

**University students' intercultural interactions and attitudes: A person-in-multiple-
contexts perspective**

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

2010

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

This research explores the significance of context in university students' experiences of intercultural interactions on- and off-campus, and attitudes towards culturally mixed learning activities. An original aspect is the adoption of a multi-layered and multiple context approach grounded in a "person-in-context" perspective (Volet, 2001; Pintrich, 2000). Inspired by central tenets from ecological psychology and activity theory, the research furthermore acknowledges the interdependence between individuals and their environment (e.g., Gibson, 1979/1986; Greeno, 1998). It construes individuals as located within multiple activity systems (Engeström, 2001) between which they move and participate, and which co-shape their intercultural interactions and attitudes.

The empirical component of the research emerged from the overwhelming evidence of minimal interactions and poor attitudes towards mixing between culturally diverse peers at universities in English-speaking countries. A review of the extant literature, however, revealed major limitations in the research designs and methodologies. Investigations of students' intercultural experiences and perceptions of culturally mixed group learning activities typically used only one sample from a single context, a single point of data collection, and self-report data, either a questionnaire or interview. On the assumption that students participate simultaneously in multiple social contexts, it was argued that such methodologies have limited potential to reveal the complex, interdependent, and context-sensitive nature of intercultural experiences and attitudes. A particular aim of the present research was to address the lack of systematic investigations of the social context to explain paucity of intercultural interactions and poor attitudes to mixing on multicultural campuses. This implied conceptualising intercultural experiences and interactions as multi-dimensional

and contextualised, adopting multi-layered and multiple context research designs, and carrying out empirical studies that combined quantitative methodologies for the identification of meaningful patterns, and qualitative methodologies for gaining experiential insight into these complex, social phenomena.

The findings revealed significant and powerful contextual affordances and constraints at multiple levels of the immediate (learning) environment for students' experiences of culturally diverse group work and interactions. Contingent to a combination of contextual elements, students' intercultural experiences were perceived and emerged differently within and across distinct social contexts. More specifically, cohort characteristics, language competency and level of academic standard were identified as salient facilitating or inhibiting factors for positive peer interactions and group management. One unexpected finding was that the culturally similar and close peer group seemed to represent an important social context that played a vital role in students' openness and willingness to engage in interactions with peers from different backgrounds. The emotional risk of peer group disapproval when stepping out of the in-group to interact with 'others' was linked to fear of jeopardizing existing group memberships. These issues have been overlooked in prior research on intercultural interactions and have potential for contributing to a better understanding of the multi-faceted and interdependent nature of intercultural activities.

The research concludes by stressing the crucial role of the social context in co-shaping students' intercultural experiences, and development of cognitions and attitudes. It is argued that the identification of patterns in students' attitudes and experiences of interactions with peers from different cultural-educational backgrounds has to be interpreted in relation to the

immediate, social environment, and the specific contextual affordances and constraints within which interactions occur. In that regard, stable and narrow conceptualisations of the construct of intercultural interactions appear incompatible with the complex, interdependent and situation-specific nature of students' intercultural activities on multicultural campuses.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When about 3.5 years ago I embarked on the flight to Australia to commence with this PhD I certainly had no idea of what life had in store for me in the coming years. It truly was an exciting and unforgettable experience.

This is the occasion to thank all of you who made this endeavour possible – the ones welcoming me in Australia and the ones left behind in Germany.

I would like to express my sincere appreciation and deepest gratitude to Professor Simone Volet for all her guidance, support and immeasurable patience during these years. Throughout innumerable discussions and meetings I have learned far more than I could ever put in words – as an academic and as a person. Her unconditional support, capturing enthusiasm, expertise and seemingly endless trust in my ability to deal with arising challenges encouraged and motivated me to pursue with this project when personal, unexpected complications emerged and fuelled my desire to continue with work in this field in general. Working with her was an absolute pleasure.

I am also truly indebted to my co-supervisor Dr. Caroline Mansfield for her ongoing support, kind encouragement and invaluable feedback on this research.

My cordial thanks additionally goes to Professor Marold Wosnitza for asking important, helpful questions and for providing advice.

Furthermore, I would like to thank Joanne Thurman and Mark Summers who generously took the time for careful and thorough proof-reading of some of the manuscripts.

Enormous thanks also goes to the administrative staff from the ERAP office (particularly Angelina Chillino and Refat Murshed) as well as Bronwyn Prothero and Alison Wells from the Dean's office who provided me with a supportive work environment.

To my fellow students Becky Saunders, Penelope Coutas and Tracy Jones: thank you for creating such an open and comfortable work atmosphere. I would not want to miss the countless moments of lively discussions, shared laughter and occasional despair. You definitely made my time at Murdoch more sociable and, hence, my work even more enjoyable.

Of course, I am especially grateful to my partner, Dr. Alexander K. Zschocke, who always supported me and my work and patiently accepted my disappearance to the other side of the globe for extended periods of time.

Moreover, I would like to thank all the participants who willingly supported this research.

I wish you all the very best.

Finally, it is important to note that this research would not have been possible without the Endeavour International Postgraduate Research Studentship (EIPRS) funded by the Commonwealth Government and Murdoch University as well as the financial support from the Australian Research Council's Discovery Projects funding scheme (project numbers DP066693 and DP0986901).

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LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

STUDY 1

Kimmel, K., & Volet, S. (in press). Significance of context in university students' (meta)cognitions related to group work: A multi-layered, multi-dimensional and cultural approach. *Learning and Instruction*. doi:10.1016/j.learninstruc.2009.05.004.

STUDY 2

Kimmel, K., & Volet, S. (in press). University students' perceptions of and attitudes towards culturally diverse group work: Does context matter? *Journal of Studies in International Education*. doi:10.1177/1028315310373833.

STUDY 3

Kimmel, K., & Volet, S. (submitted). Intercultural interactions at university: New insights from an activity theory and multiple contexts perspective. Submitted 5/2010 to the *British Educational Research Journal*.

REVIEW CHAPTER

Kimmel, K., & Volet, S. (2010). Culture in motivation research: A challenging and enriching contribution. In P. Peterson, E. Baker & B. McGaw (Eds.), *International Encyclopedia of Education* (Vol. 6, pp. 576-584). Oxford: Elsevier.