

## Framing International Education within the Global

Kahn, Hilary E., ed. 2014. *Framing the Global: Entry Points for Research*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

### Reviewed by Eric Leise, University of South Dakota

Framing the global requires one to possess a clear understanding of what the term “global” means, where its boundaries start and stop, and who it includes and excludes. This emergent thesis in Hilary E. Kahn’s edited volume, *Framing the Global: Entry Points for Research* (2014), furthers our understanding of the global by forcing us, as academics and practitioners, to reflect on our own relationship with the word and the way we contribute in our praxis to its meaning.

The “global” leaves out the United States and the local contexts of its people’s daily existence. In global studies discourse where the United States appears in analytical frameworks, it is usually an overlooked unit of analysis, often taken for granted. The United States is not the object of analysis; at best, it emerges as the antagonist. We see this throughout international relations, comparative ethnic and race studies, and cultural studies, among others. Of course there are countercurrents to this trend in areas such as critical and queer theory, but these schools of thought tend not to make their way into dominant academic discourse. As a result, the United States emerges in the global studies literature and research frameworks largely as a point of comparison or a basis off which to situate the context of the “other,” the “non-American.”

Faranak Miraftab’s chapter in *Framing the Global* is case in point. The chapter addresses displacement and dispossession in post-industrial midwestern United States by contrasting U.S. citizens, specifically African Americans, and immigrant communities. In doing so, Miraftab demonstrates how global economic transnationality reframes boundaries of belonging, as well as “social reproduction” processes. The study is an acute observation of the intersection of transnational economies and their embedded relations, and makes a strong argument for considering different explanations of how native and nonnative-born workers feel those effects. Miraftab’s study pulls the “American” aspect into the global by situating the analytical framework within complex transnational, intersectional, and relational processes, but it does so by taking the United States as a unit of, and not the subject of, analysis. It also juxtaposes the citizen against the noncitizen as its units of analyses, thus reinforcing the span between “American” and “non-American.”

Miraftab’s work also touches upon a more subtle observation about the American hegemony that is reproduced throughout the transnational and relational nature of contemporary world markets, as evidenced in the discussion of free trade agreements. The emergent theme of hegemony comes about in other chapters of Kahn’s volume as well. Manuela Ciotti observes how global art markets have evolved in the global south to reframe “hegemonic and universalizing trends arising out of the West” (2014, p. 54), while Stephanie DeBoer examines how film and media redefine the meaning of the local to demonstrate how this medium

challenges “homogenizing the globe into one Western imperialist...or global capitalist...façade” (2014, p. 138). Such inquiry into how globalization structures cultural, social, economic, and political reproduction has been repeated in other academic writing from individuals such as Naomi Klein. In most cases, American, or at least Western hegemony becomes the antagonist and the basis on which to compare the “other.” While noteworthy and necessary, problematizing this hegemony and its homogenizing effects around the globe tends to reify this dichotomy within analytical frameworks. Such analysis requires and reproduces hegemony by making it the lens through which to understand and challenge how we frame the global.

Reflecting on the complex ways in which American hegemony is reproduced through our points of entry as academics and practitioners, I am often brought back to our own discourse within international education about the global, or perhaps more appropriately for our purpose, the “international.” In our practice, we often reinforce global binaries and reify boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.

The goal of this review is to offer some points of reflection for us as practitioners that, I believe, if discussed and subsumed more pointedly in our daily work, could transform the way in which we frame our own notions of the global. The goal is to ask ourselves how we might contribute to breaking down patterns of hegemony and homogenization within the specific context of international education by examining how we categorize and quantify our students. I do so by taking the U.S. higher education experience as the point of analysis. While it is challenging to make generalizations without oversimplifying reality, I also recognize a need to sometimes paint with broad strokes. I do so without discounting work being done by colleagues that is innovative and might not fit neatly within my examples and descriptions.

### **What’s in a Category?**

As the contributors in *Framing the Global* have highlighted, the global is a complex place that both divides and unites. Themes of transnationalism, homogenization, social and cultural reproduction, and intersectionality explain how identities and boundaries of belonging are becoming increasingly fluid and relational as the world becomes more interconnected. Returning to the notion of how the global causes us to question “us” and “them” and reflect on ways in which we contribute to these constructs both in practice and in academic inquiry, I turn to our own methods of identifying who “our” students are within international education.

The label of “international” student is perhaps the most ubiquitous claim we make on our students. While we use this label with the best intentions, the category reproduces the hegemony and homogenization explored earlier in this article. Our definition and discourse of international students create inherent distinctions between “domestic” and “international” students, reifying “us” and “them” in our practice. If we deconstruct these two categories, we can move toward a deeper understanding of how this dichotomy reproduces many of the same globalization processes observed in *Framing the Global*.

Domestic students are often split into myriad ethnic and racial categories, gender and sex distinctions, socioeconomic variables, and personal attributes. This same group is further split into categories of citizen, permanent resident, foreign born, DACA, or “unknown/other” (often used for “undocumented migrant”). Importing citizenship as a variable to describe domestic or noninternational student attributes brings sociopolitical distinctions into how we construct who belongs to the “domestic” student group, and reproduces senses of belonging and national identity.

This contrasts with the “international” student group. Fast facts on university websites frequently provide numbers of international students as a distinct category, separate from domestic students who are often broken down by racial and ethnic definitions. Noting numbers of international, African American, Asian, Hispanic, American Indian/Pacific Islander, etc. is used to demonstrate an institutional commitment to diversity and inclusiveness. However, it also presumes “international” describes a homogeneous group of students. Further, by placing “international” within or next to ethnic and racial categories, which is often where one finds these statistics, it prescribes a racialized label to this group. In establishing our categories, we reproduce processes of homogenization and reassert hegemonic power by ascribing labels on the “other,” the non-American.

However, we all know that the international student category is far from homogenous. This has long been established in academic discourse. In their 2008 study, Marie Väfors Fritz, Dorothy Chin, and Valerie DeMarinis highlight the heterogeneity among international students by examining variables such as finances and familial ties to explain differing levels of stress and anxiety experienced during the acculturation process. Their analytical framework takes permanent U.S. residents as the control group by which to gauge these differences among international students, and then it goes deeper by subdividing the international group into Asian and European students, recognizing further heterogeneity. While this work exposes important differences among these groups, it also demonstrates how we conceptualize students in U.S. higher education institutions within an “us” versus “them” framework.

We see the same framework reproduced elsewhere in academic inquiry. For example, in a 2001 study, Julie Spencer-Rodgers raises awareness of heterogeneity among international students by examining the practice of stereotyping between international and American “host” students, which again takes advantage of the us-them analytic. In order to understand international students, there is an unshakable need to compare this group against domestic or permanent resident populations. In doing so, we reify the categories we use as entry points to understand our students.

This is not to say that categories are without merit or do not serve broader purposes important to advancing knowledge and understanding. However, in line with the emergent themes in this book, we need to consider how our categories might change to account for transnationalism and intersectionality, both of which contribute to increasingly fluid identities that betray our current labels.

One way to accomplish this in our praxis is by being more precise in defining what we mean when employing the term “international” student. In general, an international student adviser does not advise all students who consider themselves, or are considered by others, as international. When we use titles like “international student adviser,” “sponsored student adviser,” “international compliance officer,” or “director of international student services,” what we mean to describe is a position that, in most cases, advises and delivers services to students who hold an F, M, or J visa.

Reconceptualizing the definitions we employ in more precise terms such as “F-1 student adviser” challenges basic assumptions and, in turn, contributes to redefining boundaries of belonging. No longer is it about “us” and “them,” or domestic and international students, but rather it is about a precise, legal explanation of the student group. I would argue that a title like “F-1 student,” which would be a natural antecedent to that of “F-1 student adviser,” leaves aside

culturally laden notions of who belongs and does not belong to the category of “international.” It also opens the possibility of anyone belonging to “us.”

Another advantage of moving toward more precise categories such as “F-1 student,” “J-1 student,” and even “non-U.S. resident student” is the disruption to representing international students in campus statistics alongside ethnic and racial categories. Since “F-1” is a legal category not synonymous with an ethnic or racial identity in popular consciousness, these students become a more visible agent of diversity. In such a framework, the international student becomes “a student from Ghana who holds an F-1 visa.” This example uses People First Language to transform the passive international student into an active agent who has more control over his/her own identity. Avoiding the prescribed identity of the “other,” as is presumed in the term “international student,” contributes to disrupting the reproduction of hegemony and homogenization by framing the student as his/her own agent, while also accounting for complex identities and shifting boundaries of belonging.

### **Quantification and the Bottom Line**

The notion of challenging our categories for the purpose of reorganizing our point of entry in working with and serving our students is perhaps grounded by the need for categories within the assessment culture of U.S. higher education. One cannot deny the importance of assessment, nor shall one write off the importance of the shift toward empirical-based practice in higher education over the last decade and a half. In her October 26, 2010, article featured in *Inside Higher Ed*, Linda Suskie brings attention to the purpose of data gathering, which she describes as the “accountability versus improvement” need for assessment. Without meaningful categories, gathering data and producing reports is impossible, and detaches us from the importance of empirical-based practice.

It is the nexus between the quantification of our students and the categories we employ in quantifying them that is of concern here. By disrupting the process of categorization, we can draw attention to and problematize our culture of data gathering as a way of ensuring we are asking appropriate questions in appropriate ways to the appropriate groups. Doing so will allow us to remain true to our shared values as international educators, which often fall by the wayside when justifying our *raison d’être* within higher education.

Since most of our work is situated within, or in relation to, institutions that have broader goals and priorities, some that do and some that do not embody our own shared values as international educators, we need to rely on our data to tell our stories to those above us, and to inform institutional goals and strategies in ways others in higher education may not. International educators often find themselves within the accountability area of assessment needs because of one simple fact: a university can exist without an international programs office. It cannot exist without academic departments, financial aid professionals, registrar officers, or student housing. This forces us, the “global” practitioners within higher education, to negotiate our value and purpose within the institutional context. At the same time, our positionality within this assessment culture gives us the opportunity to impact the way we imagine our student communities.

There is an abundance of studies on student learning outcomes in education abroad (e.g., the Georgetown Consortium project), and the same inquiries into “international” student motivations, integration processes, and academic success have also developed into a robust body

of literature over the last two decades. We also have the Institute of International Education's annual *Open Doors* report that exemplifies national-level data gathering mechanisms that employ our own distinctions between "international" students and "study abroad" students. It is telling that in the *Open Doors 2016* report, for the first time, it will report on the number of "international" students taking part in education abroad.

But, what is the utility of separating out "international" students within our education abroad data? One might guess with some certainty that it will serve as another dimension to describe the ethnic and racial breakdown of study abroad students, a trend familiar in campus fast fact statistics. I would suggest, however, that this new data point has utility only in so far that one could rephrase the reporting request as: report the number of domestic versus international students who study abroad. The fact that the *Open Doors* report exists as a national project, much like a national census, provides a concrete example of the reproduction of hegemony through the power of ascribed identities within U.S. higher education, as well as of the reified dichotomy between "us" and "them." It also demonstrates that the way we categorize our students informs the data we deem important and useful. I would argue in defense of the Institute of International Education that the report is simply mimicking the categories we set, and thus it is our job to challenge these categories and the meanings we attach to them.

The bottom line comes down to this: we must reflect on how our praxis contributes to separating out the United States from the rest, and how we might instigate dialogue about why we use the categories we do. Are the categories we use and the way we deploy them in our work appropriate in advancing our shared values as international educators? I surmise our goal is to unite, not divide, to bring "us" and "them" together. And thus, I want to answer "no" to that question. I believe by reimagining our students' communities and disrupting the categories we use to describe them, we can achieve a more meaningful style of internationalization.

## References

Kahn, Hilary E., ed. 2014. *Framing the Global: Entry Points for Research*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Spencer-Rodgers, Julie. 2001. "Consensual and Individual Stereotypic Beliefs about International Students among American Host Nationals." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 25, 6:639–657.

Suskie, Linda. October 26, 2010. "Why Are We Assessing?" *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2010/10/26/why-are-we-assessing>.

Väfors Fritz, Marie, Dorothy Chin, and Valerie DeMarinis. 2008. "Stressors, Anxiety, Acculturation and Adjustment among International and North American Students." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 32, 3:244–259.