

“It’s Both Ways”: How International Students Negotiate Belonging in Local and Global Contexts

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Abstract

This study sheds light on the overall adjustment of international students in local and global contexts. The study is based on in-depth focus groups with international students from three separate universities that are located in relatively small communities in Atlantic Canada. We find that participants negotiate a sense of belonging through a transnational process by forming multicultural friendship networks that primarily include other international students at university, while remaining somewhat detached from the local community and from Canada, despite their desire and efforts to become more integrated. The findings contribute to an understanding of the multiplicity of international student experiences from an intersectional paradigm. The authors suggest that a greater facilitation of the integration of international and domestic students within a multicultural framework is especially important in small and relatively homogeneous communities.

Résumé

Cette étude fait la lumière sur l’ajustement général des étudiants étrangers dans des contextes local et international. Elle se fonde sur des discussions de groupe approfondies effectuées avec des étudiants étrangers de trois universités distinctes qui se trouvent dans des collectivités relativement petites du Canada atlantique. Nous estimons que les participants trouvent un sentiment d’appartenance grâce à un processus transnational en formant des réseaux d’amis multiculturels qui regroupent principalement d’autres étudiants étrangers de l’université, tout en restant quelque peu détachés de la collectivité et du Canada, et ce, malgré leur désir et leurs efforts de s’intégrer davantage. Les trouvailles permettent de comprendre la pluralité des expériences d’étudiants étrangers à partir d’un paradigme intersectionnel. Les auteures prétendent qu’une facilité accrue de l’intégration d’étudiants étrangers et canadiens dans un cadre de travail multiculturel est particulièrement importante dans des petites collectivités relativement homogènes.

Introduction

There is broad consensus that the diversity of the student body in higher education settings enhances learning (Umbach and Kuh 169), which supports internationalization. There is less agreement, however, over the relative benefits to international students, and how their experiences may be shaped in relation to various contextual factors. Our objective in this article is to explore such experiences with a focus on the concept of belonging for international students in small university and community settings in the Atlantic region of Canada, the changes in experience for them over the course of their studies in Canada, and the significance of these changes. We begin this enterprise with a review of literature on the

integration of international students in various national contexts. In this review, we distinguish structural approaches to integration, which are primarily concerned with broad academic and social outcomes, from approaches that are more context specific. The latter approaches allow for a more nuanced understanding of variability in the integration process for international students and change over time. Second, we outline our methods. Third, we situate our analytical framework and draw on the concepts of multicultural integration, intersectionality, and post-national citizenship. And fourth, we present our findings and analysis, which are intended to contribute to the literature on variability in the integration process by exploring the issue of belonging for international students in three small communities that are located in the Atlantic region of Canada.

Literature Review

An increasing number of people today pursue higher education in a country other than that of their primary residence. The recent government strategy to draw on the expanding pool of international student graduates to supply labour for the emerging knowledge economy in Canada (Alboim; Kemp) is based in part on the assumption that they will have a smoother transition into the Canadian labour market. Their transition would be eased because they will not face the barriers and delays associated with accreditation that immigrants educated abroad often do (Maheux and Schellenberg; Simmons, "Economic Integration"). And presumably, they will also have acculturated somewhat to the host country during their studies.

There is wide agreement that academic and social adjustment, as well as integration for international students, is dependent on tangible measures of preparedness such as host language proficiency. However, there is also considerable evidence that the availability of various kinds of support for international students in the host context varies widely, and that they often face a number of structural constraints to successful integration. In a meta-analysis of studies on international students in English-speaking countries, Andrade found that international students overall experience greater difficulty adjusting to university than domestic students, and that they experienced greater levels of homesickness, stress, anxiety, lack of confidence, and isolation. Studies furthermore suggest that international students generally feel that professors often do not understand the academic and social challenges facing them, and that informal support from host country peers, such as that obtained through friendships and the social inclusion in friendship groups, is also often lacking (Andrade; Dunn and Olivier; Kamara and Gambold; Wright and Schartner; Simmons, "Economic Integration").

The research on academic and social adjustment and integration outcomes for international students provides mixed results. Grayson, in a representative study of four Canadian universities, found that international undergraduate students overall performed at lower levels than their domestic peers. Andrade, however, found broad support in the relevant literature showing that despite the additional academic challenges facing international students, they tend to adjust better academically than socially, and this is confirmed in their eventual academic success. There is also wide agreement in the literature that international students tend to be more engaged academically than their domestic peers (Andrade 136). Other large-scale studies furthermore suggest that the outcomes for the adjustment and integration of international students vary by country of origin (Sam) and by gender (Senyshyn, Warford, and Zhan).

International students may not benefit equally from university support provided to them due to systemic issues. Kamara and Gambold argue that models of support services are often reactive, so that

only those few students who actively seek out services will receive them. This reality may interact with the fact that certain types of institutional support and approaches may work better for international students according to gender, country of origin, and other social locations. Furthermore, resources and support for international students tend to be concentrated in the first year of study (Coles and Swami 89). Arthur and Popadiuk argue that cultural influences in particular are often not adequately considered in services such as career counselling, which can further disadvantage international students. These studies point to important structural constraints for social integration and related academic performance when it comes to international students, but they do not provide detail into important variations based on gender, country of origin, race, and other factors. More detailed analyses from an intersectional approach may help to explain such variations. An intersectional approach can be used to analyze the ways in which these socially constructed differences of gender and country of origin, for example, intersect in particular contexts, and such an analysis can help us contextualize the mixed results of the aforementioned studies on this topic.

Literature that focuses on the *process* of integration for international students is less concerned with the so-called integration outcomes and more concerned with contextual factors, including the cultural backgrounds of international students and the host community as well as the university setting. First, the contextual factors that may be relevant for the integration of international students in host communities and universities include the following: the degree of homogeneity or heterogeneity in the population, including the number of other international students; the social relations and interactions with domestic and other international students, including the availability of opportunities to get involved in student groups and extracurricular activities; and the interactions with professors and the social dynamics in class. The variability observed in studies that focus on the integration process for international students reflects this range of contextual factors. Second, attention to process requires a consideration of how individual and group differences among international students intersect and interact with this range of host country variables. And third, process-oriented approaches may provide insight into change over time during the integration process for international students.

International students may face more enduring challenges with social integration into a host context than with adjustment to academic expectations, although it is uncertain exactly how and the degree to which social adjustment is linked to academic adjustment. Andrade finds support from a number of studies suggesting that combined social and academic adjustment is ongoing and gradual, yet with variations across studies for the pace and the significance of the number of years studying abroad for adjustment (140–1). In a study exploring the adjustment of international students in Australia, Arambewela and Hall found that lack of integration within the wider community created problems with overall adjustment, including academic. Other studies stress how bonding among international students can contribute to better adaptation at university (Andrade; Myles and Cheng). However, because of the need for international students to devote more time to their studies than domestic students, they may invest less time in establishing wider social networks in the host context, which requires them to interact with a different community than the one composed solely of students of similar backgrounds. This trade-off for international students is no doubt reinforced when social integration is not adequately supported in the university and the wider community.

The context of reception may significantly influence the choice of international students to devote time to their studies or to making friends and expanding social networks. International students often feel that the onus is on them to initiate friendships (Andrade 141). Coles and Swami found that for some international students opportunities for cross-cultural interaction decreased over time as they

settled into established, nationality-exclusive friendship groups or cliques. Andrade highlights support from a number of other studies, however, which suggest that, in most cases, social adaptation for international students improves gradually over the course of their studies abroad. From a process-oriented approach, we can interpret these variations in relation to a number of specific contextual factors, not least of which is the degree of openness of domestic students to integrating international students into their friendship networks and daily activities. It is also possible that international students who integrate eventually do so in spite of the lack of effort on the part of the host community to reach out to them, or, in other words, mostly through their own efforts, as Wilson-Forsberg found in her study of the integration of immigrant adolescents in Fredericton, New Brunswick.

In a meta-analysis of literature on social-cultural support for international students, Andrade identified a range of orientation initiatives and matching programs, including homestay, outreach agendas, and counselling programs (141–2). Both domestic and international students have provided positive evaluations of intercultural and other matching programs (Campbell 211, 218). Peer-based tutoring has also been shown to be beneficial for both tutors and international students (Andrade 146). Interestingly, Dalhousie University has proposed matching faculty buddies with incoming international students for the duration of their studies in Canada (Dalhousie International Strategy Committee 7, 35). However, while these various programs may be somewhat beneficial, all operate on a one-to-one basis and therefore do not address the lack of integration of international students into the wider community and signal an ingrained separation between international and domestic student networks on campus. Finally, the lack of wider sociocultural integration may have implications for academic adjustment, but this is not well understood (Andrade 143).

Literature that pays attention to integration as a process and considers the specific social context of reception allows for an understanding of change over time. For example, Coles and Swami argue that the tendency to target sociocultural integration for international students in their first year of study, and the lack of such an emphasis in their second year, often leads to two divergent paths of adaptation—one toward greater integration and the other toward potential isolation. Similarly, Knutson suggests that longer-term outcomes for international students depend on their ability to develop social capital in the host context and is linked to the level of intercultural competence demonstrated by both international and domestic students within a given campus community. Despite recent positive changes in policies and programs for international students in Canada (Knutson 43), smaller and more homogeneous communities continue to face specific challenges in integrating this group on a longer-term basis. Wade and Belkhodja suggest that universities in smaller communities often contribute to “transitory diversity” (42) and have little control over whether international students remain in the community in which they study after graduation. While they are helpful for understanding long-term outcomes, these studies do not pay enough attention to the heterogeneity of international students. Moreover, the links among the size of the community, its level of diversity, and how welcoming it is to international students and immigrants are not well understood. Wilson-Forsberg, for instance, found somewhat counterintuitively that a smaller and more homogeneous community in New Brunswick was more welcoming to immigrant adolescents than a larger and more heterogeneous community in the same region.

The literature reviewed above provides a number of insights into the specificity of the process of integration for international students in various contexts. However, federal and provincial policies as well as university recruitment efforts aimed at increasing the flow of international students into the country tend to conceal the precarious status that this targeted demographic occupies and the potential barriers that it faces to integration both socially and academically. Programs for international students

similarly do not address the wider systemic issues that result in international and domestic students forming largely separate friendship groups and often engaging in distinct activities. Literature that focuses on the process of integration for international students provides preliminary insights into the important role of the receiving community (Arambewela and Hall; Coles and Swami; Myles and Cheng). However, there is insufficient analysis of how international students, individually and collectively, endeavour to integrate themselves and what the process of integration entails from their perspective. We also note a broad gap in the literature on the development of a sense of belonging during the integration process for international students. Related to this gap is the lack of literature that analyzes integration using an intersectional approach grounded in the experiences of international students.

Methods

The main objective of this study is to explore, in depth, the issue of belonging for international undergraduate students in Canada. Ethics approval was obtained prior to commencing the research. International students were recruited to participate in focus groups with the help of advisers and using international student electronic mail lists, posters on campus, and word of mouth. In the winter of 2012 four focus groups were carried out (two in Nova Scotia and two in New Brunswick) with five to seven participants from three universities located in the Atlantic region of Canada (two in Nova Scotia and one in New Brunswick). The three participating universities are relatively small (with total enrolments between 2,500 and 4,000 students) and are situated in small communities (with populations between 4,000 and 6,000 people). The duration of each focus group was approximately ninety minutes. Focus groups were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed by the researchers.

Informed consent was obtained by the researchers from all the participants prior to conducting the focus groups. Sixteen women and seven men, ranging in age from nineteen to twenty-nine at the time of the interviews, agreed to participate. Participants were international students from thirteen countries of origin: four from Japan; three from India; two each from Botswana, Kenya, Malaysia, and Nigeria; as well as one each from Bahrain, Barbados, Bhutan, China, Ecuador, Indonesia, and Norway. Over half of participants (twelve) had lived in at least one other country in addition to Canada and their country of birth. Seven participants had been to Canada prior to becoming international students here. In addition to the twenty-two students listed above by country, one Canadian student was permitted to participate because of her close association with international students, which earned her a kind of honorary membership to this group. Nine participants were in their last year of study while the remainder were spread equally among first, second, and third years. Over half of the participants (fourteen) were pursuing a degree in the social sciences, arts, and/or humanities; seven were pursuing science degrees; five were in business and/or economics; and three were in music or fine arts (counts include double and multiple majors where applicable).

Our overall research design draws on strategies for qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln), and on grounded theory for coding and analysis procedures (Strauss and Corbin). We adopt a constructivist grounded approach to theory (Charmaz), whereby existing knowledge and related questions about the adaptation of international students informs our inquiry and interpretation of meaning from the data (see literature review above). We do not have a representative sample, nor is the intent to provide a representative account of the experiences of international students in small universities in Atlantic Canada. Rather, our approach is exploratory and oriented toward generating

preliminary hypotheses or theoretical conclusions on a specific topic for which there is little prior research—in this case, the sense of belonging as experienced by international students. Two of the researchers involved in the project were international students in their final year of undergraduate studies; they provided valuable insider perspectives that informed the research from its initial design to its completion. Key tasks carried out by the international student researchers were recruitment, interviewing, transcription, and coding.

We are interested in how the targeted group's sense of belonging is shaped by both the structures of the university and its surrounding community within a global context. We pay particular attention to its social interactions and to contextual factors related to the local setting in which they occurred. We also aim to understand interactions between broad structural factors and more localized contextual influences for changes in the sense of belonging experienced by international students over the course of attending university in Canada. Our main research question is the following: does a sense of belonging for international students change over the course of their university education, and if so, how? Our secondary research questions pertain to how international students are received in Canada and the extent to which they feel at home here.

Participants were asked about noteworthy experiences at university and their interaction with the surrounding community up to the time of the interviews. Specifically, they were asked about the following: initial impressions and formative early experiences in Canada as international students; social networking at university and in the surrounding community, including making friends; experiences in classes and with professors; and services and support provided by universities. Depending on their answers, specific probes were added in an attempt to learn more about the following: their interactions with peers, professors, international student advisers, and with others at the university; their friendship groups and other relationships; and their responses to various challenges at the university and in the surrounding community. Additionally, the semi-structured approach allowed for the emergence of spontaneous dialogue on issues of importance to participants within the broad topics outlined above. The analysis of this information begins with a review of relevant theories. We then draw on these theories to interpret our data, combining existing conceptual insights with emergent theme analysis techniques developed by Strauss and Corbin. Because we began the research with a broad and open-ended definition of belonging, relevant themes emerged from the data. In the analysis, the names of the participants have been altered to protect their identities.

Theoretical Framework

The integration of international students into various host contexts is under-theorized, to the extent that the precarious status that they occupy and the various integration processes that they experience are subsumed by a preoccupation with outcomes (reflected particularly in provincial and federal policies as well as university recruitment efforts), and the lack of specificity for a range of contextual variables. We draw on three key concepts to better analyze the process of integration for international students: multicultural integration, intersectionality, and post-national citizenship. An analysis of the role of multicultural integration in Canada, both in terms of the limits of multiculturalism in specific contexts and its potential for the integration of international students, is useful in this regard. An intersectional approach allows a better understanding of the way in which temporary status interacts with the cultural background, language, gender, and social class of international students in Canada, thereby influencing their sense of belonging and their overall integration. Finally, the concept of post-

national citizenship provides a framework for understanding how international students belong in Canada.

A key premise of this research is that there are likely to be both similarities and differences in the adaptation process in Canada for immigrant youth as opposed to the one intended for international students. In regard to potential similarities, we look to Berry, who provides a framework for analyzing immigrant youth adaptation that takes into account their social relations and interactions within various contexts of reception. Berry astutely stresses the benefits of *integration* for overall adaptation, as opposed to *assimilation* or *separation*, which are only preferable to *marginalization* as patterns of adaptation (619). Berry and Sabatier, in a comparison of second-generation immigrant youth adaptation between Paris and Montreal, found that the integration pattern, including both the maintenance of heritage culture and the involvement in the host national culture, was stronger in Canada and led to more positive adaptation for individuals in school and, overall, in the community (204). They conclude that this dissimilarity is based on different national policies, such as an official multiculturalism policy in Canada and differential experiences of discrimination in the two contexts. By contrast, dominant articulations of multiculturalism in Canada have been widely criticized for failing to account for variations in belonging in the case of negatively racialized groups in different geographical spaces and over time (Walcott 12). The degree to which multiculturalism in Canada shapes specific local host contexts of reception for international students, including specific university contexts, warrants further study.

The precariousness faced by international students due to their status as temporary residents may create specific challenges for integration. Previous studies have demonstrated how migrant workers and others with similar precarious status are often exploited by industry with little cost to or commitment on the part of the state (Bernhard; Goldring and Landolt). Corresponding studies on international students tend to focus on the financial benefits that they bring to Canada (Siddiq et al.), the potential human capital that they contribute to the economy should they become permanent residents (Chira; Lowe), and the lack of resources devoted to ensuring their academic success (Fama). Insufficient attention is paid, however, to the precise ways in which their precarious status shapes their experience as international students in Canada and potentially influences their sociocultural adaptation and integration.

The influence of intersectional theory has led to a greater recognition in sociological analysis of the importance of social location in all of its complexity, including divisions of gender, race, class, and immigrant status. Abu-Laban and Gabriel argue that contemporary articulations of feminist theory, such as intersectionality, are relevant for all spheres of social life and provide a framework to analyze activities that have been marginalized or neglected and are therefore invisible. This approach is useful for the present study because it will allow us to better understand the multiplicity of the international student experience within an intersectional paradigm. We are interested, in particular, in how a precarious status may interact with race, culture, language, gender, and social class for international students in specific contexts of reception.

Recent studies that examine immigration and settlement in Canada from global and transnational perspectives (Goldring and Krishnamurti; Simmons, *Integration*) discuss the category of temporary migrants in the context of increasing global mobility as a factor in the formation of communities and models of citizenship. Henders argues that in an era of increasing mobility and global interconnectedness, state-bound ways of understanding citizenship are being challenged on multiple fronts because this restrictive model of citizenship poses barriers to meaningful membership and

participation (40). For instance, Stasiulis and Bakan examine how the transnational lives of migrant women with temporary status in Canada pose a challenge to exclusionary nation-state citizenship practices. Similarly, preliminary studies have explored how the expanding global market for university education provides opportunities for a range of international student mobility strategies (Sherriff et al.; Tremblay), contributing to the extension of transnational migrant networks (Hawthorne). Basok and Ilcan examine how migrant rights activists are challenging the exclusionary practices of states in various ways, while Soysal argues that we are undergoing a transition to post-national citizenship, including the gradual provision of rights by the state to noncitizens living as temporary residents outside their country of citizenship.

In summary, we draw on theories of international migration and settlement, gender, and citizenship to analyze the process of integration for international students with a focus on the issue of belonging. In particular, we draw on the concepts of multicultural integration, intersectionality, and post-national citizenship to examine the issue of belonging.

Findings

This study examines integration for international undergraduate students from an intersectional approach: it focuses on their diverse experiences of social interactions with various groups in three similar, local host contexts for the purposes of understanding what the latter can tell us about the students' integration process and sense of belonging over the course of their studies. The analysis is broken down into three time periods: the first year of study, the second and third years, and the fourth and/or final year. To measure a sense of belonging in Canada among participants, we identified two dominant variables: "feeling welcomed" and "feeling at home" in their respective universities and towns. With the first variable, we explore if and how students are being welcomed by those in the surrounding community. For the second variable, we explore where and with whom they feel at home. The three main questions that we consider are: by whom do they feel welcomed (or not welcomed); does this sense of being welcomed change over time; and how does this experience ultimately influence their sense of belonging? Without discarding numerous anecdotes shared by the participants, as they also hold value, we examine significant observations and common themes that point to shifts in belonging over time in Canada.

First Year: First Impressions and Feeling Different

The participants initially perceived Canadians as "really nice," which for many confirmed their expectations of Canada. Over time, however, participants felt that their interactions with Canadians often emphasized perceived or real cultural differences. This feeling of difference was based on frequent cues that they noticed from everyday interactions in the community and sometimes with their peers, professors, and other university staff. They found that, despite the fact that most Canadians were polite with them, some remained distant. Participants in all four focus groups often second-guessed themselves about whether or not the frequent interactions with Canadians that left them feeling different were a manifestation of racial prejudice or something else. Collectively, these interactions caused them to question their sense of belonging in the context of the university and surrounding community.

Hillary, a fourth-year student reflecting on her first year, stated that because she had a distinct accent when speaking English, she experienced what she called "some kind of discrimination [in which] people thought [she] was a helpless person":

I'm like, "I understand what you're saying. You don't have to speak so slowly"; [and people] are like, "How do you speak like that? Where did you go to school?" I'm just like, "I went to school in Kenya." [The response would be:] "And you speak like that? And I can understand you?"...It's a bit offensive when somebody asks you that right away, right off the bat. But yeah, there is some level of maybe oversensitivity? Especially [in this town], I mean, I don't know how it is in bigger cities, but [here], there tends to be that oversensitivity.

Similarly, Audrey was approached by a number of people during her first few weeks in Canada who asked her if she needed "any help." Like Hillary, she received these offers less than positively and stated that "how people approached [her] clearly showed [she] was different." For other participants, the persistence of what was perceived initially as friendliness and expressions of welcome became reminders to them that they were "from away."

Participants felt that Canadians' interactions often seemed to be influenced by the persistent impression of Canada as "friendly" and "open to all cultures." Leslie felt that "Canada is looked upon as being multicultural and having a mosaic, [but Canadians] are scared of being racist." Similarly, Wendy, a third-year student from another school, remarked:

Many people don't really show that...they're discriminating [against] you...because of your colour, maybe because Canadians are known to be really welcoming people, so they would want to show that they're nice. [In the United States], they're blunt,...but Canadians don't tell you. They're more like, "We want to keep this thing [that] we're nice."...I can't say I have seen someone say something to me and I was thinking, "Oh, he's being racist." I've never had that experience.

In addition to the daily subtle cues and feeling of distance from Canadians, participants also experienced blatant, albeit less frequent, expressions of racial discrimination. For example, one participant recalled how, in her first year of study, the predominantly Canadian students in her dormitory referred to her as "the Asian." Phillip went through a potentially even more unsettling experience in his first year as an international student:

I had this guy [in my physics class] who had never [been physically close] to a Black man in his entire life. So whenever I came [close], he acts like he's asthmatic. He breathes heavily with lots of difficulty, trying to really tolerate this closeness....Then he told me, "Hey, I'm sorry." I thought that was sort of bold of him to come out and tell me that. I said, "Never mind, I understand. You're in a learning process, that's why you're in university. I'm sure you'll meet other guys like me eventually. You'll have a better experience."

Phillip came away from this interaction stating that he "felt pity for [the physics student]" because he has never "come in close proximity with people like us." Participants also spoke of being the targets of "drive-by" racism, the practice of shouting racist slurs from the open window of a car and then driving off.

The reflexivity demonstrated by participants in the focus groups suggests that as early as their first year they were engaged in a self-conscious process of trying to understand the social context that framed their interactions with domestic and other international students. This process was evident when

participants who were faced with unwelcoming experiences attempted to overturn them in various ways and to transform them into situations in which they exercised more control. The example provided by Phillip signifies a level of awareness on his part that takes him beyond simply “feeling victimized.” In another instance, Barbara, a student in her second year, stated that it was “fun” when local students or residents would try to identify where she “came from,” turning it into a game under her control. However, participants found some practices, such as the aforementioned drive-by racism, particularly difficult to face because there was little or no opportunity to respond.

Some experiences in the students’ first year of study allowed participants to begin to gain a sense of belonging in the context of the university and surrounding community. Jessica, a fourth-year student, brought up international orientation week, which takes place before the general student orientation, known as Frosh Week:

I didn’t know anybody when I came here, and then suddenly you have, what, like fifteen new friends...who all are experiencing similar experiences as you. Like they don’t know where they are, they don’t know anything, so I think that was really great because when Frosh Week comes...that was really good in the way that you kind of knew where things were [before other students did]; you can be like, “Oh, I know where this is.”...You didn’t feel like you were completely an outsider.

Some participants mentioned how international student orientation prevented them from feeling isolated when they first arrived, but others expressed reservations. The latter group felt that it would have been an advantage to have more activities at the beginning of their first year that involved greater integration of domestic students with international students. This concern would arise multiple times in later conversations about friendship circles and the development of bonds with other international students as opposed to domestic students, a topic that becomes a primary focus as the students progress through their degree.

Second and Third Year: Social Circles and Academics

In contrast to their first year of study, friendship circles and academic pursuits solidified for participants somewhat in their second year and even more during their third. One group of three participants who had been together since their first year referred to themselves jokingly as “Little India.” Stephanie said she met Little India during her first few days at university and she immediately felt “really welcomed” and “at home.” As she began to devote more time to academics and extracurricular activities, she found little time to devote to anyone else apart from her Indian friends. Other participants also mentioned prioritizing school over making new friends in their second year. Stephanie and others tended to maintain and spend time primarily with individuals that they had befriended in their first year, who were predominantly other international students. Jessica agreed that one feels “safer to be with people that kind of understand [their] experience”; or, as Wendy, a third-year student, observed, “We want to hang out with people who are from the same country as us; maybe sometimes because of the language.” Michelle, in contrast, had difficulty establishing a network of friends, even among other students from her home country. As she stated, “There was [already] a community [among them],” then admitting that “it’s kind of hard to make friends.” Tina, being the only student from her home country at the university, had no choice but to seek out friends from outside her cultural background. She ended up making friends primarily with other international students. As she observed, “It’s just a lot easier to find commonalities—like common ground with them—the click just suddenly happens.”

The examples above highlight the advantages perceived by participants from having bonds with other international students. Such circles seem to form and persist because of their common experiences such as that of being away from home, and perhaps on a deeper level, the joint sense of not quite feeling at home due to lack of a welcoming environment among the dominant cultural group. In the words of one participant, these relationships are incited by a “click” between individuals that may well serve as a “welcome” into a certain “community” of friends. However, examples such as that of Michelle should not be overlooked. Exactly the same “communities” of international students or students from similar national and cultural backgrounds into which many international students seem to ease themselves can evidently leave others feeling isolated. This outcome highlights the complex ways in which multiculturalism plays out in different social contexts. Multicultural relationships are fostered by certain contextual factors such as the shared experiences of being away from home or being the only students of a certain background in the university, yet these relationships are also impeded by other contextual factors simultaneously at play, such as exclusion from already established international friendship circles. Interactions among students are shaped by a perceived cultural difference and perhaps by “race” within various social contexts. However, deeper analyses of the social dynamics at play elaborate a “sense of belonging” beyond those common origins.

Another important point that arises when evaluating participants’ friendships with other international students is timing. Participants’ narratives suggest that most bonds with other international students start during the first days of their university experiences; they strengthen as students progressed through their first year and solidified in their second or third year. This observation raises questions about the nature of the social engagements that take place when international students first arrive and their significance for nurturing feelings of “welcome.” Mike, a fourth-year international student, asserted that one “make[s] friends from day one,” as “you have three or four days of just them.” Howard, another fourth-year international student, agreed that friendships are created if one is in another’s “vicinity.” He used international orientation week as a vivid example: “IO [International Orientation] is like [the] first impression. ...Obviously you’re going to make some ties. And obviously if it’s all international students, that’s going to have an impact.” This comment leads us to question how big an impact it would make on the formation of international students’ friendship circles if domestic students were more involved in activities such as international orientation week.

Consequently, despite the greater ease that most participants felt in the company of other international students, they believed that it was also important to create social bridges to domestic student networks and that they should take more initiative in doing so. As Wendy stated, “Segregation is two-way.” According to Ashley, a second-year student, “We have to be open to trying new things—like if my Canadian friend invites me to go skiing and I’m like, ‘I don’t know,’ ...next time they won’t [invite] me.” Mike believed that “making Canadian friends is just about how much you want it,” because, as he observed, “a lot of international students have a lot of Canadian friends.” However, some participants felt that friendships with domestic students tended to remain “just on the surface.” As Tina explained:

For example, if I need help, I’m very hesitant to ask them for help because I don’t think they are my friends I can ask [help from]....It’s not really a deep friendship. I don’t know, I just feel it’s quite difficult to build that kind of relationship with Canadian students.

Audrey, a fourth-year student, offered a different perspective, however, stating that it is a matter of “giving *them* the opportunity to interact with *us*.” Wendy agreed, stating “There are also other Canadians who just want to hang out with international students.” For example, Lisa, a first-year student from the Atlantic region who joined the international society, stated that there were “some people [she] didn’t even know were international,” and so she just “approach[ed] them like anyone else.”

Lisa’s participation in the international society and in our focus group challenges the assumption that cultural differences are a barrier that must be bridged between international and local students. Instead, it suggests that cultural difference can sometimes act as a basis for integration. It occupies a position that allows domestic and international students to “meet halfway.” Just as international students seek to belong in a new place or find a sense of home “internationally,” local students have an opportunity to also find a place within an emerging international community, a place that allows them to “be international while at home.” An intersectional multicultural context is stressed in this way, which highlights that being an international or domestic student is only one of many differences among students. While there are undoubtedly some experiences where international students and domestic students are “unable to relate to one another,” a mutual engagement in environments in which cultural differences are both recognized and valued can act as a catalyst toward a genuine sense of multiculturalism.

These experiences provide the basis for a wider critique of so-called “multiculturalism” in Canada, in which the reality is often a separation between Canadians and “multicultural others.” This underlines the dynamic that characterizes the separation of international orientation week and Frosh Week, for instance, and the contradictory assumption that “multicultural others” need isolated, segregated means of integration into the larger Canadian society. As the data suggest, this dynamic and assumption may be counterproductive. What instead needs to be supported are dynamics of cultural hybridity, in that genuine integration can take place on the basis of valuing differences in culture and challenging racist practices that undermine integration. Given the willingness on all sides to engage with all others, such interactions at university may lead to greater multicultural tolerance and a further reduction in racial prejudice—societal consequences of immeasurable value.

Our data confirms the important role of multiculturalism within participants’ academic lives, specifically in the classroom and in their interactions with professors. The academic experiences discussed by participants suggest variations between schools, programs, and individual faculty; yet, there are common experiences noted in the literature and confirmed in our study for minority students in educational settings that lack cultural sensitivity, causing them to question their sense of belonging in the Canadian context. This included a range of reported feelings: feeling *invisible* in class when they were not called on by the professor, while domestic students would simply raise their hand; feeling *excluded* when they were unfamiliar with culturally specific material used during class; and feeling *uncomfortable* when they were inadvertently put on the spot in class in ways that emphasized or exaggerated real or perceived cultural differences. In a specific instance, Mike, who is a fluent English speaker, was given constant Cs on his assignments. When he asked for an explanation, the professor stated that it was due to his lack of ability in the English language, leaving Mike feeling hopeless. Leslie, also fluent in English, went through a similar experience:

I got a C on a paper and I wasn’t happy with it because I was used to getting higher marks. So I was like, “What did I do wrong? I put a lot of time into it. How can I improve it?” And he told me I couldn’t improve because “maybe it’s just a language barrier kind

of thing; maybe it's because you're an international student and I don't think you can improve it."

Participants also brought to light opportunities that helped to increase their sense of belonging within an academic setting. They emphasized, in particular, the advantages of a small university, such as a smaller professor-to-student ratio, which becomes more frequent as students progressed to later years. Thomas, a first-year student, was impressed that some professors knew his name, even though he tended to participate less in class than other students. Similarly, Ashley, a second-year student, stated that "there are profs that taught [her] just once, and they got [her] name from there." Establishing a supportive relationship with professors is likely dependent on individual factors as well as issues of gender and country of origin, not in essentialist but in complex ways. As Phillip stated, "I'll easily go to a professor, sit down, even without an appointment, and share my stories with them." Leslie, by contrast, felt that it was more important for professors to "approach you, because it's harder for us to ask for help." Hillary elaborates on the differences between teacher-student dynamics in Canada and those from "back home":

You sit down, you be quiet, you listen to the teacher and you cram pretty much everything. What the teacher says is a lot, and there's no such thing as your own idea! So I was used to that, but the teacher here would take us aside and would say: "You have to talk, even if you just want to put your hand up. But I'm not going to force you to do that, you just have to talk."

The data from participants suggest that professors are better able to support international students not simply by treating them in the same way as domestic students; rather, it seems important that their professors are aware of the real and specific challenges that they may face due to their international student status, cultural background, gender identity, and other related factors. These challenges include issues such as feeling invisible, excluded, or out of place, as well as the precarious status that they hold as temporary residents and often a reluctance to ask for help. Participants stated that those professors who did make an effort to accommodate international students often provided support that extended beyond the classroom and the university, and sometimes even into the surrounding community. As Audrey stated:

[Professors who] just stop you outside and say, "Hey, how are you doing," or "How's the class going," or "Hey, I'm organizing [an event], you should come," or "Hey"—it's both ways....So it's like you understand that you're becoming more and more visible in the community.

Fourth Year: Looking Back and Looking Forward

As much as participants generally noted a number of struggles throughout their university experiences, many also expressed a level of satisfaction and noted how they "would not do things any differently." For instance, Barbara and Audrey both mentioned that toward the end of their second year they were seriously contemplating leaving, but once in their final year, they were pleased that they had decided to stay. Audrey stated that professors "actually [know] you a lot better by the time you're in your third and fourth year....I'm actually really grateful that I did come back because my last two years turned out to be completely different [from the first two]." Barbara stated that she learned from the experiences of "most of [her] friends [who are] international and...in their third or fourth year." As the

president of the international society, she asserted that she “kind of found what [she] want[s] to do in this university.”

Thus, friendship circles as well as relationships with professors solidify for many participants in their final year; some students did come to view the university and the surrounding community in which they lived as “like home.” Such development once again reflects the intersection of international student status with race, gender, and perhaps other differences, and how these shift over time in relation to one another depending on the student’s year of study. Cultural difference is insufficient to explain a lack of this sense of belonging among our participants. Indeed, cultural difference may serve as a basis for integration, if barriers such as international student status and race can be overcome, as illustrated by the success stories of participants like Audrey, Barbara, and non-international students like Lisa. Nonetheless, integration still remained somewhat lacking in the bigger picture when the dominant sense of belonging among participants in their final year of study was to a loosely defined international community as emerging global citizens. Few of our participants developed a lasting sense of attachment to their immediate communities in Canada, but they did integrate into predominantly multicultural friendship groups and felt that they belonged as much as others within their chosen community. Furthermore, some participants, such as Audrey, who is quoted at length below, questioned the atmosphere of inclusion that was initially promoted to them:

For an international student, I think, for example, a lot of first-year and second-year students who are international, who might have English as a second language, don’t end up doing well in school; and it does not necessarily reflect on their capabilities. I feel like most of the time, our school has definitely invested a lot in promoting the university as this international institution, but at the same time, I know that I, or most of the people that I talk to, feel that once you’ve been attracted to this university, you’re brought here and you’re kind of left on your own to figure it out by yourself.

With specific reference to small university settings, Audrey observed how “there’s a lot of peer pressure that comes with just being in a small community, like you just want to do what everyone’s [doing].” Similarly, Jessica believed that there is “the need...to accommodate for people, like different people.” She, like many other participants, was alluding to the drinking and partying culture of universities. Georgia, a student in her second year, felt that friendships are often made when people “go drink and party,” and if one does not engage with this widespread culture, “it’s almost like you’re excluded.” This form of exclusion applies to international and domestic students alike, and brings to light the fact that upon arrival to university in a new country, international students enter into complicated intersectional social dynamics that include mechanisms of social inclusion and exclusion that are already in place. This observation illustrates how existing dynamics and systemic issues in the context of reception can circumscribe a sense of belonging for international students.

In summary, feelings of inclusion generated by friendship circles, coupled with supportive academic experiences, clashed against forces of exclusion from multiple sources, resulting in a highly complex picture of integration for international students. In all cases, participants did achieve a measure of belonging in Canada among their friendship groups that were composed predominantly of other international students and characterized by diversity on the basis of cultural background, gender, year of study, among other factors. In exceptional cases, participants made friends with Canadians and established a greater sense of belonging within the university and local community. Despite the fairly limited integration of our participants into the Atlantic region, a number of them planned to stay in

Canada, at least in the short term. Some of them made this decision believing that they had limited choices, whereas others hoped to find in a larger urban setting such as Toronto what they are seeking.

Discussion

Our main objective for the present study was to explore the issue of belonging for international students. As most studies focus on the experiences of international students in urban centres, we were most interested in the “voice” and “agency” of international students in small university and community contexts in Atlantic Canada. Participants initially perceived Canadians as friendly, but over time this perception gave way to a more complicated negotiation of perceived and real cultural differences. The most difficult challenge in this regard was the covert, and in some cases overt, racism that they experienced in Canada. Above all, they did not see themselves as victims in such interactions, but as active agents in an ongoing and dynamic multicultural context that was open to change. Participants assumed partial responsibility for their lack of integration with Canadian students, insisting that it was a “two-way” process. In some cases, they did form meaningful friendships with Canadians and became more involved socially in extracurricular activities and even politically, on campus and beyond. Similarly, after some initial struggles in classes, they often found supportive professors and performed better, but they sometimes had to first overcome certain fears and adopt new behaviours in the classroom. The ability to form closer relationships with professors due to small class sizes, as well as the non-threatening nature of the small university and community setting, were advantages mentioned by a number of participants. Over time many participants broadened their sense of belonging by their association with other students and through new experiences in the Canadian context. The sense of belonging that they developed as international students in university was, however, somewhat detached from the local community and even from Canada.

This study sheds light on the overall adjustment of international students in Atlantic Canada. We view adjustment for international students as an ongoing dynamic process and advocate for policies and programs that adopt a long-term approach to integration. Gaps in services and a related lack of resources to better support the integration and academic success of international students must be addressed within and across universities in Atlantic Canada. In particular, our study strongly advocates for greater facilitation of integration on an ongoing basis between international and domestic students in classes and in extracurricular activities within a multicultural framework, especially in universities situated within relatively small and homogeneous communities.

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