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Social inequalities in international student mobility: reviewing conceptual approaches

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, research on international student mobility (ISM) has increased considerably. One recurring topic within this emerging interdisciplinary research field deals with the various social inequalities that exist in relation to accessing and participating in this form of mobility. However, while methodological and empirical aspects are becoming ever more refined, there is a paucity of discussion in relation to its theoretical concerns. Against this background, this paper provides a review of the main theoretical-conceptual approaches currently in use for explaining inequalities in access to and the experience of ISM: rational choice theory, Bourdieusian class theory, critical race theory, intersectional and post- and decolonial perspectives. This allows us to highlight some shortcomings in the debate and possible points of convergence between these approaches while suggesting new avenues for future research on ISM-related social inequalities.

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Introduction

In recent decades, international student mobility (ISM) has become a truly global phenomenon. Historically understood as the act of physically crossing national borders for the primary purpose of studying, ISM now encompasses a wide range of different forms, including short- and long-term study abroad (or credit vs. degree mobility), exchange programmes, international work placements and internships abroad. ISM now takes place in a varied and multi-scalar space in which students travel from the Global North to the Global South and back, from South to South, from East to West and vice versa. The global presence of ISM also means that events such as the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union in 2020 ('Brexit'), political developments in the United States ('America First'), the COVID-19 pandemic or ongoing wars – for example, in Ukraine and Palestine – have

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profound effects on cross-border mobility, continuously reshaping the ISM landscape (e.g. Peters et al. 2021; Yang 2022).

Alongside the rise of ISM, research from scientific disciplines such as education research, human geography and sociology has increasingly been devoted to this phenomenon, creating a growing interdisciplinary research field. This is also evident from a number of systematic reviews, research agendas and overviews that have been published on ISM over the last years (cf., inter alia, Jing et al. 2020; Lipura and Collins 2020; Lomer et al. 2024; Luo, Latukha, and Panibratov 2023; Mittelmeier, Lomer, and Unkule 2024; Waters and Brooks 2021). Early on, one of the main recurring themes in this research has been that – rather than contributing to an ever-increasing global interconnectedness – ISM is significantly shaped by and implicated in various kinds of social inequalities, thereby creating unequal chances for students to access and experience study abroad opportunities (e.g. Waters and Brooks 2021). However, while the field of ISM research has burgeoned, there are some noticeable shortcomings in the way it deals with social inequalities theoretically. While studies on ISM-related inequalities have become more refined in methodological terms, the specific theoretical approaches informing the empirical work often remain backgrounded and under-elaborated. This is also noticeable in some of the aforementioned agenda and overview publications that discuss social inequalities in ISM thematically, but do not systematically engage with theories accounting for these inequalities (cf., for example, Jing et al. 2020; Waters and Brooks 2021). Conversely, some literature provides theoretical-conceptual discussions, but these do not essentially refer to inequalities in ISM (see, for instance, Luo, Latukha, and Panibratov 2023; Mittelmeier, Lomer, and Unkule 2024). Furthermore, studies that do focus on such inequalities tend to adopt distinct frameworks that exhibit only limited cross-fertilisation, are often excessively shaped by assumptions favouring westward directionality in ISM and overemphasise the significance of privilege (Lipura and Collins 2020). Dealing with single dimensions of inequality in isolation and paying limited attention to how they intersect can have far-reaching implications for policy and practice, however (Hankivsky and Cormier 2011). As theories profoundly shape perceptions of social phenomena, an insufficient theorisation of ISM may ultimately give rise to inappropriate policy and practice recommendations.

To overcome these constricted perspectives on inequalities in ISM, we therefore focus explicitly on the main theoretical-conceptual approaches currently available for analysing ISM-related inequalities. Our objective is not to review all the existing empirical research on the relation between ISM and various forms of inequalities (for this, see Lomer et al. 2024) or to pinpoint specific empirical findings, but to highlight how different theoretical-conceptual 'lenses' shape our understanding of inequalities in relation to ISM. In doing so, we restrict ourselves to theories that address issues of unequal access and experience in ISM, asking how these approaches are currently used to explain such inequalities and which limitations may exist in this regard. Specifically, we concentrate on rational choice theory, Bourdieu's conceptualisation of capital, habitus and class distinction, critical race theory, intersectionality, and post- and decolonial perspectives as these have been the most widely used theoretical approaches in research on inequalities in ISM for the last 20 years (Lomer et al. 2024, 35–36). Undoubtedly, one could also think of outcomes as another relevant dimension in which ISM-related social inequalities may manifest (e.g. in terms of income, social position, life satisfaction, etc.). However, since empirical evidence on this dimension is, to date, somewhat inconclusive (cf. Roy et al. 2019) and analysing inequalities in outcomes would require considering different theoretical frameworks than

the ones discussed here (as the focus necessarily shifts from higher education to other societal domains – especially the labour market – in and through which inequalities are constituted), we focus only on the former two dimensions. Reconstructing how these five theoretical perspectives account for inequalities in access to and/or the experience of ISM, will then allow us to highlight in the second half of the paper some shortcomings in the debate as well as possible points of convergence between these approaches and to suggest new avenues for future research on ISM-related social inequalities.

Why inequalities matter for ISM

In a recent review of scholarship on ISM, Lipura and Collins (2020) call for explorations of the interplay between life trajectories, privilege and precariousness that account for the diversification and stratification observed in ISM patterns in recent times. This necessitates the integration of various theoretical approaches, which often offer diverse perspectives on inequalities, their causes and consequences. Given that ISM research is an interdisciplinary research field and that inequality research in general has become much more differentiated, using terms such as 'inequality', 'disparity', 'difference', 'heterogeneity' or 'social gradient' to designate its subject matter, we define our take on 'inequality' first.

We understand 'inequality' in the plural, as inequalities, manifesting in multiple ways and dimensions. In this regard, we adopt Therborn's (2006) distinction between vital, existential and resource inequalities. Vital inequalities concern matters of life and death, encompassing differential chances of exposure to fatal risks (such as short life expectancy or a high likelihood of becoming seriously ill). In contrast, existential inequalities pertain to unequal recognition and respect, given to or denied to people as persons (making ascription, discrimination and stigmatisation important issues here), akin to epistemic justice. Finally, resource-related inequalities refer to people's unequal capabilities to act, stemming from differences in economic, cultural and/or social resources or forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986). Additionally, a symbolic dimension to resource inequalities exists, as specific resources are recognised as more or less valuable. Furthermore, it is crucial to conceive inequalities in the plural since different kinds of inequality may cut across, reinforce, but also contradict each other (cf., for example, Crenshaw 1989; Yuval-Davis 2015).

With this in mind, we see three reasons why inequalities in relation to ISM matter. First, internationally mobile students nowadays constitute a highly diverse group and do not conform to the somewhat outdated stereotype of a highly privileged group anymore (Waters and Brooks 2021). Many struggle to amass the financial, social and cultural resources necessary for participating in and sustaining such mobility (e.g. Mulvey 2022). All of this means that inequalities in various forms manifest not only between mobile and non-mobile students, but increasingly also *within* mobile student populations.

Second, the issue of inequalities in ISM arises because of increasing marketisation processes in higher education in many countries (Findlay, McCollum, and Packwood 2017). For example, differential tuition fee rates for international students compared to domestic students can be observed in various European destinations, ranging from the United Kingdom as early as 1980 to Portugal and Spain in 2015 and Finland as of 2023 (cf. França, Alves, and Padilla 2018; Weber, Van Mol, and Wolbers 2024). The adoption of such a marketised approach usually goes hand in hand with increasing inequalities as the rising financial costs of international education create fewer opportunities for individuals from less privileged economic backgrounds. Even more so, the differentiation between international and

domestic students, inherent to marketisation processes, implies in itself a fundamental existential inequality as the principle of educational equality (and the policies, practices, theories etc. derived from it) is largely deemed of relevance only within nation state borders and usually tied to national citizenship (Tannock 2018), thus excluding international students and constituting a form of methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003).

Third, these changes must also be contextualised within societal discourses that increasingly place a high symbolic premium on mobility while devaluing sedentariness or immobility. Some authors therefore regard mobility as ideological (e.g. Adey 2017; Brodersen 2014). In academic and policy discussions in recent years, ISM is often framed as contributing to national and individual competitiveness (Lipura and Collins 2020; Tran 2016) or as a way to achieve 'positional' and 'transformative' investment (Pyvis and Chapman 2007). Thus, mobility is frequently perceived as 'an ineluctable good or positive' (Adey 2017, 27), making it all the more necessary to reflect on the various inequalities related to ISM.

Theoretical frameworks for analysing social inequalities in ISM

We now introduce several key conceptual frameworks that inform the analysis of inequalities in relation to ISM as they highlight different dimensions and underlying mechanisms that re-/produce these inequalities. Specifically, we concentrate on rational choice theory, Bourdieu's conceptualisation of capital, habitus and class distinction, critical race theory, intersectionality, and post- and decolonial perspectives as these have been the most widely used theoretical approaches in research on inequalities in ISM for the last 20 years (Lomer et al. 2024).

Rational choice theory

Generally, rational choice theory sees inequalities as resulting from individual rational decision-making that is shaped by unequally distributed resources and various scoping conditions which can reach from the macro to the micro level (cf. Breen and Goldthorpe 1997).[1] Thus, within certain structural parameters, actors supposedly weigh the costs and benefits associated with different courses of action and then choose the option with the highest expected utility. However, since actors occupy different socio-structural positions, each associated with specific advantages and/or disadvantages, and are unequally endowed with various resources (whether of an economic, cultural or social kind), they systematically differ in the way they assess costs, benefits and the expected utility of certain courses of action. This, in turn, gives rise to the (re-)production of socially unequal outcomes.

Applying rational choice theory to the question of inequalities in ISM, Lörz, Netz, and Quast (2016), for example, suggest that students who regard costs associated with studying abroad (e.g. additional study fees, increased living expenses, indirect costs caused by the extended duration of studies, but also immaterial costs as the loss of family and friends) as low and related benefits (e.g. improvement of career prospects, personal development, skills development) as high, should decide to study abroad. However, they further argue that students will only really undertake such a project if they are convinced of their chances of success and if the expected utility of going abroad clearly exceeds the expected utility of staying where they are. Such individual cost-benefit calculations furthermore need to be seen as structured by wider meso- and macro-level conditions (e.g. related to the institutional

or country level). Finding that German students with a non-academic family background are significantly less likely to go abroad for study purposes than their peers with an academic background, Lörz, Netz, and Quast (2016) explain this by pointing out a range of factors (worse academic school performance, less well-developed foreign language skills, higher cost sensitivity and lower benefit expectations among students with a non-academic family background). Focusing on gender inequalities in study abroad intentions among US students, Salisbury, Paulsen, and Pascarella (2010) also draw on rational choice theory in order to explain why female students are more likely to participate in ISM than male students. Considering a range of institutional- and individual-level factors (e.g. type, size and location of study programme, students' demographic characteristics and family background), they conclude that students' social and cultural resources and the gendered ways these shape decision-making processes explain the gender gap in ISM. Many studies that draw on models such as the 'push-pull model' (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002) also implicitly build on rational choice theory (e.g. Van Mol and Timmerman 2014; Zhu and Reeves 2019). From the perspective of rational choice theory, inequalities in ISM thus result from differences in individual decision-making against the background of preexisting opportunity structures and general conditions. In the following discussion, we introduce alternative conceptualisations and raise some critical objections to the rational choice perspective.

Bourdieu's theory of capital, habitus and class distinction

Another widespread approach for explaining social inequalities in access to or participation in ISM employs Bourdieu's encompassing theoretical framework and especially his concept of capital (Bourdieu 1986). For Bourdieu (1984, 1986), inequalities arise from the unequal distribution of economic, cultural and social resources, or assets, which he characterised as different forms of 'capital'. In so doing, he highlights that – similar to economic capital – cultural and social capital can also be invested, transmitted and converted into other forms of capital (albeit in different ways), thus generating specific yet unequal returns. In contrast to more economically focused analyses, research on inequalities in ISM therefore often applies the Bourdieusian concept of capital to emphasise the role of cultural and social assets (e.g. Kim 2011). However, as such, these analyses do not differ much from the rational choice paradigm.

The actual added value of a Bourdieusian approach to inequalities in ISM derives from the concepts of habitus, distinction and a focus on the symbolic dimensions of social practice. Habitus, defined as a system of dispositions shaped through unequal socialisation processes, structures people's practices and ways of thinking and perceiving the world. Habitus helps to understand how even seemingly non-strategic and disinterested actions can contribute to creating or maintaining social inequalities and thus goes beyond rational choice theory's focus on rational, calculating decision-making (e.g. Liu, Huang, and Shen 2022). In their study on privileged mobile students from the United Kingdom, Waters and Brooks (2010) draw on Bourdieu's habitus concept to highlight how these students' excitement- and adventure-seeking orientation towards studying abroad (rather than an overtly career-related or monetary interest) nevertheless serves to ensure social reproduction. Cairns (2015) uses habitus to point out how inequalities between families endow students differently with mobility dispositions – that is, an unequal inclination to seek out and enjoy international experiences (cf. also Brooks and Waters 2010).

Many studies on inequalities in ISM also turn to Bourdieu's notion of distinction, which he regarded as a central element of contemporary class struggles: Due to their superior capital endowment and specific habitus formation (characterised by an aesthetic disposition rather than an orientation towards the necessary), the upper classes symbolically define what is desirable in society and distinguish themselves from the other classes through their lifestyle practices, thereby legitimising their own privileged position. Since the middle classes similarly try to distinguish themselves, not least by emulating the practices of the upper classes, certain practices and forms of capital become symbolically devalued over time, making it necessary to find new ways of gaining distinction (Bourdieu 1984). Building on this idea, Liu, Huang, and Shen (2022), Prazeres (2019) and Zhang and Xu (2020), among others, argue that ISM nowadays affords such distinction, whether by being mobile (rather than immobile), by accessing specific, symbolically highly valued places or by engaging in specific forms of mobility. From a Bourdieusian perspective, inequalities in ISM thus need to be seen in the context of ongoing class struggles for distinction and occur due to prior inequalities in capital endowment and habitus formation.

Critical race theory

Critical race theory (CRT) draws on US intellectual traditions of critiques of racial inequality from W.E.B. Du Bois (2007) and other African-American scholars and activists (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). CRT examines how race is socially constructed and used to maintain racial inequality (Dixson and Rousseau Anderson 2018). It acknowledges racism as endemic to American society but has also been extended to other societies with histories of racism and contemporary racial inequalities, such as the United Kingdom (Arday, Belluigi, and Thomas 2021), France (Beaman 2019) and Germany (Moffitt, Juang, and Syed 2019). Indeed, with its emphasis on normative Whiteness and racial inequalities, CRT is globally relevant (Weiner 2012). CRT is also used to examine the experiences of various ethnic minority groups – for example, Latinx and Asian Americans (Yao, George Mwangi, and Malaney Brown 2019) or Central and Eastern European migrants (Sime et al. 2022). Civil rights and equalities legislation, CRT proposes, facilitate a liberal 'colour blind' approach to understanding race, fostering the discourse of meritocracy, and therefore fail to adequately address racial inequalities. Similarly, CRT scholarship argues that multicultural approaches to education that seek to celebrate difference as diversity, without addressing or recognising tensions, conflict and oppression, do not achieve racial equity but instead re-centre Whiteness in the curriculum as that which is not 'different'. CRT seeks instead to centre racism and racial oppression in analyses, often by examining educational policies and processes that foster deficit discourses around minoritised groups and support White supremacy (Dixson and Rousseau Anderson 2018).

In the context of research on ISM, CRT is particularly suitable to examine the different experiences that ethnic minority students have in classrooms, framing these as processes that racialise students (Xu 2022) through ascriptive identities – that is, through attributing individuals' characteristics to socially defined or structured identities. Yao, George Mwangi, and Malaney Brown (2019) have further argued that it is essential to apply CRT to transnational education mobilities and to understand how international students are racialised during their studies. For example, Madriaga and McCaig (2022) discuss the process of 'becoming Black' for African international students in the United Kingdom, where Blackness

has a specific cultural connotation that rarely reflects these students' self-identification. Adjusting to this racial minority-ascribed identity can be alienating and challenging, since many will not previously have occupied minoritised social positions in their home country (Yao, George Mwangi, and Malaney Brown 2019). As part of such racialisation processes, international students experience discrimination, isolation and microaggressions. In some cases, this can lead to overt racism and violence, as Chinese international students in the United States experienced 'Asianization' during the COVID-19 pandemic (Saito and Li 2022). CRT, therefore, provides a valuable theoretical lens to understand racial inequalities in ISM.

Intersectionality

Rational choice theory, Bourdieu's notions of capital and habitus, and CRT all offer useful perspectives on ISM but ultimately only examine one dimension of inequality at a time. Intersectionality instead offers a multilateral understanding of inequalities (Crenshaw 1989; Yuval-Davis 2015). It is based on the premise that single dimensions of inequality may lead to a simplification of lived realities (Windsong 2018). As a conceptual framework emerging from Black feminist studies, intersectionality urges the consideration of relational dimensions of inequality, such as socio-economic status, gender, sexuality, disability or ethnicity with each other (Crenshaw 1989; Okazawa-Rey 2017). In so doing, intersectionality also counters shortcomings some of the other theories have in terms of their conceptualisation of gender (for a feminist critique of Bourdieu, see, for example, Lovell 2001 and Mottier 2002, and of rational choice theory, England 1989). However, intersectionality is more than an additive approach (Windsong 2018), exceeding the idea of simply summing up different inequality dimensions. It requires a complex analysis of the layered interrelation between social inequalities and individual experiences of inequality and discrimination (Hankivsky and Cormier 2011). For this reason, intersectionality also moves away from the individual as a unit of analysis. Instead, it adheres to more structural forms of exclusion and social inequality and how these lead to specific disadvantages in educational settings, for example within and between student groups (Hankivsky and Cormier 2011). It thus seeks to comprehend and tackle the connections between power and inequality in society. Similarly to CRT, intersectionality assumes that inequalities are reproduced through power hierarchies, either by constructing fixed identities or through racialised, gendered, class-based or other discriminatory/exclusionary practices.

In the context of ISM, an intersectional approach thus allows enquiring into how different inequality dimensions may interact in shaping international students' access to and experience of studying abroad – for example, for migrant students with a disability or LGBTQ+ students with a working-class background. Taking an intersectional perspective also challenges a conceptualisation of international students' experiences as 'homogeneous' (O'Connor 2020). Furthermore, cultural distance between the home and the host university, nationality and language proficiency appear as key intersectional categories, bringing about unequal study abroad experiences (Avenido 2022). Okazawa-Rey (2017) also underlines the importance of 'nationality' in social inequality research, as nationalities are imagined as communities regardless of the inequalities which may prevail within these groups. In ISM, international students often experience 'nationality' in the differentiation between 'us' and 'them' (Resch et al. 2021), leading to exclusion from small group work or prejudice by connecting nationality to a specific part of students' identity, which is devalued. By bringing

attention to nationality as only one among many dimensions through which inequalities can manifest and emphasising students' multifaceted identities, an intersectional perspective can provide a more comprehensive understanding of inequalities in ISM. Considering both intersectionality and CRT can, in turn, contribute to illuminating how international students' racialised experiences are complicated by other markers of difference such as gender, ethnicity, disability and socioeconomic background. This reveals the complexity of experiencing different dimensions of social inequalities in everyday student life, as the multiple dimensions of social identities cannot be compartmentalised into isolated strands (cf. Brah and Phoenix 2004). Students of colour and disability, for example, cannot be asked to present their views on ISM based on separable dimensions of inequality, as the intersection of their multiple identities frame their daily social practices (Liu 2017).

Postcolonial theory and decoloniality

Postcolonial theory explores not only the legal, political and material colonisation of nations occupied by a foreign imperial power, but also how these structures have endured after independence, through global aid and development programmes or global financial structures like the World Bank perpetuating the domination of Global North nations over the Global Majority. Quijano's (2000) colonial matrix of power extends this interest from the political and material domains into the control of knowledge (epistemology and education) portraying all non-Global North knowledge as subaltern and building the European epistemic tradition as the true and universal one (cf. also Grosfoguel 2007). Post- and decolonial theories expose how geopolitical hierarchies are reproduced in knowledge production dynamics (Mignolo 2002), working towards dismantling Eurocentric knowledge and colonialist mentalities. Therefore, decoloniality aims at re-centring local knowledge, history, ideas and values and developing systems of thought that challenge and undermine colonial oppression. This also means revaluing teaching practices as well as curricula, aiming at an 'engaged pedagogy' that values students' knowledge and supports their development – an idea that is also highly relevant in the ISM context as Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo (2009) show. Decoloniality thus offers the possibility of an epistemological rupture that challenges the fallacious conceptions of superiority of Western pedagogies and higher education systems and fosters diverse knowledge ecologies instead.

Applying a decolonial lens to ISM, scholarship can show how this phenomenon is also intensely structured by the colonial matrix of power. For example, Lomer (2017) demonstrates how policies related to ISM may represent international students from the Global South as subaltern subjects, upholding practices and discourses of deficit that portray these students as lacking academic skills to perform properly in Western academia. Thus, many international students are marginalised and excluded in their daily learning and socialisation routines in their host institutions (Yao, George Mwangi, and Malaney Brown 2019). Furthermore, imperial and colonial legacies shape (but do not determine) the contemporary landscape of ISM, inform attitudes and representations of international students and intersect with epistemologies, which may even reinscribe intellectual coloniality (Moosavi 2020). Epistemic inequalities emerge as a critical dimension in international students' experience, constraining their agency (Hayes, Lomer, and Taha 2024). Coloniality of power can also manifest not only in mobility from the Global South, but also in ISM directed towards new/emerging (or simply under-researched) destinations. Although

Global North to Global South mobility (or West to East mobility in the European context) may challenge the typical imaginary of movement from poorer to wealthier regions (cf. Prazeres 2019), it still reflects inherent power imbalances. Destination choices may be constrained by resource (and other) limitations, on the one hand, and driven by the desire to capitalise on relative privilege, on the other. As research on two-way migration links shows, in the postcolonial transnational context, international students can simultaneously embody racialised stereotypes and suffer their consequences (Augusto et al. 2022). Post- and decolonial approaches thus offer powerful insights into how inequalities in access to and the experience of ISM are profoundly shaped by deep-seated power disparities in epistemic structures.

An agenda for future research on social inequalities in ISM

As previously shown, an array of theoretical frameworks is used to study inequalities in access to and the experience of ISM, each foregrounding specific aspects and centring attention on different mechanisms that bring about such inequalities. This overview also shows, however, that there are still a number of open questions and threads to be taken up. Therefore, we will discuss four potential avenues for further research on social inequalities in ISM.

Mining the full potential of existing theoretical frameworks in thinking about social inequalities in ISM

The discussion above shows that these frameworks have more to offer than is currently accounted for. For example, in Bourdieu's original studies on social reproduction, inequalities in education were not only ascribed to class differences in habitus and (cultural) capital among families, but also to educational institutions (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). According to Bourdieu, educational institutions and their predominantly middle-class teaching personnel do not fully take existing inequalities and their effects on students' academic capabilities into account, but instead regard students' achievements as the result of individual talent, thereby reinforcing and legitimising such inequalities. Additionally, they apply evaluative standards that implicitly follow conceptions originating from the culturally privileged classes, thus systematically disadvantaging lower-class students. Research on inequalities in ISM has so far only rarely engaged with these insights, however. Thus, further research is needed on whether and, if so, *how* educational institutions actually adapt to an increasingly diverse student body to which ISM also contributes (Resch et al. 2021). Similarly, not much is known about how distinction-making processes play out during students' mobility experience: Which student groups enjoy a symbolically elevated position and which are excluded and/or devalued? Focusing more on the symbolic dimensions of social practices and their implications for the (re-)production of inequalities in the context of ISM also offers the chance to connect a Bourdieusian theoretical perspective with other approaches, such as intersectional or post- and decolonial theory, as actors may draw on different markers of distinction and evaluative standards than the ones Bourdieu originally pointed out.

There is also still unrealised potential in intersectional approaches to researching inequalities in ISM. Not only does intersectionality allow the consideration of multiple

forms of social divisions and hierarchies (along economic and cultural lines, but also age, caste, ethnicity, gender, race, religion or other markers of difference), it can also provide a more situated and nuanced understanding of how ascriptive identities related to such characteristics can transect to both hinder and facilitate access to specific social arenas (e.g. Yang, Jackson, and Zajicek 2021). Furthermore, intersectionality serves as a crucial analytical tool for challenging the notion of international students as a homogeneous group (cf. O'Connor 2020; Waters and Brooks 2021). It enables an examination of differences not only between local and international students but also among international students themselves. This represents a significant advancement in the framing of ISM, as the prevalent tendency has been to focus on specific groups of international students and generalise assumptions to the entire cohort. Furthermore, CRT and intersectional lenses provide a framework to examine higher education institutions as sites of power within which the classed, gendered, ethnicised and racialised bodies of international students are placed.

Moreover, it needs to be noted that, despite the prominence of intersectionality as one of feminist theory's most influential concepts, ISM research rarely engages with feminist approaches that analyse gender as a system of power and oppression, moving beyond simplistic, binary understandings of men's and women's experiences (Lomer et al. 2024). As a result, because in some contexts women make up a growing segment of international student flows, studies fail to explore the structural nature of gender inequalities in ISM, neglecting the complexities of gender as a social system of difference and inequality that privileges men over women (Ridgeway 2011). Insofar as they address gender, many studies in ISM position a biological understanding of gender as sex as part of the demographic attributes of their participants (i.e. number of 'male/female'), without exploring how gender shapes inequalities. Rather than advocating for studies that examine gender in isolation, we argue that an intersectional approach in ISM research has significant potential to enrich our understanding of gendered inequalities in ISM. It would also help to move beyond binary gender identities, which categorise individuals as either women or men, thus allowing for a more inclusive analysis that also accounts for sexualities. As Nguyen, Grafsky, and Lambert-Shute (2017) state, LGBTQ+ international students remain largely silenced in contemporary research, further emphasizing the need for a broader, more intersectional approach to ISM that considers the diverse experiences of all gender and sexual identities.

Finally, post- and decolonial theory can enrich the discussion on ISM by challenging the conventional directionality of student mobility toward the Global North. These theories examine how geopolitical power asymmetries shape student flows and provide new tools to reflect on students' learning experiences. By addressing the epistemological hierarchies present in higher education systems, these perspectives aim to transform ISM to be more inclusive, equitable and detached from the colonial matrix of power and advocate for a world where multiple epistemic traditions coexist. Thus, incorporating intersectional, CRT and post-/decolonial lenses enables us to interrogate systems of oppression that re-/produce inequalities among international students, providing grounds for further contemplation of questions such as: How do intersectional aspects of identity, specifically ethnicity/nationality, race, gender and transnational markers of class relate to the construction of distinction in international higher education settings? How are these processes of distinction-making derived from, and constitutive of, a colonial matrix of power?

Revisiting the structure–agency debate with regard to social inequalities in ISM

Explanations of social inequalities bring with them the perennial question of structure and agency (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984). After all, inequalities are ultimately brought forth by agents and their various practices, but these agents are formed and transformed by societal structures which condition the unequal distribution of resources as well as agents' opportunities, aspirations and ways of perceiving the world. This also holds true for ISM research; yet, as the current theoretical frameworks in this research area testify, there is substantial variation in the way these approaches deal with this question. While CRT and decoloniality, for example, predominantly emphasise structural aspects (in the sense of powerful racial or postcolonial structures pervading society), rational choice theory, intersectionality and the Bourdieusian approach claim to bring structure and agency together, albeit in noticeably different ways.

Rational choice theory only manages to link structure (represented through macro and meso factors) and agency (individual features) by either conceiving them in a purely additive manner, without any kind of interrelation between them or by ultimately assigning priority to actors' preferences which are simply taken as given – without considering how structure might impact on preference formation or realisation (Archer and Tritter 2000). This model, and the research that builds on this approach, thus typically fails to fully interrogate the structural inequalities that shape such decision-making, either ignoring them or simply considering them as static 'background factors'.

In contrast, Bourdieu (1977) aimed to overcome the structure–agency divide by linking individual dispositions with social structures, thereby enabling a more dynamic explanation of persisting social inequalities. While his notion of capital is often used in ISM research in a more structural manner, it also allows an analysis of how individual and social groups construct value and seek to 'acquire' capitals in different forms – in other words, agency. Similarly, while habitus is not always conceptualised as consciously or reflexively developed, it is nevertheless actively cultivated. Whether it is necessary for agency to be conscious or reflexive is a matter of much debate. Still, one of the enduring strengths of the Bourdieusian framework is precisely its capacity to incorporate a more dynamic dialogue between structure and agency. ISM research that captures this dynamism often takes a micro approach by studying, for example, classroom dynamics, but there is so far only limited scholarship on inequalities in ISM that considers the interaction between structure and agency as originally envisaged by Bourdieu.

While CRT, intersectionality and post-/decolonial theory as frameworks emphasise structure more than agency, all three have the activist intention of fostering positive, radical and fundamentally egalitarian change. In this sense, they are profoundly agentic. With regards to inequalities in ISM, the generative potential of these conceptual frameworks is two-fold: first, in understanding how inequalities have been historically, geographically and socially constructed; and second, in providing powerful epistemic tools for reflexivity and radical social change. Thus, while earlier research has already explored how international students are marginalised as subalterns, future research might address how international students, drawing on decoloniality, re-interpret, undermine and challenge this marginalisation. Far more research is needed to understand how intersectional aspects of identity construct unequal access to and experiences of ISM, and a decolonial frame would enable a global-historical grounding for such analyses. As these short

reflections show, revisiting the structure-agency debate when analysing inequalities in ISM holds the potential to achieve a deeper understanding of how such inequalities are (re-)produced, which also promises to be relevant for broader theoretical discussions beyond the ISM research field.

Theorising the role of nationality for social inequalities in ISM

A third issue arising from the previous survey of theoretical frameworks is the need to think more about the role of nationality for (re-)producing social inequalities in ISM in theoretical terms. As discussed previously, a few studies, such as Avenido (2022), Okazawa-Rey (2017) and Resch et al. (2021), indicate that nationality (or citizenship and 'home country' as related, albeit not quite congruent, concepts) constitutes one important dimension for structuring inequalities in access to and the experience of ISM. Similarly, Liu, Wong, and Tsai (2016) find that female Asian international students are discriminated because of their nationality (as well as gender and race), and Deutschmann (2022) can show that visa fees, often required for studies abroad, are noticeably higher for international students from the Global South than for those from the Global North.

In itself, it is not very surprising that nationality matters for social inequalities in ISM – research on global inequalities has long pointed out how, in an increasingly interconnected world, nationalities are assigned, as well as provide, unequal 'value' and advantage, thus strongly affecting people's life chances and experiences (e.g. Milanović 2011; Shachar 2009). What *is* surprising, however, is that research on inequalities in ISM does not take this more into account, both empirically and theoretically. In their systematic literature review on social inequalities in ISM, Lomer et al. (2024, 29) find that only 60 per cent of the reviewed empirical studies indicate the nationality of their research participants and, unlike socio-economic status, ethnicity or gender, nationality does not seem to be a particular focus point within this research field. In addition, we would contend that there is also a somewhat insufficient theorisation of this issue, often treating nationality (if considered at all) simply as one inequality-related factor among others but without really connecting it to further theoretical considerations. One reason for this shortcoming may be that some inequalities affecting international students – for example, related to differential tuition fees and visa regimes as mentioned before – are perceived and accepted as almost 'natural' due to methodologically nationalist understandings of concepts such as educational equality (Tannock 2018). Another reason could be that many theories accounting for social inequalities, including some of the approaches discussed here (e.g. Bourdieu's approach or critical race theory), were originally devised based on a conception of 'society' that equates it with the form of the nation-state, thus dismissing inequality-related dynamics and relations that transcend national borders (Weiss 2005; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003).[2]

Without delving further into the possible reasons for this situation, there are at least two ways out of it from our perspective. One option is that research on inequalities in ISM connects with more recent theoretical developments in migration and inequality research that try to overcome those theories' original methodological nationalism by adapting them to transnational and global settings. A prominent example for this is Bourdieu's theoretical approach, for which there are numerous suggestions by now of how to apply his concepts of capital and habitus beyond national borders (for an overview, cf. Carlson and Schneickert 2021). In so doing, it becomes possible, for instance, to conceive of nationality as a form of

capital (Erel 2010; Hage 1998), whose value is structured not least by postcolonial relations and racist conceptions, thus creating a distinction between 'desirable' and 'less desirable' international students.

Another option for theorising on the role of nationality for social inequalities in ISM is to draw on theories that start out from a global perspective, thus avoiding methodological nationalism from the beginning. One example that comes to mind here is Tannock's (2018) engagement with social justice theory that allows him to regard educational equality as a global matter. Similarly, theoretical work may depart from newer discussions within citizenship studies that point out how global, rights-based forms of citizenship have emerged (related to actors' skills and credentials rather than 'birth') that can give rise to new inequalities, however, as nation states continue to determine the rights made available to different categories of people (e.g. Aneesh and Wolover 2017). Another example is, of course, postcolonialism or decoloniality which see actors' unequal social positions and possibilities for action (as defined, inter alia, by their nationality) as fundamentally structured by the colonial matrix of power. Either way, the task for further theorisations of the role of nationality for social inequalities in ISM is to avoid conceptualising it as just another factor that needs to be taken into account but to conceive of it, instead – as emphasised by intersectional approaches – as part of various interrelated systems of power that structure social inequalities.

Researching social inequalities in ISM in turbulent times

As recent times have exposed, serious disruptions or 'unsettling events' (Kilkey and Ryan 2021) can affect ISM in multiple ways, upending pre-existing migration projects and experiences abroad, impacting the extent of ISM and the composition of the international student body, reflecting global inequalities (Macrander 2017). Such unsettling events typically exacerbate inequalities in access to and experiences of ISM, demanding further comprehensive explorations.

The COVID-19 pandemic imposed serious restrictions for international mobility (Jakobson et al. 2023), disrupted educational activities, grounded students in home institutions and abroad and caused mental health and well-being problems as well as financial difficulties (Qushem, Lam, and Kondakci 2023). Meanwhile, anxieties about the virus spread led to various expressions of xenophobia in host nations, constraining international students' engagement with, and occupation of, public and community spaces. During the pandemic, the 'Asianization' of Chinese international students (Saito and Li 2022) and anti-Asian racism and violence rose. Microaggressions in such contexts can make international students feel unwelcome and unsafe in their host universities (Quinton 2019), shaping interactions with the local community and potentially leading to self-segregation.

On the positive side, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the capacity of entire sectors to adopt emergency remote-teaching practices. While virtual mobility existed pre-pandemic, the use of virtual learning platforms increased significantly during the lockdowns. From an inequality perspective, virtual mobility is an important research subject, as it reduces financial and environmental costs usually associated with physical mobility, thus potentially allowing for more accessibility and inclusivity in higher education (Villar-Onrubia and Rajpal 2016). However, virtual mobility might also have negative effects in terms of social inequalities as international students might lose out on other aspects attached to physical forms of studying abroad (such as social capital formation). Future research on ISM will

need to enquire into the potentially mitigating as well as reinforcing effects of virtual mobility on social inequalities.

Looking, in turn, at the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, research shows that this situation left African students without safe refuge and exposed Indian students to violence and prejudice (Roohi 2022), prompting questions about power hierarchies and global inequalities. The war has also affected Ukrainians' higher education choices, with more students enrolling in neighbouring countries (Al Gharaibeh, Ahmad, and Malkawi 2023) and restricted mobility for Russian (and, to some extent, Belarusian) citizens. While the effects of escalating violence in Palestine remain underresearched in academic literature, international mobility of Palestinian students is understood as part of prolonged and enduring coerced migration (e.g. Procter 2024). Media reports point out the injuries and deaths of international students in the area (Ghimire and Niazi 2023) and a new generation of students has been forced into remote, mobile or abandoned studies as universities and other cultural institutions have been destroyed. These developments necessitate paying particular attention to vital and existential inequalities in ISM research, going beyond the longstanding dominant focus on resource inequalities.

Conclusion

Starting out from the observation that research on inequalities in ISM tends to rest on distinct theoretical frameworks that are rarely brought into conversation with each other, and that empirical/methodological concerns often take precedence over theoretical ones, we reacted to these lacunae by reviewing five theoretical approaches – rational choice theory; Bourdieu's conceptualization of capital, habitus and class distinction; critical race theory; intersectionality; and postcolonial theory – that are most widely used when analysing ISM-related inequalities. We restricted ourselves here to a discussion of theories that address issues of unequal access and experience in ISM, as other inequality dimensions related to ISM (e.g. when thinking about 'outcomes' in terms of income, social positions, career trajectories etc.) would have required considering different theoretical frameworks. This allowed us to highlight how these five theories shape our understanding of inequalities that exist to students' participation in and experience of this form of mobility, to identify possible points of convergence between these theories, and to suggest avenues for future theorising on this issue.

To sum up, our discussion shows that there are actually many possibilities for interrelating the theories presented here – in particular, Bourdieu's conceptual apparatus, critical race theory and intersectional and post-/decolonial approaches. However, the full potential of these theories has not yet been exploited. This becomes clear when looking, for example, at issues such as the potential role of educational institutions in (re-)producing social inequalities in ISM or symbolic aspects in this context (e.g. stigmatisation, discrimination, exclusion). Thus, future research on inequalities in ISM may engage in more depth with these theories. Based on our discussion, we also expect that, by connecting these different theoretical frameworks, new insights may be gained for ongoing discussions about how structure and agency play into maintaining and/or generating social inequalities. Part of this debate will also be to advance our theorising on the role of nationality for (re-)producing social inequalities in ISM. Finally, future theoretical work on ISM in turbulent times also demands further consideration of 'vital inequalities'

(Therborn 2006) – that is, social inequalities linked to matters of life and death – and that we do not restrict ourselves solely to the study of unequal resource distributions. After all, international students are not a homogenous group, and thus social inequalities not only exist in comparison with their non-mobile peers, but also within the group itself. All of this will require further theoretical discussions and empirical research, hopefully based on these starting points.

Notes

1. However, within rational choice theory, there are different versions of how individual decision-making is precisely conceptualised (cf. notions such as 'bounded rationality' or 'subjective expected utility').
2. Obviously, this does not apply to post- and decolonial approaches that, since their inception, have focused on how social inequalities within as well as across different societies result from unequal, cross-border relationships of economic and epistemic power.

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