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FEMALE INTERNATIONAL SCHOLARS: “I FEEL MANY TIMES I LIVE BETWEEN CRACKS”

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ABSTRACT

Derived from a larger research project on female faculty in the United States, this paper reports findings focused on a sub-group of participants, international scholars who work in U.S. colleges and universities. Based on in-depth interviews, some of the obstacles they face are portrayed in order to enhance the understanding of an understudied population and find ways to address their specific challenges.

INTRODUCTION

An increasing number of scholars¹ in the United States are first-generation immigrants who make significant contributions to American colleges and universities. Nevertheless, little attention has been paid to their experiences in the United States in general, and in American institutions of higher education in particular. Recruitment and retention of international faculty are often overlooked aspects of internationalization (Wells, 2007, p.77), and international faculty constitute an understudied population. This paucity of information stands in marked contrast to the large body of research on international students (Howe, 2008, p.73) and contradicts globalization and increasing student demand for international education (Wells, 2007, p. 78). The findings reported here are intended to help address this gap in the literature.

As I was researching the challenges faced by female faculty (Philipsen, 2008), I noticed that international scholars seem to encounter special challenges. Reporting these is a first step to a better understanding of this group aimed at increasing awareness and, ultimately, institutional change in higher education. This paper discusses only experiences of female international scholars because it is derived from a larger study on how female faculty attempt to balance their personal and professional lives. The larger study was a qualitative interview study, geared at understanding the women's experiences through their stories. As qualitative

researcher Irving Seidman wrote, “stories are a way of knowing” (Seidman, 2006, p. 7), a way for people to reflect on their experiences and give them order. For Seidman, when people tell stories about themselves they are making meaning about their lives by selecting details of their experience from their stream of consciousness. Seidman makes reference to Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who argued that every word people use in storytelling constitutes a microcosm of their consciousness (Vygotsky, 1987, pp. 236–237). It is this consciousness that provides access to complex social and educational issues “because social and educational issues are abstractions based on the concrete experience of people” (Seidman, 2006, p. 7)

Forty-four interviews with women in various disciplines and at five institutions of higher education were analyzed, giving voice to the experiences of female faculty at early-, mid-, and late-career stages. The participants ranged in age from 28 to 75, and among them were eight immigrant scholars from China, Ghana, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, the Netherlands, Pakistan, and Trinidad. Five were on the tenure track, either as junior or senior professors, while three held instructor or professor positions without tenure. Their places of employment included a community college, a large urban public university, an HBCU, and a research intensive institution, all located in a southeastern state.

Data collection employed a mix of purposeful and “snowball sampling”; at times I sought out specific participants, and at other times I relied on participants to recommend whom I should interview next. The goal was to diversify along career-stage, discipline, family constellation, race, nationality, etc. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, member checked, and coded with the aid of the software program ATLAS, then analyzed by career stage. The experiences of international scholars transcended career stage, however, and were included in a separate chapter.

It was found that a number of the trials international scholars recounted are similar to those of their American-born counterparts, and well documented in the literature (Bracken, Allen & Dean, 2006; Hile Bassett, 2005; Trower, 2005; Drago & Colbeck, 2003; DiGeorgio-Lutz, 2002). They include struggles with nebulous tenure expectations, super-busy schedules seemingly impossible to handle at times, and a work environment that continues to be based on the increasingly outdated model of the male breadwinner. Similar to their American colleagues, many are torn between meeting high expectations at home and at work—both “greedy institutions” (Letherby, Marchbank, Ramsay & Shiels, 2005, p. 211)—and they tend to sacrifice care of self in order to meet the myriad demands on their time. Beyond these, however, a number of problems appear unique to this group of faculty, and are little known or understood by American-born academics. The following sections give voice to what female international scholars had to say in hopes that their concerns become part of the discourse about how to make higher education more inclusive. All names are pseudonyms to protect participants’ identities.

A note on gender: If I had designed a study exclusively focused on interna-

tional scholars, I would have included male faculty. It is quite possible that while some aspects of the immigrant experience in higher education may be gender specific, many are most likely shared. This, however, is not how the findings reported here came about. As explained above, they were embedded in a larger study on female academics, and a rather unexpected find. I am discussing them here, separately from the larger study, because they invite readers to pay attention to an important topic. I am, however, also keenly aware that future research ought to focus on both genders of international scholars.

LEGAL CHALLENGES

Being an immigrant myself, I have experienced how immigration laws and policies, both in the U.S. and abroad, have a tendency to produce a maze difficult to navigate without the expenditure of considerable amounts of energy, time, and money. They may result in unpredictable life situations and even truncate career expectations. The visa process, for example, recently prompted 25 higher education, science, and engineering groups to issue a joint statement drawing attention to the fact that visa-related problems are making it difficult for international students and scholars to study and work in the U.S. and to attend conferences (Censer, 2004). If the situation is not remedied, the signatories warn, "the damage to our nation's higher education and scientific enterprises, economy, and national security [will] be irreparable" (Censer, 2004).

Assistant professor Yong, a participant in this study, serves as an example for how visa-related problems can disrupt international scholars' lives and derail their careers. Yong recounts leaving the United States while in graduate school to go back to her home country, China. She was subsequently denied a visa to return to the U.S., something that according to her is not at all an isolated incident but "happens all the time." It took the political connections of her father to ultimately enable her to re-enter the United States and resume her studies. Back in the U.S., however, the worries about her legal status were far from over, and even after she secured a faculty position, she had to embark on the long, expensive, and unpredictable road to permanent residence or "green card" status. This process tends to be an arduous one.

Obtaining a green card involves a switch from visa status (such as H1 for faculty and F1 for students) to permanent residency. While an H-visa allows an "alien" to work and stay in the U.S. longer than a simple tourist visa does (tourist visa are typically restricted to a six-month stay), it needs to be renewed during the third year of stay. It may be extended for an additional three years (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2005) but carries limited legal rights and protections. A green card, on the other hand, basically bestows upon its holder most of the rights and privileges of a citizen with the exception of the right to vote or to run for public office. Green cards are to be renewed every ten years (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2009a), but the renewal process tends to be uncom-

plicated. Without a green card, a faculty member's existence in the United States might well be tenuous and overshadowed by the possibility of non-renewal of the visa.

Securing a green card (permanent residency), however, is complicated. For one, a faculty member cannot walk the road alone but needs the support of the academic institution that hired him or her. This institution becomes the sponsor: "The employer acts as the sponsor (or petitioner) for the applicant (or beneficiary) who wants to live and work on a permanent basis in the United States" (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2009b).

The college or university (the "sponsor"), then, is required to demonstrate that the international scholar (who, even as a permanent resident, continues to officially be called "alien") did not usurp an American citizen's job but, instead, was chosen because no American was equally qualified for it (see U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2009c). Since tenure-track positions tend to be awarded after national searches—which are designed to find the most qualified person in a national pool—an academic institution should not have any trouble defending its selection of the international scholar for the job. Nevertheless, green card applications require paperwork as well as steep application fees which, when added to the fees charged by immigration lawyers involved in the process, can constitute a considerable burden. Most unsettling, however, might be the insecurity involved in the prolonged process of obtaining a secure status. Stress is likely added, in other words, to a career that is already marked by a considerable degree of unpredictability.

Many faculty members, American-born and international alike, are unable to predict where a newly obtained Ph.D. will ultimately land a job or, if desiring to change positions later on, where that quest might lead. These insecurities are compounded for many international scholars by the riddles of ever-changing immigration policies, rules, and regulations, as well as the fickle nature of bureaucracies that native-born Americans are typically able to avoid all of their lives. And while common stressors of the tenure-track existence have long been discussed in the literature (Finkelstein & others, 1998; Gappa & others, 2007; Olsen & Sorcinelli, 1992; Rice & others, 2000; Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006; Trower, 2005) and addressed by professional organizations, mentoring programs and support initiatives, international scholars' particular problems with immigration processes are typically veiled in a cloak of silence and dealt with by the individuals alone.

SACRIFICE

Moving between at least two countries entails, in some cases, unique sacrifices. While it is often assumed that international scholars come to the United States to create a better life, some of them in fact leave a better life in order to provide opportunities for their children, to name one possible reason. Dr. Yong illustrates the point. Her primary incentive for staying in the United States after

completing graduate school was to provide her son with opportunities she did not think he would have in China. Dr. Yong herself could have enjoyed a successful career back home and easily moved into the professoriate in China after her U.S. graduation. Yet she decided to face the life as an immigrant instead, for her son's sake. She tells stories of other Chinese immigrants in similar situations who gave up the professional accomplishments and status they had achieved in China in order to raise their children in the United States. She explains:

Many of them [Chinese professionals of previous generations], as I witnessed, sacrificed their own profession for the next generation, their children. Many of them just picked up whatever work. I had doctor friends... and when they were in China, they were already medical doctors and very successful, and now they have research fellowships.... They are in their fifties or older but none of them are now doctors.

Moving to the U.S. to gain an education and establish a life for her son, however, involved more hardships for Dr. Yong than merely leaving her native land. She had to leave without the child, who stayed with her parents in China while Dr. Yong went to graduate school in the United States. Dr. Yong recounts that it was not only painful to live without her son, but she was also confronted with people asking her, "How could you leave your child behind?"

I said 'I did not leave him behind, I had something to do; I had wanted to make a better life for him.' Also I was doing that because my parents wanted me to, it was part of my family's priorities. They wanted me to achieve. It was not like I wanted to leave my child behind. But that was very hard.

A move to the United States may mean prolonged or permanent separation from family and friends. Assistant professor and recent immigrant Dr. Ingersen-Noll describes how the "fixed" teaching schedule limits her ability to travel which makes it difficult for her to go home and visit her family back in the Netherlands:

So we're not going home. If I weren't in a teaching schedule, we could go in October but we can't do that right now. It [being an Assistant Professor] is not as flexible as it used to be when I was just a researcher.

Since the job market for academics is a national one, many American-born scholars face long-distance separations from their families as well. And yet they may have the opportunity to look for academic jobs closer to home, if they so desire, or move their families closer to them. Unless international scholars come to the United States with their families in the first place, they may not possess these options. Parents and other family members live in different countries, often on a different continent, speak different languages, and are restricted by immigration policies. In short, they may face insurmountable hurdles if they even consider

joining their daughters in the U.S. Being an international scholar, consequently, might well mean permanent and painful separations.

MARGINALIZATION

International scholars face other obstacles that appear largely unknown in academia, some of them revolving around the clashing of cultures. Culture can be defined as “persistent patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that shape the behavior of individuals and groups ...” (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. 6). Related to culture, the women in this study reported what has been called marginalization, defined as the result of trying to maintain family traditions while also assimilating into the dominant culture, without fitting fully in either group (Cheng, 1999). Dr. Yong, for example, describes “identity paradoxes” and living “between cracks,” meaning between two cultures. She says, “Every time I go back to China to visit I don’t feel I fit anymore. I have lived in this country for ten years; I feel many times I am never completely accepted.”

While professionally highly accomplished today, the thirty-eight year old does not have a “typical happy personal life” because it is “missing a lot of parts.” She feels she “missed a lot, as a person, as an individual,” including friends and a social life. She often feels lonely and uncertain about where, exactly, she belongs. One particular challenge is to connect to people on a level beyond superficiality, as Dr. Yong elaborates:

There is an obstacle of communication between me and my colleagues. One particular example I remember so clearly.... My mentor, she was a very nice lady, she wanted to help me succeed professionally. At this point I really needed to talk about my personal dilemma. I’m lonely, I want a friend.... I tried maybe three times when we had a mentor-mentee lunch. I felt very, very lonely. My child at the beginning was not there with me, and I wanted to share some of my struggles. It started when she asked me ‘How are you doing?’ And I started to share my problems but I was interrupted. And then I began to realize, okay, when people, some people, nice people, when they ask you how you are doing, the response they want from you are not really the problems. It’s a courtesy. It’s a social courtesy. You’re supposed to answer ‘I’m doing great,’ and if you cry, close your door but you’re not supposed to tell them.

In order to overcome marginalization and fit into the receiving culture, international scholars may make concessions and do things they would not have chosen to do in their native land. An interesting example is Dr. Ingersen-Noll’s negotiation of attitudinal difference between people in two countries. She grew up in The Netherlands, and the Dutch simultaneously strike her as more and as less traditional than people in the United States. Back home, they are much more closed-minded about working mothers, she says: “In the Netherlands, if you have children and you keep working five days a week, you are pretty much considered

a bad mother." And yet, the Dutch are more open-minded toward different living arrangements:

This is a very strong difference between Western European countries and being here. Back home you can just live with someone, and that is considered the same as being married. Here you actually have to have the paper that says you're married.

Her husband and she realized the difference in perception and got married, whereas "if we were in the Netherlands, we probably wouldn't have been married by now."

To be sure, cultural differences do not merely exist between and among nations but, rather, exist within nations, among sub-groups of people and organizations. Therefore, American-born scholars may also have to get used to the particular assumptions, beliefs, and practices characteristic of academic culture, defining academic institutions. According to Kuh & Whitt (1988), academic culture at any given institution forms through an interplay between the external environment and salient institutional features such as the institution's historical roots, its constituents (alumni, sponsors), the academic program, core faculty and administrators, student subcultures, cultural artifacts such as architecture, customs, stories, and language, and more (p.7). What makes the situation of international scholars different when compared to their native colleagues is not the experience of cultural inconsistencies per se, because it is likely that many American-born faculty and students can attest to the cultural adjustments they may have had to make once they became part of an academic institution. Particularly first-generation college students can bear witness in that regard. And yet these cultural challenges have been documented and analyzed in the literature, according to Pascarella and others (2004); they have become part of a university community's collective awareness and have spurred such initiatives as student and faculty orientations, support groups, mentorship programs, and more.² International scholars' cultural struggles, on the other hand, are little discussed in the higher education literature or other public forums. Therefore, international scholars may well face a double-burden: getting used to academic culture just like everybody else and dealing with immigrant-specific issues derived from the cultural context of their origins.

ISOLATION

While the feeling of isolation is certainly not confined to international scholars, their experiences of it may be directly related to their immigrant status and compounded by cultural barriers and the lack of family. Dr. Marx is a full professor at an HBCU, and came originally from Jamaica. She talks about rarely getting integrated into the community, a fact she finds particularly odd because she is a black woman feeling rejected by African-Americans:

I'm a foreigner. We very rarely get integrated in.... I'm Black in African-American society.... I have been invited to dinners by non-African-Americans, not by African-Americans.... It's African-Americans in relation to other blacks from other countries.

She describes how she gets together with other international scholars, and this group is inclusive of "whites, Indians, all kinds," but African-American colleagues in her immediate work environment tend to be exclusionary. Dr. Marx has previous work experience in another historically black university, and recounts how there, too, she found her colleagues unwilling to share information. She attributes this attitude to past hardships African-Americans endured which led them to think, "Okay, if I had to go through it, you go through it too. I'm going to keep my information, whereas the culture I come from, we share." She concludes that if she had to live her life over again, she would not choose a career but stay home instead. She says "I cheat my personality going into the workplace," which she finds very harsh in the United States:

I must say if I had been in Jamaica or in the islands I would definitely prefer to work, but I find the American workplace very harsh. So, for me, if I had to do it over, I would stay home with my kids.... I do very well; don't worry. But all I can think of is, I'm going to walk out one day and not work again because I found it traumatizing, as it were.... I've been very successful at it.... So I have achieved but it's not the life I would've chosen had I thought it through before.

Isolation made life difficult for Dr. Yong, as well, who finds it culturally strange not to be able to share personal dilemmas or problems. After her disappointing experiences trying to connect to colleagues, she followed their example and kept her office door closed. Her isolation mounted:

If I did not go out and ask a question or say 'Hi' to people, I realized some days if I don't teach I did not say a word. I was in the office the whole day, got some lunch and came back, didn't see anybody. I said, 'That's really very weird.' I feel very abnormal to live that way.

ADVANTAGES AND COPING

Full professor Dr. Koshino from Japan believes that while she may have been exploited because of her minority status, being an international scholar has its advantages, too. Her cultural background helped her a great deal in that it prepared her to be organized, a perfectionist who likes to do "things almost 110% right." She compares her basic education in Japan with basic education in the United States, and feels relieved she got what she did:

I can't believe the problem of literacy in this country. That American natives can't spell, cannot write grammatically correct English, that's very, very

disturbing for me. So then I say to myself, 'Wow, I got something right from being Japanese.'

In addition to emphasizing positive aspects of the immigrant experience, some international scholars in this study developed coping strategies to improve their situation. One way to break through the reported sense of isolation, for example, was to rely on extended families. While international scholars often face the separation from their families left in the home countries, as described above, some move to the United States with or followed by their families. The women in this study who have been able to do so do not take the family's presence for granted. Instead, they take full advantage, because having family support available proves invaluable.

Assistant professor Dr. McMillan came to the U.S. from Trinidad at the age of nine, and she recalls the importance of her family throughout her life. Her family had immigrated to New York, and she found it painful to be far away from them while at college, so she transferred and moved back. She got married, had two children, moved South, and her family followed:

I'll be honest with you; I forced a lot of that. I said I needed to have my mom close by, so we really worked with her on selling her house in New York City. We talked seriously to my in-laws about not retiring very far away because we wanted them to have a close relationship with the children. My mother came, and subsequently my sisters came, and when my sister got divorced, I said, 'You need to be with your family because you need the support. Do not leave. You need to have the family to hold you up.' We've generally been that support for each other. Even growing up, because we moved from another country, your family was always the nucleus of everything you were doing.

Currently, her sister lives next door, while her mother resides in the same house with her. It is this family that has kept McMillan grounded, as she might say, and has also supported her and made it possible for her to go to graduate school. Her mother and mother-in-law took turns cooking and taking care of her children while she went away to work on her Ph.D. Whatever friends she makes, they become integrated into her family, and so "you stay within that hub."

There are few Caribbean scholars at her university but her extended family—"the hub"—helps Dr. McMillan deal with the fact that as Caribbean people "we have really different cultural lives," as she explains:

Coming to this country as immigrants, my parents let us know very early, especially my father, that Americans were very different from us, and we didn't live like they did.... It was pretty clear: they have their lives, we live here, we will get the best of what's here but we will always be who we are.... So we always had that thing: we have our family, and our family will be our friends. We would have interactions with people on the outside, but it wasn't as important. One of the really strange things is that we would always look at my sister who

always had lots of American friends. It was like ‘Why does she do that?’ It was like she always had these people around her, and we would always kind of turn our nose and see that as something not being very right about that. We’d see them as a little bit unsavory.

To be sure, Dr. McMillan and her family opened up and befriended other people on the outside, given that “I realize that you do need people outside of your family that you are friends with, that you are close to.” The extended family does remain her most immediate support network, however, and a major factor in preventing the feeling of isolation so prevalent among international scholars.

Dr. Sikka from Pakistan, full professor at a community college, also emphasizes the significance of her extended family. She and her husband were greatly aided by her parents, who moved to town after her father’s retirement. Their move coincided with the birth of Dr. Sikka’s daughter, “...and that did enable me to continue working at a pretty intense rate.... They watched her and juggled her pre-school and all that schedule, so that helped.”

Extended family is equally important for Dr. Nelson at an HBCU, who immigrated from Ghana at age thirteen. Her family was instrumental in helping the 28-year-old Ph.D. pursue her career while having three children who are now six, five, and two years old. Dr. Nelson stresses that she has family support and never took any time off to have or care for her children. She says, “I went to school while giving birth and taking care of them, but I had family support. They would come watch them while I went to class and come back.” She attributes her professional success to the help of her husband, parents and parents-in law.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

While more research is needed to fully explore this topic, it seems that many international scholars face some of the same barriers to professional success as their American-born counterparts. They have to balance busy lives, understand role expectations and reward systems, and learn to negotiate cultural norm of academic institutions. And yet, in some ways their balancing acts appear to be unique. They may have made significant sacrifices on their road to exile, and immigration laws and policies may now pose hurdles to their existence unknown to their native-born American colleagues. International scholars may have to negotiate webs of relationships based on conventions markedly different from those in their native lands, as Dr. Yong’s battle with prolonged loneliness illustrates. In addition to the difficult navigation of conflicting cultural norms, international scholars may carry burdens largely invisible to others and little understood because they are culturally scripted in ways unimaginable to most Americans.

In addition, it must be difficult for international scholars to draw attention to their struggles. For one thing, doing so may not be expedient because, after all, they are trying to prove their value to the American community, much like many other immigrant groups have done before them. Additionally, however, not many

of them live in one place, typically, at least not many from the same home country. It is hardly possible, then, to speak in a united voice from scattered communities.

Still, perhaps some international scholars are uniquely positioned to deal with the challenges of academia. They may, for instance, have close-knit families who support them and enables their careers, particularly by providing child care. They stay together, move close to each other and live the idea that it takes a village to raise a child.

Immigrant communities can also serve important emotional functions as in the case of Dr. Marx who experienced black-on-black racism. Rejected by the African-American community at her college, she found solace not only in her immediate family but also in a community of immigrants who were more embracing and open-minded than her native-born colleagues at work.

Being an international scholar might also positively affect the scholars' work in that it enhances their work ethic and increases their motivation to succeed. Dr. Kochino explained how being an immigrant was a positive influence on her work, because her Japanese education prepared her well. Dr. Nelson recalls that being an immigrant made her "work harder" and "strive to be better. That's why I was brought here," she said; "Otherwise I would have failed my parents, because the only reason why they came here was to give us a better education. It was my job to take that opportunity and make something out of it."

Dr. Nelson personifies what educational anthropologist John Ogbu describes as "voluntary minorities," in contrasts with "involuntary minorities." Involuntary minorities became minority groups against their will through conquest or enslavement. Examples are African-Americans or Native Americans, who have a long history of oppression and exploitation and tend to see little experiential evidence that hard work will lead to success or remove discrimination. Consequently, Ogbu observes, members of involuntary minorities, especially adolescents, are likely to develop oppositional cultures. They may be inclined to view hard work in school, for instance, as "selling out" and instead engage in actions intended at subverting the system. Such behavior backfires, and they often undermine their own educational success. Voluntary minorities like the ones found in this study, in contrast, came to the United States by choice in search of economic, political, or religious opportunities or to flee oppression. Voluntary minorities are much more likely than involuntary minorities to accept a temporary second-rate status in order to prove themselves worthy and to work their way up through society. They tend to have a strong work ethic and seek success within the existing educational system (Ogbu, 1987).

In sum, international scholars are invaluable assets to institutions of higher education in a globalizing world. They personify some of the best other nations have produced; they diversify our colleges and universities, and enhance academia with their productivity. International scholars themselves, or their children, may benefit from what academia has to offer, and they often develop successful strategies to cope with some of the challenges of working in American academia.

Nonetheless, they may also suffer in silence from marginalization, isolation, legal obstacles and other issues that have thus far remained unexplored. Therein lies the challenge for their institutions: to take advantage of the unique resources international scholars bring to the academy, while also providing them with the recognition and support they need.

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NOTES

¹ The exact number of immigrant scholars, defined here as first-generation immigrants who hold faculty positions in academe, are difficult to obtain. The group includes immigrants who are nonresident aliens (people with visas that allow them to work), resident aliens (green card holders), and citizens. According to the National Center of Educational Statistics, 21,200 full-time instructional faculty in degree-granting institutions were nonresident aliens in 2003 (NCES, 2005). To obtain an accurate picture of the size of what is here defined as “immigrant scholars,” one would have to add green card holders as well as first-generation citizens to this number. The Institute for International Education reports that in 2005-2006, 96,981 international scholars pursued academic partnerships with American universities, an increase of 8.2 percent from the previous year (Open Doors, 2006).

² Claudia Ladeira McCalman (2007) did, however, call for support groups for “international women and women of color” (p. 72)

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