Reimagining the Orientation of International Students in Canadian Universities

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Welcome…

Welcome is a word we, the authors, heard often during our early days as international graduate students at research-intensive Canadian universities. It is also a word deeply connected to our research projects, having met through the Pathways to Prosperity Standing Committee of Student and Junior Scholar Engagement. Even though we grew up on different continents, inhabit different social positions, and live in different provinces, we share an experience: researching what it means to welcome newcomers *while being welcomed* as newcomers ourselves.

Our university admission letters and study permit approvals rendered us 'desirable' in the eyes of the university and the state. Yet all of us felt, to varying degrees, undesired by our 'host' universities, communities, and country - the latter of which is now, also to varying degrees, our 'home.' This interplay of inclusion and exclusion - paradoxically positioning international students (IS) as simultaneously wanted and distained - is well documented (King & Raghuram, 2013; Stein & Andreotti, 2016). However, as we co-authors continue to 'settle' in this settler-colonial state and now hold positions in which *we* extend welcomes, we feel compelled to interrogate the role of universities in that extension. Who had the right to welcome us, on what land, and for what purpose? What challenges did we endure, perhaps unnecessarily? What opportunities for growth did we miss? What could have been different?

Orienting the study

In 2019, there were 250,020 study permit holders (at all education levels) in Canada (Crossman et al., 2021). 16% of university enrollments were international (StatsCan, 2020), the second-highest proportion in the world (IIE, 2019). Despite their highly publicized economic benefits, IS are politicized in Global North economies (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Marginson, 2013). There is dissonance between policies and the lived experience of IS, particularly around issues of discrimination, racism, and marginalization (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Guo & Guo, 2017). Logistical concerns, such as housing and support for accompanying family members among graduate students such as ourselves, also present serious challenges for IS.

Many locate universities' imperative to provide international student orientation within an ethics of duty and of care (Coate & Rathnayake, 2013). However, another imperative in the Canadian context relates to (1) a neoliberal shift from government to privatized immigration settlement services, and (2) an increasing dependence on international students as future immigrants, both of which refashion universities as de facto settlement service providers (Flynn & Bauder, 2014; Walton-Roberts, 2011). Universities are not explicitly funded, trained, or prepared for this immigrant 'integration' role. At the same time, not all settlement services agencies are funded to serve temporary residents such as international students, resulting in a significant gap in services (Johnstone & Lee, 2014; Goh, 2019), although this is slowly changing. Finally, there is a lack of critical approaches to orientation in which issues such as racism, colonialism, and other forms of violence and discrimination are discussed.

Methodology

Our research question was: *what were our lived experiences of university orientation as IS in Canada?* To answer, we probed our own lived experiences using a collaborative autoethnography (CAE) approach. CAE is a qualitative research method in which researchers gather lived experiences and reflect on their socio-cultural meanings by analyzing and interpreting these lived experiences (Vellanki & Prince, 2018). The collaboration of multiple researchers can give voice to concerns by pooling autobiographical materials together (Kim & Reichmuth, 2021); thus, as a process of group meaning-making, CAE can enrich the exploration of experiences and identities (Choi et al., 2021). Because we are (or were) international *graduate* students, our study reflects the experiences of a specific sub-population within IS, yet may contain generalizable lessons.

Findings

The overarching theme highlighted in our stories was the ongoing nature of orientation and our desire to frame the process not through the dominant frame of temporality but though one of **continuous relationality**. Within this finding, we identified the following major themes and sub-themes:
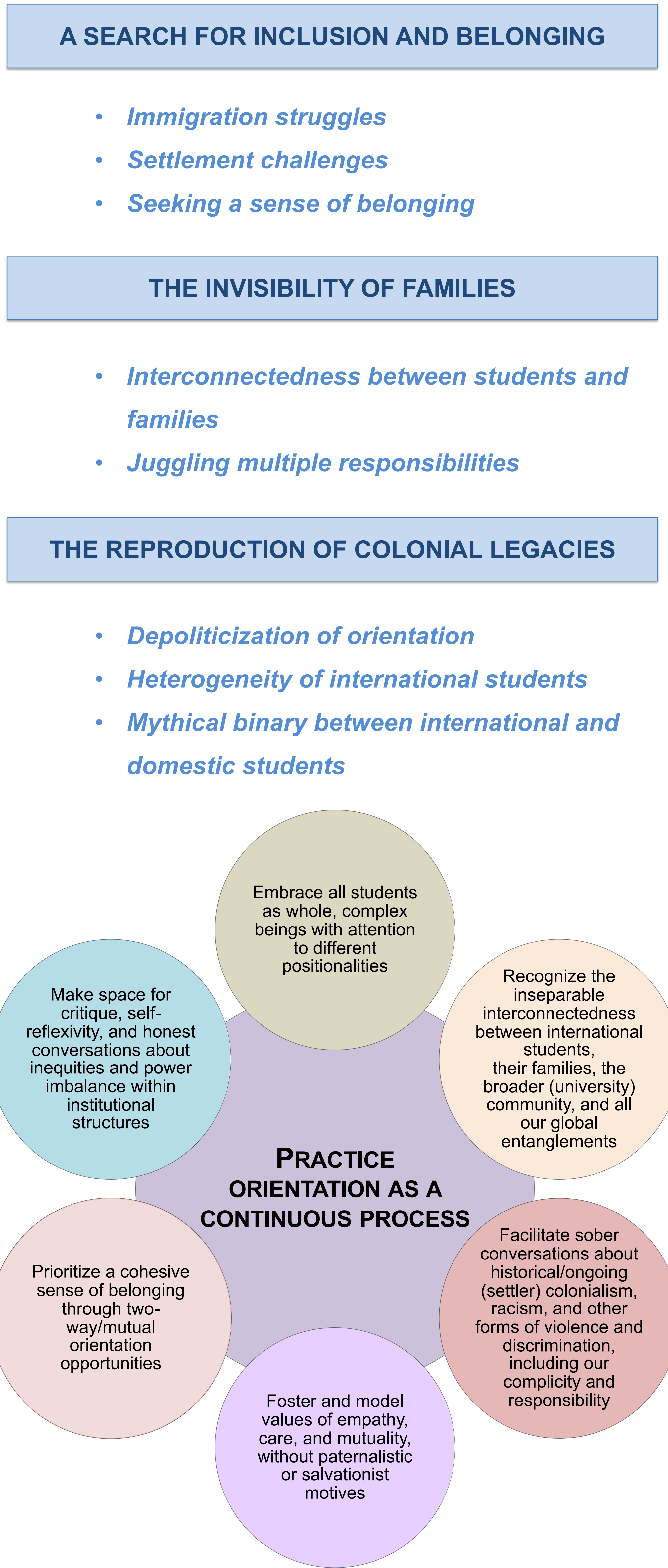
A SEARCH FOR INCLUSION AND BELONGING

- *Immigration struggles*
- *Settlement challenges*
- *Seeking a sense of belonging*

THE INVISIBILITY OF FAMILIES

- *Interconnectedness between students and families*
- *Juggling multiple responsibilities*

THE REPRODUCTION OF COLONIAL LEGACIES

- *Depoliticization of orientation*
- *Heterogeneity of international students*
- *Mythical binary between international and domestic students*

Figure 1: A 'flower' model to guide IS orientation

Possible reorientations

Our findings demonstrate the tensions between the temporally-bound nature of 'traditional' IS orientation and the lack of connections that emerge due to the rigidity of the process. We point to a **need** for thoughtfully-designed orientations, practiced as a continuous, relational process which recognizes the unique settlement needs of, and amongst, IS in all their manifestations. We also **discourage** artificially-imposed boundaries where they do not need to exist (e.g. domestic/international) and shying away from difficult conversations about power, race, and colonialism.

There are opportunities to **incrementally improve** international student orientation, e.g.:

- (Virtual) pre-arrival and 'refresher' programming
- Cohesive support networks between governments, education institutions, settlement service organizations, and local immigration partnerships

However, institutions should also **revisit their approach** to 'orientation' and (re)-centre student identities, explicitly recognizing that IS mobility presents an inherently colonial process. We do not prescribe what a 'better' approach would look like. Instead, based on our collective analysis, we offer a model (Figure 1) with suggested considerations for those wishing to re-conceptualize programming. We place continuity at the center, representing its centrality to the process, while the surrounding petals represent interconnected pieces. In this way, we might move away from 'welcoming desired guests' towards **relating with each other** in a shared world and all the complexities, power imbalances, and violence that entails.

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