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COLONIALITY OF POWER AND RESEARCH WITH INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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Introduction

While the push–pull theoretical framework has been used to explain factors influencing decisions to study abroad, underlying postcolonial trajectories continue to facilitate the current global flows of international students (Ploner & Nada, 2020). In many ways, colonialism has brought many international students from the Global South¹ to the Global North. Many of these students associate Global North education with higher value and attribute inferiority to their home education (Karimi & Bucarius, 2018). Such students are pulled by the desire not only to hold degrees from prestigious Global North universities but also to belong to the global standards and norms created by coloniality – a specific consequence of centuries of European colonialism – that established excellence, superiority and world-class reputation of high-quality education (Rizvi, 2007). As Heleta (2016, p. 2) writes, “One of the most destructive effects of colonialism was the subjugation of local knowledge and promotion of the Western knowledge as universal knowledge.” Thus, the epistemic heritage associated with Global North education continues to influence, if not dominate, some international students’ decisions to study abroad, reflecting prevailing postcolonial power/knowledge structures (Ploner & Nada, 2020). Seen from this angle, going abroad to study becomes a means for some students with a colonial mentality – characterised by a perception of their ethnic or cultural inferiority (Karimi & Bucarius, 2018) – not only to escape from restrictive and unfavourable social conditions (such as political oppression, limited educational and employment opportunities) in their home countries but also to gain prestige and career mobility and enhance social status. While the majority gain international educational experiences and a degree abroad,

it is important to emphasise that many international students with racialised ethnicities within Global North higher education institutions live under coloniality (Udah, 2021). The coloniality of power of their host countries and institutions continues to racialise and construct them as the inferior Other.

As a former international student and a non-Western immigrant researcher, I have learned how racialised international students are exposed to discriminatory epistemic violence, dominated by deficit discourses – focusing on what is wrong, broken, or pathological, not what is strong within them. Born and raised in Nigeria, I came to Australia, specifically, to further my education. I love Australia for its safety, high-quality education and vibrant multiculturalism, which are important elements for considerations among international students in choosing Australian universities. However, since arriving, living, studying and working in Australia, I have become interested in changing the negative stereotypes about racialised international students (see Chapters 1, 3 and 7).

Drawing on the concept of coloniality, this chapter examines colonial mentalities in research. The chapter contributes to the literature on research with international students and broader debates on global coloniality. It illuminates how coloniality shapes research and uneven relations create conditions that exploit, dominate, oppress and marginalise. In doing so, the chapter highlights the harms of framing research with international students in prevailing colonial perspectives and assumptions, which can perpetuate subjugation, impacting learning and engagement outcomes. The chapter concludes with practical suggestions for researchers.

Critical considerations

Coloniality

First coined and developed by Quijano (2016), the concept of coloniality captures the living structures of dominance and subordination within modern society. Coloniality refers to long-standing ways of knowing, being and power in contemporary societies associated with five hundred years of European colonialism. Despite its roots in colonial history, coloniality has survived formal colonialism and continues to operate at the heart of the macro-structures of modern society. As a process, coloniality manifests in three main ways: (1) systems of hierarchies through racial classification and valorisation of Whiteness – a category of power, domination, and privilege; (2) systems of knowledge through the construction of Western and Eurocentric perspectives as the universal scientific norm; and (3) societal systems through the creation of state and specific institutions (e.g., national institutions, international organisations and courts of law) to control, manage colonised populations and diminish decolonising systems of lived experiences. Thus, coloniality manifests in particular forms of domination, subjugation and exploitation and conditions of power,

defining people, culture, intersubjectivity, relations and knowledge production (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Coloniality is maintained in various aspects and levels of everyday experience in the classroom, university and society – media, curriculum, research, criteria for academic performance and aspirations (Quijano, 2016).

Coloniality not only highlights the structures of power and hegemony but also addresses the experiences of race, class and gender that still exist in many modern contexts. According to Quijano (2016), the idea of race and the social construction of racial classification legitimised colonial relations and structures of power after the end of colonialism and continue to shape all social, economic and political structures that persist today in varied forms of exploitation and domination. In fact, the existing colonial matrix of power affects all dimensions of social existence, ranging from hegemony over history, economy; authority; politics, gender and sexuality; language; to control over subjectivity, health and knowledge (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

Coloniality of power is an important concept for understanding the continuities of varied forms of hierarchical unequal social relationships of domination in contemporary life, particularly the global racial/ethnic hierarchy. In the Global North higher education contexts, the power of coloniality affects all epistemologies – curricula and research remain largely Western and Eurocentric. Coloniality still operates at the centre of research practice (Heleta, 2016), influencing interpersonal interactions with, and responses to, international students as research subjects.

The problem of coloniality is that research practice is subsumed by the norms created and imposed by Western ways of knowing, being and doing. This imposition has led to a corresponding marginalisation of international students. In many ways, this imposition upholds systemic racist and colonialist ideologies and practices that underpin colonial mentalities and relations of rule in research. The concept of coloniality is, therefore, used in this chapter to understand the continuity of colonial forms of research practice and oppression. Moreover, the concept allows us to understand contemporary subjugation and offers a theoretical framework to consider new approaches for conducting research with marginalised groups, especially racialised international students.

Coloniality and international students

International students represent one of the most relevant and biggest sojourner groups. As described by Neto (2020), sojourners are “people who travel internationally to achieve a particular goal or objective with the expectation that they will return to their country of origin after the purpose of their travel has been achieved” (p. 457). As student sojourners, their goal is to study abroad and gain globally recognised qualifications, solidifying their status on return

to their home countries (Udah & Francis, 2022a). However, racialisation – the ascription of ethnic or racial identities – remains central to the ways many international students from the Global South are received, constructed, understood and dominated by people who represent, uphold and ratify the power of coloniality in their host countries and institutions (Arday et al., 2022).

Colonial education has promoted Eurocentric worldviews and ways as universal (Heleta, 2016), which inform attitudes and representations of international students (Udah, 2021) and subjugates them. This subjugation is nothing but epistemic violence, which Spivak (2015) defines as the subjugation of colonial subjects and undermining of non-Western approaches to knowledge. This explains why international students from Global South (determined along racial, social, economic, political and cultural lines) experience the power of coloniality. As a result of existing colonial mentalities, these students confront discrimination and feel marginalised, unsupported, dominated and subjugated in higher education (Udah & Francis, 2022b).

Studies examining racialised international students' experiences indicate that the power of coloniality maintained through hegemonic Whiteness continues to classify, disfranchise and exclude them (Chapters 9 and 10). In the Global North higher education institutions, Whiteness is the most silent, pervasive and invisible source of power and authority that continues to dominate research practice (Gatwiri, 2018), leading to racist, patronising and unjust colonialist practices with international students (see Chapter 7). Being measured and judged only as the inferior, unintelligent Other (Chapter 5), racialised international students are seen by some researchers as subjects to be defined, scrutinised, regulated, controlled and saved within the colonial project (Suspitsyna, 2021). In many cases, for example, they are denied agency (Arday et al., 2022) and engaged in research that does not reflect their lived experience (Chen, 2021). In fact, the valorisation of Whiteness as the invisible norm, by which they are judged, reinforces the living legacies of colonialism and the hegemony of Western and Eurocentric perspectives.

Indeed, the coloniality of power of contemporary Western societies continues to identify and turn many international students into the Other – forever lagging, lacking in something (knowledge, critical thinking skills, language proficiency and academic competence) and needing extra help (Burton-Bradley, 2018; Lomer & Anthony-Okeke, 2019). In classroom spaces, they are problematised and defined by their deficiencies. Existing colonial ideologies and discourses of race continue to shape social relations and influence research with international students, leading not only to their vulnerabilities but also to the cultural justification for their attainment gaps and misconduct prosecutions, including the microaggressions and treatment that they receive (Arday et al., 2022). It is, therefore, important to understand and consider what needs to be done towards decolonising research with international students within Global North and other Global South regions.

As Quijano (2016) argues, many non-White and non-Western Others still confront discrimination and experience domination through the existing colonial matrix of power, structures and knowledge control. What this means, then, is that we need to make some structural and sociocultural changes, adopting human rights-based and culturally appropriate approaches to research, that are respectful, safe and ethically just. As researchers for anti-racist, anti-oppressive and transformative practice, it is essential to break away from Western and Eurocentric hegemony and the narrow ways of thinking about colonial relations and become key players in decolonising research. Decolonising research means, therefore, interrogating various forms of hegemonic dominance produced and perpetuated through colonial and neo-colonial cultures and structures (Grosfoguel, 2007) and recognising alternative knowledge systems as legitimate (Welikala, 2015). Thus, we need to consciously engage in questioning, recognising and problematising colonial and racial ideologies that inform research and practice. This implies deconstructing colonial theories, standpoints, structures and values that shape and influence our research. Achieving this would also require both dialogue and engagement with, and taking seriously, the epistemic and cultural insights, theories and perspectives of non-Western ethnic/racial people, students, and critical thinkers from the Global South.

Coloniality and decolonising research practice

The first step in decolonising research is to decolonise our minds – decolonising minds shaped by Whiteness and imperialism. Without decolonising our minds (Moosavi, 2020), internalised colonialism would not allow us to challenge the passivity, colonisation and marginalisation, including the racialisation of international students (Maitra & Guo, 2019). Adopting a decolonising stance demands openness and willingness to map out coloniality and dialogue with marginalised and non-Western ways of knowing, doing and being in a praxis of solidarity, inclusivity and social justice (Chapters 21 and 25; Saraceno, 2012).

It is, often, in power relations and dominance that international students are constructed, racialised and subjugated (Spivak, 2015) by researchers, who silence and provide them with no voice (Arday et al., 2022). Thus, as researchers, we have a duty of care to work respectfully with international students, protect them from colonial mentalities, reframe counterproductive narratives and reject deficit discourses. Overcoming international students' marginalisation requires not only being responsive to unequal power distribution but also being critically reflective, and accountable as well as embracing decolonial practices. As researchers working with international students, we need to afford them agency (Arday et al., 2022), conduct interviews in the language of study rather than their first language (Chen, 2021) and conduct practitioner

research to dictate power dynamics (Casey et al., 2017; Gregson, 2020). We need also to be self-reflective and reflexive about our positionality/biases (Moosavi, 2020), exploring alternative ways of doing research that challenge dominant discourses and assumptions about race and power. In the Quijanoian way of thinking, we need to tackle and end the hegemony of Western and Eurocentric perspectives and paradigms. This implies that we rethink and reconstruct our research approach; use decolonial theoretical tools to reflect on practices, challenge intentions biases and assumptions; and avoid inadvertently contributing to oppressive practices that marginalise and affect international students' experience and well-being.

Humanising international students (Chapters 1, 4, and 7) can change how they are seen or how their problems are defined and conceptualised. Seeing their humanity and valuing them as capable individuals with experiences, knowledge and skills regardless of their shortcomings can be a profound and powerful way of working, and researching, with them. It can change how we research as well as open for them a world of hope and possibilities. Hence, there is a need to decolonise research with international students. A more profound way to decolonise research is to shift consciousness and problematise routine abuses of power relationships by incorporating their perspectives and thinking carefully about how we view them and our own practice (Moosavi, 2020). We need also to do more research that places them at the centre. When international students are valued, listened to, engaged, taken seriously and shown that they matter, they will be more prepared to engage and enrich what we do and explore (Arday, Branchu & Boliver, 2022; Udah & Francis, 2022a). Therefore, embracing decolonisation as a strategy in research is crucial, and we must ensure that we engage with theories from Global South.

Reflection questions

- How does coloniality affect my perception of international students?
- Do I focus on what is wrong, broken or pathological, not what is strong within international students? Do I particularly expect international students to need extra support?
- Do I perceive, construct and conceptualise international students in terms of their deficiencies or capabilities? Or could my research approach and design be reinforcing this (unintentionally)?
- Am I socially conditioned to question the credibility, integrity and intelligence of international students?
- In what ways do I value knowledge and practice from imperial centres/ Global North relative to those from Global South? How might this impact my research practices with international students?
- What obstacles hold me back from doing humanising, anti-oppressive, culturally appropriate and transformative research with international students?

- How do I self-reflect on my positionality in relation to coloniality and its impact on my research with international students?

Suggestions for researchers

Much of our society has become super diverse – different cultures, identities and languages (Chapter 8; Magazzini, 2020). With increasing diversity, there is potential for a new approach to doing research. As researchers, we need to break through our limited perspectives based on and rooted in Western and Eurocentric perspectives and engage in innovative and decolonising research. When researching with international students, we need to address important epistemological questions relevant to their issues; build cultural understanding and illuminate the multidimensionality of their experiences and nuanced subjectivity. Some international students might be marginalised by the way we speak and work with them when our research frameworks carry the unspoken yet somehow tangible oppressive effect of epistemological and cultural hierarchy (Dudgeon & Walker, 2015). Hence, it is important that we recognise our positionality and privilege and embrace a decolonising strategy and alternative knowledge systems.

More importantly, we need to understand what we can and/or should do to decolonise imperial ideologies about the Other – international students – that underpin colonial relations of rule, especially, in terms of its racialised privileging of Whiteness and Eurocentric knowledge system (Maitra & Guo, 2019). As researchers, we should examine, consider, critically reflect and consciously engage in conversations around how the power of coloniality impacts research engagement and affects international students as individuals, groups or collectives (Prilleltensky, 2008). It may require also decentring Whiteness, working on and against racist and deficit discourses and transforming colonial mentalities and ideologies in our approach to research. This would also entail that scholars:

- Make visible and undo coloniality and its consequences on personal and professional levels.
- Recognise race privilege and White supremacy and do a power analysis and a critical discussion of Whiteness in relation to the research focus.
- Critically examine the structures of domination and oppression and how they are embedded in them.
- Explore and validate worldviews, perspectives, cultural knowledge and practices of international students.
- Engage in cross-cultural interaction with international students in a decolonising or anti-colonial approach.
- Recognise, name and problematise systemic discrimination, and champion the voices of international students.

- Become allies to historically marginalised and dispossessed people, working together to find solutions to address issues of racism and growing inequities facing people, especially international students.
- Adopt a human right-based approach with an ethic of, and commitment to, social justice and promotion of more inclusive conceptions of human rights for international students

Our goal as researchers becomes, then, to transform research using anti-racist, anti-colonial, anti-oppressive, culturally appropriate and decolonised forms of research to build a more just, inclusive, sustainable, resilient and thriving world. Therefore, we need to make effort to decode the matrix of coloniality and make necessary changes by deconstructing, questioning, confronting and challenging colonial ideologies, theories and values that shape and influence our research practice. We need to critically rethink research from our experiences of marginality in relation to hegemonic dominance and their corresponding impacts on international students' experience, well-being, belonging and academic success.

Example in practice

Article: Udah (2021)

Article focus: This article examines coloniality of power and international students' experiences.

Article strengths: This article uses “coloniality of power and border thinking” to reflect on the systemic nature of discrimination and international students' racialisation. It highlights the need for critical, self-reflexive awareness about the legacies of colonialism and hegemonic Whiteness, which illuminate the critical issues of research with international students discussed in this chapter.

Note

- 1 Global South refers broadly to regions of, or people from, Latin America, Asia, Africa and Oceania. It is one of a family of terms, including ‘Third World’ and ‘Periphery,’ denoting regions outside Europe and North America, mostly (though not all) low-income and often politically or culturally marginalised or so-called developing countries. It marks a shift from a focus on development or cultural difference toward an emphasis on geopolitical power relations (Dados & Connell, 2012).

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