Making sense of diversity: Differences that make a difference in international education

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Over the past 10-15 years Danish universities have attempted to position themselves in the global competition to attract mobile students from around the world. In order to make Danish higher education accessible to non-native students an increasing number of study programs – especially at the post-graduate level – are offered in English. Often these programs are promoted as "international" with an aspiration to not only educate young people in an international environment but also to help them develop intercultural competences and global outlook.

Taking its departure in a research project which explores the internationalization of university education in Denmark, this paper discusses how students attending international study programs at a Danish university make sense of the diversity they encounter and how they relate it to their understanding of international environments. The purpose of the exploration is to contribute to our understanding of the ways differences are perceived and given meaning in an international environment and how different kinds of diversity may be constructed as more or less desirable.

The paper initially approaches the question of diversity from a sociological perspective. With reference to a comprehensive survey of the students who attend international study programs at Denmark's second largest university (Aarhus University) in terms of nationality, age, gender, educational background, family background, mobility history, language abilities, social class etc. (Wilken & Madsen forthcoming) the paper reflects on the various ways that students attending international study programs at Aarhus University could be said to be similar and different. The survey has led to a construction of a "social biography" (Madsen 2014, Bourdieu 1988) of the student body. While it does not reflect all similarity and differences imaginable, it does provide the contours of the "territory" being mapped when students make sense of the diversity they encounter in the international environment. It also allows for an understanding of where students "are coming from" when they talk about others. As pointed out by Pierre Bourdieu (1989: 17) visions of division are created from specific points in social space which makes it important to get a basic understanding of positions when interpreting narratives of difference.

The paper goes on to analyze how students talk about diversity. This analysis draws on approximately 30 in-depth interviews with students attending international study programs at Aarhus University. The interviews used in the analysis have been selected so that they represent different forms of diversity in the student body in order to explore how diversity is represented from different points in the social space.. Drawing on Michele Lemont's conception of "symbolic boundary making" (Lamont 1991, 2000) the paper then explores which differences the students talk about and how they distinguish between "good" differences which are considered to contribute to the international and educational environment and "problematic" differences which are considered to be disturbing.

The concept of "symbolic boundary making" which is inspired by *inter alia* the writing of Norbert Elias' work on the established and the outsider (1965), Mary Douglas' work on moral order (1966) and Pierre Bourdieu's work on symbolic violence (1984) refers to conceptual distinctions made by social actors creating or reflecting categorical inequality (Lamont 2002). The concept focuses attention on the way that actors differentiate between self and various kinds of others according to different parameters. In the context of

an international environment where diversity is promoted as good and where the ability to interact with and learn from culturally or otherwise different others is a valued skill the concept helps identify ways of classifying differences that are experienced by social actors as problematic or undesirable.

At a time where higher education is becoming more diverse and where embracing difference and plurality is becoming an explicit goal attempts to understand how people make sense of diversity and how they categorize differences and perhaps produce or reproduce inequalities of various kinds is becoming equally important.

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