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Intercultural relationship development at university: A systematic literature review from an ecological and person-in-context perspective

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Abstract (maximum 150 words):

For more than four decades, issues pertaining to the development of intercultural relationships between international and domestic students in university settings have received scholarly attention. However, there appears to be lack of research exploring the extent to, and the manner in which the individual and environmental dimensions interact with one another to co-create this development. This review addresses this gap by scrutinising English-language refereed journal articles from an ecological and person-in-context perspective. The review, involving a constructionist thematic analysis of systematically searched and screened papers, identified the few empirical studies from that perspective, the vague operationalisation of intercultural relationship development, and the methodological limitations of the empirical work. It also generated content-related themes of the individual–environmental interactions in the development of intercultural relationships. The review concludes by suggesting multiple areas of inquiry that warrant further empirical investigations, and by calling for the amplification and refinement of the research methodologies.

Highlights (maximum 85 characters including spaces per bullet point):

- Offers a systematic review on intercultural relationship development at university.
- Develops an ecological and person-in-context framework for the review.
- Reveals the scarcity of relevant empirical studies and methodological limitations.
- Identifies the vague operationalisation of intercultural relationship development.
- Generates themes of individual–environmental interactions in this development.

Keywords (maximum of 5 keywords):

Intercultural interaction
Intercultural relationship development
Ecological framework
A person-in-context perspective
Higher education

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Abstract

For more than four decades, issues pertaining to the development of intercultural relationships between international and domestic students in university settings have received scholarly attention. However, there appears to be lack of research exploring the extent to, and the manner in which the individual and environmental dimensions interact with one another to co-create this development. This review addresses this gap by scrutinising English-language refereed journal articles from an ecological and person-in-context perspective. The review, involving a constructionist thematic analysis of systematically searched and screened papers, identified the few empirical studies from that perspective, the vague operationalisation of intercultural relationship development, and the methodological limitations of the empirical work. It also generated content-related themes of the individual–environmental interactions in the development of intercultural relationships. The review concludes by suggesting multiple areas of inquiry that warrant further empirical investigations, and by calling for the amplification and refinement of the research methodologies.

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1. Introduction

In recent years higher education institutions around the world have espoused, as an educational goal of internationalisation, the value of developing intercultural and global competences in students through education abroad, or on culturally diverse home campus (Knight, 2008). In this context, many studies have stressed the importance of interaction between international and domestic students¹ (hereafter, intercultural interaction), because this is assumed to facilitate positive academic and sociocultural adjustment of international students (Schartner, 2015), and intercultural learning for both groups of students (Jiang, 2008; Jon, 2013). The benefits of intercultural interactions can hypothetically also be considered, if not empirically grounded, from the viewpoint of strengthening diplomatic relations and international friendships, and the integration of international students into a host society as future skilled workers or immigrants.

However, a growing body of literature has persistently shown that, irrespective of host nation, domestic and international students do not interact spontaneously (De Vita, 2002), and any kind of consolidated relationships, such as friendship, is difficult to develop (Gareis, 2012). The domestic–international student divide is widely documented, with evidence of international students cherishing cosmopolitan friendships among themselves (Sovic, 2009), or residing in close-knit conational friendship groups (Brown, 2009). Further, a recent literature review on ‘internationalisation at home’ highlighted a tendency among domestic students to resist intercultural group work and generally avoid contact with international peers (Harrison, 2015). These findings stress the importance of developing coherent institutional policies and strategies that promote intercultural interactions (cf. Kudo, 2016; Leask, 2009). In addition, there is a growing recognition across the higher education sector of the need to conduct studies that explore students’ agency, self-determination, goals and motivation, *in dynamic interactions* with the environment (Volet & Jones, 2012). Such a perspective is considered necessary since studies with a restricted focus on either the individual (psychological) or environmental (educational) dimensions of intercultural interaction, and paying limited attention to the ways in which these two dimensions interact and influence each other, can only lead to a partial understanding of the vexed relationship between domestic and international students.

Accordingly, this review scrutinised academic articles reporting empirical studies that addressed the development of intercultural relationships between international and domestic university students, with a specific focus on the dynamic relations between the individual and environmental dimensions. To acknowledge the inherently interactive nature of intercultural relationship development, this review adopted a conceptual framework grounded in Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1986, 2005) ecological model of human development overlaid with Volet’s (2001) person-in-context perspective. This framework, which is elaborated below, provided a unique conceptual lens through which to explore and examine the extent and manner in which existing empirical studies have examined or interpreted intercultural

¹ Here the distinction between ‘international students’ and ‘domestic students’ is arbitrary and operational. Considering the increasing immigration and intermarriage and, increasing cultural diversity of domestic populations in many countries as a result of ongoing cross-border mobility and hybridisation, it is too naïve to assume the clear-cut distinction between the two student groups and the cultural homogeneity of domestic as well as international students.

relationship development at the dynamic interface (Volet, 2001) of the individual and environmental dimensions of intercultural interactions.

In the last few decades a number of literature reviews related to aspects of intercultural relationship development between international and domestic students have been conducted. These reviews have addressed: international students' adjustment (Church, 1982) and acculturation (Smith & Khawaja, 2011); the adaptation and transformation of students and teachers in cultural transitions (Volet & Jones, 2012); transformational and cosmopolitan learning (Marginson & Sawir, 2011); and internationalisation at home (Harrison, 2015), including the roles of formal and informal curricula to stimulate relations (Leask, 2009). However, to date no systematic literature review of empirical studies has examined intercultural relationship development from a combined ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986, 2005) and person-in-context perspective (Volet, 2001).

Before presenting the conceptual framework and the research questions that guided this systematic literature review, the foci of recent research that explored intercultural interactions, and the limitations of previous empirical work, are examined in turn.

1.1. Foci of recent research

Issues pertaining to intercultural interactions in university settings have received scholarly attention for more than four decades. Recent empirical work falls into two clusters of research each with a distinct focus. The first cluster is concerned with the development of intercultural friendship, with the primary attention concentrating on individuals' dispositions and behaviours. That research is mostly grounded in social psychology and interpersonal communication studies. Many studies have identified the roles of personal (e.g. personality, prior intercultural experience, adjustment stage, age, communication competence, spoken language skills), interpersonal (e.g. self-disclosure, homophily), situational (e.g. propinquity, targeted socialising), and cultural (e.g. cultural similarities and differences) factors influencing intercultural friendship development (e.g. Gareis, 2000; Kudo & Simkin, 2003; Sias et al., 2008). Studies with a stronger theoretical orientation have utilised concepts such as, social exchange (Dunne, 2013), social penetration (Chen & Nakazawa, 2009), identity management (Lee, 2008), cultural identity and dialectics (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013), and communication competence (Gareis, Merkin, & Goldman, 2011) to label and analyse the target phenomena. In many of these studies, the important roles of students' reciprocity in self-disclosure, intergroup attitudes, abilities to coordinate and negotiate culture-bound expectations, and behaviours have been highlighted.

The second cluster of research is concerned with intercultural interactions or contact and is largely informed by perspectives derived from social and educational psychology. Some of this research has focused on the individual's intergroup attitudes and motivations, while other has focused on educational conditions that hinder or facilitate intergroup interactions. For example, some studies exploring students' socio-cognitive appraisal of group assignments have revealed that many domestic and international students find it challenging to mix together due to perceived difficulties concerning communication tinged with intolerance and unacceptance arising from sociocultural differences (Kimmel & Volet, 2012a; Volet & Ang, 1998). Other studies within this cluster have examined the role of students' motivation (Dunne, 2013) and agency (Colvin & Volet, 2014) in the satisfaction of intercultural interactions. Against these studies, practical recommendations, particularly for teaching staff to maximise opportunities for collaborative intercultural learning, have been made (Marginson & Sawir, 2011). Further studies within that cluster (some derived from the contact hypothesis) have pointed to some necessary conditions for reducing prejudice and facilitating intergroup interactions, for example, the equal numbers and status of the interactants, active and conjoint engagement in day-to-day circumstances, pursuit of common goals, prospects of

friendship formation, and institutional support (Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011). A few other studies have assessed the effectiveness of interventions in classroom and non-classroom settings, including joint assignments (Pandit & Alderman, 2004), cross-cultural orientations (McKinlay, Pattison, & Gross, 1996), peer-pairing/tutor systems (Lassegard, 2008), and dormitory interventions (Todd & Nesdale, 1997). Common across all these studies is the emphasis on intercultural interaction or contact.

In addition to these two clusters of research, a few recent empirical studies have provided a few clues about the co-contributing role of the individual and environmental dimensions in intercultural interactions and relationships, by exploring to varying degrees: the roles of institutional affordances and constraints in the development of close intercultural relationship (Bennett, Volet, & Fozdar, 2013); the power relation associated with the knowledge of tacit host institutional rules (Colvin, Fozdar, & Volet, 2015); the hegemony of the English language in interactional settings (Jon, 2012); and the interactions between different situational contexts for intercultural interactions (Kimmel & Volet, 2012a), all issues largely unexplored in earlier research.

What the proceeding highlights is an apparent gap in the research exploring international and domestic students' intercultural interactions with a focus on understanding to what extent, and in what ways the *individual* and *environmental* interact with one another to co-create positive relational outcomes.

1.2. Limitations of previous empirical work

Notwithstanding the gradual expansion of scholarship on the intercultural issue, the extant literature reveals two limitations. First, there is a *vague or loose operationalisation of key concepts* (e.g. intercultural interactions, contact, relations, relationship, friendship). Thus, understandings pertaining to the quality of intercultural relationships can be considered inconsistent or fragmental at best. For example, some studies use different terms interchangeably, or give shallow definitions of relational terms such as, friendship (Sovic, 2009) despite its cross-cultural/linguistic variations in the manifestation of relational expectations, self-disclosure, emotion expression, and nonverbal intimacy (Gareis, 2012). Other studies have limited their focus on the functional and instrumental aspects of interactions (e.g. group-work) (Summers & Volet, 2008), while dialectic theorists, for example, have elaborated on the non-functional and non-instrumental as well as the opposite aspects of friendship (Giddens, 1991; Rawlins, 2009). To date, limited research has paid explicit attention to the development of potentially lasting intercultural relationships that encompasses both the ephemeral and functional nature of contact and interactions (e.g. group work), and the voluntary and evolving nature of socioemotional bonds (e.g. friendship).

The other significant limitation in the literature generally, is the dominance of studies with a narrow focus on the *individual*; thus, the issues of intercultural relationship development have hardly been explored from the perspective of an individual located in a particular environment. While the two main research clusters outlined above have identified evidence of both individual and environmental factors as promoting or inhibiting intercultural interactions and relationship, they invariably imply – though mostly implicitly – that the onus on the development of intercultural relationship is on the individual student, and often more on the international student, who is assumed to have or need to develop motivation and competences for this purpose. Alternatively, the onus is assumed to be on individual teaching staff, who may or may not have addressed the issue of intercultural relationships in their classroom. This focus on the individual, therefore, does little more than neglect the role of environment, particularly the responsibility of universities to advance knowledge and practice in promoting intercultural relationships and internationalising the student experience as an outcome of internationalisation at home or internationalisation of the curriculum (Green & Whitsed,

2015).

Therefore, a systematic examination of how *individual* (e.g. reciprocity, motivation, goals of interaction) and *environmental* (e.g. global student mobility, policies and strategies aiming to promote intercultural interactions, on-campus facilities, curricula) constructs have been examined empirically as interacting with one another, is essential to gaining more nuanced and potentially new understandings of intercultural relationship development, and in turn an empirical basis that could be used to ensure universities are more fertile grounds for intercultural interactions and learning.

1.3. Purpose of the review and research questions

The purpose of this systematic review was to critically analyse from an ecological and person-in-context (EPiC) perspective, the characteristics of empirical studies that have scrutinised the development of intercultural relationships between international and domestic students on university campus. Toward this objective, the following two research questions were generated:

- (1) What individual and environmental dimensions are represented in studies of the development of intercultural relationships, and to what extent and how have the dynamic relations between the two dimensions been investigated?
- (2) What are the main findings of studies that directly addressed the dynamic relations between individual and environmental dimensions in the development of intercultural relationships?

2. Conceptual framework

To enable a systematic analysis of the interactions between individual and environmental dimensions in intercultural relationship development, this review was grounded in a combination of Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986, 2005) ecological model of human development and Volet's (2001) person-in-context model of learning and motivation. Bronfenbrenner's model consists of five systems (i.e. microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem) embedded within each other. The breakdown of environment into multiple systemic levels of possible direct or indirect influence was considered relevant to an exploratory study. This is supported by a major assumption underpinning Bronfenbrenner's model, that each system can directly or indirectly contribute to co-shaping the development of a person nested in these systems. Although Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory does not articulate how each system interacts with the systems it comprises or is nested within, it is argued that it nevertheless represents a useful basis to explore the interplay between a person and their immediate systemic environment during a particular experience, and how other systems that encompass such a situation may co-contribute to the occurrence of the phenomenon under study. Many studies have applied Bronfenbrenner's systemic model to identify the value of conceptualising multiple layers of influence on intercultural conflict (Oetzel, Dhar, & Kirschbaum, 2007), on complex social problems in relation to family (Dorjee, Baig, & Ting-Toomey, 2012), on health (DiClemente, Salazar, Crosby, & Rosenthal, 2005), and on motivation in learning contexts (Gurtner, Monnard, & Genoud, 2001).

To address the specific aim of the present study, we were interested in the ways in which the environment (conceptualised following Bronfenbrenner as a multi-layered model of context) interacts with individuals' 'effectivities' (a term used by Snow (1994) to refer to an individual's attributes, dispositions, abilities and personal resources but also their interactional

experiences). Volet's (2001) cognitive-situative, person-in-context model of learning and motivation addresses such individual–environment interactions by paying close attention to the 'experiential interface' (P. 57), where individuals' effectivities through a process of appraisal are attuned in different forms (i.e. congruence, incongruence, ambivalence, difficulty) to the affordances (a term coined by Gibson (1979) to refer to opportunities for action, perceived or actual, that exist in an environment) and/or constraints within learning and other social contexts. In other words, the experiential interface is where individuals are engaged in a real situation in real time that can be either positive or negative, depending on the extent to and the manner in which their effectivities are perceived to be congruent with the affordances created in their immediate situations. Yet, although the experiential interface captures the now and then of individual–context interactions, broader environment systems also play an important role in framing individuals' effectivities at this interface. Several empirical studies have employed Volet's framework to explore the experiences of, for example, adjunct foreign English-language teachers in Japanese university contexts (Whitsed & Wright, 2011) and medical students in international traineeships (Niemantsverdriet, van der Vleuten, Majoor, & Scherpbier, 2005).

Thus, this review aimed to explore how the empirical literature has examined the interactions between individual and environmental (conceptualised as multi-layered) dimensions in the development of intercultural relationship development. Inspired by Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, we conceptualised a multi-layered conceptual framework for this review, composed of six systems embedded within each other. The individual dimension is represented as a microsystem that captures two levels: personal and interpersonal, and the environmental dimension is represented at four levels: situational (mesosystem), institutional (exosystem), sociocultural (macrosystem) and global (chronosystem). Each level of this multi-layered framework is described in turn.

In terms of the individual dimension,

- The *personal* level refers to a student's *attributes, dispositions, abilities or resources* at a given moment in his/her life (e.g. physical characteristics, gender, motivation, agency, language ability, previous international experience, region/country of origin).
- The *interpersonal* level refers to a student's *experiences* mostly in dyadic settings (e.g. anxiety, uncertainty, subjective cultural differences, language difficulties, cooperation, group identity, verbal and physical abuse, reciprocity, homophily).

In terms of the environmental dimension,

- The *situational* level refers to the *immediate settings* in which a student shares experience with one or more persons, including potential or present relational partners (e.g. curriculum, group work, recreation and leisure activities, proximity, conational and international student communities).
- The *institutional* level refers to the *remote settings* that do not directly involve a student but affects the situation containing the student (e.g. policies, plans, strategies, interventions or pedagogies aiming to promote intercultural interactions, campus size and location).
- The *sociocultural* level refers to the *overarching pattern of interpersonal, situational and institutional dimensions* characteristic of a given society (or local community), culture or ideology (e.g. national culture, national policy of international higher education, indifference of the host community; racial and Islamophobic prejudice).
- The *global* level refers to the *grand-scale phenomena* that cut across national or regional borders (e.g. global student mobility, international tension over Islamic terrorism).

This multi-layered ecological framework, with two individual dimensions and four environmental dimensions was combined with a person-in-context perspective to frame our

analysis of the empirical literature on intercultural relationship development. The person-in-context perspective, as conceptualised by Volet (2001), complements Bronfenbrenner's multi-layered ecological model, by stressing the articulation and reciprocal influences of individual and environmental dimensions to explain real life psycho-social phenomena at the experiential interface, and more generally. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework that guided this systematic review of the literature.

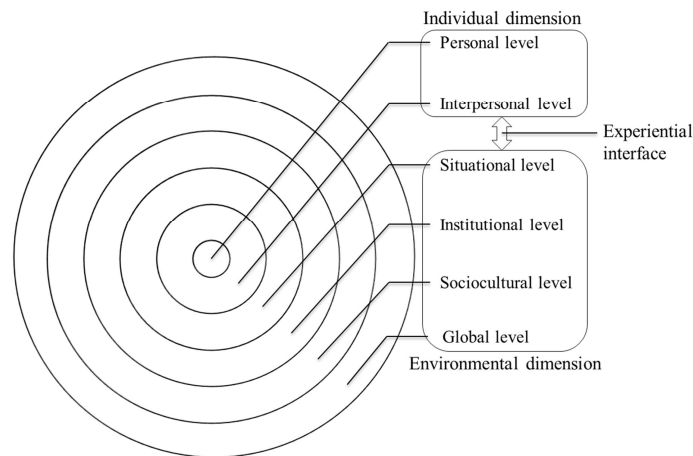


Figure 1
Multi-layered, ecological and person-in-context framework

Specifically, this review aimed at determining which individual (i.e. personal, interpersonal) and environmental (i.e. situational, institutional, sociocultural, global) dimensions are represented in the literature exploring intercultural relationship development, how the interactions of individual and environmental dimensions are conceptualised and empirically examined, and what content-related themes emerge that enrich our understanding of intercultural relationship development.

3. Methodology

3.1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

This review scrutinised English-language refereed journal articles that empirically examined the dynamic relations between individual and environmental dimensions in the development of intercultural relationships between domestic and international students in university settings. Other than the domestic–international distinction, this study did not operationalise any a priori components of ‘intercultural relationship development’ in order to explore the multiple conceptualisations of intercultural relationship in context found in the literature. Furthermore, and consistent with a person-in-context perspective, retained studies had to include at least one individual and one environmental dimension in their attempt to explain intercultural relationship development. Consequently, studies that focused on either individual or environmental dimension were not retained (e.g. Chen & Nakazawa, 2009; Dunne, 2013; Gareis et al., 2011; for individual, Arkoudis et al., 2013; and, Lassegard, 2008, for environmental). Other studies that were not included were those investigating the place of intercultural relationships in general satisfaction and adjustment of international students (e.g. Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011). Finally, studies that only examined relationships

between international students from the same or different countries, or relationships between domestic students were discarded.

To enable the systematic literature search by abstract, a search string of keywords was created. The string, consisting of eight constructs and their synonyms (see Table 1), aimed at identifying empirical studies that had addressed the intersection of three core elements of the current review: (1) intercultural relationship development (operationalised as interculturality, relationship and development); (2) domestic and international university students (operationalised as domestic, international and university students) and (3) individual and environmental dimensions. First, since the operationalisations of the notion of intercultural relationship development are rather vague and diverse in the literature; we broke down this notion into three separate constructs in order to capture various relational connotations (e.g. intercultural friendship development, cross-group relationship formation). In regard to the second core element, caution was necessary to ensure a rigorous search of studies that scrutinised specifically the relationships between domestic and international students. Given many studies have examined 'intercultural' relationships among international students from different countries or among domestic students with different ethnic or racial backgrounds, the use of the two separate constructs was essential. Also important was the inclusion of a general term 'student' in the construct 'university students', in order to capture the wide variety of students studying at university, including postgraduate, doctoral, or master level students as well as (under)graduate students.

Finally, the relations between individual and environmental dimensions were operationalised by creating two separate constructs – individual and environmental – to frame the range of concepts that previous studies had identified as relevant to the intercultural relationship development. Given the propensity of previous studies to focus on a decontextualised individual, an attempt was made not only to consider the significance of the environment but, consistent with Bronfenbrenner's model, to consider multi-layered environmental concepts in the search string for the environmental construct (#8 in Table 1). The inclusion of institutional-level concepts, beyond immediate interactional settings (e.g. internationalisation, policy, intervention, curriculum), was especially important to addressing the direct or indirect roles of university executives, or teaching/administrative staff in the development of intercultural relationships. Consistent with the multi-layered EPiC framework, concepts representing larger environmental systems (e.g. society, power, culture) were also included in the construct 'environmental'.

Table 1

Search string

	Constructs	Concepts
#1	Interculturality	“intercultural*” OR “crosscultural” OR “cross-cultural” OR “cross-group”
#2	Relationship	“relation*” OR “friend*” OR “interact*” OR “contact*”
#3	Development	“develop*” OR “form*” OR “evol*”
#4	Domestic	“domestic” OR “local” OR “host” OR “home”
#5	International	“international” OR “overseas” OR “foreign” OR “mobile”
#6	University students	“universit*” OR “college*” OR “student*” OR “undergraduate*” OR “graduate*”
#7	Individual	“personal*” OR “experience*” OR “language*” OR “competenc*” OR “agency” OR “motivation” OR “determin*” OR “goal*” OR “prejudice” OR “time” OR “age” OR “transform*” OR “identit*” OR “self-disclosure” OR “homophily” OR “adjust*” OR “adapt*” OR “dialectic*” OR “reciproc*” OR “exchange” OR “penetration”
#8	Environmental	“soci*” OR “institution*” OR “environment*” OR “situation*” OR “context*” OR “campus” OR “proximity” OR “propinquity” OR “internationali*” OR “affordance*” OR “power” OR “cultur*” OR “intervention*” OR “curricul*” OR “polic*”
#9		#1 AND #2 AND #3 AND #4 AND #5 AND #6 AND #7 AND #8

3.2. Literature search

The literature was searched through the combination of database and manual methods. In order to acknowledge the possible interdisciplinary nature of the empirical research on this topic, 11 databases were used to cover education, psychology, sociology, medicine, nursing and other related fields: EBSCOHost, ERIC, MEDLINE, ProQuest Central, PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, Scopus, Social Services Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, Web of Science and Wiley Online Library. Based on the assumption that recent studies have paid scant attention to the dynamic relations between the individual and the environment in intercultural relationships, the review was not limited to recent publications and instead considered, for possible inclusion, all the empirical studies that had been published prior to 1 January 2016. Furthermore, the database search through the search string was followed by manual search to ensure the retention of relevant articles in reputable journals that have published a substantial amount of work on this topic, such as *Higher Education*, *Higher Education Research and Development*, *International Journal of International Relations*, *Journal of Higher Education*, *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *Studies in Higher Education* and *Teaching in Higher Education*. After this two-stage literature search was completed, title and abstract screening was conducted to exclude papers irrelevant to the present review. An attempt was also made to double-check the exclusion of duplicates, books, letters, reviews, comments and theses/dissertations. At that stage, 52 papers were retained.

Finally, the first author screened the main text of the 52 retained articles, and the second and third authors checked and confirmed the results. Interestingly, despite the match between keywords of the search string and those in the abstract of the 52 papers, nine papers had no focus on intercultural relationship development (e.g. development of intercultural competence, confidence in academic writing) and eight papers targeted at different research settings (e.g. short summer programmes, offshore or online virtual interactions) or samples (e.g. pre-university students). These 17 papers were therefore discarded. This left 35 papers to be submitted to further scrutiny, with a focus on the degree and manner to which intercultural relationship development was in focus from the viewpoint of the individual–environmental interaction.

Out of these 35 papers, four groups of papers that could potentially provide an EPiC perspective of intercultural relationship development between domestic and international

university students were identified:

- Four papers argued the importance of institutional and pedagogical strategies to maximise intercultural interactions or learning but did not include any empirical work;
- Six papers focused on the roles of or attitudes to intercultural relationships;
- Twelve papers explored either individual or environmental dimensions in intercultural relationship development; and
- Thirteen papers addressed, at least to some extent, how individual and environmental dimensions are related to another to co-produce intercultural relationships.

Consistent with our focus on empirical studies, the four papers that did not include any empirical work were not retained for further analysis, even though they provide conceptual or pedagogical implications for intercultural relationship development. The reason these papers had been identified in the search string was because they contained all the keywords. The next set of six papers that was discarded did consist of empirical studies; however, they were excluded because the focus of the investigation was not directly on the development of intercultural relationships but rather on related issues, such as attitude toward culturally mixed group work, cultural learning and inclusiveness, and the place of intercultural relationship on loneliness and acculturation or on the development of academic or intercultural competence. The last set of 12 papers that were discarded did report empirical studies that focused on the development of intercultural relationship, but because their focus was either on individual (e.g. agency, cultural interest, motivation, social exchange, identity negotiation) or environmental (e.g. curriculum, intervention programme, group work) dimensions, there was no evidence of a search for understanding how individual and environmental dimensions may co-produce intercultural relationships. Consequently, only the last set of 13 papers was retained and subjected to full analysis to address the two research questions (see Table 2 for the 22 papers excluded from the review at this final stage).

Table 2
Papers finally excluded from the review

Categories	n	Authors (Year)	Focus
Conceptual (non-empirical) papers	4	Croese (2011)	Teaching strategies
		Leask (2009)	Formal and informal curricula
		Ogden (2008)	The colonial student
		Zhao and Wildemeersch (2008)	Interculturalisation
Empirical papers focusing on the roles of and attitude to intercultural relationships in contexts	6	Eisenclas and Trevaskes (2007)	Intercultural competence
		Lin and Kingminghae (2014)	Loneliness and acculturation
		Sheridan (2011)	Academic literacies
		Halualani (2008)	Interculturality
		Kimmel and Volet (2012b)	Attitude to group work
Mak, Daly, and Barker (2014)	Cultural inclusiveness		
Empirical papers focusing on either individual or environmental dimensions in intercultural relationship development	12	Colvin and Volet (2014)	Individual (agency, intercultural transformation, cultural interest)
		Colvin et al. (2015)	Individual (students' cultural backgrounds)
		Dunne (2013)	Individual (motivation, social exchange, homophily)
		Hotta and Ting-Toomey (2013)	Individual (identity negotiation, cultural expectancy, sense of time)
		Williams and Johnson (2011)	Individual (multicultural personality and attitudes)
		Bodycott, Mak, and Ramburuth (2014)	Environment (internationalisation of the curriculum)
		Campbell (2012)	Environment (buddy project)
		Etherington (2014)	Environment (internationalisation of the curriculum)
		Jackson (2015)	Environment (learner-centred curriculum)
		Joseph (2012)	Environment (internationalisation of the curriculum)
Sakurai, McCall-Wolf, and Kashima (2010)	Environment (intervention programme)		
Turner (2009)	Environment (group work)		

3.3. Analysis of the literature

The next step was to conduct qualitative, constructionist thematic analysis of the 13 articles (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Schreier, 2014). Thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2006) is 'a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (p. 79) and was deemed suitable for flexible, yet systematic analysis of the literature from an EPiC perspective. Since this review focused on the experiential interface between individual (e.g. motivational) and environmental (e.g. structural conditions, sociocultural contexts) constructs, the authors found it suitable to carry out a constructionist rather than essentialist thematic analysis. An essentialist approach was deemed unsuitable because it assumes a simple, unidirectional relationship between individual and environmental constructs, often considered to inhere with individuals (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In contrast,

the constructionist approach assumes that meaning and experience are socially produced and reproduced. The adoption of this approach for the present review means that the product of the review represents the authors' active interpretation and meaning-making of the literature in focus.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis involves six phases: (1) getting familiar with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Consistent with these steps, the first author read and re-read the 13 papers, coded significant features of the relevant information (data), collated codes into potential themes and generated definitions and names for each theme. Following this preliminary analysis, the second and third authors repeatedly checked coding consistency and the names and definitions of constructed themes until full agreement was achieved. The coding system was then applied to all of the reviewed articles and continued until agreement was reached for all of them. The overall objective of this systematic approach was to generate an EPiC understanding of the empirical studies that examined the individual–environmental relations in the development of intercultural relationships as well as to identify their operational and methodological characteristics.

4. Findings

The present systematic review aimed to identify: (1) the extent to, and the manner in which extant empirical studies examined the dynamic relations between the individual and environmental dimensions in the development of intercultural relationships (Research Question 1) and (2) the main findings of studies that directly addressed the individual–environmental relations in this development (Research Question 2). To address these questions, this section outlines in turn: (1) the operationalisation of intercultural relationship development; (2) the scarcity of studies and methodological characteristics and (3) four emergent themes of intercultural relationship development from an EPiC perspective.

4.1. Operationalisation of intercultural relationship development

Before addressing the two research questions, the authors examined the ways in which the 13 selected papers operationalised intercultural relationship development. This was an essential step because contrary to the authors' expectation, it turned out that six out of the 13 papers explored negative intercultural relationships (e.g. absence of contact, group separatism), whereas five focused on positive intercultural relationships (e.g. increased interaction, friendship formation) and two on both positive and negative intercultural relationships. It was also found that different papers used different terms to address the issue of intercultural relationship development. As Table 3 shows, some were specific and concrete (e.g. intercultural friendship formation, absence of host contact), and others were general and abstract (e.g. positive intercultural relationships, engaging relationships). This led to a conclusion that positivity/negativity was a general relational quality that cut across all the empirical studies and was therefore found to be a solid basis for operationalising intercultural relationship development in the current review.

Table 3**Operationalisation of intercultural relationship development**

Relational quality	Relational focus
Positive	General positivity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive intercultural relationship/relations/interactions (Bennett et al., 2013) • Positive (intercultural) relationships (Burdett, 2014) • (Intercultural) relational development (Dunne, 2009; Ujitani & Volet, 2008) • Acquaintance prospects (Dunne, 2009) Increase in interaction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased intercultural interaction (Jon, 2013) • Greater intercultural contact (Nesdale & Todd, 2000) Friendship formation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intercultural friendship formation (Glass et al., 2014) • Forming intercultural friendship (Nesdale & Todd, 2000) Specific interactional quality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging relationships (Burdett, 2014) • Interact more productively (Hellmundt et al., 1998)
Negative	Absence of contact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Absence/lack of host contact (Brown, 2009) • Hindering intercultural interactions (Rienties & Nolan, 2014) Group separatism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in-group clustering phenomenon (Lehto et al., 2014) • ('us and them') separation (Hou & McDowell, 2014) • passive xenophobia (Harrison & Peacock, 2010)

4.2. Scarcity of studies and methodological characteristics

The first research question of the present review was: *What individual and environmental dimensions are represented in studies of the development of intercultural relationships, and to what extent and how have the dynamic relations between the two dimensions been investigated?* Our extensive literature search and screening found that the 13 retained papers explored the individual–environmental interactions from the following conceptual lenses: contact hypothesis (Jon, 2013; Nesdale & Todd, 2000), intercultural competence (Burdett, 2014), social identity (Hou & McDowell, 2014), social network (Rienties & Nolan, 2014), affordances and constraints (Bennett et al., 2013), leisure constraints (Glass, Gómez, & Urzua, 2014), integrated thereat (Harrison & Peacock, 2010), and critical pedagogy (Hellmundt, Rifkin, & Fox, 1998) (see Table 4). However, none of them had been explicitly designed to examine intercultural relationship development from an ecological, person-in-context or any other systemic perspective. Rather, the discourse pertaining to individual–environmental interactions emerged loosely from the authors' interpretation of the findings, or through their discussion of directions for future research.

It is also important to note that compared to individual dimensions, environmental dimensions received limited attention in the 13 papers. As Table 4 indicates, most of the studies explored personal, interpersonal and situational constructs (n=10, 10 and 11 respectively). However, environmental constructs beyond immediate interactional settings such as; institutional, sociocultural and global contexts attracted either modest or scant attention (n=7, 4 and 1 respectively). This imbalance may be attributed to the predominance of studies relying on students' self-report data, which inevitably emphasise personal experiences within their immediate surroundings. The paucity of research attending to the place of larger environmental constructs reveals the limitations of previous research and points to directions for future research on intercultural relationship development.

Our analysis also revealed three conspicuous methodological limitations (see Table 4). First, 11 out of the 13 retained studies were conducted in English speaking countries while

studies in non-English speaking countries were not well represented. This may be inevitable, as the present review was restricted to peer-reviewed, journal articles in the English language. Second, despite claims that the use of multimethod approaches is desirable when studying attitudes towards and experiences of intercultural interactions (e.g. Kimmel & Volet, 2012b), only one study utilised mixed methods; while the others used qualitative (n=9) or quantitative (n=3) methods. The predominance of qualitative methods can be attributed to the focus of the present review that was framed from an ecological, essentially holist perspective, of the phenomenon under study. The reliance on one-off, self-report data from interview or questionnaire was also obvious. Third, ten studies studied intercultural relationship development exclusively with undergraduate students, while only one study focused on postgraduate students and two on both groups of students. Also noticeable was the scarcity of studies that involved academic and administrative staff who could be in a position to design or implement interventions, curricula and policies to facilitate intercultural relationship development and therefore provide alternative perspectives that may complement students' self-report data.

4.3. Four emergent themes of intercultural relationship development

The second research question was: *What are the main findings of studies that directly addressed the dynamic relations between individual and environmental dimensions in the development of intercultural relationships?* Our analysis unveiled four themes that illuminate the experiential interface between individual and environmental constructs over the development of positive or negative intercultural relationships. Table 5 presents an overview of these themes, their definitions, the focus of relational quality, and the list of studies that addressed the respective themes.

Table 4
 Relational, conceptual, methodological, and dimensional foci

Author (year)	Relational quality; conceptual grounding	Research site; method(ology); data sources and participants (and country/region of origin if stated)	Individual dimensions		Environmental dimensions			
			Personal	Interpersonal	Situational	Institutional	Sociocultural	Global
Bennett et al. (2013)	Positive; agency, affordances and constraints	Australia; qualitative (micro-level case studies); longitudinal pair interview with 1 multilingual international (Vietnamese) and 1 monolingual domestic undergraduates, complemented by institutional enrolment data and the pair's individual questionnaire data from a broader study	+	+	+	+		
Brown (2009)	Negative; NA	UK; qualitative; participant observation and longitudinal in-depth interviews with 13 students from 13 different countries, drawn from ethnography of a 150-strong cohort of postgraduate international students (mostly from South East Asia)	+	+	+		+	+
Burdett (2014)	Positive and negative; intercultural competence	Australia; qualitative; one-off interviews with 5 international (from China, India and Singapore) and 6 domestic undergraduates	+	+	+			
Dunne (2009)	Positive and negative; NA	Ireland; qualitative (grounded theory); one-off interviews with 24 domestic undergraduates	+	+	+		+	
Glass et al. (2014)	Negative; leisure constraints theory	USA; quantitative; cross-sectional questionnaire of 298 international students (96 undergraduate, 195 graduate and 7 unidentified) (from East/South East Asia, South Asia, Europe and Middle East/North Africa)	+	+	+		+	
Harrison & Peacock (2010)	Negative; integrated threat theory	UK; qualitative; focus group (n=60) and individual interviews (n=40) with 100 domestic undergraduates at two universities		+	+			+
Hellmundt et al. (1998)	Positive; dialogic method of teaching, critical pedagogy	Australia; qualitative (case study); open-ended questionnaire for 32 undergraduates in two tutorial groups, reflective journals of 4 students (2 international and 2 domestic), observation and informal discussions with students and tutors, and debriefing with the lecturer/designer of the programme		+	+		+	

Hou & McDowell (2014)	Negative; social identity and self-categorisation theories	UK; qualitative; participant observation, document analysis and in-depth interviews with 16 Chinese international, 2 non-Chinese international and 5 domestic students, 18 staff and 2 Chinese parents, drawn from longitudinal ethnography of a 50-strong cohort of undergraduates in the 2+2 articulation programme		+	+	+
Jon (2013)	Positive; contact hypothesis	South Korea; mixed method; one-off online questionnaire for 244 domestic undergraduates (95 in intervention groups, 148 in non-intervention groups and 1 missing) and one-off interviews with 30 students from the survey sample	+			+
Lehto et al. (2014)	Negative; social constructivism	USA; qualitative (phenomenology); 9 mixed focus groups for 25 international (from China, Taiwan, South Korea, Ireland and Mexico) and 34 domestic undergraduates	+	+	+	+
Nesdale & Todd (2000)	Positive; contact hypothesis	Australia; quantitative; longitudinal questionnaire for 76 first-year undergraduates (46 international and 30 domestic) in intervention programme and 71 first-year undergraduates (32 international and 39 domestic) in a control group living in different dormitories (76% of the international participants were ethnic Chinese.)	+			+
Rienties & Nolan (2014)	Positive and negative; social network theory	UK; quantitative (social network analysis); longitudinal questionnaire of 485 international students from 58 countries and 107 domestic students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels	+		+	
Ujitani & Volet (2008)	Negative; socio-emotional challenges	Japan; qualitative; longitudinal in-depth interviews with 8 exchange (Australian) and 9 domestic (Japanese) undergraduates all living in the same dormitory	+	+	+	+

Table 5
Emergent themes of the individual–environmental interactions

Themes	Definitions	Relational quality	Sources
1. Environmental constraints and affordances in relation to relationship prospects			
1.1. Environment constraining relationship prospects	Institutional or situational environment constrains the prospects of intercultural relationship development.	Negative	Burdett (2014) Dunne (2009) Harrison & Peacock (2010) Hou & McDowell (2014) Lehto et al. (2014)
1.2. Environment affording relationship prospects	Institutional or situational environment affords the prospects of intercultural relationship development.	Positive	Dunne (2009) Hellmundt et al. (1998) Rienties & Nolan (2014)
2. Personal blockers and enablers in constrained environments			
2.1. Interaction blocked by personal backgrounds and dispositions	Personal backgrounds and dispositions can moderate or exacerbate environmental constraints in intercultural relationship development	Negative	Brown (2009) Dunne (2009) Glass et al. (2014) Harrison & Peacock (2010) Hou & McDowell (2014) Rienties & Nolan (2014)
2.2. Interaction enabled by personal skills and agency	Personal skills (e.g. host language skills) or agency enables intercultural relationship development despite environmental constraints.	Positive	Bennett et al. (2013) Burdett (2014)
3. Personal blockers and enablers in intervention environments	Personal resources (e.g. past experience, intercultural knowledge and openness) interact with the outcomes of interventions in enhancing the prospects of intercultural relationship development.	Positive	Jon (2013) Nesdale & Todd (2000)
4. Cultural barriers and intolerance at individual and environmental level	Cultural barriers and lack of (reciprocal) understanding at individual and/or environmental level constrain the prospects of intercultural relationship development.	Negative	Brown (2009) Harrison & Peacock (2010) Ujitani & Volet (2008)

4.3.1. Environmental constraints and affordances in relation to relationship prospects. This theme concerns the manner in which environments influence students' interactional experiences, which subsequently determine the quality of their intercultural relationships. Five papers examined situational and/or institutional constraints on interpersonal experience that co-produced negative intercultural relationships, and three papers reported on the situational and/or institutional affordances in the flowering of positive intercultural relationships.

With regard to the environmental constraints on relationship prospects, two issues were recurrent. First, a lack of well-planned institutional or pedagogical strategies to enhance intercultural interactions triggered students' interactional challenges (e.g. anxiety, perceived threat, language difficulty), resulting in seating segregation in the class (Dunne, 2009; Hou & McDowell, 2014), exclusive monocultural groupings in assignments (Dunne, 2009) or 'us versus them' categorisation involving in-group favouritism (Harrison & Peacock, 2010). The likelihood of the development of positive intercultural relationships waned in competitive academic environments, because (domestic) students feared that their learning or marks would be compromised by the actions of their intercultural peers (Harrison & Peacock, 2010). In addition, even if culturally mixed groups for assignments were formed by chance rather than by well-designed arrangement, language difficulty and coordination frustration, together with increased pressure of time limited students' opportunity and motivation to manage group problems, and such interactional challenges inhibited the development of positive intercultural relationships (Burdett, 2014).

Another conspicuous environmental constraint was the presence of close-knit conational communities of international students, which served not only as a comfort zone, but also as a barrier to positive relationships with domestic students (Lehto, Cai, Fu, & Chen, 2014; Rienties & Nolan, 2014). Lehto et al. (2014) found that when intercultural interaction brought socio-emotional difficulties (e.g. anxiety and uncertainty), international students tended to revert to their comfort zone (i.e. same culture communities); thus, 'in-group clustering' resulted. This homophilic tendency also held true for domestic students, as they were often dependent on the 'referral system', or 'domino effect' in which they became friends with their friends' friends who were also domestic students (Dunne, 2009). Peer pressure among domestic students mattered, too, as they hesitated to introduce international students into their core friendship for fear of being admonished by in-group peers (Dunne, 2009).

All of these findings suggest that in order to alleviate intergroup separatism, the roles of university, especially the staff in intervening in intercultural relations, are critically important. In this regard, three studies that focused on environmental affordances are noteworthy, because they showed that the development of positive intercultural relationships was possible in carefully designed contact zones that promoted cooperation, equality and mutual respect through shared activities (Dunne, 2009; Hellmundt et al., 1998; Rienties & Nolan, 2014). Dunne (2009), for example, found that in situations where domestic students shared a common work placement and cooperated to achieve common goals and overcome challenges, they often bonded together with international students. Similarly, Hellmundt et al. (1998) reported that experiential, student-centred activities contributed to the creation of a safe and non-threatening learning environment, which along with the appreciation of cultural difference encouraged both international and domestic students to participate in classroom activities and promoted greater intercultural interactions.²

In sum, this theme focusing on the possibilities and limits of environments in the prospects of intercultural relationship development is consistent with the literature that supports the development of institutional and pedagogical strategies to promote intercultural interactions (e.g. Arkoudis et al., 2013; Crose, 2011; Leask, 2009). It especially resonates with the contact hypothesis that postulates the criticality of the equal numbers and status of the interactants, authority support, targeted interactions with common goals and cooperation

² Harrison and Peacock (2010) also observed that even in the absence of explicit institutional support, students in some courses (e.g. creative arts) appeared to develop more positive intercultural relationships than students in other courses (e.g. business), as domestic students in creative arts sought out international students as a useful resource of perspectives and knowledge deriving from their cultural background.

rather than competition (Pettigrew et al., 2011). However, more research will be necessary to fully understand the extent to which environments constrain and afford the prospects of intercultural relationship development irrespective of individual differences. Consideration must also be given to the extent to, and the manner in which positive intercultural relationships in one environment can grow into consolidated relationships that may involve broader environments (e.g. from a group work member to a romantic partner).

4.3.2. Personal blockers and enablers in constrained environments. This theme accentuates the roles of personal dimensions (e.g. characteristics, abilities) in the development of intercultural relationships in environments where there is no pedagogical or institutional strategies to enhance intercultural interactions and learning. Six papers focused on the significance of personal blockers (e.g. backgrounds and dispositions) in the development of negative intercultural relationships, while two papers examined the importance of personal enablers (e.g. language skills, agency) in the creation of positive intercultural relationships in constrained environments.

In terms of the formation of negative intercultural relationships, six papers identified such personal blockers as: nationality or region of origin (Dunne, 2009; Glass et al., 2014; Rienties & Nolan, 2014), constraints on recreation (Glass et al., 2014), age and maturity (Dunne, 2009), economic situation (Hou & McDowell, 2014), work ethic (Dunne, 2009), alcohol consumption (Dunne, 2009; Harrison & Peacock, 2010), and physical dissimilarity (Brown, 2009). Though further explorations are necessary to create an exhaustive list of personal blockers, this theme suggests that in real-life environments (situational or institutional levels), the development of positive intercultural relationships may be hampered by students' backgrounds and dispositions. Glass et al. (2014), for example, found that compared to international students from Europe, South Asia, Middle East and North Africa, international students from East or Southeast Asia felt greater constraints to participate in recreation and leisure activities offered at a US university, and such constraints brought them more difficulty when trying to make American friends.

In contrast, another group of studies examined the ways in which personal dimensions played a central role in intercultural relationship development despite environmental constraints. For instance, Bennett et al. (2013) reported that although pedagogical or institutional strategies to enhance intercultural interactions were absent in an undergraduate unit at an Australian university, a mutually beneficial intercultural relationship was formed between a monolingual domestic student and a multilingual international student. This, it was reported, mainly occurred because these students mobilised their agency into action, knowing that they were both leftovers in a group work assignment and sharing desires for social inclusion. Burdett (2014) also found that group work assignments tended to bring increased frustration among domestic and international students at an Australian university; yet, engaging relationships were formed when international students were fluent in written and spoken English.

This theme suggests not only the criticality of institutional involvement in nullifying the blockers of intercultural relationship development, but also the importance of nurturing agency and intercultural competence in both international and domestic students who otherwise would have limited prospects of positive intercultural relationships. This point was raised by Burdett (2014) and Jon (2013), and concurs with a large body of literature of university internationalisation in favour of cultivating students' intercultural competence (e.g. Leask, 2009). However, it appears that the available literature has hitherto paid scant attention to the roles of such enablers in intercultural relationship development in natural environments. In addition, little is known about the extent to, and manner in which these enablers evolve in the course of intercultural relationship development.

4.3.3. Personal blockers and enablers in intervention environments. This theme concerns the extent to, and the manner in which personal dimensions impact on the outcomes of institutional interventions aiming to promote positive intercultural relationships. It was found that none of the reviewed papers examined personal blockers that hamper the effectiveness of interventions, and only two papers provided empirical evidence on the impact of interventions from the viewpoint of intercultural relationship development while taking personal dimensions into consideration.

Two personal enablers in intervention environments were identified in these two papers. One is previous international experience. Using path analysis involving a large sample with control groups, Jon (2013) measured the extent to which domestic students' participation in interventions (i.e. buddy systems, language and culture programmes) improved their subsequent interactions with international students and intercultural competence at a Korean university. Although the main focus of that study was on the development of intercultural competence rather than on that of intercultural relationships, the co-contributing effects of participation in the intervention and prior international experience on the increase in intercultural interactions were revealed. Also important to note was the finding that the institutional interventions influenced intercultural competence positively, but indirectly by influencing intercultural interactions first.

The findings of Jon (2013) contrast with those of Nesdale and Todd (2000), who identified students' intercultural knowledge and openness as a personal enabler of intercultural relationship development in intervention environments. Nesdale and Todd conducted an intervention in the context of a dormitory at an Australian university over a seven-month period. Grounded in the contact hypothesis, their study found that domestic students who participated in the intervention developed more intercultural contact, friendships, knowledge and openness than non-participants. This effect, however, was not evident among the international students. The researchers attributed this difference to the international students' greater intercultural knowledge and openness that they had already developed before participating in the intervention. Thus, the effectiveness of the intervention on intercultural relationship was, it was argued, dependent upon the extent to which students' intercultural knowledge and openness was enhanced.

The findings of these two studies suggest that intercultural relationship development is a cumulative process, as newly formed relationships through an intervention may have been built on previous international experiences in other environments, or on the gradual development of intercultural competence (including knowledge and openness). They also suggest that the success of interventions may emerge from, and get consolidated through interactions between well-designed contact zones and students' preparedness (e.g. past international experience, enhanced intercultural competence). Nevertheless, a question remains of the extent to and the manner in which the development of intercultural competence through an intervention can enhance positive intercultural relationships, especially for international students who, despite assumed considerable intercultural knowledge and openness, might become the target of cultural intolerance and discrimination by domestic students, as illustrated below.

4.3.4. Cultural barriers and intolerance at individual and environmental levels. Three papers explored the constructed nature of cultural barriers and intolerance at individual and environmental levels, which inhibit rather than facilitate the development of positive intercultural relationships. Unlike the other three themes, this theme involves broader environmental dimensions at the sociocultural and global levels.

Two issues are of particular note. First, cultural differences are treated as a stumbling block to positive intercultural relationships. Harrison and Peacock (2010), for example, referred to the constructs collectivism and individualism to illustrate the 'cultural distance' between international and domestic students with regard to different classroom behaviours. They also addressed the role of popular culture (e.g. knowledge of Anglophone music, film, websites, television programmes and comedy) in defining students' identity that served for the inclusion or exclusion of potential friends. Ujitani and Volet (2008) took a more concrete approach to highlighting culture-related, socio-emotional challenges faced by domestic Japanese and international Australian students at a Japanese university. Using a critical incidents method, the authors provided a detailed analysis of various interactional difficulties and misunderstanding that were present in multiple social contexts (e.g. joking and teasing, communication styles, instrumentality of relationships, non-verbal behaviours, personal topics).

Another conspicuous aspect of this theme is the construction and continuation of intergroup divide, often expressed as exclusive and negative attitudes of one group of students toward the other. As already discussed, the absence of institutional interventions or strategies to enhance intercultural interactions prompted the in-group/out-group divide between international and domestic students. This divide was exacerbated by the host community's negative stereotypes, prejudice or even discrimination. For example, Brown (2009) revealed that in the UK, some international students with physically distinguishing appearance (e.g. non-white students) or from particular religious backgrounds (e.g. Muslim students) became targets of bigotry and physical abuse from local students and residents. This made it difficult for them to make host contact, even though they were highly motivated to do so.

An important implication of this theme for the development of positive intercultural relationships is the need for sensitivity and reciprocal understanding between international and domestic students (Ujitani & Volet, 2008), and again for institutional commitment, engagement, and strategies that create culturally tolerant and inclusive environments on campus and beyond. Equally important, but unattended in the previous studies, is the place of positive appraisals of cultural difference in intercultural relationship development. Future research could examine the transformative nature of consolidated intercultural relationships in university settings, especially concerning the extent to, and the manner in which, relational partners appreciate and negotiate cultural differences and utilise them for their personal and professional development.

5. Discussion and conclusion

5.1. Main findings

This systematic review examined empirical studies that explored the dynamic interactions between individual and environmental dimensions in the development of intercultural relationships between international and domestic students in university settings. It stood on the premise that the extant literature had loosely operationalised relational terms and primarily focused on an individual as a unit of analysis while viewing environments as secondary.

Addressing the first research question provided support for this assumption. Three general aspects that have hitherto been under-scrutinised or under-utilised also emerged from the in-depth analysis of the 13 retained papers. First, positivity/negativity was found to be a useful category to operationalise the quality of intercultural relationships, but due to the limited research scrutinised, patterns have yet to be identified. Second, only a few studies have examined the wider environmental dimensions beyond interactional situations (i.e. institutional, sociocultural and global environments) in relation to intercultural relationship

development. Third, from a methodological standpoint, there is a predominance of self-report questionnaires or interviews mostly involving undergraduate students in Anglophone countries. These findings suggest directions for further research, which will be elaborated below.

Addressing the second research question, focusing on the research findings, led to the identification of four specific themes that have great potential to advancing knowledge and practice of intercultural relationship development from an EPiC perspective. They are: (1) environmental constraints and affordances in relation to relationship prospects; (2) personal blockers and enablers in constrained environments; (3) personal blockers and enablers in intervention environments; and (4) cultural barriers and intolerance at individual and environmental levels. Each of these themes provided distinct lenses through which to further explore the intricacies of the individual–environmental interactions in the development of intercultural relationships.

5.2. Directions for future research

For the purpose of further research on intercultural relationship development, especially from the viewpoint of promoting positive intercultural relationships at university, the following issues emerged as the most salient. First, there is a need for more empirical studies about what constitutes environmental affordances, which in interaction with personal blockers (e.g. backgrounds, dispositions) and enablers (e.g. agency, language and intercultural competence) would engender positive intercultural relationships. Our thematic analysis showed that the creation of safe and non-threatening environments involving student-centred, cooperative activities seemed to maximise the likelihood of the development of positive intercultural relationships (e.g. Hellmundt et al., 1998). Conversely, non-interventional and competitive environments tended to produce or exacerbate students' uncertainty, anxiety and fear, which have the potential to divide and foster intolerance between international and domestic students (Harrison & Peacock, 2010). In this regard, the roles of institutional or national policies and strategies of international education deserve special attention, because they may constitute a significant portion of environmental affordances and constraints, which is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's observations. Although some of the retained papers discussed the importance of building a campus-wide environment and degree-long curricula to facilitate intercultural cohesion and university internationalisation (Bennett et al., 2013; Jon, 2013), we found no empirical study that was explicitly designed to address this issue.

Second, studies exploring enablers of students' positive intercultural relationships in the university environment, and the strategies and environment that develop such enablers, would make a welcome contribution to our understandings of this phenomenon. In constrained environments where institutional or pedagogical strategies to facilitate intercultural interactions were absent, it was found that positive intercultural relationships only developed when students mobilised their enablers such as, agency (Bennett et al., 2013) or language skills (Burdett, 2014). Otherwise, most of intercultural encounters tended to occur by chance and superficially with limited relationship prospects. On the other hand, there were isolated findings suggesting that interventions (e.g. Nesdale and Todd's (2000) dormitory study) could produce positive outcomes in developing domestic students' intercultural knowledge and openness, and their greater contact with international students in the wider campus environment. In combination, these findings suggest that positive intercultural relationships can be formed if students are given due opportunity to develop such enablers. Thus, there is a need for further research, which may reveal hitherto hidden insights, on the significance of students' enablers (e.g. agency, intercultural competence) in relation to intercultural relationship development, and especially the ways in which such enablers can be nurtured in

campus environments. Acknowledging the co-shaping role of individual and environment dimensions builds upon the person-in-context perspective (Volet, 2001).

Another important but underexplored issue relates to individual and gender differences in intercultural relationship development, and their interactions with environmental affordances and constraints. Ujitani and Volet (2008), for example, found significant individual differences in cultural sensitivity among international Australian students at a Japanese university. Similarly, Rienties and Nolan (2014) argued the necessity of studies exploring why some domestic and international students developed substantial intercultural relationships while others primarily developed co-national relationships, even though they all were on the same campus. In addition, there is a need for research focusing on the role of gender in situated intercultural relationships. While a few studies alluded to the associations between student groups (i.e. whether students are domestic or international), gender and intercultural relationships in the dormitory (e.g. Nesdale & Todd, 2000; Ujitani & Volet, 2008), only a limited number of studies have examined the extent to, and the manner in which gender plays a role in intercultural relationship development on campus settings. It might also be interesting to explore how same- and cross-gender intercultural relationships are formed differently in interaction with particular environments.

Such undertakings would require the amplification and refinement of research methodologies, which we reported were limited in scope and approach. First, more diverse and multiple research methods are needed to capture the dynamic interactions between the individual and the environment in intercultural relationship development. Rather than relying solely on self-report data from interviews or questionnaires, future studies would benefit from complementary observational data, or mixed methods in descriptive or experimental design. Action research that specifically targets the promotion of intercultural relationship development has the potential to provide rich insights into this phenomenon. Second, more longitudinal studies that capture the evolving nature of intercultural relationships are needed. Out of the six papers that we found employing a longitudinal design, Bennett et al. (2013) was the only study that focused on the dynamic process of intercultural relationship development. We thus far know very little about the process and the manner in which positive or negative intercultural relationships were developed in contexts that may themselves evolve.

Third, future research could incorporate the voices of university staff into empirical studies, and this ideally in multiple institutional settings. In this respect, investigating the roles of staff in different institutional environments may complement current knowledge of intercultural relationship development. Finally, interdisciplinary research may be of significant help to advancing the knowledge of intercultural relationship development. As previously discussed, the issue of intercultural relationship development in university settings has been examined primarily within the fields of psychology, communication studies and education. Considering the complexities of this psycho-social phenomenon, especially the great potential of research investigating the place of institutional, sociocultural and global environments, it may not be too bold to suggest that future studies go beyond disciplinary affordances and constraints by collaborating with other fields such as economics and political sciences.

5.3. Limitations of this review

Although the present review embarked on a systematic screening and analysis of the literature, it presents three limitations. First, due to the strict focus on English journal articles, a note of caution is necessary regarding the generalisability of the findings. As Kehm and Teichler (2007) contend, the literature available in the English language may not be truly representative of the overall available knowledge on the international dimensions of higher education. Second, our review rested on the domestic–international distinction, and this

operationalisation of interculturality, tinged with the 'passport approach' (Dunne, 2013, p. 568), neglected to consider the diversity of domestic as well as international student populations, and its implications for intercultural relationship development (cf. Fozdar & Volet, 2016). Third, the conceptual framework that was developed for the analysis of the literature placed a primary focus on the experiential interface between individual and environmental dimensions. Consequently, scant attention was paid to the extent to, and the manner in which constructs within the two-level individual dimensions and the four-level environmental dimensions interact with one another. Nevertheless, in closing, it is our hope that this systematic review has casted new light on intercultural relationship development, proposed new avenues for future research, and ultimately will serve to enrich the student experience from an intercultural perspective.

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