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On studying those who study abroad: Insights into Early Career Migrant Researchers' subjectivities within the Western European University

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ABSTRACT

With the global as the dominating frame of reference, the international higher education landscape and its transients move to the forefront of discussions on whose and which education matters today. Embodying the internationalized university, the Global Southern international student turned into an early-career migrant researcher remains a valuable access point to consent and dissent from Western cultural hegemony at the European neoliberal university. Using Pitard's term (2017) for reflexivity in qualitative research, this paper reflects on an "internal dialogue" of two women PhDs, one from North Macedonia and one from Brazil, studying international student mobility in continental Europe. From the position of "host-sponsored international students who study international students," we discuss the ambiguity of embodying power and subservience. We conclude that the reflexivity demonstrated here, especially in South-South solidarity constellations, has the potential to reignite debates on global knowledge production today.

Keywords: International students; Global South; Western Europe; reflexivity; knowledge production

In this article, we, as two non-European women and early-career migrant researchers (ECMRs), offer reflections on researching international students in Germany and Switzerland from this stance. We examine the implications of our subjectivities while producing knowledge on and as non-Western graduate students financed by our host countries. Our migratory or mobility condition, educational experiences, class, and ethnic-racial backgrounds influenced our

positioning vis-à-vis the international student category and scholarly knowledge in this field. Moreover, our interest in the unequal distribution of academic opportunities and a relative institutional solitude encouraged us to exercise reflexivity. Other early-career (Sakurai et al., 2022) and senior researchers (Guo et al., 2022) reflecting on their experiences as academic returnees or migrants, have engaged with similar questions on the ascribed value of institutional affiliation by global-local scholarly communities. With much less methodological rigor than these endeavors, our reflection on the doctoral experience echoes the willingness to position oneself as a researcher on internationalized higher education recognizant of the importance of reflexivity. Hence, we write about our “internal dialogue” (Pitard, 2017), focusing on the differences to each other and to our research participants entangled within complex hierarchies and power relations, arguing for more and diverse Global Southern standpoints in research on international education.

GLOBAL SOUTHERN “INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS” AS ACCESS POINTS TO CONSENT TO AND DISSENT FROM WESTERN CULTURAL HEGEMONY

Beyond mere critique only, the internationalized Western university can aid to foster alternative imaginaries of globally ethical research. On its good days, the Western European university flourished as a site of occasional alternative knowledge production through South-South solidarity and academic friendships within the low ranks of the European academic workforce. Scholars have stressed how vital academic friendship is to counter the increased rivalry and competition among the most precarious academics at the neoliberal university (Metcalf & Blanco, 2021; Webster & Boyd, 2018). Ultimately, our self-positioning as “international students” was an opportunity to regain agency as a particularly disenfranchised share of the European academic workforce.

Such a vague category, encompassing many antagonistic experiences with international student mobility and migration from the Global South, rendered it imperative to prioritize reflexivity in our experience with knowledge production on international students. Albeit differences in our geographic origins and trajectories, both of us kept identifying as international students to maintain a global frame of reference in our research projects. However, we knew just how relative the term global was: Trained in and financed by Western European higher education, we embodied migrant labor and international scholars from two distinct yet equally negatively-connoted world’s peripheries, the Balkans and Latin America. We thus shared the experience of embodying figures undergirding local anxieties and aspirations of the Western European university today.

We also had much in common with the Global Southern international students we were interviewing: student precarity and isolation, as well as the post-graduate risk of downward social mobility and loss of legal status. Nevertheless, every interview showed socio-economic, cultural, and geographical differences, varying stances on individualism, and different abilities to act as brokers of higher education norms. At times, interviewees assumed a shared student socialization

with us. The second author, a Brazilian national who studied abroad since her undergraduate studies, identified this tendency in how Brazilian graduate students, who had engaged in student activism during undergraduate studies at Brazilian public universities, saw themselves as politically more combative and expressed empathy towards those who had an early experience of academic precarity as opposed to graduates from Brazilian private universities or those who studied abroad. Some interviewees who had solely studied abroad did the opposite, portraying themselves as superior to those who had only studied in their countries of origin. They showed how trained they were to think of home higher education as sites of deficient learning, and host universities as emancipatory and empowering (Tripathi, 2021, p.2). Like the latter, we did not escape the coloniality undergirding other ECMRs' stances on international education. For instance, the first author's feeling of inferiority and inadequacy to some of her interviewees with a Western European background brought to the surface our subaltern yet active participation in global power relations.

Born out of our subjectivities about material disparities, comparisons among the two of us became a daily reminder of unequal access to international higher education, nearly imploding our South-South academic experiment: What is from the perspective of a researcher on a limited student visa (like the first author), the privilege of obtaining a host country passport, is lived by the person who experiences it (such as the second author) as a privilege with clear restrictions. For instance, the naturalization processes of female student migrants who turn into marriage migrants, impose assimilationist practices, determining the life of the second author. Meanwhile, holding a prestigious international scholarship from the host country, like the first author, as opposed to working as an average academic worker, as the second author, can serve as a marker of distinction for an academic career in the long term. Reflecting on the nuances of our different trajectories allowed us to highlight one aspect of power relations that other ECMRs in similar situations may recognize as important in their biographies: the conditions under which we work and produce knowledge influence how we relate to one another and whom we consider an equal or an ally in the many encounters the experience of studying abroad offers.

Finally, we reflected on another inherent mutual challenge: Our knowledge (re-)production relied on Western bibliographies, even when it attempted to position itself critically against the cultural hegemony exerted by the European neoliberal university onto marginalized spaces of knowledge production. For instance, in her dissertation, the first author relied on a French theorist to explain transnational social dynamics among Eastern European and other Global Southern students in the West. In contrast, the second author mobilized the insights of Latin American authors relevant for her analysis of Brazilian students, grounded in European Marxism. But it was not just us, ECMRs: Some of our interviewees also reported the feeling of being epistemologically compromised through their respective positions in Western European research projects. In this sense, the question Anna Amelina (2022, p. 2394) asks regarding global inequalities in knowledge production in migration research, applies for our field:

What concepts would be appropriate to extending the established transnational studies in migration in a way that addresses more explicitly the global and cross-border power asymmetries, including those created by the (post)colonial, postsocialist and neo-colonial relations?

If we, ECMRs studying those who study abroad, could observe the interplay between global power relations and inequalities of accessing international higher education informing our research, how does the – equally – complex positions of Western researchers on international students manifest itself in the knowledge they produce? How does the volume of state investment into research and the availability of an appropriate legal, economic, and physical infrastructure influence (non-) ECMRs in the West, their research designs, theoretical preferences, and even their ability to conduct research over an extended period? Finally, how telling of global power struggles and historical inequalities is the fact that our respective studies were motivated by our shared interest in problematizing international higher education by focusing on geographically different yet compatible experiences with Global Southern student mobility?

CONCLUSION

Who (re-)creates knowledge in international student mobility, and under which conditions? What agency do ECMRs have in reshaping the hegemonic consensus within internationalized higher education? This article argued for the importance of valuing (non-)ECMRs "internal dialogues" in knowledge production on international student mobility. Moreover, our exercise enabled a dialogue between two Global Southern international students and ECMRs studying international students, showing the importance of agentic reflexivity for more ethical global knowledge production today.

By examining how our experiences as international students affect our research and recognizing our share in hierarchical power relations, we show that continuous critical self-evaluation (Berger, 2015) can contribute to a better understanding of inequalities in international higher education. As Tripathi (2021, p.9) notes: “[...] scholars from the Global South, based in the Global North, can act as bridge builders in a process of knowledge production, bearing in mind their often complex positionalities can raise challenging questions of authenticity and representation.” In this regard, we offer a reminder of the importance of and necessity for reflexivity to those engaging with international students. Ultimately, “how does our positioning affect our research?” should not be a question applicable only to ECMRs, as it has the potential of a gold standard in scientific knowledge production in general.

Note

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