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# **“I’D SAY IT’S KIND OF UNIQUE IN A WAY”: THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN INTERCULTURAL STUDENT RELATIONSHIP**

*Dr Rebecca Jane Bennett*

*Student Learning Centre, Murdoch University, Perth, Western Australia*

*Professor Simone Volet*

*School of Education, Murdoch University, Perth, Western Australia*

*Professor Farida Fozdar*

*Anthropology and Sociology, University of Western Australia, Perth, Western Australia*

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This paper tracks the emergence, maintenance and evolution of a positive intercultural relationship between a multilingual international student from Vietnam and a monolingual local Australian student in their first year at university. The literature overwhelmingly suggests that in institutions where English is the language of instruction, monolingual local students rarely mix with international students who are not fully proficient in English. This dyad thus provided fertile ground for exploring the development of an unusual intercultural student relationship. Narrative analysis explores the extent to which individual agency and the institutional environment co-shaped this relationship over time and in various contexts. In the context of internationalisation of the tertiary education sphere, this study offers a prototypical case highlighting affordances and constraints that may influence the development of productive and amicable intercultural relationships on diverse university campuses.*

*Keywords: intercultural relationships; university; internationalisation; intercultural competency*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Hayley (local Australian student): ... I normally see people from the same culture all together. And it’s weird...we’ll be sitting in the cafeteria and all of us are different and people just look, because it’s so funny to see so many different people on one table. So yeah, I’d say it’s kind of unique in a way.

Many universities throughout the English-speaking world have student populations from diverse national, linguistic and cultural backgrounds, yet self-generated intercultural student interactions are rare. In theory, the internationalisation of the higher education sector holds the potential to foster intercultural competency and prepare both local and international students for a global workforce (Deardorff, 2006; Knight and de Wit 1995; Parsons, 2010).

The positive impact of intercultural interaction for international students (Bochner, 1977; Montgomery and McDowell, 2009; Pritchard and Skinner, 2002; Searle and Ward, 1990) and local students (Pittaway, Ferguson, and Breen, 1998; Spencer-Rogers and McGovern, 2002; Ward, 2001) has been stressed over several decades. Yet the intercultural aims of internationalisation to produce students who possess *intercultural communication competency (ICC)* - which is demonstrated through an understanding of others' worldviews, an awareness of cultural difference, self-awareness of one's own culture, and the development of generic attitudes such as openness, respect and empathy towards perceived cultural others (Parsons, 2010, 315; Knight and de Wit, 1995) – are yet to be fully realised (Harrison and Peacock, 2010; Ippolito, 2007). The dominance of research documenting the social challenges experienced by university students in multicultural classes supports the premise that internationalisation has a way to go if it is to achieve widespread ICC. This contrasts sharply with a scarcity of studies exploring the emergence of positive intercultural interactions in university settings. This article aims to contribute to addressing this gap.

### **The Development of Positive Intercultural Relations**

Studies indicate that a substantial minority of students form intercultural friendships at university (Montgomery and McDowell, 2009; Sakurai, McCall-Wolf, and Kashima, 2010; Halualani, 2008; Harrison and Peacock, 2010), but few have investigated how these relationships develop between monolingual local and multilingual international students.

Outside of the university context, research into monocultural friendship development has highlighted both personal (attitudes, values, and interests) and contextual (physical proximity, frequent exposure and workplace) influences (Griffin and Sparks, 1990; Sias and Cahill, 1998) as important. The effect of intercultural interactions has most famously been theorised in Allport's 'contact hypothesis' (1954) and Pettigrew's addendums (1986; 1998) which identified a number of conditions that encourage positive interactions between members of different socio-cultural groups: equal status; common goals; intergroup cooperation; authority support; learning about the out group; changed behaviour; affective ties; and ingroup reappraisal (Pettigrew, 1998). Hundreds of studies based on this theory indicate that such contact reduces prejudice (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). Empirical studies of intercultural relational development at the micro level are less prevalent, however. Analyses of in-depth interviews with intercultural friendship dyads reveal that socialising and prior intercultural experience (Sias et al., 2008), together with positive reinforcement, sharing personal stories and perspectives, and emphasising similarities whilst exploring differences (Lee, 2006), are influential factors in the development and maintenance of such friendships. How these factors apply to the context of a university has not yet been addressed.

The absence of research on positive relationships between local and international students with marked linguistic and cultural differences makes the investigation of an intercultural friendship a useful contribution to the field of intercultural relational development at university. The rarity of such pairings justifies the use of a micro-level case study to explore the multiple factors underpinning a functional and mutually beneficial interaction between students from groups who, according to the literature, are unlikely to mix (Dunne, 2009; Harrison and Peacock, 2010; Peacock and Harrison, 2009; Summers and Volet, 2008). Such a study might serve as a useful exemplar for tertiary institutions with diverse student populations wishing to facilitate similar relationships as part of the internationalisation process.

### **The Conceptual Value of Using a Paradigmatic Case Study**

The value of the case study as a research methodology is well established (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1984). Flyvbjerg (2006) has defended the case study as an important and valid contribution to qualitative research, in that it allows for complex behaviours to be examined at a micro-level, which can catalyse new perspectives on the topic at hand. Paradigmatic case studies in particular hold the potential to act as ‘an ideal exemplar or prototype’ (Marshall and Case, 2010, p.492). A case that offers a paradigmatic exception to a social phenomenon, allows for exploration of the ways macro-problems are resolved at a micro-level.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **The Broader Research Project**

Data was collected as part of a larger mixed methods study with 745 students investigating intercultural confidence and interaction among students in their first year at university in Australia.

### **The Case Study**

The case study emerged from the broader data set as a living example of a positive intercultural relationship. This pair was of interest because they represented student groups found, in recent literature and in the broader study, to be unlikely to mix; and because they provided an example of a positive self-generated intercultural relationship that continued to develop throughout the duration of the study. They were also the only international-local pair who volunteered to be interviewed together, which allowed another dimension for analysis.

#### ***The participants***

*Hayley.* Hayley (pseudonym) is an Anglo-Australian Catholic female, under the age of twenty, and in her first year at university. She was a full-time Communications and Media Studies major, spoke only English, and lived locally in her family home.

*Thuy.* Thuy (pseudonym) is a Vietnamese female who, like Hayley, was under twenty and in her first year at university. She was a full-time Marketing and the Media major, spoke English and Vietnamese; English was her second language. Thuy lived off campus in a house shared with other international students and young professionals.

#### **Data Collection**

The data that informs this paper comes mainly from two semi-structured interviews with the pair. The broader study, from which this dyad emerged, mapped students’ orientations to and experiences of intercultural interactions during their first year at university. Interviews complemented survey data collected at the beginning and at the end of the year. This pair was identified retrospectively during the data analysis phase of the broader project.

The interviews were conducted in a conversational style and the questions employed flexibly in response to student leads and the particular context of the interview (Patton, 2002). The interviewer was a youthful, Caucasian-Australian female researcher with extensive experience interacting with first year students from diverse backgrounds. She occasionally mentioned her interest in positive intercultural interactions. It is recognised that interview data is always ‘partial’, providing a limited, because partially ‘scripted’, insight into a socially constructed phenomenon (Silverman, 2005; Griffin, 2007). However, adopting a narrative model of inquiry focuses on the complexity of *experience* as it is recounted in

partial, subjective and socially influenced ‘stories’ (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). In this case the semi-structured interview data faced the additional challenge of reflecting the dyad – as opposed to the individual actors in isolation. In the larger research project, as well as the usual practice of individual interviews, participants were given the option of being interviewed with a friend to make the interview experience as comfortable as possible and encourage participation. In this case, the dyad had opted to be interviewed together on both occasions. This choice provided unique interactional data, which was part of this case study’s significance; however, it also meant that the individual actors provided narratives that they felt comfortable revealing to both their peer and the interviewer, leading to a possible double ‘social desirability’ effect. Following a narrative inquiry model, the ‘stories’ revealed in the interviews were considered in light of the pair’s individual survey data (collected as part of the broader study). This provided greater scope for context sensitivity in terms of continuity and situation (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 50). No significant discrepancies in values, attitudes, previous experience or intercultural confidence were found in these ‘individual’ data sources. Finally, institutional enrolment data was consulted to help predict opportunities for shared learning experiences in the future. The surveys and enrolment records thus provided secondary support to – and context sensitivity for - the primary data sources: the interviews.

### ***Interview One***

The first interview was conducted in the third week of the students’ first semester at university. It was designed to elicit information regarding students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds, experience and expectations regarding group work at university, information about peer groups and social patterns, and attitudes toward diversity on campus. Students were also asked to reflect on their cultural identity, the importance they ascribed to this, and whether and how their identity might change according to different contexts. Questions exploring intercultural interactions invited students to identify and recount processes and factors that enabled them. Students were also encouraged to recount emotional responses to intercultural interactions.

### ***Interview Two***

The second interview was conducted just over half way through semester two. Interviews were designed to elicit whether and/or how experiences on a diverse campus had altered attitudes towards intercultural communication and also whether this experience had had an impact on the participants’ perceptions of their own and others’ cultural identities.

### **Data Analysis**

The interpretive framework of the analysis focussed on broad cultural, institutional and social structures evidenced in the narratives (Bold, 2012; Engeström, 2001). Recognising situation and context assisted with understanding how students made sense of their experience and realities, and how they constructed meaning inside and outside of their relationship (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Wetherell, 1998). This approach provided scope for assessing the affordances and constraints of the relationship in terms of both individual agency and the broader institutional influences.

Narrative analysis was also applied to explore the ways in which the relationship developed over time and in various contexts. Narrative analysis is interested in the structure of narratives as it ‘takes as its object of investigation the story itself’ (Riessman, 1993, p.1). In the interview context, interviewer dialogue, field notes and interactions were analysed as part

of the story of the dyad's development. (Candinin and Connolly, 2000). The narratives that revealed the relationship between Thuy and Hayley provided clues as to how the interactants 'understood each other, developed shared meaning and made sense of their developing relationship' (Bold, 2012, p.27).

The narrative of the pair's relationship was examined on two levels. The first analysis was conducted at the micro-level, where transcriptions of dyad and interviewer dialogue constituted narratives of the developing relationship at two distinct points in time. The second layer of analysis involved collating and comparing interview, survey and institutional data for the dyad in its first year. Particular focus was placed on the details Hayley and Thuy used to explain why things happened and how they co-constructed the story of their relationship (Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1993). The ways in which the particular social process of interest (intercultural interaction) was interpreted through its place in their narratives was thus the focus.

In accordance with the research aim to track the development and evolution of the relationship, the analysis focused on five sequential time periods: *Before university*, where students' individual histories prior to their meeting were examined to set the context within which the relationship emerged; *First contact*, which considered the factors involved in the interactants' initial meeting and shifted focus away from the individuals towards the dyad as the unit of analysis; *Emerging connectedness*, which explored the dynamic of the relationship, as described in the first semi-structured interview; *Evolution of the relationship*, which compared data collected in the first and second interviews, mapping changes in context and motivation as they unfolded over time; and finally, *Future possibilities* considered factors that may facilitate and/or hinder the continuation of the relationship.

## **RESULTS**

### **Before University: Inhibiting and Enabling Factors**

Multiple data sources, including institutional records and information disclosed during the first interview were used to establish the extent to which Hayley and Thuy displayed characteristics of groups of students which the literature suggests are unlikely to engage in intercultural interaction (Dunne, 2009; Harrison and Peacock, 2010; Kimmel and Volet, 2012a; Peacock and Harrison, 2009; Summers and Volet, 2008).

#### ***Factors Inhibiting Intercultural Interaction***

Demographic data and self-defined cultural identity indicated Hayley and Thuy would be unlikely to form an ongoing relationship at university. Hayley defined her cultural identity as 'Australian', and came from a predominantly mono-cultural Anglo-European background, whereas Thuy self-identified as Asian: 'like Chinese and Vietnamese at the same time', 'looked Asian'; had strongly accented spoken English, and frequently used grammatically incorrect phrasing, such as 'my grandparents came from Chinese'.

Additional factors mitigating against intercultural interaction were evident in the students' accounts of their living arrangements, part time work status and financial obligations. Hayley lived with her family, worked in a supermarket and was not expected to contribute to rent or household expenses. Thuy's parents lived in Vietnam; she had to budget to pay for her rent, bills, food, and university fees; and she did not have a part time job for fear it would interfere with her studies.

#### ***Factors Enabling Interaction***

On the other hand, a number of factors in the students' histories were positive indicators for future intercultural interaction. Both students reported having had extensive experience with intercultural interactions within their family, socially and at school: Hayley spoke of an intimate relationship with her Italian grandparents and of a close Malaysian friend; while Thuy noted that her grandmother was Chinese and she had attended 'international' schools since her third year of primary school.

In sum, Hayley and Thuy's respective demography and history were representative of the groups identified in the literature (e.g. Summers and Volet, 2008) as unlikely to mix with one another. One element, however, differentiated Hayley from the typical 'local' student: her experience of meaningful intercultural interactions at home and at school. In addition Thuy, who had experience of mixing across cultures as part of her upbringing and earlier education, was also positively oriented to such engagement.

### **First Contact: The 'Leftovers'**

Information about first contact comes from Hayley and Thuy's first interview.

This account illustrates the emotional experience created when students who do not know one another are instructed to form groups. The students met when their tutor required self-selected discussion groups. Both students indicated that they felt awkward and embarrassed in this situation:

Hayley:           No one knew anyone and we were just like, 'Oh my God'.

Hayley recalled that the people sitting near Thuy moved, leaving her alone. Eventually the students paired up, on Hayley's instigation. Forming groups as a result of being the 'leftovers' in class has been identified as a catalyst for intercultural interactions in a university context. This case study is unusual in that this first contact was extended to subsequent academic and social activities.

Aside from the students' emphasis on the awkwardness they felt in being the 'last to be picked', previous experience may have influenced the strength of the bond formed between them in that first meeting. Thuy recounted an earlier tutorial where she had felt rejected by other students when her attempts to initiate contact failed to elicit any response.

This account is consistent with the literature reporting that first contact of an intercultural nature happens largely by chance (Colvin, Volet and Fozdar, in press; Harrison and Peacock, 2010; Volet and Ang, 1998). In this case, there was a lack of institutional affordances facilitating first contact. The students had been allocated to tutorials at random and the tutor's instruction to form self-selected smaller discussion groups suggests that there was no strategic plan to encourage diverse cultural-educational experiences in the class. In this situation, the institutional context could have provided opportunities for targeted socializing, which is vital for intercultural friendship development (Sias et al., 2008).

In this instance, personal agency to initiate intercultural contact was not activated until Hayley and Thuy were forced to respond to the tutor's instruction to form a group. Once the dialogue was instigated, the potential for a future relationship may have been realised due to the students' recognition of a shared desire to avoid being 'leftovers' again. In other words, the shared experience of social exclusion may have prompted this dyad to strengthen the bonds created in their first contact – despite apparent differences in background and history – to ensure that, in this tutorial at least, they would not be left out again.

## The First Three Weeks: Relational Development and Emerging Connectedness

Both what the students said and the interviewer's observations of body language and intonation were used to analyse the pairs' early relationship development. The aim was to identify markers of connection that may explain how and why the relationship was developing.

Students' accounts suggest that the institutional context indirectly enabled intercultural relational development by providing opportunities for repeated contact in regular shared tutorials and lectures. However, individual agency played a comparatively more significant role. This was evident in the students' choice to participate in a group assessment and the research interview together. Since only a few students volunteered for interviews with a peer, this is noteworthy. The interview, and the group assessment to a lesser extent, allowed the sort of structure-based communicative activity (Levinson, 1979) likely to promote a better understanding of each member's culture-based attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, and interactional goals (Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, 2009). Working together towards a class project – where their grades were mutually dependent – provided the dyad with a shared goal and an institutional impetus for extended contact (Allport, 1954). However, there was no evidence to suggest that the assessment task was designed to elicit 'meaningful exchange of cultural information' (Leask, 2009, p. 211). The interviews, on the other hand, encouraged conversations that allowed the interactants to share personal stories with one another, to explore similarities and differences and to examine their own and others' in-groups (Lee, 2006; Pettigrew, 1998). But it was the students' agency that put them together within these structures.

With regard to social interactions extending out to informal settings, there was no evidence this had developed yet, but Thuy expressed a desire for such interaction. Her first plan engaged Hayley's interest in travelling to envision the pair travelling together:

- Hayley            I want to travel when I finish university so if I like, know sort of different people, different places I can travel and come see them...
- Thuy              Hey, we could go together.
- Hayley:                (laughs)
- Thuy:                ...travelling girl[s], you know? (laughs)
- Hayley:                (laughs)

The spontaneous shared laughter in this exchange can be interpreted in a number of ways. It could be a sign that the students were building affective ties (Pettigrew, 1998) and a positive interpersonal connection through humour (Jefferson, 1979; Volet and Ang, 1998), as the interviewer's observation of non-verbal cues, such as maintaining eye-contact, suggests. In this interpretation Hayley's laughter conveys a positive reception of Thuy's plans for future togetherness off campus. However, given the lack of explicit verbal affirmation, it is possible to interpret Hayley's laughter as a response to cover the awkwardness of not wanting to assent to the notion of travelling together, but not wanting to hurt her friend's feelings by saying this.

The second indication that Thuy was keen to socialise with Hayley was evidenced in an exchange after the formal interview when Thuy asked Hayley, 'so what are you doing



after this?'. From the interviewer's perspective, Thuy's agency drove much of the dyad's emerging relationship by creating opportunities for future togetherness.

Further evidence that the pair's early relationship was built around personal agency, rather than institutional affordances, was found in a shared desire for social inclusion:

Interviewer: What will make university this year a rewarding experience for you?

Hayley: Just meeting like, all these different people and having more friends...

Thuy: ...So it's kind of like I want to make this year the first years and to use that [to] make friends together can learn about uni life and get used to it

In this exchange, it becomes apparent that Thuy and Hayley's objectives to meet people and make friends in their first year at university were aligned. It also appeared that after their initial contact, they realised that they could fulfil each other's desire for social inclusion.

As well as shared laughter and informal future plans, an example of the pair's developing friendship was evidenced in their reflexive narratives about cultural difference. When asked to comment on possible challenges in a multicultural campus environment, both demonstrated that they were aware of existing prejudices between local and international student groups, and through personal historical accounts they specified that they did not share such prejudices. Interestingly, Thuy was adamant she would overcome these:

Thuy: ...when you try to mix with them [local students] they try to close the door. So you want to open the door but they lock the door

Hayley: Yeah

Thuy: So that's kind of a challenging: to open the door again.

Hayley: Yeah

Thuy: I'll break it!

Thuy's bold statement suggests she was determined to actively pursue interactions with local students. This not only provided evidence of intercultural interest, but it offered reassurance to Hayley that she would be willing to fight for a friendship like theirs. Hayley's positive affirmations in response acted to emphasise her 'similarity' in attitudes and values to Thuy, which she later reinforced in her own narrative of defiance for the sake of intercultural interaction:

Hayley: One of my friends from high school is Malaysian and I was walking around with her and then she saw a group of friends she knew and most of them were um, I think Japanese or Chinese or something, and ... I felt really out of place [and] I could see other people looking like, "that's sort of weird". So ... I just like ignore[d] what other people thought and kept walking with them...

Hayley's decision to 'keep walking' indicated that like Thuy, she was prepared to stand up to what others might think to pursue an intercultural friendship opportunity. This example aligns with factors that have been documented as influencing intercultural friendship development: prior experience of intercultural interaction, and the ability to manage intercultural conflict (Lee 2006; Sias et al. 2008; Spencer-Oatey and Franklin 2009).

In sum, the students' apparent awareness of norms against intercultural relationships on campus underscores the significant role that their own agency, coupled with shared positive attitudes towards intercultural friendships, played in the dyad's early development – their relationship was constructed as developing despite, and occasionally in resistance to, a recognised norm of segregation. It appears that at this early stage, the dyad's ability to fulfil the individual members' desires for social inclusion and their shared interest in exploring intercultural relationships superseded possible limitations derived from differing cultural backgrounds. As in the dyad's initial contact, institutional factors played a secondary role in the facilitation of the relationship in that they placed the students in the same proximity and offered opportunities for the students to work together. However individual agency was activated in order for opportunities to form a relationship to be taken up.

### **Evolution of the Relationship: Expansion and Restriction**

The primary data source for tracking the evolution of the relationship was the second interview. This data, including what the students said plus interviewer observations, was compared with analysis of the first interview to track the relationship's development in relation to institutional parameters, social activities and individual agency, in order to establish how constraints and affordances operated both on and off campus, in formal and informal settings (Kimmel and Volet, 2012a).

#### ***On Campus***

Evidence of a sustained intercultural connection between Thuy and Hayley was found six months after initial contact, when they chose to be interviewed together again. Furthermore, their connection was evidenced through shared jokes, use of the 'we' pronoun, spontaneous contributions to each other's narratives and instances of speaking in unison during the interview. When asked with whom they now socialised on campus, Thuy's statement that 'all of her friends are my friends also' was a further indicator that the on-campus relationship had sustained a change of classes and semesters and had expanded to a shared friendship-group. The longevity of the dyad stood in contrast with previously identified patterns of international-local relational development. However, there was an apparent change in the individuals' dominant motivations with regards to university study: while Hayley remained focused on social relationships; Thuy's dialogue suggested that academic achievement had replaced a desire for social inclusion as her primary goal at university. When asked about their first semester, Hayley focused on her friendships, first; and academic work, second:

Hayley: Yeah, I made heaps of friends ... and the work was a bit harder than I thought.

Thuy's response did not mention social relationships, and focused instead on how difficult she had found her academic subjects and that she had to work very hard to get an 'okay' mark.

While their dominant motivations had diverged, the students' goals appeared complementary in the context of the dyad. The students' friendship was maintained as they participated in activities that offered positive reinforcement and assistance to one another. Hayley had helped Thuy to understand her subjects:

Thuy: I'm struggling... So I always have to lean on her (Hayley) ... [I say to Hayley], tell me what does this really mean?

And Thuy provided reciprocal social support for Hayley in return:

- Hayley: I rely on other people a lot... I would consider myself to be a nice person (laughs self-consciously)
- Thuy: (over talking) You *are!*

The dialogue demonstrates the dyad's ability to support the interactants' respective motivations. Thuy offered positive reinforcement to reduce Hayley's social insecurity, while Hayley actively assisted Thuy with her studies. Thus although different, their goals remained compatible within the context of their relationship.

While both students enjoyed friendships with people from diverse backgrounds, Hayley was the only 'Australian' student on or off campus that Thuy now referred to. When Hayley and Thuy socialised together on campus, their narratives suggested that Hayley joined Thuy's culturally diverse friendship group, but there was no evidence that Thuy or Hayley socialised with other 'Australian' friends on campus (outside of a classroom context). The bravado Thuy displayed in her desire to 'break through' the barriers erected by local students was no longer apparent. This suggested that the dyad continued to represent an exceptional relationship, for Thuy in particular, in that it included a monolingual local student. In terms of ICC more generally, Hayley maintained a perspective in line with the original contact hypothesis where common interests and a sense of 'sameness' motivated her interactions with diverse friends:

- I: You've got diverse friends on campus, both of you, does that affect the kind of things that you do together?
- Hayley: I don't reckon. Like I'd do the same with I dunno, my family even, or just friends that are Australian...

Thuy, on the other hand, articulated her feelings about her diverse friendship group in comparison to interactions with fellow nationals. In the second interview she demonstrated self-awareness, willingness to change her behaviour to ensure group harmony and reappraisal of her in-group's behaviour, consistent with Pettigrew's longitudinal contact studies (1998):

- Thuy: ...you have to be careful like, if like, people don't like to talk about that or [have a] different idea ... So now I like, I learn to be more careful and you learn like there's different style when you talk with like, different friends

Thuy went as far as to indicate that she preferred interacting with diverse peers, rather than her fellow nationals, thus her perspective had evolved from a keen interest in other cultures, to a preference for diverse friendships:

- Thuy: But sometime if you interact with people from your own culture ... like, they make fun. Like, really harsh, like sometime make you feel [bad] or something like that... Because they think like we are from one culture, we understand each other so we can say whatever we wanna say... But if you in different group, for example, like me and Hayley, it's like, when we want to see each other, we just say nice thing.

Hayley articulated her developing intercultural communication competency, in response to interviewer questioning as to how she rated her intercultural confidence, compared to interview one:

- Hayley: I'm more likely to go up to someone from a different culture now than I would have been say, early last semester or even in the last few years.

Although the interview data did not provide information about how this actually occurs in practice, both of the respondents' narratives regarding the negotiation of diverse friendship groups emphasised respect for difference and sensitivity to diverse perspectives and reactions.

### *Off Campus*

In keeping with more traditional patterns described in the literature, the participants' relationship off campus had not evolved since the first interview.

Although a positive and supportive rapport had been built between the students, their friendship still did not feature in their narratives of off-campus activities. When asked what they did together Hayley stated:

Hayley: Well on campus we'll either like study in the library together or have lunch or even just sit on [a campus courtyard] and talk... I haven't been out with Thuy out of like, uni...

Thuy: I couldn't go with her because I'm living in the library

Thuy indicated that off campus she found comfort and support in the company of other international students:

Thuy: It's really important for international students because when... you just say farewell to your family in Vietnam... it's SO bad. But then they make you in the situation where [you] cannot cry, cannot be sad; "so now you with us [other international students]; not with family. Now you with us"

Thuy described off-campus friendships with international students as being 'family-like'. She recounted Saudi, Japanese, Malay and Chinese friends in intimate domestic situations, sharing food, shopping for clothes and playing cards. Thuy's off campus social group was consistent with studies that show international students from diverse backgrounds form close and supportive friendships with other international students, despite cultural and linguistic differences (Montgomery and McDowell, 2009).

Hayley also spoke of an intercultural friendship that was significant both on and off campus. She indicated that she spent a lot of time with her 'best friend' from Africa. A notable difference between Hayley's 'best' friend and Thuy was revealed through Hayley's explanation that her 'African' friend had been living in Australia for the past five years and shared a similar off-campus domestic arrangement to Hayley, as she also lived with her parents. Also, the fact that she had been in the country for five years meant that she was likely to have permanent residence in Australia, and thus be a 'local' student from an institutional and personal point of view. Hence, while Thuy and Hayley's off-campus interactions were intercultural as far as ethnicity and nationality were concerned, supporting their apparent confidence in intercultural relationships, they appeared to be divided by local and international status with the differing financial expectations, domestic living arrangements, and parental proximity often experienced by their respective student cohorts.

A significant factor in the evolution of the relationship as a whole was that it appeared to be limited by clear spatial boundaries. The dyad's development thrived on campus due to a shared friendship group, and complementary goals for university. In the first interview agency was an explicit determining factor, as the participants consciously and actively pursued their unusual relationship. By the second interview, agency operated on a more

implicit level, where evidence that the individuals used their friendship to fulfill respective academic and social needs was embedded within narratives, rather than explicit statements.

While the interactants shared both informal and formal interactions on the university grounds, off campus their relationship reflected general findings in the literature (e.g. Campbell, 2012; Kimmel and Volet, 2012b; Sweeney, Weaven, and Herington et al, 2008) in that they did not interact in a domestic setting, nor take their social and academic associations off the campus grounds. Both students maintained culturally diverse relationships with other students off campus, but these interactions were divided along 'international' and 'local' lines.

### **Future Possibilities for the Relationship**

The students' demographic characteristics, interview data, and university records were examined in light of recent literature, to speculate on the possible future trajectory of the friendship.

#### ***Cessation of the Relationship***

Given the open and friendly approach of both interactants and their positive rapport, it is unlikely that the pair would part due to an explicit disagreement. There are, however, institutional factors that may lead to the pair 'drifting apart' as their degrees progress into their second and third years.

University enrollment data indicated that Hayley and Thuy would not share any classes in their second year. This raises questions about the dyad's future because Hayley may not be able to provide Thuy with direct academic support. If Thuy's dominant motivation at university remains academic success, then there is a chance that Thuy's focus on her relationship with Hayley will wane. Furthermore, the students' differing timetables might mean that breaks between classes will be at different times – limiting opportunity for informal social interactions. If Thuy is not available to offer social support to Hayley in these informal contexts, Thuy may no longer fulfill Hayley's need for social acceptance. Additionally, if one of the students were to withdraw from university, it is unlikely the relationship would continue, because no precedent has been set for interactions off the campus grounds.

#### ***Continuation of the Relationship***

Given the identification of multiple factors that have been linked to positive and meaningful relationship development in both monocultural and intercultural dyads, it appears that a likely scenario for this dyad is that their friendship will continue for as long as they are studying at the same university. In the two interviews the dyad displayed similar discourse patterns (speaking in unison) and a shared mindset regarding the pursuit of intercultural interactions. They frequently offered positive reinforcement and provided assistance to one another; and the development of a shared on-campus in-group suggests that, on the university grounds at least, they were developing sub-cultural similarity and a shared history (Lee, 2006; Volet and Ang, 1998). Additionally, the activities that contextualized the relationship aligned with facets of Lee's intercultural friendship typology in that the dyad shared personal stories and perspectives; identified and highlighted their similarities with regards to intercultural interaction, on-campus social activities, assignment tasks, and studies; and also demonstrated active interest in their respective individual and cultural differences (p.3). The dyad appeared to have established mutually beneficial roles: Hayley offered academic assistance and Thuy, social inclusion; but these do not fully attest to the complexity of their connection. The self-disclosure evident in intimate narratives and the sharing of perspectives observed in the research interview context may also have enabled the dyad to reach a level of 'closeness' that

means extended contact was no longer needed to maintain their bond (Hays, 1989; Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, 2009). The establishment of a shared friendship group on campus is particularly pertinent as it means that Hayley and Thuy no longer need to rely directly on each other to facilitate interaction. Open and complementary approaches to interpersonal intercultural interactions and a defiant stance to prejudicial attitudes in the broader university community also set the participants in good stead to remain friends.

In sum, there were strong indicators that the pair would continue their relationship on the campus grounds because, as well as having displayed a consistently friendly and positive rapport and interest in intercultural interaction, they had set factors in place that are associated with long-term interpersonal connections in the literature (e.g. Ujitani and Volet, 2008; Sias and Cahill, 1998), such as: getting to know one another on an intimate level; developing a mutual friendship group; exploring cultural similarities and differences; and having comprehensive and continuous experiences in intercultural relationships.

Major limitations of this study, however, were the lack of observation data beyond the interview setting and the reliance on interview data collected during students' first year of study. This means that analysis of the dyad's future relationship could only be based on speculation.

## CONCLUSION

This case study has demonstrated that despite evidence of 'passive xenophobia', anxiety, and cultural homophily characteristic of intercultural interactions on campus (Dunne, 2009; Harrison and Peacock, 2010; Kimmel and Volet, 2012a; Peacock and Harrison, 2009); positive relationships that provide students with intercultural learning, and academic, emotional and behavioural support do occur (Gudykunst and Hammer, 1987; Kudo and Simkin, 2003; Ying and Liese, 1994). Most importantly a greater level of *intercultural communication competency* may result – in our case study the students demonstrated respect, openness and empathy towards cultural difference (Parsons, 2010; Knight and de Wit, 1995) and despite quite different cultural backgrounds, they were able to think and communicate in similar ways, even displaying "cultural-emotional connectedness" (Volet and Ang, 1998, p.25). Indicators suggest that the individuals entered the relationship with intercultural experience, including within their own family. Throughout the interviews they displayed evidence of listening attentively to one another, self-reflexive awareness of their own cultural group and a keenness to interact with cultural others. This provided further evidence of evolving intercultural competency that aligns with Deardorff's seminal definition of it as the 'ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes' (2006, p.248). This case study also provided evidence to support literature indicating that friendship development is influenced by both personal (attitudes, values and interests) and contextual (physical proximity, frequency of exposure) factors (Griffin and Sparks, 1990; Sias and Cahill, 1998). And as in other studies, socialising and prior intercultural experience (Sias et al., 2008) were found to be important. The relationship developed and drew strength from the shared provision of assistance, of self-disclosure, of networking to produce a shared friendship net, and of recognition of similarities and differences (Lee, 2006).

The case study has also demonstrated a number of specific facilitators of interaction. First, individual agency was the primary impetus for the relationship (although structural affordances were required in the first instance), together with earlier positive experiences of intercultural interaction. Second, the initial catalyst was students being forced together for small group work by being 'leftovers', coupled with aligned desires for social inclusion, creating the opportunity for a sustained relationship and the impetus to take it up. Third, signs of intercultural relationship development were consistent over time; however, implicit 'rules'

for social interaction appeared that situated the relationship in a shared friendship group on campus governed by clear spatial and institutional boundaries. With personal agency driving the intercultural dyad's development, this study suggests that the lack of strategic institutional engagement was a potential inhibitor for further relationship development on campus.

Sharing lectures and classes, together with shared curriculum content, was vital for both initial contact and the maintenance of interaction opportunities for the dyad described. Therefore, in light of evidence that a sense of cohort encourages stronger bonds between classmates (Kimmel and Volet, 2012b), institutions with a view to internationalization should examine how degree-long shared classes provide opportunities for effective intercultural engagement. This may be especially relevant when considering formal curriculum design to enable students to meet intercultural learning objectives and thus encourage positive intercultural interactions, in the manner outlined by Leask, (2009, p. 212).

Furthermore, the case study supports the provision of formal and informal intercultural learning opportunities for students, who may have limited intercultural experience, and strategically designed intercultural pairs, groups, discussions, and assessments on diverse campuses (Marginson and Sawir, 2011; Leask, 2009; Ward, 2006), to counter homophilic tendencies and ensure intercultural communication opportunities are not left to 'chance'. Longer-term tutorial groups might also foster a greater number of intercultural relationships, but this requires further research to assess its validity. A methodologically interesting result of the research is that the themes explored in the interview experiences may have contributed to the dyad's friendship development. It could be argued that the interviewer role fulfilled the authority support condition of the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) by offering positive reinforcement for the dyad's discussions of intercultural communication and by posing questions that encouraged the students to share their cultural perspectives and feelings about difference and diversity, and each other. Having an 'authority figure', who was linked to the university, encouraging reflection on intercultural interaction may have co-created a narrative for the dyad that supported their relationship and encouraged their interest in diversity. There may be a lesson in this for the design of curricula. Similar themes and scope for sharing perspectives might inform classroom practices, assessment activities and/or tutor discourse and thus create an environment of 'authority support' for intercultural communication competency development within the university context. This proposal is consistent with the literature fostering the cultural dimensions of internationalised universities (e.g. Knight and de Wit, 1995; Leask, 2009; Marginson and Sawir, 2011; Volet and Jones, in press).

Likewise, the question of the extent to which, and the mechanism by which, intercultural relationships can be extended from on-campus friendship to other contexts is one that deserves further attention, particularly in increasingly diverse workplaces where the ability to engage across cultures is imperative. If one of the goals of internationalization is the development of intercultural relationships that persist beyond the campus spatially and temporally, then there is a role for institutional leadership in providing opportunities for such relationships to be extended, through, for example, partnered work experience, volunteering or internship programs, for work relevant opportunities, and for more social events on campus that encourage intercultural interactions outside of classroom settings. As a result, examples of positive intercultural student relationships, such as that of the dyad described above, would become less 'unique' both within and beyond the university campus.

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