

A Case for Critical Realism in Quest of Interdisciplinarity in Research with International Students

Yingling Lou
University of Calgary

ABSTRACT

In response to a lack of theoretical engagement and interdisciplinarity in research with international students, this paper explores the affordances of critical realism and the critical realist theory of interdisciplinarity to the field. In so doing, I purport to offer the field an alternative philosophical paradigm and a theoretical blueprint that enables metatheoretical unity and theoretical pluralism to engage interdisciplinarity.

Keywords: critical realism, interdisciplinarity, international students, intersectional identities

International student mobility has been on a steady rise worldwide in the past two decades. There was an average of 5.5% annual growth in international student enrolment at the tertiary level between 1998 and 2019 (OECD, 2021). Along with the booming enrolment is proliferating research on internationalization and international student in higher education. However, further advancement in the field is hindered by a disconcerting lack of theoretical/conceptual engagement and a need for increased cross-disciplinary collaboration (Heng, 2020). Similarly, a scoping literature review of journal articles on pre-tertiary international students revealed a salient absence of interdisciplinarity (Lou, 2023). A closer examination of the selected 27 studies uncovers yet another remarkable absence—a lack of explicit discussion of philosophical assumptions.

In contemporary social research, some of the predominant philosophical paradigms include social constructivism, critical theory, post-positivism, and positivism. Yet, these contending paradigms, specifically, the camps of positivism

and postmodernism, are philosophically incommensurable, which can be limiting for interdisciplinary collaboration. To synergetically address the lack of theoretical engagement and interdisciplinarity, I argue that critical realism, a powerful alternative to positivism and postmodernism, can be a particularly robust philosophical paradigm for research with international students. This paper explores two potential affordances of this underutilized paradigm to the field: enhanced generalizability and metatheoretical inclusivity. It also introduces critical realist theory of interdisciplinarity (Bhaskar et al., 2018) as a potential theoretical approach to research with international students to offer metatheoretical commensurability for interdisciplinarity. In so doing, I purport to accentuate and enrich the critical discussion of the philosophical and theoretical landscape of research with international students and to move the field toward interdisciplinarity.

CRITICAL REALISM AND ITS AFFORDANCES TO RESEARCH WITH INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

As a heterogeneous conglomeration of elements drawn from various philosophical wells, critical realism is a “meta-theoretical position” which informs empirical studies in science and social science through its commitment to ontological realism, epistemological relativism, judgemental rationality, and hermeneutical methodologies (Bhaskar et al., 2018). It metatheoretically unites the “empirical moment of positivism, the hermeneutical moment of the interpretivist methodologies and the linguistic moment of postmodernism” (Price & Martin, 2018, p. 92).

Critical realism critiques “epistemic fallacy” which reduces the ontological being to epistemological questions (Bhaskar et al., 2018). To counter this fallacy, Bhaskar (1979/1989), drew a distinction between the ‘intransitive’ and ‘transitive’ dimensions of science—a world as it exists independently of us and our changing knowledge of it. As such, a critical realist perceives ontology as fallible because our knowledge grows over time. Bhaskar warned of overstating the importance of language and pointed out two forms of language fallacy that social constructivists often commit: The first is reducing all reality to language, which leads to the collapse of the intransitive reality, and the second is reducing all social reality to language which results in disembodiment of social reality and de-materialization of social being. Thus, a scholar subscribing to constructivism would naturally perceive international students’ cross-cultural challenges and lack of social support as socially constructed problems and likely disregard the underlying contributory mechanisms and material habitats that embody the experiences. This renders it ontologically incommensurable to collaborate with colleagues who seek to move beyond interpreting the individual international student account and uncover deeper interdisciplinary mechanisms in pursuit of transdisciplinary solutions to support students.

From the critical realist perspective, the cross-cultural adaptation process of the international students is an openly structured and evolving system which is ontologically stratified. The social structures wherein these experiences are

nested, such as the cultural and institutional patterns of the host environment and the ethnic community within it, are real entities even though they are socially defined and produced. The individual students, with agency such as adaptive personality of openness and strength, are also complex systems that are in continual exchange with their material habitat and social structures. A critical realist orientation calls for researchers with international students to map, with a combination of interpretation and explanation, the ontological character of these social structures and agency as well as the reciprocal interactions between them while attending carefully to the representational limitations.

Critical realism embraces epistemic relativism, believing that our knowledge about reality is always situated historically, socially, and culturally. Critical realism does not trump interpretation of the world, nor does it claim a privileged access to the reality (Archer et al., 2016). Embracing epistemic relativism means to perceive international student experiences as contextually situated within the host social and material environment, necessitating ontological and epistemological reflexivity throughout the research inquiry.

By decoupling ontology from epistemology, critical realism offers two affordances to research with international students: First is an enhanced generalizability of research findings made possible through “critical realist dialectic”—that there cannot be difference without commonality, hence there is always a common ground that unites the difference between entities (Bhaskar et al., 2018). Each individual international student may experience unique cross-cultural successes and challenges. Rather than exclusively portraying the subjective experiences as constructivist-interpretivist subscribers do, critical realism allows researchers to unravel the internal mechanisms—the common grounds—that constitute these experiences. Furthermore, it strengthens the theory-practice consistency as enhanced generalizability allows greater impact on practice. The second affordance is paradigmatic reconciliation that lays the bedrock for interdisciplinarity and methodological pluralism. That is, a separation of ontology and epistemology allows researchers with international students, who comprise of qualitative and quantitative scholars across the disciplines, to collaborate without philosophical incommensurability. For example, the deployment of randomized controlled trials can be coupled with qualitative methods to investigate the effects of different support models on international students without ontological conflict.

It is, however, important to recognize that critical realism is not the only theory/concept that espouses realist social ontology. Giddens’ (1984) Structuration Theory, Bourdieu’s (1987) objectivist accounts of social space, and Fairclough’s (2012) critical discourse analysis are just some of the prominent works premising on a realist social ontology.

**CRITICAL REALIST THEORY OF INTERDISCIPLINARY AND
THE IMPLICATION FOR RESEARCH WITH INTERNATIONAL
STUDENTS**

It is generally agreed in the literature that interdisciplinarity is highly desirable and promising, yet problematic in contemporary practice (see e.g., Klein, 2010; Bhaskar et al., 2018). To critical realists, although there is prevalent multidisciplinary, there is paucity of true interdisciplinarity—the integration of plural knowledge (Bhaskar et al., 2018). Bhaskar et al. narrowed down the barrier to an inadequate understanding of ontology and offered a general theory of interdisciplinarity to address this intrinsic lack of metatheoretical unity. This general theory uses a multimechanismic ontology in open systems as a starting point. Interdisciplinarity is inevitable because of the open-systemic nature of all phenomena in applied research, meaning that researchers are always tackling a multiplicity of mechanisms and theories, which necessitates engagement with multiple disciplines. From ontology, it then turns to epistemology following the pathway of multidisciplinary, interdisciplinarity, and transdisciplinarity (Bhaskar et al., 2018). Multidisciplinary is distinct from interdisciplinarity in that the former simply adds up different disciplines whereas the latter requires genuinely creative integration of different disciplines because of the new emergent outcomes and contexts in the open systems (Bhaskar et al., 2018). One great example of how emergence calls for interdisciplinarity is exemplified in the conceptualization of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989; Cho et al., 2013) as an interdisciplinary analytic disposition to identify an emergent or invisible group whose complex experience in struggles for social justice embodies the intersection of multiple categories. To explicate the qualitatively new knowledge emerged from the interdisciplinary work calls for transdisciplinarity (Bhaskar et al., 2018). Transdisciplinary work is transcending and transforming imbued with systematic integration and transsector interaction (Klein, 2010).

The implication for research with international students is that international students must be studied as a bio-psycho-social totality rather than an agglomeration of separate parts, hence, an unavoidable need for interdisciplinarity. International students' transnational/transcultural experience embodies the intersection of multitudinous disciplines such as Developmental Psychology, Intercultural/Interethnic Communication, EDI (equity, diversity, and inclusion) Education, Gender and Sexuality Studies, and religious social identity in Sociology of Religion, to name a few. It is neither proper nor possible to understand the totality of international students' lived experiences through a single-axis theoretical lens. Nor can an eclectic assemblage of extant relevant theoretical frameworks relevant to the phenomenon adequately unravels the intersectional emergence of the multifaceted identities of international students and the laminated complexities of their experiences. An integrative conceptual framework is suggested to account for the interactive interplay of the multifaceted disciplinary knowledge while concurrently attending to the tensions between them.

CRITIQUE OF CRITICAL REALISM

It would be remiss to discuss the merits of a theory without also flagging its critiques. Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009) criticized its explication of central concepts as being diffuse, failing to live up to its grand claims. Kemp (2005) opposed the critical realist idea of prioritizing ontological claims over empirical research. Similarly, Cruikshank (2002) equated critical realist meta-theoretical ontology to a “metaphysical doctrine” enforcing the conformity of practices to its edicts (p. 62). Critiques notwithstanding, as an alternative to the atheoretical currents, critical realism offers a theoretically daring and stimulating option.

CONCLUSION

This paper sets out to explore two affordances of critical realism to research with international students: enhanced generalizability and philosophical reconciliation for interdisciplinary collaboration. It then introduces the critical realist general theory of interdisciplinarity as a potential theoretical approach to addressing the lack of theoretical engagement and interdisciplinarity in the field. Acknowledging that many, if not most, qualitative researchers in the field subscribe to social constructivism, the purpose of this paper is to offer an alternative philosophical and theoretical blueprint that enables metatheoretical unity and theoretical pluralism to engage interdisciplinarity.

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Author bio

YINGLING LOU is a PhD candidate in Werklund School of Education at University of Calgary in Canada. Her research uses intercultural hermeneutics with an interdisciplinary approach to explore cross-cultural adaptation challenges, power imbalance, and identity negotiation of marginalized adolescents in secondary classrooms. Email: yingling.lou1@ucalgary.ca
