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Neo-nationalism and Turkish higher education: a phenomenological case study of a multilingual scholar's identity (re)construction

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ABSTRACT

By placing a strong emphasis on one's national, cultural, and ethnic identity, neonationalism, as a contemporary political and cultural movement, prioritizes 'sameness' over diversity. This phenomenological case study focused on Turkish universities which have been under increasingly oppressive neo-nationalist policies within the past 10 years. It examined the lived experiences of a multilingual scholar in regard to his identity (re)construction and socialization upon his return from the US to Türkiye (Turkey). Descriptions of Anıl's lived experiences were longitudinally collected via in-depth interviews, anecdotal records, and bi-weekly journal entries. The findings indicated that one's country of origin or nation-state becomes a source of discrimination not only in study abroad contexts, but also when international students and scholars return to their home countries. In other words, neo-nationalism in higher education institutions (HEIs) not only influences 'the Other' but also those within the same 'nation' with more progressive pedagogical beliefs and practices. The findings also underline the need to consider the phenomenon of *transnational intersectionality* when accounting for multilingual scholars' identity (re)construction and socialization. Such an approach would help situate the complexities of transnationalism within the larger discussions of how HEIs are shaped by current neo-nationalist policies. This study also calls for further research to pay attention to colonial legacies such as linguistic and epistemicide within HEIs so as to encourage multilingual scholars to resist and dismantle oppressive policies and practices that govern academia both at local and global contexts.

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Introduction

Neo-nationalism, which situates one's national identity and community at the centre of right-wing movements, emphasizes 'sameness' and belonging while raising questions and concerns around 'different' linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and national groups (Gingrich and Banks 2006). Promoting a sense of normative national identity, therefore, constitutes one of the processes of constructing a shared ideology of neo-nationalism which is predicated upon the assumption that a nation's citizens should employ a set of desirable religious and cultural norms and values, without which they are

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deemed inferior and marginalized (Haynes 2021). Nation, in that sense, is ‘an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign’ (Anderson 2006, 6). The *imagined* aspect of a nation derives from the fact that ‘the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’ (Anderson 2006, 6). Members will still believe that ‘the nation is the only goal worthy of pursuit – an assertion that often leads to the belief that the nation demands unquestioned and uncompromising loyalty’ (Grosby 2005, 5). In other words, nationalism enables nation-states to control people through interactions, policies, practices, and institutions that sustain the many hierarchies *within* and *across* nations. Some of the characteristic features of neo-nationalism in that sense are ‘anti-immigrant and xenophobic rhetoric; economic protectionism; constraints on civil liberties; attacks on critics, including journalists and academics; denial of science related to climate change and the environment; and the emergence and empowerment of demagogues and autocrats’ (Douglass 2021a, p. vii).

Nationalism, as Grosby (2005) puts forward, ‘injects hatred of what is perceived to be foreign, whether another nation, an immigrant, or a person who may practice another religion or speak a different language’ (5). Nationalism asserts racism and xenophobia by positioning other nations composed of different races, ethnicities, religions, and languages as enemies of the state and by claiming borders about ‘natives’ versus ‘foreigners’, or ‘immigrants’ versus ‘residents’. In that sense, nationalism is ‘embedded in the words that we use to talk about ourselves and others: native, foreigner, compatriot, expatriate, immigrant, alien’ (McIntosh 2020, 3). Haynes (2021) explains this relationship between language use and neo-nationalism as follows:

[V]ote for me and I’ll save you from the bad guys. Who are the bad guys? Anyone sufficiently different from ‘us’ to warrant the term and which permits – or ‘impels’ – ‘us’ to be suspicious of ‘them’. This kind of divisive rhetoric defines the political landscape for neo-nationalists. (26)

This divisive as well as uniting nature of neo-nationalism, as a more global form of nationalism strengthened by the neoliberal economy, constructs national identities in multiple social, academic, and professional contexts through maps, museums, media, and various socio-political and cultural institutions such as higher education institutions (HEIs) which not only circulate neo-nationalist movements but also are shaped by them.

According to Douglass (2021a), ‘neo-nationalism has different meanings and consequences for universities in different parts of the world, depending on their historical role, their academic culture, and the current political context in which they must operate’ (ix). Although there are studies that examined international students’ experiences in relation to neo-nationalism (Lee 2016; 2017; Lee, Jon, and Byun 2016), the few studies that focused on the transitional trajectories of those international students who return to their home countries after receiving their doctoral degrees in English-speaking countries – who we call *multilingual scholars* in this paper – did not situate their experiences within neo-nationalist frameworks (e.g. Karakaş 2020; Kuzhabekova, Sparks, and Temerbayeva 2019). Most of the research on multilingual scholars instead explored the challenges they faced in academic publishing outside English-speaking contexts (e.g. Casanave 1998; Englander and Uzuner-Smith 2013; Lillis and Curry 2006; Mathews-Aydınlı 2009; Salager-Meyer 2014). The present study, therefore, aims to understand the tensions involved between the identity (re)construction of multilingual scholars and the way they are (re)positioned within HEIs, both abroad and at home; and to then situate these tensions within broader discussions of how HEIs are shaped by current neo-nationalist policies. By adopting a socialization lens, this study explores the lived experiences of multilingual scholars in Türkiye, where universities have been under oppressive neo-nationalist policies that create a climate of fear and thus, surpass academic freedom.

Workplace socialization and identity (re)construction

Workplace socialization explores the practices during and through which newcomers become familiar with the professional ecology and move from the ‘newcomer’ to ‘insider’ status. Workplace

socialization relies on three components: corporate and institutional discourses (i.e. particular ways of doing things in an institution), professional discourses (i.e. contextually changing notions of what constitutes professionalism), and the social and personal aspects of the workplace (i.e. the presentation of the self) (Roberts 2010; Roberts and Sarangi 1999). These three components interact in a way 'to produce new identities with new ways of being, feeling, and articulating the self in new moral worlds' (Roberts 2010, 216). Workplace socialization is not a straightforward process but bound to various competing and dynamic social structures such as agency, power, and hierarchy even in academic contexts that seemingly orient to equality, autonomy, and self-determination. In that sense, workplace socialization is inextricably linked with the process of (re)constructing one's professional identity.

From a poststructuralist perspective, identity, rather than being fixed and stable, is a dynamic process of continuous construction and reconstruction within and across various social contexts and relationships. The poststructuralist approach perceives identity as multiple, fluid, complex, conflicting, blurry, shifting, subject to change, and socially and culturally constructed (Hart and Martel 2020; Farrell 2000; Norton and Morgan 2013). These social structures determine the activities and social relations between an expert and a novice. Yet, because of the bidirectional influence of socialization, newcomers may not necessarily adopt the shared practices and adapt to the community itself, but instead '(re)create, resist, or transform them' (Howard 2012, 341). In that sense, the tensions between ascribed, negotiated, and imagined identities are determined by the power relations in various contexts (Chen 2010; Norton and Morgan 2013). Türkiye, a country in which HEIs have been under increasingly oppressive neo-nationalist policies under the ruling government, therefore, deserves attention as an information rich context to understand how multilingual scholars' identity (re)construction and socialization are tied to the processes of neo-nationalism.

The current academic scene in Türkiye

During the past 10 years, Turkish universities have witnessed several socio-political events that exacerbated the effects of the neo-nationalist policies of the ruling government on HEIs. The 2013 Gezi protests that began in Istanbul and spiralled into nationwide protests, poured thousands onto the streets including higher education faculty and students. In 2016, a group of academics who called themselves Academics for Peace signed a petition that addressed the government to end the military operations in civilian areas in Southeastern Türkiye and to instead initiate dialogues for peace. 1128 academic from 89 Turkish universities signed the petition, along with more than 350 scholars from all over the world, 'among them distinguished international scholars, such as US linguist and philosopher Noam Chomsky, French philosopher Étienne Balibar, British anthropologist David Harvey, American philosopher, and gender theorist Judith Butler, and the Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek' (O'Malley 2021, 149). As an anonymous author named BAK (2022) recently mentioned in *The Legal Battle Waged by the Academics for Peace Continues*:

These academics were subjected to many rights violations within the past seven years. Some were arrested, imprisoned, threatened, or forced to move to a different city. They were subjected to disciplinary penalties or criminal investigations. Some were forced to retire/resign, retract their signature on the Petition; others were removed from their jobs, intimidated and subjected to mobbing. Their contracts were terminated. Of these signatories, 822 were prosecuted by penal courts, under the accusation of 'propagandizing for the terror organization.' (n. a.)

Six months after the petition, a coup attempt, organized by a group of military rebels to overthrow the current regime, happened targeting strategic locations in Türkiye, such as the parliament building in Ankara and the Bosphorus bridge in Istanbul. The attempt resulted with a death toll of 240 people and 1500 wounded. The government declared a state of emergency initially for three months, but eventually extended seven times over a period of two years. The increased governmental restrictions also influenced universities, leading to 23,420 academics being fired and to some

universities being closed down permanently. Those who were dismissed from their tenured jobs in public universities were not only banned from working in public sectors for the rest of their lives but also blacklisted for any possible positions in the private sector. Passports were blocked or cancelled, even the relatives of those blacklisted academics were banned from travelling abroad (O'Malley 2021). The regulatory function and influence of the Council of Higher Education (CoHE, known as YÖK in Turkish) have been solidified even further after the coup attempt. In October 2016, rector elections at public universities were abolished; instead, the president would appoint a rector based on the three recommendations provided by CoHE. In 2018, the percentage of foreign faculty allowed at a university was reduced to 2%, 'with the apparent hope of limiting international influence at Turkish universities' (O'Malley 2021, 157). It was right after the coup attempt in 2016, and during the turmoil the academics in Türkiye were going through, that we, the researchers of this study, contacted Anıl who had just returned to Türkiye after attaining his doctoral degree in the US.

The present study

This phenomenological case study focuses on the identity (re)construction of a multilingual scholar named Anıl (pseudonym). After completing his BA and MA degrees in English language teaching in Türkiye, Anıl went to the US to pursue his doctoral degree in a similar discipline. Upon his return to Türkiye, he started working at Uras University (pseudonym) in a less-privileged, conflict-zone in Türkiye that has a predominantly Kurdish population. Anıl, as a multilingual scholar who speaks Turkish, Kurdish, and English, and his higher education context at the crossroads of neo-nationalist ideologies of Türkiye, the US, as well as of the Kurdish-populated region it was situated in, presented us with an information rich case/context for the purposes of this study.

According to Van Manen (2016), 'a true reflection on lived experience is a thoughtful, reflective grasping of what it is that renders this or that particular experience its special significance' (32). Therefore, our guiding research question was: *What is the nature of a multilingual scholar's identity (re)construction at macro (nation-wide), meso (institutional) and micro (classroom) levels?* We were later guided by the following questions: What is the nature/essence/meaning of his lived experiences as an academic in a predominantly Kurdish region? Do Anıl's lived experiences reflect what it means to be a Western-educated multilingual scholar in Türkiye? In what ways does neo-nationalism then shape the lived experiences of Western-educated multilingual scholars in Türkiye?

Data collection and analysis

We longitudinally obtained descriptions of Anıl's lived experiences through anecdotal records, in-depth interviews, bi-weekly journal entries, and informal email exchanges throughout an academic year between 2016 and 2021.¹

Our data collection started in October right after he started working at this university and continued till the end of June. We conducted four online semi-structured interviews, which included both general and specific questions. The general questions which derived from the overarching research question were open-ended and profoundly probing to lead to a more focused understanding of 'the lived meaning of human phenomenon that is experientially recognizable and experientially accessible' (Van Manen 2017, 776). They addressed Anıl's background, study abroad experiences, current social and academic experiences in his academic context, and future goals. The specific questions, on the other hand, were based on Anıl's journals and the previous interviews. They were designed as retrospective phenomenological reflection (Van Manen 2016) so that Anıl could describe and interpret the meaning of his lived experiences in a way that would lead us to a more substantial understanding of their essence. This way, we formed a balance between 'description of the lived-through quality of lived experiences' and 'description of meaning of *the expressions* of lived experience' (Van Manen 2016, 25, emphasis original).

The journal entries consisted of an anecdotal record and a thematic journal. The anecdotal record, developed by the researchers, included three steps. First, Anil was asked to choose an experience that he had in his institution and recall this experience verbatim with as much detail as possible. The second part asked him to write an explanation of his interpretation of this experience, and the third part required a reflection on what he would do if he encountered a similar situation in the future. Lastly, the thematic journals addressed academic issues related to Anil's workplace socialization, teaching philosophy, collegial relationship, and Turkish academia in general.

Since Van Manen (2017) cautions against a set of prescribed steps of phenomenological analysis, our data analysis procedures were a synthesis of previous work (Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell 2004; Moustakas 1994; Patton 2014; Van Manen 2016). We first read and reread the entire description of Anil's lived experiences while also engaging in bracketing/epoché that helped us check for any preconceived notions and judgments. We coded the data by paying attention to significant statements, which were then combined under themes to achieve a better description of the phenomenon. The last step included writing rich, thick descriptions to illustrate Anil's identity (re)construction and socialization. A synthesis of textural (the *what* of the phenomenon) and structural (*why* and *how* of the phenomenon) descriptions were used to discuss the essence of the experience in relation to macro (nation-wide), meso (institutional) and micro (classroom) levels that were focused on in this study.

Reflexivity and trustworthiness

As both US-educated Turkish academics who carried out this phenomenological study with a participant who is also a US-educated scholar, we need to acknowledge our roles and discuss the process of bracketing out our past experiences so as to remove, at least to some extent, any preconceived notions and judgements that might prevent us from approaching and examining the data with a fresh perspective (Moustakas 1994). All contact with Anil was established by the first author of the study, who also carried out the interviews for the following reasons: The first author also had received her doctoral degree at a US university and returned to Türkiye after graduation. Having gone through similar experiences, she could easily build rapport with Anil in a way that he could share his accounts in as much detail as possible. To some extent she served as a mentor to Anil, as a result of which, we managed to receive updates and insights from Anil even after data collection ended. The second researcher, who at the time of the study was still a doctoral student in the US, kept herself distant during data collection so that she could be more neutral during data analysis and just rely on the data to draw conclusions. All transcriptions of the interviews were conducted by the second author to familiarize herself with Anil's lived experiences and his meaning-making processes. We both kept our own researcher diary to note down our reflections of the bracketing/epoché process, the new insights and information we gained as a result of the data analysis, and our own sense-making of Anil's lived experiences. By carrying out this study, we hoped to gain a better understanding of the experiences of Turkish academics, especially of those who receive their doctoral degrees abroad and return to Türkiye; and put these experiences within the context of Turkish HEIs which are shaped by current neo-nationalist policies.

We used triangulation, thick descriptions, and member checking to maximize the trustworthiness of the study (Moustakas 1994; Patton 2014). Triangulation was achieved in this study through data and analyst triangulation. We used multiple data collection instruments in which different types of data were elicited to provide cross-data consistency checks. We also developed interview questions based on the journal entries so that we could ask Anil to elaborate more on his experiences but also see if any (in)consistencies would emerge in the data. Each researcher thematically analysed the data separately on paper and then came together to analyse the data this time using NVivo while discussing the emerging themes we found individually (i.e. analyst triangulation). After the thematic analysis, we aimed to present a composite structure of the findings by presenting thick descriptions (Geertz 1973) which helped us holistically reflect the participant's identity (re)construction and

socialization at macro, meso, and micro levels. Member checking with Anil was done throughout the data collection and analysis processes and a final draft of this manuscript was shared with Anil to receive his thoughts on the description of his experiences in this paper.

Findings

Macro level: nation-wide policies and practices

At macro level, Anil's socialization and identity (re)construction was influenced by various social and political restrictions that complicate the regulations around post-graduate scholarships in Türkiye. Anil's doctoral studies in the US was funded by CoHE (2022) which provides opportunities for Turkish citizens to study abroad, but in return, expects them to perform a 'mandatory service' and contribute to Turkish HEIs. However, this scholarship programme includes inconsistencies when it comes to how and when these scholars will be appointed to academic *kadro* (tenured positions in state universities) after the completion of their doctoral degrees. The uncertainty around appointments becomes a concern for these scholars as the appointment to *kadro* also means promotion to the rank of an assistant professor from a research assistant and becoming a legitimate member of their departments.

In Anil's case, upon completion of his doctoral degree, he returned to his institution in the same academic *kadro* that he left as a graduate research assistant. Not being promoted to the rank of an assistant professor, Anil felt that he was not positioned as 'core academic' and 'knowledge producer' in his university, which resulted in many challenges in terms of his socialization and identity (re)construction. The approval of his doctoral degree by CoHE, a process all internationally educated scholars need to go through in Türkiye, took almost a year, and until then, Anil was still in the research assistant *kadro* and thus was positioned as a graduate student, being excluded from all departmental meetings which included only those in assistant, associate, or full professor ranks. Anil, however, identified himself as part of the core team of faculty, being a research assistant was just a formality for him, as he had already obtained his doctoral degree unlike his other research assistant colleagues who were pursuing their doctoral or master's degrees at that time. Problems began when he requested meetings with his department chair to discuss issues with course design. His request was denied as the department chair stated: 'I do not talk about such issues with research assistants.' [Thematic Journal 5, June].

Not having his academic *kadro* at the rank of an assistant professor, Anil, based on a misunderstanding, was removed from the faculty email listserv. This provided another layer of 'Othering' as he was not able to receive any emails about academic events that were held in the department. The academic hierarchy and the power struggles extant in this institution led Anil into an unhelpful state of mind about his recognition as a member of this academic community. Anil started raising questions in relation to his academic context by making comparisons between HEIs in Türkiye and the US:

I used to have a more peaceful academic atmosphere in which I had friendly relationships with almost everybody including my professors, but here I have an academic atmosphere built upon strict hierarchy, arrogance, pressure, etc ... I was able to talk to my supervisors in the Turkish Program about the problems and suggest some remedies which were appreciated, but here I do not have this chance because I am a research assistant 'who is expected to obey the rules.' [Journal, April]

The socio-ethnic demographics of the university also contributed to Anil's marginalization in this context. The members of his academic community were born and raised in the city where the university was located, and most of them identified themselves as Kurdish. Thus, academics who were coming from other cities, even though they were also Kurdish, were positioned as 'outsiders' and struggled to claim their membership within the university. Anil, also a self-identifying Kurdish scholar, but as someone outside this particular context, was aware of the potential discrimination in this institution. As Anil expected, another colleague, who received the same scholarship to

study in the same doctoral programme and who returned to this institution around the same time as Anil, was appointed to the *kadro* earlier than Anil since he was ‘the local candidate’. Anil’s lived experiences in this higher education context, as a self-identifying Kurdish scholar, therefore, hints that his marginalization is an outcome of ‘micro-nationalism’ based on one’s place of birth and local connection rather than macro-ethno-nationalistic faultlines in the country.

Meso-level: institutional challenges and tensions

The shift in Anil’s scholarly identity – from a research assistant and to someone holding a Ph.D. from a prestigious US university – was exciting for him as he was looking forward to bringing new insights and perspectives to an English language teaching (ELT) department in Türkiye. However, after talking briefly with his department chair on his first day back, Anil realized that he was positioned as a newcomer and claiming a legitimate membership in this academic community would take longer than he anticipated. Anil reported:

[The first day after my return] I went into the program chair’s room [to say hi], the first few sentences were followed by threats and humiliations. Never asking what I did abroad, what I studied in my dissertation, how the whole PhD process went; she threatened me by saying that I could not transfer to another university until I completed my mandatory work here. She kept saying that ‘People who would not normally be able to go abroad for PhD make use of their positions at universities to go abroad. When they return, they do not want to stay at these universities.’ [Anecdotal Record, November]

The department chair’s disregard of Anil’s return to the institution with his doctoral degree and instead immediately reprimanding him to remain at the university until the end of his mandatory service signals her attempts to regulate his future plans in order to maintain the existing power relations in this department. Anil felt that not acknowledging his doctoral degree was her discursive way of closing negotiation for anything innovative Anil might bring into this context. Positioning those who study abroad as taking advantage of Turkish HEIs dismisses Anil’s identity and experiences, and can be taken again as an indicator of micro neo-nationalist policies that lead to us vs. them positionings within academia.

Realizing that his relationship with the department chair would be contentious, Anil decided to gain legitimacy in this context by establishing collaborations with his co-workers. Anil, with the help of his colleagues, decided to organize a series of workshops for English teachers working at the Ministry of Education in K-12 contexts. Anil wanted to talk with the department chair about their plans; he thought that it would be better for her to learn about the workshops from him rather than someone else. Anil explained:

She started attacking me by saying ‘I was here three years ago when we tried to do workshops and they didn’t work out. They were in fact very bad. [K-12 teachers] came in the morning, signed in, and then left. The workshops were useless.’ In response, I indicated that even though these attempts were unsuccessful, there is no encouragement to do anything new, let alone a conference or a workshop. My goal here is just to share and negotiate some opinions. [Interview 2, November]

The department chair, by starting her response with ‘I was here three years ago’, simultaneously positioned herself as an old timer, an expert, and Anil as a newcomer, as someone who is not familiar with how academic practices work in this context. This was again a form of gatekeeping to prevent any new practices Anil might bring to this context. Anil’s positioning as an outsider was not limited to this exchange, but his department chair used every opportunity to remind him his ‘outsider’ status. In Interview # 4 [June], for instance, Anil reported her following statement: ‘the people who just join the university aim to do something new assuming there is nothing done here’. And no matter how many times Anil reminded her that he was not a newcomer and it was his 6th year at the same institution (with a three year gap in between when he was in the US), he still was not able to claim his ‘insider’ status.

Anil’s struggle for membership and affiliation continued by seeking potential collaborations within the programme, in a way to deconstruct his marginalized position and (re)position his

social and academic self. He, thus, was quite excited when one of his colleagues asked him to co-author a project on technology and language learning. Anil stated:

I was thrilled because that was the chance for me to build some sort of affiliation and belonging [to the university] and get back to academic studies. I started to regain the hope that there are some people with whom I can conduct studies and do something worthwhile. After that unpleasant experience with the head of the ELT department, this invite made me think that I did not have to stay trapped in my 'ELT box at the university,' but rather look for new opportunities. [Anecdotal Record, December]

Anil's interpretation of this collaboration as a 'chance for affiliation and belonging' shows that he was clearly in search of finding a place for himself within this higher education context. However, this offer did not result in a collaborative outcome since Anil found out that his colleague was going through a criminal investigation regarding his possible involvement in the 2016 coup attempt. Working with this colleague, under the current socio-political conjecture, meant that he could also be blamed with similar accusations which would not only have an unpleasant impact on his scholarly identity but also could potentially end his academic career. He was already in a difficult position as the same administrative staff who removed his name from the faculty listserv, had filed a petition against Anil blaming him for having potential connections with illegal religious or political groups. Anil was appalled when he read the petition that depicted him as 'someone who came from the US benefiting from, *god knows*, which political or religious groups in order to cultivate hate in our university' [Interview 4, June]. Understandably, any kind of accusation that could erase all his academic efforts and experiences would devastate Anil and his family, therefore, Anil decided to be more cautious in his academic endeavours in order not to leave any room for any misinterpretation or misinformation by his colleagues.

Anil finally built allegiances with another research assistant and an assistant professor in his programme. Anil and these two colleagues, all positioned as outsiders, were seen as a threat to their university's existing hierarchical system as they questioned similar oppressive regulations and attempted to share their knowledge with others by proposing initiations which could potentially eradicate the impediments (e.g. lack of communication among the members, not having regular programme meetings, improving the course contents, etc.). Other than these two colleagues, Anil's socialization in this institution was inhibited by the hostile environment created by the department chair and the administrative staff as well as the political fluctuations the entire nation was going through after the coup.

Micro level: classroom as the last fortress

Returning to Türkiye was particularly exciting for Anil as he was going to work with pre-service English teachers studying ELT. Anil identified the classroom as one of the few contexts where he could exercise his identity and agency as a teacher educator. He aimed to design up-to-date courses that involved instructional technology to make sure that his students' learning extended beyond the walls of the classroom. He integrated a learning management system (LMS) into his courses even though his institution did not have subscriptions to, nor did they use, online platforms.

Anil's attempts to position himself as a scholar he imagined to be did not take long. Right after he shared his course syllabus with his department chair, he received an email that demanded all instructors to revise their assessment plans by incorporating a paper-based midterm and a final exam, under the pretext of reducing student workload. Anil decided not to make any changes as he believed that a product-oriented assessment plan would not reflect students' progress fairly. The same day, Anil came across the department chair who told Anil to change the evaluation criteria and resubmit his syllabus:

I told her that my course was a process-oriented one and evaluating students' success solely through a ten-minute-long in-class final exam would be an unfair and unsuccessful practice, and therefore a process-oriented evaluation would serve more effectively. She said she was aware of the situation but had nothing to do 'because the rules say so.' [Anecdotal Record, March]

In order to resolve the issue, Anil sent an email to her explaining that ‘he was ready to take all the responsibility if the students refused the evaluation criteria’. Following this email, Anil received a phone call from the department chair who said ‘This lesson is under my supervision and I said you are changing it and sending it to me immediately.’ Losing this last battle and the only context in which he could exercise his agency and scholarly identity, Anil decided to quit his teaching duties. In fact, as a research assistant, Anil was not allowed to teach classes according to CoHE regulations. However, due to the insufficient number of instructors, he was asked to teach two or more classes every semester – just like the other research assistants. At Interview # 3 [February], Anil mentioned, ‘[Quitting] is not something I ever wanted. How can I stay away from my students? One of the best ways to punish a teacher is to separate him from his students.’ Still, he was proud of himself for adhering to his principles and teaching philosophy even though it meant saying goodbye to his students.

Discussion and conclusion

Based on Anil’s lived experiences, three main conclusions can be drawn to understand the influence of neo-nationalism within HEIs. First, one’s country of origin or nation-state not only becomes a source of discrimination in study abroad contexts but may pose further challenges when international students and scholars return to their countries. Anil’s socialization and identity (re)construction in many ways resonate with Mathews-Aydınlı’s (2009) study with multilingual scholars in Türkiye. According to Mathews-Aydınlı (2009), rather than the geographical relocation and (re)adaptation – as they could be appointed to any university in Türkiye – what caused the most difficulties for Western-educated scholars was the transition from being a graduate student to an emergent scholar. In our study, Anil was already familiar with the context as he was working at the same institution before he went to the US. He not only went back to the same institution, but he also shared the same ethnic and linguistic characteristics with most of his colleagues as a self-identifying Kurdish person who also spoke Kurdish, a minoritized and marginalized language in Türkiye. Yet, he still faced challenges while transitioning from his ‘former’ identity as a ‘graduate student/assistant’ to ‘a scholar’. This study, in that sense, suggests that being a newcomer may have very little to do with years of experience people spend in a community or their shared ethnic, religious or language background. Being a legitimate member is a position that is granted by the community newcomers enter into; discrimination and marginalization may still occur even when people share the same race, religion, ethnicity, and language. In that sense, this study presents wider contributions considering the role of internationalization in HEIs. For instance, Lee’s (2017) study of the neo-national experiences of the international students in South Africa revealed similar findings: Students within Africa were more commonly discriminated against as opposed to their outside the continent counterparts, with students from Zimbabwe feeling the most mistreated of all. In the study of Lee, Jon, and Byun (2016), compared to those students from Europe and North America, there was discrimination toward Chinese students in South Korea, despite their shared race and Confucius values. From a broader perspective, what Anil’s case has revealed is that censorship, surveillance, oppression, and marginalization are exercised in various ways across HEIs, and actors are often forced to contain and even implement oppressive practices on members of their own community (Freire 1970/2005).

Second, this study underlines that transnational lives such as the ones of multilingual scholars cannot be explained solely by the discourses within their nation-states but require a *transnational intersectionality* that attends to the complexities of transnationalism – ‘composed of structures within, between, and across nation-states and virtual space’ (Purkayastha 2012, 62). Anil’s transnational space, in this study, included his academic and social networks in the US, in Türkiye, and within his local context in Southeastern Anatolia. Anil not only sought a community of practice within this local context but also desired to maintain his multilingual, multicultural identity that expanded to his networks in the US. His transnational trajectory confirms the ways in which social

and academic lives are built by combining the intersecting local, regional, national, and transnational spaces and the reduced influence of single-nation states on multilingual scholars' lives (Purkayastha 2012). What's even more interesting is, Anil's lack of privilege and power in his 'own' country pushed him to make comparisons between the US and Türkiye and seek out privilege and power in the former. On the one hand, these comparisons confirm Casanave's (1998) description of multilingual scholars as 'struggling within a multicontextual and multicultural world to develop several inter-related identities that could be juggled and balanced as needed to their best advantage' (196). On the other, we need to approach these comparisons from a critical lens as oppressive academic environments may exist within any HEI in the world, including the US. While, as the authors of this study our goal was to present the essence of Anil's socialization and identity (re)construction in this higher education context, we do not wish to risk replicating hegemonic orientalist ideologies about Western superiority (specifically North American) and non-Western inferiority, and therefore perpetuate *epistemicide*, which promotes a colonial world order (Hall and Tandon 2017; Paraskeva 2018). We, therefore, call for further studies to adopt transnational intersectionality as an approach to study the experiences of multilingual scholars regarding the influence of neo-nationalism – and neoliberalism – within HEIs. Such an approach can help bring forward the intricacies of knowledge production in the Global South and other non-Western contexts such as Türkiye in ways that prevent epistemicide (e.g. Hall and Tandon 2017; Paraskeva 2018), and instead, establish inclusive HEIs that respect and appreciate difference and diversity.

Third, this study emphasizes the role of HEIs in terms of maintaining and perpetuating ideologies of the nation-states such as neo-nationalism, considering universities are 'extensions of the societies that give them life and meaning' (Douglass 2021b, 1). As Douglass (2021a) argues:

[U]niversities are subordinate to and usually a participant in the national political ecosystem; they are rarely outside of it, even if many still cherish the concept of the ivory tower and seek to protect their autonomy. Hence, their internal worlds, as well as their international networking opportunities, are largely determined by prevailing political norms and are exemplified in the extreme by the controls exerted by neo-nationalist and autocratic governments. (viii)

As seen in Anil's case, when governments provide international scholarships, they put scholars under heavy burdens through mandatory service which, on paper, allows economic, social, and political development of the country. However, when the nature of this mandatory service is not clearly defined through nation-wide policies, these scholarship programmes are manipulated by gatekeepers in HEIs and become a driving force for neo-nationalist power relations.

One limitation of this study is the lack of explorations into how Anil's Kurdish identity played a role within macro, meso, and micro levels in this higher education context. According to Grosby (2005), the common language spoken by a group of people in a geographical area or 'nation' helps develop a collective consciousness which refers to 'a social relation of each of a number of individuals as a consequence of those individuals participating in the same evolving tradition' (9). In this study, Anil spoke three of the languages that were in focus: Kurdish, Turkish, and English. Based on his accounts, Anil only spoke English with his students in the class, and in social interactions with the students outside the class he 'code-switched between Turkish and English'. Kurdish did not play a role at all even though it was most of the students' first language and a common language between them and Anil. Further studies with multilingual scholars who share a marginalized language with their students can also look at their actual language use to understand how collective consciousness builds from *and* contributes to social relations. Studies can also examine linguistic genocide, or *linguicide*, among multilingual scholars (e.g. Mufwene 2004; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). If HEIs are really committed to decolonizing their curriculum and knowledge, concerns over epistemicide should also extend to linguicide, and research and other academic initiatives and collaborations should work towards encouraging and facilitating the scholarly work of multilingual scholars especially in minoritized, endangered languages such as the Kurdish language in Türkiye (e.g. O'Driscoll, 2014; Vurayai and Ndofirepi 2022).

This study paves the way for further explorations on the intersections of neo-nationalism and HEIs, in ways that provide insights into how multilingual scholars can resist and dismantle these oppressive policies and practices that govern academia both at local and global contexts. More transparent policies and regulations in terms of the appointment and promotion criteria and procedures for returning academics, as well as mentorship programmes for early-career scholars, would help minimize the unfavourable conditions for returning multilingual scholars during their re-integration period. There also seems to be a need for stronger trade unions, albeit difficult in countries such as Türkiye where the leaders of trade unions are arrested and employees who become a member of trade unions are dismissed. Trade unions in such contexts would help protect the social, economic, and political rights of academics and improve their working conditions. They would also offer support for individual scholars, such as Anıl, to adopt and develop approaches and strategies to navigate and resist power relations that reside in higher education institutions.

Note

1. Since there are only a few US-educated English language teaching scholars who return to Türkiye every year, we refrain from providing a specific date for the timeline of this study to protect Anıl's anonymity.

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