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Searching for Own Space: Korean Female Graduate Students' (Re)construction of Their Professional Selves in the U.S. Academia

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Abstract: Adopting a transnational feminist perspective, this study draws on interviews with female Korean graduate students to explore how race, gender, and nationality shape the students' locations and subject-making processes in the U.S. academic context.

Keywords: women international students, transnational feminism, Korean, higher education, identity development

Introduction and Purpose

In recent decades, the United States has become one of the most popular destinations for international students, as the country's higher-education system is perceived as competitive and dominant (Rhee, 2009). Today, over a million international students study at U.S.-based higher-education institutions. This number represents a 3.4% increase since 2016 and a twofold increase over the last decade (Institute of International Education, 2017). A noticeable trend associated with this increase in international students is the steady growth of female students (Le, LaCost, & Wismer, 2016). Despite their growing presence, female students remain a peripheral subject in the related literature. The few existing studies on female international students are generally based on a celebratory discourse that focuses on the positive outcomes of studying in the United States, such as opportunities for economic advancement, upward social mobility, and engaged citizenship (e.g., Noreen & Khalid, 2012; Suspitsyna, 2016). Yet studies on the adaptation process involved in female students' transition to the U.S. academic context remain scarce. More specifically, female students' experience of crossing national, social, and cultural boundaries and negotiating their own spaces within academia is under-researched.

As female international students cross these borders, they face multiple identity-related challenges. Despite the portrayal of the university as an equitable and diverse/inclusive learning environment, the university features stressors such as institutionalized racism, gender discrimination, and cultural and language conflicts, all of which make female students' academic adaptation challenging and result in the students' marginalized/disadvantaged status (Alfred, 2004; Le et al., 2016; Sadeghi, 2008; Wu, 2015). However, little attention has been paid to the role of this sociocultural context in shaping female students' subject positions, learning experiences, and coping methods. In this study, we provide new insight into how members of this understudied population confront and negotiate various aspects of their identities, such as race, gender, and nationality/citizenship, as they strive to carve out their own spaces in the U.S. higher-education system. We pay particular attention to female Korean students, whose country of origin has the third-largest representation within the international student body in the United States (IIE, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts transnational feminist theory in order to interpret female Korean graduate students' processes of transition, adaptation, and relocation of self in the U.S. academic context. Transnational feminism considers women's transnational experiences during the current wave of globalization (Mohanty, 2003); it emerged in opposition to Western-centric feminist scholarship that tends to collapse the distinctions among women and their diverse experiences by focusing on similar forms of oppression, such as family structure and motherhood. More specifically, this reductive approach is blind to the various differences among women that arise from markers of power, such as race, ethnicity, class, and nationality (Mohanty, 2003). Instead of binding all women in the world under the umbrella concept of "global sisterhood," transnational feminism understands that women's everyday lives are embedded in specific racial, economic, and cultural power dynamics that have been intensified by the recent globalization flow (Mohanty, 2003). It also pays attention to the "in-between" spaces of local, everyday life in which global women are situated and looks at how the globalization process is affecting the recolonization of these women (Mohanty, 2003).

Using the transnational feminist framework, in this study, we look at female Korean graduate students' experiences in a particular higher-education institution while simultaneously paying attention to the surrounding historical, economic, and social contexts, especially in regards to the relationship between the United States and Korea. We try to understand how the women's subject-making processes are shaped by the various forces that surround them. We also seek to highlight the heterogeneity among women. That is, we aim to

demonstrate how women exercise their agency in various ways while negotiating space for themselves in the U.S. academic context.

Methods

The main research questions that guided this study were “What are the adaptation experiences of female Korean graduate students in the U.S. academic context?” and “How do they negotiate this space?” Using a qualitative research approach based on a transnational feminist perspective, we conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with five female Korean graduate students attending a public research-oriented university in the United States. During these interviews, we asked about the students’ motivations, desires, adversities, coping strategies, and future plans for their academic careers. All of the research participants were individuals in their 20 and 30s who had come to the United States within the past five years and who had completed their undergraduate educations in Korea. Open-ended questions informed by the literature and our experiences were developed. Participants were asked to reflect on their motivations to come to the United States for school, adjustment experiences at their higher-education institution and in U.S. culture, coping strategies for conflicts, explorations of new possibilities, and meanings and interpretations they ascribed to their experiences. The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Korean and audio-recorded, with each lasting between 40 minutes to an hour. We analyzed the data following the thematic analysis method suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). After transcribing and rereading the data, we generated initial codes based on the interview questions. We collated the codes, categorized them, and generated potential themes based on the relationships among the codes. We reviewed and refined the themes and clarified the relationship between the themes and the research problem. The interviews were translated selectively into English after the emerging themes had been identified and categorized.

Findings

Studying in the United States as necessary capital: The American Dream is still alive

Despite their different personal backgrounds and life paths, the participants had similar explanations for their motivation to study in the United States. The female Korean graduate students asserted that studying in the United States meant receiving a “better” education and gaining degrees that would be advantageous to them in the future. Prior to deciding to come to the United States, the students had either directly and/or indirectly witnessed the advantages of having an American degree in Korean academia. One of the study’s participants, Buri, articulated the privilege of U.S. degree holders in Korea, saying:

As a matter of fact, in my academic field in Korea, domestic doctoral degrees holders can be full professors only in teaching schools. I mean, they can become a faculty in a 4-year university, but it's hard for them to enter a 1-tier research-oriented school. More likely, they will have to target for community colleges in suburban areas or colleges in the provinces. But if they study abroad, they get opportunities to apply for research-oriented schools, four-year universities ... that's the biggest merit [of the U.S. degree].

Buri also pointed out that her decision to come to the United States could not be separated from the fact that the Korean academic curriculum is largely based on the U.S. model. Moreover, the majority of the professors in the Korean system of higher education earned their degrees in the United States. Indeed, the modern Korean education system is based on the U.S. system (Joo & Halx, 2012). Thus, during their formal education, Korean students encounter the power and privilege of U.S. education (Rhee, 2009). Given this situation, Buri noted that the United States was essentially the only option available to her when she considered studying abroad. This was (surprisingly) similar to the sentiments of the other participants.

Engaging and embracing the U.S. academic culture

The participants experienced different levels of cultural shock, adaptation stress, and time needed to become accustomed to the U.S. academic context. However, having spent between one to five years in the U.S., each of the participants said they had finished the necessary, initial adaptation process. The participants were noticeably enchanted by the U.S. academic culture, including its vibrant discussion atmosphere, students' passion for learning, and professors' warm support. In particular, the participants pointed out the relatively flat student-faculty relationships as the strongest and most impressive aspect of the U.S. academic culture.

For instance, the participant Sue shared her first memorable email contact with her advisor. Before finalizing her decision to join her program, she received an email from her advisor with the subject line, "working *together* at Green Valley (pseudonym)." Included in the email were the advisor's CV, explanations of his past and current research activities, and his thoughts on how he could advise her based on her writing samples. This episode was particularly striking to Sue because prior to receiving her advisor's email, she had experienced an embarrassing situation with a professor in Korea. She had used the phrase "working *together*" when expressing her gratitude to the professor for helping her with writing a thesis. The professor claimed that she worked *under* his supervision—not with him.

Another participant, Yoni, also expressed positive perceptions of U.S. academic culture, especially of her relationship with professors. She noted:

The thing I think is different from Korea [in U.S. academia] ... is hierarchy in the relationship between professors and students. Compared to Korea, the U.S. doesn't have hierarchy. So, at first, it was a bit awkward to address them by their first names because I was more accustomed to address them in a very polite manner. I realized... they don't pretend to look humbler or to intend to make students feel more comfortable. Rather they sincerely treat me equally.

She continued:

It is totally different from Korea. They [U.S. professors] never think it for granted that they should be respected because of their status. If I were in Korea, I might have spent more time doing mundane works to assist professors rather than engaging into my research. I would have had more stress due to the relationship with professors.

As seen in the interviews with both Sue and Yoni, the participants felt that the U.S. higher-education system was a "better" place for them to study. They showed this by drawing comparisons to negative aspects of Korean academic culture they had personally experienced or heard about before. Just as they addressed the inequalities embedded in Korean higher education, they were convinced of their beliefs upon their education-driven migration to the United States. The participants' positive interpretations of the U.S. academic culture came to shape their overarching view of the social conditions in the United States. They indicated that American culture places higher value on equality, fairness, and respect for women than Korean culture does. The participant Eun noted:

I think the U.S. is more fair [than Korea] ... For example, when I do the presentation, regardless of the project's outcomes, [American] bosses would say something like, "XXX contributed to this work. Without XXX, we couldn't make it." They always show real appreciation towards people in public. I could feel they thank me with their whole hearts...I feel something is more fair here. I think this is good.

As the women experienced the adaptation process in the U.S. academic context, they reflected on their previous experiences in Korea and compared them to their experiences in the United States. Their experiences of adaptation were based on their early socialization and cultural backgrounds in Korea. Yet in search of space for themselves in this new transnational context, they rejected Korean society and came to feel appreciated and competent by embracing U.S. culture.

Different approaches to relocating selves in the U.S. academic context

The sources of the adaptation difficulties the women in this study experienced were not very different from those found in previous studies on international students, with language and academic stress being the most representative ones (see Hung & Hyun, 2010; Le et al., 2016; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). For the women in this study, language difficulties had repercussions beyond difficulty in communicating with others. Lack of English proficiency led them to take passive attitudes and hesitant in raising voices in classrooms and made them concerned about how others viewed them. In order to carve out space for themselves in the U.S. academic context, the participants took various approaches to coping with such difficulties. In many cases, the difficulties were gradually resolved as time went on without requiring extra effort.

Over time, though, the women's burdens of socialization–mixing within the U.S. student-centered academic context–were not easily reduced. Buri noted that international and native American students are divided from the beginning. Eun similarly observed that despite the seemingly inclusive academic environment that welcomes students of diverse backgrounds, the distance she felt between her and her American friends and colleagues was not easily lessened despite the efforts she made. Invisible but nonetheless existing social barriers to movement towards the center of the U.S. academic context stood out in the participants' narratives.

Buri in particular was convinced of her marginalized status in the U.S. context. She noted:

I think I will remain as a minority although I do my best here [the U.S.] ... Regardless of how hard I try, when I think of the tension I will have to bear as a minority ... I am sick and tired of such [tension]. So I thought, "Do I have to necessarily live in America with carrying such thing [minority tension]?"

Buri indicated that her minority status was not a personal matter, but instead a structural one. Convinced of the barriers to her securing her own space in the U.S. academic context as a minority, Buri decided to return to Korea after graduation and found a strategy to cope with the socialization stress for the time being. Instead of making further effort to mingle with others, she was determined to invest her time solely in studying and thus earn the degree which become a career incentive in the future. She noted:

My goal is just to graduate and go back to Korea...my goal is not to meet people... I just focus on earning a degree. It doesn't matter whether I go to social gathering or not...I don't care. When I go to a social gathering and even if someone behaved rudely, because I did not come [to the U.S.] to hang out with

people [Americans], I could get over it. If I thought it [socialization] was important, I would have had a hard time, but I don't care about it much.

The participant Lim, who was planning to return to the secure job she had in Korea after graduation, took a more reserved attitude towards establishing space for herself in the U.S. academic context. She had previously struggled in a course where she was at a disadvantage due to her international background and unfamiliarity with the U.S. sociocultural context. Although she was acknowledged of unfair treatment she received in the course, instead of reaching out to the professor for help, she decided to leave the situation as it was. She said:

Most of all, my basic mindset is "I will take the classes and just gain whatever I can from them." I don't want to do more than that because I am not an American, and I don't plan to stay here afterwards ... So I decided not to engage more than necessary any more.

Both Buri and Lim can be understood as reserved students, internalizing their marginalized or inferior status within the U.S. academic context. However, their narratives reveal that such seemingly quiet and submissive behaviors were their chosen strategies to survive their studies. By placing more value on the U.S. degrees they would earn from their studies and that would help them progress in their careers, they purposefully avoided resistant, proactive actions that would move them towards the center of the U.S. academic context.

Eun also commented that she felt "the invisible wall" between her and her American colleagues; unlike her fellow participants, however, she planned to build her career in the United States after graduation. She compared her previous experiences in Korea to those of her current life in the United States. After evaluating the weight of the difficulties she had experienced and was experiencing as a working woman in both societies, she decided to stay in the United States, even as she expected to face some hardships as a racialized and nationalized Korean subject. Her decision to stay in the United States was not entirely due to an illusion of the United States as a land of dreams. Rather, it was out of a negotiation process that she used in determining how to best reach her goal of becoming a woman with a professional career.

Conclusion

This study expands our understanding of this unique and understudied adult learner population. It reveals how five female Korean graduate students interpreted their academic experiences and carved out space for themselves in the U.S. academic context in order to reach their goals. During their education-driven migration process from Korea to the United States, the women experienced hardships that were complicated by the interdependent issues of race, gender, language, culture, and nationality. By looking into the women's everyday experiences

in the academic community, we could better understand how these multiple power dynamics and systems of domination shaped the women's identities and locations within the broader context of the U.S. educational system. In their engagement with both local (institutional) and global (U.S. and Korean) contexts, the women continuously reconstructing unique identities for themselves and their social status as Korean women in U.S. higher education.

This study articulated some of the different ways the women exercised their agency in negotiating their gendered, racialized, and nationalized locations in the U.S. academic context. On the surface, the women appeared to conform to the dominant stereotypical image of Asian women as silent and submissive beings (Mayuzumi, 2008). Rather than succumbing to the positions assigned to them by their surrounding social realities, the women in our study chose to adopt passive stances to achieve their goals of professional development and social capital by earning U.S. degrees. This raises the importance of considering the reasons that the women appropriated the dominant discourse's framing of them. Such a view will increase our understanding of this growing population of adult learners and their strategies for pursuing their dreams.

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