Identity Negotiation of International Women in Higher Education: Language and Culture in Focus

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The Asian Conference on the Social Sciences 2023
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract
The role of women in academia and especially in STEM fields has been receiving more and more attention among researchers, however few studies used a quantitative approach and considered the experiences of international women across various disciplines in relation to identity negotiation. This study examines the experiences of foreign-born female faculty living and teaching in the United States through a survey of international women in academia. We explore how they negotiate their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic identity while fulfilling their role in academia. The variables under consideration in this quantitative study include bicultural identity, ethnic pride, language maintenance, language attitudes, and code-switching. Our findings indicate that international women faculty in our study feel strong connection to their place of origin and their native language and culture although length of residence in the United States and U.S. citizenship play a role in the perception of their biculturality. Our respondents' positive attitudes towards native language correlate with ethnic pride and language maintenance, which also strongly correlate with each other. Finally, international women faculty in arts, humanities, and social sciences appear to exhibit more positive attitudes towards English and their native language, more ethnic pride, and more interest in native language maintenance compared with their counterparts in STEM fields.

Keywords: International Women Faculty, U.S. Academia, Bicultural Identity, Language Attitudes, Language Maintenance, Ethnic Pride

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Introduction

U.S. universities are known for attracting international (i.e., foreign-born) students and scholars from across the globe. Many university departments, especially those in STEM fields, have a sizeable portion of foreign-born faculty. Their presence on college campuses is instrumental in the internationalization of higher education in the United States where they increase diversity and make unique contributions to service, teaching, and research. Working in U.S. academia for foreign nationals is not without challenges. International faculty deal with immigration issues, linguistic and cultural differences, loneliness and isolation, as well as prejudice (Collins, 2008; Ghosh & Barber, 2021; Omiteru et al., 2018). Foreign-born female faculty may face even more challenges, especially in some disciplines traditionally dominated by white males (e.g., Li, 2020; Yakaboski, 2016). As U.S. universities continue to recruit international scholars and among them female faculty, it is imperative to examine their experiences so that their contributions as well as concerns do not go unnoticed. Such research can inform universities at large, individual departments, and international faculty's colleagues and mentors and eventually facilitate retention of foreign-born scholars and international female academics in particular.

This study draws on data from a larger, mixed-methods interdisciplinary project focused on the experiences of international women faculty in U.S. academia, with a focus on the state of Texas. The larger project encompasses multiple variables, such as work-life balance, efficacy, job satisfaction, bicultural identity, and language attitudes, among others. Using survey and interview data we aim to discern common trends for our participants as a group as well as describe some unique experiences via their personal examples and stories. This paper is based on the survey data collected from the initial 36 participants and focuses on the multilingualism and multiculturality of our respondents.

Background

As academia is becoming more diverse, it is imperative to understand the experiences, feelings, and thoughts of immigrant scholars in the United States and especially female academics since gender differences continue to affect U.S. faculty (e.g., O'Meara et al., 2017). Recent research demonstrated that international faculty in general and international female faculty in U.S. academia encounter some challenges that may have an effect on their personal and professional lives. For example, among challenges experienced by foreign-born academics regardless of gender prior research revealed immigration issues, cultural differences, and loneliness (Collins, 2008). As for gender-based differences in academia, O'Meara et al. (2017) found that women faculty spend more time advising students, participating in campus service, and engaging in teaching-related activities and that they also receive more new work requests compared with their male counterparts. While this study did not examine international faculty specifically, it is likely that similar patterns would be observed among foreign-born academics as well. For example, Skachkova (2007) interviewed 34 women U.S.-based professors from 22 different countries and discovered that these international women faculty were often treated differently and experienced difficulty in such areas as teaching, research, service, administration, work-life balance, and interaction with other faculty members.

Research into the experiences of immigrant faculty and international female faculty can be crucial to higher education institutions' attempts to facilitate retention of foreign-born faculty (Lawrence et al., 2014). Indeed, if international faculty's challenges and concerns are not

acknowledged and support is not provided, it may be difficult for them to be successful in academia and they may choose to leave it. On the other hand, research into their experiences can inform various stakeholders involved and recommendations can be made for faculty themselves and for institutions where they are employed (Gahungu, 2011). Mentorship programming for international faculty can also be improved based on research findings (Lawless & Chen, 2015). In addition, comparisons can be made with U.S.-born faculty and male foreign-born faculty to understand the roles of national origin and gender in the experiences of faculty. Finally, this type of research will allow for the issues of diversity and inclusion to be examined more critically. To illustrate, Ghosh and Barber (2021) conducted interviews with 33 immigrant women faculty and discovered that their participants "find themselves suffering from cultural tokenism … in ways that isolate them while also making them effective institutional resources for demonstrating diversity and inclusion" (p. 1076).

Recent studies have shed some light on the experiences of foreign-born academics in the United States demonstrating that both gender and national origin may create challenges for international women faculty. In terms of methodology, prior research mainly employed interviews (e.g., Ghosh & Barber, 2021; Li, 2020) or autoethnographies (e.g., Cruz et al., 2020; Wang, 2021). This study employed a quantitative approach and drew on survey data, which will later be supplemented with interview data within our larger, mixed-methods interdisciplinary project. Moreover, many previous studies focused on a specific subgroup of immigrant female faculty, such as women of color (e.g., Hernandez et al., 2015; Vaishnav et al., 2023) or Asian women (e.g., Li, 2020; Yakaboski, 2016). While we acknowledge the importance of these more narrowly focused investigations, our goal was to examine the experiences of international women faculty in general. We expect to find some universal trends among our participants and later examine their unique stories via interviews. Finally, in this study we focused on the linguistic and cultural aspects of our participants' identities and experiences and explored the issues related to their language attitudes and maintenance. Traditionally, in studies on international faculty in the United States other researchers have considered acculturation (e.g., Véliz et al., 2020) and English proficiency and foreign accent in particular (e.g., Folwell, 2013; Ghosh & Barber, 2021), while mother tongue and its maintenance have not been considered. On the other hand, it is a crucial topic within research on immigrant groups in the United States (Lee & Gupta, 2020; Lutz, 2007/2008; Nesteruk, 2010; Zhang & Slaughter-Defoe, 2009). Thus, our study contributes to research on language attitudes and maintenance among immigrants in general and specifically among international women faculty.

Methodology

Participants

For this study, we collected data from 36 respondents. Participants' age among those who disclosed it (n = 30) ranged from 33 to 68 (M = 44.47, SD = 9.86). Length of residence in the United States ranged from one year to 47 years (M = 16.03, SD = 9.61). With regard to place of origin, seven respondents were from Europe, 20 were from Asia, six were from Middle East, one respondent was from Africa, and two were from South America. Seven participants reported being H1B (i.e., work) visa holders, while 15 were U.S. residents and 14 were U.S. citizens. In terms of academic rank, there were six full professors, five associate professors, 16 assistant professors, and nine held other academic ranks (e.g., lecturer, visiting assistant professor, etc.). Discipline-wise 19 participants were in arts, humanities, and social sciences, while 16 were in STEM fields. One person chose not to disclose their discipline. Participants'

self-reported language ability in the English language and their native one is presented in Table 1 below.

Question	***M***	***SD***
How well do you speak English?	5.47	.74
How well do you understand English?	5.67	.53
How well do you read in English?	5.69	.47
How well do you write in English?	5.47	.70
How good is your pronunciation in English?	4.81	.98
How familiar are you with U.S. / American culture and traditions?	4.53	.97
How would you rate your ability in your native language?	5.67	.72

Table 1. Language ability (1 = the lowest, 6 = the highest)

Instrument

The data collection instrument consisted of two parts, a background questionnaire and a multi-scale questionnaire that included items related to ethnic, cultural, and linguistic identities and practices of our participants. The background questionnaire solicited information on participants' age, length of residence in the United States, place of origin and native language, immigration status, academic rank, and discipline. In addition, participants were asked to self-rate their English language ability. This portion of the background questionnaire was partially based on Birdsong et al. (2012). The main questionnaire consisted of five subscales: language attitudes, language maintenance, bicultural identity, ethnic pride, and code-switching. Most questions in the main questionnaire were Likert-scale type with answer options ranging from *Strongly Agree* (7) to *Strongly Disagree* (1).

Procedures

After securing an approval from the Institutional Review Board, we began our data collection. To find participants, we perused the departmental websites of universities in Texas in search of female faculty whose profiles indicated that they could be foreign-born. This information was either mentioned in their bios or CVs (e.g., undergraduate education was obtained outside the United States). Then, we sent an email to potential candidates containing an invitation to participate in our study, which briefly outlined its purpose and listed participant criteria, and a link to the survey.

Analyses

Initially, we analyzed our participants' responses to the main questionnaire descriptively. Then, we ran a correlation analysis to see whether there were any relationships among our variables (language attitudes, language maintenance, bicultural identity, ethnic pride, and code-switching) as well as our participants' length of residence in the United States and language ability in English and in their native language. Finally, we ran a series of one-way ANOVAs to examine potential group differences with regard to citizenship and discipline.

Results

First, we present the descriptive statistics, followed by additional analyses. As a group, our participants exhibited positive attitudes towards both English and their native languages, although there was some variation in their responses. Table 2 provides the means and standard deviations for the six questions measuring language attitudes.

Question	***M***	***SD***
I like using English in my daily life	5.92	1.32
I feel positive towards the English language	6.06	1.17
I enjoy speaking English every day	5.86	1.36
I like using my native language in my daily life	5.67	1.41
I feel positive towards my native language(s)	6.19	.98
I enjoy speaking my native language	6.17	.97

Table 2. Language attitudes (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree)

Our participants considered it important to maintain their native languages. However, the importance of language maintenance among their offspring was slightly lower, albeit with high variability in responses. Table 3 presents the means and standard deviations for the language maintenance questions.

Question	***M***	***SD***
It is important for me to maintain my native language	5.92	1.32
It is important for me that my children learn my native language	5.44	1.78

Table 3. Language maintenance (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree)

In addition to the questions in Table 3, we asked our respondents to indicate how often they visited their home country. Eight participants reported that they visited their home country never or rarely (every three to five years), while 28 participants went back regularly (every two years), often (every year), or very often (twice a year or more). Finally, our respondents were asked to select ways that they used to maintain contact with their home culture and language. Only one person did not maintain contact with their home culture and language, whereas 25 participants used three or more ways to do so. Table 4 shows how many participants selected each option.

Option	***n***
Regular trips to country of origin	23
Regular contact with friends and family in country of origin (e.g., via Skype, Zoom, WhatsApp, Facebook, etc.)	31
Media consumption in native language (e.g., movies, TV shows, music)	16
News in native language	15
Books in native language	10
Following social media accounts in native language	16
Through work (e.g., research or teaching have to do with native language)	7
Participation in local groups and events that focus on home culture / language	10

Table 4. Contact with home culture and language

Bicultural identity portion of the questionnaire, adapted from Huynh et al. (2018), measured our respondents' perception of their two combined cultures: their culture of origin and American culture. Higher scores on these questions indicated a more harmonized and blended bicultural identity and lower scores indicated a more conflicted and compartmentalized bicultural identity. Table 5 presents the means and standard deviations for the bicultural identity questions, which appear to indicate that there was a lot of variation in participant responses. Some respondents exhibited a more harmonious view of their two cultures, while others seemed to perceive the two cultures to be at odds with each other. These differences in

participant views averaged the mean scores for the group around the middle of the continuum. Question items marked with an asterisk (*) were reverse coded during analysis.

Question	***M***	***SD***
I feel torn between my native (i.e., culture of origin) and American cultures*	4.78	1.61
I feel that my native (i.e., culture of origin) and American cultures are incompatible*	4.22	1.57
I keep my native (i.e., culture of origin) and American cultures separate*	4.06	1.71
I feel both _____ (i.e., culture of origin) and American at the same time	4.08	1.70
I relate better to a combined _____ (i.e., culture of origin)-American culture than to my native (i.e., culture of origin) or American culture alone	4.17	1.76

Table 5. Bicultural identity (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree)

The next portion of the questionnaire contained ethnic pride questions related to native language and culture and was based on Barry (2002). Our participants exhibited a relatively strong sense of ethnic pride, albeit with some variation. Table 6 shows the means and standard deviations for the six questions measuring ethnic pride.

Question	***M***	***SD***
Being _____ (i.e., culture of origin) is an important part of who I am	5.81	1.28
I value my native language (i.e., the language spoken in my place of origin)	5.97	1.11
When a stranger asks me where I am from, I am proud to say that I am _____ (i.e. my place of origin / nationality)	5.58	1.63
I have a strong sense of being _____ (i.e. my place of origin / nationality / culture of origin)	5.39	1.61
I am proud to be able to speak my native language (i.e., the language spoken in my place of origin)	5.72	1.52
I identify with a _____-speaking community (i.e., the language spoken in my place of origin)	5.17	1.61

Table 6. Ethnic pride (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree)

Finally, the last set of questions asked our participants to consider their code-switching practices and attitudes. Most of these questions were adapted from Dewaele and Wei (2014). Admittedly with some variability present in the group, the majority of our respondents reported that they used code-switching when interacting with other multilinguals and their attitudes to code-switching were mainly positive as well. Table 7 contains the means and standard deviations for the individual questions on code-switching. Question items marked with an asterisk (*) were reverse coded during analysis.

Question	*M*	*SD*
I regularly code-switch when I interact with people with whom I share more than one language	5.06	1.84
Code-switching is a sign of incomplete linguistic competence in one of the languages or both*	5.11	1.95
Code-switching displays a distinct multicultural identity	5.19	1.26
Code-switching is a sign of arrogance*	6.14	1.25
Code-switching is a useful tool for multilingual speakers	5.61	1.50

Table 7. Code-switching attitudes and practices (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree)

A correlation procedure revealed that there were relationships between several variables in our study. We found a moderate correlation between length of residence and bicultural identity, r (34) = .37, $p < .05$. There was a strong correlation between English language ability and attitudes towards English, r (34) = .61, $p < .001$, and a moderate one between English language ability and attitudes to code-switching, r (34) = .46, $p < .01$. In addition, there was a moderate correlation between attitudes towards English and bicultural identity, r (34) = .33, $p < .05$. Attitudes towards native language strongly correlated with ethnic pride, r (34) = .63, $p < .001$, and with language maintenance, r (34) = .74, $p < .001$. Finally, there was a strong correlation between ethnic pride and language maintenance, r (34) = .84, $p < .001$.

A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant difference with regard to bicultural identity between participants with U.S. citizenship (M = 4.71, SD = 1.05) and those without (M = 3.97, SD = 1.03), F (1, 34) = 4.36, p = .044. Furthermore, we conducted a one-way ANOVA to test if our participants' discipline (non-STEM and STEM) had any effect on variables under examination. We found significant differences between groups with regard to attitudes towards English, attitudes towards native language, code-switching practices, ethnic pride, and language maintenance. We present these results in Table 8.

Variables	Group	*M*	*SD*	*F* (1, 33)	*p*
Attitudes towards English	non-STEM STEM	6.42 5.41	.85 1.40	7.10	.012
Attitudes towards native language	non-STEM STEM	6.39 5.59	.86 .97	6.94	.013
Code-switching practices	non-STEM STEM	5.68 4.31	1.67 1.85	5.31	.028
Ethnic pride	non-STEM STEM	6.11 5.04	1.01 1.25	7.70	.009
Language maintenance	non-STEM STEM	6.26 5.03	.87 1.72	7.54	.010

Table 8. ANOVA results by discipline

Discussion

This study surveyed a group of international female faculty employed at higher education institutions in the state of Texas, United States. We explored the multilingual and multicultural aspects of these women's identities focusing specifically on bicultural identity, ethnic pride, language maintenance, language attitudes, and code-switching. We found that our participants felt positive towards both their native language and English. They also reported engaging in code-switching practices between English and their native language and expressed rather positive perceptions of this phenomenon. Furthermore, their positive

orientation towards language and culture of origin was evident not only in their language attitude scores, but also in language maintenance scores and ethnic pride scores. Our respondents' positive attitudes towards native language correlated with ethnic pride and language maintenance, which also strongly correlated with each other. In other words, participants with higher ethnic pride and more positive attitudes towards their native language considered maintenance of their native language important.

Our findings indicated that international women faculty in our study felt strong connection to their place of origin and their native language and culture. This was evident not only in their high scores with regard to attitudes to native language, language maintenance, and ethnic pride. Most of our participants used multiple ways to maintain contact with their home language and culture, including contact with friends and family in their country of origin, regular trips to the country of origin, media and news consumption in their native language, and following social media accounts in their native language. These results were not uniform and there were exceptions among our respondents, whose engagement with home language and culture was limited. Future studies with more participants could shed further light on this finding and explore which factors may affect international women faculty's practices concerning contact with home language and culture.

As for the scores on bicultural identity, the results were rather variable, suggesting that some of our participants perceived a harmonious and compatible relationship between their culture of origin and American culture while for others the two cultures were at odds. Language attitudes towards English displayed a moderate correlation with bicultural identity. Furthermore, we found a moderate correlation between length of residence and bicultural identity, which indicates that the longer our respondents resided in the United States, the more harmonious and blended they perceived their culture of origin and American culture. This was further supported when we compared bicultural identity scores of those who were U.S. citizens at the time of this study and those who were not. The citizen subgroup's scores on bicultural identity subscale were significantly higher. We cannot, however, claim that the difference in citizenship status alone affected our participants' bicultural identity. Naturally, the path to citizenship is quite lengthy and length of residence may have played a greater role than citizenship. Future studies could consider these two variables and explore their contributions to the bicultural identity of international faculty.

The finding regarding the effect of discipline was rather interesting. Specifically, international women faculty in arts, humanities, and social sciences appeared to exhibit more positive attitudes towards English and their native language, more ethnic pride, and more interest in native language maintenance compared with their counterparts in STEM fields. They also more readily agreed with the statement about participating in code-switching practices. Perhaps, representatives of non-STEM disciplines engage with language and culture in their teaching and research in a way that makes them consider these aspects of their identities more carefully than their colleagues in STEM fields do. More studies are necessary to explore this topic in greater detail and to ascertain whether this finding will be supported.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

Our findings should be viewed in light of several limitations. First, these results may not be generalizable to all international female faculty in U.S. academia since we only collected data from faculty in Texas. Faculty from other states should be considered in future research to establish whether our findings apply in different contexts. Second, the sample in this study is quite small and more data is necessary to support our findings. We hope to collect more data

and to rerun the analyses in the near future. Finally, it is important to supplement our quantitative findings with some qualitative data to obtain a more vivid picture of our participants' experiences. We plan to conduct semi-structured interviews with selected participants in the next stage of our project to explore how our participants' experiences in U.S. academia are shaped by two major aspects of their identities (being foreign-born and female) as well as more narrow categories (e.g., place of origin, race / ethnicity, discipline / specialty).

Conclusion

As universities in the United States and across the globe continue to diversify their faculty, it is crucial to examine the experiences of international scholars in order to understand how to support their productivity and overall well-being if higher education institutions are interested in success and retention of these academics. This study contributes to the body of research literature that focuses on international women faculty in U.S. academia. Our research demonstrated that many foreign-born female scholars continue to preserve deep links with their culture of origin and express strong ethnic pride, hoping to maintain their native language and transmit it to their offspring. These linguistic and cultural considerations may add an extra layer to the roles and responsibilities these women have to navigate in their personal and professional lives.

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