Part 4

Higher Education, Lifelong Learning & Social Inclusion

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An Ambivalent Community: International African Students in Residence at a South African University

Abstract

This is a qualitative case study of the experiences and perceptions of South African and especially international, African students living in university residences in South Africa. The concept, community, is used to interpret interview data. This community was characterised by ambivalent social relations: There was discrimination by South Africans against their fellow Africans and a problematic institutional environment in which the internationals studied. Nevertheless, international students identified with the academic mission of the university and its goals of participating in the global knowledge economy.

Keywords: community, social relations, African students at a South African university

Introduction

Socio-cultural change is theorised about in the literature on globalisation and the internationalisation of higher education. However, there is a dearth of empirical studies on changing social relations at African universities. A manifestation of the internationalisation of higher education is cross-border student mobility. In South African, as has been the case globally, student mobility has transformed the demographies of university populations. I wish to explore how diverse social relations in respect of nationality are evolving in these circumstances at one tertiary institution.

The postgraduate residence community

Community studies date back at least to the First World War. Two interrelated themes are evident in the evolution of this scholarship: debates about how to conceptualise and define the field and the meaning of community and, methodologically, questions arising from the variety of ways in which to study communities. These problems have changed over time. Crow and Mah (2012) have reviewed conceptualisations of community arguing it is a contested concept. Their discussion is based on 100 publications since 2000. They focus on 4 themes around which future research might be structured: "connection, difference, boundaries and development". I shall work with the first 3 in this paper. Connection relates to the social linkages between individuals and groups and includes "disconnection" and

conflict. Diversity relates to living with and "celebrating" cultural difference, and includes social exclusion. Boundaries are associated with connection and diversity between different community types and their relations with one another. Different boundaries can be theorised and researched depending on the particular community. Boundaries can be entrenched, and can be crossed. Development is used in the sense of policy change and social and community development in areas such as health. I have operationalised the inter-relatedness of Crow and Mah's (2012) conceptualisation by discussing connection, boundaries and diversity together, as one interlocking framework in the analyses below.

Methods

This study was conducted at one of the 25 public universities in South Africa. It is based upon qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 51 postgraduate students at the three residences that housed the largest numbers of international students. These students were male and female, and came from South Africa and other countries in Africa. Respondents were selected at random, although I was mindful of representativeness in terms of gender, wished to speak to students from different countries, and wished to obtain a wide a range of experiences and views. I have tried to capture the variation of individual experiences, as well as the interviewees' common, group understandings.

I define community spatially and in terms of the locality of the three residences which are viewed as comprising a single case. Additionally, community is situated in the context of the paucity of research on changing relations of diversity in African higher education. Specifically, community is viewed as African students' perceptions and experiences of living and studying at a South African university. I focus on social relations between the locals and the internationals, thus defining community also as diversity in respect of nationality.

Students' understandings of community

Several interviewees who were critical of their experiences at the university, nevertheless spoke about the residence positively, in the sense of social and community "connectedness". One student offered an ambivalent definition of what community means: problematically "sharing" and "learn[ing] from one another", despite the boundaries of difference and encountering "problems" one had "to solve" when interacting with the Other.

Engagements with people who were culturally different were tied to the values and ethos the residence promoted: "mutual respect, co-existence... appreciating diversity". Hardly anyone was critical of these formal policies. There appeared to be endorsement of what the university management wished to achieve. However, the point was made that around a third of the students attended the house meetings regularly organised at each residence. This was seen as an indicator of the absence of community and the expression of "individualism" where you went about your own business, and minded your own business. "I'm just here to study, and leave, I don't want to mingle with anyone". The residence was not a community because students were not "concerned" about "the next person's well-being". "[The building]

looks like a prison to me… sometimes you don't talk to someone for days; nobody will come knocking at your door. So that community thing is not there...".

Community was furthermore defined spatially in terms of the social engagements that occurred at common meeting places – the kitchen, the common room which had a television, the laundry room everyone used. "It's a very *functional space* where you *operate* from… you do not have a *social connection*… (emphases added)". One residence consisted of individual houses clustered in a common space. In each house there lived eight people who shared two bathrooms, two toilets, two showers and one "big" kitchen. "Communal relations [are] enhanced in that... when it's cooking time, you'll find at least two people in the kitchen... there's engagement about the social, the political [etc.]...".

Defining the residence-community spatially without social associations (such as its "communal nature"), can be compared to defining it a-culturally and a-politically. It was merely a place "where I go every evening". This student said that students had access to "all the basic things" and infrastructural amenities they needed. This "makes it a home". Another student described it as "secure", possibly comparing it to the crime in the surrounding town in which the residence was situated.

The university was a hostile, lonely place. People were alienated from one another. A student said it was particularly oppressive during the Easter recess because many students at the residences left and the campus was deserted. It was easier and cheaper for the locals to leave for their homes than it was for the internationals. Then there were the demands of postgraduate study which kept students busy. They moved between the computers in the library or the laboratories, and the computers in their bedrooms.

The absence of community was sometimes mitigated by its presence. References were made to the excursions and social gatherings that were arranged. These were few and far between and the general view was that more of them "to bring people together" should be arranged. Students also participated in sport, religious activities, and formed societies, mostly by nationality. One student referred to the religious community to which she belonged as the "fellowship".

The residences were also viewed politically in regard to their governance. Each residence had an elected "house committee" and was headed by an academic who lived on the site and who reported to the university management. Overall students approved of the work of house committees, but acknowledged that power was exercised top-down by university officials. One student complained that grievances were ignored and that "people are just scared to voice" them. A common complaint was that they were treated like undergraduates who lived in residence. Thus there were too many rules, some of which were inappropriately applied to adults. While the university management was viewed in a positive light and its efforts to serve students appreciated, there were practices that were criticized: There were the "ridiculous" cases of fifty year olds having to request permission for husbands to sleep over.

In sum residence communities were perceived and experienced as both hostile and as "communal" sites with which students identified. The presence and absence of community, of "connection" and "disconnection", contextualised social, political and inter-personal relations. A few students defined community narrowly as a physical place that had a given infrastructure and architecture, while others

remarked on it social features. Some students spoke about its internal politics and grievances as part and parcel of the community culture. The presence and absence of community contextualised social, political and inter-personal relations which I shall now discuss.

Discordant social relations

For a few students, social relations between South African and international, African students were fine: "... we're just a happy family, really". It was noticeable that those who did not think these relations were problematic were often South Africans. The perception that "we're just a happy family" could be related to the fact that many of the encounters between the internationals and indigenes were superficial. People met one another in corridors, they smiled, and they said, "Hi". This could recur week after week, month after month, and year after year. "People all greet, you say, 'Hi, Hi', you meet somebody, you shake hands, and so on. But people don't really mix freely". And one day you graduated and returned home without ever having established any social or personal intimacy.

For most of the respondents, social relations between South African and African students were fraught with tension. "They [South African students] look at other international students as if they came to grab their work, grab their chances". Relations were "very poor", "there's a big, big problem", "... as soon as they see that you don't sound like them, your accent is foreign they look at you weird". A distinction was made between African students who came from other southern African countries for whom there was greater acceptance among the locals, and those who came from countries further to the North like Nigeria and Tanzania. There was also a racial dimension: "If you come from Europe [it] is okay [laughing], if you come from Kenya and Tanzania there's a problem". A Namibian student said that because she was dark-skinned, South African blacks, when they met her would remark, "'So you're from Ghana'... maybe they have the perception that you don't have to be *that* dark-skinned... (emphasis added)". "Like [you're from] up there...".

One interviewee said:

... when they [black South African students] see you as a foreigner, the first thing they ask you is, "Why are you here, why have you not studied in your own country, why South Africa?" That's the question, not one, not two, not three [I have heard it] many [times].

According to a Namibian student there was a considerable degree of separation by nationality at the residences. If there were two girls, one from Namibia and one from Angola she would "... go and look for the Namibian one, and chill with her, hang out with her, but not with the Angolan one... People stick to their own...". It was common to form international societies by nationality. At social events diverse nationalities could be observed grouped together, separated from one another. Relationships among international students were not always conflict-free: "Yes, I don't get along that well with my Muslim roommate, because you know, they're praying in the middle of the night, making a noise". However, the common experience of being discriminated against by South Africans and the fact that they were all in a foreign country drew international students together and relations between international students who came from different countries were described as more cordial than relations between international students and South Africans.

There was a "subjective" "feeling" of being discriminated against when one met and engaged with South Africans. The discrimination referred to was not the kind of thing that one could prove empirically, say in a court of law. It was similar to the findings of a government-commissioned report (Department of Education, 2008) in regard to racism and sexism on South African campuses which were described as "covert" and "subtle". Sometimes respondents were not sure whether it had occurred at all. It's most common expression in this study was in questioning international students about why they came to study in South Africa, whether there were universities in their own countries, and what their long term plans were. Suspicion and distrust permeated such enquiries.

A scholarly community

According to Munene (2003, p. 117) the history of African higher education illustrates that student activism has "permeated the entire spectrum of the continent's education". African students have often protested against social injustice from a left-wing ideological perspective. Marxist-Leninist ideas have developed in countries like Kenya, Tanzania and Zambia. Munene argues that student activism has enjoyed a social acceptance and legitimacy in Africa that is greater than compared with the West. African students have defended their own interests, opposing attempts to reduce or do away with benefits such as subsidized housing. This has complemented critiques of the roles played by international agencies in African underdevelopment.

Discussing higher education in Africa as a site of political resistance by students raises critical issues in regard to how we conceptualise globalisation. Escobar (2004), Torres (2002), Burbules and Torres (2000, p. 18) draw our attention to thinking about globalisation in terms of the opposition to it and speak about "*counterglobalization*" and "*antiglobalization*".

What is striking about the data I collected is that the great majority of the interviewees were not concerned with political activism. There were preoccupied with their studies.

> *... we have a couple of other Cameroonian students at the residence whom you hardly ever meet... because they are always really busy with their studies, its either they tell you they have a deadline to submit an article or they are doing some research on something... I mean they are always just busy... to most students it is all about research, research, research. So that makes some people completely cut off from social lives...*

Curricula and pedagogies were not questioned or criticized. These were assumed to be objective and politically neutral. One learned so much at the institution that one genuflected in awe of its scholarship. Most of the African postgraduate students were progressing well academically, probably better than their South African peers and a further basis for competition and conflict. When asked whether there were any advantages in studying at this particular university, the typical reply was that there were many: good physical infrastructure, libraries, access to journals, quality supervision by competent academic staff of dissertations and theses. These were much better than in their home countries, it was said. The university's reputation in particular fields was well-known in other countries. Its

academic mission resonated strongly with the academic goals of its postgraduate, African international students.

Under globalisation the role of higher education in the production and transmission of knowledge has become a driver of economic growth. Knowledge has become an international good which companies can trade across national boundaries. With the assistance of revolutionalised communication and technology, it can move faster than capital and people. The "knowledge economy" is global in scope and operation (Varghese, 2008). Higher education has expanded at greater rates than other economic sectors. Demand for it has grown; its "massification" is well-known. It has provided opportunities for investment and profitability. The production of goods and services has become dependent on the production and application of knowledge. Both are market-led. Governments and universities administrators have tried to put in place policy frameworks and teaching and learning programmes to attract foreign students to local universities. The General Agreement on Trade and Services has promoted the development of competitive higher education systems, sometimes in partnership with the private sector, as market-friendly and as a tradable commodity (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Knowledge and information in this technically-rationalist, instrumentalist, quantifiable sense (Blankley & Booyens, 2010) has little in common with knowledge as integral to social critique and political activism, or the knowledges the humanities have traditionally sought to create (Sabour, 2005).

Conclusion

The students lived in a complex, ambivalent community. Opposing perceptions and experiences were intertwined. The conceptualisations of community in the academic literature capture these contradictions and equivocations well. The international students were discriminated against by their South African peers. The institutional culture at the university and at the residence was alienating. Oppressive experiences of diversity by national origin were understood, but tolerated by the interviewees. Opposition to them had hitherto not occurred publically. An important reason for this is that the students identified with the academic mission of the university, in the context of globalisation and internationalisation. They formed a community spatially and territorially, but crucially also, as the scholarly writing says, by "interest". They were privileged because their postgraduate education would enable them, if it had not done so already, to join and compete with others in the international economy. This facilitated the pursuit of personal, as opposed to activist goals. Almost all these students were keen to complete their degrees. They can in a sense be said to be complicit in their discrimination and the reproduction of its social relations. The other side of the coin is that they have the potential for social action, against the background of mass student protests recently across South Africa. People, most especially in the age of globalisation, do not have fixed social identities. Students' political silence as a group did not imply they had uncritically embraced the community which they had created and which had been created for them. Future research might examine the trajectories and forms of these changes.

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