20

REFLECTING ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

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Introduction

For developing and framing research with international students, the previous chapters focused on conceptual and theoretical considerations. This section turns to practical methodological considerations and methods that can address the key critiques so far and shift research on this topic towards more ethical and critical outlooks. Starting off the last section of this book, this chapter concerns positionality as a foundation for developing new research designs. A key argument of this book is that international students and their knowledges, languages, and cultures should be treated as epistemic equals in the research about their experiences (see Section 2, particularly). We argue that this requires that researchers understand and recognise the ways their positionalities influence the research process and its outcomes. Just like the groups they study, researchers come with histories and socialisation. The positionalities researchers bring with them affect the whole research process (Madden, 2010). The aim of this chapter is to provide perspectives and suggestions that can help researchers to reflect critically and responsibly on their positionality in research with international students. Additionally, this may help address some of the issues raised in the preceding chapters. We draw on our previous work on researcher positionality (Adriansen & Madsen, 2009) and use examples from research with international students studying at a Danish higher education institution (Spangler, 2022).

Critical considerations

Positionality refers to the social and political positions of those involved in the research – both the researcher and the participants. It is a tool to critically call into question how we know, inhabit, and move through worlds (Mullings,

1999). Positionalities are relational and emerge situationally; they are not total, nor are they static (Rose, 1997). Positionality extends beyond the boundaries of our selves; it is a relational formation of co-constituted nature (Massey, 2005), rather than only navigating our individual identities (Kinkaid et al., 2022). Research about positionality builds upon the notion that knowledge is situated (Haraway, 1988) and that "where we are located in the social structure as a whole and which institutions we are in . . . have an effect on how we understand the world" (Hartsock, 1987, p. 188). Challenging epistemological claims about universality, objectivity, and unbiased knowledge, we argue that critical reflections on positionality may lead to more comprehensive analyses because it becomes transparent where the researcher speaks from. It is about acknowledging that our age, gender representation, nationality, ethnicity, job, and position in society, as well as our personal experiences, influence our research, while keeping in mind the transient and relational nature of positionality (Reyes, 2020). When conducting research with (international) students, reflecting on researcher positionality entails reflecting on how these different aspects affect us during our whole research process from formulating research questions, to conducting the research itself, to analysing and publishing the research. It is about acknowledging how it will affect your research if you are, for example, a young, international master's student conducting research multilingually with other international students, as compared to an experienced professor working in your mother tongue.

Reyes (2020) uses the concepts of visible and invisible characteristics when writing about the strategic use of positionality in the field. We find the concepts useful as visible characteristics such as gender, age, accent, and other appearances such as 'race' are different from invisible characteristics, such as nationality, profession, academic degrees, hobbies, and family background. Folkes (2022) argues positionality is relational and, therefore, we use (consciously or not) our different characteristics when, for instance, negotiating access or building rapport. It is also important, however, to move beyond what Folkes (2022, p. 4) has labelled 'shopping list positionality', which is simply listing the researchers' characteristics and how they are similar or not to the informants. Instead, we need to engage in situational understandings of positionality that entail reflecting upon how positionality has played a role in the construction of knowledge from the design of the study (Chapter 21), to producing the empirical material (Chapters 22–25), to the analysis and writing (Chapter 26).

Being an insider in educational research

According to Sikes and Pott (2008), an insider is somebody who is attached to or involved in the organisation or its social groups prior to commencing the study. Therefore, being an insider is common in research with international students. However, we find this is a simplified understanding of the insider

position. Foremost, we see the insider positionality as a sub-position as you are always an insider by sharing a position with the research participants, whether this is a visible or an invisible characteristic (see Reyes, 2020). The debate of being an insider or outsider to the community studied has been and remains a key debate within qualitative research (e.g., Folkes, 2022). Discussions often concern dis/advantages of each position. 'Insiders' argue that they are likely to gain more intimate insights and competently understand the experiences of those inside the community, while 'outsiders' argue that they have an advantage of greater distance and are more likely to be perceived as neutral by not belonging to the community under study (Holmes, 2020).

There seems to be, however, a binary implied in such insider/outsider debates assuming that being an in/outsider is a fixed attribute, disregarding the dynamism of positionalities through space and in time. Few researchers completely remain outsiders and no one can attain a consistent insider position (Mullings, 1999). In research with international students, we will, as former students ourselves, always have some sort of insider knowledge. Yet, international students may see us as outsiders due to, for instance, our seniority or nationality. One will likely move between both positions and fall somewhere within the 'space between' (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Hence, "an insider is someone who is considered an insider by the other members of a given community and/or who participates on par with the other members of that community" (Adriansen & Madsen, 2009, p. 147). This means that, while the researcher may use her positionalities strategically to gain an insider position, this may not happen if the members of that community do not consider her an insider. Or the insider position can rapidly change if the researcher talks or behaves in a manner that is not considered to be a 'true' way of behaving for an insider.

One should also responsibly attend to the power relations and hierarchies. When having an insider position, these hierarchies may seem blurred, but it is important to remember that the researcher maintains analytical power (Rose, 1997). The researcher has a privileged position by defining the research problem, deciding which questions should be asked, and analysing the data. Furthermore, it is important to reflect on the diversity present within the homogenised groupings of 'international students'. Insider status does not mean insider to *all* experiences. For example, a young White woman studying in a majority-White country may be an insider in terms of being an international student but cannot claim to truly understand the racialised or marginalised experiences of other groups of international students (e.g., Chapter 9).

Examples of negotiations of positionality during fieldwork

We will now draw on examples from our research with international students to illustrate how researchers might reflect on and negotiate positionality during

a study. The first author, Hanne, is a Danish associate professor and the principal investigator (PI) of the research project Geographies of Internationalisation. The second author, Vera, is German. During her undergraduate studies, she studied for one semester in Denmark. After Vera finished her studies in Germany, she returned to Copenhagen as a full-time international master's student. Driven by her personal experiences and motivation, Vera designed the research for her master's thesis, which was affiliated with Hanne's research project. Hanne was her supervisor throughout the process from research design to fieldwork and thesis writing. Afterwards, we co-authored a paper based on Vera's ethnographic fieldwork with international students (Spangler & Adriansen, 2021), which we draw on here.

During her semester abroad, Vera studied at the same institution where she conducted her research and was able to *gain access* through her contact with the international coordinator. The position of Hanne as PI of the project was also important, as she had a signed agreement of collaboration with that higher education institution. In the field, Vera had to learn that access is far more than a simple matter of physical presence; it is rather a constant process of negotiating positions from which the necessary data can be gathered (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007). Here, for instance, the lecturers of the individual courses were important gatekeepers within the first weeks of fieldwork. With a few lecturers, gaining access to their classes was a simple, practical matter, communicated via email. Some others wanted to meet Vera before they agreed to invite her to their class. These different forms of negotiation access shaped her position within the individual classrooms. The lecturers who she met in advance made extra time to introduce her to their classes, creating more direct awareness of her presence. Interestingly, the specific ways in which the lecturers presented her to the students also had an impact on her position and interactions in the classroom. One lecturer said, "She will be our little fly on the wall", and another one said, "We are thankful to have her. She will participate with you in class". Vera adapted and followed these somewhat implicitly assigned positions. In one class, she would sit in the back corner of the room, quietly observing, while in the other class, she would participate in activities and discussions.

Participant observation is often described as an oxymoron, as there is tension between the two terms (O'Reilly, 2012). Yet, Vera experienced it more as dialectic. In the beginning, she found herself in a complete observer role. Coming from many places, the international students, though, were in the same position, having to form social bonds with one another. Vera was naturally pulled into this process (becoming a full participant). This proved decisive for building closer relationships with the students. She followed them everywhere around campus, joined them to get coffee during class breaks, ate lunch with them, or attended study group meetings after class hours. Based on her age, nationality, and position as a student herself, it was not difficult for Vera to blend in with the students. She used these insider positionalities for building rapport with the group. She introduced herself as an international

student and, for the purpose of being with the group, as a researcher. Many of them approached her to ask about small things, like how to get around in the city or to learn about her experiences of what it means to be a student in Denmark. The students quickly started to greet her in the morning, included her in group work, and invited her to social events off campus. This insider positionality was a continuous, dialectic experience which also led to careful ethical considerations and (re)negotiations.

Ethnographic fieldwork requires a careful balance between becoming close, but not too close (Madden, 2010). Throughout fieldwork, Vera observed several classroom situations where she saw students trembling, unable to speak, filled with anxiety, and leaving class in tears. By participating in the daily lives of the students, Vera became entangled in multiple facets of their lives. This integration presented her with feelings of morality and questions of commitment which went beyond the immediate research topic (see Moskowitz, 2015). Witnessing scenes that she considered on a moral human level not acceptable invoked a feeling of obligation within her. She encountered serious ethical responsibility and her different roles and forms of engagement posed a dilemma on how to position herself.

Sharing personal experiences with her participants both helped and affected the research process. Primarily, her personal lived experiences as an international student herself challenged her in keeping a distance and not becoming overly sympathetic. Many of the international students referred to Vera as their friend, often emphasising that she was one of the first people to be attentive and available to them during their time in Denmark. The relationship between informants and ethnographer may be perceived as one of the core aspects of conducting ethnographic fieldwork (Driessen, 1998). While the aim of the fieldwork experience is to get a sensibility and closeness of the people and everyday sociality, ethnographic work is also coloured by instrumentality (Madden, 2010). Consequently, it is essential to engage reflexivity to identify and articulate one's positionality. Getting close to the international students allowed Vera to 'be there', while at the same time, she had to keep a certain distance and disengage to absorb and process all the information. Here, one may perceive Hanne's position as an external-insider (Banks, 1998). As an insider, she brought expertise to the subject and field, but also helped Vera to detach herself from the group and suggested ways to strategically use her positionality differently, for example, drawing more on the researcher/ethnographer positionality and less on the (fellow) international student positionality to develop a more detached role in the group. This helped Vera realise that positionality is not static or fixed but rather an ongoing negotiation.

The aspect of *language* and positionality is also important (explored further in Chapter 25). While English was the means of communication among the international students, it was not the only language present. During fieldwork, it seemed that coming from the same country and speaking one language provided students with an understanding of one another's experiences.

Indeed, previous research has portrayed the preference between students to work with those sharing the same backgrounds (Singaram et al., 2011; Moore & Hampton, 2015). Vera's classroom observations mirrored these aspects of self-segregation by cultural background among the international students, wherein language often played a role of dis/connection, regulating positioning of inclusion and exclusion and a sense of belonging. Being German herself played in similar ways into Vera's positionality. She could, for instance, approach students from Switzerland, Austria, and Germany in their mother tongue and conduct interviews with them in German. Being a linguistic insider and sharing an ethnic identity (Liamputtong, 2010) was facilitative for Vera to seek positional spaces of trust and cooperation. Positional spaces are, however, transitory and cannot be reduced to such insider/outsider privilege (Mullings, 1999). Particularly, international students bring various backgrounds and languages with them and researchers will most likely find themselves in a position of cultural outsiders (Manohar et al., 2019) to most of them.

Vera had planned two *interview sessions* with some of the students. The first one on campus and the second one in the students' current homes – one of the most intimate of our everyday spaces. Entering the private space of research participants is usually off-limits because participants can be in fear of judgment or a certain sense of scepticism (Folkes, 2022). During the visits, Vera noticed how important it was for the students to make her feel comfortable in their homes, offering her slippers, tea, and one informant cooked dinner for her. This may reflect that it was important for them to present themselves in a certain way. To negotiate her insider position in the students' homes, Vera tried to emphasise some of the commonalities between them, sharing stories about her living situation and how challenging it was to live on a student budget. This situation, however, can lead to an atmosphere where it is difficult to maintain the position as a researcher asking critical questions or just saying "What do you mean by that?" (Adriansen & Madsen, 2009). This requires reflexivity during the analysis, where the researcher should ask herself about the potential shortcomings of the material and how her positionality has influenced the data generated.

Reflection questions

- Who am I in this subfield of research with international students? What is my position in terms of academic position, disciplinary background, gender, age, ethnicity, etc.? How does my personal migration history influence my approach to this topic?
- What do I bring with me, which biases and/or subjectivities? How can my positionalities be limiting to understanding international students? What may cause a lack of shared understanding (e.g., assumptions and

expectations)? How does my privilege shape what I am seeing/not perceiving due to my location in social structure?
- How am I positioned by my participants and others while in the field?
- How can I use my position strategically (e.g., to gain access or empathise with participants)?
- How has my own positionality changed, or not, through the research, and why?

Suggestions for researchers

Keep a journal to stay aware of your positions throughout the research process. Conducting research with international students means that you have participants from various sociocultural backgrounds. Some may consider you an insider in some ways, others not. Your positions may shift, and you will need to continuously clarify them.

If you can conduct research with another person, try to make reflective notes about what is going on before you talk and synchronise your views. If you interpret situations differently, this can be valuable data.

Create a practice (e.g., take notes, talk to others, listen to your interviews) where you critically reflect on who you are in the subfield/ community, what you bring with you, and how you approach and position your participants and vice versa. Positionality is at stake during all phases of the research process, from the planning phase to conducting the research to the analysis. Acknowledging and identifying your positionalities can enhance a reflective awareness and better understanding of your own biases.

Altogether, this involves reflecting on your position within the wider research subfield and your (potential) contributions about international students' lived experiences, and how you eventually portray them.

Example in practice

Article: Folkes (2022)
Article focus: It shows how to move beyond simple 'shopping list' descriptions of positionality to understand the actual dynamic of positionalities.
Article strengths: It uses the concepts 'in/visible characteristics' to understand basic elements of positionality and shows how researchers can use conversations with colleagues and interviewees to engage in reflexivity about positionality. Through examples from her own research, we see the transience of positionality and how it influences both the construction of the research problem and its outcome.

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