

Re-imagining 'interaction' and 'integration': Reflections on a university social group for international and local women

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Abstract

International education research has long been preoccupied with the question of how to foster interaction between international and local students. 'Integration' is imagined as a desirable endpoint of interaction, where international students become part of the broader social network and local students are accepting of and open to international students. However international-ness and local-ness are problematic categories. Numerous commonalities and differences are subsumed within them, and by considering 'interaction' and 'integration' only in international-local terms we may mask other kinds of interaction and integration that occur.

This paper discusses the complexities of developing a social group for women who were international and local students and partners of international students in higher education. The group was part of a broader doctoral research project and was initially aimed at fostering interaction between international and local women. However, throughout the two years of the project, multiple differences were constantly at play alongside moments of surprising commonality. Women described the group as both a 'safe house' and a 'contact zone' (Pratt, 2002); on occasions an uneasy space, while also a source of connection, support, information, explanation, and learning.

After considering how the women's reflections troubled the initial project aims, the paper highlights three key implications of the project for international education practitioners. These include the importance of (1) recognising interaction in international education as occurring multi-directionally, not only between so-called international and local students; (2) fostering, looking for, and affirming moments of understanding, rather than focussing on integration as an endpoint; and (3) recognising differences and similarities between students as complex and unexpected, not predictable or frozen.

Key Words

International education, Women, Interaction, Integration, Social groups, Contact zones

Introduction

The desirability of social interaction between international and local students is an assumption evident in New Zealand international education marketing and policy discourse and academic literature (for example, see Berno & Ward 2003; Deloitte 2008; Education New Zealand 2008; Ministry of Education 2007; Ward & Masgoret 2004). A desired outcome of such interaction is international students' integration into New Zealand educational institutions and communities (Ministry of Education 2007). Berry (2005, p. 705) has defined 'integration' as occurring when dominant groups accept diversity, and minority groups maintain their 'cultural integrity' while becoming 'an integral part of the larger social network'.¹ In New Zealand academic and policy literature, New Zealanders are positioned as the dominant group with whom international students should ideally integrate.

Research has highlighted a lack of interaction between New Zealand and international students, despite evidence that many international students in New Zealand expect and desire to make "local" friends (Deloitte 2008; Ho, Li, Cooper & Holmes 2007; Ward & Masgoret 2004). The evident disjuncture between international students' expectations and reality has prompted calls for interventions aimed at promoting interaction between New Zealand and international students. It has also fuelled suggestions that some international students' 'cultural difference' and/or 'visible difference' may be factors limiting their 'acceptance' by (some) New Zealanders (for example, see Deloitte 2008; Ward & Masgoret 2004; Ward, Masgoret, Ho, Holmes, Cooper, Newton & Crabbe 2005). In a previous ISANA paper I argued that the discursive construction of (some) international students as 'distant' or 'different' by implication positions New Zealanders as a homogenous, oppositional group against which distance or difference are read (Anderson 2006). In this

¹ In this paper I use single quotation marks to indicate where I am quoting verbatim from another person or source. Double quotation marks are used as scare quotes to indicate where I see a word or the meanings implicit in it as problematic or open to question.

paper I argue that the construction of international-ness and New Zealand-ness as fixed, separate and oppositional categories is problematic given concurrent concerns with fostering interaction and integration between people in internationalised education.

Critical² scholars suggest that a fixed sense of self (New Zealand-ness/local-ness) and other (international-ness) is likely to preclude rather than promote interaction and integration (for example, see Ang 2003; Doherty & Singh 2005; Haigh 2002; Madge, Raghuram & Noxolo 2008). Further, from a critical perspective, concerns around some students' integration that are not paralleled by reflexive attention to how dominant discourses and institutional practices might *promote* us-them separation, may signal a 'form of assimilation' (Ang, 2003, p. 193), or a one-sided attempt to '[bring] the foreigners up to speed' with how we do things here (Haigh 2002, p. 57). Critical scholars suggest that if interaction and integration are to be non-assimilatory, then a fundamental condition of possibility is that all involved learn to see themselves and others in new ways (Haigh 2002; Gibson-Graham 2003; Lugones 1987; 2003; 2006). It follows that interventions aimed at promoting interaction between "international" and "local" students should therefore also be aimed at challenging simplistic assumptions about students' sameness and/or difference.

Critical scholars issue a dual caution that is useful for those considering developing such interventions. The first is that comfortable endpoints (as implied in the term "integration") may not always be possible, given the historically-grounded and ongoing *use* of difference by some people in relation to others (see Ang 2003; Doherty & Singh 2005; Mohanty 1991; Pratt 2002). The second is that 'an endless... search for difference' is also problematic (Madge et al. 2008, p. 13). While cautioning against 'impos[ing] a premature sense of unity' between people (Ang, 2003, p. 197); critical scholars also call for 'identity theorisations' that are complex (Ichimoto 2004, p. 265; Kenway & Bullen 2003), and open to 'the possibility of commonalities *and* differences at all times' (Madge et al. 2008, p. 13, emphasis added; also see Chawla & Rodriguez 2007; Fine 1994; Lugones 1987; 2006).

Gibson-Graham (2003), Lugones (1987; 2003; 2006), and Pratt (2002) are three critical scholars who advocate for intentionally fostering human interaction between people without downplaying or reifying the differences between them. Gibson-Graham (2003) advocates for the deliberate organisation of activities that bring people together over time (see Anderson 2005); suggesting that by bringing people together without assuming their sameness or difference we resist both homogenisation or assimilation and social fragmentation (also see Lugones 2003). Gibson-Graham (2003), Lugones (1987; 2003; 2006) and Pratt (2002) suggest that sites in which people come together are rich with possibilities for learning through the 'extension of [one's] own intercultural journey' (Lugones 2006, p. 81; also see Gibson-Graham 2003). Pratt (2002) emphasises however that this learning is unlikely to be linear; but that 'moments of wonder and revelation' are likely to occur alongside other moments of bewilderment, conflict, and/or misunderstanding (p. 15, emphasis added). Pratt emphasises the hard work involved in engagement across differences. She describes sites in which such engagement occurs as 'contact zones' (p. 1), suggesting the importance of spaces of retreat from contact, or 'safe houses' alongside (p. 15).

In the remainder of the paper I consider a doctoral research project conducted during 2005 and 2006, aimed both at fostering interaction between "international" and "New Zealand" women and interrogating the international/local binary itself. The paper extends an earlier one, in which I discussed the project's aims and my initial development of an "intercultural"³ group for women (*Women Across Cultures*) as central to the project (Anderson 2005). After briefly revisiting the project aims, I then discuss how women's interview accounts troubled my initial assumptions about New Zealand-ness, international-ness, interaction and integration and complicated my research aims. I conclude the paper with some suggested implications for international education practitioners, drawn both from the women's accounts and from my own 'intercultural journey' (Lugones 2006, p. 81) in conducting the project.

Outlining the project

My doctoral project, as discussed in two previous ISANA papers (Anderson 2005; 2006), involved women who were international students, partners of international students, and New Zealand students associated with public tertiary education institutions in a small New Zealand city. The project was designed in response to three things: first, the sidelining of gender and the particular invisibility of women partners of international students in much international education literature (De Verthelyi 1995; Kenway & Bullen 2003); second, concerns over a lack of social interaction between international and New Zealand students and calls for interventions to promote such interaction (see Berno & Ward 2003; Deloitte 2008; Ho et al. 2007; Ward 2006; Ward & Masgoret 2004); and third, critical scholars' suspicion of binary categorisations (such as international and local) as a basis for research and analysis (for example, see Doherty & Singh 2005; Madge et al. 2008).

² I use the term "critical" here after Sikes (2006, p. 46) in reference to a range of conceptual tools loosely described as belonging to the 'critical tradition'. Specifically, my study draws on feminist, post-structural, postcolonial and borderlands perspectives.

³ I put "intercultural" in scare quotes here to signal its limits as a way of framing a group that was marked by many differences and similarities, not just culture. This is of course ironic, given the group's name.

An intercultural group, *Women Across Cultures*, was central to the project and was developed in collaboration with university international office staff. The group involved fortnightly low-key meetings and activities⁴ as well as occasional larger events that were also open to family and friends (see Anderson 2005). Over the two years of the project, the group email list remained at around one hundred women, a core group of fifteen to twenty women attended regular group meetings, and thirty to fifty people generally attended larger-scale events.⁵ I was a co-facilitator and participant observer in the group, and data was collected both through participant-observation and twenty-eight in-depth interviews with twenty women over two years.⁶

Methodologically-speaking, *Women Across Cultures* was not developed as a support group, discussion group, or focus group but drew on elements of all three. Although not a support group in an intentional, therapeutic sense, I hoped that the group would foster social connections and therefore multi-faceted forms of support for the women involved (Ramsey, Jones & Barker 2007). Also like Carr, Koyama and Thiagarajans' (2003) support group, *Women Across Cultures* was open to women's comings and goings, and its programme was established in conjunction with the women involved. Although I did not establish *Women Across Cultures* with focussed dialogue in mind, I hoped that it would be a context in which conversations would occur (after Gibson-Graham 2003), and as such, a site in which women could share practical issues, practical information, and similar and dissimilar experiences (Carr et al. 2003; Mahalingam & Reid 2007). In addition, I hoped that as a site in which language could 'circulate' (Gibson-Graham 2003, p. 67), *Women Across Cultures* would facilitate learning for all involved; the challenging of assumptions and stereotypes, moments of exchange, and the development of broader views of themselves and others (Dey 2005; Mahalingam & Reid 2007; Volet & Ang 1998; Haigh 2002). Although not a focus group as such, *Women Across Cultures* was established as a site in which women's experiences of living and/or study could be informally explored through group and peer discussion (Kitzinger 1994). I anticipated that data that emerged from participant observations (and conversations) in the group would augment, clarify, and complicate the data obtained through research interviews. As outlined in my earlier paper (Anderson 2005), the initial research aims were as follows:

1. to document the process of establishing an intercultural group for local and international women associated with a tertiary student community;
2. to explore the adjustment needs and experiences of international women students, and women partners of international students associated with public tertiary institutions;
3. to explore parallel living and study experiences of New Zealand women students;
4. to consider whether an intercultural group is a helpful way of supporting international women students and women partners of international students;
5. to consider whether an intercultural group may facilitate a sense of connection for women who are international students or international students' partners;
6. to consider how involvement in an intercultural group may influence the perspectives of New Zealand women towards international students and their partners;
7. to evaluate the intercultural group as a means for promoting intercultural interaction between New Zealanders and international women on campus; and
8. to interrogate the international/national binary in relation to the research participants, and their perspectives on their own complex subjectivities (Brooks 2004).

I turn now to interview accounts, in which women described their expectations of and reflections on *Women Across Cultures*.

Women's interview accounts

Expectations

Sixteen women spoke during their interviews about *Women Across Cultures*, including six international students, seven New Zealand students, and two international students' partners.⁷ In eleven interviews, women recounted their initial

⁴ These were developed in response to women's suggestions and typically involved a shared activity, presentation or visiting speaker as well as tea, coffee and refreshments. The group was open to all women in the tertiary student community and their preschoolers.

⁵ For example, pot-luck meals and local festival events. These events included women's flatmates, family members and friends, as well as women whose names were on the email list but could not attend fortnightly meetings.

⁶ Interviewees included eight international students, three women whose partners were international students, and nine New Zealand students. Of the New Zealand students interviewed, six were recent immigrants who had moved to New Zealand from elsewhere less than seven years prior to the project's commencement. Eight women were interviewed twice.

⁷ Of the remaining four interviewees, two were not involved in the group until after our interviews, one had been involved in the group for a brief period eighteen months prior, and one was not involved in the group at all during the course of the project. Janice, a New Zealand student who spoke about *Women Across Cultures*, was also an international student's partner.

expectations of the group. In most cases (and echoing my project aims), women indicated that they had come to *Women Across Cultures* looking for interaction, connection, friendship, and/or encounters with ('different') others. But (unlike my first seven aims, above) women imagined otherness or difference from and across multiple locations, and revealed more complex understandings of international-ness, New Zealand-ness, and interaction. Anita and Fiona, both "international" women, evidently came to *Women Across Cultures* eager to encounter and explore differences (plural): linguistic, cultural, and perceptual. For example, Anita:

I felt that through this medium I will meet so many people from different places and cultures... I like meeting people, knowing about their culture, what they think and all those different languages they speak (ISP from India, interview 1/2, 2005).⁸

And Fiona:

I really like ... that people have different world views and different ways of looking at things and understanding things and different ways of experiencing for example, kiwi culture. It's interesting to talk to people that have different experiences.... Because it is different I think depending on where you're coming from (international postgraduate student from Norway, interview 1/1, 2005).

Janice, a Pākehā⁹ New Zealand student was also an international student's partner. For her, international-ness was not necessarily a matter of enrolment category, but also of family affiliation. Janice stated that she joined *Women Across Cultures* hoping to both 'meet new people' and to 'talk about my experiences with...[my] international husband' (interview 1/1, 2005). Stella, a New Zealand student and recent migrant from Korea, located herself as both a 'Permanent Resident' and a person 'from overseas'. She explained that she hoped to make friends through *Women Across Cultures* both with other people from overseas and with (New Zealand-born?) 'Kiwis'.

Only two women's expectations revealed explicitly fixed notions of New Zealand-ness. Sharon and Violet (international students from Taiwan and Malaysia respectively) recalled having come to *Women Across Cultures* specifically hoping to meet 'native people' (Sharon) or 'Kiwis' (Violet) through the group:

Sharon: I still like try to seek more opportunities to meet up with the native people here so that's why when I saw the Women Across Cultures...I came here (international undergraduate student from Taiwan, interview 1/1, 2006).

Violet: That's also one point why I come to this.. Women Across Cultures. It's like... there **might** still be a small chance you know [laughing], just to get to know [Kiwis] (international undergraduate student from Malaysia, interview 1/2, 2005).

Elsewhere in their interviews it was clear that Sharon did not use the term 'native' in reference to indigeneity but in reference to "white" or non-Asian New Zealand-ness, and Violet's use of the term 'Kiwi' was similar. Notably, Violet also saw the group as an opportunity to meet people *other* than 'Kiwis', saying, 'I think it's... a good opportunity to get to know other cultures instead of.. just looking for kiwi culture'. (I discuss the extent to which these expectations were fulfilled below).

Xena (whose partner was an international student) recalled negative expectations of *Women Across Cultures*. She had come to the group in response to an acquaintance's invitation, and based on this person's description, imagined *Women Across Cultures* as a kind of safe house for 'Asian' women (Pratt, 2002). Here Xena recalls (and recoils from) her expectations of feeling like an 'outsider' in the group:

I suppose I... was a little bit nervous about the thing at the start because.... oh gosh! Actually I'm just remembering what I did think.... I think at the time there were a lot of Asian.. girls and I thought 'no one's going to speak English', so I'm a racist too. I kind of thought 'ohh well they'll all be fine. They'll all be able to talk to each other and I'll feel like such an outsider.' I suppose I was feeling like an outsider anyway (ISP from Ireland, interview 1/2, 2005).

Xena's expression of her initial fears of coming to *Women Across Cultures* usefully highlights two things. The first is the inadequacy of reading cultural distance or difference in international education only in relation to the so-called "host culture" (Deloitte 2008; Ward & Masgoret 2004; Ward et al. 2005). As a fellow international,¹⁰ Xena anticipated

⁸ Where I include interview excerpts in the paper, I identify the speaker in relation to her codename, "home" or birth country, and level of study. The abbreviation 'ISP' refers to an international student's partner. I also note which interview the excerpt comes from and the year in which the interview took place (for example, 1/2 refers to the first of two interviews, 2/2, the second of two interviews and so on.) Short quotes from interview transcripts are indicated by quotation marks. Longer quotes are indented, with bold type indicating interviewees' emphasis of words or phrases. Repeated full stops indicate a pause in the conversation, or a place where I have removed a phrase to avoid participants becoming identifiable. More dots indicate a longer pause or deletion. Square brackets show where I have added or altered a word to make the meaning or the context clear. Where two speakers are quoted, 'V' indicates my voice and the other letter refers to the interviewee. All interview data was checked with participants prior to publication.

⁹ In this article I use the term 'Pākehā' to refer to "white" New Zealanders (after Mohanram 1998). In doing so, I acknowledge the right of indigenous Māori to name those who came after them (Alton-Lee, Nuthall, & Patrick, 1993; Spoonley 1993), and the ongoing privileges in New Zealand associated with whiteness (Mohanram 1998; Zodgekar 2005). At the same time I note the contestability of this term and the diversity subsumed within it.

¹⁰ I use this term ironically; not to reinforce its appropriateness as a broadbrush descriptor for women who are not New Zealanders.

interactions with 'Asian' women as uncomfortable, isolating and difficult. (As indicated in her statement above, her views were later challenged). The second is the courage and intentionality required to interact with others across differences, especially when day-to-day life already involves the hard work of contact across lines of unfamiliarity (see Ho et al. 2007; Pratt 2002). In this sense, and given her own sense of outside-ness as a newcomer to New Zealand, Xena's initial caution about coming to *Women Across Cultures* can be read as both "natural" and not surprising (Gibson-Graham, 2003).

Reflections

Women spoke about *Women Across Cultures* in four ways: as an uneasy space; as a space in which to be and do with others (Gibson-Graham 2003); as a source of support; and as a site in which learning occurred. Although in women's accounts these different perspectives on *Women Across Cultures* were often intertwined, I separate them here in order to highlight the different ways in which women alluded to their experiences of interacting with others in the group.

1. Feeling uneasy

Lugones (1987, p. 17) describes 'uncertainty' and a 'lack of self-importance' as important characteristics if one wishes to engage with others across differences in a non-reductive, non-assimilatory way. For Sharon (an international student) and Alexis (a New Zealand student) however, experiencing such uncertainty in *Women Across Cultures* reinforced a sense of personal inadequacy. Both women lamented a sense of not knowing what to talk about in group meetings. First Alexis:

Like to be honest, I'm a little afraid of Women Across Cultures because I just can't make conversation [laughter]!... I'm useless... And I know I shouldn't worry about it but... I've got a personal thing about being boring as well, I think I'm boring (Pākehā NZ postgraduate student, interview 2/2, 2006).

And Sharon:

Whenever I was in the club I tried to talk to people but sometimes I just don't know what to talk about... I think I should take some courses to teach me how to you know speak... what to talk about, how to be a social person (international undergraduate student from Taiwan, interview 1/1, 2006).

Notably, both Alexis and Sharon indicated that they also experienced a sense of self-doubt in other social contexts and elsewhere in their interviews, referred to *Women Across Cultures* more positively. I include their statements here however because alongside Xena's worries (above), they highlight the naivety of assuming that fostering interaction is necessarily always positive.

2. Being and doing with others

For some women, or at some moments, *Women Across Cultures* was a site in which to be with others; in Nikki's words, for 'meet[ing] a friendly face' (international undergraduate student from Norway, interview 1/1, 2005). Two women drew a contrast in this regard between *Women Across Cultures* and lecture or tutorial contexts. Laura (a New Zealand student) indicated that for her, university teaching spaces did not foster interaction or connection, and Wakuwaku (also a New Zealand student) contrasted the kinds of interactions fostered through university classes and *Women Across Cultures*:

If you go to...the class or tutorials, that has a different atmosphere and it's [a] much more huge group, and people are not there to talk about their cultural backgrounds or anything like that. Whereas Women Across Cultures, what people [are] interested in [is] not what they do much because ... other people do different studies, but more or less what their life has been like back in their home country and their culture and that sort of area, more sort of personal (Wakuwaku, NZ PhD student from Japan, interview 1/1, 2006).

Both Laura and Wakuwaku credited the group's 'intimacy' with facilitating more enjoyable and 'personal' interactions than those possible in a tutorial or lecture room.

Three women emphasised the significance of *Women Across Cultures* as a site for being with people they might otherwise not have met (Gibson-Graham 2003). Janice referred to having met 'European' international students for the first time through the group. Deanna, an international student, referred to the group as countering her earlier fear of 'Asians' (I discuss this further below). And Wakuwaku highlighted how the group offered opportunities for interaction across many lines of difference/dissimilarity (not just international-ness and New Zealand-ness): 'This is a sort of social network group isn't it, so you got to know... international student from different departments..., and of course different age and different nationalities and different social or cultural background' (interview 1/1, 2006).

Laura and Wakuwaku echoed a view of *Women Across Cultures* as resistant to both social fragmentation (as separation between people) and the reduction or assimilation of differences (Gibson-Graham 2003; Lugones 2003). Laura stated that she saw *Women Across Cultures* as a way of countering hostility and/or suspicion between 'New Zealanders' and 'other groups':

I think something like that is definitely needed because from my observations what happens is people come and generally stick with their own cultural group because... Kiwi society as a whole is so kind of inward looking and not

really reaching out.... Other groups tend to become like that as well (NZ postgraduate student from USA/Fiji, interview 1/2, 2005).

Wakuwaku suggested that for her *Women Across Cultures* had countered the homogenising assumption that all international students are 'Asian':

I knew there are quite a few international students... but they are sort of merged into other students and I... couldn't quite tell - other than Asian student because they're obvious - how many different nationalities... the students are from and so Women Across Cultures I just realised, 'Wow! Yeah there are so many people from different nations and which I didn't really know'.... to me it was [an] encouragement (interview 1/2, 2006).

For two women, *Women Across Cultures* as a site for being and doing with others (Gibson-Graham 2003) was (at least initially) disappointing. First, Sharon, who as noted earlier had expected to 'meet Kiwis' through the group remarked, 'I didn't find... a lot of Kiwi people in the club here' (interview 1/1, 2006). Sharon's comment reveals more about her imagined ideal (Hall 1996) of ("white"/non-"Asian") New Zealand-ness than the group's actual make-up however, since at most group meetings approximately half of those present were New Zealand students.¹¹ Second, after a year's involvement in the group, both Sharon and Violet indicated that they had hoped for 'deeper' or 'more cultivated' friendships than those that they had developed through the group, although in this regard, Violet's second interview differed markedly from her first.

3. Finding support

In her second interview Violet no longer expressed disappointment with the kinds of friendships she had developed through *Women Across Cultures*. On the contrary, she now referred to *Women Across Cultures* not only as a forum for meeting people, but also as a 'functioning... support group'. When I asked her how the group had offered her support, Violet replied:

During the meeting times you can chat with others and you probably can talk to them about what you are facing in your study or in your daily life, so... if they know how to deal with it they will tell you. That will be a good way, and other times it's like...just meeting on campus and going the extra effort to have lunch together, or have a cup of coffee or those sort of things, so that would kind of build up the relationship (international undergraduate student from Malaysia, interview 2/2, 2006).

The marked shift between Violet's initial and later perceptions of the group suggests the importance of recognising that the development of (emotionally) supportive connections between strangers does not happen instantly. Rather, as Gibson-Graham (2003, p. 67) argues (and Violet revealed), they take time and 'multiple opportunities' for people 'to encounter each other'.

Laura and Wakuwaku also emphasised the support function of *Women Across Cultures*, and as New Zealand students troubled my disproportionate concern with *international* students' adjustment, connection and support needs (see research aims earlier). Both women associated *Women Across Cultures* with a reduced sense of isolation and increased sense of wellbeing in their higher education context, and expressed regret that *Women Across Cultures* or another similar 'international networking group' (as Wakuwaku put it) had not existed when they first began university study. Similarly, Arui (a newly-enrolled first year New Zealand student from China) emphasised the group's 'safety' as helping her to become more confident in a new locale:

A Yeah I feel so happy to join your group.... It's given me so much help.... confidence... nobody need worry [that they will] be ignored, or be joked or something.... relax.

V It's a relaxed place for you?

A Yeah. I really hope your group will continue, continue, continue (Arui, NZ undergraduate student from China, interview 1/1, 2006).

Arui described *Women Across Cultures* as for her, a substitute 'family', and indicated that the support she had received through others in the group had also fostered her confidence in other social contexts.

Some women emphasised commonalities as key to the group's support function. For example, Yukiko described *Women Across Cultures* as 'safe' due to the fact that it was a women-only space: 'It's... very safe environment because we are all women. It's kind of sexism but... I found [it] safe' (international undergraduate student from Japan, interview 1/2, 2005). Deanna noted many different kinds of shared understandings within the group; for example, of (solitary) thesis study, being older and less a part of younger students' peer networks, and being 'international', or having moved across social and geographical worlds (Lugones 1987). Deanna used the word 'community' to express how *Women Across Cultures* had functioned as a protective and healing safe house for her when her academic journey in New Zealand was proving difficult (see Pratt 2002). Deanna and Xena both described a sense of belonging and 'community' in a new context as allowing them to feel more 'integrated'.

¹¹ Mostly "Asian" New Zealanders.

4. Learning to be and see differently

The fourth way in which women spoke about *Women Across Cultures* was as a site in which learning occurred. Yukiko, Stella, Violet, and Deanna described how discussions and interactions in the group had enlarged their view of the world. For example, Stella said: 'Through... those people's presentations,... you learn about other cultures but also you talk about them and through those presentations you just have the wider view on the things [that] happen in other countries' (NZ undergraduate student from Korea, interview 2/2, 2006). Similarly, Violet explained that through group presentations and discussions, she had learnt to understand and be open to ways of being and behaving that were to her, unfamiliar: 'You get (to appreciate) something about different cultures, [that are] different from ours, they have their reason behind, you know, it's so interesting' (international undergraduate student from Malaysia, interview 1/2, 2005).

Deanna and Xena noted how *Women Across Cultures* had challenged their earlier assumptions about 'Asian' women. Deanna highlighted three factors that led to an 'extension of [her]... intercultural journey' while involved in the group (Lugones 2006, p. 81): being with 'Asian' women (as discussed earlier); engaging in reciprocal, non-dominant communicative exchange (see Mahalingam & Reid 2007); and developing new 'link[s]', or the ability to recognise similarities between self and other:

I think Asians [are] something special for me here because... I always found it.. difficult to approach Asian people.... Actually I had very little to do with Asians that didn't grow up [in Switzerland] or in other western culture..... With Women Across Cultures I felt like I can ask questions that... I think if I would go for a coffee with some Asian girl... maybe they don't want to talk about that and then [in] Women Across Cultures I feel like they probably want to talk about that or they're interested in this as well and it's [a] really nice exchange.... I guess... for Asians the difficult thing here [is]... I guess it's the same, that they are afraid, just as I was maybe afraid of them. And yeah I think Women Across Cultures does make this link and for me it's easier to understand them (international PhD student from Switzerland, interview 2/2, 2006).

Women Across Cultures had allowed Deanna to develop new 'intercultural' understandings (Lugones, 2006, p. 81): recognition of her own fearfulness, and a new awareness that those she had previously feared were like her, active subjects who may also be fearful (see Fine 1994; Ross 2002). Similarly, Xena described how through *Women Across Cultures* she had learnt to see other women involved in the group not just as 'others', but as people who like her, were grappling with being foreign in a new context. Xena's statement below contrasts markedly with her initial expectations of the group (see earlier):

X[Referring to Women Across Cultures] It's made me feel less like the only outsider. Like I'm not particularly outside because you know for me it's relatively easy, I'm a European, I speak English, it's... easier. But I've realised that there are a lot of people out there who are not New Zealanders, like you kind of think everyone else is from New Zealand and they all know what's going on and I'm the only one so it does kind of help you to realise there's actually a lot of people out there who are finding things reasonably culturally difficult... I was nearly crying one day when... I was chatting to one girl,... and her difficulty with the language and feeling she can't go out of the house, and I just thought 'oh my goodness'. I realised that it was so important to have somewhere... to come where it is all foreigners... and from different experiences just to help people to feel=

V=that foreignness is actually a point of commonality.=

X=Yes a shared experience, this is tough (interview 1/2, 2005).

In contrast with her earlier expectations, Xena's interactions with other 'outsider[s]' in *Women Across Cultures* meetings both validated and reduced her own sense of outside-ness (Carr et al. 2003). Notably, Xena did not position the other women in the group *only* as similar to her. Through hearing the specific challenges faced by women in New Zealand whose first language is not English, Xena learnt to see foreign-ness as both a shared and an uneven experience (Mahalingam & Reid 2007).

Implications

In women's accounts of *Women Across Cultures* my initial project aims were both met and complicated. Of the eleven interviewees who discussed their expectations of the group, ten described these as having been met. In addition, Xena, whose expectations had been negative, described the group as having been a helpful source of support and connection. The three women involved in the group whose partners were international students (Anita, Xena and Janice) described it as 'enjoyable', 'comfortable', and as facilitating the development of social networks; while Anita, Xena and Arui as newcomers to the city, also found it a helpful source of practical information. *Women Across Cultures* effectively promoted interaction between "international" and "New Zealand" women, but it was also a site in which a binary construction of New Zealand-ness and international-ness was problematised, and multiple ways of being and seeing explored through presentations, discussions, interactions and conversations. Sharon's account was an exception. She remained disappointed in her lack of 'Kiwi' friends, and her imagined ideal of New Zealand-ness (Hall 1996) remained apparently unchallenged through her involvement in the group.

The data considered in this paper complicates my initial research aims in the following ways. First, New Zealand-ness and international-ness emerged as blurred and slippery categories of identification, and intercultural interaction as multidirectional; occurring across more than a two way (international/local) binary and more complicated and multifaceted differences and commonalities than culture. In *Women Across Cultures*, differences were certainly a

source of discussion, curiosity, confusion, and richness; but they were shifting and complex so that (as Xena and Deanna discovered) moments of surprising commonality and connection also sometimes emerged. *Women Across Cultures* was clearly in some respects and for some women, a source of human connection, practical information, social and emotional support. But it was also a shifty space; at some moments and for at least two of the women involved, uneasy.

Implications from this study for international education practitioners are as follows. The first is the need to 'worry the clear distinctions' (Fine 1994, p. 80) between so-called international and local students in (international) education, both in terms of teaching and support provision, and in research and other forms of re-presentation (such as marketing, and report writing). For example, in my project, both "international" and "New Zealand" women expressed the importance of support, connection and belonging. Rather than focussing on interaction and integration in relation to students' difference (or sameness) critical attention should instead be given to educational institutions' support and pedagogical responsibilities to all of the students they enrol (see Haigh 2002; Madge et al. 2008). In terms of research and re-presentation, Sharon and Violets' (initial) interview accounts highlighted the discursive 'force' of Eurocentric imaginaries of New Zealand-ness (Palumbo-Liu, 2002, p. 769) and the disappointment that can result from overly-simplistic and unmet expectations. Sharon and Violets' expectations (and Sharon's disappointment) suggest a need to consider how those responsible for marketing New Zealand as an education destination and those conducting research in (international) education contexts might re-present a more highly differentiated view of New Zealand-ness. Sharon's statement that she had not met New Zealanders through the group also suggests that research relying on the use of categories like "international" and "New Zealand" as if transparent may be limited in its usefulness unless it interrogates the meanings that participants attach to the terms used.

The second implication that I draw is related to the first and has to do with the preoccupation in New Zealand international education literature with international students' integration or otherwise. The data in this paper suggests that a preoccupation with integration as an endpoint of interaction may be problematic, given that moments of connection and understanding occurred throughout the project alongside moments of unease and discomfort. While some women attributed new learning to their involvement in *Women Across Cultures* this learning had to do with an ongoing questioning of one's earlier assumptions and ways of thinking about self and others. It was not so much an arrival at some final understanding or destination as a learned recognition of the limits to one's understanding and an open-ness to realities that had not been comprehended fully. At the same time, it is significant that Xena and Deanna associated a sense of 'community' or belonging with feeling 'integrated'. For Deanna, Wakuwaku and Laura, a sense of belonging was fostered through micro-level interactions in *Women Across Cultures* but not through larger, less personal academic environments. Attention to moments, micro-level interactions, and the (slow) cultivation of engagement and connection between people may sit uneasily in an educational context marked by tight timetables, thirteen-week semesters, and a preoccupation with "outputs". If we are serious about fostering (non-reductive, non-assimilatory) integration in internationalised education however, such attention may be critically important.

The third implication is in part theoretical and in part, practical. Women in this study referred to *Women Across Cultures* as both a contact zone and a safe house (Pratt 2002); highlighting surprising commonalities as well as moments of unease. Their accounts suggest that the current preoccupation with fostering interaction in internationalised education across an international-local binary may be better directed at fostering sites in which moments of connection can occur between people understood as more complexly-situated subjects than binary or any other categorisations might suggest. An emphasis on interaction between so-called international and local students might limit richer interactive possibilities and/or result in a failure to see and affirm moments of interaction and connection already occurring in internationalised education contexts. The accounts included in this paper highlight how people in internationalised education are never just "international" or "local", but are similar and dissimilar to each other in multiple ways.

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Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Dr Karen Nairn and Dr Jacqueline Leckie, my academic supervisors, for their feedback on the thesis chapter that this paper draws on and their guidance throughout the course of the project. I am also grateful for the generosity and trust of the women who took part in the project, and who continue to encourage me to 'get it written'. Funding for the project was provided by the New Zealand Tertiary Education Commission.

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