

International Students and Politics of Vulnerability

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ABSTRACT

A significant amount of educational research has foregrounded the challenges international students face while living and learning abroad. While “challenge-centric” research has been productive for highlighting the needs of international students, it has tended to reify international students as a vulnerable group in need of intervention. This approach has often downplayed international students’ agency and has not fully moved beyond the boundaries of deficit thinking. This article discusses the implications of framing international students as a vulnerable group before offering some conceptual starting points that might orient future research in more productive directions. It suggests that foregrounding the agency of international students offers a promising mode of reanimating research and briefly discusses the methodological, conceptual, and political implications of doing so.

Keywords: agency, educational research, deficit thinking, international students, vulnerability

Over the last few decades, a significant amount of research has highlighted the hardships international students face in educational institutions. Systematic literature reviews have highlighted persistent challenges they encounter in classrooms, as well as issues such as social isolation, economic insecurity and mental health issues (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). This research has also highlighted forms of discrimination international students endure when living and learning abroad. Analyses of this kind have gained momentum in recent years, given the impacts of COVID-19. Some emerging studies highlight the deepening of existing hardships for international students and the creation of new ones (Forbes-Mewett, 2020).

While such research has been productive for highlighting the needs of international students, it has tended to reify international students as a vulnerable group in need of intervention. However, does research of this nature generate the kind of change scholars

are wanting to bring about? Are there negative implications of framing international students in this way? Are there alternative framings that might be more valuable? This article discusses the implications of framing international students as a vulnerable group before offering some conceptual starting points that might orient future research in more productive directions.

VULNERABILITY AGAINST DEFICIT

Increasing rates of student mobility throughout the 1990s precipitated scholarly interest in the experiences of international students. An early strand of this research was predicated on an assumption that the hardships international students faced were the result of their own conduct, background, and behavior (see Andrade, 2006). Anchored firmly within a deficit approach, much of this research explained international students' negative experiences by highlighting what they apparently lacked, focusing especially on the cultural competencies to thrive in their host nations. Zhang-Wu's (2018) systematic review of research about Chinese students' experiences in American institutions, for instance, found that many studies begin from the assumption that Chinese students are linguistically incompetent. From a deficit approach, the solution to such issues was for international students to adopt "acculturation" strategies that might help them "fit in" with a dominant culture abroad.

Later research sought to unseat this kind of deficit thinking by linking the negative experiences of international students with the shortcomings of educational institutions themselves. By centering the voices of international students, researchers highlighted themes such as inadequate teacher training, racism, challenges navigating university bureaucracy, and social exclusion (Montgomery, 2010). Heng (2017), for example, shows how Chinese students in some American institutions feel that educators share anecdotes that are difficult to understand without having grown up in the United States and want more encouragement from educators to share their viewpoints. This kind of research draws attention to axes of power that affect international students and suggests that these need to be mitigated to create more inclusive and democratic spaces.

This latter kind of research critiqued the assumption that international students needed to change by presenting a convincing case in which they needed support. However, this conceptual maneuver entailed another set of difficulties that have not been fully unpacked. Without attending to the agency of international students, some of this research has reified understandings of international students as a vulnerable group in need of intervention. Lomer and Mittelmeier's (2021) recent systematic review of pedagogical practices with international students in the United Kingdom, for instance, demonstrates that international students still tend to be framed as passive or deficient, rather than as agents of knowledge. Heng's (2020) systematic review of studies about Chinese international students worldwide found that most studies foreground the challenges they face rather than how they actively navigate higher education. As Tannock (2018, 187) puts it, we have come to know international students as "inevitably struggling foreigners". I want to suggest that by casting international students as a vulnerable group, much research has yet to move fully beyond the boundaries of deficit thinking.

VULNERABILITY AS A DEFICIT

Davis and Museus (2019) argue that a critical element of deficit thinking is that marginalized groups are said to lack the motivation and graft to succeed. If this is so, anti-deficit research might be advanced by highlighting the skills and capacities of marginalized groups. It might foreground the dynamic ways they create change and render visible the contributions they make to educational institutions and societies. One wonders, then, whether “challenge-centric” studies that cast international students as vulnerable advance anti-deficit thinking.

Educational research about international students that casts them as vulnerable has had little to say about their capacities and practices. Deuchar (2022) argues that studies that investigate the “experiences” of international students, for example, tend to catalog what *happens to* them in higher education rather than how they actively shape those institutions (see also Heng, 2020). Focusing on international students’ “experiences” often downplays their agency and consolidates their understanding as a passive group. In other instances, international students’ agency has been cast in reactionary terms by investigating the ways they “respond to challenges” or how they develop “coping mechanisms” (Hong, 2022). In this formulation, agency follows hardship but does not precede it. This tells us little about the array of human activities that punctuate international students’ lives.

Casting international students in need of support also privileges institutions as the architects of paternalistic interventions that are “received” by international students. In part, this is as it should be: educational institutions are centrally responsible for ensuring international students’ needs are met. However, framing international students as passive recipients of interventions downplays the vital ways they support and care for each other. This includes developing “communities of practice” to help them meet the demands of new learning and social environments, as well as offering emotional, affective, and practical support throughout their transnational sojourns (Montgomery, 2010).

It is also worth questioning the political value and implications of framing international students as a vulnerable group. Such portrayals are unlikely to win among a broader public in Western countries, especially in times of austerity and uncertainty. Even if the case for supporting them is especially well made, their claims are unlikely to garner much traction relative to other social groups. Analyses that center the challenges international students face do not give another card to play. They are unable, for example, to substantiate a robust claim to recognition based on the social and cultural contributions that international students make to educational institutions.

There is clearly a lot at stake in the way that researchers portray international students in Western countries. What I have tried to establish thus far is that framing international students as a vulnerable group might not be the most viable way of improving their circumstances. However, how might research about international students be more productively framed?

REIMAGING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS, REIMAGINING RESEARCH

Anti-deficit research about international students must begin with conceptual categories that create scope for illuminating their social practices and agency. Social practices can be understood as vast arrays of embodied human activity that are materially mediated and

organized around shared practical understanding, while agency can be understood as the capacity of actors to shape and make meaning from and through their environment (Schatzki, 2001). Practice theories draw attention to the significance and meaning of everyday life, and they converge in their assessment that the social world and institutions – such as universities – do not exist prior to practice but are constituted through it. Centering the practices of international students orients attention to *what they do* in spaces of education, how they are entangled with other materialities and objects, and how they partake in the production and change of educational spaces. It also casts attention on how their practices are interconnected with other sites, such as the home, the workplace, and other sites of sociality.

Scholars have drawn on theories of practice in educational settings to investigate how privileged social groups reproduce their advantage (Bourdieu, 1984) and how dominated groups attempt to resist their domination. Others have shown how marginalized groups come to value ways of being that consolidate their marginality (Willis, 1978). The point is that casting international students as agentive actors is a starting point and not a finding, and exploring the expressions and implications of social practice requires empirical investigation and theory building. Importantly, building theory in this way will necessitate the use of more expansive repertoires for analyzing international students' practices, including posthuman theories (Gravett et al., 2021), with existing debates still dominated by individualist and instrumentalist approaches (Lo, 2019).

There are also important methodological implications of reorienting research toward the social practices of international students. Educational research about international students has typically drawn on survey methods and one-off interviews. However, a broader set of qualitative methods carries the promise of conducting research “with” international students and recognizing their role in knowledge production. Peter et al. (2020), for instance, developed insights into the emotional and affective impacts of COVID-19 on students in China through autoethnography. Ploner's (2017) analysis of biographical narratives of international students in the United Kingdom illuminated “alternative mobilities” that challenge analyses that privilege economic criteria. Other methods researchers might productively draw on include participant observation, which is especially well suited to investigating social practice, as well as photovoice and other creative methods.

If research productively pursues this path, what will become of the vulnerable international student? A focus on social practice will not altogether dispense with a focus on hardship. However, international students are conceptualized as relational and agentive actors amid that hardship. It is this conceptual move that opens theoretical terrain that has not been fully probed. A focus on international students' social practices will investigate the array of activities that punctuate their everyday lives. In addition, it will render visible the contributions they make to educational institutions and societies. Therefore, vulnerable international students should be reimagined as capable and competent agents with the capacity to change the world.

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