

The Nomadic Identities of Expatriate Academics in the UAE Private Universities: An Interpretive Study

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the perceptions of expatriate academics of their subjectivities and their understandings of their academic identities in the context of private universities in the United Arab Emirates. Situated within the theoretical framework of the nomadic subjectivity theory, and within the conceptual framework of the interpretive paradigm, 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted with women and men expatriate academics in six different private universities in the UAE. Results showed that the participants' multiple sense of belonging, diverse experiences, and transitory existence suggest they can be regarded as nomadic academics who live physically and mentally at the borders of multiple cultures, countries, and ideologies. The study showed the complexities of their perceptions and understandings of their self-image and roles. Results also indicated that most of the interviewed academics identified with their teacher identity and prioritized it over researcher identity, with their perception of research as a requirement.

KEYWORDS

Academic Identity, Nomadism, Researcher Identity, Academic Roles, Expatriation

INTRODUCTION

Some people still believe that academics lead a very privileged academic life in their ivory towers, where they leisurely write books and discuss esoteric topics in their tweed jackets as they contemplate thoughtful issues in the faculty land where they are secured in their intellectual cocoons (Fleming, 2021). However, this image couldn't be further from the truth; academics are individuals who, when navigating their workplaces, tend to be marginalized, with voices that may also be unheard (Brown & Leigh, 2018). Higher education worldwide has generally gone through shifts toward managerialism, neoliberal corporatism, audit culture, fast evolving use of digital technologies, and increased datafication (McCune et al., 2024), all of which have generally changed the traditional face of academia. These changes have substantially altered the very nature of academic roles and have in many ways challenged academics' sense of their academic identities (McCune et al., 2024). They have restrained work practices by making them increasingly competitive, with continuous and increasing pressures for accountability, productivity, and international mobility (Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013).

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With the changes in status came the changes of expected roles. Many academics in neoliberal universities have been receiving conflicting messages about their roles as academics, apparently leading to tensions and discrepancies in their expectations versus those of the management. Even though teaching, research, and service are considered the three traditional roles that academics are expected to perform, this established “tripartite” has been mostly unbundled, with academic roles being extended beyond teaching and research (Blair & Briggs, 2019). This trend has made the role boundaries unclear (Henkel, 2002) and academic identities blurred, leaving many academics at the periphery, uncertain of what their roles are or what support to expect (Blair & Briggs, 2019). Academics’ roles in higher education have become unequally weighted with teaching and research, in specific, in constant tension owing to the universities’ struggle with economic constraints, quality audit imposition, and emphasis on rankings that have been intensified in the last two decades. This struggle has resulted in shifting academic identity in particular directions, with more emphasis on research output (Flecknoe et al., 2017).

Despite the importance and significance of conceptualizing teachers’ identity development, research is still at the initial stages of understanding the factors that affect identity formation and the role identities play in teachers’ motivation (Schutz et al., 2018). Also, the bulk of literature comes from studies on schoolteachers’ identity development and novice teachers’ identity construction. Given that most of the previous studies focused on teachers’ identity development, in their examination of teacher identities on schoolteachers, Kreber (2010) argued that more studies are needed to examine the distinctive social and occupational contexts of university academics. At universities, research is one of the roles that shape the academics’ professional identities besides their teaching identities, thus making their identity differ significantly from schoolteachers’ identities (Kaasila et al., 2021). Moreover, much of the previous literature attempted to explore the teacher identity of academics, as highlighted by Kaasila et al. (2021), in isolation from other sub-identities; this type of research should be challenged because it can lead to a narrow, fragmented perspective. Existing studies tend either to focus on research or on teaching, but the research-teaching nexus has not been explored in depth; therefore, this gap in research can be problematic because it does not capture a holistic view of the academic identity development (Kaasila et al. 2021).

The experiences of expatriate academics in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have been researched in a few doctoral theses (Desai, 2018; Knott, 2019). Still, “the UAE is under-represented in SIE [self-initiated expatriate] literature, despite the large numbers of expatriate academics in the UAE” (Desai, 2018, p. 38). Also, none of these studies examined the roles of academics within the nexus of research, teaching, and administrative duties. In this study we aim to give voice to expatriate academics and to examine their perceptions of their academic identity. We aim to answer the following research question: How do full-time expatriate academics in the UAE private universities perceive their academic identities (self-images and roles) at their institutions?

RESEARCH CONTEXT

The nomadic subjectivity theory forms the theoretical framework of this study in which we explore the expatriate academics’ identity, self-understanding, and subjectivity. What makes nomadic subjectivity theory an appropriate lens for exploring expatriate academics’ experiences is that it understands, as Metcalfe (2017) suggested, academic mobility within the nomadic political ontology that acknowledges academics’ awareness of their sense-making opportunisms when moving across national borders, which applies to the expatriate academics’ transient and fluid being. They are nomads because they are temporary settlers. Nomadic theory, as Braidotti (2014) stated, is a symbolic conceptualization of identity that rejects the polarized duality and proposes that we live in permanent processes of transition, nomadism, and hybridization. The nomadic theory’s central figuration expresses a process ontology that privileges change and motion over stability in a process of becoming that requires the dissolution of all sexed identities based on gendered opposition (Braidotti, 2014).

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