

## Negotiating researchers' presence and reflexivity: Researching overseas students' identities

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### ABSTRACT

When reporting my PhD research, I used to have constraints in locating and negotiating my authorial presence in my writing. These constraints stimulate me to write this article to explore and to examine the ways in which I contest and negotiate my authorial self and self-reflexivity in my writing. I argue that having authorial presence in writing is less concerned with whether I would find it culturally, academically, linguistically difficult for me who speaks English as foreign language, but more with whether it is consistent with my ontological and epistemological positions, theoretical perspectives, and methodological approaches. I suggest that the authorial presence is essential in my writing, for the vital role it plays to articulate the overall architecture.

### INTRODUCTION

When I started writing my PhD thesis, I was strongly advised by my supervisor at the time, to use the third person pronoun- 'it' or 'one' in particular, instead of the first person pronoun- 'I', for the reason Pennycook (1994) highlights:

(the third person pronoun) can be seen to function as a means to establish objectivity, to generalise, and to conceal the existence of a specifically located subject with opinions. This occurs typically in academic prose and similar attempts to claim authority (1994: 177)

Such advice is not uncommon for English academic writing. There has been a conventional doctrine indicating that formal academic writing would be better written 'with no reference to the "I" author' (Lerner, 2001:16). Writing in the first person may not be considered to be appropriate for academic writing which aims to be detached, objective, impersonal and most importantly, scientific (Arnaudet and Barrett 1984: 73; Coniam 2004:283).

For a novice researcher who has learned English as a foreign language, writing in the third person can be problematic. First of all, to conceal the existence of my own voice and opinions in relation to the subject disturbs both the flow of thinking about the topic and the progression of my intellectual development. Furthermore, I have constantly been faced with the ambivalence of both wanting to present my authorial self and at the same time contesting its presence in reflexive accounts. This ambivalence inhibits my writing, as in the process of constructing social knowledge, I have to 'declaim' my authorial self as if it does not correspond to who and what I write 'on/for/with' (Griffiths, 1998: 35-6). Secondly, despite being invisible, the relationships of power and authority between supervisors and supervisees have been institutionalised, implicitly suggesting that there are some rules or instructions for writing which are politically correct and which I am supposed to adapt, and

some which are not (Lea and Street, 1998: 168). These 'writing instructions' mistakenly led me to consider academic writing less concerned with 'epistemology, authority and contestation over knowledge', and more in line with 'technical skills, surface linguistic competence or cultural assimilation' (Lea and Street, 1998: 160). I am now encouraged by my current supervisor to have my authorial presence in my writing, especially from the perspective that 'academic writing should be reconceptualized as **competing and contested** sets of writing methodologies and social practices rather than as homogeneous sets of skills' (Burke and Hermerschmidt, 2005: 347-8). This perspective enables me to write with more confidence and ease, at least to the extent that I am on the way to find my own voice. I would assert that the art of writing itself can also be a process of contestation and negotiation for my authorial self.

Ohta (1991, cited in Hyland, 2002: 1110) and Scollon (1994: 44) both suggest that 'the use of first person pronouns is largely unacceptable in the traditions of Asian cultures because of its association with individual rather than collective identity' (Hyland, 2002: 1110), Hyland (*ibid.*) concludes that:

authorship in academic writing in English both carries a culturally constructed individualistic ideology and places the burden of responsibility for the truth of an assertion heavily on the shoulders of the writer.....to display an authoritative persona among Asian writers may, in part, be a product of a culturally and socially constructed view of self which makes assertion difficult..... Teachers have an important consciousness raising task here to ensure students understand the rhetorical options available to them.....( p1110-1)

Hyland (*ibid.*) points out precisely one of my personal dilemmas, particularly in relation to the use of the first person. However, there are not many alternative rhetorical options available. I want to argue here that my authorial presence plays a significant role on the development of the overall architecture of my PhD thesis. This is to say that the stance I take to report my research is less concerned with whether I would find it culturally, academically, linguistically difficult. Rather, it is more concerned with whether it is consistent with my ontological and epistemological positions. In developing this argument, I will start by examining the role that my authorial self plays in relation to my ontological and epistemological position, theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, data collection and data analysis methods, and in the process of writing up.

## ONTOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL POSITIONS

I have adapted the definition of ontology and epistemology given by Carson *et al.* (2001). According to them, ontology is regarded as 'reality' and epistemology as 'the relationship between that reality and the researcher' (p4). I began to realise that the journey of undertaking my PhD thesis is one of self-understanding and self-construction (Lillis, 2001; Burke and Hermerschmidt, 2005). My ontological and epistemological positions are bound up by the perspectives of constructivism, leading me to interpret the ways in which the identities of overseas students are partly constructed by their host institutions, and vice versa. Their identities are not only multifaceted, but also are also always incomplete as they are in a state of fluidity (as Bryman, 2001, also see Grix, 2002:177).

By regarding epistemology as 'the relationship between that reality and the researcher', my inquiry set out to examine how 'we' understand the identities of different stakeholders (overseas students, teaching staff, managerial groups of UK higher education institutions) in general, and overseas students in particular (Schutt, 2006: 44). 'We', which could be problematic in this context, refers to those who not only participated in my empirical work, but also the prospective readers of my thesis. By using 'we' here, I send out an invitation to my research participants and to the imagined reader, for they indeed contribute to the construction of social knowledge throughout my research (Anderson, 1989:254; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:113).

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

In this research, I took two theoretical perspectives to examine the construction of overseas student role-identities. *From an interactionist perspective*, I extracted five theoretical assumptions: (1) the process of self-construction via stimulus and response is generated by human interaction; (2) the overseas student has to engage in different social relationships (as customer, as scholar) with UK higher education institutions; (3) the overseas student has a role-identity which is generated from her interaction with her university. (4) There is interplay between the structure of the self and the movement of overseas students. The shifting of overseas students' identities is dependent on their transcendental physical, psychological and intellectual movement, for instance, studying abroad; (5) the student identity and the customer identity can co-exist in the context of the marketisation of higher education, although there is an issue of compatibility between these two identities.

*From a cultural perspective*, I considered the formation of overseas students' identities as a process. I examined this process in the following sequence: (1) overseas students experience the process of differentiating her/himself from others, and try to locate her/his self within this context; (2) overseas students experience a state of ambivalence, particularly with regard to being a 'student' or a 'customer', creating the possibility that their new identity could challenge their core values or a faithful belief in their previous identity; (3) overseas students take up challenges, try to accommodate changes in environments, and while doing so may find themselves negotiating between their student identity and their customer identity.

## METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

My methodological approach was directed by my constructivist-oriented ontological and epistemological positions, and this shaped my choice and use of particular methods to gather and analyse the data related to my research inquiry (Crotty, 1998, 3; Grix, 2002: 179). In terms of gathering data, I drew on the following techniques: case study; participant observation; interviews; and documentation (e.g. newspaper articles, the prospectuses of case study universities, application forms, and fieldwork diary). In terms of analysing data, I adapted the voice-centred relational method from Mauthner and Doucet (1998, also see Brown and Gilligan, 1992, Taylor *et al*, 1996, Brown and Gilligan, 1992, 1993; Brown *et al*,

1991; Gilligan et al 1990), and used it as a technique for transcript reading and listening during the analysis of interview data..

There are four categories of reading involved:

Reading 1: reading for the plot and for our responses to the narrative

Reading 2: reading for the voice of the 'I'

Reading 3: reading for the relationships

Reading 4: placing people within cultural contexts and social structures

(Restructured by Mauthner and Doucet, 1998: 126-132)

I see methodology as 'a rationale for the way' and as 'the theory of getting knowledge' (Griffiths, 1998: 35). My research was carried out as qualitative research drawing on ethnographic approaches. There are three interrelated methodological principles guiding the ways in which I collected and analysed data.

First, I am one of the co-constructors of social knowledge. An essential question that I asked myself prior to conducting my fieldwork was: why do I value these contributions made by the research participants (particularly interviewees) in my research? For me, conducting interviews helps to formulate a discourse of overseas students' identities by interviewing distinct groups within four UK higher education institutions. I regard conducting interviews as 'a situation of knowledge production' in which knowledge is created between the views of the researcher and interviewees in the conversation (Kvale, 1996: 29). The process of research is that of knowledge production in which knowledge is created between the views of the researcher and the research participants. This is to say I interpret interviewees (research participants) and myself (the researcher) as co-constructors of social knowledge (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; Anderson, 1989: 254; Finley, 2002a: 216). Given that my ontological and epistemological positions are constructivism oriented, I tend to believe that the relationship between the researcher and the researched is reciprocal and dynamic. The value of my research is generated from my interpretation of the data, particularly the interview data, as well as from exploration of 'the dynamics of the research-researched relationship, which is seen to fundamentally shape research results' (Finlay, 2002b, 534). Finlay notes that reflexive analysis could come into play to 'examine the impact of the research and the participants on each other and on the research' (op.cit: p535). However, there are concerns here. The first is that reflexivity in respect to the researcher's social position and emotional responses to the researched (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998:127); and the second is that 'interpretation and representation of people's lives into the analytical foreground and is a solution to the challenges these issues raise for researchers and the researched' (Byrne et al: 2008: 3). To respond to this, when analysing interview data, I adapted Mauthner and Doucet' (1998: 126-8) voice-centred relational method, and its first reading- 'reading for the plot and for our responses to the narrative' in specific, requiring me to give my reflexive accounts, which, on the one hand, reveal my constructivist driven ontological and epistemological perspective, and on the other, is

concerned with the correlation and asymmetry between my experiences as an overseas student and those of my participants.

Second, my aim was to give voice to overseas students and enable them to take a direct part 'in the production of sociological knowledge' (Aldred, 1998: 150). The voices of overseas students were essential in my research. Despite the fact there is much influential research concerning overseas students' experiences and voices, little of this is concerned with overseas students' customer and academic relationships with their institutions. However, I was aware that I the impact that you make could not assume that I already knew the voices or perspectives of the overseas students, even as an overseas student myself (Genzuck, 2004: 4; Hammersley, 1998:8). Moreover, one research approach that I borrowed from ethnographic research method was 'not to predefine a problem to be studied but rather allow interesting problems to emerge from within the social settings' (Woods, 1998: 94). In other words, my research could not be limited to 'the testing of explicit hypotheses' (Genzuck, 2004: 4; Hammersley, 1998:9); accordingly I should not hypothesise what overseas students and university staff would say about their perceptions regarding one another. I aimed to 'discover' (Hammersley, 1998:9) all the voices of my research participants. In order to listen to overseas students' voices, particularly voices concerning their interpersonal relationships, the second reading (reading for the voice of 'I') and the third reading (reading for the relationships) of the voice-centred relational method were employed in my research. The emphases placed on two readings were (a) the way in which overseas students positioned themselves as 'students' in the academic relationship; (b) the awareness of their customer relationship with their institution; (c) whether the overseas students were aware of the customer and academic relationships with their host institutions: does their 'I' fluctuate between the position of 'student' and that of 'customer'?

The third principle was to be reflexive about the process of data collection and data analysis. The nature of the social constructivist approach is reflexive oriented. Reflexive analysis, as Finlay (2002b) highlights, can 'give voice to those who are normally silenced' (p541). 'Those who are normally silent' could refer to both the overseas students in my research and myself as a researcher. One of the aims of being reflexive at the data collection stage and at data analysis stage is to 'expose researcher silences' (op.cit: 541). However, breaking my silence also invites questions such as: where do I position myself in relation to my research; to what extent does my personal experience influence my research; how to maintain 'the balance between "insider" and "outsider" status' (Brewer, 2000:59)? I learned how to write and to use fieldwork notes from ethnographic researchers (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; Anderson, 1989; Hammersley, 1998). As Coffey (1996) elaborates, fieldwork and diary notes:

Documented and told a 'reality' of the field but also represented, in textual format, my relationships and transactions. Fieldnotes provide memories and a record of what the field was like and of the cultural relationship to the field (p69).

When I revisit my fieldwork diary, I come to realise the extent to which I regard ontology as 'reality' and epistemology as 'the relationship between that reality and the researcher' (Carson *et al.*, 2001: 4). Secondly, the extent to which as a writer and as a researcher, I am socially constructed and construct a field which I am a part (Coffey, 1996: 69).

I am often reminded that being reflective is challenging and problematic (Finlay, 2002b: 541), which I think is very true particularly when writing up my research and emerges as the central theme of this article. I will discuss this issue later under the headings of personal reflexivity, epistemological reflexivity and methodological reflexivity.

## **WRITING: CONTESTING AND NEGOTIATING THE AUTHORIAL PRESENCE AND REFLEXIVITY**

Although I was initially discouraged from having the first person presence in my writing, I am now encouraged and guided by my current supervisor to write with my authorial presence, which aligns with my ontological and epistemological positions. This transition of supervisory style also implies a transition of writing style, particularly in respect of the stance that I take in my writing. Both transitions emerge as the outcome a journey of contestation and negotiation for my authorial presence and self-reflexivity. In this section, I would like to explore this journey under three headings: personal reflexivity, epistemological reflexivity and methodological reflexivity.

### **Personal reflexivity**

Darmer (2006: 551) points out that in practice the implications of poetry could 'inspire', 'stimulate' and 'develop' one's research process. I tend to agree with Darmer (ibid.) and what he said remains me a powerful statement concerning writing good poetry, made by a professor who taught me 'Modern and Contemporary Poetry' in the third year of my undergraduate degree: '*Writing good poetry requires you to be introspective and honest with yourselves*'. I took this statement seriously and tried to find a correlation between writing poetry and writing my research. Although creative poetry and an academic thesis are two dissimilar forms and types of texts, serving different purposes and having different audiences, there are affiliations between writing poetry and my research. *First*, whether I have been introspective and honest; and *second*, to what extent my reflexive accounts have been brought into my research.

When I first started writing my thesis, I took a third person stance. However, I was often stuck and not very productive. I have often seen my PhD research as a personal journey, reflecting on my internal debate about my experiences, challenges and interactions in UK higher education institutions. I was anxious about disclosing my authorial self and hesitated to use 'I' in my writing. I was concerned about two issues. First, I was worried whether my reader would tend to take the role of psychoanalytic literary critic to analyse my psychological processes and motivations during my writing (McManus, 1998). Using a third person presence could sound detached and 'prevent' my life and emotions from being seen or analysed. Second, I covered my emotions for the sake of 'being detached' by taking the third person's stance, for I made efforts to avoid what Borg (2001) indicates-'these emotions threaten the progress of the research, analyzing and reacting to them' (p164).

However, the more I write and reflect about my research, the more I experience the problems of taking a third person stance in my writing and of hiding of my authorial self and reflexive account. I am aware that there is emotional side of conducting my research,

and which is 'undeniable part of the human researcher's work' (Borg, 2001: 164). I shall acknowledge, rather than overlook, the value of it. These emotions could be neither threatening nor negative to my research, and could be transformed into what Fay (1996: 217) calls 'epistemologically self-conscious and what Thomas (1995) calls 'intracommunication between self and writer' (cited in Borg, 2001: 165). Engaging with my emotions in such a way has helped me to overcome some challenges and self-doubts relating to my research and life here in the UK.

Accordingly, I may invite questions such as: is it necessary to be self-reflexive in my writing? Why should the reader be interested in the ways in which I have been self-reflexive? How can I defend against criticisms concerning 'indulgent introspection' (May, 1998: 19) or of being 'self-indulgent' or 'narcissistic' (DeVault, 1997: 225, cited in Finlay, 2002a: 226)? How does my reflexive account correspond with my research about overseas student identities? To conduct and report my research, I need to be self-reflexive. Firstly, my authorial presence would only be useful to my research under the condition that it has to reveal my research thread running through my ontological and epistemological position, theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, methods of collecting data, and methods of data analysis. Secondly, the construction of social knowledge should be linked to my social position within the world and the context that I research (May, 1998: 14; Gouldner, 1970: 489). Thirdly, I have to be epistemologically and methodologically self-conscious. Yet, writing with my authorial presence is not 'for confessional', (Griffiths, 1995; cited in May, 1998: 19-20), but a starting point for the development of a general reflexive account that is to correspond with theorising overseas student identities.

Fourthly, the art of self-reflexivity is that of constructing and expressing authorial self in writing (Scollon, 1994: 33). On the one hand, writing reflexively with my authorial presence is to depart from my personal experiences and to go beyond my introspection toward the social, political, and cultural stances that motivate me to write and to research on overseas student's identities (Finlay, 2002b: 537). On the other, as May (1998:14), indicates,

(writing reflexively with first person presence) seeks to deepen self-awareness of the production of valid and reliable "bits of information", to strengthen a commitment to the value of this awareness and to generate a willingness to be open to 'hostile information'

My research should be more than just personal revelation or autobiographical material. I am committed to analyse its relevance in terms of the broader study, which is concerned with overseas students in the context of marketisation of higher education (DeVault, 1997: 225, cited in Finlay, 2002a:226; Fay, 1996: 216-7; May, 1998: 14-20). I would assume this is what really interests my reader.

### **Epistemological reflexivity**

Epistemological reflexivity is crucial to my research for at least three reasons. First, epistemological reflexivity here indeed functions to examine how continual evaluation of my authorial self (Ivanic, 1998; Hyland, 2002: 1093), involving a dialectical process with (a) the research participants' commonsense constructs; (b) the research data; (c) 'the structural and historical forces that informed the social construction under study' (Anderson,

1989: 254-5). The authorial presence in my writing (a) is to distinguish myself from others, for instance, research participants, and (b) is to demonstrate that there is a partnership between me, as the researcher, and the researched.

I am not more than a co-constructor of social knowledge concerning overseas students, taking into account that the element of 'intersubjectivity' comes into play during the process of my research (Finlay, 2002a: 211). Being self-conscious about epistemological reflexivity is to search for where 'the self-in-relation-to-others becomes both the aim and object of focus' (Finlay, 2002a: 216). I see understanding and construction of knowledge concerning overseas students as a means of introspection to observe my inner struggles as an overseas student myself, displaying what Finlay (2002a: 213) calls the 'meta-reflexive voice'. Working intersubjectively, I aim to make the voices of overseas students visible in the public by presenting my research.

Second, the essential element of epistemological reflexivity is to explore the way in which my ontological and epistemological positions 'influence, act upon and inform' the process of knowledge construction via the research (Nightingale and Cromby, 1999:228). Thus, following the constructivist paradigm, I acknowledge the conceptions of 'the relative nature of social reality' and 'multiple realities' (Banister, 1994: 172). In other words, the reality that I present and the knowledge that I construct in my thesis would be partial. 'Seeking of alternatives and possibilities' (ibid.) is necessary. As mentioned earlier, the reason why I use 'we' is to send an invitation to those who take part in my research journey. The reader is invited to engage and to constitute alternative social realities via reading my work. Thus, having had 'I' presented in my writing is not to present an omniscient point of view; instead it is limited.

### **Methodological reflexivity**

Methodology is defined by Schwandt (2001) as 'a particular social scientific discourse (a way of acting, thinking, and speaking) that occupies a middle ground between discussions of method and discussions of issues in the philosophy of social science' (p161). This notion of methodology raises two issues in relation to methodological reflexivity. The first is concerned with what roles my author self plays in relation to the negotiation of method and discussions of the philosophy of social science. The second is the dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity.

(1) What roles my author self plays in relation to the negotiation of method and discussions of the philosophy of social science? When I first started writing my research, I used to be 'distant, removed, neutral, disengaged, above-it' (Richardson, 2000:253). As mentioned above, I found myself having difficulties progressing with my writing. I began writing relatively smoothly after using 'I' in my writing and it is now easier for me to locate my position in relation to my research and my voice in my writing.

There are several ways that liberate me to report my research by using first person presence –'I'. The first is that, in terms of contemporary qualitative research, the ways in which researchers report their work can be both 'scientific' and literary', and researchers are welcome to break 'boundaries between "fact" and "faction", "subjective" and "objective",



and “true” and “imagined” (Richardson, 2000:253). I am convinced by Richardson (ibid.) to the extent that my work could be both scientific and literary. Richardson (ibid.) states that:

(it is) scientific – in the sense of being true to a world known through the empirical senses- and literary- in the sense of expressing what one has learned through evocative writing techniques and form. (p253)

The second reason is, ‘because of subject-based contextualism, enforced by the rule of actuality’ (Isaac Levi, 1997, cited in Hendricks, 2006: 77), I, as an overseas student myself, am more likely to have insider knowledge in relation to overseas student identities and experiences than a third person. Thus, taking the first person stance in my writing would be relatively more authentic than taking the third person, corresponding with what Levi (ibid.) argues, ‘if there is a transcontextual third person logic of knowledge, such logic is probably rather weak’.

Although I seem to have obtained comparatively more freedom with the first than the third person presence in my writing, Richardson (2000) reminds me that:

Self reflexivity brings to consciousness some of the complex political/ideological agendas hidden in our writing. Truth claims are less easily validated; speaking for “others” is wholly suspect (p, 254).

I make efforts to pay attention to political issues within my research. For instance, the term ‘overseas student’, which I use in my writing is more political than not, not least because it is kind of invention of political and economic forces, for Burke and Hermerschmidt (2005) may argue, ‘these practices are institutionally embedded in hierarchies of knowledge construction’ (p347). The idea of power and the idea of authority come into play regarding ‘othering’ overseas students and the construction of ‘the concept or meaning of overseas students’. For instance, the UK government and UK higher education institutions normally refer to those who come from abroad/ overseas and study in the UK as ‘international students’-which may include students from the European economic area, despite differentiating between home and non-UK students, for the sake of political correctness. The Higher Education Funding Council, for instance, in *Higher Education Students Early Statistics Survey 2005-06*, describes that:

Island and overseas students are generally those from the Channel Islands or the Isle of Man or from outside the EC. They are not included in any of our funding allocations or student number targets for 2005-06. Students who are not island and overseas are home and EC. (Higher Education Funding Council, 2005: 9)

This ideology of the Higher Education Funding Council is political and diplomatic, for its role is to distribute public money for teaching and research to universities and colleges. Overseas students are excluded from the public funding schemes of both the UK higher education policies and of the HEFC. Public money is meant to benefit and to reflect needs of home students. The HEFC’s message also conveys economic connotations, corresponding the UK’s higher education policies which, since the Conservative government of the 1970s-80s, have promoted entrepreneurial spirit and culture. A traditional medieval university in the UK such as the University of Cambridge would have

to acknowledge this connotation and differentiate overseas students from their home student and EU student counterpart.

Overseas students (other than students from countries in the European Community who pay the same fees as U.K.-based students) pay higher fees than home and E.C. students. Special rates apply to those resident in the Channel Islands and Isle of Man. (Univ. of Cambridge webpage)

The third reason is that the notion of reflexivity has always invited qualitative researchers to think about the issues concerning 'validity' and 'trustworthiness' (Anderson, 1989: 255). Inevitably, writing reflexively, I cannot avoid dealing with these interrelated concepts (e.g. 'authorship', 'authority', 'truth', 'validity' and 'reliability') in my writing (Richardson, 2000: 254). In response to this, I quote Scollon (1994: 33)

Authorship and fact, taken together, present to the reader a stance or a position of responsibility which is being taken by the writer. From the way writers construct the authorial self and from the way they present their facts, readers construct a judgement about the extent to which authors are ready to stand behind their words and about the ideological positions they are taking.

Taking a first person stance to construct the knowledge in relation to overseas student identity, I would like to tell the reader that: it is me, Yu-Ching, telling the story about overseas students. My intention is to take responsibilities in which (1) the presence of my authorial self in my writing and (2) the role that my reflexive account plays constructing the knowledge about overseas student identities. As a novice researcher, I see writing reflexively as a learning process through which I learn to allow my political, social and cultural perspectives to interact within this academic community (Burke and Jackson, 2007: 213-4). I am very likely to be challenged by my potential reader (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983: 227). Yet, these challenges that I might have would not be the end, but a recurrently starting point of searching for my own voice through the social construction of knowledge.

(2) The dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity with regard to the presence of my authorial self. The positivist paradigm is too powerful and influential not only in the way the research is conducted, but the ways in which the researcher writes (Gouldner, 1970). Thus, Gouldner (ibid) noted that social scientific research has long pursued a doctrine in which the researcher and the researched are differentiated within a concept of 'methodological dualism' (p495-7). Those who adapt a positivist paradigm would try to leave out researchers' stories and silence their voices to avoid 'bias' or 'prejudice' in their research. Objectivity, as Robson (2002: 549) defines, 'in simple terms, refers to a lack of bias or prejudice', which could be problematic in my research. From the positivist perspective, my research would fail to meet the criteria of 'being objective'. My text and the ways in which I structure it consist of my own biases. The point is that by examining my relations with what I research, I cannot meet the criteria of being objective (Heshusius, 1994: 15) and have been subjective to some extent; partly because I am an overseas student myself and, as mentioned, because my research was initiated from my own experience; and partly because I adapt the constructivism paradigm. It is unlikely that my authorial self can be detached from my writing (Gouldner, 1970: 498). As Janesick (1994) states:

as we try to make sense of our social world and give meaning to what we do as researchers, we continually raise awareness of our own biases. There is no attempt to pretend that research is value free (Janesick, 1994: 212).

Instead of trying to conduct and to write as if I can evade or detach from the researched, I have to recognise my influences on the research process and the vital role that my authorial self takes in my writing. The subjectivity may need to be explored in my research rather than hidden away, since my personal and political interests motivate me to conduct my research and if 'they are concealed that they do the most damage' (Parker, 1994: 9). Similarly, Peshkin (1988) argues that researchers should be conscious about 'their subjectivity throughout the course of their research' (p17) so that they can write free from 'orientations that they did not realise were intervening in their research process' (ibid).

Engaging with debates concerning the dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity, Harding (1991) challenges the conventional interpretation of 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity' and proposes the notion of 'strong objectivity' in contrast to 'the weak objectivity of objectivism and its mirror-linked twin, judgemental-relativism' (p. 142). Harding (op.cit: 144) notes that objectivists claim to achieve value-free research; to be objective the researcher is required to eliminate all social values and interests attached to them, since they would affect the results of their research. She argues this conventional notion of objectivity is weak, for the fact that

our cultures have agendas and make assumptions that we as individuals cannot easily detect.....Cultural agendas and assumptions are parts of background assumptions and auxiliary hypotheses that philosophers have identified.....we can think of strong objectivity as extending the notion of scientific research to include systematic examination of such powerful background beliefs. It must do so in order to be competent at maximizing objectivity (Harding, 1991: 149)

Harding (ibid.) here reminds me that there was a weak or conventional objectivity that I tried to follow by, for instance, taking a third person presence, hiding my own voices, experiences, political and cultural values and beliefs. I thought this was scientific. But, Harding's argument persuades me to hold the converse view that the strong notion of objectivity requires me to conceptualise the subject of knowledge as the object of my inquiry (Harding, 1991: 161).

Furthermore, she claims that the differentiation between weak and strong objectivity permits the parallel construction of weak and strong notions of reflexivity (op.cit.: 161). Although there are problematic and regressive elements, I adapt Harding's (op.cit.: 163) notion of strong reflexivity, requiring me to explore the oppositional voices and perspectives, for instance, voices of overseas students versus that of university staff. Thus, I tend to see my methodological reflexive account as a progressive negotiation of reciprocal and oppositional dialogues firstly between myself as a researcher and as an overseas student; secondly, between overseas students and their generalised and significant others (university staff).

## CONCLUSION

Being epistemologically self-conscious in relation to my personal experiences as an overseas student is not the focal point, but the starting point of conducting my research. Ultimately I intend to go beyond self-introspection toward what social, political, and cultural stances motivate me to write and to research on overseas student's identities on the one hand and on the other hand to move towards the progress of theorising overseas student identities. I confessed that my writing was not making good progress partly as a result of writing with the third person presence in order to 'sound' objective. I was not aware that the attempt to conceal my voice, to avoid bias and prejudice, would do the most damage to my research, missing the fundamental elements of the constructivism paradigm. There was no surprise that there was no voice of mine in my writing.

Having to address this problem, my current challenge is to negotiate the authorial presence, and whose crucial point is in search of the equilibrium between self-discourse and indulgent introspection. The preliminary and ultimate aim of searching for this equilibrium is to extract the knowledge concerning overseas student identity. As a constructivist, I am not more than a co-constitutor of my knowledge concerning overseas students. When collecting data, the research participant and other data resources take a part in the construction of knowledge. The process of writing is that of silent dialogue between my imagined reader and myself. The latter cannot be excluded from the constitution of knowledge production.

At this stage of research, I portray myself as a novice researcher and writing for and on overseas students require me to consistently contest and negotiate the existence of my authorial self and my reflexivity in my writing. The first person presence-'we'-could be problematic. But, I use it in my thesis as well as this paper in order to show my willingness to be challenged by those who participate in my empirical work and prospective/ imagined readers. The construction of knowledge of overseas student identity is always incomplete and is an ongoing process. Any challenge that I receive will accelerate and flourish this process.

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