

Drivers of Homophily and Its Perceived Impact on Intercultural Skill Development Among International Social Work Students in Australia

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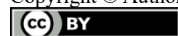
Abstract: *Cultural homophily, the tendency for individuals to associate with culturally similar peers, raises important concerns for intercultural skill development in social work education. This study aimed to explore the drivers of homophilic group formation and its perceived impact on intercultural learning among international master of social work students in Australia. Guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study engaged 14 international students (7 African, 7 Asian) who consistently self-formed culturally homogeneous groups during academic tasks. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically using MAXQDA. The findings revealed two superordinate themes: Drivers of Homophily (emotional refuge, academic survival, linguistic intimacy) and Implications for Intercultural Learning (narrowed exposure, delayed professional readiness, and normalisation of cultural clustering). While homophilic groups offered safety and peer support, they also limited opportunities for intercultural engagement, critical reflection, and transformative learning, which are key outcomes in social work education. The study concludes that without intentional pedagogical intervention, cultural diversity alone does not guarantee intercultural competence. It recommends structured group allocation, reflective tasks, and facilitated dialogues to enhance intercultural readiness. These findings carry significant implications for social work educators in designing inclusive learning environments that balance psychological safety with professional preparedness.*

Keywords: *Homophily; intercultural competence; international students; social work education; Australia*

Intercultural competence is foundational to ethical and effective social work practice, particularly within educational settings that prepare students for work in diverse, multicultural contexts. As social work is anchored in principles such as respect for human dignity, social justice, and cultural responsiveness (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2020), the cultivation of intercultural skills is not only pedagogically important but a professional imperative. Within this context, the phenomenon of homophily, the tendency for individuals to associate with others who share similar language, ethnicity, or worldview (Chen et al., 2025), raises critical concerns in social work education, particularly when students self-select peers for collaborative academic tasks such as group assignments. Globally, social work classrooms are increasingly composed of students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. While this diversity offers rich opportunities for intercultural engagement and learning, emerging research suggests that students often self-organise into culturally homogeneous groups when given autonomy in forming teams for academic work (Santos et al., 2024). Such informal groupings—formed for the purpose of completing assignments and projects, may reinforce cultural silos, limit cross-cultural exposure, and constrain the development of the intercultural competencies essential for contemporary social work practice (Marginson, 2022; Seven & Aysel, 2025). Despite growing awareness of these dynamics, there is a notable lack of empirical research

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examining the drivers of such self-segregation and its implications for intercultural learning, especially in postgraduate professional programs such as social work.

This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the drivers of homophily in self-formed student groups for school-based assignments and exploring their impact on intercultural skill development among master of social work (qualifying) international students in Australia. The term master of social work (qualifying) refers to a graduate-entry program in Australia for students who hold an undergraduate degree in a different field. It provides the academic and practical training required for professional accreditation by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). The findings aim to inform inclusive and globally relevant pedagogical strategies in social work education, particularly in multicultural and multilingual learning environments worldwide.

Conceptual Issues

Homophily, a foundational concept in sociology and social network theory, refers to the tendency of individuals to associate and bond with others who are like themselves. This similarity can manifest across various dimensions, including ethnicity, language, education level, socioeconomic status, religion, values, and worldview. Homophily refers to the tendency of individuals to associate with others who are like themselves in characteristics such as culture, language, ethnicity, values, or social background. It comprises two main components: status homophily (based on demographic traits like race, gender, or nationality) and value homophily (based on shared beliefs, norms, or worldviews) (Chen et al., 2025; Lee & Kim, 2025). Homophily influences peer group formation in educational settings, often reinforcing cultural silos that may limit intercultural learning, particularly in professional programs such as social work, where collaboration across differences is essential. Homophily limits people's social worlds in ways that shape the information they receive, the attitudes they form, and the interactions they experience (Chen et al., 2025). Homophily shapes the structure of human connections, influencing how individuals navigate social, educational, and professional environments.

Building on this definition, homophily is closely related to in-group bias and social identity theory, both of which posit that individuals derive self-esteem and a sense of belonging from associating with those perceived as "like them." Literature reflects that individuals strive to maintain positive social identity by favouring their in-group, which often results in social distancing from out-groups (Alarcón González, 2024; Elie & Stijn, 2024; Santos et al., 2024). This psychological mechanism is central to how homophily manifests in educational contexts, where students may unconsciously align with peers who reflect their own cultural or linguistic identities. Another related concept is homogeneous grouping, particularly in educational psychology and pedagogy. According to Leask (2009), "when left to their own devices, students from different cultural backgrounds often choose to work with peers who are culturally similar, thereby limiting their opportunity to engage in intercultural learning" (p. 213). This behavioral pattern, while understandable, has implications for the development of intercultural competence and collaborative skills in increasingly diverse learning environments.

Homophily and Social Work Practice

Internationally, cultural homophily has been well documented in student group formation. Studies demonstrate that students from minority or international backgrounds often cluster together to seek psychological safety, linguistic ease, and cultural familiarity (Leask, 2009; Yang et al., 2024; Zhao, 2023). While this may support cultural affirmation and peer support, it often inadvertently limits intercultural contact, which is vital for developing intercultural empathy and responsiveness (Alarcón González, 2024; Chen et al., 2025; Santos et al., 2024). In Australia, similar dynamics have been observed. Motos (2016) found that international students, particularly those from Asia and Africa, frequently form insular groups in classrooms, often due to perceived exclusion, prejudice, or linguistic barriers. In social work education, this has been linked to reduced cross-cultural learning opportunities and the reinforcement of stereotypes (Castillo de Mesa et al., 2021). While cultural affinity may offer emotional comfort, it may also diminish the transformative learning experiences required for cultural humility (Seven & Aysel, 2025), a vital component of ethical social work practice (Gottlieb, 2021). Cultural affinity is a natural liking for and identification with a culture's customs, values, and practices. It describes a shared understanding that can foster a sense of connection, making people more likely to cooperate and respond positively to messages or products that align with their own background.

These patterns of homophilic group formation are not simply incidental, they are driven by a constellation of psychological, linguistic, social, and institutional factors. One of the most prominent drivers is the pursuit of psychological safety. Students often seek out culturally similar peers as a buffer against marginalisation, stereotyping, or microaggressions. Students seek safety in the familiar particularly when navigating emotionally and cognitively demanding environments (Seven & Aysel, 2025). This is especially salient in social work education, where education frequently engages with issues of trauma, structural inequality, and identity (Zhu et al., 2023), all of which can heighten vulnerability.

Language proficiency and communication confidence also drive homophilic grouping. Kulkarni (2015) stated that students from non-English-speaking backgrounds often gravitate toward others who share the same first language, helping them manage academic pressure and avoid exclusion from fast-paced group interactions. In disciplines like social work, where dialogic learning, critical reflection, and emotional expression are central (Zhu et al., 2023), language barriers can significantly inhibit participation. Homophily, in this context, becomes a pragmatic response to institutional and pedagogical gaps. Additionally, cultural norms and expectations regarding group loyalty and collectivism influence group formation. For example, in India, students from collectivist cultures were found to feel a sense of moral obligation to align with co-nationals, valuing group harmony and shared responsibility over intercultural experimentation (Dutta & Kundu, 2021). While not inherently problematic, this dynamic may hinder the development of intercultural competencies essential to relational practice in social work, as acknowledged by Bennett and Gates' (2021) study in Australia.

Importantly, homophily may also be a defensive response to exclusionary practices. Studies across the social sciences suggest that minority students often experience implicit or overt exclusion in group settings, such as being overlooked in discussions or having their contributions devalued (Dutta & Kundu, 2021; Motos,

2016). In response, students may form culturally homogeneous groups as a strategy of resilience. While this allows for solidarity and affirmation, it can also entrench social divisions and limit exposure to diverse worldviews necessary for critical professional development.

Intercultural competence in social work is more than cultural awareness. It entails critical reflexivity, contextual sensitivity, and the ability to navigate complex cultural power dynamics (Sue et al., 2010). Deardorff's (2006) process model of intercultural competence, emphasizing attitudes (respect, openness), knowledge (cultural self-awareness, sociolinguistic knowledge), and skills (listening, interpreting, adapting)—has been widely adopted in educational frameworks, including social work. Australian scholarship has emphasized the unique need for social workers to engage with Indigenous knowledges, sovereignty, and decolonising practices. Bennett (2023) argues that social work education must be grounded in Indigenous epistemologies and challenge Eurocentric assumptions. However, cultural homophily in student groupings may insulate students from these critical engagements. If students predominantly work with peers from similar backgrounds, they may avoid the discomfort necessary for transformative learning (Gottlieb, 2021; Zhu et al., 2023) and anti-oppressive practice (Mitchell & Folk-Nagua, 2025). In Nordic countries and Germany, where social work education has strong social justice orientations, similar concerns have been raised. In European countries, social work students are accused of failing to confront their cultural biases when not exposed to diverse peer interactions (Hollinrake et al., 2019). In India and China, where social work education is rapidly professionalizing, intercultural competence is often framed through the lens of community development and marginalisation (Wu et al., 2024), again emphasizing the need for inclusive pedagogies that resist cultural siloing.

In this context, group work refers to classroom-based team assignments rather than the social work intervention method, and is commonly used to simulate collaborative, interdisciplinary professional practice. However, self-selection in group formation often leads to cultural homophily, where students cluster based on ethnicity, language, or shared cultural identity (Dutta & Kundu, 2021). This has been observed across Australian universities, particularly in programs with high international student enrolment. While cultural homophily may reduce anxiety and increase perceived cohesion (Kulkarni, 2015), it also risks reinforcing cultural bubbles and implicit biases. In social work, where practitioners must be adept at working across differences, such practices may undermine the development of cultural responsiveness, a key AASW competency (AASW, 2020). Moreover, it contradicts the ethical commitment to engage with diverse perspectives and challenge systemic inequality. International literature supports this concern. In the UK, Bourdieu-informed analyses of social work education have shown how cultural capital and social positioning shape student participation and inclusion (Thompson, 2025). In the United States, critical race theory has been used to examine how whiteness is reproduced in classroom dynamics, often marginalising students of colour (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2018; Sleeter, 2017). Cultural homophily in student groupings, while often seen as benign, may thus reflect deeper structural dynamics that reproduce inequity and exclusion, undermining social work's main professed commitment of "social justice" in both education and practice.

In the Australian context, cultural homophily also intersects with the nation's colonial history, settler privilege, and racialized social structures. Social work education has a moral responsibility to decentre whiteness and centre Indigenous

sovereignty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, as articulated by Bennett (2023). Similarly, migrant and refugee students, especially those from African and Asian backgrounds, anecdotally, often report feelings of isolation and tokenism in group settings. Cultural homophily may function as both a protective strategy and a barrier to mutual understanding. The result is a fragmented learning environment where students are not adequately prepared for the real-world diversity of social work practice. These challenges align with social work literature, which increasingly supports the use of cultural humility (Gottlieb, 2021) and anti-oppressive practice (Mitchell & Folk-Nagua, 2025) as guiding frameworks for social work education. Cultural humility emphasizes lifelong learning, power analysis, and institutional accountability, challenging the notion of cultural competence as a static achievement. Anti-oppressive practice extends this by requiring practitioners to critically analyse systems of power, privilege, and oppression, skills that cannot be developed in echo chambers of cultural sameness. From this theoretical lens, cultural homophily may limit the reflective discomfort necessary for critical consciousness. As Timor-Shlevin (2023) argues, dialogue with the 'Other' is essential for liberation and transformation. Learning environments must therefore be designed to interrupt homophily and promote intercultural dialogue, not through forced assimilation, but as mutual engagement grounded in respect and justice.

Despite a growing body of literature on intercultural competence in higher education, there remains a significant gap in exploring how cultural homophily specifically effects the development of intercultural skills within social work education (Motos, 2016). While studies have examined international student integration (Motos, 2016), few have examined how student-initiated cultural grouping may affect professional readiness in ethically sensitive fields like social work. There is a need to explore how educational structures, group formation policies, and identity politics shape intercultural learning in the classroom. This study seeks to contribute to this gap by examining the real-world implications of homophilic group formation within a master of social work (qualifying) program in Australia, drawing on both student experiences and broader pedagogical imperatives.

Theoretical Framework

Given the complexity of disentangling the social, cultural, and structural factors that contribute to homophily in human relationships, no single theoretical lens is sufficient. Therefore, this research draws upon an integrated theoretical framework composed of: (1) Social Identity Theory to explore the drivers of homophily; (2) Transformative Learning Theory to examine how such groupings may shape the processes of intercultural learning; and (3) the framework of cultural humility to situate these dynamics within the ethical and pedagogical imperatives of social work education.

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)

Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the late 1970s, provides a foundational lens for understanding how individuals form group affiliations and how those affiliations influence behaviour. Central to SIT is the premise that individuals derive a significant part of their self-concept from membership in social groups, especially those that provide a sense of belonging, esteem, or cultural

affirmation. Key tenets of SIT include social categorisation, social comparison, and in-group favouritism (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). These processes shape how individuals navigate environments characterised by diversity, particularly in settings such as higher education.

Applied to this study, SIT provides a theoretical scaffold for exploring why students, particularly those from minority or international backgrounds, gravitate toward culturally similar peers when forming groups for academic assignments. The theory suggests that students may categorise themselves and others along cultural, linguistic, or ethnic lines, and are likely to seek in-group membership to reinforce identity and psychological safety. This aligns with Leask's (2009) observation that students often "seek safety in the familiar" (p. 213). Importantly, SIT highlights that such self-selection is not merely pragmatic but tied to deeper needs for affirmation and protection in environments where students may feel marginalised or underrepresented.

Moreover, SIT allows this study to examine homophily not as a simplistic preference but as a socially and psychologically mediated response to broader institutional dynamics, such as language hierarchies, racialisation, or cultural exclusion. In the context of social work education, where emotional vulnerability, reflexivity, and dialogue are central, grouping with similar others may serve as a defence against discomfort or perceived cultural misrecognition. For social work education, SIT invites critical reflection on how group identity dynamics shape students' engagement with difference and whether homophilic grouping might limit the broader goal of preparing culturally responsive practitioners.

Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991)

Transformative Learning Theory (TLT), introduced by Jack Mezirow, is a critical adult learning theory that emphasises how individuals revise their frames of reference through critical reflection and dialogic engagement. Mezirow (1991) posits that disorienting dilemmas, experiences that challenge one's assumptions, are key catalysts for transformation. The learning process involves critical self-reflection, rational discourse, and a transformation of perspective that leads to more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative understandings.

In the context of this study, TLT offers a vital lens for analysing the implications of homophilic group formation on intercultural skill development. Intercultural competence development requires students to engage with diversity, challenge ethnocentric assumptions, and reflect upon their positionality, processes that are central to Mezirow's theory. If homophily reduces students' exposure to culturally different peers, it may also limit their opportunities for the disorienting encounters and dialogic engagements necessary for transformative learning. In social work, scholars (e.g., Gottlieb, 2021; Zhu et al., 2023) concur that learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience. Thus, TLT is not used here to predict outcomes but to theorise the conditions under which meaningful intercultural learning might occur, or be constrained, within social work education. It also facilitates an analysis of whether current educational structures and group-formation practices adequately support the transformative goals of professional formation in a profession that requires deep reflexivity and engagement with difference. For social work, TLT reinforces the

profession's emphasis on lifelong learning, critical reflexivity, and the development of ethical judgment through exposure to diverse perspectives.

Cultural Humility (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998)

Cultural humility is a relational and ethical framework introduced by Tervalon and Murray-García (1998) in response to the limitations of the cultural competence model. Unlike cultural competence, which implies mastery of knowledge about "other" cultures, cultural humility emphasises lifelong learning, self-critique, and acknowledgment of power imbalances in intercultural encounters. It requires practitioners and learners to remain open, reflexive, and accountable for how their own cultural values and assumptions shape relationships.

This framework is particularly relevant to social work education, where students are expected to develop the ability to work with culturally diverse populations in ways that are respectful, responsive, and critically reflective (Santos et al., 2024). When students form homophilic groups, they may reduce their exposure to the kinds of cultural complexity that encourage humility, challenge assumptions, and foster growth (Seven & Aysel, 2025). While cultural affinity can offer safety and affirmation, it may also insulate students from the discomfort and uncertainty that are integral to intercultural development.

Cultural humility thus provides an ethical lens to assess whether the learning environment supports the kinds of ongoing reflexivity, openness to difference, and relational awareness that social work demands. For social work, this framework highlights the importance of cultivating not just knowledge of cultural "others," but the capacity to critically engage with one's own positionality in relation to others. This skill that cannot be meaningfully developed in culturally homogeneous learning environments.

Research Method

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative methodology guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), rooted in the philosophical traditions of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith, 2017). IPA is particularly suited to inquiries that explore how individuals make sense of lived experiences, especially in educational, cultural, or professional contexts where meaning is constructed through subjective interpretation. In this study, which examines the drivers of homophily in self-formed student groups and their impact on intercultural skill development, IPA was selected because it allows for a double hermeneutic process: participants interpret their own experiences, and the researcher interprets those interpretations. This design was essential because the study's focus is not on behavioural generalisations but on the meaning, emotions, and identities behind group formation practices. Exploratory or descriptive designs would not suffice, as the research required in-depth engagement with culturally situated meaning-making processes, central to both educational experiences and professional formation in social work.

Participants

Consistent with the principles of IPA, a purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants who shared a common experience (Smith, 2017), namely, forming culturally homogeneous groups within a master of social work (qualifying) program in Australia. The sample comprised 14 international students, evenly split between African (n=7) and Asian (n=7) backgrounds, all enrolled in the third (final) trimester of their program at one private tertiary institution that is a Melbourne-based campus of a higher education institution. No domestic students were part of this cohort, which had been observed by the researcher (a lecturer in the program) to consistently self-select into continentally homophilic groups during group-based academic tasks. The practice of self-formed group work is standard institutional policy within the program, allowing students to select their own group members for assessment tasks. Recruitment was facilitated through program coordinators, who shared information about the study and invited expressions of interest. Participants voluntarily enrolled and were stratified by continent to ensure balanced representation. In line with IPA's emphasis on experiential homogeneity (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021), participants were not selected for demographic sameness, but because they shared the same academic program, institutional setting, and the specific experience of forming culturally aligned peer groups.

Table 1 outlines key demographic information, offering contextual insight into the age, gender, length of stay in Australia, and religious affiliation of the participants. This helps situate their experiences within broader cultural and social identities that may inform their choices about group formation.

Table 1. *Participant Demographics (n=14)*

Participant ID	Age	Gender	Region	Years in Australia	Religion
P1	27	Female	Africa	1.5	Christian
P2	29	Male	Africa	2	Christian
P3	26	Female	Africa	1	Muslim
P4	30	Male	Africa	2.5	Christian
P5	28	Female	Africa	2	Christian
P6	32	Male	Africa	3	Muslim
P7	27	Female	Africa	1.8	Christian
P8	26	Female	Asia	1.5	Hindu
P9	29	Male	Asia	2	Buddhist
P10	25	Female	Asia	1	No religion
P11	28	Male	Asia	2.2	Muslim
P12	31	Female	Asia	2.8	Hindu
P13	27	Male	Asia	2.5	Christian
P14	30	Female	Asia	3	Muslim

The demographic table reflects a balanced distribution of participants across age, gender, continent, and religious affiliation, highlighting the diversity within each regional group and underscoring the relevance of cultural, linguistic, and social identities in shaping students' group formation experiences.

Research Instrument

In alignment with the methodological foundations of IPA, data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide comprising open-ended, exploratory questions (Smith, 2017). Semi-structured interviews are the most widely endorsed method in IPA, enabling participants to reflect deeply on their experiences while allowing the researcher to follow emergent threads of meaning (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). The initial interview guide was developed by the researcher and peer-reviewed by two experts in migration and education research to ensure cultural sensitivity and alignment with IPA principles. Two overarching questions framed the inquiry: (1) *Can you describe your reasons for choosing to work in culturally similar groups?* (2) *How do you think this has influenced your intercultural skill development in your social work education?* Consistent with established IPA interviewing principles (Alase, 2017), these broad prompts were further toned into four levels: contextual, experiential, interpretative, and existential as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *Interview Framework*

Level	Purpose	Specific Question	Probing Techniques
Contextual	Understand cultural-academic setting	"Can you describe how group formation works in your program?"	"What happens when you're asked to form groups?", "Who do you choose?"
Experiential	Explore emotional experience	"How did you feel working in groups with culturally similar peers?"	"Did it feel easier or harder?", "How did others respond to this?"
Interpretative	Uncover personal meaning	"Why do you think students tend to form groups with similar others?"	"What does this choice say about your comfort, identity, or goals?"
Existential	Connect to broader self and future	"How has this influenced your understanding of working with diversity?"	"What might this mean for your future as a social worker?"

Each level included a specific guiding question and associated probing techniques to elicit depth and richness of meaning. This structure facilitated a layered conversation that moved from descriptive accounts to deeper interpretive reflections, consistent with IPA's goals of capturing how participants make sense of their personal and professional experiences.

Data Collection

Following ethical approval from the College's Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. SAE-023/2025), data collection was undertaken between 12 April and 10 May 2025. All interviews were conducted face-to-face in private rooms on campus to ensure confidentiality and participant comfort, in line with IPA's emphasis on creating a safe and dialogic space (Smith, 2017). Interviews were audio-recorded (with consent) and ranged from 47 to 63 minutes. The researcher, who had previously taught the participants, adopted a reflexive stance, explicitly acknowledging potential power dynamics and social desirability bias. Prior to each session, participants were clearly informed that the study was independent of academic assessment, and participation was

entirely voluntary. A three-minute pre-interview briefing was essential to establish trust and mitigate perceived coercion. Although some of non-IPA studies often recommend outsourcing interviews to reduce bias, the approach also recognises the value of researcher involvement in the double hermeneutic process (Nizza et al., 2021). This study embraced a pragmatic insider-researcher role, not for epistemic objectivity, but to enhance interpretive depth.

Data Analysis

In the first phase, MAXQDA 2022, a qualitative data analysis software used for coding and thematic organization. The first phase involved line-by-line coding of transcribed interviews, focusing on semantic content, emotional tone, and interpretive nuance. Using the word frequency and co-occurrence tools in MAXQDA, preliminary codes were identified, such as “comfort,” “trust,” “same background,” “support,” and “language,” which were then clustered into preliminary themes. This process generated over 180 coded segments across the dataset, which were then reviewed for connections, overlap, and thematic density.

In the second phase, consistent with IPA’s idiographic commitment and guidance from Eatough and Smith (2006), highly related preliminary themes were merged, refined, and differentiated using metaphoric descriptors that captured the essence of lived experience. The researcher then constructed superordinate and subordinate themes, ensuring that each subordinate theme was grounded in thick, illustrative verbatims. Interpretive metaphors (e.g., “*emotional exhale*,” “*quiet dilemmas*,” “*comfort now, consequences later*”) were used to distinguish and deepen interpretive engagement, as IPA encourages metaphor to signal experiential depth. Themes were organised around two superordinate domains: Drivers of Homophily and Implications for Intercultural Learning. These domains reflect both the motivations behind cultural grouping and the professional learning tensions that emerged. The final themes were reviewed for coherence, uniqueness, and recurrence across participants.

Trustworthiness

Although generalisability is not the aim of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, 2017), ensuring the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of findings remained central to the study. First, the researcher maintained a detailed reflexive journal throughout data collection and analysis, documenting personal assumptions, positionality, and emotional responses to enhance self-awareness and analytic transparency. Second, expert debriefing was conducted with two academic peers specialising in cultural and migration studies, who critically reviewed early interpretations and challenged potential bias. To enhance credibility, a member-checking session was conducted, attended by 11 of the 14 participants, where preliminary themes were shared and affirmed. This process confirmed the resonance and authenticity of the emerging findings without forcing consensus. Additionally, a clear audit trail of methodological decisions, coding processes, and theme development was maintained, ensuring that interpretations were grounded in participants’ accounts. These measures collectively enhanced the trustworthiness and ethical integrity of the study.

Ethical considerations

In line with Australia National Statement on Studies in involving human participants, this study was ethically approved by the Acknowledge Education Research Committee) with ethical approval number (SAE-023/2025). Informed consent was sought, and participants signed the consent form prior to the data collection session.

Results

This study identified two overarching (superordinate) thematic domains: Drivers of Homophily and Perceived Implications for Intercultural Skill Development, each comprising three subordinate themes. These themes were developed through interpretative engagement with participants' lived experiences, using key metaphors to capture the emotional and cognitive tone of their reflections.

Drivers of Homophily

This section explores the underlying motivations and contextual realities that led students to form culturally homophilic groups, revealing how these alliances functioned as both academic coping mechanisms and emotional sanctuaries.

Theme 1: “We’ve Got Each Other’s Backs” — Informal Safety Nets in Academic Survival

Students consistently described group formation as a strategic social arrangement, forged not only from cultural affinity but also from shared survival needs. For many, forming study groups with familiar peers served as an adaptive response to the competing demands of academic life, financial hardship, and part-time employment. These groups evolved into relational infrastructures for accountability, information sharing, and academic continuity, especially when institutional systems proved inflexible or impersonal. Participants revealed that these alliances were not just helpful, but sometimes vital to staying afloat in an unfamiliar and demanding educational environment. The following feedback confirms the above observation:

There are weeks I have back-to-back shifts at work, and I miss a class or two. But my group already knows—I don’t have to ask. They just send me the notes, the slides, and sometimes even explain what happened. (P4, Male, African, 30 years)

This contextual account highlights how academic support was embedded in the realities of economic survival, where participants had no option but to work while studying. The unspoken nature of this help reflects a deep sense of knowing within the group, an intuitive, pre-arranged solidarity shaped by shared life rhythms. This is also reflected in another student’s narrative:

We all work part-time jobs, and sometimes someone can’t meet a deadline. But because we know each other’s situations, we divide the work in ways that help everyone. One week I do more, the next week someone else carries the load. (P9, Male, Asian, 29 years)

This experiential reflection moves beyond observation into lived negotiation within the group. The participant describes how work is re-distributed fluidly, not just to meet academic goals but to maintain a collective rhythm, underscoring the moral economy of reciprocity that sustains these alliances. In line with the above, one student added that:

I've never had to worry about being left behind. If I miss an update or something changes, one of my girls will message me straight away. It's like we're a team inside and outside class. (P7, Female, African, 27 years)

Resonating with the above, this interpretive and existential account reveals how group membership provided more than functional support; it offered a sense of belonging. The phrase “inside and outside class” signals how academic life and emotional connectedness were interwoven, and how these alliances became spaces of mattering in an otherwise transient educational experience. The data revealed that homophilic groupings acted as relational safety nets, built not merely on shared culture but on mutual trust and shared vulnerability. These alliances helped participants manage institutional pressures informally, demonstrating that group formation was a survival strategy as much as a cultural comfort.

Theme 2: “I Can Just Be Myself Here” — Cultural Familiarity as Emotional Refuge

Participants often spoke about group formation as a space for emotional recalibration, where cultural familiarity allowed them to drop their guard and feel psychologically safe. In contrast to the broader academic environment, which demanded constant linguistic and cultural adjustment, these culturally aligned groups served as refuges from performance. Students described being able to speak in their native languages, share humour, and express frustrations without fear of misinterpretation or judgment. These spaces were not merely convenient, they were described as necessary for preserving emotional energy and maintaining a sense of self amidst academic and social stress. This is reflected in the following narratives:

When I'm with my people, I don't always have to speak English. It's like I can breathe again. I don't have to think too much about how I say things or whether someone will misunderstand me. Verbatim 1 (P2, Male, Asian, 26 years)

Emerging from the prior theme's focus on mutual support, this contextual and experiential reflection reveals how language use becomes a form of emotional exhalation. The participant is not merely opting for linguistic ease, but is describing a release from self-monitoring, illustrating how cultural alignment functions as a protective emotional zone. This interpretation is further exemplified in the following narrative:

I don't want to offend anyone, but it's just easier when I don't have to explain every cultural thing I say or do. Sometimes I make a joke or reference and people from my country immediately get it. That makes me feel more like myself, not like I'm always adjusting. (P6, Female, African, 28 years)

This interpretive account adds depth to the above by highlighting cultural shorthand, a shared social code that affirms identity without explanation. The

participant articulates the invisible labour of cultural translation, and how homophilic groups offer a rare space to exist without editing. In similar experience, another student shared that:

In class, I'm always thinking, 'How do I say this so people won't take it the wrong way?' But when I'm with my group, I just talk. Even when we disagree, I feel safe to speak my mind. It's like I'm home, even if I'm far from home. (P11, Male, African, 31 years).

Resonating with the above reflections, this existential perspective captures the deep psychological anchoring that familiar group spaces offered. The metaphor of “home” underscores how group belonging reconnected students with their cultural and emotional centres, enabling authentic self-expression in a foreign context. Homophilic groups served as emotional sanctuaries, allowing students to reclaim a sense of cultural ease and authentic selfhood. This familiarity reduced cognitive and emotional strain, showing that language and cultural resonance were not about exclusion, but about psychological restoration in an otherwise demanding academic landscape.

Theme 3: “When Others Join, It Gets Awkward” — Linguistic Intimacy and Unintentional Exclusion

While students valued the comfort of speaking their native languages within culturally aligned groups, many became aware that this linguistic intimacy created unintended discomfort for others. Participants described moments when students from different cultural backgrounds joined their group, and the group inadvertently slipped into non-English conversation, causing tension or exclusion. These occurrences were often unintentional but left some feeling guilty or conflicted, as they recognised the importance of inclusive practice, especially in a profession like social work. The result was a quiet dilemma between preserving emotional ease and fostering intercultural openness. This is reflected in the following narratives:

Sometimes when someone from another background joins, we try to stick to English, but it's hard—we forget, and then it gets awkward. You realise the person is just sitting there, not talking. Then you feel bad, but it also feels unnatural to keep switching. (P7, Female, African, 27 years)

This contextual and interpretive reflection follows naturally from the prior theme of emotional refuge, now complicated by the presence of cultural outsiders. The participant reveals a tension between habit and awareness, illustrating how language operates both as comfort and boundary, especially when social codes are unspoken. This is reflected in the following narrative:

It's not that we don't want others—it's just, when you're tired, your brain switches to what feels natural. That's our own language. After a long day, you just want to speak freely without thinking too much. (P11, Male, Asian, 28 years)

Resonating with the above, this experiential account brings out the cognitive exhaustion that underpins linguistic choices. The participant is not just defending the use of native language but pointing to the role of mental fatigue in defaulting to cultural norms, suggesting that exclusion may arise from emotional necessity, not

intentionality. In contrast to the above, the following narrative shows the effort to include other students from different linguistically background:

There was a time an African student joined our group, and we were all Asians. We tried to include him, but we ended up translating things a lot. Eventually he stopped coming. I felt bad, but I also saw how different our ways of thinking and even joking was. (P8, Female, Asian, 26 years)

This existential and reflective account highlights how inclusion efforts can falter not due to rejection, but because of cultural dissonance. The participant notices that even with translation, deeper forms of social connection, such as humour, rhythm, thought patterns, remained misaligned, revealing the limits of surface-level inclusion. Participants demonstrated an acute awareness of how linguistic comfort can unintentionally marginalise others, even when inclusion is desired. The data suggests that while homophilic groups offer emotional relief, they can also reproduce subtle boundaries, revealing the fragility of intercultural cohesion in settings where shared language and culture are central to group identity.

Perceived Implications on Intercultural Skill Development

This section presents participants' growing awareness of the professional and pedagogical limitations of homophilic groupings, highlighting tensions between cultural comfort and the intercultural demands of social work practice.

Theme 4: "I'm Not Seeing the Whole Picture" — Narrowing of Intercultural Horizons

Although students formed groups for emotional and practical support, some later began to reflect on the missed intercultural learning opportunities this pattern created. Several participants admitted that remaining within familiar cultural circles led to a limited exposure to differing perspectives, communication styles, and worldviews. This reflection often came belatedly, during practicum placements or deeper academic engagement, when students confronted the diversity, they had avoided in the classroom. While homophily had met immediate needs, it also obscured the broader human and professional learning that the social work context requires. One student acknowledged that:

I know I need to work with all kinds of people as a social worker, but in class I always end up in the same bubble. It's not like I'm against others—it just happens naturally. But then I realise I'm not really learning how to work with difference. (P2, Male, African, 29 years)

This interpretive reflection connects directly to the earlier theme of unintentional exclusion, now reframed as a form of self-limitation. The participant moves from describing habitual comfort to recognising its professional cost, showing the slow surfacing of critical awareness regarding intercultural engagement. In line with the above, another student reflected that:

On placement, I worked with people from very different backgrounds—different even from my own classmates. I suddenly saw how much I hadn't learned. I was like, 'Oh, this is what I missed by just sticking with my people in class.' (P10, Female, Asian, 25 years)

This experiential account emphasises delayed realisation, where the consequences of cultural clustering only became visible outside the classroom. Her words reflect a moment of awakening, where the gap between classroom behaviour and professional expectations became personally and professionally significant. Acknowledging the importance of other groups, one student shared that:

Sometimes I hear something in class from another group, and I think, 'Wow, I never thought of it like that.' But those moments are rare, and they remind me there's a lot I'm not seeing when I stay in my circle. (P13, Male, Asian, 27 years)

Resonating with the above, this existential reflection captures the fleeting but powerful awareness that emerges when diverse thinking is encountered. The participant acknowledges that while such moments are insightful, they are also infrequent, suggesting that deeper intercultural learning is being unintentionally deferred. Participants began to recognise that cultural comfort in group formation came at the cost of broader learning opportunities. Though not immediately evident, students came to see that social ease could narrow professional readiness, particularly in a profession that demands cultural responsiveness and adaptability.

Theme 5: "Comfort Now, Consequences Later" — Conflict Between Familiarity and Future Readiness

Students frequently expressed an internal tension between staying within culturally familiar groups and the professional demands of social work, which requires engaging with diverse populations. While homophilic grouping offered emotional ease and academic survival, some participants questioned its long-term value, especially as they looked toward practicum placements and future employment. The short-term benefit of reduced stress was often accompanied by a quiet discomfort, as students wondered whether they were avoiding necessary growth. This conflict surfaced not as a rejection of others, but as a growing awareness that their choices may be shaping their readiness to practice across difference. One student shared that:

It's like I'm choosing what's easy now, but I know later I'll have to work with people very different from me—and I don't know if I'm ready. I'm comfortable now, but maybe too comfortable. I sometimes feel I'm missing a chance to stretch myself. (P5, Female, African, 28 years)

This interpretive statement builds on the previous theme's insight about missed horizons, now turning inward toward self-assessment and professional doubt. The participant's language suggests a cognitive dissonance, where the ease of the present is weighed against the unknowns of the future. Related to this, one student shared that:

In our groups, we understand each other quickly—we don't argue much. But when I did a workshop with students from other backgrounds, I found it hard to explain myself. That's when I realised, I've been avoiding that kind of challenge in class. (P13, Male, Asian, 27 years)

Resonating with the above, this experiential account highlights the practical consequences of avoiding intercultural dynamics. The participant acknowledges that familiar groups make things smoother, but at the cost of developing the communication skills needed for broader professional contexts. This is shown in the following:

I think we all know that we should try to mix more. But the truth is, everyone's just trying to survive—work, rent, deadlines. It's easier to stay close to what you know. Still, I sometimes wonder if we're losing something important. (P2, Male, African, 29 years)

In line with the above, this existential reflection offers a collective framing of the dilemma. The participant names the structural pressures, financial, academic, emotional, that make cultural comfort appealing but also voices a shared uncertainty about what might be sacrificed in the process. While homophily offered immediate psychological and academic relief, participants began to reflect on its potential cost to their future professional confidence. The data reveals an emerging awareness that avoiding discomfort now may lead to unpreparedness later, especially in a profession that centres on working across cultural differences.

Theme 6: “That’s Just How We Do It” — Normalisation of Cultural Clustering

As students settled into the rhythms of academic life, group formation based on cultural familiarity became habitual and unquestioned. Participants described this pattern as something that simply “happened,” often without deliberate choice or critical reflection. Over time, homophilic grouping became a normalised practice, reinforced by convenience, trust, and shared needs, but rarely reviewed against the goals of intercultural learning. Although some students recognised the value of diverse group work, they admitted that without external intervention, their group choices would remain unchanged. This is shown below:

We just go with the people we know—we don't even think about it now. It's not about excluding others; it's just automatic. You see your people, and that's who you sit with, work with, and talk to. (P3, Female, African, 26 years)

This contextual account echoes previous themes of cultural ease, now reframed through the lens of unreflective repetition. The participant's use of “automatic” illustrates how homophilic grouping has become a social default, shaped more by routine than by conscious exclusion. In line with the above, another student added that:

Unless the teacher says you can't do that, we'll probably keep forming the same groups. It's not like we're trying to avoid others—we just don't feel pushed to do anything different. (P9, Male, Asian, 29 years)

This interpretive reflection highlights the role of institutional silence in reinforcing cultural clustering. The participant implies that the absence of guidance or structured mixing allows students to remain within their comfort zones, even when they intellectually acknowledge the value of broader engagement. One student reflected that:

It's kind of like a habit now. At first, it was about support and trust, but now it's just what we do. I think even if someone new wanted to join, it would feel a bit strange. (P8, Female, Asian, 26 years)

Resonating with previous reflections, this existential account captures the inertia of routine of how early choices solidify into group norms that are difficult to disrupt. The mention of discomfort around newcomers suggests that group boundaries become subtly reinforced, even without active exclusion. The data show that homophilic group formation became a socially embedded pattern, sustained by familiarity and left

unchallenged over time. Without intentional prompts or structured opportunities for intercultural engagement, students are likely to continue forming groups that prioritise predictability over diversity, even when they recognise the long-term professional value of broader interaction.

Summary of the Findings

The findings show that international social work students consistently formed culturally homogeneous groups driven by emotional safety, linguistic comfort, and shared academic expectations. While these groups offered support and reduced anxiety, they also narrowed opportunities for intercultural engagement and limited exposure to diverse perspectives essential for professional readiness. This pattern contributed to delayed development of intercultural skills and reinforced cultural clustering within the learning environment. Table 3 summarises these key themes and subthemes that emerged from the analysis:

Table 3. *Summary of Themes*

Superordinate Theme	IPA Metaphor	Subordinate Theme	Merged Preliminary Themes
Drivers of Homophily	<i>"We've Got Each Other's Backs"</i>	Informal Safety Nets in Academic Survival	Peer support; Shared workload; Missed classes; Group loyalty; Unofficial coordination; Academic survival strategies
	<i>"I Can Just Be Myself Here"</i>	Cultural Familiarity as Emotional Refuge	Native language use; Emotional fatigue; Humour and cultural shorthand; Safe spaces; Authentic expression
	<i>"When Others Join, It Gets Awkward"</i>	Linguistic Intimacy and Unintentional Exclusion	Code-switching fatigue; Guilt over exclusion; Translation burden; Cultural rhythm mismatch
Implications for Intercultural Learning	<i>"I'm Not Seeing the Whole Picture"</i>	Narrowing of Intercultural Horizons	Missed perspectives; Reflection during placement; Cultural echo chambers; Limited exposure
	<i>"Comfort Now, Consequences Later"</i>	Conflict Between Familiarity and Future Readiness	Short-term ease; Professional uncertainty; Avoidance of discomfort; Underdeveloped intercultural confidence
	<i>"That's Just How We Do It"</i>	Normalisation of Cultural Clustering	Habitual grouping; Lack of critical reflection; Institutional silence; Resistance to mixing

Discussion

This study examined how international master of social work students at an Australian private college formed culturally homogeneous (homophilic) groups, and how this shaped their intercultural learning and professional development. Findings revealed that group formation was driven not only by cultural affinity but by deeper

needs for emotional refuge, academic survival, and relational trust. Yet, while these groups offered safety and support, they also limited intercultural dialogue, reinforced social boundaries, and potentially reduced students' readiness for the diverse demands of social work practice.

The first two themes, "We've Got Each Other's Backs" and "I Can Just Be Myself Here", highlighted how homophilic group formation served as both a strategic and emotional infrastructure. Students described forming groups with culturally similar peers out of necessity: to manage work-study balance, share academic tasks, and preserve emotional well-being. These alliances functioned as informal safety nets, responding to the absence of flexible institutional support. This aligns closely with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which posits that individuals seek out group affiliations that affirm identity and offer psychological security. In this context, cultural similarity provided not only social recognition but also relational certainty within an otherwise unpredictable academic environment. Unlike previous studies that link homophily primarily to exclusion or prejudice (e.g., Motos, 2016), this study reveals its adaptive and relational logic, particularly among students confronting structural vulnerability. However, while these groups supported survival, they also became protective enclosures, spaces that shielded students from discomfort but may have inadvertently curtailed intercultural growth.

That tension became more visible in Theme 3: "When Others Join, It Gets Awkward," where participants described the fragile balance between cultural comfort and inclusive practice. Although students did not intentionally exclude others, they acknowledged that using native languages and shared cultural codes often created barriers for those outside their group. Here, Cultural humility emphasised in social work by (Gottlieb, 2021) is instructive. This framework emphasises the need for ongoing reflexivity, power awareness, and openness to difference, qualities that were at times compromised when students defaulted to linguistic intimacy. The findings suggest that while homophily provided emotional restoration, it also created unspoken boundaries that were difficult to navigate when others attempted to join. This echoes Deardorff's (2006) assertion that intercultural competence is not merely about knowledge or attitude, but about the ability to adapt behaviour in diverse contexts. In this cohort, the adaptation often failed, not because of resistance, but due to the emotional and cognitive fatigue of consistently having to perform cultural translation. As such, the findings underscore that intercultural engagement requires more than goodwill; it demands sustained institutional and pedagogical support to manage complexity, vulnerability, and ambiguity.

Themes 4 and 5, "I'm Not Seeing the Whole Picture" and "Comfort Now, Consequences Later," revealed a gradual but growing awareness among students that cultural comfort might be limiting their professional development. Some participants expressed regret that their habitual group choices had narrowed their exposure to alternative viewpoints, communication styles, and ways of thinking. This realisation often surfaced during practicum placement, when students were finally required to work with individuals from different backgrounds. These accounts resonate strongly with Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991), which emphasises disorienting dilemmas as the starting point for deep learning. In this study, the discomfort of intercultural work, often avoided in the classroom, emerged belatedly, creating anxiety around professional readiness. Students began to question whether their group habits, though emotionally convenient, had blunted their growth as

culturally responsive practitioners. This highlights the paradox at the heart of homophily in social work education: while it protects students in the short term, it may also deprive them of the reflective discomfort essential to ethical practice. In social work, Corchado Castillo et al. (2024) remind us that transformation involves critical reflection on one's assumptions, a process unlikely to occur within culturally homogeneous echo chambers.

The study's final theme, "That's Just How We Do It," demonstrated how homophilic grouping becomes normalised over time, turning into a behavioural default rather than a deliberate act. Participants described how these patterns became habitual, reinforced by routine, convenience, and the lack of pedagogical challenge. This finding aligns with Leask's (2009) observation that when intercultural engagement is not intentionally scaffolded, students will often retreat into cultural silos. When instructors did not structure groups or scaffold cross-cultural interaction, homophilous groupings persisted, indicating that classroom diversity alone does not produce intercultural learning (Marginson, 2022). From a theoretical standpoint, this theme reveals the limits of individual intention and the critical role of institutional design. While students may value diversity conceptually, their behaviours are shaped by systems that fail to facilitate meaningful intercultural dialogue. Cultural humility, as an ethical framework, challenges this status quo by insisting on institutional accountability, arguing that educators must not only teach about diversity but also structure learning environments that interrupt homophily and create space for mutual transformation.

Taken together, these findings offer a nuanced account of cultural homophily as both an act of care and a barrier to growth. They confirm that group formation among international social work students is shaped by layered realities: emotional vulnerability, linguistic fatigue, institutional rigidity, and professional aspiration. The study complicates the binary of inclusion/exclusion by showing that students can be both nurtured and constrained by their group choices. While prior research has documented the isolating effects of cultural clustering (Dutta & Kundu, 2021; Yang et al., 2024), this study adds depth by revealing how such clustering is self-sustained even in the absence of dominant-culture students. This suggests that homophily is not merely imposed by external social hierarchies but is also internalised and reproduced by those navigating shared marginality. Unlike studies in mixed cohorts where homophily is often interpreted as a response to marginalisation by domestic students (e.g., Motos, 2016), the study reveals that homophilic patterns can emerge within minority groups themselves, driven by internal dynamics and structural conditions. This complicates overly simplistic narratives of exclusion and inclusion and calls for a more nuanced understanding of how culture, language, structural vulnerability, and institutional design intersect in shaping students' relational behaviours. However, more research is needed to explore how these patterns unfold across different institutional types, program structures, and cultural compositions. For social work education, this raises urgent questions: How can learning environments foster both safety and challenge? How do we design group tasks that promote authentic intercultural exchange without forcing assimilation or tokenism? And how can institutions disrupt habitual patterns without undermining students' sense of belonging?

The findings have clear implications for intercultural skill development in social work education. Intercultural competence, whether framed through Deardorff's (2006) process model, Corchado Castillo et al. (2024)'s transformative learning, or the ethical stance of cultural humility in social work, requires exposure to difference, critical

reflection, and dialogic engagement. Homophilic grouping, while understandable, may insulate students from these developmental processes. In a profession committed to anti-oppressive practice, cultural responsiveness, and social justice, this insulation is not merely a pedagogical issue; it is an ethical one. Without intentional disruption, students risk entering practice with limited intercultural reflexivity and inability to challenge their assumptions or navigate culturally complex relationships. As Bennett and Gates (2021) remind us, transformation begins in dialogue, with the Other, not just the familiar.

Limitations

This study was conducted within a single private Australian higher education institution, composed entirely of international students, with no domestic student representation. As such, the findings reflect a unique cultural and institutional context and may not be transferable to public universities or mixed cohorts where cultural dynamics differ. The use of IPA, while valuable for exploring lived experiences, carries inherent subjectivity, including the researcher's interpretive lens. The sample size, consistent with IPA traditions, was small and purposively selected, which limits the breadth of perspectives. Additionally, the researcher's positionality as a lecturer in the same institution may have influenced participants' responses, positively or restrictively, despite efforts to maintain reflexivity and ethical boundaries. These limitations suggest caution in generalising the findings and point to the need for further research in diverse institutional settings with a wider range of student demographics and researcher positions.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study revealed that cultural homophily in student group formation is a complex, adaptive, and emotionally grounded practice among international social work students. While these groupings provided essential academic support and emotional sanctuary, they also narrowed intercultural learning, limited professional preparedness, and became normalised patterns that often went unchallenged. The findings underscore that intercultural engagement does not occur naturally, even in culturally diverse classrooms. Instead, it requires intentional design, reflective pedagogy, and institutional scaffolding. Most notably, the study highlights the tension between short-term comfort and long-term professional development, suggesting that without structured opportunities for intercultural interaction, students may leave social work programs underprepared for culturally responsive practice. The following recommendations are suggested:

1. **Structured Group Allocation:** Social work educators within this institution should rotate and assign group members in selected assessments to ensure intercultural engagement and prevent habitual clustering.
2. **Critical Reflection Tasks:** Incorporate formative assessments that require students to reflect on their group dynamics, cultural positioning, and intercultural encounters.

3. **Facilitated Intercultural Dialogues:** Introduce workshop-style sessions facilitated by trained staff, where students engage in guided conversations about cultural identity, communication styles, and shared challenges.
4. **Staff Training on Cultural Grouping Patterns:** Academic staff should receive professional development on recognising and constructively addressing homophilic patterns in classrooms.
5. **Practicum Placement Preparation:** Pre-placement training should include intercultural readiness modules, preparing students to work across difference and critically reflect on classroom habits that may hinder practice.

These recommendations aim to intentionally disrupt habitual cultural clustering, strengthen intercultural competence, and ensure that international social work students graduate with the relational, reflective, and practice-ready skills required for culturally responsive professional engagement.

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