Ticking the 'Other' Box: Positional identities of East Asian academics in UK universities, internationalisation and diversification

Abstract

This paper critically interrogates East Asian academics' positional identities in UK universities, internationalisation and diversification against the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) and Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework. Contemporary UK policy promoting racial equality and diversity is often over-generalised, while the critical race theory-based literature has focused on hegemonic notions of 'white privilege'. This discourse does not provide an adequate, comparative perspective of power relations among whites and ethnic minorities. Against the background, the paper compares and contrasts the experiences of two groups of East Asian (AME) academics working in UK universities. The first group is foreign-born but has strong British identities following their English elite education. The other group came to the UK for postgraduate studies and /or have chosen to work in Britain. The paper changes the picture of a static, white-dominated perspective of BME-CRT by offering a dynamic, fluid discourse involving AME academics. (146 words).

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What does internationalisation and widening participation in UK universities mean in the context of racial and ethnic diversity? Recently there have been a number of evidence-based research reports on the under-representation of black and minority ethnic (BME) academic staff in leadership roles in UK Higher Education (UK HE). However, there remains a paucity of knowledge on the interface, or disparity, between 'international' and 'minority-ethnic' academic identities, and their accompanying experiences, which can be strategically important for the future of UK HE, with anticipated benefits principally for the sector and its stakeholders from further internationalisation and diversification.

The overall proportion of non-UK born, 'international' academics employed in British universities is expected to rise to 50 per cent in ten years by 2027 (Universities UK, 'Policy Brief Talent Wars', 2007, p. 10), which indicates that the continuing success of UK universities would be increasingly dependent on international academics. Research has suggested that international academics can enrich the intercultural dimensions of leadership and bridge the gap between 'widening participation' and 'internationalisation' agendas of UK HE (Kim, 2009; 2011), for example, by offering networks and experience that can broaden the impact of research outputs, while gaining additional sources of research funding and potential collaborators with distinct skills and competencies.

In this paper, we argue that the contemporary UK policy of promoting racial equality and diversity is often over-generalised by the BME policy discourse, while the critical race theory-based (CRT) literature has often focused on hegemonic notions of 'white privilege and supremacy'. A principal outcome of these notions is that we still do not have an adequate, comparative understanding of intricate relations among different racial and ethnic groups in the UK, and of how this understanding may affect, and be affected by, dominant white perspectives in the CRT literature. An immediate implication of this problem is the juxtaposition, naturally but somewhat superficially, of a single, static perspective of white versus black underlying the BME policy discourse, where protagonists in most discourses are either white or black.

Given this and other shortcomings of the critical race literature, the paper builds a more nuanced conception of racial equality and diversity by drawing on previous research findings in these areas – e.g. ECU, 2011; 2014; Kim, 2011; 2017; Bhopal and Jackson, 2013; Morrow, 2015; Singh and Kwhali, 2015), as well as the ongoing research project funded by Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (2017-18), which traces the impact of the BME Leadership Development Programme.

Here we critically examine selected East Asian academics' lived experiences, positional identities and their (im-)mobile networks. Our initial proposition is that East Asian ethno-national and cultural norms have gained new recognition and rationality in the contemporary rise of East Asian power (Cox, 2012; Jacques 2012). Those norms are strong and distinct in their antecedents and developmental pathways and deviating from Western hegemonic narratives. However, how this meta-narrative change is translated into the micro-level of individual lived experiences requires attention. Drawing on C. Wright Mills (1959)' *The Sociological Imagination*, this paper offers biographical narrative analyses to highlight the intricate entwinement between individual lived experiences and social structures and movements, and the course of world history - in order to "understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life [as embodied subjectivity] and the external career of individuals [East Asian academics selected for this study]" (Mills 1959: 5).

To explore our proposition, we adopt a narrative-constructivist methodology and an intersectional approach which recognises that ethnic-nationality, socio-economic class, gender, prior education and career trajectories, social and cultural identities, as well as age are all likely to influence perceptions and positional identities. The paper compares and contrasts the experiences of two distinct groups of East Asian minority ethnic (AME) academics working in UK universities. The first group of academics was foreign-born but retains strong British identities following their English elite education and local networks since childhood. The other group came to the UK initially for postgraduate study and/or have chosen to work in Britain as academics.

This paper contributes to knowledge by providing an additional, critical dimension of the existing framework for the analysis of international, East Asian minority ethnic academics, and presenting the possibility of a dynamic, fluid discourse involving AME academics. An additional, practical outcome of our research would be in its implications for increasing knowledge of multiple BME perspectives among UK universities and for applying this

knowledge in achieving greater intercultural diversity, impact on a broader, international audience, and in enhancing the internationalisation of academic leadership.

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