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Being and Becoming an intercultural doctoral student: Doctoral students’ reflective autobiographical narratives

Abstract

This paper underscores the dynamic and complex dimensions of ‘becoming’ an intercultural doctoral student. It employs autobiography as a research method to re-construe the reshaping of the authors as doctoral students and help us engage in self-reflexivity on our mediation of academic, personal and cultural identities in international doctoral education. Our self-narratives on how the plurality of our doctoral identities has emerged and how we have mediated these multiple identities show that becoming an intercultural research student is intimately linked to the process of self-empowerment and re-constructing oneself as a flexible and reflexive intercultural learner and human being. The paper concludes by discussing the notion of reciprocal intercultural supervision in doctoral education. It highlights the increased need for (Western) supervisors to develop reciprocal interculturality and the capacity for greater agency in their international doctoral students so that both groups can become more ethnorelativist in how they relate to each other.

Introduction

The process of being and becoming intercultural doctoral students involves not only doctoral students’ pursuit of professional knowledge but also their mediation of multiple identities. These identities are shaped and re-shaped by a range of factors including their institutional supervision practices, disciplinary conventions, cultural values, personal life histories and professional aspirations. These multiple identities can be fragmented, contradict or harmonise with each other during the doctoral journey (Beijaard at al., 2004).

There has been a growing body of research that examines the experiences of international and intercultural doctoral students (Hall & Burns, 2009; Halse & Malfroy, 2010; Lee & Green, 2009; McAlpine & Akerlind, 2010). However, the nature of the multiplicity of doctoral students’ identities and the conditions shaping and reshaping these multiple identities, which are at the heart of the ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ an intercultural doctoral student, remain vague. This paper attempts to respond to this literature gap by drawing on the authors’ self-narratives in re-construing our own experience and negotiating multiple identities in doctoral education. It aims to capture the process of ‘becoming’ in intercultural doctoral education by analysing how intercultural doctoral candidates negotiate the complex cross-border world and re-construe their own academic experience. It analyses the impacts of such negotiations upon identity re-formation. The three authors who were intercultural doctoral students from the Chinese and Vietnamese backgrounds share common patterns in navigating cultural, academic and personal demands anchored in the doctoral landscapes of different Australian institutions. Our stories are at the same time distinctive. One addresses the negotiation process of becoming an “Asian-Australian” migrant and doctoral student. The other reflects on shifting from being an ‘expert’ in teacher education in Vietnam to becoming an international doctoral student. The third narrative is centred around the negotiation of plural identities as a mother, an intercultural learner and a doctoral student.
The paper begins by addressing the notion of identity formation and reformation within the context of doctoral education. It next discusses the relevance and value of autobiographical accounts of researchers in shedding light on our understanding of the nature of doctoral education. We then proceed by critically reflecting on the core aspects shaping our identity as an intercultural research student in Australia. In light of the analysis of our own reflective autobiographical accounts, we propose the notion of ‘reciprocal intercultural supervision’ and discuss its implications for supervisors and international students the field of doctorate education research.

Exploring the notion of identity development in challenging doctoral education landscape

In view of the changing landscape of higher education, more research has given prominence to the experiences of doctoral students and the imminent changes to the nature of doctoral supervisory work (Hall & Burns, 2009; Halse & Malfroy, 2010; Lee & Green, 2009; McAlpine & Akerlind, 2010). In fact, a number of empirical studies in the United Kingdom (e.g. Borg et al., 2009; Evan, 2007), in United States (e.g. Robinson, 2008; Trice & Yoo, 2007; Kim, 2007), and in Australia (e.g. Harman, 2003; Cadman, 2000; Ingleton & Cadman, 2002) have explored the experiences, interactions, needs and challenges that international doctoral students encounter in host countries. In spite of the heterogeneity of the samples and educational contexts, the majority of these qualitative studies has broadly classified doctoral student experiences as potentially problematic due to differences in academic expectations, intellectual and cultural traditions and educational provisions across cultures. As a consequence of such challenges, various support mechanisms have been put in place by some Australian universities such as establishing programmes for international doctoral students and their supervisors to foster the value of transculturalism (Cadman, 2000), and enhancing research environment for the students by creating social inclusive culture within the institution (Leonard & Becker, 2009).

Recent body of evidence suggests an important role of identity trajectory for exploring the kinds of concerns that doctoral students and early career academics encounter and explaining the unique and paradoxical academic and personal experiences of identity change (Altbach, 2004; Charmaz, 2008; Halse & Malfroy, 2010; McAlpine et al. 2010; Pearson, 2005). Much of this research stream is based in the U.S. and Canadian context. Yet there is a paucity of work within the Australian doctorate education research in examining the experiences and negotiation of identities of doctoral students from Chinese and Vietnamese backgrounds, focusing on the notion of identity as a trajectory to becoming an intercultural doctoral scholar in the host and home countries.

Although embarking on a doctoral study is regarded as an onerous intellectual learning process requiring students to master the skills of critiquing, articulating, researching and writing about their field (Acker & Haque, 2010; Brabazon, 2014; Green, 2009). It is also regarded as a process that touches on all aspects of a person’s life, requiring the development of a research identity in addition to existing personal and professional identities (Gee, 2001 & 2006; Hall and Burns, 2009; McAlpine & Lucas, 2011; McAlpine et al., 2010; Murakimi-Ramalho et al. 2013). This latter perspective calls for a way of understanding the intercultural formation of a research identity. Our paper responds to this call by analysing the dynamic ‘lived’ realities shaping and reshaping identity formation of intercultural and cross-border doctoral students.
The work on identity in doctoral education is not new. ‘Identity’ is viewed as a developmental process for individuals (Colbeck, 2008). Based on Egan-Robertson (1998), identity is posited as unfixed, fluid, co-constructed and reconstructed over time. Identity is also impacted by various social and cultural factors (such as race, gender, and social status) which are context specific (Alsup, 2006). Yet, Hall and Burns (2009) do not dismiss the importance of research identity construction influenced by a level of self-agency (Gee, 2006). Agency, according to McAlpine (2012), is defined as ‘efforts to be intentional, to plan, to construct a way forward given constraints (whether expected or unexpected)’ (p. 39). In such a condition, as Lee (2012) has rightly pointed out, research students are encouraged to reflexively explore their research and practice contexts together with their identity development process. This leads to the question of how features of a research identity are variously formed over time. For instance, McAlpine & Akerlind (2010) work examines the identity development of pre-tenure academics (including doctoral students) as an integral part of a ‘research identity trajectory’ by exploring how time and individual agency are key to helping them navigate the various aspects of academia. The concept of identity development is regarded to have occurred over time, constructing a past-present-future trajectory, and being embodied in the daily experiences, covering what the authors specific as, namely: intellectual refers to what the individual attempts to contribute to a chosen field through speaking and publication; networking refers to what the individual has been and is connected within a range of local, national or international links; and, institutional refers to what the institution provides in terms of finances and resources (ibid, 2013).

Although these strands are intimately integrated and developed asynchronously over time and space, in line with Gee’s (2001) work, the identity of becoming an intercultural doctoral student in our paper is postulated to be both self-appropriated and attributed by others. This is also evidenced in Labaree’s (2003) study which indicates that identity development has particular significance for students who have likely established professional identities and experience outside university culture. In fact, Hall and Burns (2009) also postulated that doctoral students, especially in the social sciences, with a wealth of professional experience may be beneficial in their doctoral learning experiences. Yet, the transformation to a doctoral identity in particular can be quite challenging for students who place a ‘great deal of identity capital to a place where their current capital has little value and new capital must be acquired’ (Hall & Burns, 2009: 54). Building on the idea of identity development as a process of change from ‘ethnocentric’ to ‘ethnorelative’ perspective, we aim to critically reflect our individual doctoral journeys and relationships with our supervisors in order to advocate for a theory of cross-cultural supervision for enabling intercultural doctoral students to effectively participate in knowledge contribution.

Additionally, recent studies on experiences of aspiring (doctoral students) and early career academics in U.S. (Austin, 2010) have highlighted doctoral students of colour and minority students experiencing less supervision than other students. Such problematic situations, according to Quaye (2007), are attributed to a number of factors including; the misalignment of students’ preconceptions of their supervisors’ values; the unspoken differing conceptions of identity of both students and supervisors; the mismatched expectations between supervisors and students which were left unsaid; the lack of shared understanding about what is valued in the field and who the students want to become rather than transmission of academic skills (cited in Hall & Burns, 2009: 55). While McAlpine and Norton (2006) have claimed that it is individuals who create their own personal meaning and identity around
academic practice, they also acknowledged that such practice is situated within ‘socio-geographical-historical contexts’. This suggests that identity development for the intercultural ‘other’ is dependent on personal histories, dispositions and values of the individuals, and the multiple roles and intentions of the individual in engaging various academic practices within doctoral education work. Drawing on such idea, doctoral education is perceived as a reflexive space (Brew & Peseta, 2009) and much of the nuanced challenges we faced as doctoral students in Australia were often left unspoken.

In closely reflecting and examining our personal experiences and identity change, we argue that the many unspoken personal distinct past experiences with our supervisors are powerful because they are representational way of our ‘knowing’ in shaping our identities of becoming intercultural academics during the doctoral years. Our identity growth has been grounded in history and memory (Walker, 2001) with prior personal understandings and concerns that are being enacted in multiple, often conflicting, representations of Otherness, in influencing how we interpret the present and future as we found ourselves questioning several core values resulting from differentiated subjectivity, agency and power.

**Autobiography as a research method in the field of doctoral education**

The use of autobiography as a research method has become more recognised in social science research over the past couple of decades (Coffey, 2014; Coffey, 1999; Sharkey, 2004; Tenni, Smyth & Boucher, 2003; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Coffey describes autobiography as ‘the telling and documenting of one’s own life’ (p.1). Autobiography has been drawn on as an approach and space to capture invisible or hidden voices, especially those of marginal groups (Coffey, 2014). International students and students from recent migrant backgrounds often experience more intellectual and cultural challenges than their local counterparts due to the complexities of undertaking doctoral education in a foreign academic and cultural environment. Therefore, the reflective autobiographical work of this student group can be a valuable resource in terms of what they reveal about their doctoral life experience.

There is currently a lack of reflective autobiographical research in doctoral education. We believe our own biographies have important impacts on how we re-create our identity through intercultural and intercultural research education and how we engage in our own research trajectories after our doctoral study. In reflecting on our own doctoral experience, we have engaged in self-reflexivity and moved beyond our own comfort zones because reflective autobiographical inquiry requires us to write about ‘rich, full accounts’ of our own doctoral life which may include the self-doubts, the contradictions and the complexities (Tenni, Smyth & Boucher, 2003:2).

Reed-Danahay mentioned that personal or self-autobiographical narratives can be considered as an approach within the broader genre of autobiography (2001). In order to unpack how we re-construe our intercultural and cross-border doctoral experience and the factors shaping our own identity formation, we have drawn on the concept of professional self-narratives that Sachs (2001) proposed in the field of teacher education. Sachs (2001) argues ‘teachers themselves construct these self-narratives, and they relate to their social, political and professional agendas… These self-narratives provide a glue for a collective professional identity’ (pp.157-158). In writing this paper, we see ourselves as unfolding our own reflective autobiographical narratives and make connection with the ‘contextual’ and ‘personal’, the ‘internal’ and ‘external’, and the ‘individual’ and ‘collective’ factors shaping our identity.
reformation within the doctoral education landscape. Our own autobiographies entail the processes through which we have written about, reflected upon and re-constructed our own doctoral life and research identity. One’s biographical accounts can thus be valuable sources for insightful analysis of the ways one exercises agency and the shaping of oneself as an intercultural doctoral student.

Soong’s self-narrative: Negotiating identity change and agency in becoming Asian-Australian migrant cum doctoral student nexus

To begin with, I undertook undergraduate teacher education degree because I had to, and I have never thought I could do well and be one of the top students in one of the state’s Australian university. I arrived in Australia as an independent skilled migrant, and given that the Federal Government accepted my former teaching qualification and ten years of teaching experience back in my home country (Singapore), I thought I could also get a teaching employment in one of the Australian schools. However, little did I realise, like many other new migrants with professional working experiences and qualifications back in their home countries, I need to undertake local teaching qualification in order to be qualified to teach in the state. That was my first culture shock because I did not realise both Federal and State government bodies had differentiated standards and criteria in recruiting migrants and preparing them to work in the country.

Despite it being a shock, it was a blessing in disguise. I have always wanted to continue learning and study in Australia. Even though this meant that during my studies, my husband and I had to learn to cope with our initial phase of adjustment and financial struggles (we had to look after our toddler daughter and baby son without a proper job), I did not feel my studies was a burden. In fact, when I was granted a scholarship to do PhD, I felt it was an even bigger privilege. Yet, like all the participants1 in my research study (which focuses on Australian international education-migration nexus), I find myself being challenged and changed by my research work. Perhaps one possible reason why I was doing my research study was because it allowed me to write about education, identity and culture—subjects which have always been my passion. I was embodied within my research study and attempting to answer questions like: how could I not write myself into the research when I knew that I too was being negotiated in becoming a knowledge worker and contributor in the field of international education and migration nexus?

As a person, I value cosmopolitanism and view my doctoral research as a way to contribute to an understanding of cultural globalisation that I believe is still needed in Australia. For instance, when the term ‘international student’ was coined to me, it felt somewhat a euphemism similar to being ‘less-than-capable’. I was conscious of how my name, ethnicity and nationality reveals that English is not my native language. Despite feeling marginalised, it did not prevent me from preforming well in most of my academic subjects. I later did some casual tutor work in some of the undergraduate and Master’s courses while I was doing my PhD. Because there was no scaffolding to frame how to approach teaching Australian tertiary students, I had to use my background experience as a teacher to create a relevant pedagogy that suit the large diversity of students. It felt like ‘a sink or swim’ form of assistanceship to develop my attributed identity as a hyphenated ‘Asian-Australian’ doctoral student. I echo Ien Ang’s standpoint that this prescribed identity by the host country is too broad-brush. Like her, I am too a Chinese who is able to think

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1 International pre-service teachers who have intentions to graduate with Australian teaching degree in order to obtain permanent residency status
about how, as a migrant doctoral student becoming academic, I can eventually play a role on the
global stage within the transnational space. Therefore I am a complex individual, merged at the
crossroads of several cultures, in developing an unfinished identity.

For this specific reflective piece of my personal journey as a doctoral student, I would like to
begin with my experience as a doctoral student and how much the ‘lack’ or even ‘loss’ of the
reciprocal intercultural supervision has impacted me in my identity development in becoming an
intercultural researcher for producing sound knowledge.

Sadly, my doctoral experience has been troubled with a number of problems and at times I really
felt like an ‘orphan’. I sometimes wondered if it was because I was intellectually inadequate and
if there was any communication competence on my part. For this reflective piece, I shall write
about my initial stage of my doctorate experience.

Just two weeks before I had to present my proposal to a panel of reviewers, I was then informed
that I would have no supervisor with me. That was because my supervisor found another position
elsewhere and tendered his resignation. Such news came to me as a great shock because I felt that
I was kept in the dark until he knew he has secured his job position. The timing of his departure
made me feel ‘worthless’.

Alpine and Paulson’s (2010) work on ‘abandoned’ doctoral students reported that students were
often left confused and some were even traumatised by such experience. For me, it was a moment
of truth when I realised that I could not rely on being ‘supervised’ only. I had to find my way
around in understanding the process of doing research. Such feeling of being ‘abandoned’ has not
only affected my confidence but also my identity development. I had to quickly learn that I am
not a commodity or a number in someone’s statistic report or a ‘cash cow’ (Robertson, 2011).
But, I do possess an agency existing within me. You could deduce to this agency as a sense of
ontological security or emotional resiliency (e.g. Morris et al., 2010), or as part of transformative
learning process of adult-learners or other plausible reasons. Honestly, what prompted me to go
on and complete my doctoral journey is the deep sense of moral obligation to complete what I
have been obliged to do for the Australian government. I know that I would never be given a
chance to do a PhD back in my home country. Although Singapore education system is broadly
equal for all, it is narrowly streamlined to cater to the privileged class. Thus, regardless of the
many other obstacles I faced during my candidature, the desire to search for deeper meaning in
my pursuit of knowledge and identity development only intensified.

In sum, the process of identity change for international doctoral students, or migrant-doctoral
students in becoming early career academic like me, does not exist in void. Today, I belong to the
quarter of Australia’s twenty-two million citizens born overseas. Yet, despite the influx of
different nationalities and cultures, Australia, as a nation, continues to be shrouded with the
concerns of identity and national character. Many scholars, like Ang (2001) and Marginson
(2012), have argued that it remains to be seen whether Australia can finally embrace
multiculturalism and be identified as part of Asia-Pacific. Despite the deliberate move to study
or/and migrate, my experience of identity development, is marked by a great degree of
negotiation between our/their home and host cultures; between entrenching and appreciating the
intercultural other; between feeling ‘abandoned’ (because of the lack of reciprocal intercultural
supervisory relationship) and the increased sense of agency. Like the participants of my research
study (Soong, forthcoming), I realise that I am too embodying the possibilities of human mobility
in enacting out our global imagination (Appadurai, 1999).
What is clear is that doctorate education is studied for its economic impact but rarely deeply investigated in terms of the cultural and ideological consequences or of its impact upon individuals’ sense of identity – features which hold every doctoral student in thrall. The task to analyse the negotiation of one’s cultural space through myriad ways such as language, beliefs, behaviours, identities and daily interactions is the key thesis of what is to be an ‘Asian-Australian’ early career academic.

**Hiep’s self-narrative: Shifting from being an ‘expert’ in teacher education in Vietnam to becoming an international doctoral student**

Good start but not smooth journey

Becoming an intercultural doctoral student for me involves seeking ways to negotiate how doctoral education underpinned by an imperialistic undertones that influence my identity evolvement as a reflexive autonomous researcher. My doctoral student’s identity re-definition was intimately linked to the move from an ‘ethnocentric’ perspective where I was an *established expert* in the field of language education Vietnam and viewed the discipline from my own cultural/national frame of reference to a *student* identity developing ‘ethnorelative’ perspective as a reflexive learner in the host country. I started my doctoral studies at a prestigious university in Australia with certain advantages. Before entering the doctoral program in Australia, I had experience studying in the US. I completed my MA degree in applied linguistics at the University of Massachusetts with excellent GPA. After my MA course I worked as a teacher educator for a prestigious Australian training project in Vietnam for than two years. This opportunity greatly enhanced my professional expertise as well as cross cultural communication skills. I also had experience teaching English at university level in Vietnam for over a decade. Before starting my doctoral study, I also had two papers published in international journals and I presented at the international conference once.

One's identity is closely shaped by one's personal experiences (Beijaard at al., 2004). Therefore, doctoral students’ multiple identities emerge from their ‘multiple experiences’ (Sears, 2011, p.71) within their institutional milieu. Despite my academic and professional background, plus my cross cultural experience, I was not able to avoid challenges in my doctoral program. Although I was doing well with the course work component, I found that doctoral study was a very new and challenging experience. Not long after I started my program, I realized that I needed to work independently, and manage my time better. In the MA course work, I had classes to attend, reading lists to follow, and assignment deadlines to deal with. In the doctoral program, except some course work to complete, it seemed that I had all the time for myself. I had no tangible work to do and no fixed schedules to follow. However, I always felt the need to work toward my research doctoral confirmation and my thesis. I felt I needed to submit pieces of my writing for supervisor feedback though she did not ask me to do so. I found that writing and submitting work at the doctoral level was not like writing and submitting work at a MA level. In my MA course work program, I used to get high distinction marks simply by showing in my papers that I understood the literature, and was able to link the issues discussed in the literature to my personal and professional life. Every time I submitted MA assignments, I had the sense of complete fulfilment, and never had to rewrite the paper. For doctoral studies, I usually submitted a piece of writing and waited for my supervisor feedback. The first draft was usually full of comments and corrections. The second draft was normally better than the first draft but it did not still make
my supervisor happy. For many chapters of my thesis, I had to rewrite four or five times until my supervisor was satisfied. The process was painful, but it was helpful. Each time I rewrote, I became more aware of the required academic conventions and my weaknesses, as well as became more focused on my research agenda.

**Personal issues**

Around 50% PhD students in the US quit during their candidature due to some personal, non-academic issues. Apparently, the 50% who successfully complete a PhD are not necessarily the cleverer people, but the luckier. (Smallwood, 2004). No matter how smoothly things go with you, unhappy things like sickness, death in the family, financial problems, scholarship discontinuation or even happy events like pregnancy can happen to anyone at any time, and hinder one’s progress. Although I did not suffer any major unhappy things in my doctoral years, two children were born then. In the third year in my candidature, my wife got pregnant for the second child. She felt not well and had to go back to Vietnam with my first child, as she would receive better care from the extended family at home. When my wife and child were away, I had more time to focus on my study, but separation from them was a painful experience. This also put more pressure on my study as I always thought I needed to complete my thesis so that I could go home to unite with my family the sooner the better. About two months before I was allowed to submit my thesis, I got very tough feedback from my supervisor regarding the literature review chapter. She wanted me to rewrite the whole chapter while I thought I was making a very good progress and expected to submit the whole thesis in a few weeks. Eager to complete my work quickly to be able to go home, I was so upset that I even thought of quitting. I wrote an email telling my supervisor about my feelings. Fortunately, she understood my feelings and gave necessary comforts. After a few days, I felt better and was able to get myself back on track.

**Supervisor-student conflicts**

Gee (2001) argues that individuals’ identity formation is both self-appropriated and attributed by others. My ‘becoming’ an international doctoral student is mediated in relation to my supervisor’s professional beliefs and expectations. My doctoral identity formation happens within a web of shifting experiences, positionalties and beliefs (Leki, 2003, p.68) in which I was in a constant process of negotiating different professional and personal perspectives and ways of ‘being’ and ‘doing’. No matter how well a doctoral student gets along with a supervisor, there are some certain views, standards, and goals relating to a doctoral degree that they cannot share. As I said earlier, at some point, I was under the pressure to complete my thesis as soon as possible to reunite with my wife. Honestly, many times all I wanted was to write a modest thesis which just allows me reach a passing level and get a degree. I felt I did not have more energy and time to move even to a step higher. However, my supervisor had a different view and goal. She always wanted me to write the best thesis possible, and benefit from it academically in the long run. She once frankly said that there were a certain level of doctoral work at this research intensive University, and since she was not able to lower that level, and to be sure, she wanted to push me far above that level. By doing that, she said, she knew she became a horrible, unsympathetic person. She also said she had a notion of ‘kindness’ which could be different from students’. For her, ‘kindness’ means helping students write a good thesis, get a doctoral degree. It does not mean being sympathetic and willing to listen to stories about someone’s pregnant wife and small child. I was then unhappy with her words, but thinking back on this, I now I think she is right, though
I admit she is a tough supervisor. Thanks to her “unkindness”, I did write a decent thesis, and was able to publish three papers from it internationally in top ranking journals.

Ethnocentricism

For the past 15 years, there has been a call, at least in the field of language education to decentralize the hegemonic power, prestige, and authority of the Western scholarship, while at the same time, encouraging and promoting academic work from the periphery countries (Canagarajah 2002, Makoni et al., 2005). However, there are tensions in this movement. It seems that scholars working in non-Western developing contexts are likely to continue to be underrepresented in international academic forums. These scholars, as Flowerdew (2001) and Canagarajah (1996) observe, encounter many difficulties in getting their work heard as the work might deal with something marginal while it is evaluated by mainstream Western academics who might not be contextually familiar with these issues. My doctoral thesis was an example that illustrates this tension. It was concerned about Vietnamese teachers trying to make changes within their contextual, cultural and physical constraints. In sum the thesis written by a Vietnamese and deals with Vietnamese issues but it was supervised by an Australian academic and examined by two other Western academics. The issue echoes the dominance of academic culture as described by a number of authors (Said, 1993; Pennycook, 1996; Lechner & Boli, 2009). The main argument of my thesis is that it can be problematic to take a set of teaching approach developed in a Western country and use it in another part of the world, but the irony is that the examiners and evaluators of my work all work in a Western context.

Ly’s self-narrative: Navigating doctoral education, motherhood and intercultural being

My doctoral journey is a process of mediating different identities that are associated with my multiple experiences (Sears, 2011, p.71) including being a mother, an international Vietnamese student and an intercultural scholar. Engaging in an international doctoral education entails a dynamic interplay of challenges, self-reconstruction, self-formation (Tran, 2012) and identity re-definition.

The sub-identities as a mother and as an intercultural learner have become core aspects underpinning my academic, intercultural and personal development during my doctoral candidate. Motherhood has indeed become an integral part of my PhD as my first child was born right after the confirmation of my doctoral proposal and grew up alongside with my thesis. Juggling the commitments of motherhood and study has been a challenging but inspiring and enriching journey for me. The PhD became more fulfilling because I was able to watch the growth of my son alongside with the evolution of my thesis. I found motherhood provided an invaluable counterpoint to my research and a constant reminder of the need to use my time more effectively. During these years, my supervisor has been not only an immense source of wisdom but also emotional support for me.

Along with disciplinary knowledge in the field of my research, understanding, encouragement, empowerment and negotiation of practical goals for each step of the PhD and explicit ways to realise those aims are amongst the most important strategies and attributes that supervisors may need to draw on in working with doctoral student-mothers. What I learnt from my PhD journey and has a useful implication for my role now as a researcher on the
experience of international students and an intercultural supervisor is that personal life and life away from home of international PhD students can greatly influence their research and academic performance. Three or four years away from our home country is a considerable period in a person’s life and a lot of issues may just happen back home that can have significant impacts on the academic life of PhD students. This can also be the case with domestic students. However international students’ conditions appear to be more unique due to the complexities of the cross-border world, the absence of extended family support and the distance from home country. Therefore intercultural supervisory relationship often has to go beyond mere academic relationship to touch on aspects of PhD candidates’ personal and cross-cultural life that are interrelated to their academic life. However, where is the boundary? There may be no definite answer as it may depend on particular situations, and can be sensitive, complicated, overlapping and unresolved.

Navigating the intercultural doctoral education world for me is also closely related to the negotiation of being a Vietnamese, being an intercultural learner and becoming a doctoral student in a ‘Western University’. I have found the mediation of different cultural values and personal desires in meaning making in academic practices is central to my academic and intercultural development during my Ph.D. My personal experience and challenges in exercising agency and juggling different approaches to constructing knowledge in my PhD is central to my doctoral identity re-definition. Importantly, my ‘becoming’ a Vietnamese doctoral student in Australia is embedded in the process of exercising agency in validating my ‘Vietnamese’ knowledge and experience related to my PhD field of research on international Vietnamese and Chinese students’ adaptation to academic writing in Australian higher education. My process of self-formation (Marginson, 2014) and identity mediation in becoming a Vietnamese doctoral student in Australia is intimately linked to the making of trans-national intellectual connections (Singh, 2010). For me knowledge inquiry during the PhD extends beyond learning about new knowledge and new ways of ‘becoming’ to validating my Vietnamese knowledge and connecting with my Vietnamese experience relating to the research field. Such engagement in cross-border knowledge connections parallels with the emergence of the identity as an intercultural learner.

The multiple identities associated with the multiple roles and experiences that international doctoral students embrace can be fragmented, contradict or harmonise with each other. Mishler (1999, cited in Beijaard, 2004, p.113) refer to such collection of plural identities as ‘a chorus of voices, not just as the tenor or soprano solist’ (p.8). For me, the mother identity associated with the responsibility I felt towards my children can contradict with the doctoral student identity which is going hand in hand with the doctoral study demands I need to fulfil. Also, as discussed previously, there are tensions between my Vietnamese identity together with the Vietnamese approaches to knowledge construction I embraced and the identity of a doctoral student in an Australian university who is expected to follow the conventions in this specific context. But it is the process to mediate and harmonise these differences and contradictions is part of the journey of ‘becoming’ an intercultural doctoral student. The awareness of these multiple identities, the conditions that they come into existence and how they shape our ways of being and becoming are essential for our continual process of professional learning and reflection.

Conclusion and implications
The analysis of our own autobiographical narratives revitalises our lives lived in the context of intercultural and cross-border doctoral education and reveals the complex and multi-conditions shaping and reshaping our identity formation. In other words, our accounts help us glimpse and reflect on the conditions that have led to the emergence of the multiple identities of an intercultural doctoral student and the nature of these identities.

Our self-narratives on how we have mediated the multiple identities emerging during our doctoral study show that becoming an intercultural research student is the process of self-empowerment and re-construction of oneself as a flexible and reflexive human being. Having experienced some measure of marginalisation both personally and professionally, our stories do not end here. We are constantly creating space for agency both within our research and student-supervisor landscape. We are driven by a desire to becoming an ethnorelativist researcher. We assert our sense of ownership of knowledge that guides us to pursue the regimes of truth. For Hiep, it involved seeking ways to acquire a perspective into how doctoral education has an imperialistic undertones that impacted his identity evolvement as an ethnorelativist researcher. For Ly, it is about exercising agency as an intercultural learner as she negotiated how to make connections with and draw on her Vietnamese knowledge, experience and ways of being rather than simply learning about new knowledge and accommodating the conventional ways of doing PhD in Australia For Soong, her personal journey of becoming an Asian-Australian academic through the challenges of doctoral education, has given her the space to negotiate her identity-change within the context of transnationalism. Indeed, our stories add to the emerging literature on changing conceptions of research identity trajectory (McAlpine et al., 2010) in intercultural contexts.

For international students, when we start a doctoral study, we need to be prepared to accept new challenges, to take on new roles that might be beyond simply a doctoral learner and thus to negotiate new identities emerging in the context of intercultural and international doctoral research. The matter of being and becoming an intercultural doctoral student is not only intimately related to the new knowledge we learn and contribute to but also the values and experiences we gain in the process of pursuing our professional and personal goals by working with new people in a new environment.

These reflective autobiographical accounts indicate the need for (Western) supervisors to be aware of the vulnerability of international students, the tensions and dilemmas facing their cross-cultural journey of undertaking a PhD in the host country without positioning these students as being deficit. Therefore, how to move towards a more positive and productive supervision approach of capitalising on the diversity and trans-national intellectual property international students bring along is a critical question in cross-cultural supervision. The challenge to learn in intercultural supervision is from both sides. There is a need for (Western) supervisors to be more aware of how they think and communicate with their international doctoral students. Our stories of identity re-formation in the doctoral research landscape also indicate the need to view international research students as active and self-determined agents who are potentially capable to mediate the complex cross-border world, re-construe their own research experience and thus re-define their ‘being’. It is thus imperative to place empowerment and agency at the heart of the intercultural supervisory relationship. These are essential elements for reciprocal intercultural supervision. Whilst our reflective autobiographical accounts do not lend this study generalisable, they have highlighted the ways in which international doctoral education has a potential to shape the capacities of doctoral students from diverse backgrounds and histories.

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References:


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