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Maodzwa-Taruvinga, Mandi; Msimanga, Audrey

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Contradictory location of the black woman passport academic: Embrace, alienation and vulnerability

M. Maodzwa-Taruvinga*
e-mail: Mandi.Taruvinga@wits.ac.za

A. Msimanga*
e-mail: Audrey.Msimanga@wits.ac.za
*Wits School of Education
University of the Witwatersrand
Johannesburg, South Africa

Abstract

This article is a narration of two black women's experiences and perceptions of inclusion and/or exclusion within the academy arising out of their identity as 'passport academics'. The inter-relation of nationality, ethnicity and race as identity markers creates power dynamics that lead to conflicting and competing expectations depending on whose discourse holds sway. The competing expectations form the nexus of the contradictory location leading to an identity crisis of a particular kind. Using an auto-ethnographic approach, the authors describe critical incidences in the course of social and academic relationships within the university which were interpreted as instances of 'othering'. Alternate perceptions and feelings of embrace, alienation, and vulnerability by both black women 'passport academics' and black women South African academics are described. These reveal complex identity issues in which, sadly, black academics' feelings of affirmation are still seen through the eyes of their white academic colleagues. The irony is that colleagues of different racial categories originating from the same foreign country are often perceived and labelled differently as either 'outsiders' or 'insiders'. It is interesting how the apparent invisibility of one racial category affords people the privilege of global citizenship, while the visibility of blackness opens people to the scrutiny of national origins. What also emerges is that current discourses of transformation and diversity within the university seem to be struggling under the weight of a nationalistic turn. The authors conclude by suggesting that recovering the 'academic' rather than projecting nationality might be more productive and beneficial to all.

Keywords: black woman academic, contradictory location, identity, nationality, passport academic, othering, race, South Africa, university

INTRODUCTION

In the year that it has taken to produce this article, we have had the privilege of reflecting on our experiences as black women 'passport academics' in South Africa. The article is the culmination of two important phases of our journey as passport

academics in foreign tertiary institutions. In considering the first phase of our journey, we revisited our many similar and varied experiences as well as the contradictory messages and expectations of us as academics, by the institution, on the one hand, and by colleagues and students on the other.

We explore our experiences of difference, not just as black women, but also as foreign nationals, academics and professionals navigating the higher education terrain and having to continually make choices that distinguish between the sacred and the mundane. At play are multiple identities constituted as projections by others or creations by the self. Youngblood Jackson (2001, 386) notes how 'feminist poststructuralist theories of subjectivity posit a notion of the self as a site of disunity and conflict that is always in process and constructed within power relations'. Our journeys in reflecting on and writing about experiences of being passport academics certainly confirm this.

The second phase of the journey described here entails our experience of putting together the article over the past year. As we reflected and dialogued on the interpretations we had made of our experiences over the years, our perceptions underwent interesting and insightful shifts. In some cases where we had made negative generalisations, we came to realise that some of what we perceived as unique to passport academics was not necessarily so. The incidents discussed in the article reveal how we have finally arrived at the point where we are able to reflect more objectively on our experiences *vis-à-vis* relations with different colleagues within the university. This reflective narrative derives from our location as black women 'passport academics' in the South African university and academic environment at this historical juncture. The article takes the form of a dialogue about our observations and experiences of the tensions between perceptions of advantage and disadvantage within a context of changing nationalistic discourses in South Africa. It aims to open up a long overdue conversation in order to unravel and interrogate silences around the relations of 'foreign' and 'local'; black and white academics in present-day South Africa. In the process we ask: 'What lessons can we draw from these experiences? What can be a win-win situation?'

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY APPROACH

The article is based on a dynamic conception of auto-ethnography (*auto* meaning – self and *ethno* – culture). Personal experiences, historical situatedness, the cartography of place, and territory and border crossings are saturated with discourses of the self, others, the nation and citizenship – identities reflecting multiple realities. The use of this qualitative research approach involves autobiographical narrative, self-observation, reflexive inquiry, story and writing within the ethnographic field where the personal, cultural, social and political connect (Ellis 2004; Marechal 2010). It foregrounds the researchers' subjectivities as participants/subjects who write personal stories and narratives. We identify ourselves as black women 'passport

academics'. The aim is to position personal experiences situated in the self *vis*-à-*vis* a social context or setting, in this case the university located within a particular nation state.

Auto-ethnography is premised on rejection of the binary 'between the researcher and the researched, objectivity and subjectivity, process and product, self and others, art and science, and the personal and the political' (Ellingson and Ellis 2008, 450–459). Our experiences collapse these distinctions so that the researcher is also the researched.

While an attempt at objectivity is made within our subjective narration, the reverse is possible – we might make subjective interpretations of objective situations. Our portrayal of selected 'critical incidents' or vignettes might therefore be viewed as subjective, distorted and biased accounts. This is a critique typically advanced of auto-ethnography (Ellingson and Ellis 2008; Merriam 1998). However, we hope to go beyond these limitations by proffering an analysis that might resonate with a critical and reflexive reading of experiences germane to this global phenomenon of academic migration.

We present our narratives in the form of a dual auto-ethnography. Our collective, but by no means homogenous, memories and reflections are presented through dialogue. Our stories represent a perspective of an academic phenomenon characterised by 'relational and personal experiences' (Ellingson and Ellis 2008). The resulting embodied knowledge and experiences can best be expressed in a dialogue, and by what Denzin and Lincoln (2011, 504) describe as 'collaborative co-performative meaning making and critical agency at once'.

CRITICAL INCIDENTS FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

The critical incidents or personal encounters experienced within the university context represent 'the processes of understanding, recalling and summarising stories' as well as use of memory – a psychological approach (Cortazzi 1993, 10 in Merriam 1998, 158). The 'evocative' auto-ethnography incidents narrated here might provoke emotional reactions and generate conversations that seek either to interrogate the narration or to extend our conversation. The incidents described are not only a documentation of primary experiences, but also a quest to contribute to the development of theoretical explanations of a broad regional and global social phenomenon – the academic dispersal (Ellingson and Ellis 2008). It is in the phenomenon of global migrations that we perceive what we describe as the contradictory location of the passport academic.

Critical incident 1: Mandi's job interview – perceptions, experiences and interpretation of cultural difference by foreign academics

We start our dialogue with a personal narration by Mandi of her memory of a question which was posed during her job interview:

> During an interview for the post I currently hold, one of the panellists asked the question, 'If appointed, how would you deal with students from a different cultural background from where you are coming?' In other words the question was asking how I would cope with students whose cultural background was different from mine or the culture of the country I was coming from. I struggled with this question and I wondered if it was genuine or a trick question. The insinuation seemed to be that I was coming from a different country with a different culture. I felt there was an underlying assumption that the national culture of my country was drastically different from that of the prospective host country and therefore the 'two cultures would be in direct contrast to each other' which I felt would obviously not be the case. It was a question I resented because, I did not then feel there would be a big difference between cultures and thus did not expect to encounter such a challenge.

In the discussion that ensued, Audrey's response was that this incident speaks to some very important assumptions on the part of the passport academic, the most fundamental being the assumption of a smooth transition from the home environment into the new (foreign) academic terrain. We naively assume homogeneity of the student body in the two countries, 'after all they are just students – how different can they be?' we often think. It is this mindset that frames a person's interpretation of this interview question, making assumptions about both the question as presented and/or about the individual (and even the entire interview panel) asking the question.

However, the passport academic's experience of the reality of the new academic environment later proves very different from this initial idealistic perception of the academic terrain.

Mandi elaborates on the reality of teaching at a South African university and the shift in her interpretation of cultural difference

My interpretation of the interview question as having underlying innuendos stemmed from my assumption that cultural diversity was always a given in any country and part of what educators are expected to be sensitive to. I resented the question not because of some naïve assumption of homogeneity, but more out of a feeling that 'after all they are just students – how different can they be?' I wondered if there would be a particularly distinctive cultural difference.

As it turned out, the source of my challenge was not anchored so much in ethnic, racial or cultural differences arising from different nationalities as implied in the question. It is the effect of the history of apartheid in apportioning different educational capital to different students (differences in the culture of education) that proved to be my biggest challenge. As a result of apartheid education, I found that I had to revise my expectations of students' level of English language expression. I learnt to separate concepts and ideas from language expression. I also realised I had to be very patient and tolerant in the initial years and eventually witnessed students' significant conceptual development over a period of time. Indeed there are always different lessons to be learnt in any transition into a new setting. The interview

question would therefore be valid, within a broad interpretation and understanding of 'cultural differences'.

Audrey narrates her experience of difference

My experience has been different from Mandi's in this regard. From my previous experience as an academic in another African country before coming to South Africa, I was fully aware of the challenges of navigating a new academic terrain. I had had some experience with the illusion of the apparent uniformity of the academic environment globally. At first glance it seems that the issues are similar and the solutions common, calling for only slight adaptations to the context by the passport academic. However, the differences in educational and socio-cultural backgrounds do matter and cannot be taken for granted. For Mandi it was not so much the ethnic differences but the educational complexities arising out of the history of South Africa.

However, my experience has been influenced mostly by the illusion of initial appearances of similarity rather than differences in ethnicity. For instance, because my forebears originally migrated from South Africa and settled across the Limpopo, I have a 'South African surname'. For some South African colleagues this is viewed as a common link between me and them, while for others it is a source of contestation of identity. In the case of the latter group of colleagues, my experience has been that of initial acceptance because I am mistaken for a South African and then a dramatic change in attitude and working relations follows once my identity as a passport academic is discovered. Thus, the black woman passport academic identity can be both an advantage and a disadvantage, a tool and a handicap.

Mandi's reflection on Audrey's and her own experiences of cultural difference

It is evident that the question of coping with cultural differences relates equally to relations among lecturers and students yet there is often some illusion that engagement among academic colleagues will not be an issue. These issues relating to negotiating entry into the new sights also signal the entry of dynamics whose source and nature unravel slowly in different aspects of academic culture leading to conflict of identities due to contradictory expectations.

One of the issues the incident on perceptions about cultural differences raises is how academics view the identities of self and others. We share similar experiences of the pendulum swing between being seen to be the same and therefore belonging in certain sets of circumstances, while being viewed as different in others and therefore outsiders.

In the next section we narrate our experiences of the contradiction between being expected to show loyalty to the category of black academic and then at times being labelled outsiders due to our nationality. We engage with the complexity that racial category brings to perceptions of who is a foreign academic. In doing so, we bring to the fore how the white racial category brings a complex dynamic to relations among different categories of black lecturers. Conflicting positionings of the passport academic affect the agency with which we can respond to and act on or give voice to

specific academic issues such as collaborative research for team development or the dialogue around transformation.

Critical incident 2: 'Local vs. foreign black academics and the white factor'. Mandi recalls an incident that occurred during the first two weeks of taking up her post

Once I had taken up the post, I noticed that a simple 'good morning' or greeting to a black colleague within the same department was not responded to. There was a kind of stonewalling. I read this behaviour as indicating some fear or anxiety whose full nature I could not immediately fathom. I quietly read this apparent resentment as a form of xenophobia which I would later unpack as being rooted in the complexity of relations between local and foreign black academics and the differences in how they related to white academics.

A few years later, a candid colleague would explain how there was a feeling among black South African colleagues that white academic colleagues embraced and treated foreign black academics as if they were 'superior' to local ones. I reflected on what this statement signified at a deep level, how black colleagues saw and defined themselves through the eyes of the formerly dominant white academic colleagues and thus presented with deeply assimilated images of inferiority. I pointed out to the candid black colleague that these white colleagues were being ascribed the power to determine which black academic was either superior or inferior. I also drew to the attention of the South African black academic colleague, who had the courage to bare this resentment to us, to the fact that among these white colleagues from whom attention and approval were being sought there were some 'passport academics' who shared similar national passports with us.

Audrey's response: Experience of open resentment from a local black colleague and the white factor

For me an experience that comes to mind in relation to this one was an altercation with a colleague who felt that foreign black academics were being placed on a pedestal, with endless accolades for their work and none for 'us', that is, her and other local black academics. She complained that passport academics come in and get all the higher positions, all the merit awards; they are co-opted into all the good projects and teach in all the significant programmes; they are published all over the place. In short, she perceived a systematic culture of favouritism for passport academics, both by the system itself and by white colleagues.

She was so unhappy that she threatened to sever any academic interaction that involved passport academics. My initial reaction was surprise, disappointment and later frustration at what I had assumed would be (for me) an unproblematic transition into the new academic context. I then became conscious of differences, both real and perceived, of hostility, resistance and a sense of being shut out, not accepted by those whom I had assumed would find it easy to accept me. I had come from an academic context in my country where race and colour still mattered and had therefore,

assumed that my struggles in South Africa would be 'inter-racial'. I did not imagine that they would be 'intra-racial' as well. This called for a huge adjustment in terms of my approach to inter- and intra-racial relations and expectations as well as my interpretation of black and white colleagues' attitudes and behaviours.

Mandi's response: Tacit and explicit intra-racial resentment and feelings of vulnerability

It appears that open verbalisation of resentment to the 'passport academic' might explain my experience of greeting a colleague and being met with silence. Here, it appears feelings of fear, anxiety and vulnerability towards perceived competition from fellow blacks are surfaced through a stonewalling silence. This awkward and uncomfortable encounter brings out raw and painful emotions. The open verbalisation in contrast to the silence is, however, a good start to an inevitably long process of dialogue around how perceived 'injustices' could be addressed.

What is disturbing though is the continued manifestation of a perception that white colleagues have the power to adjudicate on the academic competencies of different categories of black colleagues. Here, we witness a continuation of the power that apartheid and colonialism conferred on white people being manifested in academia. Blacks themselves invoke that power to perpetuate the dominant-subordinate relationships while seeming to be fighting for the 'master's' attention – among themselves (Freire 1970).

Mandi continues to comment on the complexity of the white factor

My year long sojourn in the United States (US) as a master's student in 1995 made me realise a pattern of how the triad of different nationalities of blacks *vis-à-vis* white colleagues is not unique to relations in South Africa. In the US, in an encounter with one white academic, he seemed to play up the differences between Africans from the African continent and African-Americans by suggesting that the former are comfortable with who they are because they have 'a strong sense of identity'.

If white academic colleagues in South Africa either wittingly or unwittingly send messages of the superiority of the black passport academic, this could be viewed as a divide and rule tactic, a ploy to assimilate[1] the passport academics and give them an illusion that they 'pass'[2] as members of the dominant academic group because they possess the 'appropriate traits'. Perhaps a reading of this strategy by South African black colleagues would be that once assimilated, the new migrants would speak in 'his or her master's voice' to their exclusion. Obviously this is bound to evoke resentment and vulnerability. Writing in a different context, Lasky (2005, 901) points out how, as demonstrated by our experiences,

> professional vulnerability is the emotional experience that can be given primacy in this analysis. Vulnerability is a multidimensional, multifaceted emotional experience that individuals can feel in an array of contexts. It is a fluid state of being that can be influenced by the way people perceive their present situation as it interacts with their

identity, beliefs, values, and sense of competence. It is a fluctuating state of being, with critical incidents acting as triggers to intensify or in other ways change a person's existing state of vulnerability.

Audrey adds

Related to these incidents of resentment and displays of vulnerability is a conversation I had with another black South African colleague on manifestations of xenophobia in the country. While we both marvelled at this phenomenon, we disagreed on the possible underlying factors. My colleague expressed strong emotions about intrusions by foreign workers into the South Africans' workplace, including those of passport academics. However, it soon became clear to me that her sentiments related to only one racial group of non-South Africans. At this point I then probed her on the identities of foreign academics in our institution, deliberately intimating that they were of all racial categories. Her answer confirmed my fears, that she was only aware of black passport academics. She had problems believing me when I pointed out to her some white passport academics in our institution. They were invisible to her and possibly to other black South African colleagues. To me it seemed that this view of the identity of the passport academic by fellow black academics might create room for a relatively less problematic transition by white passport academics into the academic community, than for fellow black passport academics. Black foreignness was more problematic than white foreignness.

Mandi's comment: The visibility of black passport academics and the invisibility and apparent privilege that whiteness confers on white passport academics

These matters made me realise that by virtue of belonging to the white racial category, white colleagues who are also passport academics and compatriots do not seem to have a problem with having their national origin questioned. Somehow whiteness makes them invisible in the eyes of South African black colleagues and 'whitewashes' their foreign nationality. Whiteness also ascribes to them the power to be viewed as belonging to South Africa and therefore legitimate players at the institution who could also deliberate on the suitability or capacity of all black academics, South African and non-South African alike.

Mixed signals: 'Sister' and 'outsider' – essentialising and differentiating black identity

In addition to the detection of resentment or anxiety evident in Audrey's experiences of an open confrontation, Mandi reflects on mixed signals in which passport academics are simultaneously invited to be sisters and then cast as outsiders – observations and experiences of contradictory expectations.

When it comes to general discussions of perceived disempowering and marginalising strategies that are perpetuated by the culture of the university, I am expected to show solidarity with and understanding of the black academic's plight

and be equally vocal in highlighting, interrogating and even challenging the status quo. Having been identified as an 'outsider' black academic due to my nationality, I am still expected to project a shared understanding of the experience of exclusion or marginalisation as a black 'sister' and colleague upon which some solidarity could be built for purposes of seeking a strategy for change. While I might understand the plight of black academics given my own historical and socio-economic background of education in a former colony, the reception of mixed messages that I belong and do not belong creates ambivalent feelings and generates an identity crisis.

The same black 'sisters' – who had alluded that my foreign nationality was the basis of preferential treatment by white colleagues – would revert to essentialising the black experience as the basis for solidarity. These contradictory or paradoxical demands meant that my antennae had to be alert to the tendency to play games with different identities.

DISCUSSION

In our discussion and reflection on these incidents we came up with several important insights regarding this swinging pendulum of (sometimes) being excluded because of nationality and (at other times) being required to show solidarity with fellow black sisters. We sensed a cautious welcome or embrace, on the one hand, and a withholding of information and/or assistance, on the other. Interaction was marred by innuendos, inconsistent behaviour and attitudes, seemingly positive sometimes and negative at other times.

The turning point in our experience was an unexpected incident that was to be the starting point of the articles in this special issue. A black colleague brought several of us passport academics to her place for lunch and boldly confronted us with a series of questions and observations about local–foreign academic relations in our institution. She articulated the grievances that local black academics had about passport academics. Most of these were not new to us but there were several that we had not been aware of, or had viewed completely differently from the way she articulated them. It was an 'Aha' moment for several of us in the room. However, it was her candour and her spirit of reconciliatory engagement that made the greatest impression on all of us. For the first time we were able to look across the room and begin to consider a different perspective. We decided on that day to confront these issues and to deal with our prejudiced views of each other's positions and intentions.

By exposing sources of disaffection among South African colleagues, the candid black colleague opened up a conversation that projected the tension between foreign and local black academics. This eventually led to a conceptualisation of the need to engage with black women's experiences of academia in ways that relieved the tension and brought understanding in a productive way while creating academic opportunities for this previously excluded group to get their work published. Lasky (2005, 901) incisively points out how 'in these situations, people willingly open themselves to the possibility of embarrassment, loss, or emotional pain because they

believe that they, another individual, or a situation will benefit from this openness. A person being willingly open facilitates learning, trust building, and collaboration.'

The broad-based collaboration on the writing of the special issue is illustrative of how black and white women academics – local and passport academics – might go beyond stereotypes to join together to fulfil an academic project. A willingness to engage and come up with ideas and strategies to leverage resources to facilitate the writing process has been generative and could be viewed as sowing the seeds for a pedagogy of inclusion and collaboration that goes beyond the impasse of stereotypes. The conversation that started in 'othering' has generated multiple dialogues and a meeting of minds to advance the academic project, mentoring early career academic researchers while providing a platform for the development of black academics.

Theorising emerging issues

Academics' historical and nationally situated experiences are the basis of differences between and within diverse groups of academics. It is evident that under different conditions or circumstances, people invoke different shades of blackness and whiteness through ethnicity, nationality and the symbolic capital accrued from academic background weighing in to give a nuanced definition of academic identities. Research on black politics in the US, for example, makes assumptions of a 'unified political outlook among blacks based on racial affinity' (Alex-Assensoh 2009, 90). However, our narratives demonstrate that racial category is no longer the only category that motivates affinity, sameness or divergences. Perceptions of 'unity, homogeneity and distinctiveness' that 'characterise much of the conventional wisdom' about racial behaviour do not always hold true (Alex-Assensoh 2009, 90). This proliferation of identities does not strip the construct identity of its analytic purchase (Brubaker and Cooper 2000), it simply guards against its reification. This is also not to deny that marginal persons can choose to play what Stonequist (adapted in Green and Little 2011) describes as the nationalist role where 'the marginal person identifies with the subordinate group or culture and may become a leader of it' (Little and Green 2012, 204).

Jeyifo (2007, 130) recognises how the reification of racial category leads to a 'hypostasis which generates and naturalises "racial explanations" in place of scrupulous attention to the historically contingent crystallization and intensification of unequal relationships between and within nations and peoples'. It is evident that inter- and intra-group differences within academia, if not confronted with courage and respect, might perpetuate not just intensely unequal relations, but attitudes of resentment that lead to a poisoned chalice of dysfunctional academic and social relations.

When nationality or racialised identities are selectively invoked to suit particular agendas, this might have an impact on the habitus of both black passport and local academics due to fractured expectations. Within the field of academia, as in the politics of the nation state, contestation and conflict emanate from how racial, ethnic,

gender, class and national identities are understood and how they are seen as acting either to perpetuate selective inclusion or to open up or close down opportunities.

What lessons can we draw from these experiences? Tempering recognition of excellence with recognition of historical 'baggage'

There is a need to engage both black and white academic colleagues in order to confront the historic baggage of mistrust and suspicion of hidden agendas. White academics need to understand that in the different colonising contexts that black academics have experienced, certain systems empowered some black colleagues more than others. While it may be necessary to recognise excellence (including among passport academics), it is equally necessary to recognise how the burden of Bantu education in apartheid South Africa deprived local African black academics of academic capital. Vulnerability can therefore be understood to be arising from perceptions of manipulation of this historical legacy of disadvantage in order to perpetuate exclusion. It could also be interpreted either as a divide-and-rule or an assimilation tactic through selective passing.

The passport academic's high horse

The paradox for the passport academic is that the same foreign identity that s/he perceives as a disadvantage is seen by others as a source of privilege. A case in point is the conflict that arises when the passport academic is seen as being 'placed on a pedestal'. Passport academics need to acknowledge the advantage with which they often enter the South African academic terrain. They bring with them a distinct cultural capital, in terms of differences in the educational systems and the academic discourse to which they have been exposed.

However, an acknowledgement of the passport academic's cultural capital brings with it the danger of 'sitting on their high horses' and 'looking down their collective noses' at others. As passport academics we have realised and experienced fellow black passport academics' use of their English language proficiency as a manifestation of their intelligence. This ironically surfaces a colonial mentality where fluency in the 'coloniser's language' (and culture) is equated to (confused with) a measure of intelligence. It is easy to come from a different context and be judgemental and it takes a certain kind of moral reasoning to accept and know how to work with the difference.

A unifying and inclusive approach

We argue that an approach that builds capacity for all is not just unifying but is also inclusive. Individuals within academia like in any other community need to define themselves in terms of the shared purposes and values of the community (Taylor 1995). It is in day-to-day routines and structures that a shared sense of culture and community develops (Siskin 1994) among academics. Bullough, Knowles and Crow (1992, 5) remind us that we see 'ourselves as others see us'. This is the case in

an environment where early career academics need validation and mentorship from more senior and experienced colleagues as they develop their academic and research identities.

CONCLUSION

The greatest lesson in this journey of reflecting on our experiences as passport academics is that it takes confronting our own a-priori lens or framework to notice that situated perspectives result in different (and at times biased) interpretations of incidents or experiences. Confronting the personal lenses that shape our perceptions and interpretations is critical within the contradictory, location experienced within the academic terrain.

Whether real or imagined, self or projected identities influence perceptions and shape experiences. We have attempted to paint, in broad strokes, our emerging and evolving perspectives as passport academics. We hope that through this dialogue we can stimulate reflections on personal perceptions and experiences of contradictory locations by both 'passport' and 'local' academics wherever they are. The ensuing narratives or counter-narratives could be the beginning of an iterative writing process that interrogates the effects of the phenomenon of 'passport academics'.

Within the context of the contradictory intensifying nationalistic discourse in the country and the university's transformation and diversity agenda, the bigger question is: 'How do academics experience xenophobia within the university?' While machetes are used on the streets, pens are used within the university. What are the experiences of passport academics on the national and global level and what could be a win-win situation?

NOTES

1. Assimilation or passing the marginal (the one who is between cultures) person is either completely incorporated in the dominant group or 'passes' as a member of that group through possession of the appropriate traits. When assimilating, for example, the (marginal academic) might express values aligned with those of the dominant group, rather than those of the subordinate group.
2. 'Passing' tends to require secrecy or subterfuge and can feel uncomfortable to the person playing this role in Stonequist's (1937/1961) model (adapted from Green and Little 2011).

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