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Research with International Students: Looking Back on Lessons Learned

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A year ago, my co-editors Jenna Mittelmeier, Sylvie Lomer, and I contributed an introduction to our then forthcoming edited volume "[Research with International Students: Critical Conceptual and Methodological Considerations](#)" (henceforth RIS) to this newsletter. Following the open access release of this work, I aim to share reflections here on how this book might be used by researchers as well as those planning projects of this nature in the field and beyond.

RIS is not a how-to guide on designing research studies. Although each chapter concludes with practical suggestions for researchers, the preceding discussion encompasses considerations relating to axiology, ontology, epistemology, and reflexivity. The volume is critical of prevailing approaches to research in the field as well as deficit narratives attached to students from certain geographies even as various sectors of the global economy profit - and in some cases draw their very sustenance - from their mobilities. Broadly speaking, I believe the volume contains useful insights for scholars seeking to ground their research using critical lenses as well as those seeking to more mindfully approach the range of decisions involved at various stages of the research process across a spectrum of fields. In the rest of this article, however, I will focus my attention on four specific aspects: lines of enquiry, concepts, reflexivity, and access.

Our questions/Research "with"

Our training emphasizes "advancing the field." So, we take for granted the questions already being asked - established lines of enquiry. In doing so, we fail to revisit assumptions about the world and characterisation of certain regions/peoples/experiences that are built into these questions. We know enough about the history of scientific research to recognise that there is no field, no discipline which can claim it's foundation in disinterested enquiry. Yet, not only does the edifice continue to be built but it also dresses itself in the veneer of objectivity. Add to which, the vogue is to foreground hitherto marginalised voices. Unless new voices generate new questions, this is nothing but a form of co-option - feeding new experiences without changing the fixed molds used to describe the world. Thereby, the first way to use this book would be to pay close attention to unstated assumptions about the world underlying frequently investigated questions in the literature. Sometimes, the field doesn't need advancing. It needs course correction - targeted intervention that comes in the form of a spanner in the works.

When inclusion of new voices results in new questions, we are learning "with" them rather than "about" them. Hence, the title and focus of the book - research "with" international students.

Our concepts/Pluriversality

What is the recurring terminology in the literature? Whose worldview does it encapsulate? Are textbook definitions of the concepts we use rooted in a spacio-temporal specificity but precisely because they are found in textbooks, assumed to connote universal understanding of the idea?

Every field has its own vocabulary or jargon. Now it makes sense that as the field advances, our associations with those terms transform. But this seldom occurs. Instead, we keep concepts constant and use these fixed frames to make sense of diverse situations. As a result, any experience that was not foundational to defining that concept becomes a departure from the standard. The leap from operationalising concepts to allowing concepts to unravel that we seek to make in the volume is a step in the direction of theorising around other ways of knowing the world and other ways of being in the world.

Our selves/Reflexivity

Many understand reflexivity as our background and experiences shaping the way we view and navigate the world - which is important and should be made more explicit in our research and writing. Due to its scope and subject matter, however, this volume adds another dimension to reflexivity - that of positionality. Acknowledging our location is one piece of reflexivity. Making the effort to properly contextualise our field and what we study within a hegemonic economic and ideational order is another equally important piece (not least to maintain the distinction between reflexivity and subjectivity).

As individualised as it sounds, reflexivity cannot be a solo effort when it comes to research. There is a need to design our projects as spaces where people can be themselves. Whether it be walking the extra mile to invite contributors from diverse backgrounds, or linguistic and stylistic license, or how we write author bios - these are often choices made about the extent of our complicity.

Our readers/Access

Although I mention this last, audience and readership issues must be thought through at the outset of undertaking a book project like this one. Because this determines who conceives the work, who contributes to it, how it is structured, how it is written, where it is placed, and what interventions are needed for its message to translate into practice.

The way this volume has been daydreamed into being opens up a tripartite dialogic space between the researcher, the "researched" as co-participant, and the reader as the next link in the chain. In the process we hope to have shown how impact in research is not just made through findings but in fact stems from undergirding the effort of knowledge creation itself in a relational ethic of responsibility.

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