

Chapter 9

Enhancing the Australian Doctoral Experience: Locating Culture and Identity at the Centre

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ABSTRACT

Culture and identity play a significant role in the education of Indigenous and non-Western doctoral students. While a substantial body of literature explores interpersonal communication in doctoral supervision, it remains largely silent about how history impacts on doctoral students' identities and their potential for unique knowledge creation. This book chapter draws upon postcolonial/decolonial theories and life history methodologies in order to more effectively contextualise Indigenous and non-Western doctoral students' identities in Australia. These life histories include those outlined by the Indigenous and Chinese members of this team of authors as well as one life history interview with a migrant Asian student. Through careful theorisation of the interconnections between the life histories of our participants and their supervision experience, an inventory of supervision strategies will be distilled to improve intercultural supervision.

INTRODUCTION

Culture and identity play a highly significant role in the education of Indigenous and non-Western doctoral students. This chapter explores the connectivities between culture, language and identity specifically for the doctoral student. In this chapter, the category ‘non-Western’, while complex (Bonnett, 2004), refers to doctoral candidates of immigrant or refugee backgrounds as well as international students from Asia, Africa, the Middle East and South America. The category ‘Indigenous/Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’ refers to the First Nations peoples of Australia and who, whilst contributing to the diversity of university student populations, are considered outside on the non-Western category. This is a protocol which we use to mark our acknowledgement of the unique location of Indigenous peoples in our theorising.

Each of these doctoral student groups brings significant cultural, linguistic and intellectual capabilities and networks to their research studies (Manathunga, 2014; Singh, 2013; Bunda, 2014; Qi, 2015). While a substantial body of literature explores interpersonal communication and relationships in doctoral supervision, it remains largely silent about how history impacts on doctoral students’ identities and how their cultural backgrounds provide important potential for unique knowledge creation. Western culture/identities bound in western knowledge systems remain the dominant condition of the intercultural doctoral space. Counter strategies are difficult to realise in environs that hold to contemporary ‘enterprising’ values of efficiency and expediency.

Doctoral education researchers have sought to generate greater understandings of the individual supervisor and student narratives to deepen understandings of students’ cultural identities and their impact upon supervision pedagogy (Bendix Petersen, 2014; Bista, 2012; Chan, 2012). This is important work but it has often been limited by the lack of careful theorising of the links between individual supervision experiences and broader issues of identity and culture in higher education. Some of this research has also generated discourses about Indigenous, migrant, refugee and international students that unduly suggest deficit and Eurocentric perspectives on problems and challenges (Tomkiewicz et al., 2011; Trudgett, 2013).

This book chapter draws upon postcolonial/decolonial approaches to history in order to more effectively contextualise Indigenous and non-Western doctoral students’ cultural and linguistic identities in Australia. Postcolonial scholars have created unique methodologies for critiquing the ways in which global trends get played out at the micro level of individual lives (Chakrabarty, 2002). These historical analytical strategies are designed to recover the silenced stories of Indigenous, migrant, refugee and international communities. Our theoretical position is deliberately *both* postcolonial *and* decolonial because many Indigenous and non-Western scholars believe the ‘post’ in postcolonial is problematic for reasons that we will outline in detail below. Much of the mainstream literature on identity and culture in doctoral studies adopts a largely positivist focus on roles and responsibilities of students and supervisors that ignore the complexities of identity and culture in doctoral education. As a result, this chapter deliberately illustrates these complexities through the methodology of life history.

The first part of the chapter will briefly explore the ways in which the existing literature on doctoral students’ cultures and identities does not always recommend supervision strategies that would allow Indigenous and non-Western students to incorporate their rich personal, cultural, linguistic and epistemological histories into their creation of new knowledge in their research studies. It is argued that the relationship between supervisors and students is pivotal to successfully grappling with the complexities of identity and culture in doctoral education. This chapter also explores the ongoing domination of Eurocentric research and knowledge production practices in doctoral education in Australia and globally. Then a postcolonial/decolonial conceptual and methodological framework for capturing Indigenous and

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