Intercultural interactions in university tutorials: 
A Bourdieusian analysis

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Abstract: This research explores mono-cultural, mono-lingual local student perceptions of intercultural interactions in structured university learning environments through the lens of Bourdieu’s social field theory. Employing qualitative analysis, this study revealed intercultural interactions to be co-shaped by structural, institutional and contextual elements, as well as the personal dispositions students bring to the classroom. Implications for University providers are discussed.

Keywords: intercultural interaction, domestic student, Bourdieu.

Introduction

Universities in English-speaking nations are now sites of considerable student cultural diversity, yet there is evidence to suggest that local student take up of opportunities to engage with students from culturally different backgrounds is limited (Dunne, 2009; Harrison & Peacock, 2010; Ward & Masgoret, 2004). Further, there evidence that it is the cohort of students with the least international exposure and experience (mono-lingual students from mono-cultural backgrounds) that is most likely to live out culturally-separate experiences on campus (Strauss, U, & Young, 2011; Summers & Volet, 2008). The limited take up of opportunities for mixing on campus suggests that the benefits of intercultural interactions for learning, creativity, problem-solving and intercultural development (Cathcart, 2006; De Vita, 2002; Leung & Chiu, 2010) are not being fully realised across the student population.

The research reported in this paper explored mono-cultural, mono-lingual local students’ accounts of their classroom intercultural experiences through the lens of Bourdieu’s social field theory. It sought to understand how structure, agency and context intersect to co-shape student uptake of intercultural interaction opportunities.

Local students and intercultural engagement at university

The literature indicates a number of factors limiting local mono-cultural students’ interactions with those who are culturally different. These include the low motivation of the local student to interact with students from culturally different backgrounds (Cathcart, 2006; Summers
& Volet, 2008), perceptions of threat or anxiety generated by interacting with students from different cultures (Harrison & Peacock, 2010; Strauss et al., 2011), a lack of confidence and low self-efficacy with regard to intercultural interaction (Daly & Barker, 2005) and poor levels of intercultural knowledge and openness (Nesdale & Todd, 2000). Summers and Volet (2008) found that local student attitudes and behaviours relating to the formation of diverse working groups were established early in a student’s first year of study and were unlikely to change, even when the student reported positive experiences of working with diverse others. Their findings also suggested that the local student controlled the intercultural interaction agenda within the context of the university classroom, and that the attitudes and motivations of the non-local student to establish culturally-diverse working groups was far less influential in shaping intercultural interactions.

It has been argued (Mak & Buckingham, 2007; Ward & Kennedy, 1999) that a better understanding of intercultural interactions within the university classroom can only be achieved through analyses that consider how contextual elements frame these experiences. This study contributes to this space. It sought to establish how students understood and experienced the context of tutorials, and how these understandings and experiences may have shaped their intercultural interaction experiences.

**Bourdieu’s social field theory**

In order to address the above questions, Bourdieu’s social field theory was selected as an appropriate theoretical lens through which to view student intercultural interaction experiences. Bourdieu’s theory breaks social phenomena into three seemingly separate, yet dynamically interconnected, constructs: field, habitus and capital. Bourdieu conceives of social activity as practice that occurs between actors in social spaces called fields. Fields are autonomous spaces that have rules and roles that inform social behaviour and distinguish them from other fields; in Bourdieu’s words, they have their own “logic” (Bourdieu, 1992). In order to succeed within a field, an agent needs to understand what the rules are that govern social behaviour within it. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 98) extend the analogy of a field to that of a game: “we can, with caution, compare a field to a game…it follows rules or regularities that are not explicit or codified”. However, the “game” of the field is not experienced equally by all agents within it. Rather, a field assumes inequality between agents. This can be owing to different positions held by agents in the field, these determined by the resources (capital) and dispositions (habitus) that agents have access to, and how these ‘fit’ the rules of the game. Bourdieu argues that fields are contested spaces, in which agents seek to either improve or retain their status through strategies known as position-takings.

While field is the structure and environment in which social activity occurs, habitus refers to the internalised dispositions held by the agents that will influence decisions and actions made by the agent in a social context. It is influenced by one’s socialisation, culture and history. It is essentially “the mental structures through which they [individuals] apprehend the social world” (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 18), providing individuals “predisposed ways of categorizing and relating to familiar and novel situations” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53 as cited in Morrison, 2005, p. 313). The habitus also provides a framework that will embrace subjective and objective realities: by influencing how one perceives or sees surrounding structures, the habitus will influence how one chooses to engage with a particular social situation.
A third construct in social field theory is capital. Field is the context for the action, habitus the disposition to engage in the action – and capital refers to the tools, skills, knowledge and resources available to the individual to help them engage in the interaction. Capital comes in many forms, social, cultural, economic and symbolic, and implicit to these is value or worth. The value of capital is determined by the field, and the agents within it. Bourdieu’s insight was that while everyone holds capital, certain fields privilege certain types of capital, providing advantages for some sections of the community and disadvantages for others.

Bourdieu’s theory recognises that social phenomena occur in, and are shaped by their, context (field), and that the participation of agents is shaped by their habitus, access to capital, and the value afforded to each by the ‘rules’ of the field. Further, Bourdieu considers habitus, field and capital to be dynamic constructs, shaping and being shaped by each other.

**Applying social field theory to intercultural interactions on campus**

This study sought to explore intercultural interactions as they occurred within the tutorial field. Key practices occurring within this space include class discussions, and group work activities and assessments. Lectures are not part of this space. This conceptualisation of field was inspired by Bourdieu’s application of field to multiple arenas of social practice, including (but not limited to) the intellectual field, literary field, journalistic field, tennis field, the field of cultural production, and the university field. Like the tutorial field in this study, which involves students bound by the practice of, and logic relating to, structured learning activities within tutorials, each of Bourdieu’s fields involves multiple and disparate actors and institutions bound by common practice and logic. In this paper, the tutorial is the field (or arena) that governs learning activities (practice) located within it.

Consistent with Bourdieu’s theory, this research also assumed the tutorial field to be an unequal playing field, with students holding different positions within it, primarily owing to the type and volume of capital that they possessed. Indeed hegemony and differentiation are important concepts in Bourdieu’s oeuvre. However, while Bourdieu’s writings employed socio-economic class as a primary form of group ‘distinction’, this paper distinguishes students (agents) on the basis of cultural background.

**Research aims and questions**

The main aim of this research was to better understand, by using Bourdieu’s field theory, how mono-cultural, mono-lingual, local students perceived, reflected upon and explained their own engagement in intercultural interactions in the context of university tutorial. Two research questions were generated for this study.

RQ1. How do students perceive the tutorial as a field of social practice, and how does this frame their interactions and engagement?

RQ2. What habitus do students bring to the tutorial field that mediate their intercultural interactions?
Methodology

This study sought to determine how students reflected upon and conceptualised intercultural interactions in tutorials and what factors and structures they believed enabled or constrained these interactions. The research was grounded in a phenomenological epistemology: students’ perceptions of their experiences were the phenomena being studied (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). In-depth qualitative interviewing was employed to allow participants to recount their experiences.

Research site

The research was conducted at a medium-sized (n>15,000), metropolitan university in Australia. At the time of the research, 86% of the total student population were local (citizens or permanent residents of Australia). Of this population, 73% were born in Australia and 10% spoke a language other than English. International students studying on a student visa comprised 14% of the on-campus student population, and were fairly evenly distributed across faculties (at least 12.5% of students in each faculty were from overseas). At the time of the research, the institution had included ‘global perspective’ as one of its graduate attributes, although it had no related policy outlining how this should be achieved.

Participants

Participants were ten mono-cultural, mono-lingual local students in their first-year of study at the university. The term mono-cultural denotes students who identified as Australian, and did not reveal any other ethnic heritage in themselves or their parents. Students were recruited in the first week of the academic year from major first-year units across a number of disciplines, including business, media and engineering.

The benefits of a small sample size for in-depth, qualitative analysis of complex, social phenomenon are suggested in the literature (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). Qualitative analysis is most concerned with understanding interactions and dimensions within a phenomenon, rather than quantifying them: that is, “what things ‘exist’ [rather] than determining how many such things there are” (Walker, 1985, p. 3 as cited in Crouch, 2006, p. 489). The sample of ten participants adopted in this study is sufficient for this study.

Procedure

Research participants were involved in two semi-structured interviews: the first in the first few weeks of the academic year, the second at the commencement of the second semester of study. Interviews lasted 40-50 minutes, were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The interviews were structured around a series of open-ended questions that addressed broad, pre-determined themes relating to the research objectives. These included reflections on intercultural interactions within and outside of the classroom. The use of semi-structured interviews provided flexibility within the interview, allowing for emergent themes arising in the context of the interview to be explored where appropriate (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006).
Interview data analysis

Data was coded through a four-step process. In the first step, two broad categories were established: tutorials (to capture all data related to the selected field), and intercultural interactions and diversity (to identify all data related to the social phenomenon under investigation, and which could refer to attitudes, practices, observations, accounts of experiences). The data was read a number of times and any data that referred to these categories was tagged to one, or both, of the categories.

In the second step, data within each category was further coded into themes that emerged from within the broader categories. Braun and Clark (2006) inspired the notion of theme as patterned responses and meanings. Within the category of tutorials, emerging themes included, for example, observations about the demographic profile of the class or seating patterns, accounts of group work and the structure of the course. Within the intercultural interaction and diversity category, themes comprised attitudes toward diversity, perceived intercultural confidence and accounts of intercultural interaction experiences.

The third step in the data analysis involved assigning themes to Bourdieu’s primary constructs of field, capital and habitus.

A fourth step was required by research question 1. This final step of the data analysis involved analysing the theme data that was assigned to the construct of field, and tagging this to areas of activity that emerged within the field data. Three primary areas of activity emerged in the data, the pedagogical, the physical and the social. Each of these three areas appeared as distinct spaces within the tutorial field and were therefore referred to as domains.

Findings

Students’ perceptions of the tutorial field and its framing of interactions and engagement

Students’ perceptions of the tutorial field revealed three primary areas of activity (domains) within its space: the pedagogical, physical and social. Each of these domains was characterised by distinct logic and capital that contributed to the broader logic and values of the tutorial field. Findings relating to students’ perceptions of the logic and capital of the three domains follows.

Pedagogical domain

The pedagogical domain was concerned with learning processes utilised within the university classroom. Two themes emerged within this domain as having a particular influence on intercultural interactions. These were the perceived importance of active verbal participation in tutorials, and the need for English language proficiency.

Active verbal participation in tutorials

Students emphasised the importance of group work and in-class discussion: the need to work with, and present one’s arguments or opinions to others, was considered intrinsic to tutorial participation. Confident and clear expression of ideas was seen as a key objective of university pedagogical practice: “I want each person [in my tutorial group] to be very outspoken and confident” (MCC057). One student, when asked what qualities they would prefer in-group members, answered “…people who aren’t too shy to put forward their opinions” (COD048).
Students appeared to perceive that the logic of the domain rewarded the communication of knowledge, not the knowledge that was communicated. No student suggested selecting group members on the basis of academic ability, rather they appeared to seek members with the ability to communicate ‘effectively’, suggesting that this skill was considered to be of more value in the field.

I looked at them and went “Wow! These guys aren’t afraid to have a chat and if we’re going to be doing an oral presentation, they might be the ones you want to be involved with”. (MCC057)

There emerged in the data a relationship between context and students’ understandings of the logic of group work. When group work was to be assessed, the students’ accounts focused on the academic outcome of the learning task, the final grade, and not the learning process surrounding the completion of the task. The benefits that cultural diversity could bring to working groups in tutorials did not appear to be recognised by students. Students emphasised the need for a “positive outcome on the work level” (COD048) and sought group work partners who would facilitate good grades (these achieved through effective communication of knowledge) as opposed to ‘good’ group outcomes and experiences. In this context, it appeared that the logic of the field emphasised the academic outcome of the group work.

On the other hand, when assessment was not underpinning the group work experience, students emphasised the value of group process, such as the benefits of exposure to various perspectives, and learning about different cultures through their interactions with others. In this context, the logic of the field appeared to emphasise relationship and process elements of groups work.

Analysis of the pedagogical domain not only highlighted students’ emphasis on the importance of active verbal participation, it also revealed this to be linked to an ability to communicate in the language of instruction. This is discussed in the next section.

*English language proficiency*

Many students recalled instances in tutorials where the language competency of fellow students became salient, impacting interactions and the running of learning activities:

Some of these…you know…cultures don’t have English as their first language so you have to be a bit patient when you’re talking to them and not use superfluous language. (TLC007)

I: Was there an occasion, last semester, in that class, where the conversation, or the learning, was influenced by the diversity?

P: I’d say most of the time, due to the fact when it came to the English language, it was a case of somebody got selfless and selfish confused [ ] I’m trying to think of a good example at the moment but I can’t. (TLC006)

Further, there emerged an implied relationship between perceived English proficiency and appearance:

The courses I’m doing are very English based so there are lots of English people [ ] as in like Western people. (MCC107)

English language competency was seen as linked to physical traits: students recognised some peers as looking like English speakers.
In summary, students saw the pedagogical domain as emphasising oral participation and English language proficiency. These logics encouraged interactions with peers who were confident and outspoken, those who were “more verbal” (COD048), “the alpha dog” (TLC006). The field did not appear to encourage interactions with persons who were reserved, quiet or lacked English proficiency. Rather students’ accounts revealed the field to have a mediating effect against local students interacting with those from different cultural backgrounds.

**The physical domain**

A number of material, or objective, elements relating to classroom demographics were identified by students as influencing student interactions and engagement. The first concerned size. Students considered smaller numbers of students in tutorials to be more conducive to interactions:

> It’s easier to feel safer in smaller groups [ ] interaction between different cultures in tutorials is a lot more than outside of tutorials. (COD048)

References to ‘safety’ and ‘intimidation’ were common: large groups appeared more socially threatening to students.

The opportunities that small class sizes may have generated for enabling intercultural interactions appeared to be mediated by the ethnic profile of the class. When reflecting specifically on intercultural interactions, some students attributed their lack of engagement with persons from different cultural backgrounds to a lack of diversity within their classes.

I: Do you have diversity in your class?
P: [Pause 4 seconds] Within my classes I’d say probably not. (TLC006)

While this research could not measure the level of ethnic diversity in individual classes, these findings suggest a relationship between student perception of the level of diversity and their engagement with it that suggested a field effect. In this respect, levels of diversity had a structuring influence on intercultural interactions: smaller classes were considered conducive to intercultural interactions, a lack of diversity was considered to constrain them.

**Social domain**

For many students, tutorials were a site of social relations: “Group work’s a fantastic thing [ ] it’s a great way to meet people” (MCC057). However, these relationships generally remained contained within the field of the tutorial: relationships starting in the tutorial field stayed in the field.

Like you don’t just invite someone [from the tutorial group] it’s just not how it works. (TLC007)

For some, this conceptualisation of relations as spatially bounded mirrored a broader understanding that university life was distinct from a student’s life off-campus: “I’ve got uni and then I’ve got life” (MCC057); “my uni life and my life are completely separate” (MCC107). These students appeared to perceive the university experience as focused on academic utility, admitting to being at university “to get study out of the way” (TLC006). However, this was presented as a doxa of the field, not something they, as students, had agency over. Interactions were presented as vehicles through which academic, rather than broader social goals, could be achieved:
Most people I’ve met have been for group projects so far, not really on like a societal level [ ] like a professional level. (COD048)

Interactions were also perceived to be bound by seating conventions adopted within classes. Students observed that seating patterns formed at the beginning of semester tended to remain fixed throughout the semester, and that these patterns had a strong influence over group formations:

most of the time ummm you just sort of sit down at the beginning of the semester and you end up working with the group, with the people that were sitting around you. (COD048)

While the tendency of students to remain in fixed seating configurations for the duration of the study period is noted in the literature (Dunne, 2009), this research presented this phenomenon as an expectation of the field, rather than owing to student agency. Interestingly, while students observed fixed seating patterns, they did not perceive them to be formed around race or ethnicity: “I guess that does happen but at the time you don’t really notice it” (BUS061). However, by the end of their first semester, only three students out of the research sample reported working with students from different cultural backgrounds. This suggests that students may inadvertently choose to sit next to people who are from culturally similar backgrounds. This relates closely to another prominent theme identified in student account, that is, the perception that homophily was an important organising principle shaping social relations. In this discourse social and ethnic homogeneity was presented as if inevitable and unchangeable, a field effect:

I couldn’t see one of my friends going over to someone who looks like they are from a different country. (MCC073)

I think the people are more comfortable with people who have a greater understanding of their culture [ ] you know, if you’ve got two, two Caucasian males of 22, they probably have a lot more, initially, in common. (MCC057)

There was also an expectation that, within this domain, the initiation of interactions was the responsibility of ‘the cultural other’: “I’ve got to be 100%, I haven’t actually approached anyone yet at Murdoch [ ] all the people have approached me” (MCC057). Other students expected intercultural interaction to occur as a product of being exposed to diversity in the class, rather than making an effort:

I don’t really consciously go, “I need to associate with other cultures so I can get this knowledge”…just sort of a passive thing that I would believe [ ] would just inherently come to me through my studies here. (TLC009)

Thus social interactions within the tutorial field appeared to be co-shaped by logic governing how interactions should look, begin and function.

Valued capital in the tutorial field

The mono-cultural, mono-lingual local student appeared to benefit from the possession of cultural, academic, social and symbolic capital that was perceived to be valued in the tutorial field. Their capital resonated with, and was embodied within, the practices and structures of the field, ensuring them a high status and privileged position within its space.

Within the pedagogy domain, capital relating to how a student engaged with the learning process appeared to be most prized. Students were comfortable and confident with practices adopted in the pedagogy domain, particularly the emphasis on participation, discussion and oral presentations, suggesting a possession of relevant capital:
To me, uhh, tutorial groups, with discussions and group work, is where I feel I thrive. (TLC008)

Many students could recount exposure to similar pedagogical practices within earlier schooling experiences, providing them academic capital to draw upon: “in [highschool] we did group work as well” (TLC007). They were also familiar with the communication conventions sought by the tutorial field. Not only were all students native English speakers, their status as local students ensured they understood, and were confident in, the tacit communication conventions expected within tutorials:

I like to think I use a reasonably high level of English that …you know I can certainly choose my lingos. I can use more informal forms basically at will. (TLC008)

I can never shut up and in the tutorials I’m always chatting. (MCC057)

Mono-cultural, mono-lingual students also benefited from the possession of existing friendship networks both on and off campus that provided them with their primary social support structures (social capital):

I: Socially, what would your main friendship group be?

P: Probably the people I hung out with last year at school [ ] they’re still my main friendship group. (COD048)

It is possible that having existing friendship groups reduced the need for students to actively seek social interactions within tutorials, allowing interactions in tutorials to function primarily as conduits for learning.

Finally, the very appearance of mono-cultural, mono-lingual local students appeared to function as an important symbolic capital, reinforcing their dominant position within the field. As white Australians, the students benefited from looking like they possessed the capital required by the field: they looked like ‘good’ students who were able to speak ‘good’ English. Their appearance appeared to facilitated interactions, seating patterns and group formation processes. As members of the dominant ethnic group on campus, they were able to be assured of forming groups and relations with ‘like’ people: there was not an imperative to seek relations with the ‘cultural other’ in the field.

The value of capital changed within the different domains within the field. Within the pedagogy dimension, capital relating to one’s ability to engage in learning took precedence over capital relating to cultural knowledge and social capital. The reticence of students to ‘seek out’ those from culturally different backgrounds may be owing to the fact that it was felt that the ‘culturally other’ student did not possess capital that mono-cultural, mono-lingual local students perceived to be of value to the field.

**Mediating habitus in the tutorial field**

Student accounts highlighted dispositions that appeared to enable and constrain intercultural interactions within the tutorial field.

**Habitus as enabling**

Student data revealed a number of dispositions that should enable good intercultural outcomes, these relating to attitude, motivation, social identity and ethnorelativism. Overall, students were
positive about diversity and appeared motivated to engage with culturally different peers: “I seek out people who come from really varied and different backgrounds” (MCC001).

Some students appeared to be aware of their own, and others’, cultural positioning. Cultural difference, when acknowledged, was not diminished or disparaged, but rather assessed through an ethnorelative lens:

   Not only should they be immersed in our [ ] culture but I think we need to learn a little bit about theirs to understand where they’re coming from. (COD048)

   You even get a better understanding of your own culture [ ] not only gaining a perspective of other people’s cultures but getting a perspective on your own culture. (MCC073)

Social goals were important to these students: “probably the most important thing to me would be meeting, meeting an entirely new circle of friends” (MCC057).

**Habitus as constraining**

By contrast, habitus also constrained intercultural interaction outcomes. Many students appeared to see culture as something belonging to ‘the cultural other’, setting them apart. Ethnocentrism was evident in their lack of awareness of their own cultural position, and their active positioning of cultural others as different and, on occasion, deficient.

   It is that language barrier [ ] their lack of familiarity with the language that I’m using and the level to which I can use the language [ ] I need to drop down my English and they need to try and listen just that bit harder. (TLC006)

These students were less motivated to engage in intercultural interactions, with their goal at university to get good grades, and a focus on the academic, ‘task’ aspect of university experience. Other students described intercultural interactions as difficult and requiring effort:

   I think to do it [interact within persons from different cultural backgrounds] I’d actually have to seek it out [ ] which would make it somewhat more difficult than I’d like. (TLC006)

Finally, students’ perceptions of ethnic diversity on campus as segregated, bounded and impermeable emerged as an important element of a ‘constraining’ habitus. The perceived impenetrability of the ethnically homogeneous groups was captured in references to the groups “sticking [ ] like wasps” (MCC073): “generally ethnicities are sticking together a lot and not mixing much” (MCC057). Accepting homophily as a dominant principle for social relations was able to be justified: “It’s easier chatting to someone you recognise as associated with you” (TLC007).

Habitus and field appeared to interact with each other in complex ways. Habitus (as dispositions, attitudes and motivations) seemed to give students ways of thinking about, negotiating and perceiving intercultural interactions, as if it had the potential to shape how students saw and engage with diversity. For instance, some students reported intercultural interaction experiences that appeared positive and sustained:

   P: Yeah everyone’s from diff, somewhere different in our group. There’s like an Italian dude and a Dutch dude and um, some Malaysian dude and Indonesian girl and there’s a few people, another girl from Tasmania, um.

   I: Yeah and these are the people that, like you hang out with [ ]

   P: Yeah, yeah. Like yeah my really good friends. (TLC009)
In these examples, the students possessed capital that appeared to be valued by the field (they were white, English native speaking and reported extensive existing friendships on and off campus), yet their habitus enabled them to take up the opportunities presented to them to engage with peers from culturally different backgrounds, overriding the more restrictive logic of the field.

In other examples, students’ interaction experiences appeared constrained by their habitus. In these cases, when interactions did occur, their potential appeared not to be realised. Examples included mono-cultural, mono-lingual students describing intercultural peers through stereotype, or positioning them in an inferior position.

There were also instances when field effects seemed to dominate intercultural interaction experiences, negating possible positive effects of habitus. For example, one student (MCC107) reported sustained and meaningful intercultural interactions off-campus, even choosing to fast for Ramadan along with their peers, suggesting habitus that enabled intercultural interactions. However, the student was not able to report any intercultural interaction experiences on campus, suggesting that they did not see intercultural interactions as resonating with the logic of the field of structured university learning activities.

**Conclusion**

Applying Bourdieu’s social field theory allowed intercultural interactions to be studied as situated, highly complex phenomena, shaped by multiple co-existing, interdependent and competing factors, at both the institutional and broader social structure level. A major finding was the breakdown of field into three domains, pedagogical, physical and social. Intercultural interactions appeared to be shaped by their location within the field, and the perceived logic that was afforded by this position. Students saw intercultural interactions as governed by implicit and explicit rules that not only appeared to hinder interactions, they also privileged mono-cultural, mono-lingual local students, enabling them to control the intercultural agenda. Owing to the importance of a receptive host culture for positive acculturation outcomes, the constraining perceptions of logic and capital that emerged in this study are concerning.

University policy could begin to address the problem by modifying the rules of the field over which it has power, and broadening the types of capital that are valued within it. This could be achieved through strategies including the development of assessment mechanisms that value intercultural learning in addition to academic outcomes, expanding small group opportunities with diverse cohorts, and designing opportunities for students to work in mixed groups. Such practices could be expected to modify the capital valued in the field, thereby mediating local students’ privileged positions within it. In turn, this may allow habitus to engage with the field in a constructive way, improving the likelihood of positive intercultural learning experiences.

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References


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