14

CONCEPTUALISING TO TRANSCEND

Glocal imaginaries and international students

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Introduction

The previous section of this volume focused on ways that narratives about international students can be made more nuanced and complex through considering intersectionalities. This section closely examines the conceptual underpinnings of the subfield to reveal assumptions – tacit or explicit – which are steeped in the deficit narratives previously discussed (Section 2). The chapters in this section show how the ways in which key concepts like "global", "language proficiency", "mobility" and "intercultural learning" have been operationalised in research with international students have not only restricted avenues of investigation in the subfield but also buttressed dominant ways of walking through and knowing about the world.

As the opening chapter of Section 4, which answers "What concepts might be reconsidered?", I take the opportunity here to step back and ponder our research practices, particularly with the aim of developing and revising concepts. Scholars from and/or based in the Global South, such as myself, enter the scene of research when the conceptual bottom lines either are set in stone or are specifically roped in to solidify textbook definitions by writing up our experiences as deviant data points. Therefore, in the first part of the chapter, I discuss how centering the dynamic interweavings between the global and the local might shift the purpose and possibilities of conceptualisation. Later on in the chapter, I explore how such reframing may be operationalised while engaging in research with international students.

One of the hierarchies reinforced by the current system of international higher education is that of institutional allegiance first to the "global", then to the "national" and lastly, if at all, to the "local". This chapter argues that

such a ranking of priorities stems from misconstruing the global and local as a binary and has contributed to the entrenchment of the deficit approach in thinking about international students (Chapter 7). The conflation of the Western disciplinary canon, and metropolitan ways of being with the ideal type of the global, places before international students a false choice between their origins, which are understood as local, and their aspirations, which are deemed global, as long as they reinforce such conflation. To break this entrenched pattern, local must not be conceptualised, as the very act has usually left it essentialised, particularised and relativised. Global must first be deconceptualised to account for readings which trouble its homogenising thrust and presumed inevitability. Thereafter, a promising step towards reducing the harm that stems from theorising as if standpoint does not matter is to discover the ways in which local and global are mutually constituted.

Pointing towards a post-hegemonic conceptualisation of the glocal which is rooted in genuine respect for other ways of knowing, I begin with a glossary of terms or the ABCD of an alternative vision. To disrupt inertia and infuse intentionality, I first address "D" which stands for de-centering and dialogue. Moves towards the local may entail erosion of the centrality and validity of hegemonic frames and practices, provided they are accompanied not just by dialogues on diversity, but rigorous dialogic diversity. The acknowledgement in much research with international students of diversity as a prominent feature of educational mobility has done little to clear the path of knowledge creation towards engagement with other lived experiences on their own terms (see also Chapter 18). "C" for continuum recasts the global and local as evolving, interactive entities, reflective of each other, best captured by the dynamic of char-achar (the Indic principle of variable constant, implying the outer world as mirroring the inner). We may even picture the global-local polarities as a yin-yang tension wherein, "one polarity already includes the other one" and desired transformations otherwise inconceivable in a zero-sum calculus, "are within the realm of possibility" (Coll, 2022, p. 60). "C" also denotes the Commons or Common Treasure that cultural diversity represents, rather than a problem of containment, as much research with international students has thus far assumed (see also Chapters 17 and 19). "B" reminds us of the Borderlands which offer singular insight into how mainstream knowledge creation is complicit in manufacturing rootlessness and which rephrase the cosmopolitan in terms of the dialectic between becoming and belonging. "A" for Adaptive Muddling draws out the genius in the local and, through its very groundedness, sharply qualifies the sophistry of claims of top-down, monopolistic innovation. Adaptive Muddling permits us to dream of a praxis which replenishes the knowledge commons, breaking through the constraints of "ideal-type" and "best practice" with their operative modality of tech-transfer. "A" for Ananta (that which has no limits) brings us back to the point of one-ness so that we may build transcendence into our concepts and our application of

them. Thus, a cosmology which recognises global and local as co-constitutive opens a new pathway for inhabiting relational ontologies and infusing internationalisation practices with an ethic of responsibility.

An epistemic framework derived from these influences allows us to conceptualise not against incoherence and meaningless-ness but alongside them. Deconceptualising global is a necessary step for the very exercise of conceptualisation to confront its limits and face the music of unspoken assumptions and unintended consequences (see Section 2 for examples of such assumptions). As I have noted elsewhere, "What is envisaged is a thriving pluriversal knowledge commons which will displace hegemonic claims of universality as the gold standard" (Unkule, 2021, p. 261). In her feminist critique of modernity's influence over Korean culture, Cho Han Hae-Joang (2000) conveys this aspiration in words that need no paraphrasing:

> As an academic, I/we must stop thinking within established categories. I/we should view existing scholarly concepts with scepticism, overthrow the language I/we have been using, and change the boundaries of modern academia itself. The time has come for us to choose reality over the image and induction over deduction.
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> *(p. 67)*

By bucking the methodological nationalism (where the nation-state is the primary unit for analysis, conceptualisation and policy-making) embedded in disciplines, global studies attest that "globals can be partial" yet, "always fashioned and explored within regimes of value and hierarchies of power across multiple scales" (Kahn, 2014, p. 7). The epistemic bandwidth thus afforded by naming the encompassing and shape-shifting features of the global adds to the range of levels of analysis perceptible within the international higher education landscape. But for those seeking to tap into lessons from an ongoing conversation between said levels, such recognising and naming can only be a point of departure – lest it merely replaces methodological nationalism and its accessories, statism and coloniality, as the dominant frame, conspiring to silence all others.

Critical considerations

The identification of global with "Western modernity writ large" has a healthy dose of ontological amnesia built into it. In practice, such conflation has bolstered systemic coloniality which normalises the enrichment of one part of the world while imposing costs on another – in sheer disregard of natural laws of interconnectedness – costs in the form of cognitive injustice, brain drain, and dumping of waste. Yet the more subtle re-orientation it orchestrates to a worldview wherein time is the new space equally demands attention. Explaining why place became unfashionable in social science, McKenzie and Tuck

(2015, pp. 7–8) observe that "globalization as represented by big-box chain stores that dot the landscape of otherwise very different places, makes it seem that place matters far less than it used to matter". Mobile populations such as international students are, on one hand, perceived as instrumental in eroding the significance of place. On the other hand, their directions of travel have in effect cemented the metropolitan centrality of certain countries and education systems, demonstrating how greater interconnectedness magnifies the importance of place rather than diminishing it.

To divest knowledge creation from the venture of colonial futurity, Paperson (2014) introduces storied land as a transhistorical analytical framework and a method that is both temporal and spatial. Storied land attempts to get our current associations with a particular place unstuck from the dominant narrative of the present, to rise above considerations of proprietorship and cartography and to relocate place meanings in a temporally dynamic frame. For our purposes, the paradigm of storied place permits us to localise all, break the hierarchical global/local dichotomy and capture each "local" as an equally valid manifestation of the global, rather than as an aberration in need of alignment with the norm.

As elaborated by McKenzie and Tuck (2015), Critical Place Inquiry could help us address the deficit view of international students in various ways: First, because it "entails, at a more localized level, understanding places as both influencing social practices as well as being performed and (re)shaped through practices and movements of individuals and collectives" (p. 19), it shifts our perspective on international students from knowable objects to agentic subjects in research. Second, thanks to a recognition that "disparate realities determine not only how place is experienced but also how it is understood and practiced in turn" (p. 19), we are able to contend with mobility as a phenomenon marked by diverse conditions and motivations, even among seemingly monolithic populations (see Chapter 15). Third, we are confronted with the ethics of mobility which, in a paradigm of neoliberal globalisation, has been assumed as inevitable and not subject to any eco-planetary constraint yet is constantly at odds with the presumed sanctity of the geographical and cultural boundaries that buttress the legitimacy of nation-states. A corresponding imagination in higher education research whereby international students' mobility is constructed as movement between national educational systems, rather than movement within an increasingly homogeneous global educational sector mirrors these logics of transnational capital.

Once place is put back into focus, we may fully specify how the global impinges upon the local. However, this would necessitate moving away from conventional ethnographic beliefs in sites being distinct, self-contained, sui generis. Bollig et al. (2015, p. 17) acknowledge the impetus provided by educational ethnography towards critiquing and revising the "implicit localism of the field concept" long assumed in methodology. Such a revision may inspire, for instance, inquiries about how all students world-travel in conversation with

each other's experiences irrespective of where the classroom is situated. To open up our sites to possible outside influence is to countenance the uniqueness of the local, not in opposition to, but in interplay with, the global. Piecing together and connecting these iterations of the global across time and space – as a sort of multi-scalar, multi-sited ethnography (see Kenway, 2016) – would then feed back into our understanding of how processes of globalisation are themselves altered via their encounters with contextual multiplicity. Thus, evading the global-local binary also subverts the circularity of the "West versus the Rest" conundrum confronting postcolonialism. Chen (2010) views this dance with a singular narrative of modernity masquerading as global, as in fact yielding multiple modernities, further noting:

> The local formation of modernity carries important elements of the West but it is not fully enveloped by it. Once recognizing the West as fragments internal to the local, we no longer consider it as an opposing entity but rather as one cultural resource among many others. Such a position avoids either a resentful or a triumphalist relation with the West because it is not bound by an obsessive antagonism.
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> *(p. 223)*

Making the local a focal point of our study need not mean fragmentation into particulars ad infinitum. To recognise the dialectic between the local and the global is to step back from theorisation severed from practice. When confronted with "the 'choice' of being either oppressed or oppressor, exploited or exploiter, dominating or dominated, predator or victim" (Paranjape, 1991), it means instinctively, tentatively, opting to occupy the space in between. As for the enterprise of conceptualisation, such non-dualism precludes a commitment to generalisation/universalisation and spatiotemporal ossification, in other words, the concerns of validity and generalisability hard-wired through the training of researchers. Mindful engagement with levels of analysis presages rigorous alignment with the relational ethics of research by explicitly confronting the question: whose interests does the knowledge we are creating serve?

Reflection questions

- How are you defining the relationship between "global" or "local" in your research? What does that definition assume?
- How does doing research with international students enable you to embrace marginality as a standpoint for conceptualising and theorising?
- What does operating on the mutually constituted local-global continuum mean for the ability of concepts to travel?
- To what extent does the continuum relieve the burden of universalistic pretensions of knowledge creation via theorising?

Marginality is envisaged here not as a disadvantage or a steady state of oppression but as a manifestation of the nimble-footed beginner's mind attitude, or, for the more pragmatically geared, a disavowal of the saturated mainstream. Put differently, how do we make seeking out borderland spaces from where convention is destabilised and agency is democratised as an integral, albeit subversive, part of our research endeavour? In positing that "the position of a 'stranger' becomes a potential competitive advantage to generate new knowledge capital" Kim (2017, p. 986) hints at how liminality could spark creativity. The unique insight that stems from being "Other" in both home and host societies affirms the centrality of reflexivity – a reflexivity heightened by an emerging consciousness of translocal identity formation in the case of international students. Here, the local-global continuum helpfully reminds us that such fledgling identities should not be assumed as levelling inherent disparities or entirely novel constructs which allow absolute transcendence of situatedness but rather as an arena for challenging well-worn scripts from a vantage of not belonging.

International students' experiences frame the phenomenon of belonging and connectedness to place in ways that elude the off-the-shelf primordial or liberal-citizenship or cosmopolitan-nomad templates. Through their exploration of how international students' ways of relating to place dynamise the frames of "here" and "there", Hasnain and Hajek (2022) arrive at the notion of "translocal connectedness". Based on their review of the Erasmus study abroad framework which they describe as "primarily a group experience of being foreign", Viol and Klasen (2021, p. 25) argue that the experience of place itself can be significantly mediated by the strength of friendships formed there – upending routine assumptions about 'culture shock'. Such definitional non-conformity is not only methodologically transformative but also potentially confounds orthodox governmentalities and policy interventions.

Suggestions for researchers

Scholars with affiliations to a range of disciplines including sociology, anthropology, international studies, cultural geography and global studies have rich contributions to make to research with and about international students. Rectifying the deficit narratives discussed in previous chapters demands tactically orchestrating disciplinary disorder and systematically confronting the question: to whom are we as researchers accountable? Put differently, we would be called on to ponder over what kind of epistemic community we wish to build through our research practices. Sun Ge's (2001, p. 270) advice accounts for the global, the local, and everything in between when he urges that "what a trans-cultural 'intellectual community' provides is not the space of dialogue for intellectuals of two or more cultures but instead the space within which these intellectuals can constructively reconfigure themselves". In this spirit, we should prepare ourselves for the scrutiny of our own research motivations,

practices and outputs, which ceasing to project hegemonic narratives onto our research subjects will ultimately portend.

Finally, as scholar practitioners, we may find the courage to renounce the allure of the myth and set off in pursuit of the parable. According to Bartzel (2022), the myth "holds the power to reconcile forces that at first seemed irreconcilable, while parable does the opposite . . . parable creates irreconciliation where before there was reconciliation". In our quest for enduring myths, much critical research about and with international students has been preoccupied with minimising difference, managing diversity, mitigating hybridity and maintaining continuity with neo-colonial regimes of knowledge creation and resource (including demographic) extraction. Forthcoming chapters in this section elucidate these very themes. To conclude, it is when we challenge the inevitability and give voice to inherent inconsistencies, inadequacy and irreconcilability of this prevailing paradigm – its methodological complicity, its epistemological conceit, its ontological disconnect and its cosmo-axiological vacuity – that we will have instead harnessed the power of the parable to express the timeless through the situated.

To summarise the suggestions emanating from this discussion:

- Examine the role that disciplinary and research training play in the kinds of questions we choose for research
- When reviewing literature be attentive to implicit/explicit assumptions underlying themes of enquiry, definition of concepts and scope and level of analysis
- Operationalise "global" on a case-by-case basis with due consideration to how it influences and is influenced by other levels (local, sub-national, national, regional etc.)
- Unpack static present-day associations with place/site of study to better account for their histories and spotlight their positionality vis-a-vis other places

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Example in practice

Article: Rutazibwa (2020)
Article focus: Interrogating disciplinary orthodoxy in the field of international relations
Article strengths: This work brings together recently published work, disciplinary socialisation practices and enactments by individual researchers in a particular discipline (international relations, in this case) to reveal the multi-level shifts triggered when we begin to question our knowledge creation practices.

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