

Methodological Approaches to the Study of International Students

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Although international students exhibit a variety of backgrounds in terms of nationalities, native languages, education histories, and other characteristics, the diversity within this group is often overlooked in higher education research and its data management. The U.S. National Center for Education Statistics' Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) racial category exemplifies the tendency to view international students as a homogeneous group because these students are categorized as a single racial category (nonresident alien); a racial category used in addition to American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian, or Other Pacific Islander, and White. In a two-part essay, we want to share examples of theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches that acknowledge and address international students' heterogeneity. In this first essay, we introduce quantitative and qualitative critical methodologies and offer several suggestions for the future direction of research about international students, focusing especially on the diversity within this student group.

Critical Quantitative Methodology

Critical quantitative methodology is the employment of quantitative data and methods in a way that is guided or shaped by critical theory. According to Stage (2007), there are two aims of the critical quantitative approach. One is to "[u]se data to represent educational processes and outcomes on a large scale to reveal inequities and to identify social or institutional perpetuation of systematic

inequities in such processes and outcomes” (p. 10), and the other is to “[q]uestion the models, measures, and analytic practices of quantitative research in order to offer competing models, measures, and analytic practices that better describe experiences of those who have not been adequately represented” (p. 10). The former goal needs large-scale datasets to conduct institutional- or national-level analysis while the latter goal requires researchers to reflect on their approach and the methods they are employing. The variable coding process offers a good example of how the traditional approach to conducting quantitative research may fail to describe the experiences of a certain group. Teranishi (2007) claims that a traditional approach to race categorization (e.g., 1=White, 2=Black, and so on) can give the impression that each category is homogeneous and can disguise the diversity within each category. For example, in such traditional coding, Asian students will be treated as one category and compared with other racial categories; however, it is critical to understand and explore the diversity within the category of Asian. Thus, researchers using quantitative methods should be cautious whether the employed approach misrepresents a certain group of students.

Critical Qualitative Methodology

The term *qualitative* is an umbrella concept that encompasses many different forms of inquiry to understand social phenomena, including observation, individual and group interviewing, and textual and visual data analysis (Cresswell, 1998). The term *critical* refers to the capacity to inquire against the grain: to question the conceptual and theoretical bases of knowledge and method, to ask questions that go beyond prevailing assumptions and understandings, and to acknowledge the role of power and position in social phenomena. The notion of critical qualitative methodology includes self-critique and self-reflexivity and bears in mind that power relations are always existent (Yao & Vital, 2018). This can be done by rethinking what, why, and how we adopt particular approaches and including the marginalized population in our work, as well as engaging in “critical transformation at the local level” (Denzin et al., 2017, p. 484). For example, when we learn the method of interviewing, it is never simply the process of asking and answering questions. The key is that we need to be fully aware of the various ways in which power is enacted in the process of interviewing, which is part of a critical reflexive exercise.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Given current research on international students, it is important to keep in mind how critical scholars can be aware of and avoid creating power within research, regardless of the methodological approach, qualitative or quantitative. We posit that the following topics should be investigated in a post-pandemic world. First, it is worth exploring the mental health issues of international students. Against the backdrop of the global pandemic and the resurgence of anti-Asian racism, international students, especially students of Asian descent, suffer more blatant racism, which results in an increased likelihood of fear, anger,

sadness and mental health concerns, such as stress, anxiety, and depression. Second, international undergraduate and graduate students have confronted different challenges, so exploring heterogeneity within international students' experiences can support the specific needs of international undergraduates and graduates. Third, the intersectionality of international students, such as class, gender, age, and nationality is important to investigate to reach a better understanding of how these identities shape students' experiences and perspectives. Fourth, based on many research studies (e.g., Yao et al., 2019; Yeo et al., 2019), international students of color are also 'raced' in the US, so the process of racialization is a crucial topic to investigate. Lastly, considering the worldwide spread of geopolitical tensions and neo-nationalism, student mobility as the core of internationalization is a key topic for future work. More conversations and efforts should be made to make international student mobility more socially equitable and sustainable.

The following questions can help researchers to better understand international students:

1. Given that the quantitative questionnaires developed for domestic students are often used for international students, what kind of student information should we ask to capture the diversity within the international student population? (e.g., nationality, K-12 education experiences in the United States, TOEFL, or anything else?)
2. What is diversity? Who defines diversity? Should international students be considered a diverse population? Who holds the power to make this decision? What are the implications of the answer to this question in higher education settings?

In the next piece in this series (also in this issue of the *Critical Internationalization Studies Review*) we share theoretical frameworks that address international students' different experiences based on the intersection of their immigration status, their nationality, and their race.

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