

(Neo)-Racism among International Students

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Abstract

Experiences with neo-racism, i.e., discrimination based on the combination of conceptualizations around race, culture, and nationality, towards international students on U.S. campuses have been well documented. In recent years, more research has been conducted extrapolating how instances of neo-racism affect different groups of international students in terms of their racial identity. However, there is a dearth of research looking at international students' awareness of how these neo-racist instances towards international students play out differently based on international students' racial identity. This critical autoethnography of a white international student from Germany offers an initial insight into this gap through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) infused with the concept of neo-racism.

Keywords: International Students; Neo-racism; Critical Race Theory

Many have criticized that scholarship on international students in the United States usually regards them as a homogenous group with little stratification in terms of their various intersecting identities, such as race, gender, and religious views, among many others (Heng, 2019). Specifically, the concepts of race, racism, and neo-racism influence different groups of international students differently as they become racialized in the context of American society. This racialized identity might differ or be altogether new for international students (Fries-Britt et al., 2014). In recent years, there have been more efforts to stratify research on the racial experiences of international students with a special focus on the discrimination that international students of color experience (e.g., Fries-Britt et al., 2014, George Mwangi, 2016; Mitchell et al., 2017; Onyenekwu, 2017). This body of scholarship takes into account the concept of neo-racism, i.e., discrimination not only based on race but also on culture (Lee & Rice, 2007), which is a type of discrimination that international students commonly face. What has rarely been researched, however, is how international students themselves perceive race and instances of racism and neo-racism and how these instances might affect them differently in terms of their racial identity, notably when comparing international students of color to white international students. This autoethnography offers an initial insight into how the awareness of the lived experiences with race, racism, and neo-racism of international students of color differ from a white international graduate student from Germany.

Review of the Literature

International Students in the U.S.

In the academic year 2021-2022, there were 948,519 international students enrolled at higher education institutions in the United States. Of these international students, 35% of

students came from China, 18% came from India, and 4% came from South Korea, as the top three sending nations (IIE Open Doors, 2022). In the context of American society, students from these top sending nations can become racialized and considered people of color when they enter the United States. Students from predominantly European countries, who can become racialized as white in American society, make up less than 1% of international students in the U.S.

These numbers are important when it comes to researching international students, for they are often viewed as one homogenous group with little stratification within this alleged monolith (Heng, 2019). The lived experiences of international students in the U.S., however, can be largely different when considering their multitude of intersecting identities. For example, the overall lived experience of a white international student from Germany can be vastly different from the lived experiences of an Asian international student from China. In terms of racial identity, taking into account the home countries and cultures and how their conceptions of race shape international students' identities are therefore important to consider when researching neo-racist experiences among international students.

(Lack of) Conceptions of Race

In general, the concept of race is a social construct that was invented by dominant groups with settler-colonial ideologies during colonial times to justify the established hierarchies between themselves and the oppressed groups, who were usually people of color (Boulila, 2019). Today, there is a noticeable lack of discussion around race and racism in certain countries when compared to the United States. Discourses around discrimination in Europe are usually closely linked with the topic of immigration rather than race (Erel, 2009). For example, in a 2014 report, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) highlighted that “the notion of racism is often interpreted too narrowly in Germany and is linked to organized groups. The racist, and particularly xenophobic, character of some public discourse is still not established clearly enough in public debates” (p. 10). Balibar (2007) discusses his observation of a new kind of racism in France, which deliberately does not speak of race and racism but of immigration:

The functioning of the category of immigration as a substitute for the notion of race and a solvent of “class consciousness” provides us with a first clue. Quite clearly, we are not simply dealing with a camouflaging operation, made necessary by the disrepute into which the term “race” and its derivatives have fallen, nor solely with a consequence of the transformations of French society. Collectivities of immigrant workers have for many years suffered discrimination and xenophobic violence in which racist stereotyping has played an essential role (p.84).

Resulting from this lack of discussions around race, or the lack of discussion about race altogether, the argument can be made that many international students do not share a similar conceptual understanding of race and racism with their American peers because race is not conceptualized the same way, or even talked about at all, in their home country (Fries-Britt et al., 2014). Mitchell et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study among international students to explore how international college students learn about race and racism and found that,

while some participants were oblivious, others, who were primarily participants of color, carried a racial awareness - often muddled by nationality, ethnicity, and confusion about what type of discrimination they were facing when things happened to them or other international students of color (p.7).

We can infer from this quote that the international students who are labeled as oblivious of racial issues are probably considered white in the context of U.S. society, while international students of color showed a racial awareness because they seemed to be largely targeted because of it. These types of discrimination were then further complicated by other concepts, such as culture, nationality, and ethnicity, which turns the experiences of these participants into neo-racism.

Neo-racism

Spears (1999) defines neo-racism as follows:

Neo-racism rationalises the subordination of people of colour on the basis of culture, which is, of course, acquired through acculturation within an ethnic group, while traditional racism rationalises it fundamentally in terms of biology. Neo-racism is still racism in that it functions to maintain racial hierarchies of oppression (p. 12-13).

Neo-racism does not, therefore, replace racism based on race as “a social construction based on physical characteristics, particularly skin color” (Mitchell & Maloff, 2016, p. 22), but builds onto it by adding cultural and national attributes of the minoritized group (Barker, 1981). Balibar (2007) states that “culture can also function like nature, and it can in particular function as a way of locking individuals and groups a priori into a genealogy, into a determination that is immutable and intangible in origin” (p 85). The phenomenon of neo-racism is thus also called “cultural racism” or “racism of cultural difference.” With these conceptions and definitions in mind, it makes sense that international students might not necessarily connect their experienced discrimination with race but rather with culture (Mitchell et al., 2017), which can be referred to as neo-racism.

Neo-Racism and International Students

At American institutions of higher education, there is an interpersonal pattern of neo-racism in negative interactions with faculty, students, and staff, in addition to structural patterns in occurrences such as admissions policies, academic evaluations, and scholarships (Lee & Rice, 2007).

Interpersonal level

There are various accounts of international students experiencing neo-racism during their time at an American college (Chen & Zhou, 2019). It is important to note that this form of discrimination is experienced through interactions with American students, faculty, and university staff, as well as the local community (Hanassab, 2006). This discrimination includes name-calling, complaining about the cooking of traditional foods, and suggesting that international students should only hang out with their national peers (Perry, 2016). Other forms of discrimination mostly relate to language and culture and the lack of perceived support from host country nationals (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Lee & Rice, 2007). After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, reports of discrimination against international students, especially those from

Islamic, Middle Eastern, and Asian countries, increased significantly (Williams & Johnson, 2011). Another study found that Asian students in the U.S. displayed feelings of distress more frequently than students from North America or Europe (Mitchell et al., 2017).

Structural level

Neo-racism can also occur on a more structural, political level, either through explicitly neo-racist policies or the absence of policy altogether (Unangst, 2021). Current immigration and visa policies favor white, Western European students over students from Asia, for example, as can be seen by the Visas Mantis and Visas Condor programs (Lu, 2009). Visa Mantis background checks are tied to the Technology Alert List, a system established in the Cold War to detect foreign danger. The fact that students from China and Pakistan tend to have to undergo a Mantis check more often than students from the UK and Canada shows the obvious links to racism and neo-racism. Visas Condor, on the other hand, requires all male visa applicants from certain countries to undergo a background check in terms of their military service and experience with potential weapons. Certain visas also only allow students to enter the country one or two times, forcing students who must leave the country for any reason to reapply and potentially get rejected (Baas, 2006). In addition, if international students would like to stay in the U.S. and work after completing their studies, the work visa program only allows 7% of each country's citizens to obtain a Green Card through a work permit. This alleged diversity and equality-oriented percentage heavily backlog countries with bigger populations, for example, China and India, the top two sending nations of international students (Bier, 2019). In more recent years, the Trump administration put an additional strain on international students with intense visa restrictions and the travel ban from predominantly Muslim countries (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017). The link to neo-racism in these policies cannot be ignored and needs to be examined further in order to better understand how these policies affect international students differently depending on their national origin and cultural ties—hopefully, more equitable policies can then take their place.

Purpose of the Study

There is a lack of research looking at how international students are aware of neo-racism and specifically how the experiences with neo-racism for white international students differ from those of international students of color. It is important to highlight here that the purpose of this autoethnography and other related research is not to re-center whiteness, as is often done. The author conducted this research in order to name and dismantle whiteness. This can only be done effectively, however, if whiteness is properly researched and understood first in order to then be able to deduce successful ways of disrupting it (Foste & Tevis, 2022). Therefore, the purpose of this autoethnography is an initial insight into the awareness of neo-racism among international students and the differences in the experiences between white international students and international students of color. The research question is as follows: How does the awareness of race, racism, and neo-racism influence the lived experiences of international students in the U.S.,

specifically when comparing the experiences of white international students to the experiences of international students of color?

Conceptual Framework

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged in the United States in the field of legal studies in the 1970s. Activists and scholars noticed an absence of recognition of the intersection of race, racism, and power in U.S. law; then introduced CRT to the field of education (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Delgado et al. (2017), explain the underlying core tenets of CRT as follows:

- a) *Racism is ordinary*: The fact that racism is not aberrational but the everyday experience of people of color in the United States.
- b) *Material determinism or Interest Convergence*: Racism advances white interests, and there are times in history when the advances for people of color briefly overlap with the interests of white people, which is why certain decisions in favor of people of color have been made; not because of genuine altruistic convictions of white people.
- c) *Social constructionism*: The fact that race is a social construct and not a biological fact. Race is a “product of social thoughts and relations” (p.7).
- d) *Differential racialization*: The fact that dominant groups have racialized different minoritized identities throughout history to serve the dominant’s group purpose and justify reasons for oppression.
- e) *Intersectionality and anti-essentialism*: The fact that no one person has merely one identity. There are many intersecting identities within one person, some of which might be systematically oppressed, whereas others are more privileged.
- f) *Unique voice of color*: The notion that because someone is a member of a minority group, it allows them to speak on race and racism.

While CRT is mostly used to analyze systems of oppression against people of color in the United States, I concur with Yao et al. (2019) that CRT can and should be applied to the international student experience within the United States based on these students’ various intersecting identities, including race. CRT is hence a useful theory through which we can explore the various intersecting identities of international students and the resulting issues. Specifically, in terms of international student research, the following tenets of CRT have been identified:

the permanence and endemic nature of race and racism in US society; sharing the experiential knowledge and counter-storytelling that people of Color experience every day; interest convergence theory, which occurs when the dominant culture tolerates advances for racial justice only when it suits its own personal interest; and intersectionality, which situates experiences within the context of multiple, interlocking

systems of oppression that are interrelated and shaped by one another (Yao et al., 2019, p.8).

CRT functions as the basis of my theoretical framework, as it lays the groundwork for how race is central among the issues characterizing the lived experiences of international students in the U.S.

Neo-Racism Theory

To research neo-racist experiences of international students in the U.S., Lee and Rice (2007) used a conceptual framework called Neo-Racism Theory in order to “situate any discrimination that international students encounter” (p. 389). According to Neo-Racism Theory, the dominant group is able to justify their feelings of superiority and discrimination against others who are culturally and nationally different rather than just basing these feelings on physical appearance alone, thereby giving way to restrictions and discrimination at both a personal and a systematic level. In the context of research on international students, The author infuses the concept of neo-racism into CRT in order to better understand prevalent neo-racist experiences in particular and how they affect white international students and international students of color differently.

Methodology

Critical Autoethnography

According to the work of Adams et al. (2015), the methodology of Critical Autoethnography includes six tenets. First, critical autoethnography “uses a researcher’s personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences” (p.2). In keeping with this research format, from this point forward, the author will use the first person. With this autoethnography, I looked at instances of awareness about neo-racism experienced by me and other international students to critique my cultural beliefs and practices, which are rooted in whiteness as a white international student in the U.S. Second, Critical Autoethnography “acknowledges and values a researcher’s relationships with others” (p.2). My relationship with my fellow international students might be a part of my research agenda, while at the same time, I am committed to appreciating the time I am spending with them as a researcher and in any other role I employ. Third, Critical Autoethnography “uses deep and careful self-reflection—typically referred to as ‘reflexivity’—to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political” (p.2). In this research, I engage in reflexivity in order to interrogate the intersections of myself and society concerning my whiteness and neo-racism, both of which are deeply personal as well as politically intertwined. To do so, I included a more detailed reflexivity statement. Fourth, Critical Autoethnography “shows people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles” (p.2). As I engage more deeply with my various identities intersecting with my most prominent one, that of being an international student, I reflect on what it means to walk the line between being perceived as white and, therefore, a member of the privileged group in the U.S. and the discrimination I face as an international student. As a fifth point, Critical

Autoethnography “balances intellectual and methodological rigor, emotion, and creativity” (p.2). This research is deeply personal and emotionally upsetting. At the same time, I am hoping to produce significant research to help create a better world for international students in the U.S. Lastly, Critical Autoethnography “strives for social justice and to make life better” (p.2), which is closely linked to my previous point. By researching international students’ lived experiences, I am committed to the fight for social justice for all, and this includes international students, specifically those with minoritized identities.

Reflexivity Statement

I grew up in Germany, where the term “race,” as the way it is conceptualized as a social category in the U.S., was hardly ever mentioned when I was growing up. In German society, discussions around it are rare and do not go into much depth. This appears to be a lingering taboo as the concept of the Aryan race was so heinously used in the Third Reich to justify the commitment of atrocities against humankind. Race is not used as an official category in any kind of form like it is in the U.S. There is no box to indicate your race on official forms; however, there is always a box in which you have to indicate the name of the place you were born, which is a way of determining someone’s national background. While race and racism are not much talked about, notions of national superiority over others and general xenophobia are very common discussion topics and are big issues in German society. I was always very much aware of national and personal rhetoric around the term “foreigners” and the ensuing xenophobia, but I hardly ever made the connection to race. One of my first memories that can be vaguely described as racial awareness was in the Social Security Office during my first study abroad experience in the U.S. in August 2014. I had to apply for a Social Security Number to get paid since this was my first time residing in the U.S. My former supervisor was kind enough to drive me to the office and wait for me to get everything sorted out. I remember sitting in the office and filling out the paperwork when I came upon the category of race. My supervisor was sitting next to me while I was filling out the paperwork, and I remember asking her: “What’s my race?” She looked at me with profound shock in her eye and was at a loss for words. I did not understand; for me, it was a legitimate question at the time. I knew I was not Black or Asian, but I had never heard of the term “Caucasian” before, and based on the word, I assumed it also had something to do with Asians. Therefore, none of the given categories on there made sense to me, and I had to ask for help. She said: “You’re Caucasian.” I remember being very confused, but I ticked the box next to “Caucasian,” nonetheless. When I got home, I looked up the term Caucasian and learned about its association with the Caucasus and that another term for it was “white.” That was the first time I ever became conscious of my race, at the age of 22 while studying abroad in the U.S. However, I only became aware of its existence as a descriptive category; I did not engage in any meaningful discussions to interrogate it any further, neither in the U.S. at the time nor in Germany. I never really had to either because the university I studied abroad at, and the place where I had grown up and lived in Germany were largely white, so I never felt out of place.

Now, as an international graduate student at another predominantly white institution (PWI) in the Midwest, I walk a strange line between being perceived as a member of the privileged white racial group in the U.S. while also experiencing the disadvantages and discrimination that come with being an international student. This includes not being able to vote, not working more than 20 hours a week (a limitation that bars me from access to higher wages and benefits), and, especially under the previous administration, a constant fear of deportation by not being able to qualify for the ever-changing and increasingly hostile requirements to be able to maintain valid visa status. At the same time, as a white student at a PWI, I hardly ever feel out of place on campus, and neither do I when I walk the streets of the city I live in. This is the privilege I receive by being perceived as white.

I am consistently in the process of learning and unlearning notions about race and racism. I am still learning so much because I have only started moving from my previous convictions that I was raceless and colorblind (and therefore a “good white”) to racial awareness and racism awareness, a process that began as recently as when I moved here in August of 2020. The resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, and other social justice-focused movements have opened my eyes to how this serves the inherent racist tendencies of systems in the U.S., such as higher education, where people of color are consistently marginalized (Patton, 2016). While I suffer from certain discriminations as an international student, my international peers of color suffer from these in addition to discrimination based on their race.

Data collection

The three incidents that I chose to analyze stemmed from interactions with international students of color during the coursework phase of my Ph.D. program. The first quote was uttered in the context of presenting my research agenda on “racism and neo-racism and international students” to my fellow classmates, all of whom were international students of color. When I asked if there were any questions left, one of my international peers asked the following: “You sound like a native speaker. You said it yourself--you identify as white. You are not like us. Have you ever even experienced racism?”

The second quote I would like to analyze was uttered to me when I shared my experience of being invited to participate in a panel on diversity, equity, and inclusion with others, where I was asked to represent the experiences of international students in terms of their career development in the U.S.: “Of course, they invited you. You’re the accessible international student. Your English is great. And you’re white.”

The third instance that I would like to analyze was said to me when I talked about my dissertation topic to a new international student whom I met at a social gathering. “You study neo-racism? Why? You’re white – what do you even know about racism?”

Discussion

Instance 1: “You sound like a native speaker. You said it yourself--you identify as white. You are not like us. Have you ever even experienced racism?”

One tenet of CRT is that racism is permanent and endemic in U.S. society. This quote exemplifies how my lived experience in the U.S. is different from international students of color because of my perceived whiteness. For them, forms of racism and neo-racism have become a part of their everyday life here which is not necessarily the case for me as a white international student. White people do not necessarily experience racism or neo-racism on an ordinary basis, which is evident in the question of whether I have ever experienced racism. Additionally, the ordinariness of racism and neo-racism in their lives sets me apart from international students of color by pointing out that I am not like them.

Another tenet of CRT talks about differential racialization. Evidently, I am being racialized differently than my international peers because of my whiteness. In this case, I am being grouped in with white Americans here, even though I myself have previously never identified as “white” in Germany. However, because whiteness is rooted in Eurocentrism and European heritage, my typical European appearance, as well as my American pronunciation of the English language, lets me be grouped in with white people in the U.S. This grouping is shown in the quote in both myself identifying as white and by being identified as white by my international peers.

In terms of CRT’s tenet on intersectionality, all international students display liminal, i.e., in-between identities as international students and racialized people in the U.S. (among many other identities). However, the difference lies in the real-life consequences of these multiple systems of oppression. The consequences of racism and neo-racism against white people are vastly different from their real-life consequences for people of color and international students of color, who suffer harm through personal as well as institutionalized racism and neo-racism much more than any white international student does. This is exemplified through the question about racism, showing that their experiences with racism and neo-racism in the U.S. are vastly different from my experiences with racism and neo-racism, if they can be categorized as racism or neo-racism at all.

Instance 2: “Of course, they invited you. You’re the accessible international student. Your English is great. And you’re white.”

In terms of the tenet of CRT saying that racism is permanent and endemic, this is again shown in this quote in how it acknowledges that my perceived whiteness offers me opportunities that may not generally be available to international students of color. In this case, the term “accessible” indicates how the ordinariness of whiteness allowed me to participate in an opportunity that was closed off to my international peers of color. This is also shown in the comments on my perceived English skills and my race. Whiteness is the perceived norm in terms of looks, language, and experiences in the U.S. (Foste et al., 2022), which shows an underlying favorable bias toward whiteness and hence ordinary racism.

Another tenet of CRT is Interest Convergence, i.e., the phenomenon of attempts to advance minoritized racial identities only being fruitful when they advance the interests of whiteness. In this case, having an international student on a panel seemingly shows commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives; however, making that representative a white international student allows many of the racial and neo-racial issues in DEI initiatives to continue to not be

addressed as I am not experiencing the same forms of racism and neo-racisms that my international peers of color have to endure.

Lastly, this quote showcases again how I am being differentially racialized from my international peers of color by my peer directly stating that I am white, as well as making note of the intersectional identities of being perceived as white in the context of American society while being an international student, as discussed above.

Instance 3: “You study neo-racism? Why? You’re white – what do you even know about racism?”

Through the first tenet of CRT, that racism is permanent and endemic, this quote again exemplifies how racism and neo-racism are a normal part of everyday life for international students of color, yet not necessarily for white people and white international students. This ordinariness is shown in the rhetorical question about what I know about racism.

Closely related to the tenet of permanent and endemic racism, in this case, is differential racialization. Again, it is apparent that I am being differentially racialized in the context of U.S. society than my international peers of color. Being perceived as white by my international peers groups me in with white Americans who are not necessarily exposed to racism in the U.S., prompting questions about the purpose of my research agenda.

The first two questions could then also be analyzed through the tenet of interest convergence, where my research overall could be viewed as advancing my own personal interests through researching race and racism in international students. This is highlighted by the questioning of the point of my research and questioning the motivation for a white person to study racism and neo-racism.

Limitations

As with any study, there are limitations to this type of work. Autoethnographies have largely been criticized as self-centered showboating rather than a serious research method (Atkinson, 1997; Coffey, 1999). I argue, however, that to do this type of research, one needs to first think about one’s own identities and how they influence the way we do research. I believe that no form of research can ever be truly objective because we cannot separate our own biases from the research we conduct. By critically reflecting on my own experiences, I am able to address underlying biases in my research and therefore have a better understanding of how it influences every aspect of my research.

Another limitation of autoethnography is the lack of generalization in terms of empirical research (Walford, 2004). By conducting this research, I am by no means claiming that these instances can be generalized to the experiences of other international students, white or of color. It is merely one example within the bigger system that is white supremacy and how it plays out in my personal life. One of the aims that Bochner and Ellis (1996) pointed out “is to allow another person’s world of experience to inspire critical reflection on your own” (p. 22). Researching my own experiences allows for a starting point to conduct more research to find out whether there are similarities and differences in the collective experience.

Implications

In general, more research is needed on white international students and how their experiences differ from international students of color both in terms of policy and interpersonal interactions. The aim of this research, however, is not to put focus on white international students but to help them cope with their white identity and the ensuing consequences rooted in whiteness. Additionally, more stratified research needs to look at policies in place that treat international students differently based on underlying biases rooted in neo-racism. Further research is also needed in terms of how international students not only interact with their American peers, faculty, and staff but also how international students interact with each other. Analyzing these interactions through the lens of Critical Race Theory and neo-racism can help reduce the harm done to international students of color.

Conclusion

This critical autoethnography offers an initial insight into how international students are aware of instances of racism and neo-racism towards them and how they affect different groups of international students differently. By viewing these three incidents in my life as a white international student through the lens of Critical Race Theory and the concept of neo-racism, I am able to highlight the fine line I walk between being an international student - and all the restrictions that come with that - and being perceived as a white person in the U.S. - and all the privileges, perceived or not, that come with that. It is important to highlight this difference in experiences, with the goal being not to re-center whiteness but to name it in order to be able to disrupt it.

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