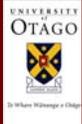


## Re-imagining 'interaction' and 'integration': Reflections on a university social group for international and local women



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## Marketing, policy & academic assumptions

- social interaction between international and NZ students is desirable
- this should lead to international students' integration into educational institutions and communities

Berno & Ward, 2003; Deloitte, 2008; Education New Zealand, 2008; Ministry of Education 2007; Ward & Masgoret, 2004

## Integration...

when dominant groups accept diversity and minority groups maintain their "cultural integrity" while becoming "an integral part of the larger social network" (Berry, 2005, p. 705)

In NZ, the dominant group = 'NZers'

## Critical theorists caution that...

- a fixed sense of self (NZ-ness) & other (international-ness) precludes interaction & integration
- a focus on comfortable endpoints is problematic when differences are at play

Ang, 2003; Doherty & Singh, 2005; Haigh, 2002; Madge et al., 2008; Mohanty, 1991; Pratt, 2002

## Gibson-Graham, 2003; Lugones, 2003; Pratt, 2002

Interaction across differences is:

- uneasy & hopeful
- a way of resisting social fragmentation & homogenisation

To be non-assimilatory it must involve:

- people 'being' & 'doing' together over time
- people's freedom to come & go at will
- an open-ness to both differences and commonalities
- a lack of preoccupation with comfort or comfortable endpoints

## Research aims: To...

- 1) document process of establishing an intercultural group for local & international women in public higher education
- 2) explore adjustment needs & experiences of international women students & students' partners
- 3) explore parallel living & study experiences of New Zealand women students
- 4) consider usefulness of the group as a way of supporting international women;

- 5) explore whether the group facilitates a sense of connection for international women involved
- 6) consider whether involvement in the group influences NZ women's perspectives on international women;
- 7) evaluate the group as a means for promoting intercultural interaction between NZ & international women
- 8) interrogate the international / local binary in relation to the research participants

#### Women Across Cultures 2005-2006

- 80-100 women on email list, 15-20 regular attendees
- Regular fortnightly meetings
  - food and drink
  - conversation
  - presentation/activity
- Larger events (30-50 people)
- programme co-constructed
- meetings co-facilitated



## Expectations

#### A site for encountering differences - plural

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.

Anita, ISP from India, 2005

#### A site for encountering difference - Kiwi-ness

I still try to seek more opportunities to meet up with the native people here so that's why when I saw Women Across Cultures....I came here.

Sharon, international FFPS from Taiwan, 2006

#### Unease at encountering difference(s)

I think at the time there were a lot of Asian.. girls and I thought 'no one's going to speak English'... 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.

Xena, ISP from Ireland, 2005

## Reflections

### 1. Uneasy space

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 be a social person.

Sharon, international EXCS from Taiwan, 2006

### 2. A site for being and doing with others

If you go to...the class or tutorial, that has a different atmosphere and it's [a] much more huge group,... 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 ... but... what their life has been like back in their home country and their culture and that sort of area, more personal.

Wakuwaku, NZ PhD student from Japan, 2006

### 2. A site for being and doing with others - resisting segregation

I think something like that is definitely needed because from my observations,.. people come and generally stick with their own cultural group because... Kiwi society.. is so kind of inward looking and not really reaching out.... Other groups tend to become like that as well.

Laura, NZ student from USA / Fiji, 2005

### 2. Being and doing with others - resisting homogenisation

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 students because they're obvious, how many different nationalities... and so Women Across Cultures I just realised, 'Wow! There are so many people from different nations which I didn't really know'.... to me it was [an] encouragement.

Wakuwaku, NZ student, interview 1/2, 2006

### 3. Finding support

During the meeting times you can chat with others and you can talk to them about what you are facing in your study or in your daily life... if they know how to deal with it they will tell you.

Violet, international FFPS from Malaysia, 2006

#### 4. Learning to be and see differently

[In Switzerland] I had very little to do with Asians ..... With Women Across Cultures I felt like I can ask questions... and it's [a] really nice exchange.... I guess that's as well for Asians ... I guess it's the same, that they are afraid, just as I was maybe afraid of them. And I think Women Across Cultures does make this link and for me it's easier to understand them.

Deanna, PhD student from Switzerland, 2006

#### 4. Learning to be and see differently

X It's made me feel less like the only outsider. Like I'm not particularly outside because... I'm a European, ... But.... it does help you to realise there's a lot of people out there who are finding things reasonably culturally difficult... it was so important to have somewhere... to come where it is all foreigners... just to help people to feel...

V...That foreignness is actually a point of commonality.

X Yes a shared experience, this is tough.

Xena, ISP from Ireland, 2005

#### 4. Learning to be and see differently

The best thing is....I get to know about Asian cultures more. I think it sounds really weird but I didn't know about Asian cultures when I was in Japan. I thought Japan is Japan, not part of Asian countries, but now I have got so many Taiwanese friends and Korean friends and Malaysians... and so on.

Miho, international FFPS from Japan, 2005

#### Re-imagining interaction & integration

1) create spaces where fixed notions of self and other can be challenged

...requires...

- multiple opportunities to 'be' and 'do' together over time (Gibson-Graham, 2003)
- open-ness to shifting numbers and people's comings and goings
- open-ness to unease & a sense of risk

2) re-think a preoccupation with (international students) 'integration'

- a sense of belonging is crucial for all students
- moments & movement, not endpoints
- significance of the one-to-one

3) recognise interaction as multidirectional

- more than 'international' vs. 'local'
- across multiple differences & commonalities

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