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Unpacking distinction within mobility: social prestige and international students

Laura Prazeres

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1 **Unpacking distinction within mobility: social prestige and international students**

2

3 **Abstract**

4 This paper investigates the complex ways in which young people engage in social distinction
5 within international mobility. The study offers novel conceptual and empirical insights by
6 examining how distinction and social advantage is reproduced through short-term student
7 mobility from the Global North to the Global South. In doing so, it elucidates the iterative
8 process of distinction-making within mobility, and argues that young mobile people negotiate a
9 tension between different forms of distinction. Specifically, it unpacks and conceptualises
10 distinction into dual categories – collective and individual – and suggests that students alternate
11 and waver between these categories in order to both validate and elevate their position within a
12 mobility hierarchy. The paper also considers how particular places are viewed as more
13 distinctive and affording greater gains in cultural and symbolic capital. It concludes with future
14 interrogations and ways forward for research on international mobility and distinction.

15

16 **Key words:** Distinction, symbolic capital, cultural capital, international study, mobility, Global
17 South.

18

Introduction

International student mobility is increasingly recognised as a marker of distinction. Since the ability to be voluntarily mobile across international borders is often reserved for the privileged elite, student mobility can contribute to reproducing social disadvantage and difference. Mobility to particular places, as this paper will show, can also further entrench privilege and accentuate distinction. What matters in the symbolic struggle for social prestige is not only *how* it is waged but *where*. This paper responds to both these queries by using international student mobility as an apt context to illuminate the complex process of distinction-making within mobility. From this starting point, it investigates how international students accumulate symbolic capital while abroad. Significantly, the paper develops conceptual insights into the notion of distinction within international student mobility and, in doing so, reveals the iterative process of distinction-making among young people.

Although research on international student mobility has etched its own distinct place within geographical scholarship, King and Raghuram (2013) point out that further research is needed to contribute to theoretical and empirical insights on internationally mobile students. While distinction within international student mobility is already posited by geographers (Findlay, et al., 2012; King et al., 2011; Raghuram, 2013; Waters and Brooks, 2011), the notion has not been engaged with in sufficient depth to elucidate how students gain and maintain symbolic capital as well as compete for greater distinction. Empirically, most of these works have focused on degree mobility to the US and UK with very few studies on short-term student mobility beyond the Western world. This paper makes an empirical contribution by examining the experiences of Canadian exchange students in the Global South.

Building on a growing body of work on distinction within international mobility (Benson, 2009, 2010; Heath, 2007; Findlay et al., 2012), this paper unpacks the process of distinction-making among international students. Conceptually, the study expands and deepens our understanding of symbolic capital acquisition within mobility. If international student mobility is implicated in distinction, then how do mobile students manoeuvre their way up the social ladder and mobility echelon? How is the recognition of symbolic capital negotiated and challenged within mobility? This paper addresses these inquiries by revealing the complex dimensions and tensions of distinction within international mobility. It does so by deconstructing and sharpening the notion of distinction into two competing yet overlapping categories. It argues that students negotiate a tension between a desire for an individual distinction and a need to co-validate a collective distinction. I suggest that without this nuanced conceptualisation, the accumulation of symbolic capital – i.e. distinction-making – would appear as a continuously upward or onward-moving process when empirically (and in theory presented here) it is iterative and more complex than the literature has previously shown.

Whilst this paper draws on studies from the travel, tourism and migration literature, the study situates itself within a mobility framework. Despite similarities, international student mobility does not fit neatly into the context of travel or tourism. This is for a number of reasons. First, Findlay et al. comment that the term 'mobility' is best suited for research on 'within-programme moves, typically for periods of 3–12 months, followed by a return to the "home" institution' and in the case of students who view their sojourns abroad in terms of a temporary movement rather than a tourism or travel experience (2006: 293). Second, universities also refer to exchange programmes as 'mobility' schemes. Third, internationally mobile students do not view themselves, nor want others to view them as travellers or tourists (Author, XXXXa).

65 Rather, as the paper will show, they seek to distinguish themselves from tourists and travellers
66 and therefore resist and eschew these labels.
67 The next section lays the foundation for an understanding of distinction-making. It
68 discusses how different forms of human capital have been theorised within international student
69 mobility leading to distinction. The subsequent section sets the conceptual scene for the
70 empirical findings by analysing how distinction has been conceptualised within international
71 mobility broadly and student mobility specifically before turning to the methodology and
72 findings sections.
73
74 **Capitalising on international student mobility**
75
76 Bourdieu's (1997) notions of human capital – although originally not tied explicitly to mobility –
77 are now well-incorporated within the literature on mobility and migration. Human capital is a
78 highly sought out asset and a means of improving and enriching one's skill set and financial
79 earning power. International mobility can generate profitable gains in social and cultural capital
80 which can then be converted into economic capital. Studies linking international student mobility
81 to the acquisition of different forms of human capital are expanding within the literature, most
82 notably with social capital (Findlay et al., 2006; King et al., 2011; Waters and Brooks, 2011) and
83 cultural capital (Bótas and Huisman, 2013; Holloway et al., 2012) but also specifically symbolic
84 capital (Findlay et al., 2012; Sidhu and Dall'Alba, 2016; Tindal et al., 2015). Social capital refers
85 to a collection of resources based on privileged relationships and networks of social connections
86 and/or membership to a group (Bourdieu 1979, 1997). Cultural capital – as embodied, objectified
87 and institutionalised – is based on a set of qualities or attributes transmitted through family or

acquired first-hand that include knowledge, skills, qualifications, material goods and education (Bourdieu, 1997; Erel, 2010). Subsumed as part of cultural capital, the sub-form of symbolic capital – that is, the recognition of distinctive qualities and competences endowed with a certain prestige – is increasingly discussed within the body of work on student mobility (Findlay et al., 2012; Sin, 2013; Waters, 2007).

Recent scholarship on international student mobility acknowledges the reasons for, and value of, international study for facilitating and enhancing human capital accumulation. Murphy-Lejeune defines the primary difference between internationally mobile students and their non-mobile peers as lying in the accumulation of mobility capital which enables ‘individuals to enhance their skills because of the richness of the international experience gained by living abroad’ (2002: 51). Mobility capital, as the accumulation of mobility experiences gained through family history of mobility, previous personal experiences and/or contacts abroad, is prevalent among international students (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; King et al., 2011). Scholars argue that not only are most international students *already* endowed with mobility capital but they are part of a ‘migratory elite’ (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002) that often reproduce (dis)advantage and privilege through their travels (King et al., 2011). This privilege is also underpinned by postcolonial imaginaries since, as Madge et al. highlight, underlying postcolonial projects and ‘power hierarchies’ are implicated within international student mobility (2009: 43). As such, simply being a traveller from the Western world can infer gains of cultural capital (Fechter, 2007).

Urry (2002) points out that ‘for many social groups it is the lack of mobility that is the real problem and they will seek to enhance their social capital through access to greater mobility’ (2002: 264). Among the reasons for seeking cultural and social capital through international student mobility are the opportunities for self-improvement (Bótas and Huisman, 2013), to

111 improve career prospects (Brooks et al., 2012) and to acquire a mark of distinction (Brooks et al.,
112 2012; Findlay et al., 2012). Indeed, one of the main motivations for international student
113 mobility is to acquire institutional cultural capital through reputable educational qualifications in
114 order to 'stand out from the crowd in the competition for lucrative employment opportunities'
115 (Holloway et al., 2012: 2279). Stocking up on cultural and social capital provides students with
116 assets that can be converted into economic capital through better job opportunities and
117 potentially a higher financial return (King et al., 2011). As such, cultural and social capital
118 acquired through international mobility is used upon return by mobile students as a way to
119 distinguish themselves from non-mobile peers in the 'home' and international labour market.
120 Attending a 'world-class' university overseas, for example, is deemed to impart symbolic capital
121 that can act 'as a distinguishing identity marker' (Findlay et al., 2012: 128).

122 However, some studies suggest that, rather than intentional, acquisition of cultural capital
123 through international educational mobility can be accidental (Waters and Brooks 2010). Instead
124 of a strategic move that anticipates advantages for future employment, some students pursue a
125 degree abroad chiefly for adventure and self-development (Waters et al., 2011). Yet as Waters et
126 al. (2011) point out, these leisurely pursuits and 'personal reinventions' can inevitably – even if
127 not intentionally – reproduce advantage and symbolic capital. In other words, rather than set out
128 abroad with the purpose and intention to accrue cultural and social capital, some students –
129 including those in my study – discover along the way or following their sojourn the benefits of
130 mobility for various forms of capital acquisition and distinction. Educational mobility abroad is
131 therefore envisaged for both personal and professional enrichment.

132 Most of these studies examined students that attended primarily 'elite' universities in the
133 UK and US for degree-mobility, with much less work on international students in the context of

short-term (credit) mobility to countries which are typically senders of students. This paper therefore examines how international students accumulate symbolic capital during exchanges to the Global South. I will show that symbolic capital – whether deliberate or not – is still accumulated and reproduced through their short-term educational mobility. In the case of Erasmus exchanges, Bótas and Huisman indicate that short-term study abroad is perceived as ‘a means of self-improvement’ alongside cultural capital acquisition (2013: 748), echoing Bourdieu’s perspective that ‘the work of acquisition is work on oneself (self-improvement)’ (1997: 48). Thus, international student mobility and the inevitable acquisition of capital that it entails are intimately tied up in projects of the self which can project both personal and social distinction. As this paper will demonstrate, even short-term international mobility can generate and elicit different categories or forms of distinction. The following section extends and deepens the discussion on distinction within studies of international mobility by unpacking the notion and process of distinction-making.

Conceptualising distinction within international mobility

Distinction arises when individuals struggle and compete to attain valuable cultural and symbolic signs. Such acquisitions endow its owner with distinctive qualities that distinguishes them from less worthy or able competitors. Those that collect and acquire the most valuable and desirable signs or goods can raise their social profile as well as their worth as an individual. The threat of being surpassed by opponents forces the current possessor of distinctive qualities into a continuous symbolic competition to achieve greater quantities, and newer qualities, of distinction. Distinction can take different forms. Gap years, for instance, can serve to elect

157 particular forms of distinction that are both social and personal. King argues that young people's
158 narrative of self-reconstruction abroad 'produces two forms of distinction: a life course
159 distinction, whereby a past self is compared to a present and future self; and a social distinction,
160 where the self is compared to others' (2011: 342). Different processes and forms of distinction
161 can therefore unfold and develop in and through international mobility. Building on this work, I
162 draw attention to the ways that distinction is differentiated within international mobility. In doing
163 so, I suggest that distinction should diversify conceptually from a singular notion to one that is
164 multilayered and complex.

165 International study and travel are popular rites of passage (King et al., 2011) and are
166 means for young people to differentiate themselves from non-mobile peers. In the case of
167 Heath's (2007) study, gap years give prospective students a distinctive edge over other applicants
168 for admission to 'elite' institutions. Once accepted into a reputable institution these students
169 benefit from a 'world-class' education that differentiates and distinguishes them from less
170 privileged peers (Findlay et al., 2012). As Findlay et al. observe, 'simply by being "different",
171 they saw themselves as achieving "distinction" through mobility' (2012: 129). By choosing to go
172 a 'step further' than their peers – both geographically and symbolically – these students view
173 their degree abroad as a distinction above their stay-at-home peers. An international education
174 grants them membership into an 'exclusive' group of privileged individuals well-stocked in
175 cultural and symbolic capital (Waters, 2007). As noted earlier, this inevitably results in a small
176 yet privileged group of young people – an 'elite within an elite' – reproducing (dis)advantage
177 and social differentiation (King et al. 2011: 165). Students perpetuate their advantage and
178 difference, widening the inequality gap between themselves and those less mobile. Symbolic

179 capital from international study is achieved not only *with* expenses, but *at* the expense of those
180 deprived of mobility capital.

181 However, mobile individuals not only seek to distinguish themselves from non-mobile
182 peers but also from other travellers and international students. Once the well-travelled (or mobile
183 individuals) have established their difference from relatively immobile peers, they seek to
184 measure their success against the experiences of fellow travellers. The process of collecting
185 social and cultural capital, resources and other markers of value inscribes mobile individuals into
186 a contest and pursuit of distinction with other travellers (Heath, 2007). In a study of British
187 lifestyle migrants in France, Benson reveals how they are continuously 'drawing out distinctions
188 between themselves and their compatriots' (2009: 132). As such, it is not simply a matter of – or
189 at least, does not stop at – who travels and who does not (nor mobile versus non-mobile), but of
190 moving up the ranks in the competition for higher recognition. Distinction is always
191 (re)negotiated in relation to other individuals, and in order to stay ahead of the competition for
192 distinction, travellers will negatively reference others in comparison to themselves (Bourdieu,
193 1979). As is the case of Koreans on working holidays in Canada, their 'effort to develop the self
194 … is often accompanied by constant measurement based on certain standards and comparisons
195 with others' (Yoon 2014: 1025). Travellers, as a result, continuously seek out newer and rarer
196 experiences abroad in order to increase their social standing and ultimately outshine and outclass
197 others in the ongoing symbolic battle for greater distinction. While Benson observes that 'this
198 quest is a never-ending process, continuing until long after migration' (2009: 133), how
199 distinction is (re)negotiated in relation to others following mobility is less clear. In seeking to
200 elucidate this process, this paper examines the process of distinction-making during the sojourn
201 abroad and upon return 'home'.

202 One way of competing for greater symbolic capital is through the location of study
203 (Tindal et al., 2015; Author, XXXXc). Since places are 'marked by individuality and distinction'
204 (Raghuram, 2013: 143), the choice of 'particular study destinations are not accidental' (Sidhu
205 and Dall'Alba, 2016: 10). Indeed, 'place' plays a role in diversifying symbolic capital and
206 raising the stakes for distinction among and between mobile individuals. 'Collecting places' and
207 experiences in the Global South enables long-haul travellers in Desforges' (1998) study to
208 profess authoritative knowledge over this area of the world that distinguishes them from non-
209 travellers. Desforges argues that 'by using travel as a form of cultural capital which serves as a
210 sign of distinction, travellers gain access to a social class and its consequent privileges' (1998:
211 185). Travel to parts of the world regarded as more 'authentic' and considered less visited by
212 other (Western) tourists differentiates travellers from the frowned upon tourism masses and plays
213 a 'significant role in defining social distinction' (Munt 1994: 102). The Global South is
214 perceived and framed by travellers and international students as a distinctive place that can signal
215 difference and achievement (Desforges, 1998; Munt, 1994; Author, XXXXa, XXXXb), but little
216 is understood of how fellow sojourners in that part of the world vie amongst themselves for
217 higher claims of distinction and thus, social and personal prestige. This paper takes some
218 empirical and conceptual steps to address this ongoing pursuit.
219 The value for the object or status of distinction lies in the interest generated 'by the mere
220 fact of entering the game, joining in the collective belief in the value of the game which makes
221 the game and endlessly remakes the competition for the stakes' (Bourdieu, 1984: 247). In
222 continuously redefining the stakes of the 'game', players must entice others – especially those
223 less endowed with distinctive qualities – to 'play' in order to generate a pursuit of distinction
224 (Bourdieu, 1984). As individuals stack themselves against others of comparable calibre, different

225 ranks and categories of distinction emerge within a hierarchy of differentiation. The reasons for
226 this are, on the one hand, to generate interest and value for the game; and, on the other, to single
227 out and reward players at different levels. Distinction emanates from a competitive process of
228 differentiation but it is also itself differentiated. For instance, newer travellers with little mileage
229 and experience will seek to distinguish themselves from non-travellers but will contently join the
230 ranks of mass tourists. Meanwhile, well-travelled people will distinguish themselves from these
231 emerging competitors in the lower ranks and, instead, strive to outdo more experienced or
232 advanced travellers by visiting places seen as 'more exotic' and collecting greater experiences or
233 distinctive qualities (whatever that may mean as the stakes evolve). Bourdieu explains that
234
235 > 'the recognition of distinction that is affirmed in the effort to possess it, … helps to
236 > maintain constant tension in the symbolic goods market, forcing the possessors of
237 > distinctive properties threatened with popularization to engage in an endless pursuit of
238 > new properties through which to assert their rarity' (1984: 249).
239
240 This paper suggests that there is a need to understand the underlining tension within distinction
241 and mobility and, in doing so, highlights its iterative process. More specifically, the paper
242 advances our understanding of distinction-making by deconstructing and sharpening the notion
243 of distinction into two parts – individual and collective distinction. The following section
244 discusses the methodology before turning to the findings on how students differentiate their
245 symbolic capital.
246
247

Methodology

As part of a larger qualitative longitudinal study that collected interviews and photographs at various stages, this paper draws on two sets of in-depth semi-structured interviews with 28 Canadian students on short-term exchanges in the Global South. Interviews were conducted at the mid-point of the sojourn and upon return to Canada. The study makes an empirical contribution by considering the experience of Canadian students both studying (13) and interning (15) in the Global South as part of their university program. The Global South here refers to a UNDP definition of countries in Latin America, Africa, South-East Asia, and parts of the Middle-East that vary socially, economically and politically but share similar challenges. Participants were either studying at a university or interning at a non-governmental organisation in the Global South. Although students interning did not attend university classes *in situ* as those studying, their internship placement was part of an academic course at their Canadian university with lectures that preceded and followed the internship. The purpose of this study is not to compare student groups, nor to generalise or homogenise mobility experiences, but instead, to scrutinise students' narratives of distinction. While I acknowledge the heterogeneity of experiences between and among these groups, I demonstrate that both consider the different contexts of their mobility along similar grounds for distinction.

Participants were recruited at pre-departure orientation sessions at universities in Ontario and Québec. A total of 24 women and 4 men volunteered to take part in the study – an uneven gender sample that reflects disproportionally higher female participation rates in the Western world, including those of the Canadian universities in this study. The majority of participants were White/Caucasian with only three participants being non-White, potentially highlighting an

271 important lack of diversity in Canadian exchange programme participation (particularly given
272 the directionality of the student mobility flows in this study). Since participation was voluntary,
273 this was a self-selected group of individuals. Exchanges varied between 2 to 12 months in
274 duration, and both anglophones and francophones participated in the study. While interviews
275 conducted in French were translated to English, some terms that were more difficult to translate
276 due to different connotations were retained in brackets in the original language as a reference.

277 The interview questions asked participants to reflect and discuss how the experience
278 compared to their pre-departure expectations, their likes and dislikes of their host place and of
279 their exchange experience, memorable moments, and the challenges they encountered both
280 abroad and upon return. A qualitative thematic analysis of the data was carried out by reading
281 and re-reading the interview transcripts in order to become familiar with the data and identify
282 emerging themes. This allowed for different themes to emerge throughout subsequent iterations
283 of analysis as well as for the researcher to refine the thematic categories. Alongside the
284 emergence of themes, a constant comparison enabled these themes to merge and form broader
285 conceptual and thematic categories. Given the sample size, the study does not claim to be
286 representative of students but rather, to provide conceptual depth and insights into the
287 experiences of international mobility and narratives of distinction for a specific student cohort.

288 The following two sections consider how students complicate the notion of distinction to
289 serve and advance dual purposes. I demonstrate how in seeking to both validate and elevate the
290 value of their international experience, participants narrate and negotiate a tension between
291 contesting forms or categories of distinction. More precisely, I argue that they negotiate a
292 personal desire for *individual distinction* with a need to validate their international exchange
293 through *collective distinction*.

294

295 **Collective distinction**

296

297 Scholars argue that for cultural capital to be converted into symbolic capital and hence
298 distinction, it must be narrated to, and recognised by, an audience (Benson, 2009; Sin, 2009).
299 Prestige is predicated on other people's recognition and validation. Bourdieu explains that
300 distinction 'only exists through the struggles for the exclusive appropriation of the distinctive
301 signs which make "natural distinction"' (1984: 247), without interest from others in these 'signs'
302 there can be no distinction. International exchanges, as this paper asserts, need to be recognised
303 and valued by both outgoing students and stay-at-home peers in order to confer distinction.
304 However, many participants lamented the lack of interest from peers and friends. Now
305 back in his Canadian hometown following a study year in South America, François – both vexed
306 and perplexed by his friends' indifference to his sojourn – shrugs his shoulders as he describes
307 how they casually overlooked his past year abroad:

308

309 'My friends reintegrated me into the group of friends as if I was gone for like two days,
310 as if nothing happened (*comme si de rien n'était*).'

311

312 Similarly, Élodie – a francophone student returned from a year-long study exchange in South
313 America – shares François' disappointment and expresses what many other participants
314 experienced upon return:

315

316 'I haven't talked about [my sojourn] that much really, because people aren't that
317 interested. … They don't understand, basically they know that I left and now I'm back
318 again…. You start talking to someone and their eyes just, don't roll, but they look away,
319 you know? They're not really interested… they just change subjects like they don't really
320 want to listen.'
321
322 Since family and friends may not always engage with returnees' narratives or recognise their
323 self-growth, participants turn to each other to validate the importance of the experience. Much as
324 Noy reveals in the case of backpackers that 'self-change is an inherent feature of the collective
325 voice' (2004: 89), participants in this study collaborate with other international students in shared
326 narratives of self-development to co-promote recognition and collective distinction. Collective
327 appreciation for international student mobility is fostered by connecting with fellow Canadian
328 exchange students and this is particularly salient in a comment by Élodie, who mentions another
329 Quebecer she met while studying there:
330
331 'There aren't many people who would find that interesting except for others who travel.
332 The only person with whom I talk about my trips, except for the other Quebecer that I
333 met there… the first semester with her, after I saw her again, we talked about it because
334 we knew the same people. We lived in the same country, you know? So it's just with
335 these people that you can really let loose about your experience and how you feel,
336 because usually they have been through the same.'
337

Élodie explains how it is only fellow travellers that can fully understand the value of international mobility and relate to a common experience of sojourning abroad – irrespective of a travelling or studying context – and can therefore position non-travellers as out-of-the-loop (so to speak) and outside of an exclusive group. International students intuitively understand the challenges and rewards of the sojourn as well as the struggles upon return to the place of origin. They can relate to the experience and co-validate their narratives of personal growth among each other in order to construct a collective narrative of distinction. Desforges explains their sojourns 'form a mutual social bond in that both value and respect the knowledge and experiences gained through travel which serves to distinguish them from others' (1998: 185). Travel, Desforges claims, can 'create a sense of social solidarity through distinction' (1998: 185). Sharing tales and narratives of the sojourn abroad attributes meaning and value to the international experience since 'in order to cash in on the social value of their experience, travelers must share it with their peers' (Week, 2012: 199). Exchange students, regardless of their host destination, can find common ground and construct a collective distinction.

As Arianne, a francophone student now returned 'home' from her 6-month study exchange in South America points out, the destination does not matter so much as the journey:

> 'At least I have a few friends that went on exchange too. We share stories and even if they were in a completely different country, it works because we lived a bit the same changes or the same experience a bit. For that it works really well (*ça se passe vraiment bien*).'

360 Yet, place still matters for Arianne – as long as it is not in Canada. Instead, it is both the mobile
361 and place-based experiences *outside* of Canada that create a shared story of collective distinction.
362 The exchange of stories is what enables recognition and thus, converts the international sojourn
363 into a marker of collective distinction (Bourdieu, 1997). Arianne further expresses how mobility
364 in the context of international exchanges is the common marker of distinction among exchange
365 students but also shared feelings of frustration upon return:
366
367 'Coming back [to Canada] it was exactly the same things that we missed and we couldn't
368 manage to explain that to people. And especially just the fact of trying to relate what we
369 experienced to other people who have never experienced something like that; there was
370 silence (*il y a avait un blanc*), it didn't work. So it was the same feeling of frustration.'
371
372 Arianne demonstrates how co-narrating the experience and shared feelings among exchange
373 students serves to differentiate and distance them from non-mobile peers. However, the lack of
374 reaction from non-mobile peers is a double-edged sword: it can be a silent confirmation attesting
375 to their difference; or, it can portend indifference. Disinterest in the sojourn threatens to
376 undermine social prestige and distinction. The sense of frustration expressed by Arianne and
377 other participants may reveal their concern for the possible lack of recognition of their symbolic
378 capital. In an effort to address and redress the lack of recognition from friends, Arianne and other
379 participants seek the company and comparable narratives of fellow travellers to compensate for
380 the oversight of their symbolic capital. Tactful narration is thus used to forge a distinctive group
381 by selectively screening and sorting members through similar experiences and excluding
382 outsiders. Here, she further explains how they co-produce a common narrative:

> ‘I guess we are all interested in hearing what each other have to say, because one of my really good friends is [on exchange in a European country], so it’s not at all the same experience, but the fact that he tells me, ‘oh ya, I did a trip here, I learned this,’ I can always relate that to something I have done …. Or when we compare people, he will talk to me about [European country] people and I talk about [South American country] people; and I talk about this and this that is different. So it’s like small things that have similarities or it’s just really general themes (*des grandes vagues*) of how we feel or how we felt.’

Arianne acknowledges that her friend’s experience in Europe differs from hers, but that similar themes and feelings experienced while abroad and upon return are what binds their experience. Mutual recognition of similar experiences regarding the international exchange establishes membership criteria to an illustrious group. In this way, the collective participation between international students generates interest among a wider (yet excluded) audience. There is appeal and value in (selective) numbers; in being an ‘exclusive club’ that others may envy or strive to join (Waters, 2007), and membership to this exclusive club grants participants both cultural and social capital.

Although current members establish the criteria for admission to the group and hold tightly to its boundaries (Waters, 2007), new conditions and conquests continuously contest and re-define its limits. Members engage in an iterative back-and-forth process of positioning and re-ordering themselves within the international traveller hierarchy. If no one wanted to do an exchange, then it would have little value, but if too many participate, then it is no longer

406 distinctive. There is a process of relative differentiation and hierarchising between groups of
407 travellers and non-travellers as well as between different types of travellers. International
408 students – particularly those interning – are similar to expatriates in that they are abroad for
409 work, but they distinguish themselves from expatriates through a reluctance to remain within the
410 'expat bubble' – although some interns did remain mostly with other interns and expats (for
411 examples in the literature on expatriates resisting the 'bubble' see Benson, 2010). Since their
412 sojourns are generally short-lived, participants want to be an active member and part of the local
413 community in order to be considered a local insider (Benson, 2009; Author, XXXXb). Whether
414 they achieve this is another point of discussion, but they use this criterion for membership to
415 distinguish themselves from other travellers, expatriates and especially tourists (even if
416 participants studying abroad often remained in circles of other international students).
417 In addition to competing with other travellers, students also need to contend among
418 themselves for distinction, both in spatial and qualitative terms (Munt, 1994). More specifically,
419 they use their destination and length of stay as markers distinguishing them from other Canadian
420 exchange students. As Munt points out, they adopt 'a number of practices in seeking to establish
421 social differentiation and to disassociate themselves from the tourism practices of class fractions
422 below' (1994: 119). There is a hierarchal differentiation of distinction and value between groups
423 as well as within groups. Members of the group can differentiate on a more generalised scale
424 between mobile students and stay-at-home students or can refine the criteria and exclusivity of
425 the group through a smaller-scale differentiation among international exchange students based on
426 specific qualitative – and at times quantitative – criteria. Since experiences and places have
427 'value', Crang suggests that,
428

> ‘the cachet offered by different activities or their “cultural capital” will vary, and may well change over the life course of an individual. These changes may be due to changes in the ‘value’ of a destination, as somewhere becomes more well-known it may lose the distinctiveness it held when visited … or it may be that through our lives we move through different social circles which value things differently’ (2004: 81).

The stakes are continuously raised for maintaining, elevating and re-establishing distinction. Participants find ways to outdo other travellers and exchange students through spatial, cultural and temporal dimensions which can be strategically and advantageously reconfigured. For instance, the duration or length of the sojourn, the cultural and socio-economic features of the destination, the purpose of the sojourn and even the number of previous international experiences are used to re-establish and re-appropriate exclusivity and distinction. Thus, different forms and contexts of mobility can complicate and differentiate distinction. So while shared and co-produced narratives with other international (Canadian) students enable participants to co-validate their experience and create a collective distinction that grants membership to a socially exclusive and prestigious group, the next section will demonstrate that they also seek a more unique and individualised form of distinction.

Individual distinction

Once value for the international exchange is generated through mutual recognition and collective distinction, participants re-negotiate their category of distinction – that is, they differentiate themselves from other (Canadian) exchange students in order to claim a unique *individual*

452 distinction. Erel posits that migrants ‘actively co-construct institutions for validating their
453 cultural capital within the society of residence’ whilst simultaneously creating new parameters to
454 validate and elevate their cultural and social capital over fellow migrants, thereby creating ‘new
455 forms of intra-migrant distinction’ (2010: 656). Participants convey specific narratives and
456 practices with the purpose of re-ordering themselves within a hierarchal structure in an attempt to
457 gain a positional advantage (Elsrud, 2001). Individuals therefore highlight distinctive qualities of
458 their sojourn over others. Based on a re-evaluation of standards and criteria, some qualities and
459 people make the cut while others are cut out. During her internship placement in Africa, Katie
460 illustrates how being (more) adaptable distinguishes her from fellow students:
461
462 ‘I’m kind of surprising myself with how well I’m adapting. Like, even though the [work]
463 life and culture is pretty hard for me to adapt to and I’m still really struggling with that,
464 the sort of day-to-day life as a culture and the miscommunications that you have, all of
465 that stuff actually really hasn’t phased me in a way that I’ve seen some of my other
466 friends who are here.’
467
468 Through this comparison, Katie positions herself above peers who are relatively unsuccessful in
469 overcoming the difficulties of adapting to the local culture. This chimes with Yoon’s (2014)
470 observation of how youth travellers continuously compared and measured their tales of personal
471 development among each other. Despite her struggles, Katie’s ability to fare better in terms of
472 adaptability infers a higher level of cultural capital and distinction. She can thus use this qualifier
473 to distinguish herself from peers in order to claim an individual distinction.

474 Since arriving in Africa for her internship placement, Brianne has been living in shared
475 accommodation with other Canadian students. For her first time living outside the parental home,
476 her experience and living arrangements with fellow Canadians have been, at times, tenuous and
477 irksome. Yet Brianne manages to transform an unfortunate situation into a positive affirmation of
478 her (superior) capacity to adapt to a new cultural environment. Having pointed out the challenges
479 and discomforts she perceives of the Global South, Brianne then discusses her tenacity and
480 difference in relation to her Canadian peers in Africa:
481
482 'I also learned a lot about how other people deal with it too; deal with being in another
483 country. I guess before we left, there were two other interns and I thought, 'Ok, we're all
484 on the same page', and then when we get there and it's completely different, right?
485 (laughs). … I guess, it sounds obvious now, but everybody is different and they are not
486 like they are at home either, especially this one girl who got really depressed. She didn't
487 want to do anything and was afraid all the time. She was not like that in [Canada] at all,
488 so I learned a lot about how some people they can do this and other people just can't, and
489 I'm just happy that I was the one that could. I survived. … So I learned how some people
490 thrive and some people don't; how some people come off as so confident and cool and
491 then, you know, people are really tested.'
492
493 Since, as Bourdieu states, agents re-negotiate their distinction by 'negatively' contrasting that of
494 others to themselves (1984: 249), participants elevate their distinction and badge of achievement
495 in relation to less successful cases of adaptation. Notably, Brianne underscores her personal
496 achievement and success by measuring her experience against the shortcomings of fellow

497 Canadians, distinguishing her ability to 'thrive' in Africa in contrast to those less able. The
498 ability to thrive abroad – a qualitative condition and outcome – is a measure of success in
499 comparison to those that struggle to merely 'survive'. Her experience is thus qualitatively
500 different and distinguishable from her Canadian counterparts in Africa. What stands out from
501 this narrative is the qualitative manner in which participants describe, frame and assess the
502 valour of their sojourn in the Global South in a way that conjures up some challenging and hard-
503 won conquest and contest. Brianne continues:
504

505 'I think it does feel kind of cool to say that I went to [African country] and worked there
506 and lived there, and it feels like an accomplishment to come out of it alive. I feel really
507 proud that I can say that I went to this poor country and was able to survive and even
508 thrive sometimes, so I think it put a little bit more confidence in me that I can be
509 resourceful.'
510

511 Brianne boasts of the 'coolness' factor ascribed to such a destination in a way that portrays her
512 sojourn in a distinctive but also privileged light. By describing the destination as a 'poor' area of
513 the world, she frames and valorises her sojourn in the Global South as a 'risky' and rewarding
514 endeavour (Elsrud, 2001). Although any international exchange is considered beneficial, some
515 are considered to be more distinctive. Waters (2012) highlights the emerging differentiation
516 within different types of international education and Heath (2007) and Simpson (2005) indicate
517 that a hierarchy has begun to manifest itself in which certain types of international sojourns are
518 positioned as more valuable than others.

519 Specific places also matter in both endowing and demarcating distinction. In particular,
520 scholars highlight the distinctive value, prestige and privilege of travel to the Global South
521 (Ansell, 2008; Desforges, 1998; Elsrud, 2001; Noy, 2004). Since the destination can lend
522 additional value to the international sojourn, students can draw on the location of study as a way
523 to further heighten their distinction in relation to others outside of these unique places
524 (Raghuram, 2013; Tindal et al., 2015). While European destinations have become over-
525 popularised and are losing their distinctive appeal among western travellers, countries in the
526 Global South are imagined as less travelled and more 'authentic' (Korpela, 2010). Imaginative
527 geographies of the Global South as different and distinct from the Global North are thus seized
528 upon to (re)produce particular ideas of specific regions of the world (Williams et al., 2014).
529 These colonial spatial imaginaries and discourses within international student mobility
530 underscore imperial legacies and end up reinforcing power relations between different places –
531 and thus, different people – at an international and national scale (Madge et al., 2009). Since
532 Korpela suggests that participants 'imagine' countries in the Global South 'according their own
533 needs' (2010: 1299), the Global South is framed as a destination offering higher stakes and
534 claims to distinction. Indeed, Desforges (1998) argues that young travellers differentiate
535 themselves from peers by placing a distinctive value on countries in the Global South and
536 dismissing travel within the Global North as commonplace, insignificant and decidedly pointless.
537 I therefore suggest that the Global South is regarded as a step ahead of others in the quest for
538 difference and distinction. As the Global South grows in popularity as both a volunteer and study
539 destination, a hierarchy may emerge between countries in the Global South where those
540 perceived as less travelled and more 'risky' may carry a higher symbolic currency than others
541 (Elsrud, 2001). Places are therefore productive for (re)producing difference and distinction.

542 Participants are persistent in wanting to outdo the value and worth of their experience in
543 relation to others and once again, Arianne illustrates this contention:
544
545 'I think I get more frustrated by the fact that there are people that understand absolutely
546 nothing of what I'm saying and the worse is that if they think they understand, and like, I
547 have a friend that spent 9 days in [South American country] and we were talking about
548 our experiences, like [they said], 'ya! I love South America!' and I was like, 'can you
549 really say that?' (laughs) I don't know, it's only 9 days in one country. So things like that,
550 that I think before going it wouldn't have bugged me at all but now it's weird.'
551
552 Arianne re-affirms the value and superior worth of her sojourn by devaluing that of her friend. A
553 tourism trip is judged as inferior and less worthy than an educational sojourn but this is also in
554 relation to time spent in the same place abroad. Arianne mocks and downplays the length of her
555 friend's sojourn as too brief to appreciate and lay credible claims to the entire continent or region
556 of South America, implicitly contrasting it to her own more lengthy sojourn of 6 months in her
557 host country.
558 Claims to acquisition of cultural capital are contested among different travellers
559 according to the length and purpose of the international sojourn. Longer-term sojourners are
560 deemed to possess more legitimate claims to cultural and social capital since, as Bourdieu notes,
561 acquisition is 'an investment, above all of time' (1997: 48). Indeed, time is the highest indication
562 of distinctive value (Bourdieu, 1979) and scholars also underscore the length of the sojourn as an
563 important marker of distinction vis-à-vis tourist and short-term travellers (Falconer, 2013).
564 Length and context of the sojourn carry more worth and value than short-term leisure travels,

565 which explains why participants express their frustration when social relations in Canada refer
566 and view their sojourn as a leisure 'trip', rather than a *living*, *working* and *studying* part of the
567 local everyday life. By 'living' in one place abroad instead of continuously moving on to other
568 destinations, participants like Marie-Anne and Arianne can differentiate themselves from passing
569 tourists and travellers. Residing in the same place allows participants to legitimise claims of
570 integrating into local everyday life in a way that implies greater accumulation of cultural capital
571 over other (Canadian) travellers. I therefore suggest, as I have done elsewhere, that students'
572 articulate distinction in temporal and spatial terms through their relative *im*mobility while abroad
573 (Author, XXXXa, XXXXb).

574 Since ability to use cultural and symbolic capital is dependent on the recognition of peers,
575 friends and family members abroad and 'at home', the lack of interest and attention from friends
576 and peers is of concern to returnees as it can lessen the anticipated sense of achievement and
577 distinction. This explains why many of the participants in this study voiced frustration at
578 people's disinterest in the international sojourn. Here, Arianne bemoans how during the first
579 week back in Canada her friends paid little (or insufficient) attention to her tales from abroad.
580 She describes how she initially reacted to, and now copes with, her friends' inattentiveness to her
581 unique experience:

582

583 > 'Now it's better because I understood a bit that it's not that important that they
584 > understand. But in the beginning, I was like 'no, please listen! I've lived the best thing of
585 > my life and it's not equal to the work you did in [hometown] this summer!' It's really
586 > bad/rude (*c'est vraiment chien*), but it really annoyed me.'

587

588 Arianne exhibits a sense of distinction (and desperation) by contrasting the apparent
589 momentousness of her sojourn with the less significant experiences of her friends in Canada
590 during her absence. As a result, participants frequently narrate their sojourn in terms of
591 difference to others. Camille, who spent 5 months studying in South America, expresses this
592 difference upon return:
593
594 ‘I question things a lot, to put things in perspective (*de relativiser*), that we buy things
595 without awareness (*de façon inconsciente*). But unfortunately I cannot change people, the
596 people that surround me, and that is frustrating. I would like to educate them. I don’t
597 know, (laughs) it’s maybe a pretentious thing, but I have like a conscience that is a bit
598 different and I have the impression that I’m marginal in relation to my society and I have
599 the impression that I feel a bit different and that there aren’t many people that can
600 understand me.’
601
602 Camille, like other participants, acknowledges the pretention of her comment, yet demonstrates
603 how she uses her sojourn as a way to convey and affirm difference. This feeling of difference can
604 thus be narrated publicly or internally as part of an individualised distinction. Much like the
605 international students in Findlay et al.’s study, in viewing themselves as ‘different’, participants
606 projected distinction through their educational mobility (2012: 129).
607 While I concur with this perspective, I suggest that many of my participants accidently
608 stumble upon an opportunity for distinction (Waters and Brooks, 2010), rather than purposely
609 anticipating such an opportunity from the outset. Much of the process of hierarchal

differentiation is internalized and not necessarily premeditated prior to the exchange. Difference is a qualitative condition that participants can (un)intentionally showcase upon return to Canada.

Importantly, while the paper presented the narratives of distinction as progressing from a collective to an individualised distinction, participants navigated back-and-forth between both categories throughout the interview stages. The analysis of the mid-point and return interviews reveals that, willingly or unwittingly, participants are drawn into a social contest of prestige wherein players iteratively interchange between dual forms of distinction. As participants narrated their individual distinction, their narratives of collective distinction re-emerged alongside frustration and concerns about the lack of interest from peers and friends. I thus argue that depending on the audience, context and necessity, participants will alternate between being a member of a collective distinction – inclusive of all travellers – to that of an individual distinction based on refined and personalised criteria. International students therefore tactfully negotiate their ascription to different categories of distinction according to their desires and needs, but also in response to threats of over-popularisation and under-valuation emerging from opposite ends.

Conclusion

Distinction, the recognition of differential worth, is riddled with nuances and interlaced with contestations within students' international mobility. This paper contributed conceptual insights to the literature on distinction and mobility by putting forward a finer-grained representation of the process of distinction-making and sharpening the notion into two categories. I have argued

632 that participants negotiate a tension between a need to co-validate their international sojourn
633 through a *collective* distinction with a desire to gain a more unique *individual* distinction.
634 As this paper has shown, social networks are integral to conferring symbolic capital.
635 Symbolic capital requires a receptive audience to recognise its worth and value. Distinction from
636 international student mobility can only be achieved through other people's interest in, and regard
637 for, the international sojourn as a commendable and enviable experience. As such, students
638 narrate their sojourn to family, friends and peers as a way to showcase their accumulation of
639 cultural capital and increase their social prestige. However, the findings revealed that when faced
640 with disinterest and indifference from peers and friends, international students will exchange
641 similar tales and shared narratives with a dual purpose: to co-validate and promote the sojourn;
642 and, to generate interest and distinctive value for international exchanges. The act of co-narrating
643 the perks and benefits of the sojourn forms the basis for a collective distinction and thus,
644 membership to an exclusive and prestigious group.
645 Perched on the upper echelons of a distinctive mobility hierarchy, international students
646 survey and scrutinise – albeit precariously – others down below as over-popularisation threatens
647 to depreciate and overthrow their social standing. While numbers in a collective group generate
648 value and appeal for the sojourn, it can also by this very measure undermine distinction. As
649 international student mobility increases, so too do the stakes for distinction. To prevent
650 membership from reaching a critical number that threatens to debase the distinctive value of the
651 collective, members must continuously re-assess and re-establish membership criteria to
652 maintain distinction. The paper demonstrated that a continuous process of differentiation and re-
653 hierarchising between different categories and contexts of mobility re-order and re-position
654 individuals within the travel hierarchy and distinction echelon. It revealed that when opportune

moments arise and popularity threatens to strip the distinctive lustre of the group, students compete amongst each other for higher ranks and stakes of distinction. More specifically, students seek to differentiate themselves from other international students in order to gain an individual distinction. The paper also goes beyond the existing student mobility literature by arguing that hierarchal distinction is not only produced by the internationalisation of higher education, but also by individuals, and not necessarily premeditated prior to mobility.

Competition for higher distinction is negotiated and manoeuvred through emerging and refined markers. The findings illustrated how qualitative, temporal and spatial markers of difference are used to compete for greater symbolic capital and individual prestige. Although travelling in its simplest form can transfer cultural capital, the findings indicated that certain places can offer higher rates of symbolic capital. The paper suggested that exchanges in the Global South were seen to hold more value than travel within the Western world and may infer a more distinctive position to students within the international mobility hierarchy. Through their host destination in the Global South, students differentiated themselves not only from other travellers but also from fellow (Canadian) international students. Places are therefore productive for distinction-making and (re)producing difference and inequality. This reproduction of inequality not only affects stay-at-home peers in Canada but extends to those in the Global South. Students draw on, and are drawn by, imaginative geographies of the Global South as risky and challenging for claiming distinction. As a result, international student mobility can perpetuate postcolonial assumptions and social difference between the Global North and the Global South (Madge et al., 2009). However, participants do not necessarily strategize or envisage the distinctiveness of the Global South (or for that matter, distinction per se) prior to their mobility. Rather, once abroad and/or upon return, they may be unwittingly influenced by a

678 social milieu that values differentiation and, as a result, are drawn into a socialised 'game' of
679 distinction-making.

680 A successful sojourn is also judged in terms of an ability to not only survive in the
681 Global South but more pre-eminently, thrive. The paper further showed that time is of essence
682 and value (Bourdieu, 1997) with longer sojourns considered to offer greater accumulations of
683 cultural capital. I therefore suggested that students highlight their relative *im*mobility while
684 abroad to distinguish themselves from fellow (Canadian) travellers. Since the educational context
685 and purpose of the sojourn is deemed more worthy than a tourism trip, participants devalued and,
686 to some extent, disparaged other peoples' travel experiences in order to elevate their own
687 individual distinction.

688 Notably, the findings revealed that when students encounter disinterest from people in a
689 way which poses a concern to the recognition of their symbolic capital, they will seek out
690 validation and reassurance through collective distinction. Students 'down-step' to a larger
691 distinction base as a means to re-invigorate social interest in their sojourn and re-validate their
692 symbolic capital. The paper argued that students continuously reassign their membership and
693 alternate between categories in a calculative bid to maintain tension and attention in a socialised
694 game of distinction. This is significant as it shows that distinction-making is an iterative process
695 which is back-and-forth rather than just upward or forward. Distinction is thus maintained
696 through different strategies. As the players change so too do the strategies. Students calculate the
697 risks and benefits of the groups and categories they ascribe to and withdraw from according to
698 the audience and players. I therefore suggest that sharpening the notion of distinction into two
699 categories allows us to better understand the complex, iterative and contested process of
700 distinction-making. However, these dual categories are not mutually exclusive; rather, they

701 overlap within a shifting hierarchal social structure. The paper therefore argued that students
702 waver between competing yet overlapping categories of distinction based on context and
703 necessity. Importantly, the narratives of distinction and the interchange between categories
704 seems to expose students underlying insecurity about peer recognition in a way which might
705 incite further and longer-term mobility to improve their social standing – for example, in the
706 form of degree-mobility and/or an international career (Findlay et al. 2017). As such, much like
707 the literature on degree-mobility, the paper asserts that short-term student mobility can also
708 reproduce (dis)advantage and distinction.

709 As social prestige within international mobility is ever redefined with increasing numbers
710 of western travellers, future research should consider how narratives of distinction can extend
711 well beyond the short-term and ostensibly throughout the life course to reproduce advantage.
712 More specifically, how will these tensions play out in the longer-term and how can they be used
713 as resources later in life? How does this dual conceptualisation of distinction fit in with other
714 contexts of mobility and migration? How will specific places emerge and advance at the
715 forefront of a distinctive geography? Finally, I suggest that using Bourdieu's theories of capital
716 and distinction to analyse international student mobility demonstrates how students alternate
717 between distinctive categories and exclusive groups which inevitably and (un)intentionally
718 reinforce class structures and social inequalities, not only among students and young people, but
719 within and between the larger societies they navigate and inhabit through their different
720 (im)mobilities.

721

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725

726 Author XXXXb

727
728 Author XXXXc
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