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## A DECOLONIAL PRAXIS FOR RESEARCH WITH INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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### **Introduction**

In addition to critiques of the agentic limitations of the concept of ‘experience’ (Deuchar, 2022), scholars have critiqued research on other topics such as international students’ pedagogical practices (Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2023) and participation (Straker, 2016), among others, for reproducing stereotypical and colonial representations of international students (Chapter 6). In this chapter, we align with these critiques but also extend them by offering some ideas about how we might do research with international students differently. We write as two female, UK-based, international early career researchers from China (Bowen) and Canada-Nigeria (Bukola) with complex experiences and identities (Chapter 8). We argue that concepts from decolonial thinking, or decoloniality, can be useful in helping all researchers (not just those who position themselves as ‘decolonial’) resist dominant ways of researching which deepen the colonial gaze on ‘Othered’ international students (Chapter 5) to avoid reinforcing and normalising the hegemony of Western knowledge forms.

Decoloniality refers broadly to the “perspective[s], concept[s], analytic[s], practice[s], and prax[es]” (Walsh & Mignolo, 2018, p. 3) conceptualised from experiences of the colonised to reveal and contest the darker side of modernity (Western, capitalist ideas of ‘development’) and the constitutive role that coloniality played in the emergence of modernity (Mignolo, 2018, p. 112; Dunford, 2017). According to Dunford (2017), coloniality is constitutive of modernity in three ways: ‘modern’ capitalism; ‘modern’ democratic (political) institutions; and Western knowledge systems, underpinned by enlightenment ideals. Of particular interest to us is the third way, specifically how the hegemony of enlightenment forms of knowledge production, predicated on a

“disembodied, placeless thought”, disavows other knowledge forms or ways of knowing (Dunford, 2017, p. 387). Decolonial ethics, underpinned by decolonial theories, seek to offer alternate, non-Western responses to ethical questions about how to live together in a global world with legacies of colonialism and realities of coloniality (Hutchings, 2019; Moosa-Mitha, 2022). Decolonial ethics scholars draw from additional decolonial concepts, namely border thinking and pluriversality. In this chapter, we similarly draw from these concepts to situate our critical considerations in research with international students.

Border thinking entails thinking with the “subaltern knowledges and cultural practices world-wide that modernity itself shunned, suppressed, made invisible and disqualified” (Escobar, 2004, p. 210). Borders are where global coloniality, that is, experiences of domination, dispossession, and epistemic injustice, are felt (Dunford, 2017). They are geographical locations but also epistemic (Dunford, 2017), racial, sexual, religious, aesthetic, linguistic, and national (Mignolo, 2018) and, ultimately, experiential ones. Although borders may be thought of as formerly colonised places, the emphasis is on epistemology. The host country’s higher education institution, particularly in the West, as a site of hegemonic knowledge production, may be understood as a type of ‘borderland’ (Icaza, 2017), a place where international students are Othered (Chapter 5), labelled as unengaged, viewed as uncritical, etc. (Chapter 7). Border thinking is, therefore, a way of thinking about normative questions from the experiences of the Other, a way of reflecting on and from their geo-political experiences. As such, it is an ‘epistemic location’ from which to critique capitalist modernity using the experiences of coloniality (Dunford, 2017). As international researchers with our own experiences of coloniality in host institutions, our positionalities (Chapter 20) deepen our ability to border think and proffer the critical considerations in this chapter.

Pluriversality relates to the values, practices, policies, worldviews, etc., underpinning the normative ideas about how we may live together in a global world (Chapter 14). For Dunford (2017), a value is pluriversal if and only if it satisfies two conditions. First, it must be procedural, that is, conceived through real intercultural dialogue (which may take creative forms) across places, cultures, worldviews, etc. Second, it must be substantive, that is, the procedurally conceived value has the right to be different and must be considered of equal standing as other values, provided it does not disrupt the survival of other values. Since research with international students typically examines cross-cultural places, concepts, perspectives, etc., pluriversality is useful when seeking to do such research in a way which avoids the imposition of hegemonic Western values.

In what follows, we draw from these concepts to provide some critical considerations around key aspects of research with international students. We focus on the research topic; ethics framework; methodology/methods; and analysis

and reporting. We discuss these separately for simplicity while recognising that these aspects are often interlinked in the research process. We apply border thinking to how we think about the overall process of research with international students from students' perspectives, and to the notion of reflexivity, or how we think about the influence of positionality, that is, our social and political positions (Chapter 20) on our research, including our identity, particularly as part of the ethics framework and the analysis and reporting phases. We apply border thinking not to essentialise participants' culture and strip it of its time and place (Dervin, 2011) but to underpin border researching, a way of approaching research with international students from the perspectives and experiences of students (see Chapter 1). We apply pluriversality primarily to the research topic and methods. By applying these concepts, we hope to offer opportunities for how research, no matter its theoretical or methodological orientation, may be reimagined. Researching decolonially requires understanding how coloniality is reproduced within our research. We consider these ways and, in response, consider how our doings and beings as researchers of, and with, those categorised as 'Others' (Chapter 5) may be used to contest coloniality (Chapter 6) in research with international students.

## Critical considerations

### *The research topic*

As this book demonstrates, scholars are increasingly critical of the predominantly deficit depictions of international students in the literature (Section 2). Often, these deficit framings stem from research which seeks to explore the challenges that international students – often defined as homogeneous groups within their national boundaries (Chapter 1) – face in 'assimilating' to their host country's pedagogical practices assumed as 'standard' (Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2023; Straker, 2016). Unsurprisingly, research designed to unearth problems and challenges do as intended and, in the process, reproduce uncritical deficit assumptions about international students' critical capabilities, classroom engagement, experiences, motivations, and aspirations, among others. Moving towards a decolonial gaze of capabilities (Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2023) and assets (Zhao & Carey, 2023) can help produce research which challenges these assumptions.

Applying the first pluriversal condition – process of formulating value – to research topics engenders this 'move' by foregrounding international student participants in the research process. Meeting the condition requires engaging in real intercultural dialogue with international students to collectively or collaboratively determine topics worthy of study and questions worthy of being asked (see also Chapter 22). Such dialogic approaches offer opportunities not only to extend the current, fairly narrow, often deficit-laden range

of research topics, that is, beyond well-worked topics such as international students' acculturation processes, stresses, and academic experiences (Chapter 3; Jing et al., 2020; Krsmanovic, 2021), but also to critically interrogate why such topics merit inquiry in the first place (Straker, 2016). Broadening and deepening the range of topics also suggest moving beyond academic, social, or other on-campus experiences to include other dimensions of international students' lives (Chapter 16; Abdullah et al., 2014) which may be explored in interdisciplinary and intersectional ways for a richer understanding of the complexity of international students' lives (Chapter 8) and identities (Chapter 1). Problematising the notion of 'experience', Deuchar (2022) suggests that the concept contributes to perceptions of international students' vulnerabilities while only partially illuminating their agency. He advocates for the more agentic notion of 'practices' which, for him, better illuminates students' contributions to and interactions with their educational, social, and other spaces without implying the need for students to integrate into these spaces.

The second condition, thus, underscores the need for researchers to recognise international students' epistemic validity and legitimacy (Hayes et al., 2022). The dialogic approach hitherto discussed requires acceptance that the topics students may be interested in pursuing or wish researchers should pursue, are of equal standing, even if they are different, and as long as they do not limit the expression and existence of other worlds. To the extent that it is possible, in addition to co-conceiving topics, involving students in the research process (Chapter 22), or including researchers from student participants' demographic (Chapter 20) further ensures a recognition and avowal of students' epistemic capabilities. Notably, the co-creative process inherent within pluriversality requires an acceptance that one's position as the all-knowing researcher may no longer hold. A decolonial praxis brings with it a realisation of the tenuous nature of individual, all-knowing claims to knowledge and expertise (Mignolo, 2018).

### ***The ethics framework***

Conventional ethics processes in many host countries, particularly in Western/Anglophone institutions, are typically underpinned by Western normative/ethics ideals assumed universal (Oyinloye, 2021). Pluriversalising our ethics frameworks, therefore, suggests, on the one hand, that researchers accept that Western and non-Western normative ethics concepts are of equal importance and merit, at the least, consideration within our ethics frameworks. On the other hand, it suggests the need for an intercultural dialogical process of determining which values should underpin our research conduct. This implies interrogating, for example, whether Western research ethics' preferences for individual participation and written consent are relevant for student

participants from more collectivist societies and with more collectivist orientations (Tauri, 2018).

Given institutional ethics processes in many host country institutions in the ‘West’ tend to make challenging real engagement with participants until approval is obtained, researchers may feel cautious about engaging international student participants in such dialogues a priori. In lieu of real dialogue, textual or literary dialogue (Song, 2023) may be explored, that is, engagement with the textual, oral, or performative sources of the philosophies, epistemologies, worldviews, etc., which most closely represent those of participants. In other words, researchers will need to engage with and examine alternative sources such as historical or fictional literature, film, etc., which best represent those of their participants or engage with people from similar cultures outside the participant demographic. However, the two pluriversal conditions offer limited guidance on how we may put the accepted and dialogically conceived values into practice as we conduct research. For Hutchings (2019), this requires embodied, reflexive practice that is situated within the contexts and objectives of research. This, for her, may require exercising border thinking, or bracketing one’s existing ontological and ethical commitments to be able to reflexively respond to and negotiate situations from the perspectives of those being researched (see also Oyinloye, 2022). Adopting a decolonial praxis in thinking about the ethics framework of research with international students, therefore, requires not just disrupting the hegemony of the enlightenment ideals which underpin such frameworks but also disrupting their referential positioning during the conduct of research.

For simplicity, we have discussed the ethics framework as a specific phase of the research process. However, the concepts we draw on in this chapter are embedded within decolonial ethics and, as such, we highlight that ethical choices underpin the entire research process and not just the institutional ethics approval process.

### **Methods**

Researchers are increasingly creatively reflecting on the methods they employ in research with international students to disrupt coloniality by legitimising students’ epistemological frames (Hayes et al., 2022) and amplifying their voices. Deuchar (2022) suggests that research with international students has primarily been undertaken using surveys, questionnaires, and interviews and argues for a wider range of qualitative methods, including go-alongs; participatory methods; ethnographic methods such as participant observation; and narrative inquiry and autoethnographic methods. Hayes et al. (2022) suggest the use of artefacts, within a broader multimodal methodological approach. Lomer and Mittelmeier (2023) are proponents of more culturally diverse techniques, multi-institutional or multi-sited studies, as well the generation of data

from longitudinal or multi-iterational studies. Moreover, they suggest exploring data beyond what is easily available and accessible in researchers' own contexts. In addition to generating rich data, these diverse methods increase students' participation (Deuchar, 2022) and, therefore, their epistemic contribution to research about them (Chapter 22). The methods also potentially reshape the balance of power between the researcher and students. Nevertheless, for Hayes et al. (2022), the methods, and by extension, methodology, applied should have a decolonial epistemological, that is, philosophical, basis (Barnes, 2018; Hayes et al., 2022).

In addition to specific methods, language is an important consideration in disrupting coloniality (see also Chapter 25). Researching in participants' languages (Zhao & Carey, 2023) not only challenges current dominant languages of knowledge production but also enables participants to better communicate their worlds. Critical linguistic reflexivity, the explanation and exploration of linguistic positionality (Cormier, 2018) thus extends decolonial praxis towards the language of data collection, analysis, and reporting.

Decolonial considerations can also be made during participant recruitment, particularly for more qualitative approaches. For example, in research with Chinese international students, Cui (2015) and Zhao (2017) employed a 'Chinese way' to recruit and build rapport with their participants. In other words, they engaged in an approach familiar to participants, that is, by conveniently sampling people whom they already knew or snowball sampling through referral from an intermediary and adjusting researchers' identities depending on their participants. Doing this challenges colonial, disembodied forms of producing knowledge (Dunford, 2017) and legitimises participants' ways of knowing (Hayes et al., 2022).

### ***Analysis and reporting***

Border thinking is helpful in thinking about how we analyse and thereafter write up research with international students (see also Chapter 26). Where the research is conducted in participants' languages, the question of which language to carry out the analysis is particularly relevant for qualitative research where coding analytical methods are common. To think and research from the border would be to analyse in the language of data collection, but whether this is possible depends on the linguistic capabilities of the researcher or their team.

Where data involves transcription or even translation, it is particularly useful to think about researchers' roles in transmitting participants' discourses (Zhao & Carey, 2023). As part of analysis, translation can reproduce the hegemony of Western knowledge and norms where participants' words are translated word for word, that is, seeking lexical equivalence (Sutrisno et al., 2014), instead of delving into the non-Western contexts and presenting the

details of the sensemaking process to the reader (Zhao & Carey, 2023). To operate decolonially within this colonial constraint, some scholars suggest moving beyond lexical equivalence and towards conceptual equivalence which translates ideas (Cormier, 2018) thereby offering insight into participants' culturally embedded worlds (Zhao & Carey, 2023). Other practices may involve retaining key phrases in the source language (Oyinloye, 2021; Zhao & Carey, 2023), a practice which not only accords space to and makes visible the 'Othered' language but also invites readers familiar with the language to create their own interpretation. Further still, some researchers employ amplification, the inclusion of additional information to the translated text beyond what was in the original extract (Poblete, 2009, as cited in Zhao & Carey, 2023).

In addition to these linguistic analytical considerations, a decolonial praxis also extends to considerations of how international students are represented in the text (Dervin, 2011; Robinson-Pant & Singal, 2013), including how students are (in)advertently 'Othered', that is, through the deficit framings discussed earlier; pseudonymisation or anonymisation conventions; and demonstration of how participants' epistemological frames are legitimised in the research process. With pseudonymisation or anonymisation, it is particularly important to consult participants to determine preferences around the assignment of unique identifiers, pseudonyms and, where relevant, the use and representation of photographs and other artefacts.

Other ways of moving towards a decolonial praxis in reporting include providing nuances and thick descriptions of context (Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2023); conducting a reflexive literature review or purposeful scholarly referencing, that is, including references from the Global South (Song, 2023) and by Global South scholars, particularly those that represent literature on international students in Global South host countries (e.g., Pham et al., 2021); and applying a reflexive theoretical or conceptual framework which applies Southern theories or adopts a critical approach to the 'Western' theories employed to interrogate the extent to which they are relevant for the study context or participants. Notwithstanding the language of analysis and translation, much research is still reported in English, and there remains considerable scope for research to be published or translated into other languages and for reporting to be open to oral or performative possibilities which disrupt the hegemony of the written form.

The above ideas apply to research underpinned by different methodologies. However, a few additional considerations are relevant for quantitative research. For instance, applying a decolonial lens to quantitative research implies ethically engaging in sampling and representation and justifying inclusion and exclusion criteria of target groups (Cokley & Awad, 2013). Moreover, the interpretation of statistical data should be done with care, rather than used to confirm the superiority of certain groups (Cokley & Awad, 2013) or, in the case of international students, reproduce deficit discourses.

### Reflection questions

- How can I deepen my understanding of the ways coloniality is reproduced by myself and others in research with international students?
- In what ways may I move towards a decolonial praxis, for example, in the topic conceptualisation, interrogation our research ethics frameworks, rethinking our methods, etc.?
- To what extent am I able to meaningfully involve the values and views of the international student participants in my research?
- What challenges have I experienced or do I foresee in trying to apply decolonial ideas?

### Suggestions for researchers

**Engage in everyday decoloniality.** We encourage scholars to reflect on mundane, everyday research practices to explore opportunities for decoloniality, for example, reflecting on who chooses the research topic and how, which authors we reference and why, etc.

**Explore decolonial values, not just cultural referential values.** Particularly where participants are from multiple cultural groups, it is important to dialogue with all groups to determine the values which will guide the research conduct for all.

**Apply decolonial ideas also to quantitative research.** The ideas in this chapter apply to diverse methodologies and are just as relevant for quantitative research. We encourage researchers to reflect on other ways these can be applied to quantitative research as well (see also Chapter 23).

#### Example in practice

**Article:** Zhao and Carey (2023)

**Article focus:** Inclusion of participants' language to challenge clichéd discourses about international students. Use of Chinese phrases to demonstrate how Chinese international students' nuanced worldviews are misrepresented or oversimplified in English.

**Article strengths:** Application of a decolonial praxis in its use of language in its methods and analysis and reporting.

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