based exclusively on nationality and attempts to address these drawbacks will be discussed when presenting the study overview. It is also worth noting that in the United States, race is often used as a means to operationalise the idea of 'diversity' and cultural difference. Asmar (2005: 134–135), for example, refers to "the US inclination to equate cultural diversity with race". While this race based approach does recognise *intra*national diversity, it is however still problematic insofar as it forces individuals into strict racial categorisations which are themselves overly simplistic.

1.2. Challenges and opportunities of student diversity

While these approaches to operationalising cultural difference reflect different perspectives, they nonetheless overlap in their argument that a diverse student body may constitute an added educational resource for learning institutions. This argument is premised on two ideas. Firstly, students from different cultures – international or domestic – are 'culture carriers' who bring diverse ideas, values, experiences and behaviours to the learning environment (Segall, Dansen, & Poortinga, 1990; cited in Simon & Davies, 1995). As Lackland Sam (2001: 315) comments:

> One rationale behind the increasing number of international students is the assumption that students can serve both as cultural carriers and resources (Klineberg, 1970; Mastenhauser, 1983; Paige, 1990) and as links between cultures (Eide, 1970).

This links with the idea that all students bring their own 'cultural capital' to campus (Zepke & Leach, 2005; Ridley, 2004). Secondly, interaction with culturally diverse peers can enhance the overall educational experience of the student population and foster positive learning outcomes. This thesis is predicated upon the idea that exposure to and interaction with diverse perspectives, the conduits for which are often the students themselves, can create more critically engaged, interculturally competent, globally aware graduates who possess the tools required to successfully "negotiate the richness of a world miniaturised by globalisation" (Sexton, 2012: 5). As Conklin (2004: 38) contends: "We learn when shaken by new facts, beliefs, experiences and viewpoints", an argument echoed by Bollinger's (2003: 433) thesis that "Encountering differences rather than one's mirror image is an essential part of a good education". Such a rationale is informed by the work of established development theorists such as Newcomb (1943), Piaget (1971), Janis (1972), Langer (1978), and Nemeth, Swedlund, and Kanki (1973) and their work on concepts such as 'groupthink' and 'integrative complexity'. It posits that being confronted by alternative perspectives often requires individuals to reflect upon their own position as well as that or others, while also demanding that they articulate their personal position in a cogent and reasoned manner to other parties.

Despite this, there is not unanimity espousing the merits of student diversity. A significant number of scholars highlight the challenges of student diversity and the potential for negative outcomes, either for the students and/or the institution. These include increased stereotyping, a hardening of prejudicial attitudes towards other groups, and intergroup hostility