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Migrating Selves: Counteracting an Unwelcoming Ethos of Reception


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Cover Page Footnote

We thank Dr Kolewale Elufisan for assistance with the data capture of this study.

Migrating Selves: Counteracting an Unwelcoming Ethos of Reception

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ABSTRACT

Utilising the research methodology of narrative inquiry, this study set out to explore how Nigerian immigrant academics counteracted an unwelcoming ethos of reception at a South African university. Data capture comprised a mix of semi-structured interviews, observations, field notes and a researcher journal. Data was analysed utilising qualitative content analysis. Findings reveal that the resiliency process of Nigerian immigrant academics was triggered by ecological sources within the context of the academe and surfaced in the form of resilient qualities. Nigerian immigrant academics drew on specific internal assets and external resources to circumvent the effects of various stressors as well as social and institutional barriers to reconstruct their professional identities and become academically successful. The religious creed of Nigerian immigrant academics seemed to provide a mainstay and guiding force in their lives.

Keywords: Immigrant Academics; Ethos of Reception; Resilience; Professional Identity; Wandering Scholar

Introduction and Background Context

Over the past two decades, the injection of a rainbow of colours into the portrait of former white South African universities has witnessed radical change in the hues and contours that once defined these universities. Such vibrancy on the one hand has jerked South Africa out of its insulation, but on the other has introduced a different playing field, ripe for the cultivation of a new breed of discrimination and prejudice. The academic landscape during the period before 1994, in terms of race, was overwhelmingly White. The advent of democracy started a process of race transformation in higher education institutions which began slowly with the numbers of Black indigenous academics bolstered by immigrants from African countries. In recent years, much debate has been generated about the appointment of Black immigrant academics¹ to signify transformation. Nevertheless, Black immigrant academics are now part of the academic landscape. The Nigerian cohort is certainly strongly represented in South Africa and it is fitting that this group is the focus of the study.

¹ Black immigrant academics: Referencing the apartheid era solidarity of all non-whites as 'black', *Black immigrant academics* refers to both non-white immigrants who come from African countries, to descendants of any of the people of Africa, and to Indian immigrants who hail from India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

South Africa, however, has a complicated history and a complex perspective on Black immigrant academics who hail from SADC² countries, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. It is within this specific South African complexity that these Black immigrant academics find themselves. It is within the physical, political, philosophical, social, economic and educational environments of the host country and host institution that they need to function. Given this context, what are some of the challenges that Nigerian immigrant academics experience? What are some of the opportunities? Do Nigerian immigrant academics experience a sense of belonging at South African universities? Much has been written internationally on immigrant academic experiences (Thomas & Malau-Aduli 2013) obstacles and challenges in host countries (Hsieh 2012; Pherali 2011; Green & Myatt 2011) problematic transition (Nimoh 2010; Jiang et al. 2010) and identities (Saltmarsh & Swirski 2010; Richardson & Zikic 2007; Maadad 2011; Pherati 2011). However, little if any studies have been conducted on Nigerian immigrant academics in the South African context. The purpose of this study is to fill this gap in the literature. Accordingly, this study asks how do Nigerian immigrant academics counteract an unwelcoming ethos of reception in reconstructing their professional identities at a South African university?

The argument is presented as follows. We begin by locating this study in the relevant literature. A theoretical framework on resiliency is then presented. We then describe the sample and context and the research methodology that was implemented. Narratives of Nigerian immigrant academics are subsequently presented. We conclude with an analysis and discussion of findings and examine ways in which Nigerian immigrant academics have elected or omitted to adopt certain strategies in counteracting an unwelcoming ethos of reception at a South African university.

Exploring the terrain: Academic Mobility and the Wandering Scholar

Kim (2009:387) ascribes the notion of the “wandering scholar” to the birth of universities but also links academic mobility to the specific political views of an era. This pattern has not changed during current times, as immigrant academics still encounter obstacles caused and altered by “ethnicity, nationality, race, gender, religion and aspects of culture” (Kim 2009:400). Consequently, academic mobility is arranged according to political and economic circumstances as well as personal choices of career enhancement and professional networking (Kim 2010). Although immigrant academics fall under the phenomenon of crossing cultures, a number of factors distinguish them as a distinctive migratory grouping. Their migration is usually voluntary and often permanent (Zezeza 2004; Thomas & Malau-Aduli 2013).

Darker Side of Immigrant Academics’ Career

The complexity of maneuvering within a new university environment is but one element in navigating the extent of personal and professional spaces of immigrant academics (Green & Myatt 2011). The increased mobility of African academics, and their positions at host universities, highlights the long-standing dilemma of “double consciousness” (DuBois 1903; Nesbitt 2003:17). This identity crisis of belonging plays the African identity against the broader identity of integration and acculturation which immigrants academics sometimes find problematic and challenging (Clifford & Henderson 2011; Saltmarsh & Swirski 2010:292). Richardson and Zikic (2007) refer to this as the “darker side of an international academic

² SADC: Southern African Development Community) is a regional organisation consisting of 14 Member Countries (Angola, Botswana, Congo (DR), Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe).

career". Identity, as defined within diasporic/human movement contexts, therefore has crucial implications for the immigrant academic (Subedi & Daza 2008).

Establishing associations in terms of common disciplines within the world of the academe do not automatically translate well across borders, nor does it guarantee collegial connections and reassurance (Clarke et al. 2013; Kreber 2010). Approaches to scholarship and education are often deeply embedded in culture. The impact of indigenous cultures on local pedagogical techniques and the unfamiliarity of a setting can lead to confusion for the immigrant academic, for example, unfamiliar learning styles and behaviours of students and confusing grading systems and assessment methods (Hamza 2010; Green and Myatt 2011). In addition, the institutional and organizational culture and its copious official issues result in routines and deadlines that are often unfamiliar and strange to immigrant academics.

Immigrant academics used phrases like "a learning curve", "feeling like an alien", "culture shock" (Thomas & Malau-Aduli 2013:40) "a no-man's land" and "ethnic hell" (Hoffman, 2007: 101) in describing the demands of adjusting to their work environment. A review of the literature revealed that immigrant academics struggle with issues of language and accent (Selmer & Lauring 2009; 2015), collegiality (Austin et al. 2014) loneliness, and identity formation (Abla 2012:3). All of which influence the reconstruction and renegotiation of their professional identities. The most consistent perception about immigrant academics is that accent and language problems produce teaching inadequacy (Abla 2012; Marbley, Wong, Santos-Hatchett, Pratt & Jaddo 2011). Concerns are often raised in terms of their ability to communicate effectively and to teach their students well (Shaikh 2009).

Collegiality can be seen "in terms of relationships with fellow academics as well as involvement of academic staff in institutional decision-making" (Austin et al. 2014:551). Eskay et al. (2012: 236) found that African immigrant academics are frequently confronted by "racism, xenophobia and other forms of mistreatment". The concept of race apparently continues to play a destructive role in areas of higher education, particularly collaboration, funding and staff recruitment. Immigrant staff continued to experience their academic existence as being outside the mainstream (Eskay et al. 2012; Marbley et al. 2011). They seemed to participate less in university activities and knew fewer of their colleagues compared to their local counterparts. According to Austin et.al (2014:551) "academic culture depends greatly on departmental context". Walker (2015:72) notes how immigrant academics "on arrival believed that they were prepared and competent" but then had to concede that their specialist skills and knowledge were often not valued. Immigrant academics are also often overlooked for awards which they believe they deserve (Afoaku 2015). Such processes can severely damage the self-esteem of immigrant academics and it can also affect collegial relationships. Positive collegial relationships of "genuine connection" are extremely significant for the reconstruction of immigrant academics identities (Marbley et al. 2011).

Language usage and cultural behaviours of the host institution resulted in immigrant academics feeling isolated, invisible and like an outsider. They were marked by their physical appearance and received indirect messages from colleagues that their academic work was not of standard. The literature reveals that many immigrant academics were of the view that "without my permission or input, my identity had already been defined for me" (Marbley et al. 2011: 167). Teaching in a new cultural environment has an intense impact on identity (Green & Myattm 2011) and professional tensions "has a considerable impact on the quality, productivity and well-being of an academic's professional life" (Zhou, Basnet & Pigozzo 2013: 2). The way that embedded cultural values from the home society are interpreted in the host society provides

a challenge, as interpretations regarding values are important “in the interplay of work and the private life” of the immigrant academic (Kempen et al. 2015:18).

Regardless of their knowledge, what immigrant academics reflect on are feelings of “cultural dislocation” and being acutely aware of not having shared cultural and historical roots (Saltmarsh & Swirski 2010: 295). They admit to their struggle with local protocols and confess to feeling overwhelmed. These immigrant academics specifically mentioned the importance of collegial encouragement when trying to navigate culture-specific practices. Knowing that one is welcome in a new group allows immigrant academics to pursue such relationships (Kreber 2009; Yanar 2011).

Literature is extremely sparse in terms of how immigrant academics counteract an unwelcoming ethos of reception. A few studies have been conducted on the impact of resiliency on the professional success of immigrant academics (Cora-Bramble et al. 2010; 2006). Cora-Bramble et al. (2010) explored the relationship between resilience and academic productivity of minority faculty members. Findings reveal that minority faculty members encountered challenges related to recruitment, retention, satisfaction, and advancement; their resilience led to increase in academic productivity and they were able to advance academically in the absence of a nurturing academic environment or in spite of overt discrimination.

Conceptual Mooring

Resiliency theory provides the conceptual scaffolding for considering a strengths-based approach (Fergus & Zimmerman 2005; Zimmerman & Brenner 2010) to understanding how Nigerian immigrant academics counteracted an unwelcoming ethos of reception in constructing their professional identity at a South African university. A review of the voluminous literature reveals that resiliency is a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant challenges. Richardson (2002) proposes that resiliency theory rests on three prongs, namely the resiliency process, innate resilience and resilient qualities. The resiliency process is triggered by ecological sources within a context. Innate resilience refers to the belief that human beings as well as other living things possess energy or a force that emanates from within that propels individuals to seek self-actualization, altruism, wisdom, and harmony with a spiritual source of strength. Resilient qualities remain dormant until they are triggered by ecological sources. Resiliency is not a personal trait but a construct (Ungar et al. 2005) that encompasses both internal (assets) and external (resources) qualities (Cora-Bramble 2006; 2010). Assets comprise of positive qualities that reside within individuals such as self-efficacy and self-esteem. Resources refer to qualities outside individuals such collegial support, mentors and programs that provide opportunities for learning and practicing skills.

Research Strategy

Meta-theoretically we were drawn to the tenets that govern social constructivism as our worldview. Methodologically the lens we utilised identifies our view as qualitative inquirers. The research design was a qualitative case study and employed the narrative method. The case for the study was defined by an institution with Black immigrant academics. The site of this research study was a university for which we designate the pseudonym, “Freedom University”. Pseudonyms were given to the research site and to participants to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. The research sample was Nigerian immigrant academics and was varied in terms of, ethnicity, gender and years in the South African academe. Purposive sampling was utilised to recruit participants for this study (Merriam 1998; Patton 1990; Creswell 2005). The total number

of Nigerian immigrant academics employed at Freedom University was 14 and comprised 9 academic and 5 support staff. Of the 9 academic staff members, only 7 participated in the research study. All 7 participants were interviewed and observed. One of these participants was used to pilot study.

Biographical information of participants

Pseudonym	Title	Rank	Qualifications	Gender	Age	Years in the Academe	Years at FU	Previous place/s of work
Obi	Prof	Professor	PhD	Male	55	28	10	UK, USA
Lamide	Dr	Snr. Lecturer	PhD	Female	50	18	7	Nigeria
Kunle	Dr	Snr. Lecturer	PhD	Male	41	13	4	Nigeria, Egypt
Yinka	Dr	Snr. Lecturer	PhD	Male	40	12	6	Nigeria
Gbolahan	Mr	Lecturer	MSc	Male	33	6	4	Nigeria
Tobi	Mr	Research Assistant	MEd	Male	30	8	2	Nigeria

These academics were born and received their first degree in Nigeria before immigrating to South Africa. All participants except Professor Obi had academic experiences either as a master or doctoral student at Freedom University. Upon completion of their degrees, they were employed as staff members at Freedom University. Dr Lamide was the only female participant in this study.

Data capture comprised a mix of semi-structured interviews, observations, field notes and a researcher journal. Semi-structured interviews were used to provide an opportunity for academics to share and reflect upon their experiences as well as to bring new meanings of change and growth in their lives. Each interview was approximately an hour in duration. Follow-up interviews were conducted for clarification or elaboration of certain issues that arose in the first interview. Participants were also observed during the interview process and during informal settings. Data was analysed utilising qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2000; Sandelowski 2000). Codes were generated from the data and continuously modified by the researcher's treatment of the data 'to accommodate new data and new insights about the data' (Sandelowski 2000:338). This was a reflexive and an interactive process that yielded extensive codes and themes. Multiple readings of the data were conducted, organizing codes and themes into higher levels of categories within and across the interviews, observations, and other sources of data (Merriam 1998). Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Education. The ethics application went through a rigorous blind peer review process.

Findings

Findings from this study revealed that Nigerian immigrant academics counteracted an unwelcome ethos of reception in reconstructing their professional identity by drawing on both internal (assets) and external resilient (resources) qualities.

Internal Resilient Qualities

Internal resilient qualities or assets emerged in the following ways namely, self-control, good work ethic, optimism and perseverance and a culture of silence.

The capacity to change and adapt the self to produce a better, more optimal fit between the self and the world is what defines the term self-control (Rothbaum et al. 1982). The ability of a human being to exercise self-control is considered to be useful and beneficial in successful adaptation as it enables harmonious interactions and relationships (Tangney et al. 2004). One of the ways in which Nigerian immigrant academics exercised self-control was to refrain from participating in local politics at their work place Nigerian immigrant academics preferred to remain aloof and to watch events unfolding from a distance. The term ‘siddon look’ was used by one of the participants to describe the strategy that he adopted. This term is used in the local dialect in Nigeria to mean ‘sit down and look’ especially when the act of sitting down is intentionally done to avoid altercation, fully aware that one’s aspiration or voice is of no consequence in that context.

I concentrate on my academic work and personal development instead of immersing myself in local politics. As an immigrant I do not pay attention to issues that would not promote my academic trajectory. I prefer to ‘siddon look’. In so doing I avoid conflict with local colleagues. I try to use this as a shield so that I don’t see all the other things you know, so maybe that is part of my defense mechanism not to see any negatives (Prof Obi).

Good work ethic and commitment and dedication to their calling as academics surfaced strongly in the data. Nigerian immigrant academics were acutely aware of their ‘outsider’ status at Freedom University and knew that their survival and relevance in the academic fraternity depended on their publication productivity and their ability to be at the cutting edge in their respective fields of study. Thus they tried to push themselves beyond limits and even do more than what was required of them. Dr Yinka explained that the only way he could survive as a black immigrant in an environment populated by white colleagues was to be extraordinary in his areas of specialization, as aptly captured in his philosophical elucidation,

Generally if you are a Black in a typically White environment you are assumed not to know until you prove that you know. That maybe is different from, if you are typically White; you are assumed to know until you prove you don’t know.

Study participants mentioned that they were aware that the academic space was competitive and even more competitive if one was a stranger. Many of the immigrant academics increased their work rate so as to be ahead of indigenous colleagues in terms of production of articles in accredited journals. Dr Lamide mentioned that it was impossible for her not to work harder than indigenous colleagues because the only way she could keep her position was to be extraordinarily competent in her field. Therefore she made sure that she published voraciously in accredited journals as she believed that her voluminous publications would count in her favour and secure her place in the academe. Dr Gbolahan commented that if it was officially required of all staff members to attend one conference in a year and present a paper, he would try to present papers at three conferences.

It would appear that Nigerian immigrant academics were conscious of their 'outsider' status and feeling of non-belongingness, hence they adopted a culture of silence so as not to be perceived as an antagonist or a threat.

You know some of my immigrant academic colleagues were subjected to the same ill-treatment as I was. I chose to react, but they decided to maintain a culture of silence because they did not want to be perceived as troublemakers. I learnt to do the same (Dr Kunle).

Nigerian immigrant academics thus kept a low profile both at work and outside by maintaining culture of silence. At work when their opinion was sought on a particular issue, they preferred to be neutral and kept their opinions to themselves especially when they were aware that their opinion may be different from that of the majority. It would seem that job security and a sense of survival in the host country and host institution served to silence their voices.

Nigerian immigrant academics were optimistic and hopeful despite the challenges that they encountered. They harboured the hope that the situation was going to improve in the near future. This optimism and hope fuelled their inner strength to confront challenges. Of the 6 Nigerian immigrant academics 2 junior staff members were desperate to relocate from South Africa to other countries; 3 middle career staff members were hopeful that they had a better future in South Africa.

You just know who you are, you know your worth as a person and you carry yourself as such. I think if any foreign academe wants to work outside his or her base, you just need to believe in yourself and you need to psyche up yourself.

It is about me and what I can deliver, it is not about what anybody can offer me. The Freedom University cannot give me anything that I cannot get from it.

And, Professor Obi had decided to remain in South Africa until he retired.

I think I have anchored myself here at the university and it doesn't occur to me I want to go to anywhere or do anything else. At this point in my life I think I have come past the stage of I think it is to really start to give back to the society as best as I can while I have the energy.

The above four Nigerian immigrant academics argued that they were already accustomed to the South African system and that they would have to start over again if they migrated to another country. They were unsure whether the system in the new host country was going to be worse than the one in South Africa. Hence, they decided to stay and to make it work.

External Resilient Qualities

External resilient qualities or resources surfaced in the form of an excellent academic environment, academic freedom, good institutional leadership and access to permanent employment and residency.

Freedom University boasted an excellent academic environment which did not go unnoticed by Nigerian immigrant academics. The exceptional infrastructure coupled with an outstanding academic culture created a conducive space for academics to flourish. Academics had easy access to world-class facilities such as good accommodation, effective classrooms, and unrestricted access to internet and a state of the art library. Dr Lamide who completed her Master's degree in Nigeria before immigrating to South Africa explained that in Nigeria it was extremely difficult to gain access to updated academic resources such as books and journals. However she indicated that her experience was different when she enrolled for her doctoral degree at Freedom University:

Maybe if one looks in terms of infrastructure, I think there is a world of difference. I think when I was studying, the library facilities for me really stood out. Because at home I know what I went through to even get access to books that you might need to assist you in studying, those things were things that were for me that stood out. If you look in terms of infrastructure, the facilities that are here are not really available at home.

One of the push factors responsible for the emigration of academics from Nigeria to South Africa was lack of academic freedom in Nigeria. At Freedom University Nigerian immigrant academics enjoyed relative academic freedom because they were shielded from undue interference from senior colleagues and the institution. The institution operated on the basis of trust. At Freedom University academics were rewarded based on merit and research outputs.

There is an element of trust as long as you do your work and you are productive in research you are rewarded with a certain level academic freedom (Dr Yinka).

Coupled to the excellent infrastructure, Freedom University was known for its exceptional institutional leadership. All participants in this study expressed that they received good support and cooperation from University management which contributed to them perceiving themselves as members of the university community.

...here, everything runs like a well-oiled machine. There is information flow. The institution is very well managed and the leaders know what they are doing. I believe that this is one of the top universities in the country because of its good leadership (Mr Tobi).

Nigerian immigrant academics' mentioned that upon their arrival in South Africa they gained quick access to employment. All the participants except one graduate assistant who was appointed on a contract basis were offered permanent employment at and permanent residency at Freedom University.

Analysis and Discussion of Findings

Findings of this study in terms of the reconstruction of professional identity and challenges and problems that immigrant academic experience in the world of the academe,

seemed to echo findings in the literature (Thomas & Malau-Aduli 2013; Zhou, Basnet & Pigozzo 2013; Eskay et al. 2012). However, little or no studies have been conducted on how immigrant academics counteract an unwelcoming ethos of reception. The generation of new knowledge in this regard has filled this gap in the literature. Consistent with some findings conducted on resiliency in general (Cora-Bramble et al. 2010) this study also found that both internal and external resilient qualities helped immigrants (in this study immigrant academics) to counteract an unwelcome ethos of reception in constructing their professional identities.

The resiliency process of immigrant academics was triggered by ecological sources within the context of the academe and surfaced in the form of resilient qualities. Resiliency as a construct (Ungar et al. 2005) encompasses both internal and external qualities (Cora-Bramble 2006; 2010). In the face of non-cordial collegial encounters, sense of non-belongingness, xenophobic climate, unfamiliarity of the academic culture of the institution and feelings of dislocation and displacement, immigrant academics relied on internal resilient qualities to counteract an unwelcoming ethos. They maintained self-control by adopting a culture of silence. Freedom University stifled the voices of immigrant academics. Their silence which was personally embodied was used as a survival strategy because they feared embarrassment and loss of face as well as rejection from colleagues if they demanded too much or spoke out (Thomas & Malau-Aduli 2013). They also embodied internal resilient qualities such as perseverance, optimism and hope. If anything, it would seem that these ecological sources served as a catalyst to propel them into giving off their best in terms of their work ethic. Ironically, this served to breed further tension, animosity and xenophobia between local academics and immigrant academics as they were seen as upstaging their local colleagues and were thus perceived as a threat. These immigrant academics seemed to possess energy or a force that emanated from within, which propelled them to seek self-actualization, altruism, wisdom, and harmony with a spiritual source of strength. Their religious creed seemed to provide a mainstay and guiding force in their lives.

It would seem that external resilient qualities played a pertinent and pivotal role in immigrant academics counteracting an unwelcoming ethos of reception. Freedom University is internationally renowned for its academic excellence and state of the art infrastructure. It functions as a 'well-oiled machine' with limited disruptions. Even if disruptions occur (protests actions of 2016) it is skilfully managed by the sterling leadership with limited or very little impact on the academic operations of the institution. Resultantly, it is a well sought after institution. Freedom University also availed a number of programs to all academics for learning and practicing skills. Immigrant academics from other parts of Africa regarded themselves as being extremely fortunate to be working in an academic environment with such well-embellished resources. This, coupled together with easy access to employment and residency provided immigrant academics with a sense of accomplishment and connected them to society at large (Blustein 2008; Brown & Lent 2005; Vinokur et al. 2000) which was central to immigrants' self-worth and identity (Sinacore et al. 2011).

External resilient qualities in the form of the physical environment served as a buffer and cushioned the impact of an unwelcoming ethos of reception. The problem for immigrant academics seemed to be more about the human element, which was characterised by discrimination, xenophobia, distrust and resultantly a lack of collegial support and mentoring. Both internal and external resilient qualities contributed to the resilient character of immigrant academics and served counteract an unwelcome ethos of reception of the host institution.

Conclusion and Implications

Results of this study offer new insights into how resilient Nigerian immigrant academics draw on specific internal assets and external resources to circumvent the effects of various stressors as well as social and institutional barriers to reconstruct their professional identities and become academically successful. Nigerian immigrant academics bounced back from negative experiences with “competent functioning” (Rogers 2015). Although research on Black immigrant academics in South Africa is only now beginning to emerge, it is important to continue studying this growing population. We need more quantitative and qualitative studies to help us better understand the psychosocial impact of immigration and immigration policies of receiving countries of Black immigrant academics. Future research may explore the resilient nature of other African immigrant academics employed at South African universities.

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