

**INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF OTHERING IN TERTIARY
EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY**

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Abstract

Despite rising cases of xenophobia in South Africa, international students remain committed to enrolling in its universities. Surprisingly, there is limited research looking into xenophobia in tertiary institutions. Therefore, the present study aimed to contribute to the scarcity of knowledge on the experiences of international students in South Africa. Thus, the study explored experiences of Othering among international students in tertiary education in South Africa and how they make sense of these experiences. Purposive and snowballing sampling techniques were employed to recruit international students (N=5) from Botswana, China, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Data was collected through semi-structured, face-to-face online interviews. Participants reported experiencing a variety of non-violent forms of Othering, such as feeling excluded due to the intentional use of local languages in both classroom and social settings; being rejected by local students who refused to work with them; and being accused of stealing opportunities from local students. At an institutional level, participants reported systemic Othering rooted in unsupportive policies and practices that led to a negative and oppressive environment. The findings support previous research studies that purport the Othering of international students in higher education in South Africa mainly manifests through non-violent and covert forms. Moreover, participants attributed Othering of immigrants to racism, a perceived lack of exposure to diversity among locals, perceived lack of compassion for immigrants, and the tendency to scapegoat immigrants for the lack of employment opportunities in the country. The findings underscore the intricate nature of Othering and the need for further research to gain a greater understanding of this complex phenomenon. Furthermore, the findings highlight the importance of implementing effective strategies of inclusion and integration of international students at these institutions of higher learning.

Keywords: Othering, Afrophobia, immigrant, higher education, prejudice, xenophobia

Introduction

Over the last two decades, there has been an upsurge in xenophobic violence in South Africa (SA) (Mlambo, 2019). In 2008, the most heinous acts erupted in the township of Alexandra, outside Johannesburg, and later spread to other parts of the country (Chimbga & Meier, 2014; Odiaka, 2017). These attacks led to the deaths of 62 people and the displacement of tens of thousands. SA has experienced numerous waves of xenophobic attacks since 2008 (Obadire, 2018). Many of these attacks occurred in impoverished communities, with black African nationals and Asian entrepreneurs usually targeted (Addae & Quan-Baffour, 2022; O'Halloran, 2018;).

Research on immigrant population in SA post-2008 primarily focused on impoverished communities, where most attacks erupted (Kirshner, 2012). Places not considered 'hotspots' of xenophobic violence, such as tertiary education institutions, were overlooked. However, recent studies have uncovered xenophobic attitudes and perceptions among university students (Akande et al., 2018; Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2012). Subsequently, there has been a shift in the literature as researchers slowly investigate and uncover this phenomenon in higher education (Maseko, 2019; Obadire, 2018; Singh, 2013).

Singh's (2013) study, designed to investigate xenophobia and its impact at a tertiary institution in Limpopo, found that xenophobia manifested itself in non-violent ways. These practices included derogatory name-calling; use of the local language to exclude international students; hostility from staff; discrimination in room allocation; poor service delivery; and general exclusion from activities. Obadire's (2018) study, also at a tertiary institution in Limpopo, found xenophobic attitudes among students and staff. Similarly, xenophobia manifested in non-violent ways such as using the local language to exclude international students; local students refusing to share accommodation with international students; derogatory name-calling; accusing international students of practising witchcraft, and

authorities favouring local students. Similar findings were also made by Maseko (2019) in a study of students from two universities in KwaZulu-Natal.

Although xenophobia tends to manifest itself in non-violent ways in institutions of higher education, Singh (2013) cautions against dismissing its adverse effects. In fact, existing evidence has revealed that subtle discrimination can sometimes be more damaging than overt forms (Hebl et al., 2016). Furthermore, Noh et al. (2007) found a link between subtle discrimination and depressive symptoms in their study of Korean immigrants. Considering this, studying xenophobia in ‘hotspot’ areas is as important as studying it in areas outside these ‘hotspots’. Therefore, this study aimed to explore experiences of Othering among international students in tertiary education and the meaning they attach to these experiences.

Xenophobia, Afrophobia and Othering

Prejudice against immigrants is often referred to in the literature as xenophobia (Akande et al., 2018; Iwara et al., 2018; Tella, 2016). Research suggests that black African immigrants are more likely to experience discrimination than white immigrants (Addae & Quan-Baffour, 2022). Therefore, some scholars believe that Afrophobia is a better construct to capture this phenomenon (Tafira, 2011). Other scholars argue that the Afrophobia hypothesis is flawed as not all black African immigrants are targets of xenophobic attacks. Thus, racial understandings oversimplify xenophobia, especially in SA (Saville Young & Jearey-Graham, 2015). Therefore, a deeper, more contextualised understanding of anti-immigrant sentiments is necessary to capture the experiences of prejudice against immigrants accurately. The concept of Othering offers a framework that holds a generalised set of common processes, structures, and conditions that perpetuate group-based inequality and marginality and encompasses the many expressions of prejudice and exclusion based on group identities (Powell & Menendian, 2016). Therefore, in this study, xenophobia and Afrophobia are operationalised as forms of

Othring. This study thus sought to explore the experiences that marginalise and oppress international students in tertiary education in SA.

Theoretical Considerations of Othring

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Michel Foucault, Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak are scholars who contributed significantly to the development and understanding of the concept of Othring (Ball, 2012; Jensen, 2011).

In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel proposes the theory of the master-slave dialectic (Stefan, 2012). Using the analogy of "master" and "slave", he argues that for the self to be aware of itself, it must first become aware of the Other, as the awareness and acknowledgement of the Other allows the self to develop its identity (Hegel, 1977).

The idea of the Other in Foucault's work concerns the inherent power imbalance (Ball, 2012). He believes that power is not something an individual or a group possesses but is created through interactions (Foucault, 1978, as cited in Moosavinia et al., 2019). Discourse is created through interactions, and Foucault asserts that power is inherent in discourse. Foucault argues that those who control discourse have the power to define reality (Foucault, 1980, as cited in Carey et al., 2009), and the dominant group has the ability to control the discourse about the out-group.

Edward Said's theory of Orientalism builds on Foucauldian insight (Moosavinia et al., 2019). It postulates Europeans Othered persons from the East by portraying them as exotic and primitive inhabitants of a strange and dangerous land. In contrast, the West was portrayed as a place of rationality, order, and progress (Said, 2016). This dichotomy was used to justify Western imperialism and its dominance over Eastern peoples and cultures (Thomas-Olalde & Velho, 2011).

Spivak, another scholar whose work was influenced by Foucault, re-coined Othring as a systematic theoretical concept within the post-colonial theory (Jensen, 2011; Thomas-Olalde

& Velho, 2011). She argues that the Other is defined by those in power and those who benefit from its consequent marginalisation (Spivak, 1985, as cited in Jensen, 2011). Moreover, she critiques the tendency within hegemonic discourses to render the Other voiceless. Using Foucault's work as a reference, she argues that the Other, which she refers to as subaltern, is constructed through Othering, which naturalises difference for oppression to justify oppression and exploitation. Spivak's work has influenced subsequent debates about Othering and its role in sustaining inequality and injustice (Jensen, 2011). Her insights have challenged assumptions about who can speak for those considered 'lower ranking and how their voices can be heard (Gingrich, 2004). With these considerations in mind, the research questions and the focus of the present study were formulated.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study.

1. What themes of Othering can be identified from the experiences of international students in tertiary education in SA?
2. How do international students make sense of their experiences of Othering?

Theoretical Framework

Data was viewed through the lens of social constructionism. The social constructionist perspective rejects positivism and empiricism and opposes the perspective that "conventional knowledge is based upon objective, unbiased observation of the world" (Burr, 1995, p. 3). It further purports that social phenomena are products of social interactions and do not necessarily reflect "natural" differences (Bryman, 2012). The collected data thus reflects the participants' perceptions of their realities (Willig, 2013).

Methodology

This study followed a qualitative exploratory study design (Bryman, 2012). This design was deemed most appropriate given the scarcity of research exploring the experiences of Othering among international students in tertiary education in SA.

Participants and Recruitment

The study adopted purposive and snowballing sampling techniques to identify a sample of 5 international students in tertiary education in SA. The inclusion criteria were as follows; participants must have been international students studying at a South African tertiary institution for at least six months and must be at least 18 years of age. The selected participants were from Botswana, China, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Their ages ranged from 21 to 37 years, with four females and one male participant. Four participants were postgraduate students, and one was an undergraduate student.

Data collection

One-on-one semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. During sessions, an interview guide was used to obtain idiosyncratic data while keeping sight of the research objective (Willig, 2013). A set of open-ended questions made up the interview guide, allowing the researcher to incorporate the participants' comments and formulate additional questions throughout the interview. Due to the spread of COVID-19, data was collected via electronic means such as ZOOM and WhatsApp video calls. The data was then analysed, and follow-up interviews were conducted for respondent validation of the analysis (Willig, 2013).

Data analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis. The primary researcher transcribed each interview verbatim to gain familiarity with the data. The same researcher then read and re-read the transcripts to gain further familiarity and noted relevant aspects of the data related to the research question. NVivo, a qualitative data analysis

computer software package produced by QSR International, was used to generate initial codes by coding all parts of the data. Once statements were coded, they were sorted to construct themes. The themes were reviewed and refined. After reviewing the themes, some were discarded, others were split, and some were combined. Finally, the themes were defined and named.

Reflexivity

Although a stance of ‘not knowing’, a tenet of social constructionism that encourages curiosity in the research process (Losantos et al., 2016), was adopted throughout, the positionality of the first author does need to be acknowledged. The first author is an international student who has experienced Othering while studying at a tertiary institution in SA. Having adopted a social constructionist framework, the aim was not to achieve an objective or neutral position. It is thus acknowledged that the findings are co-created by both participants and the researcher.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from Rhodes University's Ethics committee. Participants were informed about the purpose and methods of the study and signed consent forms. They were further informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point. The audio recordings were password protected and kept secure by the first author. To maintain participant anonymity, participants were pseudonymised and identifying information was excluded from the transcripts.

Results

Analysis of the data identified six themes. The first two themes captured the type of experiences participants had of Othering and themes three to six captured the way in which participants made sense of these experiences.

Theme 1: Exclusionary Othering practices through non-violent behaviour and negative attitudes

Some participants described behaviours and attitudes they experienced as abusive and owing to their citizenship status. These experiences included purposefully excluding them in conversations in social settings where local students revert to vernacular language that is poorly understood by foreigners.

“But when a fellow student who is well aware that I’m a foreigner [addresses me in IsiXhosa] I get so annoyed. Yeah. Like some address you in English, only for them to speak Xhosa when the other Xhosas join them. So, like they are well aware [that] you can’t, you won’t understand. I think their intention is to exclude me from the conversation. Like it it's meant to make me feel like an outsider, like I don't belong.”
(P4)

“That's something that needs to be done, uhm to make it an intentional decision to say if a boy or girl walked in this department from Mozambique or Angola and we were talking about something that happened in rugby in South Africa, I'm picking rugby because very few countries in Africa do rugby, would they be able to understand?” (P1)

Moreover, other more specific experiences reported include local students refusing to work or interact with them, demeaning jokes about immigrants, being accused of stealing jobs, and name-calling.

“I came in early in March and then there [were] two friends [who] refused to see me after my quarantine and that hurt me actually” (P3)

“I remember there was a time my friends used to joke about foreigners crossing the border into SA on the backs of crocodiles. I don’t like such jokes cos that’s xenophobia hidden in humour. When you sit and think, you realise damn, these people are

xenophobic. So, when they see me, they see an undocumented foreigner.” (P4)

“I was a sub-warden for my res and there was a girl who stopped talking to me because she was a sub-warden in the previous year, and she told other people that 'no Kay (pseudonym) got my job'... The funny thing is we were two sub-wardens that were picked, one South African and me [non-South African], but they took offence about me and never took offence about the other person.” (P1)

Theme 2: Othering denoted and maintained by institutional policies and practices

Participants described policies and practices within tertiary education they deemed biased and discriminatory toward them as international students. There was a general sense that participants believed that they were not valued, and their enrolment was based on the monetary gain they provided for institutions of tertiary education referring to international levy, a fee that they pay in addition to the tuition fees. They further raised concerns over the international fee which is applied at some institutions in SA. Some participants reported that they found the international fee exploitative. There was also a general sense among the participants that support structures, such as the international offices, were not established to support or advocate for them. Instead, it is believed these offices sole purpose is to ensure the smooth process of registration. Perpetuating the belief that international students are only enrolled for monetary gain.

“I personally believe that we’re passive income projects for [this university.] All they do is to set up a team that will check our visas and medical aids at the beginning of the year then they disappear.” (P4)

Moreover, the participants reported that policies implemented by tertiary institutions before the 2020 national lockdown overlooked postgraduate international students. They reported that universities initially sent undergraduate students home but encouraged postgraduate students to self-isolate in their residence halls. However, a day before the

lockdown, they received a communique they could no longer be accommodated. National and local students immediately went back home, but international students could not as flights and buses were fully booked. According to participants, this indicates that management structures do not consider them when making decisions.

“They had forgotten international students, imagine sending us an email saying, ‘the following day at 5 leave’, we don't have money, we have to book flights and other countries had stopped [operating], they didn't consider international students, they didn't.” (P2)

“It was so much, like honestly, the lockdown was hard for everybody, but I feel international students had even worse than everybody else. Cos personally we had to go to an Airbnb and slept there for like three months then from there we then moved to Digs [off-campus].” (P1)

Further concerns were raised about the general management and support at tertiary institutions during the 2020 national lockdown which favoured local students.

“So, during lockdown [the university] sent us back home. Then we started seeing emails that students in SA will receive 30GB of data. Did I not die when they offered to send us R99 or something for data?” (P4)

More generally some participants complained that tertiary institutions make provisions for local issues such as femicide but fail to address xenophobic attacks or any issue affecting international students.

“Okay, so at the time she [Uyinene] was murdered I remember getting an email from our counselling centre and they were encouraging us to go for counselling. ... But, however, I have an issue with [the university's] double standards. The very same week she passed, there were xenophobic attacks in KZN and Joburg. So, I thought the counselling centre will send an invite again for trauma counselling for us foreigners

but nuh, nothing...], we were also affected by the brutal attacks on our fellow countrymen.” (P4)

Theme 3: Afrophobia vs Country of origin as a privilege.

Participants made sense of the above-mentioned experiences through two divergent and conflicting discourses. On the one hand, participants expressed that Othering of immigrants in SA is racially motivated as it is only directed at black African immigrants.

“Like if you were to sit with a white foreign national for your research, I don’t think you’d even spend 10 minutes with them cos they’d have nothing to report... I just think South Africans hate fellow Africans cos we are forever targeted.” (P4)

“We can even bring it to academics, so a black kid, a black international kid will always be [expected] to do way better because you are representing a whole country. If you fail, they will say Zambian girls are lazy, they will say Zambian people. They will not say Kay, they will say Zambians are lazy. But a white kid will be there crying in the office and the professor will also be crying with the white kid” (P1)

On the other hand, the participants reported that African immigrants are not all subjected to xenophobic violence. Whether one will be Othered, and to what extent, largely depends on their country of origin, therefore, casting doubt on the former discourse that anti-immigrant sentiments are racially motivated.

“I haven’t heard anything during xenophobic attacks that Batswana have been attacked, I only hear about Nigerians, Tanzanians, Zimbabweans yeah” (P2)

“Like we don’t experience xenophobia at all cos South Africans take us as their own.” (P5)

“I know in South Africa, the people who are having the worst are the Zimbabweans.” (P1)

Theme 4: Lack of exposure to diversity

Participants further made sense of their experiences with the understanding that immigrants in SA are likely subjected to Othering because majority of the South Africans lack exposure to diversity outside of and within the country. They opined that the majority of South Africans do not travel and that therefore it could be one of many factors that explain their apparent ‘suspiciousness’ to non-natives.

“Yeah, like South Africans are generally not exposed to other cultures. It’s so weird cos South Africa is such a diverse country. For example, you take someone from the Eastern Cape, and you ask them to tell you anything they know about the Limpopo people... We can bet 100 bucks that they won’t tell you anything. I get why they are a rainbow nation. The colours of the rainbow are just next to each other, but they don’t mix. Like they co-exist but they don’t cross each other’s boundaries.” (P4)

“I mean like I think it’s because of that, they don’t travel a lot. So, yeah, they’re not exposed to other cultures.” (P2)

“I’m sorry to say this but South Africans do not really travel. Like a lot of them do not travel from the comfort of their homes, so they are not really exposed that much to other cultures you grow up thinking that your culture is [superior].” (P1)

Theme 5: Lack of compassion for immigrants

Some participants attributed their experiences of Othering to a lack of compassion for immigrants. They argued that human beings generally lack empathy for others. This way of making sense of Othering surfaced mainly when talking about the unfair practices and policies implemented within tertiary education in relation to international students. They believed that if the management at institutions had compassion for them, there would be strict policies to protect them, especially as the xenophobic climate in the country is common knowledge.

“There was no empathy from [the Vice Chancellor] or whoever advises him, they had

no empathy...If they knew that [the university], I'm sure it's not like they knew from the night before, if they knew [the university] had no capacity to contain the virus or keep the students, they should have let us go a long time ago when undergrads were going."

(P1)

"How were postgrads expected to get home? To travel cross borders, you don't just pick bags and travel, you must book for either a bus or flight. Another thing, it's not free, how did [the university] expect them to get home? Surely, management didn't put themselves in their shoes." (P4)

Theme 6: Scapegoating immigrants

Lastly, some participants believed that the Othering of immigrants in SA is motivated by the locals' belief that immigrants are in SA to "encroach" on their already limited resources, particularly in relation to job opportunities.

"Their perception is they see us as threats honestly in all spheres, in academic spaces, they see us as threats they think, 'oh, they've come to take our spaces in our class', umm in [the] job market, they see us as threats..." (P1)

"They think we are here to steal their opportunities. I think even the country has policies on this one." (P4)

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the experiences of Othering among international students in tertiary education and how they make sense of these experiences. As with previous studies, this study found that the Othering of immigrants in higher education in SA manifests itself in subtle and non-violent ways (Maseko, 2019; Obadire, 2018; Singh, 2013). The participants described being excluded by language in social and classroom settings, having local students refuse to work with them, and being accused of stealing employment opportunities. As strict policies and laws against overt discrimination are being implemented,

levels of overt discrimination are rapidly decreasing (Johnston & Nadal, 2010). The present study seems to support some of the literature that suggest that covert forms of prejudice still exist, referred to as microaggressions (Sue, 2007).

It is the perception of the participants of the present study that covert forms of prejudice still prevail. This is considered to be antithetical to the concept and values of Ubuntu that the country prides itself in of caring for others, helping them, and treating them with the dignity they deserve by virtue of being human (Ramnath, 2022). One possible explanation for this incongruence could be that people have inherited unconscious biases through socialisation and cultural conditioning (Johnston & Nadal, 2010). Those who engage in covert Othering are likely unaware of their biases. Johnston and Nadal (2010) further argue that people generally believe they are morally right. Therefore, making them confront their biases and discriminatory actions through awareness campaigns and education may threaten their self-image. Consequently, the need to maintain an unbiased and good person's self-image may perpetuate their prejudices (Johnston & Nadal, 2010).

Participants reported structural or systemic Othering rooted in unsupportive policies and practices within tertiary education institutions. Previous studies have found similar results, such as dissatisfaction with excessive foreign fees and unhelpful international offices (Maseko, 2019; Murara, 2011). Foucault's concept of the Other (Foucault, 1980, as cited in Carey et al., 2009), based on the idea that there is an inherent power imbalance between the 'in-group' and 'out-group', could explain this preferential treatment of domestic students. Within this understanding the dominant group imposes discriminatory policies by enforcing their self-serving values.

Findings in the present study attempt to address the ongoing debate of Afrophobia versus xenophobia. Participants posit that prejudice is often against a particular group or community of black Africans. This supports the argument that Afrophobia does not

accurately describe the full scope of this phenomenon. These results are consistent with the findings of Dube (2017), who conducted a study among Zimbabwean immigrants living in Johannesburg and Durban. Dube's research revealed that Ndebele, Zimbabweans of Mzilikazi ancestry, who speak a Nguni language, felt safe in Durban. In contrast, Shona Zimbabweans who do not speak the Nguni language reported experiencing prejudice. Conversely, both Shona and Ndebele immigrants encountered prejudice in Johannesburg. This is especially important, as it attests to the complexities inherent in the understanding of the South African xenophobia that extends beyond race.

Interestingly, participants believed that locals' lack of exposure to diversity likely contributed to their experiences of being Othered. While SA is theoretically one of the most diverse countries in the world (Gefen et al., 2005), it appears to have remained racially segregated for the most part even after gaining its independence in 1994 (Seekings, 2008). During the Apartheid era, races were physically segregated through discriminatory laws (Seekings, 2008). Thus, it is likely that the lack of interaction with 'out-groups' both in and outside the country is a remnant of its separatism policies. As a result, there are fewer chances to mitigate group prejudices, as research suggests that increased contact between groups tends to mitigate group prejudices (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Further, participants cited a perceived lack of compassion for the 'out-group' as one of the factors perpetuating the Othering of immigrants in SA. This is in line with the hypothesis of dehumanisation (Haslam, 2006) that posits that the members of the 'in-group' tend to assume that the members of the 'out-group' are incapable of feeling a full range of human emotions, especially secondary ones (Anderson, 2010). Perceiving members of the 'out-group' as less than human normalises their mistreatment and discourages members of the 'in-group' to empathise or understand their pain. Exclusionary institutional policies and practices are explainable when considering the majority of the decision-makers in these institutions are

members of the 'in-group'.

Lastly, participants made sense of their experiences of Othering through the 'scapegoat hypothesis'. They argued that immigrants serve as scapegoats for the lack of jobs and other opportunities (Harris, 2002). Critics of this hypothesis argue that it is unclear why immigrants, especially those of a sect particularly susceptible to hostility, serve as scapegoats (Glick, 2002), highlighting further the complex nature of the phenomenon of Othering.

Recommendations

The present study, although based on a limited sample size, highlights the imperative for further research into covert discriminatory practices of against non-native students in institutions of higher learning in South Africa. The results could be used to improve international students' sense of belonging by identifying areas that need to be addressed. Moreover, it is recommended that the existing support structures devise strategies to increase interaction between resident and non-resident students. A review of interventions for group-based prejudices supports the ameliorative effects of such interactions (Kayitesi & Mwaba, 2014).

Limitations

The results of the present study should be interpreted in light of the following limitations. The small sample size and sampling method does not allow for generalization of the results. However, the study provide some invaluable insight into the lived experiences of the participants.

Conclusion

South African tertiary institutions continue to enrol a significant number of international students each year, many of whom face varying adjustment difficulties. This study sought to add to the existing literature on this often-overlooked population by exploring the experiences of Othering. The findings show that anti-immigrant attitudes are prevalent at

individual and institutional levels. Furthermore, the findings highlight the need for tertiary education institutions to devise strategies to engage with international students and foster belonging. Finally, the findings highlight the complexities of prejudice and the need for further research in this area.

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