The disquieting tension of 'the other':
International students' experience of sojourn in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Recent research has shown that increasing the number of international students and staff in universities does not necessarily make the campus more 'international'. Ladegaard & Cheng (2014) found that local and non-local students live completely separate lives on campus and do not work together, let alone socialise, unless forced to do so by their teachers. This article argues that one of the major obstacles for successful integration between local and non-local students is negative outgroup stereotypes and prejudice. It reports on an on-going study of international students' experience of sojourn in Hong Kong. The article analyses examples from informal group discussions among non-local students, and the examples show that for some students, meeting 'the other' has been associated with disquieting tension more than anything. Despite their commitment to the intercultural endeavour, they feel their integration has been inhibited by their own or other students' prejudice. The article suggests that intercultural dialogue, which addresses taboos and painful issues and seeks compromises, and the courage to criticise our own and other people's ethnocentric discourses, are the way forward if local and non-local students are to integrate and work together in meaningful ways.

Keywords: international education; exchange; intergroup conflict; prejudice; intercultural dialogue

Introduction

The increased internationalisation of university campuses, including staff and student exchange programmes that are now common in universities across the world, has been hailed as one of the most important accomplishments in higher education in recent years (Byram and Dervin 2008). Many (if not most) universities in East and West have as one of their key mission statements a more internationalised campus, and to further this goal, they have established international offices whose job it is to promote student and staff exchange programmes, get more exchange agreements with non-local universities, support local students when they go abroad, and receive non-local students when they arrive on campus. It is widely acknowledged that

1

internationalisation has radically changed the university environment (Vinther and Slethaugh 2015). The presence of hundreds or thousands of non-local students on campus means that local students and staff need to adapt: the local language may no longer be used in the classroom, curriculum changes may be required, and student residence halls may have to change in order to accommodate a large influx of exchange students.

Recent research has found that internationalisation has brought many benefits to the university, including increased cultural and linguistic diversity, stronger work ethics, and a more interesting and diversified work environment (Vinther and Slethaugh 2015). It is also been widely reported that students who go on exchange, or overseas work placements, find that the experience has changed them, and the reported benefits include increased self-confidence, personal maturity, improved (English) language proficiency, increased tolerance of cultural diversity, and a more global outlook (Guilherme, Glaser and Mendez-Garcia 2010; Jackson 2010; 2015; Young and Schartner 2014). However, recent research has also questioned some of the alleged benefits of internationalisation arguing, for example, that an increase in the number of non-local students and staff does not necessarily lead to a more internationalised campus (Knight 2011). In a recent study in Hong Kong, Ladegaard and Cheng (2014) found that local and non-local university students live completely separate lives on campus; they do not work together, let alone socialise, unless forced to do so by their teachers. The study also found that negative outgroup stereotypes abound. Although carefully hedged and mitigated, each of the three distinctly different groups coexisting on any university campus in Hong Kong (local Hong Kong Chinese, Mainland Chinese, and overseas exchange students) made prejudiced statements about the 'other'. Examples of intergroup conflict (although rarely stated directly) were also common (see also Ladegaard 2011a).

If the goal of internationalisation is to promote intercultural dialogue, cultural diversity and increased tolerance of the cultural 'other', and thus, extend the learning environment beyond the classroom, it is not enough to invite more non-local students and staff to join the university. This will most likely have very little impact on the curriculum and students' learning, and according to Ladegaard and Cheng's (2014) research, also little impact on students' lives and experiences. Thus, if the internationalisation project is to accomplish anything beyond the merely rhetorical, universities need to take a more proactive role in promoting successful intergroup

dialogue among their students. The widely accepted laissez-faire approach to internationalisation that most universities seem to adopt will not help them achieve a truly internationalised campus; this will only happen if and when local and non-local students and staff integrate and socialise in meaningful ways (see Ladegaard 2015).

This paper reports on an on-going study of language and intercultural communication (ICC) in the multicultural classroom and beyond. It uses data from student-led informal group discussions where non-local students at a university in Hong Kong discuss their experiences of sojourn. The students participated in a class on Language and Intercultural Communication, and after the completion of the course, they were invited to share their experiences in unstructured group discussions. The questions were open-ended and focused on their experiences of the course, and of their sojourn in Hong Kong in general. Most of the feedback from students was positive and echoes what other studies have found: that students think they become more tolerant and open-minded when they study overseas, that they learn a lot about themselves and others, adopt a more global outlook, and become more confident.

However, as the recordings accumulated over time, it also became clear that for some students, the sojourn was (also) associated with feelings of frustration, anxiety and defeat. Many of them felt they had all the best intentions when they arrived, but had not succeeded in overcoming their own prejudice, or their attempts to reach out and try to understand 'the other' had been jeopardised by other people's prejudice against them. I shall analyse some of the examples from the students' discussions, focusing on the disquieting tension of 'the other' (cf. Bredella, 2003), and try to identify the causes of the tension, as well as who is affected. Subsequently, the article discusses what might be done to help students overcome their own and other students' anxiety and prejudice.

Background information

The course 'Language and Intercultural Communication', which has been taught at a Hong Kong university since 2007, usually attracts fairly large numbers of local and non-local students across all faculties and schools (usually around 50). The course is advertised to students as a course that analyses linguistic and cultural phenomena from an East-West perspective, and usually, a fairly equal number of local and non-local students attend. One of the most interesting, and, judging from the students' feedback, one of the most successful features of the course is that all activities and

discussions are done in Cross-Cultural Activity Groups (CCAGs) where students are assigned into groups of about 5-6 students in each group based on where they come from. The idea behind the CCAGs is that students discuss the same linguistic and cultural phenomena (such as, for example, (im)polite behaviours, taboos, stereotypes and prejudice, language attitudes, and nonverbal communication) from a cross-cultural perspective and use their own experiences to inform the discussions. The aim is for students to realise that they see and experience the same linguistic and cultural phenomena differently, depending on their own cultural background and individual experiences (for more details, see Ladegaard 2015).

After the conclusion of each course, students were invited to participate in a student-led informal group discussion in order to solicit views about the class, the CCAGs, and their life as sojourners in general. Possibly because of the way the invitation was phrased - as an opportunity to talk about their experience of intercultural encounters in Hong Kong - local students usually declined. Although they would have been able to comment on this topic, they might have heard the reference to sojourn as an invitation primarily to non-local students. I do not believe in forcing students to share their personal experiences, and I think a positive outcome of adhering to this principle is that students who chose to attend had something on their mind that they wanted to share. A potential drawback, on the other hand, is that the local perspective is missing. However, local students participated in other activities such as the online discussion forum (see Ladegaard, 2011a), so their perspective is by no means missing in the discussion of intercultural issues.

Thus, the student-led informal group discussions consisted almost exclusively of non-local European, American and Asian students. As of January 2015, six group discussions have been recorded with a total of 65 students from all over the world. There was no interview guide, and students were encouraged to discuss as freely as possible and talk about issues that were important to them – in relation to the course, the CCAGs, or their life in general as sojourners in Hong Kong. Each discussion lasted 1-2 hours; I was present in every session but interacted as little as possible with the students in order not to steer the sharing in a particular direction, or in any way monitor what the participants were saying. All the recordings have been transcribed using the CLAN transcription conventions (MacWhinney 2000), and, for the purpose of this article, examples that focus on the negative aspects of meeting the cultural 'other' have been identified.

Data analysis

Before I turn to the analysis of excerpts, it is important to reiterate that positive examples of cross-cultural encounters abound in the group discussions. Thus, this article does *not* aim to give a holistic view, or a representative sample, of the issues that were discussed, but the focus is almost exclusively on the negative experiences that were recounted in the data. I do this to give credit to the students who told the stories; to them, they represented an important part of their sojourn and should therefore be considered as part of the picture. I also do it because previous research has often focused on the merits of intercultural encounters and concluded that overseas exchange and work placements are perceived as positive experiences, which help students become more independent, confident and open-minded, and adopt a more global outlook that will help prepare them for the global workplace (Jackson 2015). This is entirely true, and also confirmed in my own data (see Ladegaard 2015 for some examples), but we also need to do justice to the students for whom sojourn became associated with attempts at intercultural dialogue that failed and thus, confirmed pre-existing negative outgroup stereotypes and prejudice, and/or reinforced intergroup differentiation (Hogg and Abrams 2003; Tajfel 1981).

Simultaneously within and without

One theme that was brought up repeatedly by the non-local students was their failed attempts to become legitimate members of the dominant group. This was particularly salient among Mainland Chinese students, as Excerpt 1 illustrates (see transcription conventions in the Appendix)[1].

Excerpt 1
Participants: Li (Mainland China), Wang (Mainland (China), Celine (Sweden), Elaine (USA), and a male interviewer (Int). Li and Wang are talking about the relationship between Hong Kong and Mainland China.

1. Li: I think although we may share more common ground now, we have more er:
2.   common interests now but I'll **never** regard myself as a member of Hong Kong
3.   because I **always**, although I can speak some Cantonese now but I cannot
4.   become a real Hong Konger and I always think, although they didn't show any
5.   bias or any prejudice on me but I always think that they treat me as a (0.5) not

6.		the same as themselves **so** I don't want to spend the whole of my life here and I
7.		think I'll move to other places, maybe there (1.0) maybe I'll go overseas and
8.		there'll be more bias or more stereotypes on me but I think it **will** be better than
9.		Hong Kong because er: I think Hong Kong is **not** really different from China
10.		but there are some, I think there **are** some er: how to say, minimum, er: some
11.		very little differences between Hong Kong and China and the little things are
12.		very er: it's hard to change and I think er: maybe sometimes **more** difference
13.		is, will be better
14.	Wang:	yeah, sometimes it's easier to be **very** different […]
15.	Celine:	I'm thinking of the whole 'difference' thing because I feel it's very humbling
16.		to be the one like us
17.	Int:	yeah
18.	Celine:	because coming from (1.0) Sweden where everyone looks like me and thinks
19.		and behaves like me, I'm a very stereotypical Swedish person, and it's very
20.		liberating and humbling to be the **odd** one, and to be the one that people
21.		actually **look** at […]
22.	Elaine:	I think it's been rewarding, having been the odd ball and being the odd person
23.		and it's the first time in my life having to accommodate to another culture
24.		rather than expecting other cultures to accommodate to my own

What is noticeable in this excerpt is that the students' experience of being 'the odd ball' is perceived very differently. For the Western students, it has been a humbling but also a liberating and rewarding experience (lines 19-22), for the Chinese students, it has been a painful reminder that, despite what they see as relatively minor differences between Hong Kong and the Mainland, they will never be accepted as members of the Hong Kong community (line 2). Li and Wang are regular degree students in Hong Kong, so for them, integration is an issue. In subsequent lines not reported here, they tell the group (all of whom are non-local students)[2] that they are painfully aware of their inferior position in Hong Kong (see also Lam 2006). Unlike the overseas exchange students, who are seen as 'fresh' and 'unique', the Mainland students are barely tolerated: 'we call them [Hong Kong Chinese students] friends but actually they're just classmates … we'll have some chitchatting after class but [we're] not actually involved in their community.' Thus, these students epitomise the dilemma of many Mainland students in Hong Kong: they see Hong Kong as ingroup and are trying their best to integrate into what they see as their own country and

people. The local Hong Kong students, on the other hand, see Mainland China as outgroup, and the Mainlanders who come to Hong Kong as aliens with whom they have very little in common[3] (see Ladegaard 2011a).

The dilemma experienced by Mainland students in Hong Kong is somewhat paradoxical because, according to Li and Wang, the differences between the two groups are relatively minor (lines 10-11). However, maybe part of the problem is that 'little things … are hard to change' (lines 11-12) and 'more difference … is better' (lines 12-13). Giles (1979) argues that individuals may feel a greater need to emphasise intergroup differences when the perceived differences between the ingroup and the outgroup are relatively minor, whereas major perceived differences need not be emphasised. Giles explains this by referring to people's desire to mark themselves off from comparable outgroups, and the closer the individual is perceived to be to various outgroups, the greater the need to make his/her ingroup favourably distinct by emphasising, for example, (relatively minor) linguistic and cultural differences (Ladegaard 2011b). This tendency for Hong Kong people to favourably mark themselves off from the Mainland is also confirmed in numerous studies, which have asked Hong Kongers to label themselves. These studies usually find that people in the territory prefer labels that allow them to signal Chineseness but, at the same time, distinctiveness and difference from the Mainland, such as 'Hong Kong Chinese' (see, for example, Kim and Ng 2008; Ladegaard 2011a).

Although Li and Wang reiterate that the differences between Hong Kong and the Mainland are minor, and that they may want to go overseas where there will be more bias and stereotypes but where integration may be easier (lines 7-9), they also maintain that the major problem is their inferior position, which is also confirmed by local students (Ladegaard and Cheng 2014), as well as fundamental differences in worldview. In subsequent lines not reported here, Li explains: 'when we talk more and interact more [with local students], we'll find that our basic ideology is not the same and this limits our friendship'. Thus, both Mainland students and Hong Kong students are reinforcing an ideology of difference and inferiority/superiority which is fundamentally different from the voices of unity, solidarity and sameness that are often promoted in political speeches and other public discourses about Sino-Hong Kong relationships (Ladegaard 2011a).

The next excerpt provides another example of students who were simultaneously *within* the student community, but *without* connection and fellowship with (Mainland) Chinese students during their sojourn (cf. Simmel 1950).

Excerpt 2

Participants: Sachi (Japan), Paula (Germany), Sam (USA), Brian (Switzerland), Francois (France), and Matthias (Germany). The students are discussing the animosity that may exist between countries. Paula has just asked Sachi whether anybody has ever said anything unpleasant to her because of the strained relationship between Japan and China.

1. Sachi: not to me, but some people, they like Japanese culture, but they don't like, they
2.   hate Japanese people, they said that to us actually
3. Paula: okay
4. Sam: very strange
5. Sachi: [laughs]
6. Brian: my roommate he's for example from Beijing, and he's very against Japan and he
7.   just said in general 'all Japanese are bad', so (1.0) it's interesting why it's
8.   actually just still between the young people, the younger generation, because it
9.   was the second world war
10. Sachi: yeah, I think many, still many young Chinese people are still, think about like
11.   Japanese are not good, but on the other hand, they like Japanese anime or like
12. Franc: we don't have a grudge against German people, I've never heard of that, even
13.   my grandparents said it's the war and now it's all over, and even my parents
14.   make fun of these people who have a grudge against Germany because it's, it's
15.   done (1.0) even now I **like** Germany so, yeah […]
13. Sachi: in my opinion, the Chinese, they think **their country** is about **me**, you know
14.   (1.0) when they criticise Japan, they feel like, they criticise like me, they feel that
15.   I think so that's why (2.0) we did some really cruel things to them and they also
16.   like hurt us (2.0)
17. Matt: I'm surprised there are so many discussions going on about Taiwan about Japan,
18.   I mean we also hear it from time to time that the relationship between Taiwan
19.   and China, Mainland China is not always very good, and then some Chinese,
20.   some Mainland Chinese they want to ask **us** what we think about, and it's very
21.   difficult to **say** something because you have to be so careful what you're saying

The animosity between national groups, usually brought about by historical circumstances beyond the students' control, is often brought up in the group

discussions. The problems are always raised by the students, which suggests the issue is important to them. Sachi's discourse is typical of what many Japanese students have experienced: that Japan's was crimes are far from forgiven and forgotten and still have an impact on young people's lives and experiences. It is interesting how Sachi initially denies that anybody has said anything unpleasant to her (line 1) – possibly in an attempt not to deprive anybody of face - and yet, seconds later admits that somebody did tell her that they hate Japanese people (line 2). Sachi's laughter in line 5 is most likely a face-saving strategy, rather than humorous laughter. Brian's blunt and direct comment in lines 6-9 provides further evidence of the Chinese animosity against the Japanese without much concern for the loss of face his remark may cause Sachi.

As a follow-up comment to Brian's surprise that the hatred between the Japanese and the Chinese is still alive among young people (lines 7-9), Francois, a French exchange student, makes a comparison with the situation in Europe. In a discussion of the dynamics of the intercultural learning experience, Sen Gupta (2003) argues:

> Group discussion is a non-prescriptive way for individuals to encounter and explore information about other cultural systems as well as … explain their own cultural systems. In other words, the role of being 'the other' constantly shifts between individuals. Group discussion is a relatively non-threatening environment in which students can encounter difference; and can learn that acceptance and understanding do not necessarily go hand in hand (p. 169)

What the students are doing in this excerpt is sharing their experiences of 'self' and 'other', constantly alternating the role of being 'the other.' Sachi shares her painful experience of being a dispreferred outgroup member, pondering why some (Chinese) people like Japanese culture but hate Japanese people (lines 1-2, 10-11). Francois compares with the strained relationship between France and Germany and argues that the French have moved on and no longer consider Germany the enemy. His testimony that he even *likes* Germany now (line 15) is interesting. He manages to present his own ingroup as favourably distinct from a comparable outgroup (the Chinese) because 'we don't have a grudge against German people' (line 12; see Hogg and Abrams 2003) and, at the same time, give face to the three German exchange students who are present.

In subsequent lines not reported here, Carina, another German exchange student, suggests that the problem is 'that Japan never apologised for the war … because Germany, we apologised for the war.' Like Francois, she presents her own ingroup as favourably distinct, and she suggests that Japan could learn from Germany not to be so concerned with 'honour and pride', as she puts it. So, while the students are indeed sharing their experiences and in that way, exploring information about other cultural systems, they are also constructing the cultural 'other' as an irrational outgroup, preoccupied with ancient concepts like honour and pride and unable to move on in constructive dialogue. Thus, the European students seem unable to grasp that *acceptance* of 'the other' is possible without *understanding* them (cf. Sen Gupta 2003). For Sachi, the intercultural encounter has become a painful reminder that in certain contexts, it is impossible to put your national identity behind you. She bemoans that 'the Chinese, they think **their country** is about **me**' (line 13) and thus, she echoes Li and Wang's sentiments in Excerpt 1: that despite relatively minor cultural differences, attempts to cross over and meet 'the other' may be prevented by political and historical events beyond their control.

Racism and intergroup conflict
For yet another group of students, meeting the cultural 'other' became associated with new types of racism and intergroup conflict as the next excerpt shows.

Excerpt 3
Participants: Sam (USA), Francois (France), and Benjamin (Germany). The students are discussing how other Asian people are perceived by people in Hong Kong.

1. Sam: I'm starting to (0.5) learn this difference about how, like how Hong Kong people
2.   look at ah: the Filipinos (1.0) I noticed this with my roommate, he just hates
3.   them, he just can't stand them
4. Franc: he even told me how to recognize people from the Philippines, or he told me, he
5.   taught me how to recognize different Asian people, for **me** they are the same
6. Sam: yeah, for **us**, a Filipino girlfriend, maybe she's good-looking, I have a friend who
7.   dated a Filipino girl, and with us it was kind of cool (1.0) you know like 'oh, you
8.   have a Filipino girlfriend, that's cool' […] but then I asked my roommate, cause
9.   I had it in my head 'yeah, it's cool to date a Filipino', and I said 'would you ever
10.   date a Filipino, she's pretty you know' and he said '**no, never'** [general laughter]

11.		'it's not cool' he said, 'it's like pretty much the least cool thing you can do' (1.0)
12.		and then, we were sitting on the ferry coming across the harbour and there's two
13.		Filipino girls sitting behind us, it was a Sunday, so we're talking about Filipinos
14.		like that and ah: two of them were behind us and my roommate just goes 'it's so
15.		annoying when they're talking', it's like he was so annoyed by the way they **talk**
16.	Ben:	yeah, it's interesting to see, or as you've said it's um: a lot of the, how Hong
17.		Kong people treat people from the Philippines and Indonesia, some time I was
18.		talking to a Chinese, to a Hong Kong person here and the way she spoke about
19.		those nationalities (1.0) so she said like 'oh, it's better to take an Indonesian
20.		woman [helper] because they don't try to steal your husband, or they work
21.		harder' (1.0) so it's em: yes, strange because I think, I mean I didn't meet any
22.		people talking like this in Europe

Racist beliefs about Filipinos and Indonesians in Hong Kong are well documented and are probably associated with their inferior status as foreign domestic helpers (Constable 2007; Ladegaard 2012). In an analysis of informal group discussions about 'the other' among Hong Kong Chinese students, Ladegaard (2011c) found that blatantly racist statements about Filipino domestic helpers were not hedged or mitigated which suggests that they are not even seen as racist. The participants jointly constructed the stereotypical Filipina helper as a cunning, dishonest thief, and one participant even claimed: 'we have to be mean to them or they'll become cocky, and I heard this from my aunt who has a maid' (p. 146). Jost and Banaji (1994) argue that

> Stereotypes serve ideological functions, in particular that they justify the
> exploitation of certain groups over others, and that they explain the poverty
> and powerlessness of some groups and the success of others in ways that
> make these differences seem legitimate and even natural (p. 10).

When blatantly racist discourses about minorities are neither excused nor explained, it suggests that such talk is considered legitimate, even natural, in the local context. Thus, voicing stereotypes and racist beliefs is more than just an individual and intergroup process; it is 'a collective and ideological process linked to the power and social relations of a particular society within a particular historical context' (Augoustinos, Walker and Donaghue 2014, 267).

In contemporary discourse research on racism, a distinction is often made between symbolic and modern racism (see Augoustinos, Walker and Donaghue 2014). Modern racism is characterised by its subtlety and denial and therefore, disclaimers ('I have nothing against migrants but …') and various forms of mitigation and justification are frequently found (see van Dijk 1993). Symbolic racism, on the other hand, claims that certain (minority) groups are morally or socially inferior to others because they are believed to break a taken-for-granted codex about appropriate behaviour (such as 'work hard', 'be industrious' etc.). Therefore, it becomes justifiable to put certain generic labels (such as 'laziness' and 'dishonesty') on these people without having to explain or excuse such behaviour. The kind of racism encountered by Sam, Francois and Benjamin could be seen as symbolic in the sense that no attempts are made to justify, explain or mitigate racist claims. Sam reiterates twice that his roommate says he hates Filipinos (lines 2-3), and just hearing them talk is enough for him to get annoyed (lines 14-15). Benjamin adds to the racist stories by explaining how a local friend of his constructed Filipina domestic helpers as lazy thieves who try the steal their female employers' husbands (lines 19-21). The problem for these students, as they later explain, is that the encounter of racist beliefs among their local peers has had a negative impact on intergroup relationships.

In lines 21-22, Benjamin turns a conversation about 'the racist other' into a conversation about 'the non-racist us'. He claims that he has never met people in Europe making such racist claims. Needless to say, racist talk is everywhere; the only difference is which minority group is being vilified (van Dijk 1993). Thus, like Francois in Excerpt 2, Benjamin engages in positive self- and negative-other presentation the purpose of which is to strengthen ingroup solidarity and cohesion at the expense of the non-present outgroup (Augoustinos, Tuffin and Rapley 1999; Ladegaard 2011b). The next example is somewhat atypical in the sense that the intergroup conflict is not in Hong Kong, but the sojourn becomes a reminder of the prevalence of racism in the home context.

Excerpt 4
Participants: Eloise (USA); nine other students were in this sharing session. The students are evaluating their sojourn in Hong Kong.

1. Int: Eloise may I ask what's your conclusion (0.5) of the whole thing, is it (1.0) good

2.   or bad or both?
3.   Eloise: well, like if (0.5) if I take it to a personal level to see um: to see everyone has a
4.   culture, we talked about this in our group because someone brought up racism
5.   and I **always** feel like the odd man out period, back in America I always feel like
6.   the odd person and I'm tired of that, and being here is even more so because it
7.   seems like people here are even **closer**, so I did a lot of talking you know with
8.   my family back home about this whole disconnect with our culture, it's just,
9.   personally it just drives me crazy, it's like '**where** do I **belong**? (1.0) so I **see** that
10.   **connection**, like the Chinese they have a **long** history and all that (1.0) 'waw,
11.   just to be able to **have** that and **be** something' […] because they ask a lot of
12.   questions 'where were you brought up?', about like black people, African-
13.   Americans, but I think if I hear some, if sometimes we can be focused on, I wish
14.   we had GPS, you focus on the disconnect maybe you can see some of the
15.   reasons why people are the way they are, like I said there's no, there's no
16.   connection, I'll never say 'so and so is from Germany', whatever, I **don't know**,
17.   there's no connection, there's nothing there, so being here is just like 'oh, it's
18.   like waw, I just wish I had something to connect with'

Eloise is completely quiet throughout the entire sharing session, and only towards the end when the interviewer asks her what the sojourn has been like for her (lines 1-2) does she share her story, an emotional narrative about the exclusion felt by a young African-American woman in the USA. The emphasis is on the 'disconnect' (lines 8 and 13), not knowing where she belongs (line 9), longing to *have* something and *be* somebody (lines 10-11), but realising that 'there's no connection' (line 14). During her sojourn, Eloise was part of a CCAG that worked very well. The group met several times outside class to discuss their assignments and readings, and some of the local students invited the exchange students to their parents' homes for a traditional Chinese meal. Eloise later explains that she was moved by their hospitality and generosity, and she recounts how, on a tour for exchange students in Hong Kong, local students would say: 'we Chinese, we believe this, we believe that, and their culture is just so ingrained in them and it's not going anywhere.' And, she continues, 'I think that is awesome and a good feeling I think to talk like that, if you **have** it, and if you **don't** have it then (1.0) that's what I feel like.' So, paradoxically, the connection, ingroupness and cultural cohesion she sees in the Chinese students become a reminder that these values are missing in her own life. Like the Mainland

Chinese students in Excerpt 1, she is *within* the American society, but she feels that, as an African-American student, she is *without* the sense of belonging and connection that other Americans have (line 9) (cf. Simmel 1950).

In subsequent lines not reported here, she tells the group that she feels like an adopted person who has spent most of her life looking for her biological parents. She also explains that she is from a southern working-class family, which she left (both literally and metaphorically) when she became a university student, but she has not yet found a new 'home'. Thus, the sojourn causes an identity crisis to erupt making her realise that she does not know where she belongs (line 9). She does not know who she is and what she is (lines 11, 16-18), she is 'the odd man out period' (line 5) and feels disconnected with her own culture (line 8). And having seen 'the connect' in her Chinese peers has made her painfully aware how much she has missed that in her own life.

Saving face and losing face

The last examples illustrate perhaps the most common problem for the non-Asian exchange students in the data: how to deal with face issues in a Chinese context.

Excerpt 5

Participants: Lena (Sweden) and Tanya (UK). Fourteen more students were in this group discussion. The students are discussing how to complain to their Chinese teachers when there is something they are not happy with.

1. Lena: I feel like, because we've been talking about this that you shouldn't approach the
2.   professors and maybe offend them, and seriously, I don't know how to, approach
3.   these people// without um:// being offensive, so the I'd rather not because then it
4. Tanya: //yeah exactly//
5. Lena: might affect my grades negatively, or they might misunderstand me (1.0) so I
6.   don't want to be the person who tells them how to, to do this, because they have
7.   themselves given, instructions for keeping a, short and, concise presentation and
8.   then they praise the ones who run, overtime, with their presentation, so it's (1.0)
9.   for me it's just like, I give up [laughs]

Excerpt 6

Participant: Marius (Finland). Marius was in a group discussion with nine other exchange students, but he did not say anything during the sharing. However, after the sharing session he sent a long email to me conveying his frustration and sadness about his own experiences. Below are excerpts from his email.

1. Staff of the student residence halls claimed that I had illegally downloaded a movie using
2. the hall's network and they told me that by email. I answered them that I had not even
3. been in my room when that happened and this must be a misunderstanding. They
4. checked the hall's in- and out-record and noticed I have not been there when that
5. happened. They did not admit anyway, that they were wrong and disconnected my
6. internet for 4 weeks. It felt very bad for me, and even racist, because they knew that I
7. was right and still, I got a sanction and had to be 4 weeks without internet in a foreign
8. country which meant I could not contact my family.
10. Another example is from my [name of course] class. The teacher made a grammar
11. mistake in the mid-term test and the students answered wrong to a question. Everybody
12. knew that the teacher was wrong. Chinese students did not even mention to her about
13. that, but exchange students did. In the end the teacher did not admit she was wrong and
14. sent an email to us after our class telling us that she had negotiated with her colleague
15. and decided she was right.
16. My question is how can we communicate and get the right outcome with a Chinese
17. person who is in a higher position without him/her losing face?

Problems with face-related issues appear in each and every sharing session, and are always brought up by the students (usually European or American exchange students), and this suggests it is important to them. In Excerpt 5, the students discuss how Chinese teachers praise local students who use twice as much time as they are allocated for their in-class presentations. Tanya tells the group how she was penalised for not covering enough issues in her presentation, but most of the local students would be praised for their work, despite the fact that none of them kept their talk to the 10 minutes they had been allocated. Lena joins in with a similar experience (lines 6-8), which, unfortunately, has led her to accept failure with resignation (lines 2-3 and 9). Her remark 'I don't know how to, approach these people' (lines 2-3) echoes with ethnocentric discourses that demonise 'the other'. The use of 'these people' reinforces us-them dichotomies and in the context of the sharing session, may serve to create ingroup-outgroup differentiation as well as ingroup cohesion (Hogg and Abrams 2003; Ladegaard 2011b). In Lena and Marius' discourses, the Chinese professors and

students become the undifferentiated 'other' who displays predictable unfavourable behaviour patterns that they, the non-local students, will never understand (Excerpt 1, lines 5 and 9).

Condor (2006) points out that racist talk may serve a variety of functions. She outlines the functions that have been covered in the literature: to express private attitudes (van Dijk 1984), to convince others (Billig *et al.* 1988), or racist talk is seen as having wider macro-social functions which speakers themselves may not even be aware of (Wetherell and Potter 1992). Condor (2006, 15) adds that racially or ethnically prejudiced claims may also serve more mundane functions in the local context, such as to amuse, to exclude, to shock, and to display freedom from normative constraints. Yet another function, which may be at work in Excerpt 5, is that prejudiced talk about ethnic or racial 'others' may serve an ego-defensive function. Katz (1960, 163) argues that 'ego-defensive attitudes … can be aroused by threats, appeals to hatred and repressed impulses, and authoritarian suggestion', and it is possible that these students see their Chinese teachers' perceived authoritarian approach as an implicit threat and therefore, resort to making prejudiced claims about them (Excerpt 5, lines 2-5). Or they accuse them of being racist (Excerpt 6, line 6) in order to protect themselves in what they see largely as a difficult environment, hostile towards foreign students.

For Marius in Excerpt 6, the sojourn in Hong Kong has been associated with too many examples of misunderstanding and miscommunication, and in these situations, he has been unable to put his perspective across. In his email, he talks about the Chinese obsession with 'the fear of losing face' and 'power distance', which, he says, 'feels extremely impolite [from] a western perspective'. It is interesting how social behaviour patterns, which, from a Chinese perspective, are believed to preserve personal integrity and intergroup harmony (Gao 1996) may be perceived by cultural 'others' as 'extremely impolite'. Marius' point is that implicit in a Chinese person's attempt to save his/her own face is the risk that a socially inferior interlocutor may pay the price. The fact that neither the staff at the student residence hall nor his professor admitted that they had made a mistake, and subsequently refused to apologise, made him feel that *he* had to pay the price in order for *them* to save face (lines 6-7).

Implicit in Marius' account of events is also a criticism of his Chinese peers for not speaking up about the mistake (lines 12-13), and a criticism of a system that

allows a socially superior person to 'negotiate' a factual mistake and then *decide* that she is right (lines 14-15). It is also interesting that Marius interprets the unjust sanction against him by the residence hall staff as an example of racism (line 6). In the overwhelming majority of (discourse) studies on stereotypes and prejudice, the victims of racism are usually African-American, Chinese or Arabic, but Marius' comment reminds us that minority group members - no matter which ethnic group they belong to - are susceptible to racist attacks. Racism is not about 'white supremacy' (Leonardo 2009), but about socially inferior minority group members who are unable to speak up and right the wrongs that have been committed against them because they do not have a legitimate voice (Ladegaard 2012).

Discussion

At least two issues appear to be pertinent in the examples that have been analysed above, and they will be further addressed in this discussion. The first issue is how we deal with the disquieting tension of 'the other' in intercultural encounters, and the second is the importance of 'culture' for our understanding and appreciation of intercultural encounters. Bredella (2003, 238) reminds us that 'Being intercultural means to be aware of the disquieting tension in the intercultural experience.' There is no point pretending that students' sojourn will only lead to increased tolerance, open mindedness and a more global outlook; it will most likely also be associated with at least some degree of disquieting tension, possibly even conflict. For some students, as the analyses have demonstrated, the sojourn became associated with frustration and disappointment. They felt that prejudice (their own or others') and intergroup tension prevented them from 'crossing over' and see cultural 'others' as valuable in their own right (Grant 1997). Or they became aware of their own situation as simultaneously within society, but without connection and a sense of belonging.

The first obstacle that needs to be addressed is the dismantling of the frontiers that exist in our own minds (Verma 1997). Bredella (2003) argues that most of us grow up believing that our own cultural system is 'natural' and 'rational' and superior to other people's. Therefore, the intercultural experience 'disappoints this narcissistic belief by making us realise that things which appear irrational and inhumane from our perspective are rational and humane from the other's perspective' (Bredella 2003, 226). Thus, Bredella continues, 'this narcissistic disappointment is an essential presupposition for tolerance' (p. 226). However, for the students whose discourses

were analysed in this article, the main obstacle was arguably not their own prejudice and scepticism, but other students'. They became the victims of international conflicts beyond their control (e.g., the Mainland Chinese and Japanese students), or intergroup relationships and attempts to integrate in meaningful ways were hampered by local students' prejudice or racist beliefs (e.g., the perceived prejudice against Filipinos, or the feeling of being unfairly penalised or ostracised because of one's ethnicity).

The core of the intergroup conflict experienced by these international students is aptly presented in Marius' email: how is it possible to raise problems with somebody, and get the right outcome, without loss of face? The overriding concern for face in Asian contexts, and the fear of 'getting it wrong', are among the most frequently reported problems for the non-Asian students in the dataset. Despite extensive discussions about face in the intercultural communication class they have all taken, many still feel uncertain about how to deal with specific face-related problems they encounter. I have suggested elsewhere that the only way forward in the on-going contentious conflict between Hong Kong and the Mainland (and, we might add, between China and Japan) is that 'intergroup conflict needs to be recognized and potentially painful issues and taboos verbalized in order for any reconciliation to take place' (Ladegaard 2011a, 18). I have argued that in the university context, an online discussion forum may provide a platform for students to discuss, in a non-threatening environment, how these conflicts, caused by historical factors beyond their control, continue to shape their lives and experiences. Without constructive intercultural dialogue, which addresses painful issues of intergroup prejudice and racism, the conflicts this article has uncovered will not be resolved, but presumably, only be exacerbated with time.

The other issue to be discussed is the importance of 'culture' for understanding and interpreting cases of miscommunication and intergroup conflict. The importance of 'culture' in ICC has been a contentious issue for years (see Dervin and Machart 2015; MacDonald and O'Regan 2014 for recent overviews). In the early days of ICC research, 'culture' was often presented as a causal a-priori, which could explain *all* intergroup differences (e.g., Hofstede 1980), whereas later research has acknowledged that culture is flexible, fluid and multifaceted, created and negotiated in talk, and just one variable among many that may explain intergroup differences (e.g., Carbaugh 2007). Some scholars in the discourse-based ethnographic/sociolinguistic tradition of ICC have suggested that the importance of 'culture' is perhaps exaggerated because

people generally do not orient to culture when they interact. Schnurr and Zaytz (2012) interviewed expatriate supervisors in multicultural workplaces in Hong Kong and concluded that in their meta-discourses about leadership, these leaders would often refer to 'culture' as a salient variable and argue that it had significant impact on their behaviour. However, when the authors studied actual workplace talk and recorded these supervisors as they interacted with their colleagues, they found that 'culture was much less of an issue than claimed in the interview' (p. 295). Some ICC scholars have taken the argument even further and claimed that culture as an analytical concept has become meaningless. Phipps and Gonzales (2004, 68) argue that 'Culture is no longer a helpful discursive construct. It creates more problems than it solves. Tim Ingold speaks for us when he maintains that for us to truly progress, "the culture concept […] will have to go" (Ingold, 1993: 230).'

It is a fact that there is often a discrepancy between what people *say* they do (such as orient to 'culture' in their work) and what they *actually* do (such as being focused on 'getting the job done'). But it is equally true that we do not know how much, or how little, culture means for our behaviour. We usually do not orient to culture, or talk about 'cultural stuff', but that does not mean that 'culture' is not of paramount importance for what do, or do not do. If we reconsider the excerpts that were analysed in this article (as well as many of the excerpts that were not included), one observation appears to be pertinent: when the research reports on minority group members, as it is the case in the present study, these members themselves will usually emphasise that culture plays an important role in their lives, experiences and priorities (see Holmes 2015).

Hall (1976, 46) testifies that 'Most cross-cultural exploration begins with the annoyance of being lost', and it is arguably more likely that minority group members will experience the annoyance of being lost. I shall argue that not until we feel 'lost in translation', misconstrued and misunderstood, like the students whose testimonies have been analysed in this article, do we begin to realise the tremendous impact culture has on our lives: it constructs ingroups and outgroups, it includes and excludes, and it explains animosities and intergroup conflict. Thus, if 'culture' were ever in the attic, as recommended by Phipps and Gonzales (2004), it is time to take it down, dust it off and discuss how we may reconceptualise it into a meaningful analytical concept for discourse analytical studies on intercultural encounters (Dervin and Machart 2015; Ladegaard and Jenks 2015).

Conclusion

This article has analysed intercultural encounters in the internationalising university with focus on the disquieting tension of 'the other'. The analyses have demonstrated that, despite all the best intentions, students sometimes do not succeed in reaching across the divide between 'us' and 'them'; despite their commitment to intercultural dialogue and compromise, they may feel that their attempts to meet 'the other' are hampered by prejudice and intergroup conflict. For these students, the sojourn becomes associated with defeat and anxiety, which seriously jeopardise their attempts to become more open-minded global citizens (Jackson 2015).

Recent research on international education and study-abroad programmes has recognised that increasing the number of non-local students on campus, and sending more local students overseas for one or two semesters, does not necessarily lead to a truly international campus where students and staff socialise in meaningful ways; nor does it always lead to increased intercultural competence and readiness for the global workplace among the students (see Jackson 2015). What is required in order for us to move forward in genuine attempts to internationalise is to give up the laissez-faire approach to internationalisation that most universities seem to have adopted uncritically.

Recent research by education-abroad scholars advocates that universities should systematically intervene at all stages of international education: pre-sojourn, sojourn and re-entry (see Beaven and Borghetti 2015; Jackson 2015; Vande Berg 2009). However, in order for these attempts to succeed and address the concerns this article has highlighted, students must also be encouraged to share their experiences in a non-threatening environment and thus, be empowered to question not only the cultural values and beliefs of 'the other', but, more importantly, also their own (Ladegaard 2015). Bredella (2003) reminds us that there are people who suffer under their own or other people's culture-bound beliefs and therefore want to change them. Thus, he warns that 'the intercultural experience is in danger of justifying injustices and humiliations if it forbids us to criticise the beliefs and values of another culture because each culture defines for itself what is rational and human' (p. 238).

Therefore, ICC scholars should have the courage to confront racism and prejudice when they hear it. This means a renewed commitment to an agenda for teaching and research in ICC that is truly non-ethnocentric, multicultural and anti-

racist. It also means that students and scholars of ICC should be encouraged to engage with the animosity and political issues that are root causes of conflict. Because, as Phipps (2014, 111) advises,

> If uncomfortable, political, sensitive issues are not part of Intercultural Dialogue, and the only scope for dialogue is discussion of ways in which people might be perceiving each other as culturally different, then it is not possible for dialogue to achieve any change.

In order for students and staff to be able to critically engage with the problematic issues that this article has identified, universities must provide forums where genuine intercultural dialogue is encouraged. A pertinent problem in the context of this study (and probably other Asian contexts) is that the fear of potential loss of face may prevent us from discussing the issues that are the root causes of prejudice and racism. Thus, intercultural education must address these painful issues and advise students that 'we cannot rest content in relativism but must mediate between different frames of reference in order to make a better one' (Bredella, 2003, 238).

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Notes

1) Parts of the conversations in Excerpt 1 (lines 15-24) and 2 (lines 1-2 and 6-11) were also analysed in Ladegaard (2015), but the foci and objectives are different.

2) Another potential benefit of not having local students in the discussion group is that the Mainland students share their experiences of prejudice against Mainlanders in Hong Kong. Had there been local students present, Li and Wang would probably not have shared their story with the group.

3) The antagonism between Hong Kong and Mainland China was intensified during the Occupy Central movement in the autumn of 2014. Students and other pro-democracy activists engaged in a civil disobedience campaign by occupying certain streets in Hong Kong's business district to protest against the Hong Kong and the Central Chinese government's so-called 'conservative' political reform framework. It rules out civil nomination and stipulates that only pro-Beijing, pre-approved political candidates can run for Chief Executive in 2017. The protesters were finally dispersed

by the court in mid-December 2014 after more than ten weeks of occupation. The data used in this article was recorded prior to Occupy Central.

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Appendix

Transcription Conventions

Bold = pronounced with stress/emphasis

, = short pause, less than 0.5 second

(2.0) = pause in seconds

'give me that' = reporting direct speech

: (as in ah:) means that the vowel sound is prolonged

xx = incomprehensible

// = interruption; //as I said// = overlapping speech

? = question/rising intonation

[with] = word inserted by the transcriber to ease comprehension

[...] = turn(s) left out