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Negotiating the In-Between: How Two Foreigners Living in Rural Japan Narrated Changes in their Identities

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters in Education (Guidance Studies)

Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

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2009
This thesis used narrative inquiry to find out how two foreigners, who had resided in rural Japan for a long period of time, narrated reflectively how they had changed as a result of their cross-cultural transitions. This thesis came about through my own transition experiences in Japan leading to a hybrid, bicultural notion of myself, and my subsequent curiosity as to how others underwent changes in identity, possibly leading also to hybrid selves. Each participant was interviewed twice. Their changes were contextualised within dominant themes arising from their life stories. In addition, they were analysed using a modified version of Herbert Hermans’ personal position repertoire (2001), which was able to identify key identity positions and underlying beliefs that aided or hindered their transitions. This research found that the participants’ respective dominant life themes of estrangement and communion had major impacts on their cross cultural transitions, local relationships, and life satisfaction. The first participant followed a theme of estrangement and evoked identity positions and imagined audiences to justify his stance. The second participant took on a learning model to enhance her relationships with the local Japanese, resulting in alterity, the incorporation of a Japanese identity position in her own personal position repertoire and subsequently a hybrid self. In both participants some identity positions were aligned to Japanese ways of being, consequently coming to the fore in their psyches, whereas others were subjugated. Also new positions were incorporated, while others were lost, with affective outcomes. The participants’ transitions were impacted on by their environments. The first participant initially worked within a foreign enclave and had no close personal Japanese friends. The second participant was immersed in local public schools and enjoyed high recognition in her small, rural town. Motivating factors for being in Japan were also found to be of consequence for the participants’ cross-cultural transitions. This thesis was able to capture the complexity of the participants’ cross-cultural transitions through considering them as having multiple selves that were revealed through reflective life stories and collated within a personal position repertoire.
Writing this thesis has been an experience of both distanced and extended education. I owe immense thanks and gratitude to my supervisors, Associate Professor Jeannie Wright and Senior Lecturer Dr. Penny Haworth, for their patience, wise guidance and encouragement that often shortened the distance and ensured that across its extended duration, both I and the thesis stayed the course. The extra time they put in and numerous emails they wrote, especially during the final drafts of this report, have been invaluable. Thanks also to Peter Roe, who, with an honest discussion about my future on a train platform in Japan, saw to it that I was headed in the right direction and hence my masters journey began. Also, thanks to Sue Watson who first introduced me to narrative studies and Herbert Hermans’ work. Without her initial guidance and engagement in my studies of narrative, many core concepts of this thesis would not have been applied.

I am also gratefully indebted to the two participants who gave up their time in their busy lives and invited me into their homes, to share very personal understandings of themselves. Quite simply, this thesis would not have been possible without them. Thanks also to Michael Waterman, who proof read the latter drafts. Without your hawk-like eyes, many mistakes would have gone on menacingly unchecked.

Lastly, this thesis has impacted on the lives of the people closest to me. To my nephews and niece, thanks for being so understanding when Uncle Andy couldn’t go out to play. To my immediate family, thanks for all your encouragement, support and last minute proof reading. But most importantly, to my wife, Misao, who underwent her own cross-cultural transition during the writing of this thesis while adjusting to her new life in New Zealand. While writing this thesis to aid understandings of transitions, ironically, I have been distracted while you have been caught in between what you once were and what you are yet to become here. Despite your own needs in difficult times, thank you for your delicious, sustaining Japanese cooking, the countless cups of tea and coffee, and, most importantly, your patience during the times I typed away our shared evenings or our shared holidays. You are my greatest strength and I dedicate this thesis to you and all the courage you have shown in the face of transition.
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Introduction

Our search for identity and understanding often includes trying on many different stories. Here are two.

adapted from Otasuke et al. (2004, p. 194)
This report aims to present its findings in light of the moment in time Japan finds itself in; as a society on the verge of cultural upheaval, as it contemplates dramatic increases in its foreign population (Willis & Murphy-Shigematsu, 2008). Academia can aid policy and understanding of immigrant experience by giving voice to these immigrants. This research aimed to add to this knowledge by presenting two members of a particular minority group, the Western expatriate, living within a rural setting, where it was assumed they were more likely to be interacting and involved in daily Japanese life. It sought to discover how they positioned themselves, with their own personal histories, against the task of settling in and adapting to life in rural Japan. As such, this research sought to explore how they negotiated the complexities of their daily lives in the metaphorical space that was somewhere ‘in-between’ their home and Japan. This ‘in-between-ness’ is symbolised by ‘ma’, the Chinese character on the title page. In narrating changes in their identities throughout their life stories, this small scale project aimed to explore the motivations and self/world beliefs that led them each to certain identifications and how these identifications affected their lives, acculturation and relationships. Its aim was also to expose multiple identity positions within each participant’s psyche that were pertinent to their transitions, and to identify those positions that aided or hindered them.

Identity was chosen as a key concept for understanding self and changes in self. This research approached the analysis and interpretation of the gathered data by using a liberating theory of identity called the dialogical self (Hermans, 2001, 2004), that rejects a proprietary concept (identity as something we own) for a concept of identities as being identifications and therefore situational (Willis & Murphy-Shigematsu, 2008) and relational. In the cross-cultural transitions of the two participants explored within this study, the identifications that they spoke to in private, and performed in public through the interviews, were viewed as fluid, relational and teleological.

In dialogical thinking (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, 1998; Hermans, 2001, 2004, 2008; Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007) the key concepts of hybridization and transnationalism were highlighted, suggesting the complexity of migrants making transitions. Hybridization and transnationalism challenge the oversimplified binaries expressed in hyphenated selves; Asian-American, Canadian-Japanese; New Zealander-Japanese (It should be noted that in Japan, the hyphenated labelling of foreigners is not in practice). Hybridization and
transnationalism refer to cultural and social identities shifting within and between home and host nations, and even multiple sites (Glick Schiller et al. 1995; Glick Schiller 1997 cited in Liu-Farrer, 2008 (unpublished)), hence the metaphor of an ‘in-between’ space. These identities are sustained through cheaper international travel, promoting more frequent trips home; dual citizenship practices sustaining voting rights and political investments in the countries of origin (Basch, Glick Schiller & Szanton Blanc, 1994; Laguerre, 1999; Guarnizo, 1998, 2003; Kearney, 1991, 1995, Kyle, 2000 cited in Liu-Farrer, G., 2008 (unpublished)); through international networks sustained through internet communities such as Facebook and Bebo; and through cheaper international telecommunications. So the possibility of sustaining dual (or multiple) identities is increased through globalization. Transnationalism challenges older models of assimilation which rely on the concept of a unidirectional transition from the home culture to the host culture. Transnational identities are situated within the complex, multi-voiced, multi-positioned globalized world.

It is within this environment that this study's two participants have sought to create, sustain, and sacralize their own multi-vocal identities in rural Japan (rural, in this study, refers to an area outside of the main centres of Japan, not necessarily a small town). The sacralizing of self is a concept taken from Satre's work (1950, 1963, 1964, 1981 cited in McAdams, 1991) whereby individuals are viewed as facing the dilemma of how to sacralize their selves through narrative answers to psychological, sociological, metaphysical and cosmological concerns (p.142) in a society where religious institutions' answers to these concerns have lost their saliency. In this study, sacralizing the self is viewed as performing oneself through narrative techniques and major thematic lines as a project that is special and unique in relation to both others and in relation to oneself as a coherent project over the lifespan. In addition to the notion of a sacralized self, a defining aspect of this study was that through Hermans' (2001) notion of a dialogical self, a metaphorical image of their identities was created and their changes were tracked throughout their life stories as opposed to just throughout their transition. Therefore, the investments the participants made and why were uncovered.

Central to this thesis is the transparency of the author. Therefore, it begins with a reflexivity statement that tracks my journeying and motivations for undertaking this thesis. Followed by this, pertinent literature is reviewed. From this literature gaps are identified leading to the
posing of the research question. Special interest is given to theories of the narrative and
dialogical self (Hermans, 2001, 2004), to position this research amongst this field. The
methodology is then addressed outlining the reasons why a narrative approach was taken to
answer the research question. Next, data from the two participants is presented and analysed
followed by a discussion on how they have been shown to have changed. This thesis then
addresses the repercussions and potentialities of the knowledge that is uncovered and
produced.

The findings of this study come at a pertinent time when the Japanese government is
contemplating the potential influx of immigrants and at a time where the stability of national
identities, globalization and localization (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007) are having both
positive and negative effects for people and communities in transition (Schaffer, 2004). This
research’s approach and produced knowledge is hoped to be of interest to researchers and
those working with issues to do with identity, migrants and cross-cultural transitions within
Japan and other sites.