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Conceptualizing Centrality in Micro-Level Internationalization Through a Decolonial Approach

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Abstract

Micro-level internationalization offers possibilities to explore different human experiences in international higher education. This is especially crucial given well-reported issues of racism, micro-aggression, and underrepresentation of racially minoritized international academic staff, whose voices remain mostly invisible in internationalization discourses. Previous research connects these issues to the continuing legacy of colonial logic, that privileges hegemonic Western-centric knowledge systems. In this paper, centrality is proposed as a conceptual framework that offers a direct response to the question of epistemicide which Santos (2014) explains as the exclusion of the knowledges of racially marginalized persons [in or with origins] from the Global South. It draws attention to how epistemicide and historicide (erasure of cultural history) impinge their agentic capabilities, drawing on their lived experiences and cognitive epistemological and ontological frames of knowing and being. Centrality, therefore, reiterates the need to center marginalized voices as legitimate and knowledgeable contributors to conversations and research on decolonizing internationalization, drawing on their knowledge, capabilities, and lived experience. This calls on Global North allies to not only articulate their positionality, acknowledging the inequities inherent in the hegemonic Western-centric epistemology paradigm but to contribute to dismantling persisting structural coloniality and embedded hierarchies in teaching, research, and international partnerships. Centrality thus offers a framework for: i) dismantling the persisting pernicious legacy of colonialization by working collaboratively to undo the epistemic hegemony that perpetuates the universality of Eurocentric knowledge and subalternity of the Global South, and ii) advancing access to ecologies of knowledge that affirms rather than disparages our shared humanity.

Keywords: centrality; coloniality; decoloniality; internationalization; micro-level internationalization; positionality

Introduction

At the micro-level, individuals are central to the functioning of internationalization processes and activities. Paradoxically their agentic capabilities, experiential and aspirational rationales are less central within internationalization imaginaries (Fakunle, 2021). Rather, their numeric visibility and countability in international (e.g UNESCO Institute of

Statistics) and national (Higher Education Statistics Agency, UK) datasets underpin objectification narratives (Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021) through the lens of marketized discourses, that can be described as internationalization by numbers. Thus, a major criticism of internationalization relates to the pre-eminence accorded to dominant market logics and economic metrics (de Wit, 2024) that drives interest in recruiting international students, rising to 6.4 million globally mobile students in 2021 (Migration Data Portal, 2024). By contrast, there is a lack of comparable data for micro-level studies of individuals, such as international academics, faculty, practitioners, and administrators. This remains a blind spot in internationalization studies. This essay puts forward centrality as an approach that can be embedded in research and other academic practices from a decolonial lens that values the role of individuals in internationalization processes and activities.

Internationalization of Academic Staff

Despite the lack of visibility of the various staff cohorts captured in internationalization data, previous research has mostly focused on academic staff/faculty in internationalization. Staff cohorts include, but are not limited to academic faculty, counsellors, administrators, and leadership. Broadly speaking, the focus of research on academic staff (i.e. those who teach and/or research), in internationalization is mainly from a developmental outlook in two ways. The first is exemplified by van der Werf's (2012) proposed "International competence Matrix" as a Human Resources Management Tool to prepare staff to work in internationalised classrooms. This might be conceivably linked to Sanderson's notion of "an 'ideal" and authentic teacher to support contemplation of the development by international and intercultural perspectives in teaching" (661). This relates to the key role of those who teach in internationalising the curriculum (Leask, 2013), necessitating their professional development. The second aspect of internationalization development narratives is more specific to international academic staff. Normatively, this relates to those who teach in higher education but are not from the country in which the HEI is situated (associated normalized binary of nationality is describing international and local academic staff is problematised later in this paper). It is unnecessary to emphasize the extensive explorations of the challenges faced by international academic staff in adapting to working in culturally different higher education contexts (e.g Luxon and Peelo, 2009: Whitsed & Green, 2016). However, Minocha et al., (2018) point to the incongruity of advancing the internationalization efforts of universities with very little research into the experiences and the expectations of international academic staff. As they noted, such research can offer insights to develop frameworks for institutions to engage international academic staff in supporting internationalization and innovation in academic practice. Their research findings highlight how structural constraints limit opportunities to embed greater diversity of pedagogical practices, such as project-based learning with an international dimension. In a similar vein, in the introduction to their Special Issue: *International academic mobility and inequalities*, Bilecen, and Van Mol (2017) critique the lack of attention to the inequalities experienced by internationally mobile academic staff, and noted a limitation that, "whereas some of the [SI] papers touch upon the topics of race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, these were not central" (p. 1251). Hence, while existing studies on international academic staff contribute to an under-researched area in internationalization studies, this paper further addresses the gap in this area.

Centering Racially Marginalized International Academic Staff in Internationalization

Using the example of racially marginalized international academic staff, from a decolonial lens, this paper proposes a conceptualization of centrality in micro-level internationalization. As a concept, centrality encapsulates the knowledge, competence, and lived experience embodied by an individual. The concept confronts the erasure of the non-Western knowledges and the marginalization of international academic staff in global education. This is akin to Edwards and Shahjahan's (2024) contemplation around antiblackness and centering Black Studies in global education. Similarly, Dube and Moyo's (2022) usage of critical content analysis of Zimbabwean history curriculum affirm a "centering a self-reflexivity" (Hunting 2021 cited in Dube & Moyo 2022, p. 868) to assert how curricular justice can inform pedagogy that "transcends the Western canon and reframes it as one of the frameworks of knowledge alongside indigenous knowledges" (p. 881) in a postcolonial world. They describe historicide as one of the aims of coloniality to misrepresent and obliterate the history of indigenous people. This informs their heuristic for undoing historicide as part of the epistemic decolonial turn. Additionally, Arday and colleagues (2021) assert to "the centrality of Whiteness as an instrument of power and privilege"

that limits the advancement of "a curriculum that reflects the multiple histories of Black and indigenous populations globally but particularly within the United Kingdom" and contradicts the "the lofty egalitarian ideals often espoused by universities" (p. 298).

Research spanning diverse educational contexts thus attests to the need for critical re-envisioning of normative hegemonic Western-centric epistemological "center" in postcolonial contexts. This affirms the applicability of a reimagined conceptualization of centrality in the former colonies and metropoles. The conceptualisation of centrality in this paper is different and novel on account of both its significant departure from positivist-driven foundational normative theoretical conceptualisation of centrality in different disciplines, and the epistemological decolonial approach. By drawing on literature across different disciplines and epistemological constructs, this essay puts forward the first theoretical conceptualisation of centrality in micro-level internationalization from a decolonial lens. This aligns with the growing body of scholarly discourses that stress the need for a decolonial approach to advance our understanding of how western hegemonic epistemic culture frames the underlying structures of internationalization (Andreotti, 2011; Andreotti et. al., 2015; Ezechukwu, 2022, Fakunle et. al., 2022; Heleta, 2016; Jasen, 2019; Marginson, 2023; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). Extant literature and seminal work in decolonial studies will be used to support the conceptual framework of centrality put forward in this paper.

Literature Review

As a concept, centrality advocates for centering the academic subaltern, for whom their historicides seems inescapably manifest in coloniality, as experienced in professional and personal encounters. Coloniality expounded by Quijano (1997), is described as "the continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonial administrations, produced by colonial cultures and structures in the modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system" (Grosfoguel 2007, p. 219). Maldonado-Torrres (2007) similarly depicts the difference between current state of coloniality and historical colonialism:

> Coloniality is distinguished from colonialism in that it refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that defined culture, labor, intersubjective relations, & knowledge production beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations (p. 240)

The quote above highlights how coloniality continues to impact our frames of knowing and social encounters. The opposition to colonisation as an oppressive machinery of dispossession of land, culture and freedoms, is well documented and beyond the scope of this paper. However, there is consensus that the resurgence of interest in decolonising higher education is linked to global student protests including the 2015 Rhodes Must Fall in South Africa, and the Black Lives Matter movement. Mbembe and Parker (2019) suggest that the student protests in South Africa have necessitated revisiting the difficult debates about whiteness and resultant institutionalized racial hierarchies and violence, and new questions about what counts as knowledge. Similarly, Jansen (2019, p. 2) asks questions about knowledge production: "Who produces knowledge? What knowledge is produced and what knowledge is "left out" are central questions of inquiry within the politics of knowledge". Questions on coloniality and decoloniality have been asked for decades, in different ways. Regardless of time and space, the privileging of hegemonic construction of knowledge from dominant western frames and imaginaries is an open question, that continues to attract extensive discussion across all climes, whether in former colonies or metropoles. This speaks to a wider disjunction as to the purpose of international education with Eurocentric origins (Fakunle, 2023) and underpinning colonial logic, amidst contestations against coloniality.

At this point, it is important to state that coloniality is not inevitable. A consciousness or understanding of coloniality is a key first step to examining normatively formed frames of knowing and understanding (my interpretation of so-called unconscious bias). Next is openness to questioning conceptions of incontrovertible truth premised on albeit a dominating epistemology. A possible and desired outcome of epistemological openness is a consciousness of our shared humanity and enlightenment. This counters the damaging narratives of racialization and dehumanization that are core accompaniments of the colonial undertaking. Action or inaction predicates whether coloniality is sustained or curtailed. This paper uses centrality as a concept/framework to contribute to address persisting pernicious well-reported issues around racism, micro-aggression, and underrepresentation of racially minoritized international academic staff (Arday, 2018; Miller, 2016; Minocha et. al, 2020), whose voices remain mostly invisible in internationalization discourses.

Accompanying the renewed interest in decolonising higher education, a plethora of reports consistently reveal the scale of the issues faced especially by Black academics in navigating an academic career. As an example, a recent Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) Report "*Unblocking the pipeline: supporting the retention, progression and promotion of black early-career academics*" (Franssen et. al, 2024) highlights how some institutions in the UK do not have a single Black professor amongst hundreds of professors overall at the same institutions. The report sought to understand the prevailing issues, assess the responsiveness of universities to the issues around Black academics being the most under-represented groups in UK higher education, and the authors offer recommendations for future actions.

The HEPI report is an example of many such contributions to identifying the issues around the lack of Black representation, ethnicity awarding gap, ethnicity pay gap, and challenges with progressing through the pipeline in academia. The proposition in this conceptual paper is to build on the abundance of work that highlights the problems, to articulate a framework towards dismantling the foundational racialized causation of the barriers encountered by marginalized academics, using a decolonial lens. It is pertinent to point out the blurry line between local and international Black academic staff. A categorization of international or a migrant academic could be a time dependent journey to becoming "local", subject to a change in immigration status within the legal boundaries of the country of residence. Of course, this is a simplified version of a more complex issue of human displacement, slavery, historical injustices, and immigration. The point is important as despite differences in their nationalities, the two cohorts experience similar issues around racism and lack of representation. This is a murky area that merits future research. The concept of centrality advocated in the paper focuses on racialized marginalization that is attributable to coloniality. This transcends the social construct of nationality. There is also a distinction from normative and theoretical conceptualizations of centrality in the literature explored next.

What Does Centrality Mean in Other Disciplines?

The notion of "centrality" in human communication in small groups was firstly proposed in 1948 by Bavelas who "hypothesized a relationship between structural centrality and influence in group processes" (Freeman, 1979, p. 215). The first research investigation of centrality was conducted by Bavelas and a group of researchers at M.I.T. Their conclusions that centrality was related to efficient group problem solving, view of leadership and individual satisfaction inspired many similar experiments in the 50's, 60's (Freeman, 1979). Their influential work continues to influence conceptual framing of "centrality" across different disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, and computer science, and mathematics (Boldi & Vigna, 2014; Bringmann et al., 2019; Everett & Borgatti, 1999). Boldi and Vigna (2014) acknowledge that the various examinations of the question of "centrality" has given rise to a "whole plethora of centrality measures (a.k.a. centrality indices, or rankings) proposed to account for the importance of the nodes of a network" (p. 222). These conceptualizations originate from social network analysis defined by Freeman (2004), as "the structural approach that is based on the study of human social relationships (2), to understand the factors that drive patterns of behaviors, and the implications. This, in turn, underpins conceptualizations of the idea of centrality as measures of "degree", "closeness" and "betweenness" in relation to groups and individuals (Bringmann et al., 2019; Falzon et al., 2018), largely informed by Everett and Borgatti's (1999) conceptions of centrality that measures the sum of the distances of the group or individual to all vertices outside the group to indicate greater centrality (detailed theoretical analytical frameworks in: Friedkin 1991; Everett & Borgatti, 1999).

Notably, Everett and Borgatti's (1999) work on centrality focused on its applicability to groups and classes, as well as individuals. Group centrality indices measure how specific groups are central to the operation of a company, for example, they ask the hypothetical question: 'are the lawyers more central than the accountants in a given organisation's social network?' (p. 181). They also asked; 'Is one particular ethnic minority more integrated into the community than another?' (p. 181-182). They assert that a centrality measure could be used to answer these questions *to some extent* (italics mine). The paper is silent on "to what extent", and what happens with the extent that is not covered. This might be a limitation of the "standard" dataset UCINET that was used as an example of group centrality, based on a record of three months of interactions amongst a group of 20 monkeys. "Interaction were defined as joint presence at the river" (p. 184). This makes it pertinent to take account of earlier ideas of the relevance of centrality as an important 'structural attribute of social networks' in understanding human groups (Freeman, 1979, p. 217) across different disciplines. Freeman's (1979) observation as to the lack of unanimity on the meaning and conceptual foundations of the idea of centrality prompted a review of extant literature and a proposed conceptual approach towards centrality, underpinned by a formulaic dogma.

Centrality has also been adopted as a conceptual tool in Literature studies, offering less formulaic mathematical calculations that is dominant in other fields (Jones et al., 2020). For instance, Moretti (2011) measures the "degree of centrality" of characters in Hamlet determined by the flow of words between two characters. Jones et al., (2020), however, noted the limitation of this approach, citing the inadequate capturing of meaningful interactions between characters. The limitation may be connected to consistency of their approach with the normative formulaic node-level measures to ascertain centrality.

Within the last decade, some work in film studies, such as Jones et al. (2020) utilize a critical lens, whilst still normatively situated in the tradition of centrality indices. As the authors affirm, their work on gendered representation in film points to possible direction for future conceptual work. Referencing Mulvey's (1975) seminal work, Jones and colleagues (2020) describe the long-held feminist film theorization of the privilege accorded to the masculine perspective in Hollywood through the "male gaze" which renders male characters as active narrative forces and female characters as passive and defined primarily by their "to-be-looked-at-ness" (p. 26). Their feminism-inspired work points to future directions for utilizing centrality as a framework to critically examine other forms of marginalization. Previous studies have highlighted different forms of marginalization in internationalization (Arday et al., 2020; Bilecen, and Van Mol, 2017). Yet, there remains a gap in examining centrality in internationalization activities predicated on convergence of diverse races, ethnicities and cultures. This paper advocates centrality in the field of internationalization towards addressing this gap.

The overview of the literature over the last 70 plus years shows that theoretical and normative conceptualizations of centrality are based on relational heuristics that measures individual and group behaviors, with a focus on social network analysis. This is linked to the foundations of positivism discussed briefly to highlight its epistemological dissonance from the conceptualization of centrality put forward in this paper.

Epistemology

Differing Epistemological Approaches to Centrality

Positivism

Key tenets of positivism, such as, empiricism from direct observation of the subjects of research, methodological individualism in the treatment of social phenomena, and measurement and quantification as the basis of scientific knowledge (Little, 2019) underpin the epistemological assumptions and ensuing methodological approaches adopted in the development of ideas of centrality over the last seven decades. These methodological approaches of centrality are primarily algorithms (Everett & Borgatti, 1999, p. 182) formal algebra (Falzon et al., 2018), and experiments, process models and graph theory (Freeman, 1979). The methods are all grounded within the defining features social network analysis: structural intuition, systematic empirical data, graphic imagery and mathematical or computational models (Freeman, 2004), with hypothetical conjectures and predetermined criteria for success.

In sum, the underlying epistemology of extant notions of centrality is informed by social network analysis which Freeman (2004) attributes the implicit contribution of Auguste Comte (key contributor to the positivist paradigm). It is unnecessary to restate well-discussed criticisms of positivist approach in social research, summed up by Little (2019) as having "created blinders for social science researchers, limiting their originality in theories, concepts, and explanations of the social world and creating false assumptions about the correct methodology that social science should pursue" (p. 5). By contrast, the idea of centrality proposed in this paper is situated in a critical epistemological paradigm through a decolonial lens.

Decolonial Epistemology

This conceptual contribution put forward in this paper is not addressed by previous epistemological conceptions of centrality within a positivist paradigm, enunciated in the previous section. By contrast, the epistemological approaches situated within postcolonial, decolonial and subaltern studies are suitable to advance the conceptual theorisation of centrality. In this regard, the decolonizing approaches, as noted in Linda Tuhiwai Smith's seminal book *Decolonizing*

Methodologies (2021) highlights "different possibilities for research [beyond] a critique of colonialism" (p. xiii). Rather, the imperative is to highlight possibilities for knowing differently and offering pathways for understanding how the "problems caused by colonialism, and the failure of power structures to address these historic conditions" (p. xiii). Smith's focus on decolonizing methodologies is rooted in indigenous Kaupapa Māori approaches underpinned by the principles of relationships, connections, reciprocity and accountability. These principles are reiterated in different forms in the scholarly writings on decolonization. For example, relationality, described as vincularidad is meant to unsettle singular authoritative assumptions of knowledge rooted in Western thought (Walsh & Mignolo, 2021).

Summing the crux of his argument on resistance against cultural imperialism, Said (1993) draws on Fanon's *the Wretched of the Earth* as the positioning of the native "tired of the logic that reduces him, the geography that segregates him, the ontology that dehumanizes him, the epistemology that strips him down to an unregenerate essence" (p. 343). This powerful elocution of dehumanization that attends the colonial enterprise is aptly captured in Memmi's 1957 book, *"The Colonizer and the Colonized", (*republished in English in 1965). Much of the earlier and more recent scholarship on decolonization encapsulate what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) describes as the "epistemic line", as the major problem of the 21st century, reflecting Du Bois' (1903) 20th century proposition about "a categorization of humanity based on the "colour line". In other words, the centering of humanity within the privileges of Western-centric epistemological hegemony, are underpinned by coloniality. This informs a moral imperative for the advancement of conceptual frameworks to break down the barriers to limited, albeit dominant epistemological thought. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) provides a glossary of decolonial philosophies that (p. 49-53) to support this quest.

A decolonial epistemological approach must first dismantle a reified conception of Western-centric form of knowledge as the standard by which all other forms of knowledge, knowing and ways of being must be measured. This offers an opportunity to embark on a life-long learning journey, and broadened worldview. At the prosaic level, it reconstructs our basis of social human interactions, and intercultural encounters. This entails removing the 18th century invention of a flawed social construct of race, a biological fiction, with no scientific basis (Witzig, 1996), yet a powerful consequential line that divides humanity. A decolonial approach is needed to upturn the concept of race at its epistemological roots. This informs a re-imagined decolonial epistemological conceptualization of centrality.

Conceptualizing Centrality in Micro-Level Internationalization Studies

Centrality, Decoloniality and Micro-Level Internationalization

The conceptualization of centrality in this paper seeks to contribute to advancing emerging discourses that connect internationalization and decolonization. This is done in two ways.

First, a conceptual framing of centrality adds a novel interpretation to the considerable body of decolonial theory summed up by Hayes et al., (2021) as involving "contesting hegemony, legacy and limitations of Eurocentric epistemologies, Northern control of knowledge production, the coloniality of the cultures, languages and disciplines of institutions of higher education and interrogating whose interests are served by this knowledge and its practices" (p. 887).

Second, centrality is described in terms of representation, which points up the importance of lived experience in academic thought. The overall aim is to put forward centrality as a practical framework that articulates how hitherto racially marginalized individuals are central to the development of decolonial work drawing on lived experience, knowledge and agentic capabilities.

As noted by Ezechukwu (2022), emerging studies on the micro-level positioning of academics within the power structures of internationalization rarely utilize a decolonial lens. This is corroborated in scholarly works that reiterate how the dominant hegemonic global imaginary and racialized hierarchies frame much of internationalization activities and discourses (Andreotti et. al., 2015; Marginson, 2023; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). Broadly, there are several allusions to centrality in decolonial work. Given the conditionalities of coloniality, these works tend to reiterate the centrality of Eurocentrism, and hegemony. It is beneficial to explore existing work, to foreground a conceptual reframing of centrality.

Allusions to Centrality in Decolonial Theory

The need to de-centre the Western hegemonic portrayal of knowledge, way of being, or civilization implicitly and explicitly underpin much of scholarly decolonial work. Allusions to "centrality" permeate writings on imperialism, colonialism and decolonial approaches in two main ways. First, the prominence and predominance of "Euro centrically defined ideas" (Said, 1993, p. 400) are foundational discursive aspects in decolonial field of study or activism. Second, counter-narratives give similar attention to de-centering western dominant and hegemonic constructions of knowledge.

Said (1993) discusses centrality in the context of presence and power in American culture. He restates the configuration of power contrasted with what is not major, central, or powerful. Bhambra and Holmwood (2021) allude to the omission of multicultural others from canonical and contemporary conceptual frameworks in social theory, which they traced to a "failure to account for the centrality of colonialism and empire wire within the modern world". (p. x). This informs their focus on European social theory and colonialism in the context of Europe and the US, and relevance to the construction of the modern world. This is echoed by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) who criticizes how Europe and North America are at the center of knowledge production, seen as the manifestation of 'the international', and consistent with Mignolo's (2011) advocacy for the reconstruction of the university into pluriversity through a decolonial lens.

The common thread amongst decolonial scholars is the need for a new conceptual approach towards addressing the persisting challenge of epistemicide, linguicides (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Santos, 2014), and historicides (Dube & Moyo, 2022) that underpin modern-day inequalities in positioning a hierarchy of knowledge and what it means to be human with agency and capabilities, within and outside the academe. This is taken forward in this paper that advances a conceptual articulation of centrality as a framework for knowledge production that recognizes and undertakes action to address the impact of enduring legacies of colonialization in the implicit and explicit marginalization of non-western ways of knowing and being. The need for centrality as a concept is also informed by Dube and Moyo's (2022) concern that a wave of radical educational reform even in a Global South context could be "anti-colonial without being decolonial" (p. 865). To advance this work, the concept of positionality also known as reflexivity statements (Savolainen et. al., 2023) often posed in research warrants a critical evaluation, through a decolonial lens.

Positionality

According to Savin-Baden and Major, (2013) positionality "reflects the position that the researcher has chosen to adopt within a given research study" (71). Zamzow (2023) further elaborates on what a researcher might chose to include in their positionality statements, "race, ethnicity, geographic location, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability status, and career level", noted as a common practice in social sciences that is gradually making inroads into STEM fields. However, there are debates about the practice. Savolainen et. al., (2023) question the popularity of positionality statements "without any evidence that it actually achieves what it sets out to achieve,". Whilst they agree that reflexivity and positionality are well grounded in esteemed philosophical traditions "to address genuine concerns about the limits of knowledge production" as they deem it is "impossible to construct credible positionality statements because they are constrained by the very positionality they seek to address" (p. 1331). To buttress their argument, they use the example of a positionality statement by Elliott and Reid (2019) published in the flagship journal of the American Sociological Association:

> Both authors are middle- to upper-middle class white women—one is a mother, the other is not. A commitment to antiracist, intersectional, and feminist principles guides our research efforts, and we conducted this work with an awareness of the politics, dangers, and limitations of affluent white academics writing about the lives of low-income Black Americans. (Elliott & Reid, 2019, cited in Savolainen et. al., 2023, p. 1333)

Whilst making it clear that they were not questioning the merit of Elliott and Reid's research [on the criminalization of Black Americans], Savolainen et. al., (2023) infer from their positionality statement that the authors were able to mitigate the limitations of their lived experiences by learning "critical race feminist theory", but they question how this can be verified as true, and whether "that reading critical race feminist theory" only reinforces preexisting biases inherent in the authors' sociological worldview?" (p. 1335). Additionally, questions could be asked as to what do the researchers'

"commitment to antiracist" principles and their awareness of their "limitations as affluent white academics" mean in practical terms for the affected communities?

Pointing to the majority of the literature in the UK, and majority of interviewees [in their research], Abu Moghli and Kadiwal (2021) also problematize the notion of positionality "highlighted [in] hegemonic Western epistemologies, and the lack of reflexivity on power dynamics and hierarchies where the balance is tipped to the benefit of Western academics and thought" (p. 11)

In essence, positionality statements are discretionary and explanatory normative tools that do not address contestations about the prevalence of coloniality in research (Fig 1). The extent to which emerging debates about the relevance of positionality statements can be used to dismantle persisting racialized hierarchies of power is interrogated next.

A Critical Review of a Repositioning of Representation

Representation accords with centrality as a conceptual lens, that ensures that the knowledges of the racially marginalized are duly recognized and represented in matters within the purview of their knowledge and lived experience.

Despite the critical stance on positionality adopted by Savolainen and colleagues (2023), their assertations on "representation" and "dispassionate perspectives from outsiders with no personal stakes in the matter", merit a critical examination. They also noted that "it is particularly important to include scholars with native understanding of the subject matter". However, it cannot be assumed that their reference to a scholar with native understanding necessarily represents a racially minoritized academic. This begs a revisit of the decades old question of representation in the research process conducted with racially minoritized people (Santos, 2014; Smith, 2021), who are the living embodiments of theory.

Savolainen et al.'s, (2023) point that "a truly open discourse should also include dispassionate perspectives from outsiders with no personal stakes in the matter" is further corroborated by their assertion that "increasing representation is hinged on protecting the freedom of scholarly input...[and] methodological transparency and rigor" (p. 1331). They reify a scientific dogmatic "dispassionate" approach rooted in a distanced outsider positivist paradigm. Hence, although, Savolainen and colleagues (2023) rightly point to the fallibility of the self-evaluative process of positionality, their arguments are rooted in Western-centric "scientific" value system. Their stance contradicts the tenets of a decolonial approach that critically interrogates privileged hegemonic Eurocentric postulations of epistemological value and rigour, described by Santos as "...cognitive injustice against the wisdom of the world on behalf of the monopoly of science and the technologies sanctioned by science" (p. 15).

Racially minoritized people are not a homogenous group. Whilst there is contextual difference in experiences of coloniality, Smith (2021) offers a helpful description of representation as a form of voice and expression of "Indigenous by Indigenous [that] is about countering the dominant society's image of Indigenous people...proposing solutions to the real-life dilemmas that they face and trying to capture the complexities of being indigenous" (p. 172). A reimagining of micro-level internationalization through the lens of centrality prioritizes the needs and the voices of the racially marginalized at the center of matters that concerns them, issues that impact them, and misrepresentations that may further jeopardize their precarity and disadvantage, personally and professionally. In academia, this will include learning, teaching, research and collaborative partnerships

Representation Within a Conceptualization of Centrality

Santos' (2014) assertions about representation warrant further elaboration in relation to the conceptualization of centrality through micro-level positioning of the racially marginalized.

> We do not want to be spoken about we want to speak for ourselves. We do not want to be seen on the other side of the line. We want to eliminate the line. (p. 6)

In the book, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against epistemicide*, De Sousa Santos (2014) describes the limitations of western knowledge that sees itself as "a vanguard theory that excels in knowing about, explaining, and guiding rather than knowing with, understanding, facilitating, sharing, and walking alongside" (p. ix). This aligns with the underpinning principles informing the conceptualization of centrality as a theoretical framework that puts forward the need

for the advancement of the knowledges of racially marginalized persons in or with origins from the Global South, who historically and presently endure the ignominies of racism, erasures, misrepresentation, and marginalization.

Centrality draws extant literature from researchers, scholar and activist to highlight how epistemicide and historicide (erasure of cultural history) impinge the agentic capabilities of racialized academic staff, and structural constraints that delegitimize the value of their contributions to advancing research based on their lived experiences and cognitive epistemological and ontological frames of knowing and being. Centrality, therefore, reiterates the need to center marginalized voices as legitimate and knowledgeable contributors to conversations and research on decolonizing internationalization, drawing on their knowledge, capabilities, and lived experience.

De Sousa Santos' proposition of "a teoria poverra, described as a rearguard theory based on the experiences of large, marginalides … with the purpose of strengthening their resistance" (p. ix) is rooted in the principles of critical resistance, from a self-described intellectual activist. The distinction between the underpinning rearguard theory proposed by Santos and the notion of "centrality" are, while the former is rooted in the emancipation of the marginalized minorities, centrality is about bringing the subaltern to the forefront any work with them and about them, and a legitimate and practical aspect of designing and developing academic thought in different educational activities. This speaks to questions about the practicalities that meaningfully take forward the proliferation of debates and intellectual postulations of decolonization (Morreira et al, 2020).

Santos (2014) makes an important point about allyship, asking the question: On which kinds of allies can we count? Allies are described as those who are "solidary with us and have a voice because they are not on our side of the line" (p. 14). In this sense, the notion of white allyship confers a sense of responsibility and understanding that there is a line and their voice on the other side of the line is crucial to removing the line. An imaginary spatial configuration of a space without lines ensures that representation of the marginalized is crucial for them to speak for themselves from a position of centrality underpinned by an ethos of equity and equality. This can be adopted in internationalization studies to address research findings showing that micro-level individual experiential and aspirational rationales are not at the center of dominant economic driven discourses, and institutional policy (Fakunle, 2021). To conclude, the importance of representation within micro-level internationalization is reimagined and presented below as the enactment of centrality in practice

Conclusion

Four themes are central in the discussion of centrality in micro-level internationalization through a decolonial approach: epistemological lens that is underpinned by a shared acceptance of the legitimacy of diverse knowledges, culturally inclusivity, representation of racially marginalized people in decolonial work in teaching, research and other academic undertakings, and targeted allyship, that is aware and responsive to undo the harms of coloniality.

Conceptualizing Centrality Through Decolonial Lens: Implications for Research, Teaching, International Partnerships.

Coloniality in a postcolonial world remains unabated, despite decades of research and theoretical postulations. Centrality affords a conceptual framework that moves beyond expressing a position about the research subject but actively asking questions regarding how to undo the harmful legacy of coloniality in all aspects of educational undertaking in a globalized world. This essay puts forward centrality as an approach that can be embedded in research and other academic practices from a decolonial lens. Centrality is explained in two ways. First, decolonial work in any ramification needs to involve those whose lived experience is inescapably central to the intent of decolonial work to eradicate oppressive legacies of colonialism. This accords with notions of moving from "universal" epistemology to pluriverse approach (Mignolo, 2011), enabling a fundamental paradigm shift from normative hierarchical posturing of Western-centric as valid, while delegitimizing other knowledges.

Second, the concept of centrality supports well-intentioned aims to involve everyone in decolonial work, including allies. It should however be pointed out that positionality, whilst laudable, does not address the causes of inequities reflected in hierarchical positionings of the "knower" and the "subjects" of research. Positionality is an important conceptual lens premised on reflexivity in decolonial work (Abu Moghli & Kadiwal, 2021) and generally. Both "reflexivity" and

"positionality" can be described as important explanatory frameworks (see Fig 1). However, they provide little evidence of actively contributing to addressing enduring epistemic injustices that perpetuates inequalities and marginalization or address epistemic violence and the impact on racially marginalized researchers or subjects of research.

By contrast, as a conceptual framework, centrality explicitly recognizes the lived experience of those positioned at the receiving end of social and epistemic injustice. This goes beyond an acknowledgement of the problem in the form of a positionality statement. Practically, centrality requires a clear articulation of the implications of our work in terms of who is involved and what knowledge matters in learning and teaching, research and other forms of work entailed in knowledge production in international education. This approach can highlight structural and systemic affordances that constrain or enable the embeddedness of cultural inclusivity in internationalized institutions, and forges a way to addressing challenges, redressing inherent inequities, and sharing good practices. So how might this work in micro-level internationalization? Suggestions are offered in the next section.

Centrality: Practical applicability of an ARC model: Active involvement - Recognition – Contribution

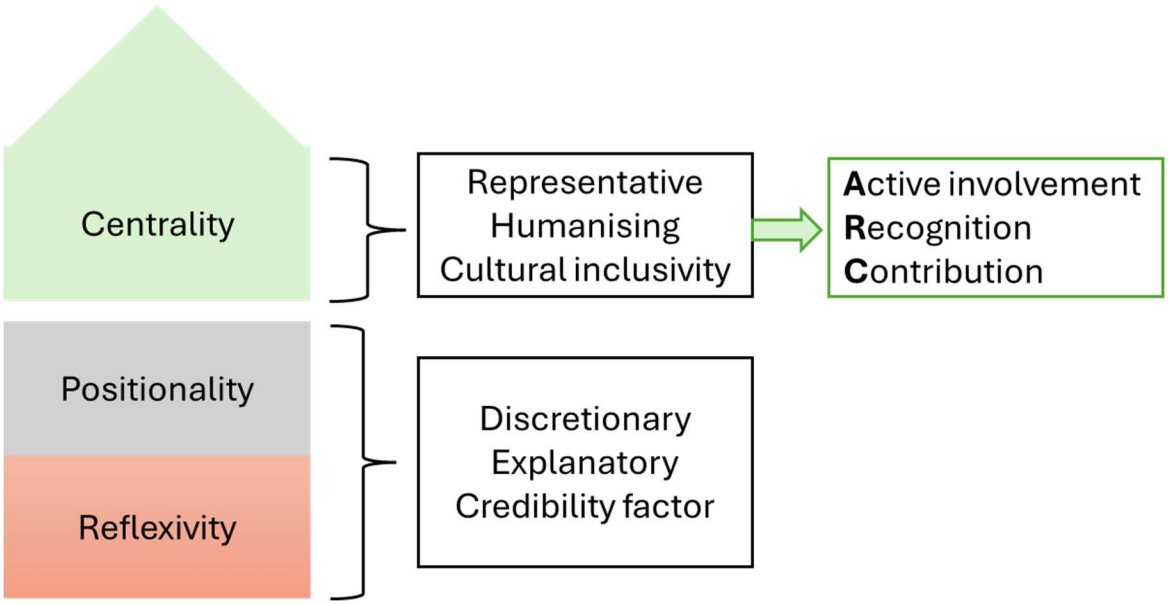
A centrality lens requires an explicit consideration of how knowledge, lived experience and agency are represented in designing teaching, research and international projects. Practical considerations can be taken forward using an ARC model: Active involvement – Recognition – Contribution (Fig 1).

As depicted in Figure 1, an ARC model of centrality distinguishes itself from discretionary and explanatory concepts, where the credibility of positionality is questioned in recent debates and discourses. The ARC centrality model foregrounds representation, from humanising and cultural inclusivity principles as follows:

- **Active involvement**: who is involved; for example, are racially minoritized academics actively involved in research or knowledge sharing activities for which they have relevant lived experience?
- **Recognition**: what is the nature of their involvement in the work; for example, are they working on the peripherals, or are they recognized as bringing valuable input that adds value to the research project? Are they recognized as bringing enrichment elements in curriculum design.
- **Contribution**: how are their contributions attributed and rewarded, as may be warranted? How are their well discussed labor, especially Black women (Arday, 2018) rewarded in promotion cycles? Are their contributions reflected in project outputs? Are the project outputs meaningful for advancement from the perspective of the beneficiaries of the research?

Figure 1

An ARC (Active involvement -Recognition -Contribution) model of Centrality in internationalization



Internationalized classrooms offer opportunities for learning for everyone. International academic staff and students offer institutions with opportunities to draw on their experiences to embed cultural inclusivity in the curriculum (Fakunle et al, 2022; Minocha, et al, 2018). From a centrality lens, institutions could examine the recruitment pipeline of racially minoritized staff and outline transparent plans for retention for sustained representation.

Additionally, based on data and research, the extent to which racially marginalized staff are underrepresented in leadership requires urgent attention. Although there has been progress in recent years, this reiterates that representation matters. Representation is not only for academic staff advancement, but for students who can see a reflection of their aspirations in the staff who look like them.

The ARC principles can be adopted to advance centrality in international partnerships. This implores partners in Global North to reflect on the enduring coloniality that underpins the framing of designing international partnership agreements and collaborations. Based on their research that used data from 7,571 approved projects between 1990 and 2020, Heinzel et al, (2023) criticize the operationalization of earmarked funding [for specific purposes] in international development organizations. This suggests a potential applicability of centrality, inferred in Heinzel et al's (2023) allusion to "normative emphasis on ownership and the principle that people affected by decisions should have a say in these decisions" (p. 491). This is an extensive area that cannot be covered in this paper. It, however, shows the potential relevance of micro-level input in macro-level international development projects.

Targeted Allyship

Allyship is important to remove the structural and systemic barriers that have maintained the "line" (Santos, 2014) for those who have been systematically excluded from building cultural capital to grow in academia. Anecdotally, mentorship is mostly seen as an end to itself. Having targeted measurable outcomes for a mentoring program can focus the mentor and the mentee. The operationalization of effective mentorships can be taken forward in future research.

Where hitherto the focus and onus has been to pen a statement on positionality, a centrality statement can highlight how dismantling hierarchies of oppression of colonialization must start from those who seek to undo it, including allies. An intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1991) can be explored in future research to take forward possible ways for centrality to be used as a framework to address different kinds of marginalization.

Limitations and Future Research

The suggestions in this paper are not prescriptive. Given the topic discussed, a key limitation of this paper lies in the fact that the cited texts are in English language, reiterating an inherent hegemonic language privilege (Wa Thiong'o, 1998). Nevertheless, this also reiterates the need to critically interrogate how we engage with the bequests of colonialization.

In sum, centrality is a beneficial framework to re-envision the actualization of the transformative potential for internationalization, for its intendent recipients at the micro-level. Benefits include expanding worldviews, knowing that the particularity of hegemonic epistemology limits the opportunity for a well-rounded international and intercultural education for all.

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