

# Renegotiating identities in international academic careers

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Many academics move countries in pursuit of career opportunities. With every move, personal identities are renegotiated as people shift between belonging to majority and minority groups in different contexts. Institutes should consider people's dynamic and intersectional identities in their diversity, equity and inclusion practices.

The experiences of international Black and Indigenous individuals and people of colour in academia are the product of intersecting patterns of racism, sexism, classism and xenophobia<sup>1</sup>. Here, we discuss how these experiences further intersect with the international mobility of individuals, which is a hallmark of academia. We contend that this mobility introduces other barriers, including challenges associated with simultaneously holding different identities.

A person's identity is shaped by personal values, experiences and relationships and can therefore mutate in response to changing contexts. This process results in the person holding different identities simultaneously or transitioning from one identity to another in response to personal choices; the latter implies shedding an identity and replacing it with a new one and can happen, for example, when a person changes genders or religious affiliation.

A renegotiation of identity often occurs following a move to a new country. Academia benefits from the international movement of highly educated individuals to scientific institutions in foreign countries, including the movement of scientists from countries in the Global South to institutes in the Global North<sup>2,3</sup>. Indeed, scientists from Africa, Asia and Latin America tend to be more employable if they get their degrees from North American or European universities<sup>4</sup>. Individuals who move internationally often encounter a set of barriers, such as needing to become proficient in foreign languages and to assimilate the work ethic and cultures of a new country. They may also suddenly become members of minority groups in the new context, having previously belonged to majority groups in their home countries. Often, a person may experience an inner struggle while they oscillate between their initial identity and their renegotiated identity (Fig. 1).

We propose that hybrid, fluid and renegotiated identities should be considered from the lens of intersectionality. Intersectionality can typically be considered a static feature of individuals. For example, being a woman of colour is at the intersection of two identities – gender and race – that may remain constant over an individual's lifespan<sup>1</sup>. However, we contend that intersectionality is dynamic and context dependent<sup>5</sup>, such that, by moving countries, new intersectional

identities might emerge, as individuals renegotiate their identity in the new place (Fig. 1).

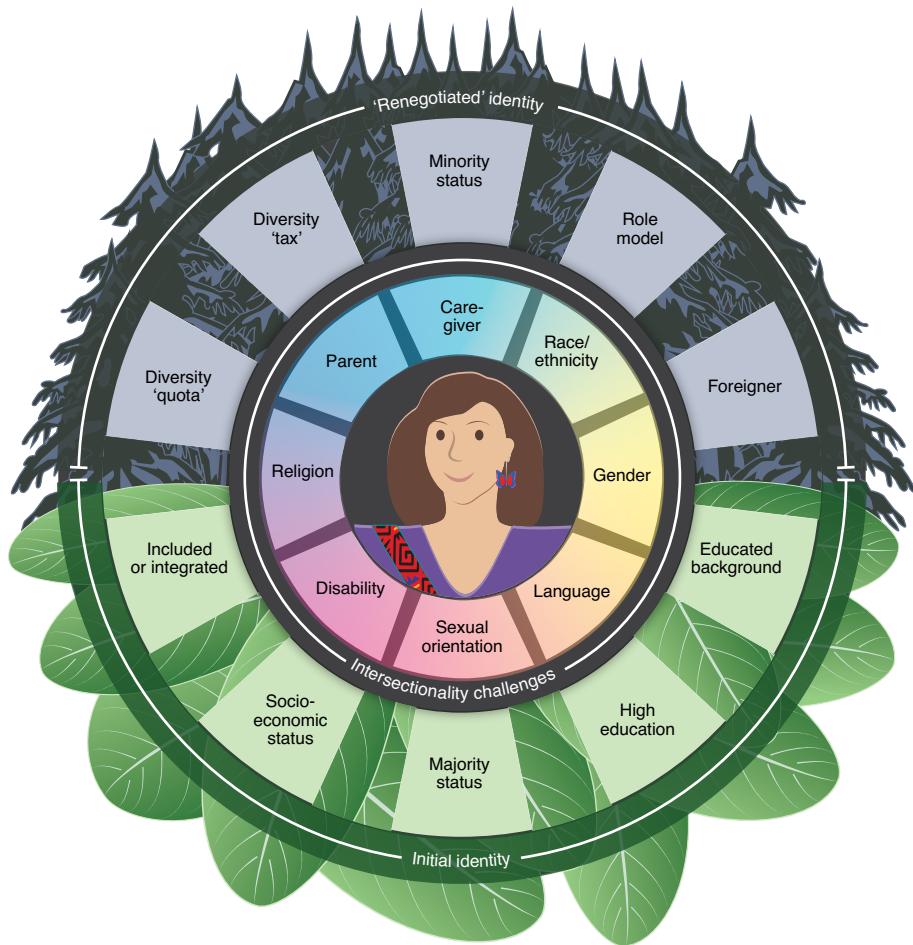
We have personally experienced this process. We are researchers born, raised and educated in Colombia. When we moved to scientific institutions in developed nations, we renegotiated our identity – fluctuating between our initial identities as women belonging to educated families from the working socioeconomic class in the majority racial group of Colombia (as white Latina women or mestizas) and our renegotiated identities as women of colour, non-native English speakers and Latinx minorities in STEM fields (Fig. 1).

This renegotiation brings both personal and professional challenges. For instance, when university colleagues put us in the 'Latinx' category, people assume we are equivalent to other Latina women, including those who were born outside Latin America and who have experienced a different set of barriers from us as a result of belonging to a minority group in their home country. For us, we are both members of a majority group in our home country, and members of minority groups in the new contexts. Novel intersectional identities in new contexts can heighten discrimination against individuals, as the process of renegotiating identities includes both changes in how we perceive ourselves and changes in how others perceive us. Another example arises when students from minority groups approach us for mentoring because they see us as role models. In some of our universities, particularly Hispanic-serving institutions, these students might be Latinx, Hispanic or Chicana and are likely to be the first in their families to go to university. Although we share many identities with them and have faced some similar challenges, including systemic racism, nationalism and sexism, we do not fully represent them and might not have a full grasp of the barriers they will face in their career paths and lives, such as being first-generation university students.

We believe that current diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts at universities are at risk of being ineffective because they fail to consider the spectrum of human diversity within groups and ignore the complexities inherent to dynamic, fluid and intersectional identities. Given the challenges brought by renegotiated identities for international researchers, we suggest some actionable recommendations that can help to provide a healthier and more welcoming environment for individuals like us at all institutional levels and career stages.

## Recognize and embrace diversity spectra

Universities have been advancing DEI efforts with increased urgency in the past three years<sup>7</sup>. An important part of these efforts has been surveying the demographics and experiences of minority groups<sup>6</sup>. The next step in advancing inclusion within surveys would be to allow people to describe their own intersectional, dynamic and fluid identity(ies). This exercise would enable a view of diversity that represents a spectrum



**Fig. 1 | Holding simultaneous identities.** International scholars are constantly renegotiating their identity as they progress through their careers, particularly when they move between countries. Whereas they might have belonged to majority groups back home (in this case, from a tropical country in the Global South), they may become members of minority groups in their new contexts

(here, a temperate country in the Global North). Identities are hybrid, dynamic and fluid, and personal experiences of discrimination might be heightened by the combination of intersectional identities that the person has (inner circle). This renegotiation implies both personal and professional challenges. Figure by Sylvia Heredia.

for each of the demographic variables considered. This would benefit individuals with initial and renegotiated identities who might not feel represented by current categories that are often legally mandated by census surveys<sup>7</sup>.

### Recognize and value DEI work

Faculty and staff from minority groups might be burdened by the ‘cultural or diversity tax’<sup>8</sup> associated with representing minority groups, including sitting on committees and doing extra mentoring and service. Intersectional, fluid and renegotiated identities heighten this problem because individuals suddenly represent various minority groups thanks to their new, renegotiated identity – for example, in our case we represent both Latinx and women in STEM minorities. We recommend that this service work be recognized, quantified and valued during merit reviews and promotions. Doing this will level the playing field for these individuals whose research time is diminished by the time spent doing institutional service.

### Practice identity-minded mentoring and teaching

As mentors, it is important that all of us recognize the complexities that come with mentoring people and their intersectional identities. Mentees should have access to a network of mentors that includes various ‘like me’ mentors who share different parts of the mentee’s identity<sup>9</sup>. For example, if we mentor a non-binary Colombian student, we can understand the language, immigration and other barriers they have faced. However, none of us personally understands the challenges of being a non-binary person. Instead, we could refer them to a mentor who shares that aspect of their identity with them and becomes part of a network of mentors.

### Build academic communities where everyone is a DEI champion

Trying to get international scholars to assimilate or acculturate into their new working environments is problematic because it perpetuates oppressive work cultures and practices<sup>10,11</sup>. Instead, academic communities should embrace the diversity of the experiences and expertise

that each individual brings. A more welcoming academic environment is one in which diversity is celebrated and where everyone, regardless of their belonging to majority or minority groups, understands the importance of DEI efforts and diversity spectra while confronting their implicit biases. It is imperative for academic institutions to continue internal efforts to unlearn discriminatory and oppressive practices and behaviours and to provide training for community members to understand demographics, barriers and best practices. It is on everyone to create the inclusive environment that we all seek.

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## Author contributions

A.E., L.M.G., S.H., N.O.P. and M.N.U contributed to the writing of the manuscript. S.H. did the figure.

**Positionality statement** We are five Colombian-born ecologists, descendants of Spanish settlers and mixed-blooded mestizos. We identify as cisgender women, and two of us are mothers. All of us have moved from Colombia to European (Norway, England, Switzerland), Asian (China, Indonesia) and North American (USA and Canada) countries to advance our careers. Our new roles have forced us to renegotiate our identities as minority Latinas in STEM fields. In Colombia we identify as being part of the majority group when it comes to our racial identity, but simultaneously we belong to minority groups when it comes to our profession. All five of us work in US and Canadian universities in biology, zoology and environmental studies departments.

## Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.