Intercultural relational development between Australian students and host Japanese students: A longitudinal study of students’ socio-emotional experiences and interpretations

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This dissertation is the report of an investigation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Murdoch University.

2006
I declare that this dissertation is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary institution.
ABSTRACT

Since the “Project of Accepting 100,000 Students from Abroad” was proposed by the Japanese government in 1983, the number of international students in Japan has increased dramatically to reach ten times the level of 23 years ago. Yet, despite the enhanced opportunities for international and local Japanese students to interact, there is evidence that meaningful intercultural interactions between the two groups have not taken place consistently (Hicks, 1988; Jou & Fukuda, 1995; Tanaka, et al., 1997).

The aim of this research was to develop a better understanding of the process of intercultural relational development between international and Japanese students in a Japanese context. More specifically, the research aimed to identify elements which facilitate or inhibit the two groups' intercultural relational development over a period of time, the nature of socio-emotional challenges that are experienced along the way, and how these are interpreted by students themselves. Several interpersonal relationship theories, cross-cultural communication theory, and research on cross-cultural and intercultural relational development were reviewed to form the conceptual background of the research. In combination, they contributed to provide a holistic approach to studying the complex dynamic, interactive and reciprocal nature of intercultural relational development.

Using naturalistic inquiry at a single site over a period of nine months, an empirical study investigated the intercultural relational development taking place among a small number of Australian and Japanese students who lived at the International House of a private Japanese university. Research methods included four semi-structured interviews with each participant, the use of various stimulus materials, including critical incidents to elicit multiple interpretations, as well as the researcher's continuous field observations.

The study revealed some of the factors that facilitated and alternatively inhibited social interactions between the two groups, at different stages of their relational development. Students' spontaneous accounts of critical incidents, combined with their subjective
interpretations of the same incidents provided insight into the socio-emotional challenges experienced by students in the process of intercultural relational development. Whereas most students' accounts and interpretations could be related to cultural background and experience, there was also evidence that some strategies for developing intercultural relationships as well as some interpretations of socio-emotional challenges were related to gender rather than cultural background. Unexpectedly, the research also found that social drinking was perceived by many students, across the two groups, as a facilitating factor at the early stage of intercultural development.

Overall, the empirical study revealed that Japanese students experienced more socio-emotional challenges than Australian students. Differences in sense of humor and in perceived appropriateness of introducing conversational topics of a private nature were given special attention as these appeared to present major socio-emotional challenges for Japanese students. Both cultural background and gender seemed to have an impact on students' interpretations of these challenges.

The thesis concludes with some suggestions for future research and for how intercultural learning between international students and host nationals could be enhanced in the Japanese context. Finally, the study makes a unique methodological contribution to research related to international students, through the use of a longitudinal design, a focus on situated experiences and socio-emotional challenges, and more generally, through a reciprocal approach to the study of intercultural relational development in the context of the internationalisation of higher education.
I wish to thank the following people for their part in this research project. Without their assistance, I could not have come this far.

Professor Simone Volet, my main supervisor, for her constant support and guidance throughout the completion of this thesis. She was always there to help me and guided me in the right direction whenever I got lost in this long and sometimes lonely journey. I would also like to thank my other supervisor, Dr. Wendy Cumming-Potvin who gave a tremendous amount of time and energy to read and comment on my thesis.

Appreciation is also expressed to Yasmina Volet and Geraldine Stack who transcribed the recordings of my Australian participants, Angelina Chilino and Louise Dixon who made sure that I would have a place to work during my short visits at Murdoch, Ruth Drake-Brockman who proof-read my whole thesis and my fellow students, Susan Beltman and Craig Whitsed who gave me many insightful comments.

My husband, Harvey Chervitz, who supported me by doing language editing and providing a workable environment by being a house-husband. My nine-year old son, Yujin, who accepted his mom's disappearances for two weeks at a time to the other side of the globe. My mother, who encouraged me to continue my studies.

And, finally I would like to thank the seventeen participants of this research, who kindly shared with me their experiences of cross-cultural relational development at the International House.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

| ABSTRACT | i |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | iii |
| LIST OF TABLES | x |

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION
- Introduction
  - Background 1
- Motivation for the study
  - Motivation arising from previous research 6
  - Personal motivation for undertaking this study 8
- Interactions between international and local students
  - Social support 11
  - The association hypothesis 12
- Significance of the study 17
- Conceptual framework 19
- Structure of the thesis 20

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW
- Introduction 22
- Interpersonal relationship theories and friendship development studies 24
  - Stage theories
    - Social penetration theory 24
    - Knapp’s model of relational development 27
    - Critique of stage models 30
  - Uncertainty reduction theory 32
    - Critique of uncertainty reduction theory 35
  - Relational dialectic theory 36
    - Baxter’s relational dialectic theory 37
    - Rawlins’ theory of dialectics in friendship 41
    - Empirical work based on relational dialectic theory 43
Critique of relational dialectic theory 46
Friendship development studies 48

**Culture and dimensions of cultural variability** 52
Conceptualizations of culture 52
Dimensions of cultural variability 53
  Individualism/collectivism 54
  High context/low-context cultures 60

Relational development in a cross-cultural or intercultural perspective 62
Cross-cultural research relating cultural dimensions to interpersonal relationship theories 63
  Studies relating cultural dimensions to uncertainty reduction 63
  Studies relating cultural dimensions to social penetration 66
  Studies related to dialectical relationships 67
  Critique of cross-cultural studies relating cultural dimensions to interpersonal relationship theories 68

Intercultural communication research 69
  Studies based on intercultural communication theory 71
  Intercultural studies based on interpersonal relationship theories 73
  Critique of intercultural communication research 76

Interpretive studies of intercultural friendship development 76

**Conclusion** 81
  Research questions 84

**CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

Introduction 85
Selection of the research methodology 85
Research method 89
  Research site 89
  Participants and recruitment process 91
    Australian students 93
    Japanese students 94
  Research design and data collection 96
    Semi-structured interviews 98
    Stimulus materials 99
Critical incidents 100
The interview process 103
Recording data 104
Language used during interviews 105
Interview questions 106
Initial interview 107
Second interview 108
Third interview 109
Fourth interview 110
Ethical considerations 111
Before the research 111
During the research 112
After the research 113
Data analysis 113
Managing the data 113
Organizing the data 114
Data representation 116
Methodological issues 116
Data collection over an extended period of time 116
Checking for researcher effect 118
Triangulation 119
Generalizability and reliability 120
Peer debriefing and participant checks 121
Conclusion 122

CHAPTER FOUR: STRATEGIES FOR INTERCULTURAL RELATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
Introduction 123
Initial expectations 124
Strategies for developing intercultural relationships 129
Initiating stage 131
Meeting through mutual friends 132
Presenting oneself as a pleasant person 135
Greetings 137
Experimenting stage 141
Engaging in small talk 143
Spending time together 145
Doing daily activities together 147
Socializing outside the International House 153
Intensifying stage 155
Engaging in self-disclosure 157
Being supportive 160
Providing information 164
Offering emotional support 165

**Factors influencing intercultural relational development** 168
Comparing perceptions 168
Accounts and reflections 172
Facilitating factors 172
- Interest in language and culture of the other 172
- Group activities 174
- Similarity in interests and hobbies 178
- Shared accommodation 181
- Organizing events 185
Inhibiting factors 188
- Dorm rules 188
- Language barriers 190
- Financial matters 192
- Japanese visitors breaking rules 195
- Communication styles 196

Conclusion 199

**CHAPTER FIVE: SOCIAL CHALLENGES IN INTERCULTURAL RELATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Introduction 200

Spontaneous accounts of critical incidents 200
- Common social and emotional challenges 204
CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

Introduction 256

Summary and discussion of major findings 257

Participants’ expectations about their stay at the International House 257
Strategies used at different stages 257
Factors facilitating and inhibiting intercultural relational development 261
  Facilitating factors 261
  Inhibiting factors 265
Social challenges emerging during intercultural relational development 268
Significance of subjective interpretation of social challenges emerging in intercultural development 272
Key features that contributed to a better understanding of intercultural relational development 274
  Development over time 275
  Situated nature 276
  Experience 278
  Reciprocity and subjectivity 279
Limitations of the study 281
Suggestions for future research 283
  The role of drinking 283
  Sense of humour 284
  The influence of gender 285
  The influence of power 286
  Significance of in-groups and out-groups 286
Implications for international education 287

REFERENCES 291

APPENDIXES
Appendix A 319
Appendix B 321
Appendix C 322
Appendix D 324
Appendix E 326
Appendix F 329
Appendix G 331
**LIST OF TABLES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Summary of Interview Data with Australian Students</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Summary of Interview Data with Japanese Students</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>The Number of Participants Interviewed Over Time</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Summary of Data Sources</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Strategies Reported Over Period of Time</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Possible Facilitating Factors</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Possible Inhibiting Factors</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Number of Reported Critical Incidents</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Types of Social and Emotional Challenges</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Explaining Dynamic Relational Development across Methodologies</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>