

252 International students and everyday multiculturalism: Rethinking 'connection' through evaluating the mundane

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

Research about international students has long considered their social network compositions, often assuming that friendship with home students equals a positive transition. Critiques are often made, both in scholarship and practice, of the tendency for international students to form friendship networks with fellow international students. Such friendships are often assumed to mean limited engagement with local communities or host cultures. This research counters these deficit narratives using the sociological framework of “everyday multiculturalism”, which considers interactions with multiculturalism in small, mundane ways in daily life. Through a photo-elicitation narrative interview approach, data from 41 students are used to conceptualise how everyday living creates a sense of cultural learning and belonging. The implications provide considerations for the ways that grand gestures like friendship may miss the meaningful intercultural encounters that students experience in everyday life, while offering suggestions for how institutions can better facilitate positive social learning experiences within local communities.

Full paper

Research about international students in higher education has long considered the compositions of their social network formations (Kudo et al., 2018), often with assumptions that friendship with home students equates with a positive sense of belonging (e.g., Gareis, 2012). Critiques are often made, both in scholarship and in practice, of the tendency for international students to form friendship networks with fellow international students (McKenzie & Baldassar, 2017). Such friendships are often assumed to mean lack of engagement with local communities or cultures in their host country (Yu & Moskal, 2018). For instance, an evaluation of friendship formation in Australia argued, “international students form a parallel society made up of fellow international students that has no clear connections to (multicultural) Australian society or culture” (Gomes, 2015, p. 517). These approaches, however, limitedly equate grand gestures such as friendship as indicative of social and cultural engagement, thereby painting international students through a deficit lens as ‘unassimilated’ or ‘unconnected’.

To counter these narratives, this research evaluates international students’ connections to their local communities through the lens of ‘everyday multiculturalism’. Everyday multiculturalism is a sociological framework for exploring the ways individuals encounter, enact, and engage with multiculturalism in small, mundane ways in daily life. It is described by Wise and Velayutham, 2009, p. 2 as “explor[ing] how cultural diversity is experienced and negotiated on the ground in everyday situations.” This focus on “the micro-sociology of everyday practice” (ibid, p. 3) provides a lens for understanding how ordinary life in multicultural spaces involves, by nature, small moments of encounter as one goes about their day. Through this lens, even commonplace acts such as riding a bus (Bovo et al., 2022), eating at Nando’s (Bennett et al., 2021) or making small talk at school (Meetoo, 2020) leads to small multicultural engagements that together develop one’s sense of other cultures and places.

The everyday multiculturalism lens allows us to see international students’ connections with and sense of belonging to their local communities in new ways, interrogating deficit assumptions that assume them ‘missing’. It also allows for considerations of how universities become ‘micropublics’ (Ho, 2011) and sites of everyday multicultural encounters. This study sought to evaluate this through the following research questions:

1. How do international students experience everyday multiculturalism within their local communities?
2. What is the role of everyday multiculturalism in facilitating international students’ sense of belonging within their local communities?

To address these questions, this study employed a photo-elicitation narrative interview approach. Prior to the interview, participants were asked to submit a selection of photographs that they felt represented their multicultural experiences within their local communities. These were used as interview prompts, whereby participants were asked to share stories about their everyday encounters in the city they live in. The interviews took place across four cities in Germany, two larger cities (over 500,000 population) and two smaller cities (approximately 100,000 population), one each in the east and west, allowing for a comparison of 'place' and its role in facilitating everyday multiculturalism. In total, 41 students from 24 different countries were interviewed, representing a wide range of national identities and identities beyond the national container (gender, race, socioeconomic status, etc.).

At SRHE, multimedia findings will be presented combining participants' stories with photographs. The findings outline the multivariate ways that international students engage with multiculturalism in their everyday lives. Participants highlighted the ways that small, mundane encounters – taking out bins, petting dogs, hearing music outside places of worship – provided meaningful opportunities to learn about the local multicultural community. International students also outlined how they contribute to multicultural society in small ways, such as picking up litter, supporting neighbours with chores, or initiating small talk. Everyday encounters were also shown as opportunities for self-evaluation of students' achievement of 'belonging' in their local community, such as learning how to order at restaurants or understand traffic rules. The findings also consider how everyday encounters may serve as confirmations of stereotypes about local residents or act as vehicles for experienced racism and othering in local communities.

Together, the findings push against notions that international students form a 'parallel society' by not engaging with their multicultural hosts (Gomes, 2015). Instead, this study conceptualises how international students are multicultural society, while simultaneously navigating through it. The implications provide considerations for the ways that grand gestures like friendship may miss the meaningful intercultural encounters that students experience in everyday life, while offering suggestions for how institutions can better facilitate positive social learning experiences within and sense of belonging to local communities.

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