Foreign women in academia: double strangers between productivity, marginalization and resistance.

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Abstract

This article examines the professional experience of foreign women academics working across geographic boundaries in today's neoliberal academia characterised by liquidity. Framed within an intersectional perspective, we use the concept of the 'double-stranger' to examine data stemming from 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with scholars at different stages of their career in the social sciences. This paper advances understandings of academic careers theoretically by identifying a temporal and hierarchical dynamic in the intersection of two categories of difference (gender and foreignness) that constitute a position of simultaneous belonging and non-belonging for foreign women academics; and empirically through a qualitative investigation that explores three areas in which academic professional experiences are mobilised for double-strangers: (1) transnational career moves; (2) productivity and performance in today's neoliberal academia; and (3) self-induced estrangement as a form of resistance.

Keywords

Academia, double-stranger, resistance, intersectionality, foreignness, gender, liquid modernity

Introduction

Zygmunt Bauman (2000) identified various changes in the way societies and relationships are constituted, organised and maintained. Life in this new era, which he calls 'liquid modernity',

is interspersed with fundamental insecurity and radical individualism, both stemming from and supporting temporary forms of relations. In academia this is reflected in a neoliberal ideology of a globalised market-economy (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997; Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004) whereby internationalisation strategies are constitutively interconnected with new managerialism that fosters the adoption of private sector practices of management control in the public sector – for instance through the use of performance incentives, targets and key performance indicators (Clarke and Knights, 2015).

Work in the 'liquid university' is characterised by staff mobility across national borders, fragmentation and instability, but also by the requirement of "high productivity in compressed time frames" (Mountz et al., 2015, p.1236). Whilst internationalisation poses considerable challenges for all academics who are part of the global circulation of knowledge production (Butler et al., 2014), research has shown that women academics face "more difficult compromises than their male counterparts" (Barry et al. 2006, p.275). Research is already available on women in academia (European Commission, 2019; Le Feuvre, 2015), but a more nuanced understanding of their positionality, we believe, contributes to diversifying research on their professional experiences in contemporary academia.

Fotaki (2013) highlights that whilst statistics show how women are often outnumbered and occupy posts in lower teaching grades or temporary contracts, figures do not report "the informal processes of exclusion and devaluation that constitute major impediments to women faculty members' achievements" (p.253). Increasingly marginalised via masculine metrics and rules constructed within neoliberal discourses (Lund, 2018; Knights and Richards, 2003), women's success is constrained by the 'double bind' of either playing by those rules or being left out (Fotaki, 2010).

This article explores the multifaceted experience of academic professionals in liquid times at the intersection between their foreignness and gender identity: empirically we

explore the experience of foreign women, which has been identified as an under-researched category of academic workers; theoretically, we build on previous research (Johansson and Śliwa 2014; Śliwa and Johansson 2014, 2015) to illuminate the positionality of foreign women academics and identify the hierarchical and temporal dynamic interplay at the intersection of gender and foreignness. Investigated through an intersectional approach, the concept of the stranger – as a position which involves being part of an environment but without fully belonging to a specific socio-cultural context – is used here to further understandings of how this particular position is individually and systemically created, maintained and mobilised both for compliance and resistance (the latter is conceptualised here as a discursive practice focussing on power dynamics and interactions, see Powell et al. 2017) .

Intersectionality in a liquid world

In 'liquid times' work-lives have become more unstable, with precariousness being a key feature of people's personal lives and professions (Bauman, 2000). Academic careers mirror this development in the increasing use of short-term and zero hours contacts, which disproportionately affects women and require rapid adjustments to environments and work practices (Hall and Bowles, 2016). Gender discrimination is still prevalent in relation to work practices, career progression and salary (e.g. Knights and Richards, 2003; van den Brink and Benschop, 2012; Baker, 2012) but it is exacerbated for women who have domestic commitments (Baker, 2012; Suitor et al., 2001). The balancing of professional requirements and family needs becomes particularly problematic (Rafnsdottir and Heijstra, 2013) because escalating workloads increasingly push academic tasks and research into private time (Svensson et al., 2010; Rolfe, 2013). Acker (1990, p.150) highlights the gendering of academic hierarchies due to "gender typing and gender segregation of jobs and the clustering

of women workers in the lowest and worse-paid jobs". In contemporary liquid academia women are therefore not only confronted with what is widely known as the glass ceiling phenomenon, but also increasingly made to face the threat of falling through the structurally porous floor.

International mobility and meritocracy are often considered ways to counter these tendencies to devalue academic labour by providing access to a wider pool of jobs and the opportunity to increase one's market value (Bauder, 2012). The promise of foreign work environments can thus be attractive for many. Yet, while there is a growing literature on 'foreign-born' (Mamiseishvili, 2010; Sang et al., 2013) workers, specific research on foreign-born women academics is still relatively rare. Exploring their lived experiences can also contribute to the understanding of how gendered professional experiences are linked with organizational practices and social norms (Ozkazanc-Pan and Clark Muntean, 2018).

Some literature on academic careers highlights foreignness and gender as distinct categories of disadvantage, but research at the intersections also shows other implications. For instance, Mamiseishvili (2010) found that foreign women academics are often more engaged in prestigious research activities and less in teaching and administration than their native-born colleagues. Similarly, Czarniawska and Sevón (2008) argue that being "a woman in a masculine profession and a foreigner – is not, as one might think, a cumulative disadvantage [...] [but] might cancel out one another, permitting these women a greater degree of success than was allowed their native sisters" (p.235). Johansson and Śliwa (2014), instead, argue for a more nuanced analysis than considering these categories with regard to their "cumulative or subtractive effect" (p.19). They propose an intersectional approach, which we embrace here.

Intersectionality refers to the understanding that people's individual identity is shaped and influenced by various aspects (gender, sexual orientation, class, race, ethnicity and so on)

which affect the way they perceive and experience the world (Warner, 2008). An intersectional framework can therefore be particularly appropriate to understand how these different aspects of one's identity interact and influence experiences in the workplace (Bowman et al. 2017) for those who are simultaneously positioned in structures of power and dominance as 'others' (Mirza, 2013). Within such a framework, dynamics of gender highlight that whilst being a woman and an academic might mean that individuals may share some common understandings, a number of variables contribute to making that group of people heterogeneous (Hancock, 2007). Similarly, foreignness is seen as complex identity category, both at the individual and collective level. Instead of simply focussing on 'foreignness' (i.e. for individuals who are born in a different country from the one they work in) with regards to people's legal, bureaucratic or immigration status, we engage here with people's understanding and perception of foreignness in relation to their lived experience and social context.

Sang et al. (2013) use an intersectional perspective to challenge the notion of frayed careers often used in accounts of migrant or women workers, and argue for an approach that considers otherness not only in terms of discrimination and marginalisation, but also as a source of advantage. Following Sang et al. (2013, p.160) in their conclusion that the professional experience of foreign women "may differ qualitatively depending on where they stand at the crossroads of differing marginalized identities", we focus here on intersectional positionality starting from the premise that it does not automatically produce additive disadvantage but multiple forms of otherness – expressed in the notion of the stranger – which can be articulated through inclusion or marginalisation. Foreign women academics occupy a peculiar position situated between belonging and non-belonging, which Czarniawska and Sévon (2008) have coined with reference to Simmel (1908) as 'the double-stranger'.

The concept of the (double-) stranger

Czarniawska and Sevón (2008) draw on Simmel's notion of the stranger as someone who does not fully belong but is a potential wanderer who multiplies "his [sic] opportunities at the cost of secure belongingness" (Czarniawska and Sevón 2008, p.237). Several researchers have pointed to the limitations of the concept of the double-stranger (see Bailyn, 2008; Johansson and Śliwa, 2014) and criticised the gendered notion of freedom from responsibility in Simmel's concept of the stranger which ignores the fundamental care-work carried out by women within and outside of the professional context (Acker, 2008).

We argue that, instead of referring to the case of a free agent who has no strings attached and can thus leave at any time, Simmel's concept of the stranger can be taken to describe a reciprocal relationship between a group that accepts a new member under certain conditions, and an individual who desires to become part of that group. Hence, a stranger is not a free-floating agent, nor a tourist who comes today and leaves tomorrow, but a person who is at the same time included and excluded, and whose condition is rather precarious, as the stranger does not have an "intrinsic place" (Karakayali 2006, p.326).

Bauman (1995) further develops Simmel's notion of the stranger with regard to contemporary patterns of increasingly liquid sociality. He argues that in contrast to how order was produced in Modernity – by suppressing and excluding strangers as social others to produce clear-cut boundaries and unambiguous identities – today's social and cultural boundaries are fluid, thus instigating a cyclical process that perpetuates issues of identity (Bauman, 1995). In this environment, "[t]oday's strangers are by-products, but also the means of production, in the incessant, never conclusive, process of identity building" (Bauman, 1995, p.8).

Contemporary strangers as 'outsiders within' (Sang et al., 2013) are conditionally accepted rather than simply excluded in their new environments. Hence, a stranger's place is inherently linked to the conditions of a specific and on-going negotiation between the stranger, their reference group and their socio-professional environments. This makes strangeness in today's professional and personal lives "a form of social interaction" (Karakayali 2006, p.312). In the fast-paced world of neoliberal academia characterised by intense productivity within limited timeframes and rapid changes to contexts and contracts that augment precarious work conditions (Ivancheva et al. 2019), liquid sociality instigates cyclical processes that perpetuate issues of identity and estrangement. Established literature on expatriate adjustment (see Boncori 2013; Mendenhall and Oddou 1985) has highlighted how lack of adjustment to foreign contexts can be costly for professionals in terms of mental health, performance, productivity and interpersonal relations. Given the time demands on academics' work and personal lives (Misra et al. 2012), it is important to understand the complex dynamics at play in terms of temporality for double-strangers as these can have a profound impact on individual wellbeing, performance and career developments.

This study then addresses the following research questions: how do foreign women academics experience the intersection between gender and foreignness? How are they positioned and how do they position themselves as double-strangers? What strategies have they consciously or unconsciously put in place to address neoliberal discourses and metrics, and their marginalising effects?

Methods

Our participants

This study used purposive sampling techniques in the selection of participants to be invited to take part in this research. Access was sought via personal contact, professional networks and

snow-balling. We focussed on academics in the social sciences since the level of professional competition in those fields seems to be of a similar nature, compared for instance to humanities related subjects. Also, whilst the scarcity of women in the STEM highly male-dominated environment has been addressed in various studies (e.g. Blackburn, 2017), the experience of women academics who constitute approximately half of the workforce in social sciences, their position and experience has not been adequately investigated – on average, in 2015, 51% of social scientists were women in the 28 EU and 11 adjunct states (European Commission, 2019), and in 2013 they represented 50,9% of tenured positions in the US (National Science Foundation, 2016). We interviewed women at different hierarchical levels with experience of working in a country different from that of origin. The decision to include mention of job levels (here indicated in line with the UK system which progresses from Lecturer to Senior Lecturer – Reader for research focussed contracts – and to Professor) in the presentation of the findings stems from our participants' narratives indicating that their perspective on the professional experience is highly influenced by their position. Although we recognise that different countries or cultures bring different mind frames, socio-cultural understanding and practices, and that in the 'international' higher education context not everyone is treated equally in terms of their status and cultural capital (see Joseph, 2013; Schech and Haggis, 2004), it is important to clarify that this paper does not focus on processes of racialization (see Mählck, 2013).

As our research posed some ethical challenges regarding the protection of our interviewees' anonymity (see also Morley et al., 2018), participant information is provided here in Table 1 at the aggregate rather than individual level, and pseudonyms are used in the presentation of our findings.

[Add Table 1 here]

The authors themselves are foreign women academics – coming from different countries of origin but both with experience of working in the UK – which provided insights and helped us establish access and rapport with our participants.

Data collection and analysis

All participants were sent an ethical consent form and an outline of the project prior to the semi-structured interviews that were conducted in person or via online videoconferencing facilities, recorded and transcribed. The interviews broadly focused on the following themes deriving from the existing literature explored above, and informed by our own experience as foreign women academics: reasons and circumstances for seeking employment abroad; experience as a foreign woman in the academic context(s); their ability to maintain work-life balance; and forms of resistance.

The authors worked on the transcripts both jointly and independently, verifying analysis with each other to ensure reliability of the qualitative data analysis process and avoid bias (Noble et al., 2009). Similarly to the methodology used in other qualitative studies on the experience of women in academia (see Nielsen, 2017) we employed thematic analysis in a reciprocal process, whereby "coding facilitates the development of themes, and the development of themes facilitates coding" (Ayres, 2008, p. 4). The three cycles of data analysis initially identified sixteen main themes (labelled as career, work culture, academic profession, academic structures, negative aspects, positive aspects, family, mobility, professional values, foreignness, visible/invisible discrimination, gender issues, coping strategy, support mechanisms, identity work and socio-political context), later reduced to fourteen, with fifty-four sub-themes. We also focused on identifying similarities, differences and contradictions in the narratives of what we had recognised as different sub-groups (e.g.

people at different hierarchical levels; with children or caring responsibilities; people who were in a relationship).

Data show that foreign women's positions in academia are far from uncontested but rather marked by complex and ever-shifting moments of intersectional belonging and non-belonging. This prompted the use of the notion of the double-stranger to present and discuss our findings: a person in a position that is permanently negotiated through power dynamics and distancing, intermittently included or relegated to the fringes, and considered part of a particular socio-cultural context without fully belonging.

Making sense of the double-stranger

Opportunities and obstacles for foreign women academics

The traits discussed above in relation to neoliberal academia (marketization of research, fast pace, precarious work conditions, competitiveness) were recognised by our participants as widespread in Europe (particularly in Germany and the UK), and in Australia. Italy was identified as rapidly following this trend, although traditional and masculine praxis was highlighted as predominant there, like in Pakistan, Turkey and Colombia.

The choice to move to a different country had been a strategic one for most (18) of our interviewees, especially for those who had moved abroad during the initial stages of their career. Marta (Lecturer) like others, stressed issues experienced in her country of origin around the exploitation of PhD students and junior researchers within a highly hierarchical academic context

> I saw PhD students that were doing the seminars back in [country], and I thought of them as the slaves of the professors, and I didn't want to be one. So, I came here with the idea of 'right, I'm going to a foreign context that is going to give me more

> independence and hopefully I will be treated less as a slave and more as an individual with some intellectual ability'.

This and other forms of nepotism or favouritism became a key motivator to go abroad for the majority of our interviewees (14). Moving to a foreign academic context, however, implies a time-consuming adjustment phase to living in a new country with a specific set of norms and socio-cultural understandings.

Whilst language issues and foreignness were considered less of an obstacle, especially after a period of initial adjustment, more significant estrangement caused by foreignness often related to misunderstandings linked to communication patterns and social conventions. In the interviews, it became apparent that communication patterns dominant in northern countries seem to collide with the ones used in the south. Specifically, women from cultural contexts in southern Europe and South America reported challenges in understanding the unspoken British code of 'appropriate' communication and behaviour which favours indirect and less emotionally charged styles. In addition, Rosaria (Reader) also noted how things that can be taken as jokes in her country of origin are not perceived as acceptable elsewhere:

> In [country A] the first thing was to learn that there were social rules in terms of political correctness. So for example there is the code of honour in [country A], and jokes about the fact that in [country B] students do copy exams, they cheat on exams all the time, would not have been welcome. It's part of the culture where I come from, and it's something I would joke about there [country B]. That simply wasn't funny in [country A].

Frictions between these different ways of communicating produced particular kinds of boundaries that highlighted differences in belonging and not-belonging and thus emphasised

the strangers' positions within their professional environment. A sense of estrangement in terms of belonging was reported in relation to various aspects: the lack of understanding of unspoken social and professional rules; the need to modify modes of expression or behaviour to conform to contextual understandings of professionalism; the required effort to invest more time in the establishment of networks and fruitful relationships; and the feeling of being valued as a member of staff. For instance, Rose (Senior Lecturer) commented

> I had a colleague in the past from Serbia and a Greek colleague and you could see that when they didn't pick a certain sort of British way of behaving or, when they were a bit more forward, people didn't like it. They were trying to almost 'put them down', calm them down, because that being different makes people uncomfortable. So, is that discrimination? It's certainly something related to it.

Hence, rather than working through language barriers, our participants reported having to adapt to cultural barriers and habit related to social conventions and unwritten norms. Carmen (Senior Lecturer), recalled having to adjust in a number of ways

> I wouldn't say polishing my accent [was an issue], but polishing my manners – that was something I had to work on at the beginning because I was a bit of a savage (laughs). I struggle a lot with meetings in which things are not being said directly. This gets on my nerves, and then I become, in the eyes of others, very aggressive and I have lost points many times because of that. […] I feel that I toned myself down a bit.

While for foreign women ignoring socio-cultural norms can be dangerous, especially in the case of unknown gendered power dynamics, it is their very same foreignness that can also provide a certain level of protection. It is by turning forms of imposed estrangement into

proactive challenges to individuals and systems that women enacted forms of resistance. Carmen (Senior Lecturer), for instance, talked about how, after some initial frustration, she used people's preconceptions about her foreignness as an advantage

> People are always trying to put you in a box, also academically. So being a foreigner has an advantage, because even if you are a bit eccentric, then they attribute that you are [southern country] and that you are too expressive (laughs). So, I must tune in my ways to try to fit into the mould, but on the other hand I know also that being a foreigner helps me.

Violating unwritten rules also included those related to hierarchies and professional behaviour – such as, for instance, the teaching allocation of less prestigious modules or subjects at lower undergraduate levels given to women; men being cited more in publications; or male professors having more powerful roles and less workload in grant work. Here, the fact that such rules were challenged (both consciously or unconsciously) by our participants in a manner considered disruptive as non-conforming to contextual praxis, highlighted a gendered order echoed in the literature whereby women are assigned roles and tasks that are not equally valued within the current neoliberal system, and subjected to inequitable division of labour. Many of our participants highlighted the impact of the time required to adjust to a new professional context. Simone (Senior Lecturer) explained how it had taken her almost four years to understand the local socio-cultural context (including the academia-specific dynamics between gender, age and hierarchy), to establish positive professional relationships, and to become more strategic in the choice of collaborators. Yet, whilst our participants reported a decrease in their sense of estrangement in terms of foreignness and belonging due to an increased ability to navigate socio-cultural dynamics and conventions, some women,

like Rose (Senior Lecturer), highlighted institutional practices that later on reminded them of the conditional character of their belonging

> I remember there was a colleague who applied for a job, who we all liked very much, but there was a professor who kept saying, 'yes but she needs a visa'. And I said 'so what?'.

Others reported how changes to the wider socio-political context suddenly put their sense of belonging into question altogether. For instance Dilly (Reader) reflects on Brexit: "I don't feel welcome in the country [...] the level of racism and social conflict that the referendum has triggered is something I'm uncomfortable with."

Therefore, although reminders of their precarious position as strangers were not permanent, even sporadic changes to socio-political and institutional practices destabilised our participants' sense of belonging and made them question or renegotiate their successful adjustment to the professional context as foreigners, and thus demanded a level of alertness and attention.

Women as strangers in academia

Several of our interviewees reported that, within todays' academic system, being a woman was the most significant and persistent factor in the maintenance of their marginalised position. Jane (Senior Lecturer), along with three interviewees at professorial level and some lecturers, highlighted that, even when belonging, women are hardly seen as reigning in positions of power, or in networks that benefit social capital, development and progression. She pointed out how 'There are very distinct all-boys clubs where in certain positions you just don't see a woman'.

Lavinia (Senior Lecturer), echoing some of her more junior colleagues, also commented on certain duties that seemed to be gendered within the workload allocation: 'as a woman you are given more pastoral roles'. Our participants reported that this unequal workload allocation also includes heavier teaching commitments and administrative roles that tend to be considered less favourably in promotion or probation applications. Narratives regarding the positioning towards neoliberal metrics were often permeated with an underlining narrative of productivity, or the lack thereof. Whilst contesting the norms that academia is now encapsulated with, over two thirds of the interviewees seemed to self-impose the same constraints onto their lives and work practices – being highly or hyper-productive within superimposed expectations, and trying to be productive or being less productive than they thought they were expected to be. This is shown in Marina's (Lecturer) account

> I had much more balance at the beginning; then it kind of slipped away for me because deadlines were getting tighter and I was having some health problems so I was not as productive as I wanted. And, instead of doing the wise thing of saying 'I will not be productive because I have a health problem', I worked more.

Rendering the metrics of productivity central to the establishment of an academic identity and the development of an academic career is an effective systemic means of pushing professionals into hyper-productive modes of working that affect other realms of their lives (Santos, 2015). Thirteen of our participants, including Rosaria (Lecturer), mentioned this as a common factor affecting their lives

> I still feel that I'm able to push myself, I *have* to push, because I'm very close [to promotion] but it's not enough, still not enough to get what I want. I focus all my

> energy on career or my work, this is true, and then it's inevitable that maybe the other dimension in your life becomes second.

Several reported that, in this environment marked by competition, frequent reference to the naturalised notion of women's reproductive desires and personal duties relegates women in a marginal positions as strangers within the work collective. Marina (Lecturer) stressed the disadvantage of being a woman working in a foreign context: 'How can you possibly ask me to make that fertility choice when my visa is related to my work […] and I will have to pay twice as much as a local for kindergarten.' Three participants, including Marina (Lecturer), felt estranged by a discourse centred around a double bias regarding women's assumed – but not existing – reproductive desire.

> Women here *are supposed to be* mothers, and they *want* to be mothers, they are brought up with the idea that they *will be* mothers… So, I am facing a lot of unconscious bias… Like they are asking me when I am going to have kids. What the hell? It's none of your business!

Dilly (Reader) also highlights this double bias in the context of equality protocols

> I don't want a different contract; I don't want to be part of a protected minority… or need to be separated from people who don't have as many family responsibilities as I have. […] There is a lot of talking about making the university a better employer for people with family responsibilities, but if that means labelling them, then NO. I don't want to be treated like a *female* academic. I'm an academic.

This form of estrangement, however, was not just systematically super-imposed on women academics, as we noticed that Rosaria (Lecturer) and other early career academics also seemed to have internalised prejudice related to reproduction and productivity

> I've realised that that motherhood has made some women much more productive in the sense that they learn to do an incredible amount of work while they are in the office, or they're able to work from home in a more efficient way compared to males or people who don't have this big commitment… So [lack of productivity for women with children] is a bias that I had in my head.

Over-emphasizing women's belonging to the domestic sphere also produces a position of not fully-belonging to the professional world. As shown in Irma's narrative (Professor), marginalisation in relation to motherhood affects women's position in that it emphasises a traditional distribution of gender-roles.

> When male academics come for jobs they're entitled to them because they're the bread winners. We never question whether they have a family; we never question whether they can commit a 100% to the job. … so, I think when we employ men and women, women are always being questioned and second guessed in terms of sexuality, marital status, parenting.

Stressing women's personal commitments and limited availability for after-office-hours work can potentially serve as an indication of non-commitment and thus limited productivity. As a result, more often than not, narratives like the one presented by Rose (Lecturer) stressed the necessity to engage with heavy workloads beyond the agreed contractual working week to demonstrate productivity 'despite' family commitments.

> Even now with the children I don't take time off. If you want to progress in academia, and you want to particularly get a professorship, you can't just work seven or eight hours a day. You have to put the time in at the weekend and in the evening because that's when you have to do your research, you know.

Three women reported resisting these dynamics by ring-fencing their family time, especially after the birth of their children, or following illness. Countering this emphasis on personal commitments, the vast majority (17) of our participants reported prioritising academic work before family commitments. This was mostly experienced as a spill-over of work into the family sphere, for instance, through tasks (especially research) carried out after office hours; absence during important moments for the family; the postponement or planning of pregnancies to fit around work; and house moves. Many, like Dilly (Reader), reported (and often regretted) working while at home, in the evenings or during holidays, in order to perform to the maximum of their abilities, evidence commitment and show the 'right' work ethos: 'There are so many pressures. And really everybody's trying to compete for the same thing. [...] I've always had very strong work ethics, you know, but I don't like to take time off to work from a holiday with the family'.

Self-induced estrangement as resistance

Our interviewees displayed resistance by distancing themselves from the mainstream hegemonic practices in various ways, a process we call 'self-induced estrangement'. All but one of our interviewees questioned the neoliberal metrics of productivity that intensify academic work and normalise regular overwork. Another important aspect linked to temporal dynamics of estrangement was highlighted by Carmen (Senior Lecture) who, like others, reflected on their positionality and discussed forms of self-induced estrangement which they

had initiated as a coping mechanism and later used more strategically to resist being positioned as a double-stranger. The first strategy consisted in rejecting the necessity to play 'the academic game' within contemporary liquid academic practices

> I think that it is impossible to fulfil any brief at the university at the moment. The fact that you will have to be an excellent teacher, and you have to be an excellent researcher, and also bring in a lot of money… is simply impossible. The people who attempt to play that game fail at some point… so it's like 'okay I'm not going to focus on that as the source of my worth'.

Seven interviewees, including Scarlett (Professor), told us that the best strategy to cope with estrangement in the workplace lies in relationships, especially in mentoring opportunities provided by other female scholars, and non-male networks experienced as safe spaces aimed at embracing rather than excluding the stranger. The traits of the double-stranger – woman and foreigner – are then used to enact a form of camaraderie that could support the individual scholar in meeting or resisting institutional expectations.

However, negotiating relationships with other more senior women academics or foreign male members of the academic workforce was reported by our participants as being particular tricky, especially when questioning relations that produce advantages for those in dominant positions. Resisting or disrupting positions of privilege and power supported by institutional structures that exploit the productivity of the marginalised, however, may threaten the structures set in place that are functional for keeping the neoliberal academia running. Sabrina (Lecturer) stressed how this kind of resistance can have both a negative personal and professional impact: 'I had to pay a price [for my resistance], because I didn't get leave for my honeymoon, and I could not go to conferences'.

Other ways of coping with gendered dynamics included learning to ‘say no’ to roles that do not contribute to career advancement, as well as becoming aware of issues around presenteeism and patriarchal measurements of performance. Resistance here was later performed by becoming increasingly strict with the time and space dedicated to work in order to preserve work-life balance, but also by dedicating the right amount of time and effort to strategically meaningful tasks in terms of career development. Interestingly, Simone (Senior Lecturer) and other interviewees reported that, whilst frequent reference to women's private commitments served to render them strangers within the academic environment, their family commitments could also be seen as a valuable resource to reinforce boundaries and gain a healthy level of distance from highly exploitative mechanisms. Further, family members who support women scholars in the monitoring of work and family boundaries could also be used as a springboard to instigate resistance:

> Two years ago, I went on holiday and I was waiting to hear from a journal. So, I kept checking emails a few times a day, and we didn't have access at home, so I had to go somewhere. And it just basically ruined the holidays because I kept checking... I sometimes try not to check emails on weekends – it’s tough, but I’m working on it, so I’m trying to establish some boundaries. And also the husband tells you that, well, actually you shouldn't work.

Hence, we found that self-induced estrangement, strategic coping and resistance to being exploited as a double-stranger within the academic professional context were implemented in both formal and informal ways by our participants as women and foreigners. Therefore, although the precarious position of being an outsider within can be prone to exploitation, it can also become a personal and professional resource to draw from in order to engage with coping and resistance.

Discussion

According to Kemp and Rickett (2018, p.343) foreign working women are still "hidden from view in academic studies". Using the notion of the double-stranger, this article examines the ways in which foreign women scholars make sense of their work-lives within the context of liquid academia, thereby contributing to a literature on foreign women academics' lived experiences of contemporary higher education. Our findings suggest that in the academic workplace foreign women academics are systemically rendered strangers – a professional position which our participants described as being situated between belonging and non-belonging, and articulated through different qualities and actions.

In agreement with Sang et al. (2013) our study highlighted that multiple categories of difference do not mean multiple jeopardy at the level of careers, or at least not to the same extent. Within the academic professional setting, the two sides of the double-stranger did not seem to carry the same weight in terms of marginalisation. The vast majority of our participants explained how estrangement resulting from foreignness seems to be to a certain extent malleable, and also contingent to time and adjustment; however, gender related strangeness was considered more fixed in terms of time and intensity.

Expanding previous studies by Johansson & Śliwa (2014) and Śliwa & Johansson (2014, 2015), our participants' narratives revealed a temporal layer to the understanding and management of their professional identity as foreign women academics with the individual categories of difference – woman and foreign – displaying different temporalities and rhythms: foreignness-induced estrangement is imposed on them and stronger at the beginning of their job abroad (due to socio-cultural misunderstandings, contextual habits, mannerisms and linguistic issues). Later it often becomes dormant and can be used both as self-induced estrangement and as a form of resistance, coping or empowerment. Occasionally, however,

the category foreignness becomes foregrounded again, for instance in institutional procedures but also through changes in socio-cultural practices or discourses. These instances then become reminders of the conditional character of our participants' belonging to their professional context and can destabilise people's sense and legitimacy of belonging.

Being a woman in academia, instead, seems to be a position of ongoing strangeness that is more rigid. Albeit articulated in different ways along their career path and life stages, this form of estrangement seems to remain in place over time. For instance, whilst discrimination in terms of promotion and role allocation were common across the different job levels, early career academics stressed the challenges faced in terms of access to networks and social capital development (see Angervall et al. 2018). More established academics highlighted issues related to the effects of workloads on family life and child rearing in connection to the need to conform to neoliberal metrics and requirements that they had not 'signed up for' at the start of their career. This finding corresponds to Bailyn's (2008) assumed hierarchy between different forms of strangeness, but it highlights a temporal discrimination within these two intersecting criteria of academic identity.

The traits of today's 'neoliberal liquid academia' were prominent in our interviewees' narratives. Neoliberal academic practices render possible and exploit this position of the stranger in a particular way. In contrast to Czarniawska and Sévon (2008) who showed how foreign women's double-strangeness served to wedge their way into a work context that systematically excluded them, here exclusion is situated within the contemporary academic system. The "built-in temporarinesss of all engagement" (Bauman, 2005, p.25) that is perpetuated by current meritocratic systems and metrics suggests that 'not getting in, whilst simultaneously not falling out of the system' leads to particular forms of exploitation that are aggravated at lower hierarchical levels. The resulting overwhelming demands on time, effort,

relationships and workloads exact an isolating psychic and physical toll that is neither reasonable nor sustainable (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004).

In line with previous research (Śliwa and Johansson, 2015), meritocracy – often identified as a key motivator to move abroad – was a dominant theme in over half of our participants' narratives. However, buying into the meritocracy discourse had two unintended consequences for our participants: the need to become hyper-productive within a limited amount of time (Mountz et al., 2015); and the negative effects experienced both at the individual and collective level. For many, the quest for meritocracy effectively translated into self-monitoring, which constitutes an effective means for ensuring high productivity without the necessity of apparatuses of control. Our findings shows that within this discourse of meritocracy women's position as strangers is collectively and systematically produced – and often internalised – by overemphasizing women's reproductive desires and duties that challenge the neoliberal ideal of a work ethic that is based on patriarchal metrics of productivity. This often contributes to the unacknowledged exploitation of female academic labour (Angervall et al. 2018) and legitimises the allocation to women of particular tasks often rejected by men (e.g. pastoral or caring roles, lower administrative duties and heavier teaching load).

With the increasing frequency of 'academic migrations' both within and between countries, foreign women academics have become a particular type of expatriate in search of enhanced visibility and permanent employment (Herschberg et al. 2018; Stalford 2005). This condition requires investments in terms of time, cognitive load and emotional labour in order to adjust to the new socio-cultural context and manage one's new identity as a stranger. This study has shown that the built-in temporality of professional engagement which liquid academia is thriving on places most of the burden of belonging and adjustment on individuals. This is implemented by ignoring or delegating institutional and systemic

responsibilities for securing and maintaining the wellbeing and status of its international workforce.

The temporal dynamics characterising the position of double-strangers identified through the analysis of our data highlights a complex relationship between adjustment and resistance. As our participants became more aware of and familiar with the socio-cultural factors related to their professional context, many reported feeling less estranged as foreigners. For some women, the enhanced understanding of their academic environment brought a realisation of hidden or unwritten forms of gendered marginalisation, which revealed the need to engage with acts of coping or resistance – either as foreigners or women. Whilst coping mechanisms were implemented to survive within an environment or tolerate specific situations, and often came as a passive reaction to issues experienced at the beginning of the foreign experience or as a result of changes in personal circumstances (e.g. caring responsibilities, a new relationship or having children), acts of resistance were purposely put in place to change or challenge the status quo, and to make a difference either in their personal circumstances or for others.

Data from two-thirds of the women in our study suggest that on-going experiences of estrangement also lead to a particular distance – which we refer to as self-induced estrangement – which questions the legitimacy of such structures and gives way to resistance strategies that are multiple and ambiguous. Resistance here implies agency rather than mere reaction, which for our interviewees took place both at the individual and collective level, but not at the institutional level suggested by Mergaert and Lombardo (2014).

Similarly to Johansson and Śliwa's research (2014) seven of our participants reported consciously working on the establishment of their 'stranger position' by manipulating the environment to produce different dynamics, consequences and opportunities over time. Contrary to the findings from Toffoletti and Starr's study (2016) where the interviewees' lack

of work–life balance was considered a personal issue, our participants placed significant stress on the systemic level of responsibility. The vast majority of our participants positioned themselves both at the centre of the problem and at the margins, thus performing a strategic and conscious balancing act in moving between being considered strangers and self-induced estrangement.

Concluding remarks

This article has shown how the positionality of the stranger – as someone who is included and excluded, that belongs and does not belong at the same time – is engaged with and maintained within contemporary academic work-lives. Far from being an unambiguous position, it produces complex and sometimes contradictory effects that can become functional forms of exploitation within contemporary academia or be used to mobilise both compliance and resistance. Echoing Bailyn (2008), and drawing from the notion of the double-stranger within an intersectional framework, this study poses that there are different dynamics and temporary hierarchies between different forms of strangeness (i.e. being foreign; being woman), whose functionality as categories of disadvantage or resource for resistance is not simply additive and may develop over time.

Introducing a temporal dynamic to the interplay between two categories of difference, this study shows that the precarious position of the double-stranger is reinforced through the varying rhythms through which categories of difference are articulated. This creates a permanent yet oscillating state of the double-stranger encapsulated within cycles of belonging and non-belonging. While being woman appears to be a rather constant form of estrangement in othering academics within their professional environment, the category of foreignness is more subject to change over time, as it can improve after an initial period of adjustment to then become dormant, with the occasional threat turning into a destabilising factor for the

participants' sense of belonging. Although both categories sometimes intersect in the creation of disadvantage, this study suggests that liquid academia systemically exploits both foreignness and gender as categories of difference (non-belonging).

Petersen (2011) identified a 'widespread malaise' in Australian academia which led to the identification of 'exit options'. In this study, however, all but one woman considered leaving academia, and only as a 'last resort' option. Instead, they considered international mobility in contemporary academia as a means to escape worsening conditions both within their workplace (i.e. due to nepotism, lack of career prospects and so on) as well as in the wider socio-political context they were initially located in. In addition, instead of trying to find an escape route from liquid academia, they developed conscious or unconscious coping strategies, and forms of resistance, to remain in a profession they loved, even though it was now embedded within a neoliberal context. Self-induced estrangement is such a strategy, focusing on individual agency in the process of distancing of the self from highly exploitative mechanisms. This then becomes a form of resistance used to gain better work-life balance and to oppose unethical practices, the influence of discriminating colleagues, unfair workload allocations, and barriers to career progression. Also, our findings highlighted how participants' private commitments – usually exploited to render them strangers within the academic system – could also be used as a resource for developing different types of resistance.

Our study is based on a small number of interviews and has limitations that could be addressed in future research. We have explored the accounts of foreign women academics in various universities across the globe without taking into account their immigration status or the privilege some nationalities may carry over others, which may be an interesting point to consider at the intersection with race, gender and foreignness. Having interviewed a limited number of participants, especially at professorial level, the development of larger study across

job levels could capture a more kaleidoscopic picture of the differences in experience at different life and career stages.

The notion of the double-stranger – regardless of the particular intersecting categories of foreignness and being women – highlights the specific condition of being bound without being settled, which, according to Bauman (2005), is a characteristic of experiences of work in liquid times. Further research on foreign women in other professional contexts might thus also generate insights beyond this specific group and point to how liquidity further translates into work conditions, expectations and experiences.

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