

On positionalities in research *with* international students

Vera Spangler
University of Surrey, UK

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I argue that if we want to further strengthen the current direction towards more innovative and critical methodological research designs in research with international students, we must engage more deeply and meaningfully with our own positionalities as researchers. In order to build a more accurate portrayal of our participants – international students, we must begin to acknowledge the dynamic multiplicity and situational understandings of positionalities and move away from monolithic and ascriptive presentation statements (e.g., nationality, age, gender). A critical appreciation of positionality helps us to develop a reflexivity that enhances the methodological strength of our research approaches and, considering the lack of nuance in many conceptions of international students, generate empirical material with international students that (more) faithfully represent their experiences and worlds. This, hopefully, allows us to counter inequalities in practice and move away from positions of deficit and problematic discourses and assumptions.

Keywords: international students, reflexivity, researcher positionalities, student positionalities, qualitative research

While previous periods of research about international students were much shaped by researchers doing research *on* international students, current developments seem to move towards more inclusive and ethical practices of doing research *with* international students (Mittelmeier et al., 2023). Nevertheless, one significant and still visible problem within this area of research is that it often portrays international students through a deficit lens, as ‘other’ or ‘different’ (Heng, 2018; Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021), persistently highlighting challenges they encounter (Lillyman & Bennett, 2014), routinely assuming that they lack certain academic skills or experiences. Some research has begun to recognise international students

as coping and capable individuals (Deuchar, 2022; Forbes-Mewett, 2020; Kaya, 2020; Moon et al., 2020; Ploner, 2017), rather than collectivising them as a homogenous and vulnerable group, however, scholarship addressing intersectional facets of international students' identities and unravelling the significant variations in their experiences is limited.

Consequently, in order to build a more accurate portrayal of our participants – international students, we must expand our methodological approaches and develop critical, innovative, and collaborative forms of generating data. This involves acknowledging more seriously the dynamic multiplicity and situational understandings of one's positionality and requires moving beyond monolithic and ascriptive presentations (e.g., nationality, age, gender) of the researcher (see also Hsieh, 2018). Positionality is intertwined with all aspects of doing qualitative research; it shapes research motivation, the collection, creation, and interpretation of the data, and knowledge production. Therefore, recognising that as qualitative researchers, we are in ways the primary tool of research and getting to know you – the researcher, properly confronting the ways you influence your research, is an unavoidable requirement to develop trustworthy and reliable accounts with your participants (Madden, 2017). I will thus be thinking through why a focus on researcher's positionality matters to bring more meaningful dimensions to life about international students as both the subject of research and willing participation in it.

WHAT WE BRING WITH US TO THE RESEARCH: INTERESTS, EXPERIENCES, MOTIVATIONS

Since research is often driven by personal interests and experiences, the most crucial and unavoidable question to begin with when discussing positionality in qualitative research should be what brought the researcher to the research field in the first place (Madden, 2017). This also serves to highlight how important it is to incorporate considerations of positionality from the very early stages of the research inquiry. I shall mention, however, that while I argue for researchers to engage continuously with their fluid and shifting positionality and to tie these reflections and observations into their methodological and analytical considerations, one must carefully consider what kind of personal reflections are useful and analytically insightful or may merely project too much into the researcher's personal life (Delamont, 2009; Folkes, 2022).

My own background and personal experiences as an international student had significant effect on the type of research I sought to conduct and my commitment to inquire from a critical perspective. Originally, I am from Germany, but I have also lived in the US, Denmark, and now the UK for extended periods of time. As I was able to pursue mobility, live in new surroundings, study, and work in systems other than my own, which, yet, also meant leaving my family and friends, learning new languages, navigating everyday life as a foreigner, I developed an interest in and commitment to expanding the knowledge of experiences of other international students. In my doctoral project, I now explore knowledge legitimacy and the role of international student mobility in the re/production of

certain global hierarchies. It is an empirical project anchored in ethnographic fieldwork in the UK, Denmark, and Germany. Further, it will impact the information that will be shared with me, what kind of questions I will ask, and how I will interpret the empirical material. Hence, researcher positionality not only shapes research interests and motivations but also situates the researcher and the people under study, influencing the creation and interpretation of data (Folkes, 2022).

THROWNTOGETHERNESS, PLACE-MAKING, AND THE SPATIALITIES OF MULTIPLE SOCIAL WORLDS

Moving across space, between places, and in time, international students create a web of extended, multiple connections and complex relations, often across long distances. In a university classroom, for example, where students and lecturers meet, various trajectories, backgrounds, and knowledge merge. In that sense, we can observe an open, widened spatiality of the university (Larsen, 2016). Following Massey (2005), places do not have a pre-given collective identity; places are not fixed or closed, rather a global sense of place aims to convey a relational and open understanding of space, one that invites us to “look outwards to address the wider spatialities of the relations of their construction” (180). For Massey, it is a ‘throwntogetherness’ of a place-making, and this, she writes, is “the unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here-and-now” (140). This is, approaching positionality, to take an interest in how we as individuals and groups of people construct and negotiate places, and in this sense, it is a constant discussion and questioning of our ‘being together’ in any specific time-geography.

Particularly, when engaging in forms of mobility, one belongs simultaneously to multiple social worlds, which, in complex and often chaotic ways, inform our social identities and positions (Torres-Olave & Lee, 2020). Across different settings and in relation to different people, positionality involves a constant negotiation of multiple identities (Hult, 2013), and carrying the identity norms of one context while learning those of a new context requires a continuous (re-)negotiation between self and setting (Torres-Olave & Lee, 2020). Interrogating our own but also the students’ positions requires then that we must be keenly aware of how these realities and social worlds present in our bodies inform our relations to ourselves and one another. When conducting research with international students who form a highly diverse group under study, the concepts of, for example, ‘home’, ‘language’ or ‘ethnic background’ are not givens. We immerse ourselves in an environment where multicultural and multilingual exchanges are required and visible attributes (e.g., race, ethnicity, or gender) that often form the familiar boundaries of insider/outsider privilege do not simply allow us to encounter a level of trust. One’s positionality is not one-dimensional, rather it depends on how the researcher manages the presentation of who they are and the complex, multiple ways participants read the researcher and define group membership (De Andrade, 2000).

Indeed, positionality inevitably involves recognising both the researcher’s and participants’ multiple identities and the ways in which we behave differently

depending on our informants (Reyes, 2018). This means researchers practicing a kind of reflexivity that engages with positionality as continuous negotiations and evolving processes in different settings, with different people and at different times (Torres-Olave & Lee, 2020). As bodies moving through space and time, international students carry memories, histories, and relationships with them, and so do we, the researchers. We come to the research, just like the people we study, with histories and socialisation which inevitably influence our research (Madden, 2017). As qualitative researchers (and ethnographers in particular), one of the challenges we face is to find some resolution between the generative embodied history (Bourdieu, 1990) we bring and our participants' somatic way of being in the world (Madden, 2017). Properly and meaningfully engaging with positionality allows us then to move beyond simply comparing a few demographic characteristics with participants (Robertson, 2002), check our "baggage for presumption and prejudice" (Madden, 2017, p. 9), and think about how our social positions and identities are shifting and multiple (Reyes, 2018).

SEEKING 'POSITIONAL SPACES', MOVING AWAY FROM ASCRIPTIVE CHARACTERISTICS

In conclusion, I would like to emphasise how a focus on positionality might shift research practice itself and help counter existing narratives that flatten the international student experience, often emphasising perceived deficits. Conceptualising international student participants more richly, we must understand to appreciate diversity, acknowledge less recognised differences, and rather than homogenising perspectives, think about how we can use it productively. Crucial herein is to traverse the landscape of power relations by seeking to create 'positional spaces' (Mullings, 1999, p. 340) where the positionalities of researcher and participants complement each other, requiring us to incorporate participatory methodologies that recognise alternative ways of knowing, the existence of multiple viewpoints, and include international students as co-constructors and partners in the research.

Critical engagement with positionality, I argue, may thus enable new ways of co-constructing meaning with participants. It may help us to value students' individual capabilities and knowledges and give emphasis to their own understandings and practices. Eventually, this may allow us to steer away from ascriptive characteristics and instead focus on the 'whole person' (Spangler, 2022) and intersectional facets of the students' experiences. A critical appreciation of positionality helps us thus to develop a reflexivity that enhances the methodological strength of our research approaches and, considering the lack of nuance in many conceptions of international students, generate empirical material *with* international students that (more) faithfully represent their experiences and worlds, and, in this way, hopefully allows us to counter inequalities in practice and move away from positions of deficit and problematic discourses and assumptions. So, I propose that we must allude to the intersectional and situational nature of positionality and engage with it in much more critically reflective and multidimensional ways than is often currently done within the field.

REFERENCES

- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. Cambridge: Polity
- De Andrade, L. L. (2000). Negotiating from the inside. Constructing racial and ethnic identity in qualitative research *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 29(3), 268-290. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/089124100129023918>
- Delamont, S. (2009). The only honest thing: autoethnography, reflexivity and small crises in fieldwork. *Ethnography and Education*, 4(1), 51-63. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457820802703507>
- Deuchar, A. (2022). The problem with international students' 'experiences' and the promise of their practices: Reanimating research about international students in higher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 48(3), 504-518. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3779>
- Folkes, L. (2022). Moving beyond 'shopping list' positionality: Using kitchen table reflexivity and in/visible tools to develop reflexive qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941221098922>
- Forbes-Mewett, H. (2020). Vulnerability and Resilience in a Mobile World. *Journal of International Students*, 10(3), ix-xi. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i3.2002>
- Heng, T. T. (2018). Different is not deficient: contradicting stereotypes of Chinese international students in US higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43(1), 22-36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2016.1152466>
- Hsieh, J. K.-T. (2018). Positioning the researcher in the studies of international student identities. *Journal of International Students* 8(2), 659-676. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1250368>
- Hult, F. M. (2013). Covert Bilingualism and Symbolic Competence: Analytical Reflections on Negotiating Insider/Outsider Positionality in Swedish Speech Situations. *Applied Linguistics*, 35(1), 63-81. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amt003>
- Kaya, J. (2020). Inside the International Student World. *Journal of International Students*, 10(1), 124-144. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i1.1031>
- Larsen, M. (2016). *Internationalization of Higher Education: An Analysis through Spatial, Network, and Mobilities Theories*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-53345-6>
- Lillyman, S., & Bennett, C. (2014). Providing a positive learning experience for international students studying at UK universities: A literature review. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 13(1), 63-75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240914529859>
- Lomer, S., & Mittelmeier, J. (2021). Mapping the research on pedagogies with international students in the UK: a systematic literature review. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1872532>
- Madden, R. (2017). *Being Ethnographic: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Ethnography*. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529716689>
- Massey, D. (2005). *For space*. SAGE.

- Mittelmeier, J., Lomer, S., & Unkule, K. (2023). *Research with International Students. Critical Conceptual and Methodological Considerations*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003290803>
- Moon, C. Y., Zhang, S., Larke, P., & James, M. (2020). We Are Not All the Same. *Journal of International Students*, 10(1), 28-49. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i1.770>
- Mullings, B. (1999). Insider or outsider, both or neither: some dilemmas of interviewing in a cross-cultural setting. *Geoforum*, 30(1999). [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-7185\(99\)00025-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-7185(99)00025-1)
- Ploner, J. (2017). Resilience, Moorings and International Student Mobilities – Exploring Biographical Narratives of Social Science Students in the UK. *Mobilities*, 12(3), 425-444. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2015.1087761>
- Reyes, V. (2018). Ethnographic toolkit: Strategic positionality and researchers' visible and invisible tools in field research. *Ethnography*, 21(2), 220-240. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138118805121>
- Robertson, J. E. (2002). Reflexivity Redux: A Pithy Polemic on "Positionality". *Anthropological Quarterly*, 75(4), 785-792. <https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2002.0066>
- Spangler, V. (2022). Home here and there: a spatial perspective on mobile experiences of 'home' among international students. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2022.2065698>
- Torres-Olave, B., & Lee, J. J. (2020). Shifting positionalities across international locations: Embodied knowledge, time-geography, and the polyvalence of privilege. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 74(2), 136-148. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12216>

Author bio

VERA SPANGLER is a PhD student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Surrey, UK. Trained as an educational anthropologist, she explores how education, learning, and knowledge are negotiated and managed in everyday life in different contexts – across national and cultural boundaries. She uses relational approaches to understand space, place, and time, taking special interest in creative, participatory methodology. Email: v.spangler@surrey.ac.uk
