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Intersecting Roles of Authority and Marginalization: International Teaching Assistants and Research University Power Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

The higher education community often views international students through a homogenous lens. To challenge the cultural norms set by the dominant group, researchers need to explore how these norms affect international teaching assistants (ITAs). The following questions guided the current study: (a) How do ITAs construct intersecting identities of teacher and learner that reflect the presence of dominant cultural norms within a predominantly White institution? (b) What strategies do ITAs use to navigate cultural and linguistic power dynamics within a predominantly White institution as they seek to establish authority? We conducted a case study through an intersectionality framework. Findings revealed participants' marginalization, authority, and strategies to overcome oppression. We offer recommendations about power dynamics that require increased institutional support.

Keywords: identity, international teaching assistants, intersectionality, marginalization, power dynamics

THE DOMINANT NORMED INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Within U.S. higher education, the presence of international students provides increasingly diverse cultural and linguistic contexts that create complex environments for students and educators to navigate (Hansen-Thomas & Sourdot, 2015). However, much of the research on international students leaves out the role of international graduate teaching assistants (the majority of whom are from India, China, Korea, and some Latin American countries; LoCastro & Tapper, 2006). Not only must international teaching assistants (ITAs) navigate homogenous learning environments, they must also traverse norms of teaching based on largely monolingual perspectives. Moreover, predominantly White institutions (PWIs) primarily function under the worldviews of the dominant White group, and racial and othered groups must operate under those ideals (Gusa, 2010). These dominant normed environments therein have underlying consequences for the ways in which ITAs' language and cultural knowledge are valued.

Within the current neoliberal university, departments increasingly use graduate students as labor to support heightened research demands on faculty (Hamer & Lang, 2015; Saunders, 2010). While the global worldviews of ITAs can contribute to diversity, they are situated in the larger context of international student discrimination, such as model minority stereotypes about Asian students and cultural intolerance by White students (Houshmand et al., 2014). Furthermore, White institutional presence serves as a construct for understanding such norms, in that it "names the racialized influences on discourses between and among students, between students and teachers, and between students and academic resources" (Gusa, 2010, p. 467). Given the interactions of ITAs with the dominant group within PWIs and resources available to support them, there is a need to further interrogate the ways that ITAs are positioned within these power dynamics.

Limited research exists on the multifaceted identities of ITAs; despite some advancement, researchers need to highlight the voices of ITAs themselves (Zhou, 2009). Ashavskaya (2015) conducted a qualitative study on the ways that ITAs negotiated identities inside and outside of the classroom, related to their belonging in various social groups. Indeed, discrimination based on a lack of cultural conformity and resulting marginalization can influence the agency ITAs have to build their own professional identities (Fitch & Morgan, 2003). Scholars must problematize the idea of culture to acknowledge the historic American ideal of culture rooted in English language and customs, founded in a framework through which the dominant group determines the value of knowledge. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to acknowledge the role of dominant cultural norms in the ways that ITAs develop their professional identities. The current study explored two research questions:

1. How do ITAs construct intersecting identities of teacher and learner that reflect the presence of dominant cultural norms within a PWI?
2. What strategies do ITAs utilize to navigate cultural and linguistic power dynamics within a PWI as they seek to establish authority?

As researchers, we recognized cultural White norms as “what knowledge is, how to assess it, what has greater value, and who possesses it” (Gusa, 2010, p. 475). Although traditional power dynamics position the instructor as maintaining authority, ITAs hold a unique function in that cultural norms dominate their ability to hold that authority. Therefore, because ITAs can be both powerful and powerless within the same system, we sought to interrogate the dichotomy of marginalization and power that ITAs experience to reveal larger structural issues that might remain unchallenged.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The experiences of ITAs connect to broader issues of communication and socialization, with the onus largely placed on international students to conform to dominant norms (Kim & Kim, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007). Previous research has evidenced a deficit view of ITAs’ pedagogical styles, with ITA training concentrating on accent reduction and language miscommunication (Ladd & Ruby, 1999; LoCastro & Tapper, 2006). These patterns of othering affirm how dominant White norms affect ITAs’ identities as students and learners of cultural knowledge. Most ITA programs utilize a language, teaching, and culture model related to instruction and communication; however, constructs of culture and nationality tend to be over broad and simplistic (Gorsuch, 2012). Therefore, we acknowledge the ways that dominant ideals of culture affect ITA identity construction.

Interrogating the Ideal of Culture and Linguistic Norms

Diversity frameworks situate ITAs with the responsibility of preparing college communities to live in a global society, but do not necessarily allow for discussion about the cultural intolerance that they experience (Houshmand et al., 2014; Lee & Rice, 2007). Kim and Kim (2010) recognized several forms of marginalization of international students by the dominant group, including ascription of intelligence due to perceptions of language proficiency, expectations to assimilate to dominant cultural norms, and invalidation of their perspectives. This marginalization relates to research noting ITA experiences in which native-English-speaking students were more favored when searching for teaching or research positions (Lee, 2015). ITAs neglect to report such instances because they do not want to challenge the authority of faculty because such actions might cause them to lose their jobs or be deported (Lee, 2015), further problematizing the idea of the agency they have in combating discrimination.

Discussion of international students’ linguistic ability must also include a critical lens on dominant cultural norms. Houshmand et al. (2014) connected language and cultural racism in stating, “Similar to racial prejudice, objections to foreign accents often have to do more with an unwillingness to accommodate differences and dominant group values than a genuine concern about comprehension” (p. 384). Ridicule for having an accent connects to racial microaggressions, the subtle verbal insults and other forms of hostility communicated against people of color (Kim & Kim, 2010; Sue et al., 2007). Despite previous teaching experience or training, the

dominant group's scrutiny of ITAs' English language proficiency might result in negative evaluation on their performance (Hebbani & Hendrix, 2014). A focus on language cannot be divorced from a direct acknowledgement of racism based on culture or nationality (Gautam et al., 2016; Lee & Rice, 2007). Undergraduate students commonly frame ITAs through a negative light, based on their perceptions about grading, classroom management, and language clarity (Fitch & Morgan, 2003; Kang, 2012). Beyond emphasis on ITAs' linguistic abilities, scholars must continue to interrogate the ways that ITAs negotiate the dominant norms that determine their success.

Identity Construction

The concept of situated learning can conceptualize ITA experiences, in that as a novice ITA working with an experienced teacher, students can form a professional identity (Varghese, 2008; Wang & Odell, 2007). When individuals perceive themselves to possess traits that are culturally accepted, they may find it more convenient to merge their personal and professional identities (Zheng, 2017). This concept of teaching identity relates back to cultural discrimination. Narratives from undergraduates naming themselves as a victim of ITA teaching based on expectations about returns on their educational investment affect ITA identity (Fitch & Morgan, 2003). Moreover, international graduate students previously described being passed over for teaching positions in favor of American students or fired without valid reason (Lee, 2015). Because ITAs may experience voids in professional identity based on varying levels of support, studies need to focus on the multiple ways that they frame their dual role as teacher and learner.

As ITAs build their teacher identities, they draw upon pedagogical norms of their own culture as well as U.S. pedagogical norms (Morgan, 2004). General classroom behaviors between groups can elicit identity gaps in the variance between one's perceived identity versus the identity described by others (Wadsworth et al., 2008). In American classrooms, international students realize they must act and speak differently to follow social norms, thereby increasing identity gaps (Ishida, 2005; Yang, 2005). Previously, scholars have explored marginalization of international students through acculturation, moving past the idea of international students discarding their cultural identities to recognition of a mutual process of change between both cultures (Berry, 2005; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). However, college communities can leave the dominant norms of White culture that result in discrimination uninterrogated and leave international students to do the work of overcoming stigmatization. Through this study we sought to provide more insight into the ways that larger systemic issues affect the identities of ITAs.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to explore the identities of ITAs and the power dynamics within a PWI that affect individuals' experiences, we used the theoretical principles of intersectionality. Scholars have advanced the ideal of identity development to consider the multiple identities that influence one's worldview. Jones and McEwen (2000) conceptualized

the model of multiple dimensions of identity to recognize identity development as a fluid process through which dimensions such as language, gender, ethnicity, class, race, and other identities intersect. While particular identities may have greater salience at given points in time, a multidimensional identity allows for acknowledgement of influences on identity that are often externally defined, such as family background and sociocultural effects. This salience affects ITAs, who hold certain identities as fundamental, but who are also influenced by the current systems into which they are being socialized.

Intersectionality allows an exploration of power and stems from scholarship recognizing the intersection of race and gender in discrimination against women of color (Crenshaw, 1994). We used research on the oppression that faculty of color experience as a framework for conceptualizing how ITAs hold a position of power yet are situated within cultural prejudices. Previous research has exhibited the ways faculty of color and women of color have been subjected to microaggressions and considered as less competent scholars due to racial and gendered stereotypes (Hamer & Lang, 2015; Gutierrez y Muhs et al., 2012). Students challenging the authority of faculty of color in the classroom requires faculty to contend with subordination based on racial stereotypes, although they are in an authoritative role (Harlow, 2003). Curtin et al. (2016) recognized the intersection of advantaged and disadvantaged identities within larger structural issues, in that “identities themselves are not necessarily ‘advantaged’ or not, rather they form based on membership(s) in group(s) that occupy particular locations on a social hierarchy” (p. 265). Because individuals represent multiple identities, they can hold power (positions of authority) and at the same time be powerless (positions of marginalization). Jenkins (2000) elaborated on the influence of marginalization, stating, “Perceptions of successful intercultural communication in situations of social inequity may depend on the ability of the lower status group to conform to the expectations of the higher status group” (p. 482). Although ITAs might have a higher status than undergraduates, they still must be cognizant of dominant cultural norms, regardless of their expertise.

We seek to understand how ITAs interact with individuals from the dominant group while also exploring how PWI structural inequities remain uninterrogated. As described by Dill and Zambrana (2009), intersectionality comprises two levels:

At the individual level, it reveals the way the intermeshing of these systems creates a broad range of opportunities for the expression and performance of individual identities. At the societal/structural level, it reveals the ways systems of power are implicated in the development, organization, and maintenance of inequalities and social injustice. (p. 4)

Through intersectionality, scholars can deconstruct ideologies that form the White institutional presence to which individuals deemed as cultural outsiders must conform (Gusa, 2010). Although individuals from other countries might hold varying understandings of race, ethnicity, and social status, deficit frameworks of nonnative speakers can influence ITAs’ perceptions of American institutions (Faez, 2012). We therefore seek to give voice to ITAs as they make sense of dominant cultural norms and how their experiences reveal larger structural issues to be addressed by those in power.

METHOD

Data Sources

We designed this research as an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) to explore the experiences of ITAs within a particular educational setting. Central University (pseudonym) is a research-intensive PWI in the Southern region of the United States, with international students (defined by the institution as students who are not U.S. citizens or permanent residents) representing approximately 10% of its student demographics. To contextualize the study, we met with representatives of the English as a second language (ESL) department to discuss the structural support of international students across campus. Those individuals explained that to meet eligibility for teaching assistantship (TA) positions, international students must register with the international student office and pass an English oral proficiency test. In addition, they revealed a lack of academic support for ITAs beyond required ESL courses for individuals who need assistance to pass the English proficiency test. Beyond a brief online workshop, support of ITAs is decentralized through individual departments. Central University was therefore an ideal site to explore the power dynamics that ITAs navigate with variability in support structures.

All aspects of the study complied with the institution's Institutional Review Board. We sought participants experiencing various perspectives of institutional power dynamics to provide insight into the influence of dominant norms on their identities. This variance showed up through several characteristics, such as the time participants were in graduate school and served as ITAs, ranging from first-year students to those completing their last semester of study. Because Institutional Review Boards typically consider topics of race/ethnicity as intrusive, and topics that bring up differences can be further marginalizing (hooks, 1990), particularly in discussing power structures of employment, snowball sampling (Patton, 2015) was appropriate for this study. We continued snowball sampling until the individuals began to represent saturation in the emergent themes. Because of this sampling procedure, the majority of the 11 participants represented social science majors (see Table 1). We recognize the considerable representation of majors such as journalism and attribute their interest in the study to the emphasis on social dynamics within their studies compared to science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) majors. Regarding nationality, Central's institutional statistics show China and Korea as representing the top two countries of origin for international students, a factor corresponding to the large percentage of participants from Asian backgrounds. However, we recognize that intersectionality allows a deconstruction of assumptions of cultural homogeneity within a group, and we sought to understand the influence of other core identities such as major, age, language, upbringing, and socioeconomic class in participants' interpretation of power. One participant of Latin descent also provided perspective beyond dominant racialized pan-ethnic labels (Rumbaut, 2009) to further contribute to the notion of group heterogeneity.

Table 1: Participant Demographic Profiles

Pseudonym	Major	Race / ethnicity	Country of origin	Identified first language	Completed school in US
Allen	Journalism	Asian	South Korea / US	Korean	—
Cindy	Information Science	Asian	China	Mandarin Chinese	Master's
Maya	Electrical/ Computer Engineering	Asian	South Korea	Korean	—
Sunny	Journalism	Asian	Hong Kong	Cantonese	Master's
Lilly	Journalism	Hispanic	Peru	Spanish	Master's
Ailee	Early Childhood Education	Asian	South Korea	Korean	-
Stella	Early Childhood Education	Asian	South Korea	Korean	Master's
Irene	Journalism	Asian	India	Bengali / English	Master's
Ivan	Construction Engineering/ Project Management	Asian	South Korea	Korean	Bachelor's
Jenny	Journalism	Asian	South Korea	Korean	Master's
Hannah	Educational Psychology	Asian	South Korea	Korean	Master's

Data Collection and Analysis

Semistructured interviews provided an interactive process to negotiate meaning with participants (Patton, 2015). We centered our interview protocol on constructs within the literature and framework. To avoid making assumptions about ITAs' identities as English language learners, we allowed them to frame their own understandings of marginalization and privilege, focusing half of the questions on the

background of participants to contextualize U.S. cultural norms and the rest on teaching experiences related to power dynamics (see Appendix). For the overlap of these questions, we structured the protocol as open-ended and adaptable as necessary. Individual interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, followed by member checks with participants for clarification to support the trustworthiness of the findings (Miles et al., 2014). Although participants were not compensated, we discussed the benefits of creating a space to give voice to their experiences, particularly for other ITAs they knew who were hesitant to discuss power dynamics within the academy.

We based data analysis on the transcripts of audio files and our memos created after each interview. To find emerging themes across the data, we conducted content analysis (Patton, 2015), looking both within and across codes for recurring regularities and saturation of themes related to consistencies and divergences of participants' experiences. This process included each of us independently coding a subset of data utilizing an a priori codebook based on our literature constructs, adding additional codes as necessary. In our second round of coding, we compared and merged initial codes for consensus, making sense of participants' voices through axial coding (Saldaña, 2016) represented by the three overarching themes presented in the findings. Through this systematic process, we used participants' voices to understand how students' intersectional identities interacted with institutional power dynamics.

Positionality

Two team members serve as international graduate assistants (IGAs), and the other is a professor who previously instructed English learners at various educational levels. While one member decided to conduct interviews, the two IGAs chose to focus their insider identities on honoring their voices through coding and analyzing the participants' stories due to their familiarity with each participant's experiences in serving as a teaching assistant and navigating through cultural and linguistic variances. Our cognizance of researcher positionality allowed us to reflect on our own assumptions, while keeping the importance of participants' lived experiences at the forefront of the research.

RESULTS

Our findings reflect the social positions that ITAs navigated within the specific power dynamics of Central University. Because each participant represents a unique positionality that reflects heterogeneity of the ITA experience, our goal in disseminating these findings is not a generalization of ITAs at Central University, but a focus on examples that reveal individual interpretations of larger systemic issues of power. Participants shared narratives about their intersectional roles through the following themes: navigating marginalization through the lens of power, influence of dominant norms on authority, and strategies of empowerment in recognizing oppression. Through these examples, we answered our research questions regarding how ITAs construct intersecting teacher and learner identities in the presence of dominant norms and the ways they overcome such norms through strategies of empowerment.

Navigating Marginalization Through the Lens of Power

The perceptions ITAs in our study held about their authority as graduate students were influenced by various cultural power dynamics. Some participants evaluated discrimination due to their identity as a language learner as influencing their teaching experience. For example, Ailee described the effort she exerted in whether to interpret the power dynamics of her graduate assistantship in an elementary school classroom as discrimination:

The master teacher does not give me a lot of responsibility...other intern, practicum students, they do not see me as a graduate assistant. The master teacher's position is here, then me, intern, and then practicum. Actually, in this classroom my degree is higher...even the master teacher only has a master's degree...since there is a language barrier, I cannot make my voice louder.

Ailee unpacked power dynamics within her situation, in that although she was pursuing a degree higher than the master teacher and held more teaching experience, the master teacher silenced her through assumptions about her language abilities. She added, "The master teacher mentioned at least once like, 'All right since Ailee is not native, maybe you can do other things.'" Although Ailee interpreted discrimination through language, her decision not to disclose the unfair situation due to fear of losing her job uncovers dominant norms that shape the agency of ITAs.

Participants expressed both individual and structural levels of intersectionality. Lilly described limited opportunities to carry out her preferred teaching methods due to dissonance with her professor's approach through working with two White students:

I would make suggestions to how they could improve their stories. They wouldn't follow my suggestions... The teacher, in a couple of occasions, would tell them "Oh this is wrong," "You didn't fix this." I was like... "He didn't want to." After two or three times that happened, they decided not to ask me for advice. With that professor, that was optional.

Lilly further explained that she interpreted the students' disregard for her expertise less as a personal indifference and more so as the professor's emphasis on self-sufficiency. Allen exemplified how structural inequalities can be either challenged or uninterrogated through professors' support; he explained an encounter with a "tea party" White student who accused him of restricting her freedom after he asked her to refrain from making volatile comments. In relation to grading her papers he believed to be biased, he shared: "She said, 'she is smart.' So I thought, 'I cannot agree with your idea. There are a lot of weak points.' So she [said] 'Okay. Let's talk with the professor.' Professor talked [the] same thing." In this instance, Allen's professor supported his efforts to challenge the student's prejudiced ideas. Because the professors in Lilly and Allen's situations were very central to their perception of marginalization, their narratives expose their limited power—even in an assumed position of power—in addressing dominant norms.

Depending on the department they represented, some participants had an apprenticeship experience in their areas of expertise. Stella described her department's system of lecturers and TAs signing up for topics of interest to divide responsibilities. However, other ITAs accepted teaching assignments based on availability and their need for funding. Representing the latter perspective, Sunny, a journalism PhD student, explained the lack of agency in the process:

I was thinking I would be assigned to teaching news design. But she [the professor] did not give it to me. She gave it to other students that have no experience in software... It really discourages our attitude to be a TA because I feel like she is not responsible for taking care of undergraduates here.

Sunny attributed the lack of care in placing ITAs to faculty's business-minded focus on research—a neoliberal (e.g., economically driven) influence that revealed the dominant norms of academia Sunny had to adapt to.

Although Sunny expressed a connectivity with American TAs, her reliance on an American TA to advise her about working with undergraduate American students called attention to her dependence on the dominant group. Other hierarchical differences between American and international TAs revealed structural discrimination. Jenny, in sharing that higher jobs were given to those with extensive experience, recognized that White professionals and stories based on White cultural values dominated the field. She used her global identity to overcome such barriers: "I try to do the things that are globally common...some scholars are bringing cross-cultural studies or comparative studies, comparing their own country systems to American systems." Although this viewpoint enabled her to create her own professional identity, the onus was on her to overcome marginalization, with the systemic inequity left intact.

Participants in the social sciences focused on social disparities due to course content focused on social events and political discourse. On the contrary, Maya as an engineering PhD student acknowledged that her interaction with students consisted mainly of going over math solutions. Participants in social sciences juxtaposed this dynamic in that they dealt with consistent language barriers as group stigmatization, emphasized by Irene, a journalism PhD student:

We will see a lot of Koreans, Southeast Asians students. They cluster in their own groups. Not just because they are not able to speak the language, but also because America does not do enough to understand our language. So it is not just that Southeast Asians feel the minority sense as Blacks or Hispanic students. So that itself creates different dynamics.

Irene noted international student marginalization as different from that experienced by American students of color. While she recognized both groups as marginalized under dominant group norms, she noted the intersection of international "othered" and language learner status made her subordinate within such a hierarchy.

Influence of Dominant Norms on Authority

In discussing how American classroom dynamics differed from those in their home culture, participants recognized a divergence in classroom communication and perceived professor authority. In fact, all the ITAs from Asian countries except for Allen mentioned the lack of discussion and questioning within classes in their home countries. They recognized the cultural differences at Central through which American students often dominated class conversations. In Irene's situation, although she described cultural norms such as putting their legs on the desk as extremely rude, she interpreted students' extensive questions as showing respect for her expertise rather than questioning her authority. In each case, ITAs in the study had to interpret their interactions through the lens of what the dominant group deemed as acceptable, even though they held the role as an authoritative figure. Jenny interpreted this dynamic:

If the student rolls their eyes or turns back on me or sigh. Like, "Hey, it's fine. Don't worry about it." Then that's when I feel like I failed them. It's like, "It's not okay. You're not okay. You haven't even got the answers yet."... They know that TAs are TAs and professors are professors...They try to take advantage of it or they think that they can be rude.

Contrastingly, some participants referred to the heightened emphasis on research that influenced undergraduate students' respect for ITAs. Cindy stated, "They don't know you are a PhD student, so they call you as a doctor." Stella reaffirmed, "I am a graduate student to them. I am who has more knowledge...they're accepting even though English is not my first language." Although this dynamic was seemingly positive, it moved the conversation past language differences to the structural norms that guided dominant decisions about acceptance. This dichotomy of being in a position of power but also subjected to approval provided insight into the ways that dominant norms of authority influenced their intersectional identities as both learner and authoritative figure.

Participants gave examples of their decisions when and when not to seek assistance with cultural and linguistic challenges, dependent on the desire to exhibit their authority. Although some felt confident in preparing for anticipated questions, the uncertainty of unstructured communications created discomfort. Ivan described a lack of confidence in grading subjective answers in a STEM major, in that his position was based mainly on quantitative data:

I was worried the first time being a grader. What if they know better than me?...Because even though we learn from the same instructor, same conversation, same lecture, they should understand better than me. What if I misunderstand and they get it right?

Ivan gained confidence by increasingly communicating with his students about his position as a novice in learning software. Maya confirmed being able to acknowledge language barriers with questions she could not answer: "In this case I ask their email address... If I couldn't solve the problem, I asked [the professor]." Although emphasis on communicative strategies as part of building an identity of

authority served as a commonality between majors, it still required ITAs to convey perceived limitations to their students for acceptance. Hannah emphasized how perceived biases influenced her self-confidence, sharing, “We could feel they don’t like international students’ accents. If we make a lot of errors, they [dominant group] don’t like it... In that atmosphere, it makes my English worse.” Such perceptions affected her ability to assert herself as an authority; in one instance, she placed graded papers on a table and left class early to avoid having to pronounce students’ names. These examples pointed to the ways that dominant norms such as American ideals of acceptance affected ITAs’ power to establish authority.

Several participants expressed feeling respected by students, but still recognized the ways ITAs experience subordination from professors. Irene depicted this discrimination, noting that no corrective systems were in place to prevent professors from taking advantage of their power:

Some professors do not work. They expect you to teach everything. They are completely checked off for whatever reasons. But the thing is, if you are getting paid and do nothing, you have no business letting your TAs do your duties... It is just unfair. In America, we cannot let such things slide. It is just unfortunate because it is criminal.

Irene contrasted her strong connectivity to students with that of her professor, influencing her dedication to student success. Her narrative called attention to the neoliberal norms that guided professors’ behaviors and held influence over the ways ITAs establish their authority.

Strategies of Empowerment in Recognizing Oppression

Participants recognized the social/professional norms that shaped their intersectional identities as learners and authoritative figures. Acknowledging the influence of dominant norms often allowed them to safeguard themselves against further discrimination. For example, Lilly testified the instance when she saw the need to establish her authority upfront in class: “[Students] look at me as equals. It makes them more confident... I found I need to talk about my expertise and background here more. Kind of to set the basis. Like demonstrate or prove my authority.” In Lilly’s case, dealing with assumptions about her international identity pushed her to develop more confidence and authority as a self-advocate. Yet within this empowerment, she acknowledged a necessitated awareness of ascribed stereotypes.

Meanwhile, Stella applied her experience with marginalization to that experienced by her students. She shared situations when she utilized her first language to better connect with her students and share her knowledge on academic expectations:

Last semester, there was a Korean student. She struggled a lot on her reports. Her scores were really low. She didn’t know why. I explained her in Korean. It’s more easier for her and me. She got the second chance to write her

report. I guess that was like my moment last semester that I can really help students.

Stella was able to share her insider knowledge as an ITA with other international students, who through linguistic differences did not have access to such understanding. Irene recognized marginalization through connectedness with American students of color. She elaborated on this dynamic related to her role as a TA:

[I connect more with] every woman, every Black student. I do not know whether it is a good way of thinking... I try not to promote their interests over [other students], but my Hispanic, Black, and women students are definitely my priority. I feel like I am an advocate for them.

In asserting “I would let Black students talk because there are certain cultural norms that no one would understand,” she valued their experiences in countering White students’ political arguments about women’s rights (which she expressed as human rights’ violations). Cognizance of domination and subordination in the classroom led to a better understanding of the ways that intersectional identities such as race, political orientation, gender, and class reflect structural power inequities.

Interestingly, Cindy was the participant who particularly felt close with her advisor, as they both are Chinese and shared languages. She mainly sought support from her advisor:

I talk a lot with my advisor. I know that she is willing to help me in any situation...But other professors, I just think only taking his/her courses, or TAing for them for one semester I did not feel that close to them.

Having a professor or an advisor as an advocate due to cultural commonalities allowed Cindy to overcome other marginalization. However, the fact that Cindy was the only participant who shared such an experience provided insight into the lack of cultural diversity among faculty as a larger structural inequity. Participants also relied on support from peer American TAs. Ailee noted, “When we do grading together, if I do not understand their sentence or meaning I just ‘hey, [let’s] grade together.’ And she will do with pleasure...she helped me a lot since my English is not perfect.”

Although American TAs equipped participants with greater knowledge about dominant norms, such dependence confirmed ITAs’ subordination in the institutional hierarchy. This dynamic was exacerbated in situations when they lacked support from their professors. Allen stated, “Even the first time, he [the professor] didn’t give us any criteria or direction to grade. We ask him how to grade, and he said, ‘You’re grad students.’ That’s it.” This condition questions whether or not support from American TAs served as a choice or a perceived necessity in overcoming subordinate power dynamics.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants within this study shed light on the complexity of power dynamics that affected their positions within American academia. Their intersectional identities of

authoritative figures and cultural learners underscore that ITAs simultaneously hold marginalized and privileged identities, and can be both powerful and powerless (Curtin et al., 2016). An intersectional framework of power exhibited the ways that stereotypes influenced their feelings of group inferiority, grounded in historical American norms based on what knowledge is considered valuable and rationalized to treat individuals differently (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Gusa, 2010). Their experiences provide a nuanced understanding of the ways that ITAs hold authority yet are still cognizant of power dynamics, based on their constant adjustment to the cultural expectations of the dominant group. Their ability to make meaning of those realities created complex, yet insightful teacher and learner identities, centered on their ability to adapt to cultural norms and recognize how power is reproduced and maintained. Harlow's (2003) study on Black faculty revealed that although they acknowledged the systemic nature of racism, they utilized strategies to reject students' discriminatory perceptions about their competence and instead built identities that affirmed their worth. Similarly, our ITA participants invoked strategies that allowed them to overcome cultural and linguistic barriers, while also shedding light on structural inequities left intact. We recognize power as central to the ITA experience, in that due to reliance on professors and American TAs, the onus remained on ITAs to build identities with cognizance of conditional authority, with little structured institutional support.

We offer several recommendations to create stronger support structures for ITAs. First, institutions need to form greater collaboration across departments. At Central, the ESL department and international office did not have any solidified connection, and departments offered ITA training focused more on administrative duties and grading policies. Institutions must broaden their focus beyond language or academic competencies (Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007) to prepare students with knowledge of power dynamics and influences on ITA authority. Students of similar backgrounds with more experiential knowledge can provide guidance to new ITAs about inequities due to American cultural norms (Boafo-Arthur et al., 2017). Although mentorship across nationalities similar to what our participants discussed might equip ITAs with information to traverse inequitable norms, there must be a concerted effort by divisions such as an international office to provide programming on the ways that dominant norms are represented in PWI policies and practices. We do not suggest that ITAs should conform to a dominant norm as a standard. However, peer apprentice relationships are left to chance and fail to hold institutional leaders' responsible for building ITAs' capital. Training should move past individual interactions to address the structural inequities that affect ITAs' success.

We call for the need to connect the ITA experience to the bigger value of diversity, particularly with the increasing pressure for faculty research productivity in neoliberal settings in which ITAs take on a significant portion of teaching. Participants echoed previous literature about the role of stereotypes, microaggressions, and discriminatory behavior based on ignorance of cultural diversity. Although participants in the social sciences discussed significant dialogue in their classes regarding social disparities in contrast to students in STEM majors, inequities based on cultural norms existed across majors, which calls for acknowledgment of these issues. Attempts to educate STEM students about

engineering-related microaggressions based on race, gender, and nationality may elicit pushback from individuals who feel conversations about racism do not belong in the classroom (Beaman, 2016). While the role of institution-wide diversity training is beyond the scope of this study, we must extend the conversation about the value of diversity to greater interrogation of the cultural intolerance ITAs experience. Future studies must not only gather data on characteristics of ITAs across departments, but also continue to problematize dominant culture norms through qualitative data centered on the individuals who navigate inequities to persist in their vital roles.

CONCLUSION

Through this study, we sought to move past such a one-dimensional focus on linguistic interactions to recognize the dominant cultural norms and structural issues that affect ITAs. Participants reflected on their marginalization and authority in various situations and called attention to the need to frame intersectional identities through the power dynamics that dominant norms create. Within the current American higher education system, it is imperative that institutions engage in intentional practices that embrace global perspectives. Related to the competitive educational environment, “the volatility of the international student marketplace places a great premium on the ability of institutions to meet the needs of these ‘global learners’” (Chalcraft et al., 2015, p. 3). Participants used various strategies to overcome oppressive dominant norms; however, no well-defined structural support systems existed. In order to highlight the ways that ITAs can transform classrooms and contribute to intercultural understanding, institutional members must be willing to take responsibility for addressing the dynamics of power that students might not have the agency to do themselves.

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