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Being and becoming an intercultural doctoral student: reflective autobiographical narratives
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Being and becoming an intercultural doctoral student: reflective autobiographical narratives

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This paper underscores the dynamic and complex dimensions of ‘becoming’ an intercultural doctoral student. It employs autobiography as a research method to portray the reshaping of ourselves as doctoral students to 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-construction of 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 understand each other better.

Keywords: international doctoral students; reflective autobiographical narratives; interculturality

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 contradict or harmonise with each other, or be fragmented, during the doctoral journey (Beijaard, Meijer, \& Verloop, 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). The majority of these qualitative studies have broadly classified doctoral student experiences as potentially problematic due to increasing differences in academic expectations, English proficiencies, intellectual traditions and educational provisions across cultures. More recent work (e.g. McAlpine \& Akerlind, 2010) has focused on the

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notion of identity formation and reformation within the context of international doctoral education. 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’ of an intercultural doctoral student, remain vague. This paper attempts to respond to this literature gap by drawing on the authors’ self-narratives in portraying 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 worlds and re-construe their own experience. It analyses the impacts of such negotiations upon identity re-formation. The three authors, who were intercultural doctoral students from Chinese and Vietnamese backgrounds, share common patterns in navigating cultural, academic and personal demands anchored in the doctoral landscapes. At the same time, each story is distinctive. The first one addresses the negotiation process of becoming an ‘Asian-Australian’ migrant and doctoral student. The second reflects on shifting from being an ‘expert’ in teacher education in Vietnam to becoming an international doctoral student. The third narrative is centred on 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 intercultural research students 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 in 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 the doctoral students and impacts on the doctoral supervisory work (Hall & Burns, 2009; Halse & Malfroy, 2010). In fact, a number of empirical studies in the UK (e.g. Borg et al., 2009; Evans, 2007), in US (e.g. Robinson, 2008; Trice & Yoo, 2007), and in Australia (e.g. Harman, 2003; Ingleton & Cadman, 2002) have explored the experiences, interactions, needs and challenges that international doctoral students encounter in host countries. 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 the research environment for the students by creating a socially inclusive culture within the institution (Leonard & Becker, 2009).

A recent body of evidence has suggested the key role that identity as a trajectory has in explaining the unique and paradoxical academic and personal experiences doctoral students and early career academics face (Altbach, 2004; Pearson, 2005; McAlpine & Akerlind, 2010). Much of this research stream is based in the US and Canadian contexts, and little is known about the Australian contexts of those from Chinese and Vietnamese backgrounds becoming an intercultural doctoral scholar in the host country.
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). 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; Murakami-Ramalho, Militello, & Piert, 2013). This latter perspective calls for a way of understanding the intercultural formation of a research identity. This 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). However, Hall and Burns (2009) did not dismiss the importance of research identity construction influenced by a level of self-agency (Gee, 2001). 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 and Green (2009) 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 example, McAlpine and Akerlind’s (2010) work examined 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 specified 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.

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 indicated that identity development has particular significance for students who have probably established professional identities and experience outside the university culture. In fact, Hall and Burns (2009) also postulated that doctoral students, especially in the social sciences, are able to make connections to their intellectual work because of their wealth of professional experience. However, the transformation to a doctoral identity in particular can be quite challenging for students when they 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, p. 54). Building on the idea of identity development as a process of change for better mutual understanding, 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.
In addition, recent studies on experiences of aspiring (doctoral students) and early career academics in US (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; the lack of shared understanding about what is valued in the field and who the students want to become (cited in Hall & Burns, 2009, p. 55). While McAlpine (2012) has 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 ideas, doctoral education is perceived as a reflexive space (Brew & Peseta, 2009).

In closely reflecting on 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. Despite our common identity as ‘Asian’ doctoral students, we have various prior personal understandings and concerns that are being enacted in multiple, often, conflicting representations of Otherness. As a result, we found ourselves questioning several core values resulting from differentiated subjectivity, agency and power on which our process of identity growth is grounded in history and memory (Walker, 2001).

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

Reed-Danahay (2001) mentioned that personal or self-autobiographical narratives can be considered as an approach within the broader genre of autobiography. The use of autobiography as a research method has become more recognised in social science research over the past couple of decades (Coffey, 1999, 2014; Sharkey, 2004; Tenni, Smyth, & Boucher, 2003; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Coffey (2014) has described 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 experiences.

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, p. 2).

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) argued that ‘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 connections 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 identities. 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**

I arrived in Australia as an independent skilled migrant, and given that the Federal Government accepted my former teaching qualification and 10 years of teaching experience back in my home country (Singapore), I thought I could also get teaching employment in one of the Australian schools. However, little did I realise, like many other new migrants from Asia background, our previous professional working experiences and qualifications back in our home countries are not as recognised in the host society. I had to undertake further studies in order to find relevant work in the state. It was a blessing in disguise even though the initial phase of adjustment was tough. I performed well throughout my university studies and was later offered the opportunity to do a PhD. I took up the chance because it allowed me to write about education, identity and culture – subjects which drove me to understand my personal migratory experience. During the process, I realised I was being negotiated in becoming a knowledge worker and contributor in the field of international education and migration nexus. I view my doctoral research as a way to contribute to an understanding of cultural globalisation that I believe is still needed in Australia. For example, 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 revealed that English is not my native language. Despite feeling like ‘a sink or swim’ experience of developing my attributed identity as a hyphenated ‘Asian-Australian’ doctoral student, I echo Ang’s (2001) standpoint that this prescribed identity by the host country is too broad-brush. Like her, I too am a Chinese who is able to think about how, as a migrant doctoral student becoming an 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 reflect on how much the ‘lack’ or even ‘loss’ of the reciprocal
Intercultural supervision in my experience as a doctoral student has impacted my identity development in becoming an intercultural researcher for producing sound knowledge.

Just two weeks before I had to present my research proposal to a panel of reviewers, my supervisor found another position elsewhere and tendered his resignation. Such news came to me as a great shock because the timing of his departure made me feel ‘worthless’ in my capacity as a doctoral student since the one person whom I thought understood me, as a doctoral student, had decided to leave. I doubted myself and what I could offer as an emerging researcher. McAlpine and Paulson’s (2010) work on ‘abandoned’ doctoral students reported that even domestic doctoral students were often left confused and some were even traumatised by such an experience. However, as a Confucius-oriented student, I felt I was in no position to question my supervisor’s choice for informing me at the eleventh hour. Not only that, I thought being silent about my pain was the best way to cope so that I could save face. Deep down, I struggled because of the power-distance I saw my supervisor had over me. I felt constrained by my Asian values. Such a feeling of ‘abandonment’ has not only affected my confidence but also my identity development. Whilst such a challenge is not alien to domestic doctoral students, there is a layer of cultural complexity that international doctoral students embody but are unaware that it is preventing them to be more proactive.

What I have learnt from this episode of my PhD journey has a useful implication for my current role as a researcher in the host country. The building of an intercultural relationship between supervisors and students requires both parties exercising cultural sensitivity (for the supervisors) and heightened agency (for the students). Being a migrant, and in search of my sense of belonging, I felt I had to learn how to resist being used as a commodity or a number in someone’s statistic report or a ‘cash cow’ (Robertson, 2011), and that I do possess an agency existing within me. In fact, I turned this initial crisis into an opportunity to drive and develop my research and knowledge production as a hybridised Asian doctoral student. Like Morris and her colleagues (2014) who talked about their research on cultivating positive emotions in reducing the effects of negative emotions, I too felt such emotional resiliency as a form of agency. I began to refocus on my purpose of doing a PhD to meet my moral obligation as an Australian migrant. I knew that I would never be given a chance to do a PhD back in my home country. The desire to search for deeper meaning in my pursuit of knowledge and identity development only intensified my motivation to complete my PhD candidature.

In sum, the process of identity change for international doctoral students, or migrant-doctoral students in becoming an early career academic like me does not exist in a void. What is clear is that doctorate education is rarely 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. Despite the influx of different nationalities and cultures, Australia, as a nation, continues to be shrouded with the concerns of identity and national character. It remains to be seen whether Australia can finally embrace multiculturalism and be identified as part of the Asia-Pacific (Marginson, 2012). 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, in press), I realise that I too am embodying the possibilities of human mobility in enacting out our global imagination (Appadurai, 1996). The task to analyse the negotiation of one’s cultural space through a myriad of 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*

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 in Vietnam, and viewed the discipline from my own cultural/national frame of reference to a student identity developing an ‘ethno-relative’ 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 this doctoral programme in Australia, I completed my MA degree in applied linguistics at the University of Massachusetts in the USA with excellent Grade Point Average (GPA). I then worked as a teacher educator for a prestigious Australian training project in Vietnam for more than two years. This opportunity greatly enhanced my professional expertise as well as cross-cultural communication skills. I also had considerable teaching and publishing experience in Vietnam.

Despite my academic and professional background, plus my cross-cultural experience, I was unable to avoid challenges in my doctoral programme. 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 programme, I realised 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 programme, apart from 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 towards my research doctoral confirmation and my thesis. I felt I needed to submit pieces of my writing for supervisor feedback although 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 an MA level. In my MA course work programme, 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 them 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 becoming more focused on my research agenda.
**Personal issues**

Approximately 50% of PhD students in the United States 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 ones (Smallwood, 2004). No matter how smoothly things proceed, unhappy events such as sickness, a death in the family, financial problems, scholarship discontinuation or even happy events such as pregnancy can happen to anyone at any time, and hinder one’s progress. Although I did not suffer any major unhappy events in my doctoral years, two children were born then. In the third year of my candidature, my wife got pregnant with our second child. She felt unwell 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 as soon as possible. About two months before I was allowed to submit my thesis, I received very harsh 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 and gave me the necessary comfort. After a few days, I felt better and was able to get myself back on track.

**Supervisor-student different expectations**

Gee (2001) argued 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 happened within a web of shifting experiences, positionalities 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 stated earlier, at some point I was under the pressure to complete my thesis as soon as possible to reunite with my wife. In truth, many times all I wanted was to write a modest thesis which just allowed me to reach a level where I would pass and gain a degree. However, my supervisor had a different expectation. 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 was a certain level of doctoral work at this research intensive university, and since she was unable to lower that level, and indeed, she wanted to push me far above that level. By doing so, 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, gain a doctoral degree. It does not mean being sympathetic and willing to listen to stories about someone’s pregnant wife and small child.
**Ethnocentricism**

For the past 15 years, there has been a call, at least in the field of language education, to decentralise 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 encounter many difficulties in getting their work noticed 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 written by a Vietnamese and deals with Vietnamese issues but 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 (Lechner & Boli, 2009; Said, 1993). The main argument of my thesis is that it can be problematic to apply a teaching approach developed in a Western country in another part of the world, but the irony is that the examiners and evaluators of my work are all Westerners who 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 candidature. 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 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 a significant
impact 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 their home country. Therefore, an intercultural supervisory relationship often has to go beyond a 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 PhD. My personal experience and challenges in exercising agency and juggling different approaches to constructing knowledge in my PhD is central to my doctoral and 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 & Han, 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 et al., 2004, p. 113) referred to such a collection of plural identities as ‘a chorus of voices, not just as the tenor or soprano soloist’ (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. As discussed previously, there are also 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. However, the process of mediating and harmonising 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. Our accounts not only 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. By articulating them, we are also connecting our individual nuanced challenges we faced as doctoral students in Australia which were often left unspoken.

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, we are constantly creating space for agency both within our research and student-supervisor landscape. We are driven by a desire to becoming intercultural researchers. We assert our sense of ownership of knowledge that guides us to pursue the regimes of truth. It might involve seeking ways to evolve professionally and interculturally as a researcher from an education that has an imperialistic undertone. This also means a mediation between the authority of ‘Western scholarship’ (Canagarajah, 2002; Makoni et al., 2005) that one is expected to conform to gain a legitimate membership in their discipline and their ‘Asianess’. Therefore, in one sense, doctoral education for intercultural students moves beyond simply conducting unique research, exploring new knowledge within a discipline and accommodating the conventional ways of undertaking doctoral research in the country of education. In another sense, doctoral education also involves the process of exercising agency as an intercultural learner when the doctoral student negotiates how to make connections with and draw on their cultural knowledge and experience and ways of being. For intercultural and international doctoral students, it is intimately linked to a process of negotiating identity-change within the context of transnationalism. Indeed, our stories add to the emerging literature on changing conceptions of research identity trajectories (McAlpine & Akerlind, 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 supervisors to be aware of international students’ vulnerability as well as the tensions and dilemmas facing their cross-cultural journey of undertaking a PhD in the host country without positioning these students as being deficit (Tran, 2011). 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 intercultural supervision. The challenge to learn in intercultural supervision is from both sides. There is a need for supervisors to be more aware of how they think and communicate with their international doctoral students. The accounts of identity re-formation in the doctoral education landscape captured in this paper also indicate the need to view international research students as active and self-determined agents (Marginson, 2014) who are potentially capable of mediating the complex cross-border world to 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 to be generalisable, they have highlighted the ways in which international doctoral education has the potential to shape the capacities of doctoral students from diverse backgrounds and histories.

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