Who do I think I am and where do I want to be?  
A study of Indian international VET students in  
Australia.

A thesis submitted by  
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ABSTRACT

There have been many studies of international students studying in Australia recognising them as a special population. Literature has also acknowledged that most international students appear to acculturate and adapt as they eventually acquire the skills needed for their Australian context. This research seeks to understand these changes in self-identity and discursive identity in relation to acculturation experiences and adaptation events. Six Indian international students undertaking a Diploma in Salon Management at a Brisbane vocational education and training (VET) college are involved in this research on identity change during acculturation.

While sojourner discursive practices and identity development form the study’s theoretical foundations, international students’ crossing political borders and social boundaries also contribute to the research theoretical framework. Issues of student security and wellness during acculturation and adaptation into Australian socio-cultural environments are also investigated.

Using a case study approach and a thematic narrative analysis, this research investigates the stories gathered from one-to-one participant interviews. As the research design recognises each student as an individual case, six participant vignettes, descriptive profiles and case study descriptions are developed from the analysed data sequences. Through use of Riessman’s (2008) narrative analysis approach, data are not fractured as in other approaches. By using a theoretically informed and methodologically rigorous approach to analysing participants’ words, their voices are able to explain their experiences in the vignettes and case study descriptions. As the researcher, I acknowledge that the participants view themselves as actors within their Australian social and VET contexts and I accept the participants’ descriptions as reflections of their chosen selves and their reality.

The findings from this research provide new theoretical insights into sojourners who, while accepting the label of student, act more like migrants. During the second analysis of the participants’ stories a new idea of resilience is identified. This shock absorbing resilience representation does not have a physical or psychological downturn accompanied by a gradual return to the pre-adverse level of functioning, as in the seminal Carver’s (1998) model. With this depiction of resilience, individuals have the ability to function continuously, thereby showing no significant fluctuations in their performance.

The results from this research open an investigation into an area that has not previously been a specific focus in the Australian context: namely, VET sector international students. Issues of identity, acculturation adjustments and adaptation of Australian VET sector international students are raised and areas where additional research is required are indicated. It is through access to further research-based information, that Federal, State and local policy makers, VET providers, and other stakeholders are better informed when pursuing their goal of quality Australian VET education services that are competitive.
DECLARATION

I certify that the work submitted in this thesis is original, except as acknowledged in the text. The material herein has not been submitted, either in whole or part, for any other award at this or any other university except where acknowledged.

4/03/2015

Signature of Candidate Date

ENDORSEMENT

Signature of Principal Supervisor Date

Signature of Associate Supervisor Date
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My professional work has been enriched by this experience. My analytical and communication skills have been extended further than I thought they could be. I have also realised that I have not yet reached my academic development plateau.

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LIST OF TERMS AND NOTIONS

Acculturation  When two cultures make physical contact over a long or short period either through migration or tourism, changes occur in individuals and groups from both cultures. Acculturation (Berry, Poortinga, Breugelmans, Chasiotis & Sam, 2011) is the collective term that describes these behavioural and psychological changes that result from the different cultures being in contact. Using a sociological lens, this concept is defined as a two-way reciprocal accommodation process where characteristics are exchanged, accepted, rejected and blended to form new cultural behaviours in response to environmental demands. In this research assimilation and acculturation are seen as different concepts. Assimilation is viewed as a strategy which may be used during the acculturation process.

Adaptation  When behavioural and psychological acculturation changes occur over a long period and have become stable, adaptation is achieved. Adaptation (Berry & Sam 2014) may be a positive or negative state i.e. well-adapted or poorly adapted. The two facets of adaptation are psychological and socio-cultural. Psychological adaptation considers the individual’s psychological and physical wellbeing while socio-cultural adaptation refers to how well and the amount of decision control the acculturating individual has for managing their daily life. In this research I investigate the participants’ achievement of psychological and socio-cultural adaptation in terms of their socio-cultural fit and ability to manage their lives within their Australian environments.

Agency  Agency (Erickson, 2010) in a sociological context refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently and make their own free choices. An agent refers to the individual person. In this research individuals are seen as agents that were influenced by socio-cultural groups or formal socio-political structures. In using their agency, individuals make decisions that may or may not agree with the group or the socio-political structure.
Assimilation

The term assimilation (Berry et al., 2011) does not appear to have an agreed meaning. The distinguishing feature relates to a change in culture but the disagreement hinges on who is undergoing the change. It may be both the host society and the individual or the group. Alternatively, it may be that the individual or group is influenced by or has selected to change culturally and have identified with the host society. This research uses the latter meaning where cultural change is an environment influenced or agency decision of an individual or group where they change so as to identify and interact within the host socio-cultural environment. The term assimilation is not considered an appropriate synonym for acculturation as it is viewed as one of the strategic options available in the process of acculturation.

Biculturalism

Biculturalism (Tadmor, Galinsky & Maddux, 2012) is a political or social ideology that describes a community that recognises only two cultural groups living together while both maintain their ethnic and culturally characteristic individuality. In a bicultural environment, people consider life as an us and them socio-cultural situation. In this research the term biculturalism is not considered an appropriate synonym for acculturation as the process of acculturation involves activities that occur in a culturally diverse environment.

Borders

Borders (Marginson et al., 2010) or barriers are considered intangible political terms in this research. The discussion on border crossing relates to the legal requirements for Australian student visas to temporarily migrate from India (their originating nation) to Australia (their host nation).

Boundaries

Boundaries (Lamont & Molnár, 2002) are considered more flexible, fluid, and intangible in this research. A social, cultural, educational boundary identifies a group and creates insider or outsider characteristics. In this research the role of socio-cultural boundary crossing by international students is examined.

Connectedness

When individuals develop functional and quality networks, they feel psychologically supported. This feeling of psychological support allows individuals to develop connectedness (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008) where a sense of belonging is built or a feeling that they have found their place in their environment. Connectedness provides individuals with a belief that they have some decision making control. This thesis discusses importance of connectedness for international students.
Cultural capital

Cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) consists of non-financial assets of an individual that promote social mobility and raise an individual’s social status within the dominate society. In some cultures, family social status is raised along with the individual’s status. In this research, cultural capital relates to the perception by the individual, their family, and their community of increased status and power which can be achieved through education. The individual’s habitus is altered due to their experiences and observations.

Diaspora

Diaspora (Hall, 1990) is the movement, migration, or scattering of people away from their original homeland.

Discourse

Discourse (Gee, 2014) can be viewed as dialogue (little “d”) or an individual’s way of being (big “D”). In this research discourse is defined as the distinctive ways an individual thinks, acts, interacts, dresses and uses body language which is considered by followers of Gee to be big D. The role of a D-discourse is to secure a place in a specific socio-cultural group and be seen as a certain type of person, such as student, worker, wife or other functional role.

Discursive identity

Discursive identities (Gee, 2014) are the functional ways of being or discourses. An individual can have a number of discursive identities that meet their needs when they interact with various groups in different environments. These discursive identities allow them to be seen as an insider or outsider of the group.

Ethnic identity

Ethnic identity (Richardson, 2007) is the way individuals and groups culturally define and identify themselves in relation to other groups that are culturally different. In this research the term ethnic identity is not considered an appropriate synonym for acculturation as the process of acculturation involves more activities than identifying with a cultural group.

Ethnocultural societies

The ethnic nature of a society identifies the cultural traits or characteristics of a group. Ethnicity is a label used to describe cultural groups e.g. Chinese, Indian, Australian, Western, Eastern. The larger society may be made of a number of ethnocultural groups. The manner these groups are clustered into the main society structure can vary, such as plural society, unicultural society, multicultural society, or melting pot society (Bochner, 2006).

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1 In contemporary research literature, the writing of P. Bourdieu (1986) in *The forms of capital*, is viewed as seminal work.

2 In contemporary research literature, the writing of S. Hall (1996) in *Who needs identity*, is viewed as seminal work.
Global citizens

The term global citizen (Bauman, 2009)\(^3\) describes the positioning of people. While they are recognised as a resident of one country, they can also be a citizen of the world. In this research international students are viewed as global citizens as they are able to travel between nations and change their residency status to meet their study and life needs.

Globalisation

Globalisation (Bauman, 2009) refers to the process where societies and cultures influence one another and become more alike through trade, immigration, and the exchange of information and ideas. In this research the term globalisation is not considered an appropriate synonym for acculturation as globalisation covers several societies and cultures and how they become alike or harmonised. Whereas, acculturation refers to the changes that take place between individuals or groups when two cultures make physical contact.

Habitus

Habitus (Bourdieu, 1986)\(^4\) refers to an individual’s lifestyle, values, dispositions and expectations that evolve over time due to their social group experiences and observations. Recognised as individual agents, a person’s habitus changes and develops due to the social identity choices they make. As people are mobile agents, they are able to take on different socio-cultural group characteristics when their environment alters. These changes create a new structured mindset of who they think they are and their perceived identity. In this research an individual’s habitus may alter due to their new socio-cultural experiences while achieving an Australian diploma qualification.

Identity

Identity (Norton & Toohey, 2011) can refer to an individual’s discursive identity or to their perceived self-identity. In this research identity is viewed as an internal formation that is continually being created, is never complete, and is an internal historical, cultural and social production. Although a person’s identity is influenced by their values and beliefs, individuals are able to develop identities to meet their needs for different socio-cultural situations.

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\(^3\) In contemporary research literature, the writing of Z. Bauman (2009) in *Identity in the globalising world*, is viewed as seminal work.

\(^4\) In contemporary research literature, the writing of P. Bourdieu (1986) in *The forms of capital*, is viewed as seminal work.
Integration (Berry, 2006a) is a process where some traits of the individual or original culture of the group are maintained while actively taking on socio-cultural characteristics of the host environment. Integration enables people to effectively take part in networks within the larger society. In this research the term integration is not considered an appropriate synonym for acculturation as it is viewed as one of the strategic options available in the process of acculturation.

International students (Marginson et al., 2010) are individuals who have been accepted under the Australian visa system to undertake formal study in a government recognised college, institute, school or university for a specific period. In this research international students are viewed as individuals whose country of origin is not Australia.

Marginalisation (Berry, 2010) is viewed as one of the strategic options available in the process of acculturation. When an individual or group are marginalised, they have little interest in interacting and establishing relationships with others in the host community. They also have little interest in or little options available to them to maintain their original cultural traits and identity.

Melting-pot society (Berry, 2006a) has a single dominant or mainstream society with various minority groups located on the margin until they are absorbed into the mainstream group. Cultural continuity is denied and only by absorption can they participate in the society. A melting-pot society believes that there should be one nation with one people and one culture.

Multiculturalism (Berry, 2006a) is a political ideology that describes how different ethnocultural groups live together while maintaining their ethnic and culturally characteristic individuality. In this research the term multiculturalism is not considered an appropriate synonym for acculturation as the process of acculturation involves activities that occur in a culturally diverse environment.

Multicultural society (Berry, 2006a) has a number of ethnocultural groups who maintain their cultural identity and participate in the larger society. While all the cultural groups have shared norms, individual ethnic cultural institutions are encouraged to accommodate the specific cultural interests of groups.

Plural society (Berry, 2006a) is where a number of different cultural groups reside together within a shared social and political framework.
Resilience  A demonstration of the physical ability to be resilient shows three common attributes: change, adaptability and transformability. In this research the focus is on personal resilience which allows an individual to bounce back after experiencing stress and adversity. Personal resilience (Baker, 2010) is viewed as an internal ability or characteristic that influences the individual’s perception of their situation, and therefore their response to circumstances that may be potentially stressful.

Re-socialisation  Re-socialisation (Sam, 2006) is reshaping of previously acquired skills so as to meet the demands of the host society. In this research the term re-socialisation is not considered an appropriate synonym for acculturation as the process of acculturation generally involves more than re-socialisation activities.

Self-efficacy  Self-efficacy (Baker, 2010) in individuals is developed over time and experience. In this research self-efficacy refers to an individual’s belief in their ability to successfully achieve their goals. Characteristics of self-efficacy or self-belief system include self-confidence, self-determination, and self-motivation. Resilience and self-efficacy are viewed as co-operators as when highly developed sense of efficacy is indicated, strong resilience ability may also be observed.

Separation  Separation (Berry, 2010) is viewed as one of the strategic options available in the process of acculturation. When an individual or group are separated, they have a strong desire and place great value on maintaining their original culture. They also have little interest in interacting and establishing relationships with others in the host community.

Socio-cultural  Change is continually occurring in societies and cultures to ensure their survival and meet the needs of their environment. Thus to be included within a particular social or cultural group, individuals have a certain discourse (Gee, 2009). In this research, factors that can affect an individual’s choices as to their discourse or identity characteristics are seen as socio-cultural areas.

Socio-cultural fit  When individuals attempt to find their socio-cultural fit, they may make discursive or self-identity changes to themselves or make changes to their environment, or do both. The need to make these changes is founded on their desire to find their place or “fit” where they feel they belong (Baker, 2010). In this research, the act of finding one’s socio-cultural fit is recognised as part of the acculturation process.
Sojourner  A sojourner (Bochner, 2006) is an individual who travels overseas with the idea of achieving a particular goal within a specified period. Sojourners may be tourists, international students, expatriate workers, international civil servants, and military personnel. International students have a specific education-related purpose and are generally thought to be a temporary population. Migrants (refugees and immigrants) are not considered sojourners as they tend to have a more permanent focus when making socio-cultural adjustments to their environment. This research identifies international students may come with different aims, objectives and purposes when they are given an international student visa and accept their Australian temporary resident status.

Unicultural society  Unicultural society (Berry, 2006a) has only one culture, one language, one set of identity characteristics, and one religion.