

Anationality: Identifying with neither here nor there

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Abstract

The logics of identity structure and organize interactions on both individual and communal levels. These logics range from how we as researchers interact with our subjects to how we make sense of contexts in which we find ourselves. This essay will further a global dialogue on researcher identity by proposing the theoretical possibility of “anationality”: a disavowal of national identity as a possible subject position from which to negotiate local, regional, national, and global processes. Drawing on experienced gained while researching international students for an NGO and later as a Ph.D. student, both in countries where I am marked as foreign, this essay follows feminist theorizing of gender, particularly gender non-binary identities, to potentially illuminate the opportunities and limitations of critiquing nationality. This work further highlights the importance of an anti-essentialist stance in conducting research. Anationality is an attempt to question national categorization. This essay productively moves the debate around the nation and nationality beyond normative, essentialistic conceptualizations.

Keywords: anationality, identity, positionality, research, experience

In this essay, I trace how my research in various contexts across various continents has shaped the evolving process of coming into my own as a researcher. The fieldwork that I have done throughout the early stages of my career has provided several unique, context-specific interactions in which the intersections of my own identity heavily inform how I did the research. As a Queer, Black, Latinx person of immigrant background born in the United States, it was impossible to extricate myself from the complex stories that diverged from, questioned, challenged, and at times, resonated with my own experiences.

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The experiences I have had conducting fieldwork in international education research have led me to challenge the concept of national identity as an organizing principle for research, specifically for internationally mobile subjects and researchers.

I begin with this description to highlight the inextricability of the researcher from the research process. Furthermore, this essay aims to discuss the extent to which one can divest from the concept of national identity and examine the implications of this complex process. Divestment from identities is often a difficult issue. Houdek discusses “symbolic divestment” as a “performative disavowal of one’s membership with an institution that has come to represent a set of ideals, beliefs, or political positions that conflict with one’s moral worldview.” (Houdek, 2016, p. 52). In the German context, this often looks like a disavowal of the German historical identification with the Holocaust. Examples of this divestment range from German-Jewish composer Ludwig Strauss (Seelig, 2013) to the main character of Georg Oswald’s novel *Alles was zählt*. (Wells, 2011). For these two figures, “Germanness” becomes a problematic category from which they attempt to distance themselves.

The limitations of essentialism cannot be overstated, particularly within the vein of research that explores identity and (self-) representation. To avoid or exceed these limitations, one must first acknowledge the dangers of reification. Reification asserts common-sense understandings of the social world as natural and fixed. In other words, “we tend to take ‘the sense we make of things’ to be ‘the way things are’” (Crotty, 2020, p. 52). This process affects research by foreclosing other interpretative possibilities for analyzing data, potentially causing researchers to miss the intricacies of their subject of study. To reify means to essentialize inherent complexities of empirical and theoretical research based on notions of a fixed and unchanging essence.

Processes of reification are undergirded by essentialism. Some notions of essentialism rely on reifying the behavioral characteristics of individuals (Gasper, 1996). This ‘performative essentialism’ is ostensibly more flexible than essentialism based on biological characteristics. It nevertheless attempts to describe cultural practices as inherent to one’s essence. More dangerous still, essentialism that reifies based on assumed inherent qualities of individuals is a form of “representation that distorts and silences” (Werbner & Modood, 2015, p. 229), flattening the identity construction process. Examining any identity construct and not acknowledging that it is contingent, conditional, and in a constant state of moving between fixity and fluidity is detrimental to potentially innovative inquiry.

Like many researchers, I strongly believe that, to a certain extent, all research is autobiographical (Aitken & Burman, 1999). My positionality is undoubtedly an integral aspect of approaching concepts of race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, age, ability status, and other dynamics of difference. There is, however, a tension between aspects I consider integral to myself and other individuals and the aforementioned concept of symbolic divestment. On the one hand, I am deeply critical of notions of taken-for-granted identity; yet, on the other hand, I acknowledge that how I relate to and identify myself is part of my professional practice as a researcher. Similarly, in the German context, conflicts between (not) being identified as German and (not) identifying as German have resulted in impassioned discussions about who can or should align themselves with national identities (Yue, 2000). The tensions between how one identifies and how one is identified by others have led me to consider the differences and similarities between gender and nationality; the concept of anationality is the result of thinking through these intellectual discussions.

I define anationality as the absence of a national identity and the rejection of identification with any particular nationality. The essay argues for the theoretical possibility of anationality as an identity from which researchers can explore, critique, and reflect on positionality. The concept I have introduced here differs from previous conceptions of “anationalism” suggested by, for example, Kostakopoulou or Miller, who link individual disavowal of national identity to a rejection of nationalism (Kostakopoulou, 2012; Miller, 2019). Within this line of thinking, anationality often indicates an adherence to ethnic identity yet a rejection of the political significance of that identity (Karpas, 2002, p. 621). Rather than confirming this “hierarchy of allegiances” based on identity (Anscombe, 2004), my conceptualization of anationality

considers the possibility of rejecting nationality identity as a potential stance from which to conduct research. This definition centers on the individual negotiation of identity construction.

This essay first outlines how positionality within a national context can both challenge and affirm understandings of national identity, using my positionality as an example. I then briefly define how I will be conceptualizing identity and situate this concept within the framework of the nation. Further, I compare national identity with gender identity, drawing insights from post-structural perspectives on gender theory, and show implications for research on international higher education. Finally, I show the limits of both current conceptualizations of the nation and my suggestions for addressing these limitations. I end the essay by suggesting potential future research implications.

My Positionality

To illuminate conceptualizations of identity, I draw on my experience working as a qualitative researcher for an NGO in Berlin, Germany, whose main goal was to promote academic exchange periods for marginalized youth. These youth from eastern Germany, as a rule, attended the lower tiers of the German secondary school system and were often of lower socio-economic class and immigrant background. The project in which I was employed entailed qualitative interviews with various high school and college-aged students who had received funding from the NGO's stipend program. Over a year, I conducted semi-structured interviews during which the topic of identity frequently arose, particularly the cultural and national identity of both interviewer and interviewee.

One anecdote that struck me as an example of how national identity is negotiated and performed was when, after asking an interview subject what he thought of his German identity, he replied, "I know that I am typically German in that I enjoy making people aware of their mistakes." (Hernandez, 2015). I was floored. After almost three years in Germany, it finally made sense to me; this individual demonstrated a classically stereotypical understanding of what it means to be German in a way that resonated with my experiences. I immediately thought of how often I had experienced this exact sentiment without having the vocabulary to name it. However, this moment also allowed me to reflect on my values and beliefs. While this characteristic is certainly not unique to German culture and, of course, not pertinent to every German, the anecdote illuminates how nationality can so subtly rely on an essentialistic understanding of behaviors and ways of being. Here is an example of someone casually and succinctly defining their "German-ness" in a nuanced way that still serves to reinforce a common understanding of national identity defined in essentialist terms.

I mention this anecdote for several reasons. First, it marked a turning point for me in my understanding of how German culture can be represented. As someone who had lived in two cities in Germany for four years, who spoke German fluently, and could have been considered "well-integrated," this information was a remarkable confirmation of how I had experienced "Germanness," both in others and myself. This moment was the beginning of a transformation for me as a cultural citizen and researcher. It marked the beginning of thinking about research differently. For example, I began to question bounded notions of national homogeneity when conceptualizing research categories, which led to nuanced definitions of international/domestic students that acknowledge local, regional, and national heterogeneity.

Secondly, upon hearing this statement, I was simultaneously overcome by amusement, realization, disagreement, and acceptance. For me, it demonstrated the affective relationship between identity representations in a visceral, embodied way, far beyond other interviews that I had conducted. The response to this particular expression of identity was an eruption of laughter, a moment of uncertainty, and a pause to reflect. But for me, the question remained: how true are statements like this about our identities?

Identity

Common-sense understandings of identity refer to an untenable concept and view the categorizations of individuals at a given moment as fixed in time and space (Hall, 1991). I rather focus on

the concept of identification, which emphasizes how the ways individuals identify are constantly shifting, forming part of the narrative of the self (Barker, 2003). However, as Brett St. Louis points out, the paradox of identity as both impossible and necessary in social and political positioning further complicates understanding the myriad ways individuals exist (2009). A postmodern, poststructuralist understanding of identity opens the path towards a more subtle, nuanced interpretation within the research context. This interpretation allowed me to re-consider my research practices.

Situating Identity in the Nation

Identity is often discussed in cultural or social terms regarding the modern nation (Wodak, 2009). Indeed, when discussing one's cultural or social identity, the topic of discussion that arises predominantly is that of national identity. One need only remember the prevalence of the question "where are you from?" to be reminded of the "importance" of the nation in mainstream discourses on identity. Particularly in international education research, discussions of national identity are gaining in importance yet often lack theoretical specificity (Tavares, 2021).

The nation as a theoretical concept has occupied the imagination of scholars since its inception. What constitutes the nation and how national subjects relate to that construct through narratives of nationhood remain the topics of contemporary academic debate. One influential strand of thought on the subject remains the conceptualization of nations as "imagined communities" in which modern nations form a timeless, essentially limited, and sovereign geographic and social territory (Anderson, 1983). This idea of the nation maintains that, even though most members of the nation will never meet all of their co-nationals, there remains an intense "horizontal comradeship" that unites them, forming the basis for a group identity. Education remains an integral aspect in the construction of this comradeship. For example, Singapore's construction of national identity relies on the school as an ideological institution to create a national identity (Koh, 2005; Ritter, 2013). My reflections on research interactions with interview participants of various national identities caused me to question the construction of this sense of comradeship. Surely, I could feel connected to my research participants in ways I cannot with my co-nationals. I also paused to reflect that this might mean divestment from national categories in the conceptualization of students in international higher education research.

The politics of identity within the nation framework are most visible when discussing migration, a key factor of comparative and international higher education. Do international students belong to their university? The nation? Are they 'loyal' to their home countries? Do they even belong here? Identity forms the basis on which claims of belonging are made. In this sense, national identity is contingent upon the inclusion of those who constitute the nation, who are imagined to belong to the polity, and who ascribe to the essential values of the nation. Conversely, claims of excluding foreignness are increasingly articulated in terms of national identity, as in the emergence of right-wing populism and anti-international student sentiment (Indelicato, 2017). This duality, national belonging and national non-belonging, are negotiated according to how the nation is formed.

National identity is a double-edged sword. In certain cases, it can form the basis of belonging within a national border for a historically marginalized group utilizing strategically essentialized identity claims for purposes of political mobilization (Spivak, 1985). Under the right circumstances, these claims can function as an emancipatory identity politics that allow anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-classism, and other forms of seeking equality to emerge within the nation framework (Hall, 1991). At the same time, however, the dichotomy of oppressor/oppressed national identities only exists within the nation framework. This framework provides the battleground for political processes that have the potential to disenfranchise as well as influence the discourses that shape national identity.

The uncertainty, anxiety, and fear around the nation's future and constitution are a driving force in maintaining these inequalities maintaining the structuring logics of the nation. Embracing ideologies of a concrete system in which a national "we" are different from the foreign "them" serves to support beliefs in

the inherent superiority of one's nation (Billig, 1995). The recent examples of anti-Asian racism inherent in responses to the Covid-19 pandemic that has impacted Chinese international students make national and xenophobic divisions all too apparent (Allen & Ye, 2021; Koo, Baker, et al., 2021; Koo, Yao, et al., 2021)

National Identity and Gender

The theoretical innovation of developing anationality can be approached through comparisons with existing theoretical discussions of gender. While there have been several movements over the years to theorize gender in ways that unpack and question our basic assumptions about the concepts associated with masculinity, femininity, and what lies between (Butler, 1990, 2004; Nestle et al., 2002; Yuval-Davis, 1993), nationality has not been theorized in the same way. This undertheorization can be attributed to assumptions about the fixed nature of the Westphalian nation-state. The following section illuminates the similarities and differences between national identity and gender identity. It will discuss the extent to which the anationality allows researchers to critique static conceptualizations of the nation and national identity. Finally, it will offer implications for research in international higher education.

There are several parallels between national identity and gender identity. Both categories have serious repercussions on the person who aligns with any of the various manifestations of those categories. Both entail hierarchies that afford those aligned with hegemonic identities more privilege. These hierarchies can often be heuristically reduced to the binaries that valorize one identity construct over another, i.e., the Global North/South divide or the gender binary between men and women. These binaries are problematic in their conceptualization and implementation.

We can also see binarization in implementing concepts such as “core” and “periphery,” referring to the division of labor production in world-systems theory (Wallerstein, 2011). The concepts played an important role in critiquing the unequal distribution of capital globally yet served to reify the Westphalian system that positions nation-states in certain positions within a global hierarchy (Quijano, 2000). This hierarchy is also present in current conceptualizations of “sending” and “receiving” countries of international student migration and influences how education researchers think of “brain drain” and “brain gain” (Zhang & Blachford, 2014). The gendered flow of capital from and to various places influences how we think about those places.

The concept of gender as a fluid construct has been established among many branches of scholarship, including education. Drawing on a postmodern approach, education research must attend to “ethical and methodological challenges of knowing certain lives in their precariousness” (Zembylas, 2016, p. 206). Identity categories like gender, sex, nationality, race, ethnicity, etc., are deeply imbricated in the politics of representation. When speaking of national identity, it is only through the lens of the organizational logics produced by a postmodern understanding of how identity is constructed through discourse that one can begin to understand the limits of national identity categories. Introducing the concept of anationality makes it possible to perform some of the intellectual work of delimiting national identity categories.

Another similarity between national identity and gender identity is the contestability of their material confines. Nationality is governed partly by basic material components and by violent, disciplinary technologies along national lines (i.e., passports, border controls, walls/fences, etc.). These technologies can be contested and resisted on both personal and group levels through, for example, political mobilization and implementation of policy. The technologies that govern gender and its representation are similarly responsible for confining populations, not necessarily in a spatial sense, but rather in terms of how meaning is made of individual categories. These categories are resisted through simultaneously serious and playful queering of gender, and insofar that the constructs of gender and sex are related, through gender-reaffirming medical interventions. Of course, the capacity to resist the confines of national and gender identity is mitigated by many aspects, like agency, privilege, and context. These theoretical and practical

commonalities merely highlight the situatedness of both categories within a structuring framework and the potential to resist and change that framework.

National identity and gender are often imbricated with one another in ways that inform and complicate human relationships. As the basis for a national identity, the construction of the nation is also inherently a gendered project (Wahab, 2008). In the material and discursive construction of the nation, gendered subjectivities come to the fore. This is apparent in several ways, ranging from gendered references to the “motherland” or “fatherland” to the physical labor expended along gendered lines, i.e., male conscription to fight in wars on behalf of the nation. The unseen domestic labor performed by women, particularly socially and/or economically marginalized women, is also an important foundation sustaining the peoples and structures that make up the nation. Far from disregarding the costs at which this labor has been performed to construct the nation, the concept of anationality could provide an opportunity to loosen the grips the nation has on its most vulnerable. For example, identifying anationally could allow us to seek other explanatory factors in describing social phenomena we discover in our research. Comparative and international higher education research has benefitted from a reflexive position when exploring gendered and nationalized subjects (Sriprakash & Mukhopadhyay, 2015). Thinking through anationality would also provide the benefit of nuancing identity categories that are often taken for granted in the field.

Despite the multitude of similarities between gender and national identity, there are some key differences. The regime of opposition to the confines of gender has, in various cultures throughout history, provided creative and dynamic examples of resistance in the global public sphere (McNabb, 2017). However, while “playing with gender” has existed since the beginning of human history (Herdt, 1994), the development of the modern nation has impeded critical thought and individuals’ capacities to shape our relationship with the nation, as has been done with gender. Throughout my academic career in various international contexts (Germany, India, the U.S., Switzerland, Canada), I made it a point to try and “play with nationality.” For example, when the inevitable question “where are you from?” emerges, I often respond with “try and guess!” which affords me an interesting opportunity to see how I am perceived and typically invites a playful dialogue about national origins. This kind of dialogue could potentially change how we as researchers approach constructing our own identity and allow us to reflect on our research practices.

The relatively recent invention of the nation-state and its attendant structures have only influenced national identity since the Westphalian agreement. The technologies that enforce this construct only emerged in the twentieth century. Passports and national borders as disciplinary tools function to contain and regulate nationals and non-nationals in a physical and material sense. In contrast, the enforcement regime of gender lacks these material trappings. Babies are typically assigned a gender based on their perceived biological sex upon birth. Being “assigned female at birth” or “assigned male at birth” is an outgrowth of the mental schemas reified by medicine, policy, and other structures. These structures take place within the confines of the nation but are not only related to geographic location. In contrast, the process of being “assigned” a nationality is typically dependent upon the location in which one is born.

The physical space or “sovereign territory” in which one develops has less of an effect on one’s gender than on one’s national identity, highlighting national influences of gender development in various national contexts. While gender functions differently in, for example, Germany and the United States, national identity functions quite similarly. Manifestations of regional gender inequality in Germany, for example, are influenced by historically structured social inequalities (Dirksmeier, 2015; Fuchs et al., 2021).

The divergent histories of Germany and the United States after the Second World War account for systems in which gender is established in culturally specific ways, as in the example of “Rosie the Riveter,” a manifest example of how national identity and labor production are deeply gendered (Winkelmann, 2018). This example can be contrasted with the interweaving of gender and the woman’s place in the family in creating the German welfare state (Abrams & Harvey, 2018), which resulted in a differentiated

conceptualization of women and mothers as producers of labor. We can see how gender is interwoven within the national system as constitutive of how national members perpetuate the nation.

The logics that structure the nation and those that structure gender function similarly. In both cases, the nation is the organizational principle for constraining, enabling, and legitimating a gendered national identity. This process has consequences for those who seek to move within this system that do not adhere to one geographic location. Discrimination toward international students who do not fit the national system is a well-documented phenomenon (Adegbola et al., 2018; Grayson, 2014; Hanassab, 2006; Lee & Opio, 2011). International students who face discrimination in new national contexts based on racist and xenophobic prejudices are subject to prevailing national ideas of what constitutes difference (Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2017). Additionally, students and researchers alike bring their subjectivities with them when crossing borders to pursue knowledge (Blanco & Saunders, 2019; Metcalfe, 2017). A critical approach to understanding the impact of our positionality also necessitates reflecting on just what we bring to our research.

Methodological Nationalism

In research contexts, the term “methodological nationalism” refers to this “assumption that the nation/state/society/ is the national social and political form of the modern world” (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002, p. 302). However, this assumption is far from being solely a feature of the methodological approach to research. It permeates the contemporary literature of international education and structures how we think of education systems and those included and excluded from them.

A primary variant of methodological nationalism is ignoring the national framing of modernity (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). The influence of modernity on shaping identity becomes even more powerful by being made invisible, innocuous, and taken for granted. Rather than being seen and thus marked as a potential subject of critique, the nation as a framework for identity formation becomes a structuring absence (Ott et al., 2011). As researchers, we should understand the driving forces behind the contexts we are studying. However, rather than critically exposing nationalistic tendencies in ourselves or our research, this variant of methodological nationalism would have the field reluctant to explain social phenomena regarding the nation’s role.

A second variant of methodological nationalism involves uncritically accepting national discourses without problematizing them. The stereotypes mentioned in my anecdote at the beginning of the essay are prime examples. Stereotypes are only a small part of discourses at the national level. However, they are influenced by the national society from which they originate and therefore frequently go uncommented upon and even perpetuated while performing research. This variant of methodological nationalism would have invoked another explanation for the anecdote at the individual level. Had I ascribed to this variant, I would not have even found this description of Germanness remarkable, choosing instead to attribute the national discourses from which it arose as a natural feature of the German social landscape. I recognize that a specific emotional understanding of the German higher education context was also necessary to perceive this form of humor. Adopting an anational focus could have potentially freed me from the confines of thinking in national terms and would have led to a more generative, reflexive conversation around the definition of national stereotypes.

These two aspects of methodological nationalism inhibit understanding the nation and nationality by obfuscating critical aspects of how these constructs are conceptualized. While doing research, it is of utmost importance to account for the role our own identities play in the co-construction of the phenomena we are attempting to explore. Anationality problematizes our relationship with the nation as an overarching principle and allows us as both researchers and individuals to adopt a position to unpack that relationship.

Avoiding methodological nationalism as a researcher is akin to disavowing nationalism in the personal and political sphere. Of course, the personal is political, and the two are interlinked. While this concept has implications for the general public, it is important to note how an anational identity might help

ways of thinking in the research setting. Anationality is also a way to redefine our position within the organizational logics of nationality. As identity is a contingent and contextually dependent, relational position, an anational identity allows us to reflect on the discourses out of which our researcher identity emerges.

Additionally, because of identity's embedded nature in the research context, disidentifying with a particular nation means centering alternative ways of relating to our research subjects. Thinking in anti-essentialist ways about research subjects, contexts, and frames also assists in avoiding a culturalist approach in which culture is a defining factor for behavior (Dirlik, 1987). The theoretical possibility of anationality also makes it possible to eschew certain aspects of our own national identity that might be unhelpful in the research process. Being able to occupy a subject position that more easily allows one to explicate discourses that attempt to fix us in national contexts is a first step towards emancipation from the thinking that reifies those national contexts.

Limitations

Of course, one must acknowledge that it is not easy and often simply impossible to disavow or dissociate from national identity within the confines of the nation. The organizational logics of the nation do not easily loosen their grips on our collective imaginaries of identity. However, the fluid potential of identity in postmodern contexts does allow for anationality as a possible subject position from which to critique extant structures.

As researchers, it is important to acknowledge the unevenness of our various positionalities. It may be easier for a person privileged by their national identity to disavow that identity. Those who are disadvantaged by their national identity in the international context would, of course, seek to distance themselves from that disadvantage. This is exactly why anationality is so potentially liberating: it would equalize a playing field characterized by core/periphery or North/South hierarchies. Those of us who occupy higher positions within these hierarchies should keep in mind the potential of giving up that privilege in the interests of emancipating the more vulnerable. The possibility of disentangling ourselves from national logics represents a worthwhile challenge.

Anationality is not about a general belief in "global citizenship," an uneven and unequal experience that has grown in importance in education research (Pais & Costa, 2020). While previous research has asserted the value of global citizenship in rejecting stereotypes (Dippold et al., 2019) and constructing narratives of cosmopolitanism (Boni & Calabuig, 2017), adopting anationality as a concept aligns with a critical praxis of disavowal of structures that have enabled certain forms of global citizenship over others (de Andreotti, 2014). If we can move away from the current divisive system of identity constructs, as much as present politics would allow, we can begin to think in new ways about ourselves, research, and the world

Future Directions

The application of anationality means reflecting on how the place in which one happens to be born does or does not affect how we navigate the world. Concretely, this has manifested in my research in a focus on local and regional heterogeneities in any given regional context. For example, in my research conducted in Switzerland, I noticed the phenomenon of "affective regional isolation," which governed how students from one linguistic region affectively navigated their surroundings in other linguistic regions in the same country (Hernandez, 2021). While conducting this research, I made sure to attend to the varied cultural and linguistic differences within Switzerland, something I might not have had the foresight to do without the diverse international experiences I have described throughout this essay. Anationality also presents other researchers with several advantages. One such potential advantage could be divesting from the neoliberal assemblage of nationally-based publish or perish practices. In the current academic climate, minimizing the importance of certain nationally-based publishing opportunities viewed with more prestige than others would allow for a more just and democratic distribution within global knowledge production.

Open-source, online journals with editors adopting this anational stance would be an example of where anationality allows for a more equitable starting point in the publication process. Operationalizing anationality could also mean de-emphasizing national affiliations in international collaborations and focusing on the quality of the work rather than its origins.

Another direction for future research could entail identifying research subjects for whom anationality is more (or less) possible and identifying the reasons and implications for this possibility. A researcher could, for example, examine “global citizen” rhetoric among globally mobile populations and examine the extent to which a global citizenry can adopt an anational position.

Anationality as a researcher stance allows us to explore alternative explanations for behavior situated in certain physical time and space without attributing nationality as a sole or predominant explanatory factor. It further allows us to decenter one’s national positionality to the extent possible by questioning assumptions based on your national history and the relations of power that constitute a national narrative. It further allows researchers to examine power relations between and amongst various nationalized identities without investing in those relationships from one’s particular national stance. Researchers have the possibility and responsibility to unpack social phenomena without relying on national identity as a crux of their argument.

The theoretical framework I have laid out for this construct serves as a basis for researchers to engage in research. Still, it also clarifies an additional subject position that individuals can occupy. As indicated in the opening of this essay, considering our positionality is the first step in examining how we relate to the research context and one another. Perspectives gained by adopting anationality can be a resource for a freer and more open exploration of the self, others, and various contexts.

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