

12

BRINGING GENDER INTO RESEARCH WITH INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Siqi Zhang and Jenna Mittelmeier

Introduction

In continuing our understanding of international students' intersectionalities (Chapter 8), this chapter considers bringing gender into research with international students. In doing so, we recognise that research through a gender lens is perhaps more prominent than other identities outlined in Section 3. However, there remains space to reflect on gender as a social and cultural construct, alongside the tendency to assume gender is only a consideration for those who identify as women. Research on this topic also often paints women international students as vulnerable or marginalised subjects, positioned from deficit assumptions around the 'challenges' of being a woman in intercultural spaces. This, of course, makes important contributions to the literature, such as Forbes-Mewett and McCulloch's (2015) critical analysis of international students and gender-based violence. However, existing research often also misses needed conversations about gender and agency, exploration, or coping.

We argue, first, that there is a need to understand gender in research with international students as a varied socially and culturally constructed concept. Second, we illuminate how new lenses are needed for understanding how gender intersects with international or intercultural experiences in complex ways. We also, third, argue for a need to see research related to gender as not merely affecting those who identify as women, but as a construct which impacts all students who cross borders. Finally, we end with considerations for how research processes, beyond the topic of study, are gendered or could be improved through the lens of gender.

Critical considerations

Conceptualising gender

Scholars have long questioned the problematic nature of gendered roles and how they influence normative behaviours and practices, particularly in relation to power and (sub)ordination (e.g., Millett's, 1970 evaluation of 'sexual politics'). Within this, it is recognised that contextual factors influence the ways gender and gendered roles are constructed, defined, and given meaning in varied 'social hierarchies' (Delphy, 1984). In this chapter, we consider how differing constructs of 'gender', which refer to socially and individually constructed identities, vary in the act of border crossing, in addition to conceptualisations of 'sex', which focuses on biological and anatomical determinants. Gender, as we evaluate it here, refers to the cultural and social imaginary that gives meaning to constructed groups such as 'men' and 'women', through which individuals develop their own gender identity/ies (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). In research with international students, these gendered social imaginaries may shift and change when studying in new contexts of power.

Social constructionist accounts have highlighted the significance of social and cultural factors in conceptualising gender across different spaces (see the analysis of, e.g., Thorne et al., 2019). Wittig (1992), for example, questioned the idea that gender is a universal category, arguing instead that womanhood (but also likely expandable to other gender identities) is a concept that is constructed (and imposed) through particular social, cultural, and historical contexts ('*one is not born a woman*'). This aligns with Millett's reflections on the importance of 'the culture's notions of what is appropriate to each gender by way of temperament, character, interests, status, worth, gesture, and expression' (1970, p. 31). Cultural meanings are, then, attached to labels such as 'men', 'women', or 'non-binary', among other identities. For international students, their cultural constructs of gender and gendered roles may vary, and they may encounter different social/cultural constructions of their gendered identities in their new host context.

Gender, thus, can be regarded as plural and provisional, rather than fixed and static, as outlined particularly by Butler (1990, 2011) who conceptualised gender as performance. Butler (1990, p. 25) argues that 'there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender', suggesting that identity is instead constituted by 'the very expressions that are said to be its results'. Through this lens, everyday practices and social interactions continuously shape a social individual's gender identity. It is through 'doing gender' that a social individual produces 'the effect that there was some gendered person who preceded the performance' (Richardson, 2015, p. 19). Therefore, the construction of gender identities can be seen as a continuous process of performance. For

international students, this may bring up cultural incongruities in normative expectations for or reactions to their performance of gender.

Gender as a global social and cultural construct

More care is needed for researchers working in intercultural spaces to recognise the plurality of ways that gender and gendered roles have been conceptualised across cultures (see also Chapter 11). For instance, some scholars have outlined that contemporary understandings of gendered roles are colonial and Eurocentric constructs that have been enacted upon cultures which were not historically patriarchal (e.g., Oyèwùmí, 2011). Binary gender constructs of ‘men’ and ‘women’ also hold alternative understandings in other cultures, where examples are aplenty for ‘third-gender’ identities around the world (Thorne et al., 2019), such as Two-Spirit (Robinson, 2020) or Hijra (Goel, 2016) identities. For instance, Ismoyo (2020) highlights how five genders are commonly recognised in Bugis culture in the South Sulawesi region of modern-day Indonesia. In research with international students, this may bring up complexities for how gender is understood and reflected on by participants, based on their cultural positionings.

Strong critiques have also been made about the tendency for hegemonic discourses about gender and feminism to erase other or alternative global constructs (Mohanty, 2003). For instance, scholars such as Lugones (2016) have highlighted that colonisation and coloniality have imposed gendered constructs in cultures which have historically held more pluralising understandings (see also Chapter 11). This further relates to diverse global understandings of feminism, which is interpreted and valued differently in various settings, not least because of its historical tendency to centre White women in many contexts. Even regionally, cultural and demographic differences impact approaches towards feminism and feminist beliefs (Maathai, 2006). For instance, scholars have outlined the differing feminist values of Arab women in North Africa and Black women in sub-Saharan Africa (Atanga, 2013) and the tendency for White South African women to align more with ‘Western’ feminist values than those of their Black African peers (Stuhlhofer, 2021). There are, therefore, tensions within research between pluralistic interpretations of gender and feminism in varied social and cultural settings and problematic assumptions about the universal applicability of Eurocentric notions. Thus, when undertaking research about gender through a feminist lens in research with international students, it begs questions of whose feminism and why?

Gendered constructions also influence the ways that international students are gendered *through* research, particularly when scholars are working across cultures. Chen (2007), for instance, critiques the construction of Asian women in the ‘Western’ gaze, revealing hierarchies of power within and across cultures. For example, the cultural heritage of Confucianism in

China has historically played a significant role in shaping gender roles and norms (Croll, 1995). The infantilising ‘small persons’ discourses (Rosenlee, 2006) used to describe women in Confucian contexts reinforced women’s subordinate position as wives, daughters, and mothers (Croll, 1995). Yet, although Confucian rhetoric has strongly impacted historical understandings of Chinese womanhood, contemporary feminism in China is dynamic and not determined by this history (Wu & Dong, 2019). However, Chen (2007) observes that researchers, particularly those in Anglophone contexts, tend to assume Asian women are carriers of certain Confucian virtues, stereotyping them as ‘obedient and quiet’ (Arisaka, 2000, p. 215). With this in mind, we reflect next on problems in existing gender research with international students.

Limitations in existing research with international students

The intersections of gender, migrant student status, and other identity facets

Other chapters in this section have highlighted the valuable lens that intersectionality (coined by Crenshaw, 1991) provides for understanding how students’ migrant status interacts with other identity facets such as race, disability, sexuality, and class. Within this, students’ gendered experiences have been in more prominent focus in critical research compared to other identity facets (see, e.g., Zhang & Xu, 2020; Liu, 2017). However, research tends to view gender in isolation without reflecting on how it also intersects with, for example, race, class, or religion. This means there is an ongoing need for researchers to go beyond one-dimensional approaches to ensure that the complexity of lived experiences is not excluded in research.

Research which does highlight gendered experiences across multiple identity facets demonstrates the importance of this lens. For instance, Selod’s (2018) conceptualisation of ‘gendered racialisation’ provides a framework for understanding how religion, race, ethnicity, and gender intersect to reinforce inequalities. This was applied by, for instance, Karaman and Christian (2020) to explore how Muslim women students’ bodies are racially coded. This was further explored by J. Zhang and Allen (2019) in their analysis of Chinese men studying in the United States, highlighting the ‘double burden’ of racialisation with constructions of masculinity. Class, similarly, intersects with gendered identities, outlined through a strong disappointment expressed by Chinese women international students when their middle-class social status was overridden by their perceived status as ‘racialised migrants’ (Zhang & Xu, 2020). Altogether, this highlights how identities intersect with gender to shape international students’ pluralistic lived experiences, offering avenues for future research.

Seeing beyond the 'vulnerability' of women

Research about gender and international students tends to centre on women's experiences. In doing so, there is a tendency to homogenise women's lives through a simplified story of 'struggle' (Mohanty, 2003). Critiques of such work highlight how this 'inevitably work[s] to flatten the women's identities, place them as victims, silence them, and remove their personal and collective agency' (Azim & Happel-Parkins, 2019, p. 15). Of course, gendered inequalities are real and should be studied, such as the important work highlighting the gendered violence women have experienced abroad (Forbes-Mewett & McCulloch, 2015). However, the subfield has a dearth of literature which also highlights how women may enact agency, cope, manage, or grow through the experience of studying in another country. By failing to illuminate women international students' agency, alongside their struggles, one danger is that scholars may reproduce stereotypes of them as solely a vulnerable group.

Some existing research shows pathways forward for new perspectives on women's experiences. For example, Martin (2016) demonstrates how Asian women international students regarded educational mobility as an opportunity for learning new social values to critically challenge gendered norms upon returning home. Another example is Sondhi and King's (2017) analysis of Indian women studying in Canada and their perceptions of 'freedom' from gender expectations while abroad. Other research points to greater complexity in narratives of international students' social networks, which typically portray them as 'unintegrated'. For instance, racially alienated Chinese women international students have been shown to negotiate friendships with fellow Chinese peers as a reference group for reflecting on their transnational growth, a creative way to demonstrate their agency (S. Zhang & Xu, 2020). In this way, women international students who may be commonly framed as 'vulnerable' show powerful ways of questioning and disrupting the normative patriarchal frames of both home and host countries. Together, this shows how research can contradict deficit narratives constructed through gendered stereotypes by highlighting women's agency in their international study experiences.

Considering research about gendered experiences beyond women

Because research about gender tends to focus on those who identify as women, there is an ongoing need for research to consider the gendered experiences of other groups. One example is the gendered experiences of international students who identify as men, which is currently under-researched. Nonetheless, existing research does highlight the ways that men negotiate ideas of masculinity and manhood in new cultural contexts, particularly through the lens of racialisation (as previously outlined by J. Zhang & Allen, 2019). Oliffe et al.'s (2010) research, for instance, shows how the intersections of masculinity and racialisation are experienced by participants across Asian, Latin American, and

Middle Eastern countries. The work of Deuchar (2023) also highlights how some Indian international students in Australia have developed ‘caring masculinities’ in providing for fellow international students. However, there remains an ongoing need to expand such understandings of how men (re)negotiate and experience changing gendered expectations across cultural contexts.

There is also a stark paucity of research which centres on the voices and experiences of international students who identify beyond the gender binary. Although there are growing avenues for researching the experience of transgender, non-binary, and third-gender students generally in higher education (e.g., Nicolazzo, 2016), hardly any published research specifically focuses on international students. Nonetheless, research about, for example, transgender and gender-expansive American students participating in short-term study abroad programmes (Michl et al., 2019) points to distinct joys and challenges. Wider migration research also provides some hints at how transgendered mobility ‘challenges how countries historically construct their borders and, by default, their nation-states’ (Yue, 2012, p. 280). However, there remains a limited understanding of the intersections between transgender, non-binary, or third-gender identities and migrant student status. While this undoubtedly is a small population, given intersecting inequalities of access to international higher education, it is an important absence that inhibits knowledge. This, coupled with the aforementioned complexities of cultural definitions of gender spectrums, represents a significant gap worthy of consideration for future research.

Bringing ‘gender’ into research processes

Thus far in the chapter, we have primarily focused on gender as an object of study, but it is also worth considering the ways that research processes are gendered (or could be strengthened through greater attention towards gender). Gendered stereotypes or assumptions may be present throughout the research design, from conceptualisation through to writing, even in research that is not expressly ‘about gender’. For instance, assumptions about gender occur in how social constructs are categorised and delineated in research (such as through quantitative variables; see Chapter 23). Gender bias may also structure the literature researchers read and cite, positioning gendered assumptions about whose knowledge matters. For example, although this has been limitedly evaluated in research with international students, analysis in other fields shows that women are cited less often than men, particularly by men (Dion et al., 2018). Equity of access to the benefits of research may also be unequal, particularly if patriarchal assumptions have delineated who imagined beneficiaries are, as highlighted by Criado-Perez (2019) in her in-depth analysis of ‘a world made for men’. Therefore, considerations are needed for reflecting on why gender in relation to international students tends to centre solely on narratives of participant experiences, whereby gender, in line with Butler’s

(1990, 2011) conceptualisation of it as *performance*, may be performed throughout the research design and writing process for research on all subtopics.

Reflection question

- As a starting point, have I considered how gender intersects with other facets of international students' identities?
- How am I defining gender in my research? In doing so, have I considered how gender and gendered norms are socially constructed differently across cultures?
- How might my participants define gender or gendered identities, and how might that vary from my own conceptualisations?
- How might my participants be encountering different or new gendered assumptions, norms, or performances while studying internationally?
- In what ways could my research move beyond focusing solely on gendered vulnerabilities? Where might my participants be enacting agency in their gendered experiences?
- How might the *processes* of my research be gendered, beyond the specific topic of study?

Suggestions for researchers

Explicitly define gender in your research and engage with how it may be constructed by participants. Constructions of gender are often an assumed shared concept, but we have highlighted in this chapter variation across cultures. Therefore, any research which centres gender should begin by defining it and reflecting on the underpinning assumptions entailed by that definition. This may include, for instance, spending time reflecting on researcher positionality (Chapter 20) and how, as researchers, our individual identities and gendered experiences may frame assumptions we have about participants. When working across cultures, this likely also means engaging with theories about gender that originate in the spaces where our participants are from.

Negotiate and reflect with participants on how they construct their gendered identities. Participants themselves are in the best position to outline their own conceptualisations of gender and how they identify themselves. Researchers may, for example, assume how participants may identify based on their performance of gender (Butler, 1990) and what that means from their own cultural lens or standpoint. This also influences practices such as creating pseudonyms for participants, where pseudonyms chosen without participant discussion may not align with the gendered reflections that participants have of themselves.

Consider the intersectionality of gender with other identity facets. We have outlined in this chapter that gendered experiences do not exist in a vacuum but instead are influenced through other identities, including race (Zhang & Allen, 2019) and religion (Karaman & Christian, 2020), among others. This means there is a need for thinking through an intersectional lens and considering nuance and complexity in the ways that identities interact with one another.

Reflect on the purposeful inclusion of gender, rather than gender for gender's sake. We reflect that gender is often 'tacked on' to research as a key indicator of engaging with inequalities and difference. For instance, research with international students may include a breakdown of participants' gender or label a participant's gender alongside their data or quote without further engagement. However, this is a shallow engagement with gender as a social and cultural construct and does not reflect on how experiences are gendered. Therefore, researchers may wish to question why they have included information about gender in their research and how, in doing so, they are engaging with what gender means to the findings developed.

Example in practice

Article: S. Zhang and Xu (2020)

Article focus: This article reflects on the lived experiences of Chinese women at universities in the United Kingdom.

Article strengths: Building upon the theories of gender and distinction, this article investigates how newly acquired gendered disposition of the mind, cultural taste, and global identity during their mobility contributed to Chinese female international students' construction of distinction. The findings suggest that the way they perceive gender intersects with race and class, which helps to understand the women international students' experience as a complicated journey rather than a simple and homogeneous journey.

References

- Arisaka, Y. (2000). Asian women: Invisibility, locations, and claims to philosophy. In N. Zack (Ed.), *Women of color in philosophy: A critical reader*. Wiley.
- Atanga, L. L. (2013). African feminism? In L. L. Atanga, E. E. Sibonile, L. Litoseliti, & J. Sunderland (Eds.), *Gender and language in Sub-Saharan Africa: Tradition, struggle and change* (pp. 301–314). John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Azim, K. A., & Happel-Parkins, A. (2019). Veiled aggression: Saudi women international students' experiences of microcolonization in the United States. *International*

- Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 32(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2018.1522010>
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2011). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex*. Taylor & Francis.
- Chen, C. (2007). The difference that differences make: Asian feminism and the politics of difference. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 13(3), 7–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2007.11666028>
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>
- Criado-Perez, C. (2019). *Invisible women: Exposing data bias in a world designed for men*. Vintage Publishing.
- Croll, E. (1995). *Changing identities of Chinese women: Rhetoric, experience, and self-perception in twentieth-century China*. Hong Kong University Press.
- Delphy, C. (1984). *Close to home: A materialist analysis of women's oppression*. University of Massachusetts Press.
- Deuchar, A. (2023). Degrees of care: Theorising the masculinities of Indian international students in Australian universities. In G. Stahl & Y. Zhao (Eds.), *Migratory men: Place, transnationalism, and masculinities*. Routledge.
- Dion, M. L., Sumner, J. L., & McLaughlin Mitchell, S. (2018). Gendered citation patterns across political science and social science methodology fields. *Political Analysis*, 26, 312–327. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pan.2018.12>
- Forbes-Mewett, H., & McCulloch, J. (2015). International students and gender-based violence. *Violence Against Women*, 22(3), 344–365. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801215602344>
- Goel, I. (2016). Hijra communities of Delhi. *Sexualities*, 19(5–6), 535–546. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460715616946>
- Ismoyo, P. J. (2020). Decolonizing gender identities in Indonesia: A study of Bissu ‘the trans-religious leader’ in Bugis people. *Paradigma: Jurnal Kajian Budaya*, 10(3). <https://doi.org/10.17510/paradigma.v10i3.404>
- Karaman, N., & Christian, M. (2020). “My hijab is like my skin color”: Muslim women students, racialization, and intersectionality. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 6(4), 517–532. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332649220903740>
- Liu, J. (2017). Beyond the cultural approach: Understanding the experience of Chinese international students in Canada from an intersectionality perspective. *International Journal of Chinese Education*, 6, 236–258. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22125868-12340082>
- Lugones, M. (2016). The coloniality of gender. In W. Harcourt (Ed.), *The Palgrave handbook of gender and development* (pp. 13–33). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Maathai, W. (2006). *Unbowed*. Alfred Knopf.
- Martin, F. (2016). *Overseas study as ‘escape route’ for young Chinese women*. <https://theasiadialogue.com/2016/06/22/single-and-mobile-overseas-study-as-escape-route-for-young-chinese-women/>
- Michl, T., Pegg, K., & Kracen, A. (2019). Gender X culture: A pilot project exploring the study abroad experiences of trans and gender expansive students. *The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 31(2), 32–50. <https://doi.org/10.36366/frontiers.v31i2.453>
- Milllett, K. (1970). *Sexual politics*. Ballantine.

- Mohanty, C. T. (2003). *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*. Duke University Press.
- Nicolazzo, Z. (2016). *Trans* in college: Transgender students' strategies for navigating campus life and the institutional politics of inclusion*. Stylus.
- Oliffe, J. L., Robertson, S., Kelly, M. T., Roy, P., & Ogrodniczuk, J. S. (2010). Connecting masculinity and depression among international male university students. *Qualitative Health Research*, 20(7), 987–998. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732310365700>
- Oyèwùmí, O. (2011). *Gender epistemologies in Africa: Gendering traditions, spaces, social institutions, and identities*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Richardson, D. (2015). Conceptualising gender. In V. Robinson & D. Richardson (Eds.), *Introducing gender and women's studies*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ridgeway, C. L., & Correll, S. J. (2004). Unpacking the gender system: A theoretical perspective on gender beliefs and social relations. *Gender & Society*, 18(4), 429–538. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243204265269>
- Robinson, M. (2020). Two-spirit identity in a time of gender fluidity. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 67(12), 1675–1690. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2019.1613853>
- Rosenlee, L. L. (2006). *Confucianism and women: A philosophical interpretation*. State University of New York Press.
- Selod, S. (2018). Gendered racialization: Muslim American men and women's encounters with racialized surveillance. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 42(4), 552–569. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2018.1445870>
- Sondhi, G., & King, R. (2017). Gendering international student migration: An Indian case-study. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 43(8), 1308–1324. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1300288>
- Stuhlhofer, E. W. (2021). *Navigating African feminisms: Wangari Maathai as a portrait* [Paper presentation]. Presented at Africa Knows! Conference, Universiété Lieden. <https://nomadit.co.uk/conference/africaknows/paper/58023>
- Thorne, N., Yip, A. K., Bouman, W. P., Marshall, E., & Arcelus, J. (2019). The terminology of identities between, outside, and beyond the gender binary – a systematic review. *International Journal of Transgenderism*, 20(2–3), 138–154. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2019.1640654>
- Wittig, M. (1992). *The straight mind and other essays*. Beacon Press.
- Wu, A. X., & Dong, Y. (2019). What is made-in-China feminism(s)? Gender discontent and class friction in post-socialist China. *Critical Asian Studies*, 51(4), 471–492. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2019.1656538>
- Yue, A. (2012). Queer Asian mobility and homonational modernity: Marriage equality, Indian students in Australia, and Malaysian transgender refugees in the media. *Global Media and Communication*, 8(3), 269–287. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742766512459122>
- Zhang, J., & Allen, K. R. (2019). Constructions of masculinity and the perception of interracial relationships among young male Chinese international students and scholars in the United States. *Journal of Family Issues*, 40(3), 340–362. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X18809751>
- Zhang, S., & Xu, C. L. (2020). The making of transnational distinction: An embodied cultural capital perspective on Chinese women students' mobility. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 41(8), 1251–1267. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2020.1804836>