

Confronting double strangeness of being female and being international academic: Autoethnography as an emancipatory methodological approach. (0341)

Thushari Welikala

King's College London, UK

Introduction

Scholarly discussions on higher education have focussed on the impact of internationalisation on different aspects of higher education starting from management, student experience to university buildings (Singh 2009). The neoliberal agenda has specifically promoted the ways in which international student experience can be used to highlight the global nature of individual learning experience in the UK. Similarly, the growing policy awareness of inclusion and diversity has resulted in well documented gender issues and their impact on theory and practice. However, the policies and practices aimed at internationalisation as well as gender equality in higher education have largely ignored the personal, social and intellectual challenges encountered and lived by female international academics in the UK (Clark, 2015).

The research context

Academics have been crossing geo-political borders for work for thousands of years (Scott, 1994). While research on expatriates in the field of business is noted, very few studies have focussed on the experience of teaching abroad. The few studies on international academics have been informed by theoretical underpinnings that highlight cultural adjustment and hence replicates the vast majority of literature on international students that focus on their problems in the process of assimilating into UK higher education. This deficit approach to studying the cultural other has further been influenced by the methodological stances that construct subordinate others who are foreigners in home campuses. As Richardson and McKenna (2000) hold, international academics present growing challenges for institutions of higher education due to their cultural differences.

The extant body of literature on the experience of international female (and other) academics are mainly based on the assumption that cultural similarity between the host culture university and the international academic will facilitate adjustment into the new professional culture (Annelies et al., 2004). These studies are centred on a simplistic notion of culture as one's own nationality. The theoretical and methodological frameworks used in these studies have almost ignored the complexity of living multiple aspects of cultural politics of being the 'academic other' within an Anglophone university context. Such studies have treated the group of international academics as a homogenous group irrespective of the intersectionality of gender, class, first language or religion (see Bhopal, 2006). Consequently, how female academics who belong to multiple socio-cultural worlds experience the white masculine spaces of the Anglophone universities still remains a largely under researched area.

This paper attempts to redress this epistemological and methodological gap by discussing how reflexive auto-ethnography can give voice to international female academics by moving beyond methodological comfort zones to critically complicate the ethical relations of *self* and *other* in order to see through the dominant representation of their dual subordination as women and as international academics.

The theoretical framework

The choice for using auto-ethnography to explore female international academics in the UK was informed by a social constructivist view of making knowledge which recognizes the possibility of multiple realities and interpretations of the world (Gergen, 1999). A narrative approach informed by a postmodern theoretical framework was used to engage critically with the auto-ethnographic insights to explore how self and other integrate and separate in the process of performing and storying self as an female international academic.

Complexities of writing the self

Reflective auto-ethnography offers a creative but a complex space for researchers to feel the discomfort of critically distancing the self in the process of retelling and rewriting the self (Richards, 2008). While auto-ethnography has been criticised as less rigorous and methodologically flawed, the reflective process of writing self is ontologically and epistemologically demanding. It creates an ontological conundrum of balancing between how much of *self* to be included and how much to be left out. The process involves ethical and political decision-making: how the context and circumstances under which we write shape our writing and how what we write inform who we become. The researcher is constantly being challenged by the multiple voices they live and made to meander between becoming *self* and *becoming other* (Somerville, 2007).

The outsider within

The ongoing struggle to distance the self from what is written and becoming the *outsider within* leads to ontological discomfort. The process of writing further revealed that being female and being international academics lead to dual subordination which is layered depending on our social class, age or nationality. It highlighted that cultural other is often politically positioned as culturally inferior and intellectually less able (Mignolo, 2000). Nevertheless, the *self* enacts agency when possible to reconstruct subordinating stories to empower the *self* and similar *others*.

The author identified that this process of feeling the outsider within enabled her to deconstruct the stereotyped creations of the female non-British academic as the vulnerable, power-less cultural other in the white intellectual space.

The omnipresent invisible Other

The process of othering occurs in varying and subtle guises and the reflexive ethnographic approach enables researchers to address the politics of discourse, action and practices in an authentic manner. The subtle nature of the presence of multiple ways in which international female academics are subjugated, however is rather invisible and covert. This has led to the 'pathetic pretence' that racism and othering within higher education is very rare if not non-existent. Similarly, the othering is not lived by the international academics in the same ways it is being constructed by the dominant professional stories. Instead, they enact agency and resist unfavourable identities offered.

Implications for future research

This paper explored how autoethnography offered the author the space to create rich and layered account of the experience of being female and being international academic in the UK. It proposed that the methodologies aimed at universally applicable great narratives do not adequately liberate researchers to create layered accounts of personal experience that show connections among theory, practice and personal experience. It showed that cultural othering within academia is a complex recurrence which is constructed and avoided in multiple complex ways. This implies that there is

theoretical demand for rethinking methodology of studying cultural other within the UK higher education.