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Hybridising identities by Korean mothers and daughters in New Zealand

A doctoral thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Doctor of Clinical Psychology at Massey University, Albany Campus New Zealand

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Abstract

The population in the Pacific region is becoming increasingly diverse. In New Zealand, Asian migrants now make up almost 10% of the total population. Among them, women and second generation migrants are often described as most vulnerable to acculturation stress and identity confusions due to cultural conflicts, intergenerational issues and discrimination. However, their resilience to overcome these difficulties and their processes to construct alternative identities are not well understood. My study particularly concerns identity issues of Korean women migrants in New Zealand. The aim of this study is to understand how they deal with the challenges and re-construct their identities. For this purpose, this study draws on theories of hybridizing selves, the dialogical self and the interactive nature of culture. Six Korean mothers and six Korean young adult daughters were interviewed. Photographs and personal items were used to facilitate the interview conversations. To undertake the analyses, this study draws on frameworks suggested by discourse analysis and narrative analysis, and is underpinned by a social constructionist approach. Informed by a discursive approach, the researcher was aware of the potentials and constraints in the social and cultural context of the participants’ everyday lives. Informed by a narrative approach, the researcher could explore participants’ active roles in constructing their own stories. The findings demonstrate that these women are in the process of constructing hybrid identities. By constructing hybrid identities, they can avoid the strictures of being either ‘authentic’ Koreans or ‘assimilated’ Westernised women. Instead, they create flexible, positive selves, negotiating gender, ethnicity, and the power structures experienced in Western dominant society. The findings also show that mothers and daughters negotiate identities in various ways. Mothers construct the sense of being in a minority in ways that allow them to claim their strength and overcome powerlessness attached to their minority status. They also strategically construct others as the same as themselves to restore a sense of equality and to claim their rights in a Western country. Daughters construct themselves as being different from both ‘typical’ Koreans and their western peers, and then this dislocation is used to create a space to allow their own ways of adjustment. Daughters also describe their difficulties in carrying out adult roles in the family, but this construction turns into a sense of worthiness as a valuable contributor to the family. Regarding their future plans, daughters strategically use their hybrid identities to form positive self images as competent young women in an international context. Hybridised identities are also constructed with regard to intergenerational interactions within the family: mothers formulate ways of hybridizing children based on both Korean and Western notions of parenting, which becomes their way to be good mothers in the western society; daughters draw on both the notions of being a good, caring daughter in Korean terms and being
an independent woman in New Zealand in order to negotiate their relationships with parents. To conclude, this study documents how culture is not a set of inherent traits of an ethnic group but is interactive, shifting and performative. Also migrant women are to be seen as active negotiators in identity construction rather than victims of acculturation stress. These findings have implications for health professionals in New Zealand who are interested in assisting migrants in developing flexibility and resilience. The implications for appropriate cultural competence in professional psychological practice are discussed in terms of the broader understanding of culture and the importance of reflectivity for practice.
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