

Exclusion on campus

If you google images for “study abroad,” you get many pictures of inclusive-looking racially-diverse groups of people such as this one.

A persistent theme in research with international students in Australia is the tension between dreams of inclusion pre-departure and the experience of exclusion once in the country. In [Kimie Takahashi's ethnography with international students from Japan](#), for instance, participants often spoke about how their decision to study abroad was partly motivated by dreams of being part of a multicultural student body. Indeed, marketing materials for study abroad abound with images of groups of diverse students jointly engaging in study or leisure activities. Inclusiveness in such images is typically signalled by images of people who look racially different.

Participants in Takahashi's research described elaborate fantasies of how they had imagined themselves being part of an international (in their case, that meant mostly 'non-Japanese' and sometimes also 'non-Asian') group of friends, hanging out in a cool café in Sydney and chatting away in their fluent English.

Unfortunately, in real life such scenarios hardly ever happened. Making friends, joining study groups, collaborating in diverse groups all turned out to be extraordinary difficult. This problem is not unique to the Japanese participants in Takahashi's study but comes up again and again in research with international students: locals stick to them themselves and international students stick to their co-ethnics or other international students.

The campus advertising images of happily collaborating diverse student groups only seem to happen for the camera and fostering an inclusive culture on campus remains a vexing problem for universities. While there is a large body of advice aimed at individual international students (“Don't be shy!” “Get over your lack of confidence!”), the actual production of international student exclusion on the micro-level of daily interactions remains poorly understood.

Maybe that is where internationalization can learn from Critical Race Theory.

A 2009 article published in the [Harvard Educational Review](#) (“Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate for Latina/o Undergraduates” by Tara Yosso, William Smith, Miguel Ceja and Daniel Solórzano) draws on the concept of “micro-aggression” to explain why Hispanic students at US elite universities share the experience of exclusion and isolation reported by international students at Australian universities.

“Micro-aggression” is a concept introduced by the psychiatrist Chester Pierce in the 1960s and refers to “subtle, innocuous, preconscious, or unconscious degradations, and putdowns, often kinetic but capable of being verbal and/or kinetic” (Yosso et al. 2009, p. x). In itself any act of micro-aggression may seem harmless but their cumulative effect over time can be deleterious: it causes stress, takes time and energy, and leads to an erosion of confidence and self-image. Can a concept developed to explain the exclusion of African Americans in workplaces of the 1960s be of any use to explain the exclusion of international students at contemporary universities?

As Yosso et al. show, the concept can certainly explain the exclusion of Hispanic students at US elite universities. In focus groups interviews, students spoke about their experiences of interpersonal relationships on campus. Everyone had a story to tell about subtle and not-so-subtle exclusions. The net result of many trivial interactions was a sense of non-belonging and a lack of feeling comfortable on campus, as one student explained:

I'm not really comfortable just being in the classrooms. Just going to class I feel the fact that I know that I'm different and I'm reminded of it every day . . . There's me, a Black male and a Black female, and everybody else is White in my classroom. And me and those two Black individuals tend to sit together every session, every class session, whereas everybody else would just kind of tend to sit away from us. So as I put my book bag on the table, I would notice that the rest of the chairs would be empty while the other table would get crowded. It would be sixty people sitting at one table pushing each other off whereas I would be by myself sitting at my own table. [...]The professor is talking and the whole time you're thinking . . . Why doesn't anybody sit here? (Yosso et al. 2009, p. x)

Experiences such as these made campus a stressful and exhausting place for Hispanic students in the study. They responded by withdrawing and by creating safe spaces with co-ethnics. The latter often led to accusations of self-segregations and so was an ambivalent strategy, too, even as it helped to ameliorate the acute sense of exclusion they experienced in the wider campus community.

In the 1960s, Chester Pierce had argued that the best defence against micro-aggression was the ability to recognize it and to defend promptly so as to reduce the cost of accumulation. That seems true of the Hispanic students in the study, too: their ability to recognize micro-aggressions as racist gave them the chance to create counter-spaces and, at the very least, to recognize that their exclusion was not their individual personal problem.

As regards international students, the racism inherent in micro-aggressions is often obscured by linguistic proficiency and the assumption that they are being excluded because their "English isn't good enough." Making micro-aggressions visible is thus a key task to create a more inclusive campus experience. As educators in internationalizing institutions we have a lot to learn from Critical Race Theory.



Tara J Yosso; William A Smith; Miguel Ceja; Daniel G Solórzano (2009). Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate for Latina/o Undergraduates Harvard Educational Review, 79 (4)