Emerging Scholar Summary

White International Graduate Students and Whiteness

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Abstract

This emerging scholar's piece explores the construct of whiteness as a post-intentional phenomenon and how it both shapes the experiences of white international graduate students in the United States as well as how they enact and benefit from whiteness themselves. This study seeks to recenter whiteness in scholarship, and above all to thoroughly research whiteness to make it visible and disrupt it in relation to a scarcely researched student population, namely white international graduate students. By way of a Post-Intentional Phenomenology grounded in Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS), the study interrogates and problematizes prevalent power structures grounded in whiteness in comparative and international higher education and explores the role white international graduate students play in perpetuating these structures.

In academic year 2022-23, there were over 1 million international students present in the United States representing over 200 countries. International students who choose to study in the U.S. come from diverse national, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. In recent years, there has been a rise in studies researching the lived experiences of international students of color (e.g., George Mwangi, 2020; Yao et al., 2019), and while the impacts of whiteness, Westernization, and Eurocentrism in the field of international higher education have been researched (Stein, 2019; Suspitsyna, 2021) and effectively described as a "global field of whiteness" (Christian, 2019, p. 179), research on the experiences of white international students with whiteness have scarcely been explored. This dearth in research might be due to the observation that, even though white international students struggle with certain types of discrimination based on, for example, accents (Dovchin, 2022) and national stereotypes (Heng, 2018), they are still shielded from racism and benefit from white privilege (Dengg, 2022) in comparison with their international peers of color (Mitchell et al., 2017).

Research on white international students is scarce and needs further exploration. Like all international students, white international students are affected by whiteness as an overarching power system in international higher education (Suspitsyna, 2021). In addition, they can be seen as actors perpetuating whiteness simply by being identified as white in the

U.S. societal context, as well as benefactors of whiteness, since they also enjoy white privilege by being identified as white, whether they are aware of it or not. Researching their experiences is therefore important, firstly, for this student population to better understand their potentially new identity as a racialized person in the U.S. context, an identity which is largely new to the majority of international students based on the lack of conceptualizations around race in some of their home countries (Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2017). Because of this widespread lack of race as a social category in "race-mute" European countries (Jugert et al., 2021, p.1), this study focuses on white international graduate students from Europe which will provide insight into how they conceptualize race and whiteness when moving to the United States. Graduate students were chosen due to their maturity in age (Suspitsyna, 2013) and proven critical thinking skills (Artino & Stephens, 2009). Secondly, this research is needed to disrupt prevalent, underlying notions of whiteness experienced by and enacted through white international students in U.S. society and in the field of comparative and international higher education in particular. The failure to acknowledge how whiteness affects white international students differently from international students of color and how they enact and benefit from whiteness as white people themselves means we let whiteness go unmarked and therefore be perceived as the harmful norm yet again (Feagin, 2020). Through this study, key stakeholders in international higher education, such as international students, faculty, and staff, will be able to identify, problematize, and disrupt underlying notions of whiteness in comparative and international higher education derived from the conceptualization of whiteness by the participants.

Literature Review

International Students by the Numbers

According to the OpenDoors report published annually by the Institute for International Education (IIE), there were 1,057,188 international students present in the United States in the academic year 2022-23 (IIE Open Doors, 2023). The majority of these international students is being identified as of color in the U.S. context. What is interesting to note here is that international students from Europe, with an increasingly racially diverse, yet still majority white population, make up less than eight percent of international students in the United States (IIE Open Doors, 2023). The principles on which international higher education are built are largely based on Eurocentric views (Stein, 2019) steeped in whiteness (Suspitsyna, 2021), yet the students they serve are mostly from the Global South. This study seeks to highlight these Eurocentric principles by researching the voices of white international graduate students from Europe and offer ways to disrupt them based on the findings.

Double Pandemic: COVID-19 and Racism

In addition to the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education worldwide, and international higher education, in particular (Taşçi, 2021), it brought to light, and exacerbated, a centuries-old and ongoing second pandemic that is raging in the United States: "a racism pandemic" (Mills, 2020). International higher education, too, has often been accused of promoting an internationalization agenda rooted in Eurocentrism and whiteness (Suspitsyna, 2021), and Singh et al. (2018) also called out racism as an underlying problem of the internationalization of higher education well before the racial reckoning of the summer of 2020. The recent rise of anti-Asian and APIDA hate in conjunction with the COVID-19 pandemic that also targets APIDA international students (Ghazarian et al., 2023; Ma & Miller, 2022; Yan et al., 2022) is just one example of this double pandemic. All of this has led to a renewed call to critically examine internationalization of higher education in the wake of a larger racial reckoning and social justice movement in the United States. I am adding to this call by critically examining the lived experiences with whiteness of white international graduate students from Europe to better make visible and problematize whiteness as part of the underlying issues of Eurocentrism and racism.

Race, Racism, and Whiteness in International Student Research

This movement has also led to an uptick in studies dealing with the multitude of identities international students bring with them, such as race (Buckner et al., 2021; George Mwangi et al., 2016; Lee, 2020). Race as an identity concept is not a universally acknowledged form of identity in many countries outside the U.S., which is why there has been more research in recent years dealing with this potentially new identity concept for international students. For example, there are studies on the experiences of international students of color and how the topics of race and especially racism as a form of systemic oppression in international higher education and the U.S. overall affect their lived experiences as doubly discriminated against by being international as well as racially minoritized (Fries-Britt et al., 2014; George Mwangi et al., 2016; Yao, 2019). Mall and Payne (2023, p. 131) underscore the "double-invisibility" of international students of color,

being both racially minoritized identity and having an immigration status and facing different forms of discrimination based on both.

There is, however, a dearth of research dealing with white international students. Inspired by Hou and Pojar (2021) and their study to see how international students' learning experiences and their own contributions to social justice dialogue and education, this study seeks to find out how white international graduate students learn about (their own) whiteness. Amatullah et al.'s (2021) work on international graduate students' positionality when learning about critical multicultural education found that white international graduate students share a certain awareness about their own whiteness and differences in comparison to domestic students and international students of color. I want to expand on the aforementioned findings with my study in addition to exploring how whiteness as an overarching systemic issue shapes the experiences of white international graduate from Europe students specifically. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to highlight and contribute to a gap in research dealing with white international graduate students from Europe and their lived experiences with and enactments of whiteness in the context of higher education institutions in the U.S. through a post-intentional phenomenology grounded in Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS). The research questions are as follows:
1. What are white international graduate students' lived experiences with whiteness in the U.S.?
2. How do white international graduate students enact and benefit from whiteness in the United States?

Theoretical Framework

Critical Whiteness Studies

Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) is a body of scholarship that seeks to name and disrupt the oppressive nature of whiteness (Leonardo, 2009). In CWS, racism is a system that marginalizes and disadvantages people of color and benefits white people in terms of economic, social, and psychological advantages (Levine-Rasky, 2000). In the U.S. societal context, whiteness is also perceived as the norm and those who deviate from that norm are viewed as inferior, putting white people on top of the social hierarchy (Perry, 2007). This normalization of whiteness leads to the promotion of white supremacy (Nishi et al., 2016). CWS then is a tool to analyze whiteness to disrupt whiteness and white supremacy.

This dissertation study employs Cabrera et al.'s (2017) five core theoretical components of CWS in higher education: colorblindness, whiteness as an epistemology of ignorance, whiteness as ontological expansiveness, whiteness as property, and whiteness as assumed racial comfort. Colorblindness refers to the belief that race is no longer a relevant factor in society and should not be acknowledged publicly (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Whiteness as an epistemology of ignorance refers to ignoring the harms done by whiteness, thereby enabling systemic racism rooted in white supremacy (Mills, 1997). Whiteness as ontological expansiveness refers to white people having the privilege to move through all spaces (Sullivan, 2006). Whiteness as property views whiteness as all kinds of forms of property protected under U.S. law (Harris, 1993). Whiteness as assumed racial comfort refers to prioritizing the comfort of a white person over the comfort for people of color (Leonardo & Porter, 2010).

CWS has been widely applied to the study of higher education in the United States (e.g., Cabrera, 2014; Cabrera et al., 2017; Foste, 2019; Foste & Irwin, 2020; Tevis, 2020). CWS is an appropriate tool to apply to studies in comparative and international higher education. In this dissertation study, I use CWS to explore how whiteness shapes the experiences of white international graduate students from Europe as they themselves perpetuate whiteness in their everyday lives.

Methodology

This study uses Post-Intentional Phenomenology within the qualitative research design. The founder of Post-Intentional Phenomenology, Mark Vagle (2018), combined post-structural thought with the methodology of phenomenology and outlined five steps for data collection and analysis. Step One is to identify a post-intentional phenomenon, which provokes and produces entanglements in lived experiences around a social issue. The post-intentional phenomenon in this study is whiteness. Step Two to is to gather data. The sample size for this study consists of six white international students from Europe (their home countries are: Austria, Greece, Italy, Spain, Scotland, and Ukraine) who have been pursuing degree-seeking studies all over the United States for at least one year. The smaller sample size is intentional to prevent oversaturation of data (Jones et al., 2014) and focus on in-depth analyses of the phenomenon as is the goal of phenomenological studies (Vagle, 2018). Data collection consists of three semi-structured interviews via Zoom. Step Three is a to reflect and create a "post-reflexion journal" (Vagle, 2018, p.139) as the researcher is intertwined with the research subject. Acknowledging my own positionality in this study, I identify as a cis-gender woman and I am an

international graduate student from Germany. My own grappling with this new identity category of "race" and the learning and unlearning that comes with it in terms of white privilege and being perceived as white, yet a foreigner in this country, is what led me to conduct this study. Step Four is to analyze the data through theory, the phenomenological material gathered, and the post-reflexion journal through a three-part analysis with a focus on the whole. Data analysis was done using repeated thematic coding of the transcripts, researcher notes, and post-reflexion journal with the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. The last step is to write up an analysis, focusing on "intense catalysts" (Vagle, 2018, p. 160) illuminating the phenomenon of whiteness as it shows up in the lived experiences of white international graduate students from Europe.

Implications and Conclusion

By exploring the lived experiences with whiteness of white international graduate students through a Post-Intentional Phenomenology grounded in CWS, this study explores ways to better make this group of students aware of their whiteness. Preliminary findings show that white international graduate students have become more aware of their whiteness and the privilege that comes with it since moving to the United States. They have also become more critical of their home countries and the lack of conversations around race. Additionally, white international students from Europe realize the privilege they carry by being identified as white they also struggle with a lack of tailored support from higher education intuitions to both help them with their own day-to-day issues based on being an international student and simultaneously acknowledge the privilege they have by being perceived as white. Through these and other findings, prevalent notions of whiteness will be dismantled and disrupted by making white international graduate students aware of their own role in the overarching system of whiteness in international higher education. Additionally, by conducting this study, white international graduate students, along with faculty and staff, can draw on these findings to make visible and further problematize whiteness as an inherently unequal power in international and comparative higher education in an effort to dismantle and disrupt it.

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