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Local university students and intercultural interactions: conceptualising culture, seeing diversity and experiencing interactions

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Abstract: This paper examines the intercultural interaction experiences of local, first-year students ($n=25$) in their first few weeks at university. The focus on local students complements existing intercultural interaction literature, which has tended to concentrate on the experience of the ‘cultural other’ student. Employing qualitative analysis, the study revealed relationships between how students conceptualise culture, see diversity and experience their initial intercultural interactions on campus. A link between students’ cultural backgrounds and the depth of their intercultural interaction experiences emerged.

Keywords: intercultural interaction, local student, first-year student, culture, diversity

Introduction

Higher Education institutions throughout the OECD are now characterized by unprecedented levels of student diversity (Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, & Forbes-Mewett, 2010), affording students extensive opportunities for intercultural interactions. However, research indicates that meaningful interactions between students from different cultural backgrounds are limited. Of particular concern is the paucity of intercultural interactions involving local students (Dunne, 2009; Harrison, 2012). While some research suggests that international students are engaging in intercultural interactions (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009), this typically involves other international students. By contrast, local students experiences of diversity on campus are tangential, with international and local student cohorts often studying and socialising in parallel (Kimmel & Volet, 2012). This phenomenon is common to many countries/regions including Australia (Summers & Volet, 2008), New Zealand (Ward, Magsoret, & Gezentsvay, 2009), Japan (Ujitani & Volet, 2008), Britain (Brown, 2009), Canada (Grayson, 2008), European nations (Groeppel-Klein, Germelmann, & Glaum, 2010) and North America (Levin, Sinclair, Sidantius, & Van Laar, 2009). Given the many proven learning and social benefits of intercultural interactions within educational institutions (De Vita, 2002; Jackson, 2009), together with the current focus within higher education institutions on internationalisation, the limited involvement of local students in intercultural interactions on university campuses is concerning and merits investigation.

The study reported in this paper contributes to the higher education intercultural interaction literature by seeking to identify the relationship between how local students conceptualise culture and perceive diversity at university, and their actual intercultural interaction experiences. This research takes as its lead recent
research advocating a shift from the study of intercultural interactions as an entity (for instance, research exploring what conditions are needed for intercultural contact to occur) toward a more constructivist examination of “what kinds of [ ] knowing, seeing and belonging” are necessary to produce positive intercultural interactions (Erasmus, 2010, p. 397). It is also influenced by research advocating a shift in intercultural interaction research from a focus on the “what, how and why” of intercultural interactions at universities, to a focus on how students perceive, define and interpret intercultural contact in their own words (Halualani, 2008, p. 1). It is argued that such insight will lead to a more authentic understanding of how and why intercultural interactions occur (Dixon, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2005).

Consistent with this approach, this research refrained from providing students with definitions of diversity and culture. It instead sought to glean how students defined and understood these terms, and how this understanding may have related to their actual experiences. Notwithstanding, the design of this research is predicated on a heuristic interpretation of culture (Scollon, Scollon, & Jones, 2012), in which the term was used to mean, broadly, the division of people “into groups according to some features [ ] which helps us to understand something about them” (Scollon, et al., 2012, p. 3).

Intercultural interactions and the local student

This paper’s focus on the local student addresses a gap in the literature, which has tended to concentrate on international students and not acknowledge the cultural positioning and role of local students in the interaction process. Local students contribute to, and are affected by, intercultural experiences on campus: they are actively involved, not neutral observers. Further, prior research has often underestimated the cultural and attitudinal heterogeneity among the local student population by assuming congruence in local student cultural background, intercultural attitude and experience.

The limited intercultural interaction research that recognises the cultural and attitudinal diversity within the local student population elicits significant findings. Volet’s (1999) early research conducted on a university campus in Australia, found Australian students from a bicultural heritage were more positive about intercultural mixing than monocultural Australians, a finding replicated in her later work (Summers & Volet, 2008). Montgomery (2009), in a qualitative analysis of group work experiences involving local and international students, found local students with previous international experience were more open to other cultures than other local students, while Harrison (2012) found strong positive relationships between a local student’s multicultural upbringing, foreign language ability and their cultural intelligence. It is important to note that these patterns are not universal, and that students without previous multicultural experiences can also positively engage in intercultural interactions (Harrison, 2012). Concomitantly, Volet’s (1999) early study had revealed that local students born in Singapore and Malaysia (that is Australian permanent residents born in Singapore and Malaysia) were, as a cohort, more positive about intercultural mixing than international students (that is students studying in Australia on a student visa) born in the same countries, highlighting that positive intercultural attitudes are not simply linked to cultural background.

These examples indicate a relationship between an individual’s cultural ‘socialisation’ and their intercultural attitudes and experiences, highlighting the need to acknowledge and explore the cultural diversity inherent within the local student population.
Intercultural Interaction and the First-Year Student

This research also takes as a focus the experience of first-year students. It explores the intercultural attitudes, motivations and dispositions first-year students bring to campus, and how these influence their initial take up of intercultural experiences. The first-year experience presents students with opportunities to establish relationships while still relatively uninfluenced by existing campus norms or practices that might influence such patterns (Koen & Durrheim, 2010).

Significant to this research are mixed findings relating to the impact of intercultural interactions on first-year students. While one body of research suggests that increasing exposure to diversity within a conducive educational environment improves the tolerance and openness of first-year students to diversity (Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Terenzini, & Nora, 2001), there is also contrary evidence. For instance, Summers & Volet (2008) found that exposure to diverse others within the context of in-class group work experiences over the course of a degree does not necessarily result in an improved attitude toward culturally-mixed group work in later years and that attitudes and behaviours relating to intercultural interactions were firmly established within the student’s first year of study. Similarly, Koen and Durrheims’ (2010) study of informal segregation patterns on a South African university campus found that seating patterns in first-year classrooms were more segregated at the end of the study period than at the beginning. Given the importance of the first year to later intercultural outcomes, understanding first-year students’ conceptualisations and experiences of culture, diversity and intercultural interactions is critical.

Research Questions

This research sought to understand the relationships between first-year, local students’ conceptualisations of culture, perceptions of diversity, and intercultural interactions on an Australian University campus. It also endeavoured to explore the role a student’s cultural background had in shaping those outcomes. Two research questions were generated:

RQ1. What are the relationships between how first-year local students conceptualise culture, perceive diversity and experience intercultural interactions?

RQ2. What is the role of cultural background in shaping first-year local students’ conceptualisations of culture, perceptions of diversity and intercultural interaction experiences?

Methodology

In order to gain insight into how students interpret and perceive culture, diversity and intercultural interactions in the context of their actual lived experience on campus, a qualitative methodology approach grounded within a constructivist epistemology was adopted. This approach recognises that conceptualisations of culture, perceptions of diversity and intercultural interaction experiences are phenomena constructed by individuals, and are shaped by the interaction of the individual with their broader social environment and previous experiences. As such, the researchers did not prescribe to the participants a definition or understanding of what an intercultural interaction was: rather, the research was interested in identifying how students understood and experienced these phenomena.
**Research Site**

The research was conducted on the primary campus of a medium-sized (2010 total enrolments n=14481), metropolitan university in Australia. The institution is noted for its outreach to low-socioeconomic status students: students from this demographic comprise 16% of the local student population. Further, within the local, first-year cohort, 40% of students are aged below 21, and 26% are 31 or over.

The campus is ethnically diverse. International students studying on a student visa comprise 14% of the student population, with top source countries including USA, Germany, Singapore and Malaysia. Within the local student population, 27% were born overseas and 10% speak a language other than English at home. 59.7% of students are female, 49% are fulltime students and 19% are enrolled externally. 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 25 first-year local students enrolled in business, engineering and communication units. Thirteen identified as possessing a bicultural background, highlighting the internal cultural diversity of the local student population. Participants were recruited in class in the first weeks of the academic year and broadly reflected the University’s overall demographic (age and gender) profile. All participants were volunteers and received a $25 book voucher in appreciation of their time.

This study forms part of a larger research project into intercultural interactions in professional schools at universities, and the choice of professional schools was driven by a growing awareness of the benefits of a culturally-plural workforce (Cope & Kalantzis, 1997). The 25 participants were the full sample of students recruited for the larger research project who met the criteria for this study. The benefits of a small sample size for in-depth, qualitative analysis of complex, social phenomenon are highlighted in the literature on qualitative research methodologies (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006).

**Procedure**

Semi-structured individual interviews (40-50 minutes) were held in the first six weeks of the academic year. They were conducted in a conversational style, and an attempt was made to keep them relaxed and informal and to tailor the flow of the interview to fit student leads (Oakley, 1981). Questions were designed to elicit information relating to students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds, information about peer groups and social patterns, attitudes toward diversity and actual interaction experiences on campus. Questions exploring intercultural interactions invited students to reflect on positive experiences involving persons from a cultural background different from their own, and to recount processes and factors that enabled those experiences. Students were also encouraged to recount how they felt during the interaction, and what made the interaction positive. Probes were used to elicit further detail and depth in responses, with feedback and encouragement given throughout the interview to reinforce to the student the value of their contribution to the study (Patton, 2002). Anecdotal feedback after the interviews indicated that students found the experience valuable, as it allowed them to reflect on issues that many had not consciously considered before.
**Interview Data Analysis**

All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and then analysed. Braun and Clark’s (2006) thematic analysis approach was adopted. This entails analysing data at both a textual and interpretive level, and provides for inductive and deductive approaches. This methodology resonated with the aims of this research. First, the application of inductive analysis enabled students’ spontaneous ideas related to intercultural interactions to emerge from the data, minimising the impact of theoretical and empirical preconceptions (Thomas, 2006). Second, it provided the researchers the opportunity to derive meaning from students’ accounts and reflections, as well as situating and interpreting the data within the students’ cultural, academic and social contexts. This was critical to reveal how students make sense of their experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analytic process involved three steps, each involving a further layer of analysis and development of the data. The first step of the analysis involved identifying concrete experiences, observations and attitudes as well as ideas and concepts relating to cultural diversity that emerged within students’ accounts. The initial reading therefore involved an inductive approach where ideas were noted against a descriptor. The second step involved grouping these ideas into themes. The analysis was guided by Braun and Clark’s (2006) conceptualisation of a theme as involving patterned responses and meanings. One example involved grouping all references to food, dress and other cultural symbols into a theme called surface culture. This process involved examining the strength of the relationship between the ideas grouped within each theme, following Patton’s (2002) guidelines regarding internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. Essentially, these guidelines posit that material within a theme should converge, and that themes should remain distinct from one another. This process resulted in the development of a thematic table that was applied deductively to analyse the entire data set (n=25). Throughout the process, care was taken to ensure that patterns and issues not consistent with the dominant themes were identified and noted (Patton, 2002; Willis, 2010).

Finally, the third step involved mapping the themes to the generic constructs that were investigated in this study, namely, how students conceptualise culture, perceive diversity, and experience intercultural interactions.

**Transcription**

All forms of transcription are, at some level, compromised representations of actual interaction and expression (Ashmore & Reed, 2000; Smith, Hollway, & Mishler, 2005). However it was important to capture basic interactional details of the interviews. Therefore, transcriptions of the interviews recorded speech patterns such as pauses, interruptions in speech, laughter and incomplete sentences. Speech inflection, pace and volume were not transcribed. Laughter and pauses were recorded in square parentheses. Speech removed from quotes is indicated by blank square parentheses. Participants were each assigned a number identifier (for instance P2 for participant 2) and not a pseudonym.
Findings

Research Question 1: What are the relationships between how first-year local students conceptualise culture, perceive diversity and experience intercultural interactions?

Conceptualisations of culture

Students’ descriptions of culture reflected a continuum ranging from essentialist, reified and ethnocentric interpretations, through to understandings that were dynamic and ethnorelative, in which culture was seen as intrinsic to being.

In the essentialist interpretation, reference to culture typically focused on symbolic and surface elements such as food, cultural symbols and social structures. Cultural knowledge was viewed as static and fixed, with set rules and practices that needed to be learned.

With people that I’ve met who are Muslim it is known that the father is the head of the household. The mother is not and she cooks. (P2)

If I want to deal with Asia, it is really important to actually know the culture over there, to deal with these guys. (P8)

By assigning culture concrete properties, these students situated it as an entity removed from themselves and their experiences. Implicit to this conceptualisation was positioning the speaker as being without culture: culture belonged to the ‘diverse’ other.

I’ve always felt a little ripped off because, you know, like Jewish people just seem to have this incredibly rich vein of humour that they can tap and it’s like, I’m just boring and white and you know. (P14)

Ethnocentric dispositions were also evident throughout their responses. Students frequently tried to understand the ‘other’ through comparison to their own cultural frame of reference.

I think when in Australian culture, that’s sort of not, not on. Like we don’t really do that. Like, we’re quite respectful in our culture I think. (P27 discussing the behaviour of one student in class)

By contrast, other students saw culture as dynamic, something that is intrinsic to being.

I really found my culture on my journey through life. Just the communities I lived in, the people I associated with, and that’s where I found my culture. (P7)

This conceptualisation revealed a deeper layer of cultural experience and awareness. Values and behaviours were noted. Culture was not depicted as something outside of the speaker’s domain, rather students recognised the universality of cultural positioning, including their own.
I guess it [culture] doesn’t affect so much who I hang out with it just [ ] affects what I know about who I hang out with [ ] the different sort of things that I understand about them. (P13)

Um, I like to accept all the cultures I’ve got in me and even the ones I haven’t, I still like to accept and embrace them. (P24)

These students focused on cultural awareness, learning to read other cultures, and displaying a positive attitude towards doing so.

It’s not just learning, learning about someone else [ ] it’s the fact that you’re curious about it and the importance of it. (P7)

Ethnorelative dispositions were also more prevalent within this group.

It [diversity] also broadens our knowledge and helps it evolve. (P24)

Like not only, um, should they be immersed in our Australian culture but I think that we need to learn a little bit about theirs to be able to understand where they’re coming from [ ] we should have to learn something about them as well. (P13)

These students appeared prepared to understand their culture within the context of equal others.

On ‘seeing’ diversity

As with responses regarding their conceptualisations of culture, students’ perceptions of diversity on campus were also varied. Most students saw the campus as ethnically diverse,

The widest ethnic diversity I’ve seen. (P9)

and agreed that diversity on campus was a good thing.

I think it’s always good to have that mixture of cultures because people seem to learn more about people and how their views on the world are different to ours. (P2)

However, there was significant variance vis-à-vis how students saw this diversity in relation to intergroup interactions. Some students saw social groups on campus as ethnically homogeneous and segregated, this generally identified as a feature of ‘visibly different’ groups and not ‘mainstream’ Australians. The reference to ‘sticking together’ was common in this discourse.

People who are maybe from the same countries kind of stick together. (P5)

Interestingly, one student interpreted their observations of diversity through a homogeneous lens, even when confronted with heterogeneity.
Either it’s Australians altogether or umm Japanese together or Indian people altogether. If not then [ ] you’ll probably have like an Indian group with one token Australian or an Australian group with one token Asian person…that’s what I see. (P10)

This student saw heterogeneous groups as tokenistic, maintaining a perception that ethnic groups ‘stick’ to themselves.

These students described patterns of mixing in terms of intergroup boundaries: cultural groups were considered distinct collectives and identified as ‘they’, spatially and culturally removed from ‘us’ or ‘we’.

I don’t want to slip up. I don’t know if I want to, like, do something that they’re going to find disrespectful. (P27 emphasis added)

By contrast, an equal number of students observed heterogeneous groups of students on campus.

Over here it’s very diverse, like I’ll see different nationalities talking together, sitting together, so yeah. (P6)

While some of these students also saw ethnically homogeneous groups, integrated, heterogeneous groups were considered the dominant pattern.

You see mixed crowds with, like, from each country, from each part of the world sitting together. (P7)

These students did not see the campus as being composed of fixed, exclusive groupings based on race or culture: rather they described a campus in which there was extensive intercultural mixing. They appeared to mediate the ‘barrier’ effect of ethnic groups through different forms of categorisation. Some saw groups in terms of superordinate identity categories in which a common student or interest group identity was salient (Gaertner, 2000).

We all sat down and discussed [ ] how the tutor group would help benefit us all [ ] we all accepted everything each other had to say, and that was when we all felt like we belonged as a group, together. (P24, describing the first meeting of a study group involving students from multiple cultural backgrounds)

Others ‘saw beyond the groups’ by decategorising (Gaertner, 2000) their own and others’ cultures as unique and subjective.

My culture is individual to me, not to a whole [ ] I always think of people as individuals. (P7)

This group described the diversity that they saw in terms that suggested an integrated, permeable pattern of intercultural mixing.

*Experiences of Positive Intercultural Interactions*

As the data was collected in the first month of the students’ first year of university study, it was expected that interactions experienced by the students would
be limited. However, the data revealed the emergence of diverging interaction experiences ranging from those that could be described as fragmented and shallow, to other experiences that, although still limited, displayed qualities suggesting the emergence of a deeper and longer lasting relationship. Some students had no intercultural interaction experiences to share, declaring they had met no one from a different culture on campus, while others recalled interactions that involved little more than a superficial greeting.

I: Have you made friends on campus with people from other countries?
P: [Pause 4 seconds] No. I can’t say I have. (P9)

I: … have you had any preliminary interactions with people from different cultural backgrounds to your own?
P: Yes, but sort of through, a little bit being forced like, if you happen to sit next to someone from a little bit of a different cultural background. (P20)

While some of these interactions were reported as ongoing, they appeared fragmented and lacking evidence to suggest that they might develop into more sustained relationships.

I: And the [interactions] that you had with people from different backgrounds, would you say they have been overall positive or negative, or...?
P: Yes, they have been nice people.
I: And what made them positive?
P: Just general politeness. Yes.
I: [ ] But you haven’t yet had any further interactions with [interrupted]?
P: Probably not. (P20)

With many of these shallow interactions, it was unclear whether or not the students genuinely considered them to be positive, or whether they were deeming them positive due to a ‘social desirability effect’ (Maccoby & Maccoby, 1954) in the context of the interview. However, interview data revealed that relationships with people from culturally different backgrounds did differ in depth compared to those with non-diverse peers.

By contrast, a significant number of students reported the emergence of more meaningful interaction experiences. While the interaction experiences were still in their formative stages, there were indications that they could develop into deeper relationships. Some interactions already appeared sustained over the first few weeks of semester.

The first week I was just, I just sat down [ ] and, this umm group of Asian girls and there was a few Asian guys [ ] they sat down and then the second week, we were forced to introduce ourselves and what not [ ] Sort of just working together, umm but then by the third week we were all just making jokes and like, ohh have you got Facebook? (P29)

There were also indications of the intercultural interaction experiences affecting the students, causing them to examine their own thoughts and beliefs.

These guys were presenting points, my own points of view to me in a way I’d never thought about it. (P17)
These students saw an intercultural element in all their experiences. Culture did not appear to be seen as something removed, but rather embedded in who they were, and what they did.

P: I’m engaging with diversity all the time. (P26)

Interestingly, while most students acknowledged the potential for intercultural learning through exposure to diverse others, many did not display the motivation to initiate intercultural interactions.

I wouldn’t go out of my way to talk to anyone unless it was needed like…”Do you know how to go here?”…that’s the only way I’d interact with people from a different culture. (P10)

Nevertheless, counter positions were found in the data with other students displaying motivation to engage with cultural ‘others’.

I feel I’ve got kind of a limited mind [ ] but now I want to get out and meet lots of different people, see how they view the world. (P4)

**Relationships between conceptions of culture, perceptions of diversity and intercultural interaction**

When reviewing the responses related to conceptualisations of culture, perceptions of diversity and actual intercultural interaction experiences, a systematic pattern of relationships between the three constructs studied emerged. These patterns are captured in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Relationships between conceptualisation of culture, perception of diversity and intercultural experience.](image-url)
This figure is divided into three rows, each representing one of the three constructs studied (that is, conceptualisation of culture, perception of diversity and intercultural interaction experience). Within each row is a vertical arrow reflecting a continuum of understanding within that dimension, with deeper, more complex conceptualisations and experiences reflected to the right side of the continuum and shallower, more limited understandings and experiences positioned to the left. Finally, the table has three connector arrows positioned between each of the constructs – one at the higher end of the continuum, one in the middle and one at the lower end. This is significant, since it represents the congruence among the constructs at different positions across the continuum. Reading down the right-hand sides of the continuums shows that students with dynamic, ethnorelative conceptualisations of culture tended to perceive the diversity on campus to be heterogeneous and integrated and reported intercultural interaction experiences that suggested emergent relationships.

Conversely, reading down the left-hand side of the continuums shows that students who understood culture as essential and reified generally saw diversity on campus as homogeneous and segregated and their intercultural experiences were fragmented and shallow. The continuum is a useful heuristic for this study, reflecting that data was not simply located at the extremes of the three continuums within Figure 1, but was found at various points within these.

Only two students’ responses diverged from the pattern captured in Figure 1. The first student displayed an ethnorelative conceptualisation of culture, saw diversity on campus as heterogeneous and integrated, yet his intercultural experience appeared fragmented and shallow. The second student revealed an ethnorelative understanding of culture and saw homogeneous and segregated groupings on campus. Nevertheless, his accounts of intercultural experiences on campus suggested an emerging deep relationship. All other students displayed convergence in their conceptualisation of culture, perception of diversity and intercultural experiences.

**Research Question 2: What is the role of cultural background in shaping first-year local students’ conceptualisations of culture, perceptions of diversity and intercultural interaction experiences?**

Empirical studies exploring the relationship between a student’s bicultural background and intercultural engagement with intercultural interaction indicate that a bicultural background makes individuals more open to complex understandings of culture and more oriented to engage with cultural difference (De Korne, Byram, & Fleming, 2007; Lee, 2010; Volet, 1999). The data was analysed on the basis of this identification to establish the extent to which a bicultural background influenced students’ conceptualisations of culture, perceptions of diversity and intercultural interaction experiences.

Participants were categorised into three groups: a group identifying as Australian monocultural (this group comprised students who identified as Australian only and did not cite any bicultural background); a group identifying as bicultural involving another Western culture (this group included students from Australian-South African [white], Australian-German and Australian-UK backgrounds); and a group also identifying as bicultural but involving a non-Western culture (this group included students from Australian-Vietnamese, Australian-Chinese and Australian-Indian backgrounds). No Australian-Aboriginal students participated in the research. While these categories appear to parallel racial divides, race was not salient in students’ reflections nor in this research, which focused on students’ cultural backgrounds, and how these might impact intercultural experiences.
Table 1 reports the extent to which levels of intercultural interactions were related to students’ cultural backgrounds.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Row</th>
<th>Sub-group</th>
<th>Shallow</th>
<th>Middle</th>
<th>Deep</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Row 1</td>
<td>Monocultural</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Row 2</td>
<td>Bicultural</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Row 3</td>
<td>Bicultural Western</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Row 4</td>
<td>Bicultural Non-Western</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Row 5</td>
<td>All students</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Depth of levels of intercultural experiences on campus by sub-groups of students (n=25).

Only depth of intercultural experience is presented in the table but, as discussed, a relationship can be assumed between depth of intercultural experience, conceptualisation of culture and perception of diversity. Rows 1, 2 and 5 of Table 1 reveal an even distribution of shallow/middle and deep intercultural experiences overall, as well as across mono- and bi-cultural groups. However, when the bicultural population is divided into Western or non-Western backgrounds (Rows 3 and 4), interesting patterns emerge. As shown Row 3, the majority of students from Western bicultural backgrounds reported shallow conceptualisations of culture and intercultural experiences, whereas a majority of students from non-Western bicultural backgrounds (Row 4) reported deeper conceptualisations, perceptions and experiences.

While the sample is small, these findings suggest that the cultural distance within a student’s bicultural background may also be related to levels of intercultural engagement. The significance of cultural distance on interactions has been examined elsewhere in the literature (e.g. Harrison & Peacock, 2010).

Discussion

This study had two research questions. The first was to explore the relationships between conceptualisation of culture, perception of diversity and intercultural interactions among first-year, local students. A consistent relationship was found between these three constructs: students with an ethnorelative conceptualisation of culture saw diversity as heterogeneous and permeable and enjoyed intercultural interactions that suggested an emerging relationship. Conversely, students with an ethnocentric conceptualisation of culture saw diversity...
as homogeneous and impermeable and engaged in intercultural interactions that seemed to be fragmented and shallow. While this research was not designed to explore the causality of these relationships, the data suggests that how individuals conceptualise culture and perceive diversity can impact positively or negatively on their actual experiences. In this sense, culture and diversity are not objective phenomena universally experienced: rather, how one sees and understands culture is related to how one experiences it. While the link between ethnocentric and ethnorelative conceptualisations of culture and actual intercultural interaction experience has been explored elsewhere (Michael Paige, Jacobs-Cassuto, Yershova, & DeJaeghere, 2003), there is limited empirical evidence or theory linking these constructs to student perceptions of diversity, particularly group permeability.

Most students identified groupings of students on campus, but not all saw these as exclusively ethnically homogeneous. However, students who did see groupings as ethnically homogeneous tended to see them as impermeable, suggesting heightened intergroup thinking and social categorisation processes (Tajfel, 1982). Further, this research suggests that these psychological processes are related to how one constructs and construes their social reality. In this respect, the groups identified by students are not social entities but function as ‘perspectives on the world’ through which student experiences are shaped (Brubaker, Loveman, & Stamatov, 2004, p. 31).

The second research aim was to explore how a student’s cultural background might shape the relationships between conceptualisation of culture, perception of diversity and intercultural interaction. This research found that intercultural interaction experiences varied according to a student’s bicultural background. The greater incidence of deep intercultural experiences reported in this research by bicultural-non-Western students resonates with other findings linking students’ intercultural interaction attitudes and experiences to previous cultural exposure (Harrison, 2012; Volet, 1999; Summers & Volet, 2008), as well as Bennett’s DMIS theory that notes individuals exposed to bi- or multi-cultural socialisation have access to enhanced resources and perspectives that can influence the complexity of their construal and experiences of intercultural events (1993).

However, the findings from the bicultural-Western students, although emergent and limited, were more puzzling. Not only did they report shallower experiences than bicultural non-Western students, they also reported shallower experiences than monocultural Australians. This was not expected. All of the bicultural-Western students identified and discussed their mixed cultural heritage during the interviews: most of them were born in another country, and all had lived in another country for extended periods. However, while they were aware of their bicultural positioning, their exposure to bi- or multi-cultural socialisation did not lead to the deeper levels of intercultural thinking and experience found in the bicultural non-Western group. Reasons for this are not clear, although it may be owing to the ‘bi’-cultural experience for these students being so culturally similar to that of mainstream Australia that it did not produce the expected effect. This finding deserves further research.

The findings reported in this article contribute to the higher education intercultural interaction literature that has, through its focus on the international student experience, implicitly assumed homogeneity in cultural background, attitude and experience within the local student population (Brown, 2009; Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008). Not only was there variation across the sample in the depth of reported conceptualisations and experiences, but also differences related to experiences emerged when cultural distance was considered. Theoretical explanation
for this latter phenomenon may be found in Bennett’s (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) that posits that intercultural sensitivity and awareness is a developmental process. Core to this theory is the concept of worldview - an intercultural outlook developed by persons through their reflection on intercultural phenomena and events. Bennett argues that exposure to diversity is, of itself, not enough to develop intercultural perspectives. Rather, he posits that the level of complexity with which one construes the intercultural event is likely to determine how deeply it is experienced. The data gathered in this study supports this, through evidence of a relationship between understanding of culture and actual intercultural experience. This study also extends Bennett’s theory by incorporating the dimension of perception of diversity and the link to cultural background.

**Conclusion**

This article’s focus on local students is timely. Much of the discourse on intercultural interactions on university campuses, and consequently many current intercultural interventions, target international students on the assumption that they are the ‘carriers’ of culture and need support to ‘engage’ with the host culture: the role of the local student in intercultural interactions is frequently overlooked. This research has shown that all university students are actors in intercultural interactions on campuses and demonstrates that local students, like international students, come to university with cultural backgrounds and perspectives that will affect their ability to engage with diversity.

These findings have implications for the design of curriculum, pedagogy and social support strategies aimed at enhancing intercultural interactions on campus. Not only should intercultural interaction strategies be designed to support all students, they need to be underpinned by the recognition that culture is inherent in all students. Education praxis that situates culture as removed and refined will only continue to reinforce many of the conceptualisations that may be hindering more meaningful interactions from occurring on university campuses. The authors note the present research relied on students’ accounts of their experiences; observational data would be useful to include in future research in order to establish how students’ perceptions converge with practices.

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**References**


