

Stereotyping International Students: The Role of Conceptual Framing in Research

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This paper discusses how international students may be stereotyped by research. It begins with examples of stereotypes commonly associated with international students—e.g., problematic, needy, deficient—and how research can be complicit in producing these stereotypes through conceptual framings used or the absence of reflexivity around one's positionality. Leveraging a literature review of Chinese international students' experiences (Heng, 2020) as the basis for deeper analysis, the paper argues how different kinds of frames can influence research methods, focus, and findings. Sociocultural frameworks appear to draw out students' strengths more, as opposed to acculturation frameworks. Yet, neither frameworks address the larger power imbalance shrouding student mobility. Consequently, the research community needs to pay more attention to the affordances and limitations of various framings and their plausible contributions to stereotypes, should one dominate. In conclusion, researchers are urged to engage in research with international students with greater reflexivity and epistemological diversity.

Full paper

Introduction

International students are subjected to different stereotypes. To begin, they tend to be discussed as a homogenous group, devoid of differences across them (Heng, 2019; Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021). Next, they tend to be portrayed from a deficit framing, where their ways of doing and thinking are seen as in need of fixing or inferior to that of host countries (Haught, 2016; Heng, 2018b). Chinese international students, in particular, have been further stereotyped as rich, cash cows (Abelmann & Kang, 2014; Song, 2020; Xie et al., 2020; Xu, 2021), collectivistic or valuing “face” (Dervin, 2011, p. 45), amongst others. As a scholarly community, we need to confront the possibility that our research has the potential to contribute to stereotype formation around international students. Thus, this paper invites readers to reflect on their research approaches, specifically their conceptual framing, and, consequently, their scholarly responsibilities.

Conceptual Framing in Research

Conceptual frameworks are core to research as they shape how research is problematised (and, conversely, justified), what questions are asked and methods chosen, as well as how data are interpreted, reported, and discussed (Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2002). A framework is closely intertwined with a paradigm. Assumptions tied to our fundamental beliefs and value systems are eventually embedded in our paradigms (Kuhn, 1970). Thus, paradigms are, arguably, value-laden. When researchers reflect on their paradigm and contemplate how and where they are located in relation to the social and political context of their research, they are “positioning themselves” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 24) and being reflexive. Reflecting on our paradigms, positionalities, and their impact is therefore critical in recognising the strengths, limitations, and consequences of our work.

Framing in Research on International Students

Scholars have observed peculiarities in how international student research has been framed. For one, there appears to be limited ways

of framing the research. Relatedly, seeing international students as subjects that need improvement reveals a subtle “othering” (Said, 1979). Further, researchers’ positionalities are not always made explicit, bearing implications on the authenticity of how international students are framed (Dervin, 2011; Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021). Scholars argued that the negative stereotypes of international students in English-language literature can be linked to the fact that scholars researching on the phenomenon are mostly based in the Global North (Mittelmeier & Yang, 2022; Tight, 2021; Xu, 2021). A combination of the colonial mentality behind higher education and the superiority complex that the Global North is more advanced and has much to teach the rest of the world has thus been inferred to subtly shape how researchers view, relate to, research, and represent international students (Buckner & Stein, 2020; George Mwangi & Yao, 2021; Song, 2020).

How Framing Shapes Research Design: A Case Study of Chinese International Students

Through Heng’s (2020) literature review of Chinese international students, this paper aims to illustrate how the choice of conceptual framing can eventually shape findings. The patterns unveil the relationship between conceptual framework, research focus, method, and, ultimately, findings. Out of 43 articles, research that engaged with theories primarily utilised two framings—sociocultural (thirteen articles; 39%) and acculturation (eleven articles; 33%). Of the eleven articles using acculturation theories, eight (73%) focused on understanding students’ challenges and problems, with only three (27%) addressing their changes and agency. On the contrary, out of thirteen articles using sociocultural theories, nine (69%) focused on understanding students’ changes and agency, with only four (31%) solely investigating their challenges. There appears to be a stronger association between sociocultural framework and more fluid or asset-based ways of understanding (and, eventually, representing) Chinese international student. Acculturation frameworks seem to predispose researchers to more fixed ways of studying and representing students and/or their problems. As Dervin (2011) cautioned, these frameworks tend to uncritically essentialise culture into “solid” (p. 39) perspectives, othering international students.

Conclusion

The purpose of discussing the roles of conceptual framing is not to villainise or glorify certain frameworks. In fact, that more than half of the articles on Chinese international students focused on reporting their problems points to potential issues these framings yield and how, as a research community, we may unconsciously be creating certain stereotypes of (Chinese) international students by excessively relying on particular framings in our research. Therefore, we hold great responsibilities in recognising our paradigms and positionalities and in diversifying our choice of conceptual framings in our research. With greater reflexivity and epistemological diversity, we can aspire to create a more balanced, inclusive, and comprehensive perspective of international students as well as achieve greater authenticity and equity in our relationship with them.

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