

## **The Intercultural Values and Social Connectedness of International Female Doctoral Students in Australia**

Sabrina Syed  
*The University of Newcastle, Australia*

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper explored the multiple layers of social and intercultural adjustment challenges experienced by international female doctoral students in Australia. The paper investigates multiple dimensions of sociocultural differences between the students' native and host countries, including sociocultural context, community engagement, personal and social lives, and the intersection of more commonly researched sociocultural identities. This investigation is undertaken within the epistemological positioning of feminist standpoint theory and intersectionality. In addition, a narrative inquiry approach and a thematic analysis are used to understand the students' social lives and issues of adjustment to a new culture. Themes like intercultural understanding, social connectedness and adjustment issues are used to encapsulate the students' views about their social positionality and understanding of their lives during PhD in Australia.*

**Keywords:** Australia, doctoral students, intercultural, intersectionality, social connectedness

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The academic performance of international students largely depends on their productive and positive adjustment to new conditions in their host countries (Mou et al., 2020; Son & Sang-Soon, 2014). The formation of positive intercultural, social and academic relationships enhance the students'

academic development and achievements (Bianchi, 2013; Newsome & Cooper, 2016). However, as they struggle to make meaningful connections and form a well-rounded social circle in a host country (Deuchar, 2022; Obeng-Odoom, 2012; Rajani et al., 2018), international students often feel a sense of lessening ties with their home culture. Physical distance from family and friends creates interruptions and weakens connections with home culture, resulting in a feeling of being caught between cultures (Licumba, 2019; Sverdlik et al., 2018). Attempting to balance their changing relationships while building a new social network in their host communities and countries' cultural differences create uncertainty and confusion for them.

This study offers a critical perspective on how multiple layers of identity and social categorization are interlaced to shape international students' lived experiences in Australia. Nested within the epistemological positioning of feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 2012) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2017), this study examined the international female graduate students' sociocultural experiences during their doctoral studies in Australia. Utilizing the narrative inquiry method, the study unpacks and de-stabilize experiences common to international students. It presents an overview of the complexity of the students' experiences through personal stories and voices.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

One of the phases of life many international students, including international PhD students, may experience in a new country is intercultural understanding. Previous research has noted that intercultural understanding allows students to explore their core values and beliefs, while navigating their personal, academic, and professional selves by shaping multiple identities in the new culture (Bui, 2021). Intercultural understanding may allow international students to gather courage, perseverance, and determination. However, it can also be daunting because it can engender stress in their lives, resulting from language difficulties, racial prejudice, work/career issues and financial concerns (Ikeguchi, 2007).

Pham & Tran (2015) noted that international students who experience cultural challenges resulting from limited intercultural understanding may have a harder time dealing with interpersonal communication problems, lack of social support, alienation, and homesickness. They may greater difficulty adjusting to a new culture, experiencing academic changes, and dealing with financial, emotional and cross-cultural challenges. This adjustment challenges can lead to a lonely life, with a limited understanding of the host country's cultural and linguistic backgrounds, lacking friends and social

networks. This loneliness may then contribute to creating confusion regarding their sense of belonging (God & Zhang, 2019; Sherry et al., 2010).

A lack of connection with the host community encourages international students to seek out people with a shared cultural understanding and language background, who most likely are their national compatriots (Le & McKay, 2018). By so doing, students often create their community with people from the same or similar cultural backgrounds who deal with similar challenges of adjustment in a new (host) country (Gomes, 2015). By creating a community with people from similar cultural backgrounds, international students may have a place to socialize, but this has its disadvantages. The influence of culture and customs associated with students' home countries can create psychological and sociocultural disassociation throughout their study period (Contreras-Aguirre & Gonzalez, 2017; Gomes, 2015).

Students can feel a lack of connection with the mainstream culture of the host country, which emotionally affects their journey in the foreign environment (Russell et al., 2010; Sawir et al., 2007). They can experience a range of negative and emotional responses, including tiredness, feeling victimized, isolation, and loneliness (Newsome & Cooper, 2016; Novera, 2004). Furthermore, international students who feel disconnected from the host culture, and who develop a parallel community only with people who share similar sociocultural contexts, often feel ostracized from the host country (Rosenthal et al., 2007; Russell et al., 2010). Such disconnection beclouds the primary reasons the international students selected an overseas education, which includes developing cognitive and communication skills and contributing to a global, interdependent, multicultural social, economic and political environment (Chira, 2017). Many students may experience this phenomenon, including English-speaking students studying as international students in non-English universities.

It is crucial to note that students' personal and professional engagements play a vital role in international students navigating the intercultural understanding phase (Andrade, 2006; God & Zhang, 2019). Students dealing with heavy study workloads or those with family responsibilities may take longer to make the necessary intercultural adjustments. In contrast, single people living alone or in shared accommodation may have more scope than students with families to socialize and create a social network during their studies in a foreign country (Myles & Cheng, 2003; Pekerti et al., 2020).

Language and communication skills play another vital role during the intercultural understanding phase. Students who are more conversant with the language of the host country tend to acquire the spoken language with its accent and sentence structure quicker than those struggling with the language. Thus, students who share living arrangements with other students from the

same linguistic and cultural background may have more satisfying social lives, as much of their social and emotional support will come from their shared cultural group, but they do little socializing with host nationals (Myles & Cheng, 2003; O'Mahony & Jeske, 2019).

Leask and Carroll (2011) suggested three things that educational institutions can implement to enhance international students' acculturation and study progress. These are formal and informal curriculum alignment, a focus on designing and managing tasks, and staff development programs for intercultural engagement. Still, managing social and personal lives may be more complex than managing academic activities because students' social identities vastly vary due to their contexts, ability and skills. This study explores the complexity of students' intercultural values and social connectedness to develop an in-depth understanding of their social and personal lives during PhD in Australia.

## METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study utilized the narrative approach. The narrative approach weaves stories of life events from a first-person perspective, where stories are related and shared in a direct, personal, and subjective voice. This allows audiences to see and understand the storytellers' narrative of their individual effort and challenges, without assumptions (Haydon et al., 2018; O'Grady et al., 2018). The narratives help in visualizing the storyteller's perspective of how place, time and relationships impacted and shaped their experiences (Clandinin et al., 2017; O'Grady et al., 2018).

The participants invited to take part in the study were female international students pursuing their doctoral degree at an Australian New South Wales University and had completed at least their first year were the potential. The participants engaged in a series of email exchanges with the researcher, to narrate and reflect on the life events of their choices that shaped and influenced their ways of thinking, acting, and behaving at that present moment(s). Thirteen (13) participants agreed to participate in the study and share their personal narratives. The researcher explored the personal narratives while paying critical attention to the diversity of participants' contexts. In a second data collection phase, a one-hour semi-structured interview with each participant.

However, there were challenges in conducting this narrative research. For instance, the identity of the participant could be gleaned from the context of the stories without mentioning the characters' names (McAlpine, 2016). While a de-identification process is vital for confidentiality in research, the stories in narrative inquiry, may be susceptible to meaning and authenticity if all crucial information were omitted. Another challenge of narrative inquiry

relates to how personal narratives may overlook hidden bias and prejudice, which could add layers of complexity (Clandinin et al., 2017). Therefore, the researcher cautions against generalizing the findings to a broader population. Instead, the findings should be interpreted as an attempt to provide an in-depth understanding of the social and intercultural experiences of 13 female doctoral students. Some examples from their narratives are analyzed in this paper.

The narratives were analyzed using a thematic model. Based on feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 2012) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2017), the thematic model establishes the links between stories and identifies the distinctiveness between narratives by theorizing them. For example, the participants' challenges or struggles as international female doctoral students were analyzed based on the intersections of their race, class, gender and cultural differences in the context of Australian universities. Participants' standpoints were also recognized and simultaneously contextualized as they narrated their experiences. The primary concern of this thematic analysis was to illustrate each thematic category's descriptions, including the participants' contextual specificity. Therefore, the researcher applied the thematic model to understand how the participants made sense of their experiences and how their interpersonal and social interactions shaped the construction of their stories' following.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical underpinnings of this study were Feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 2012) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2017), which allowed the researcher to see each participant's positionality as her unique intersectional and focus on participants' narratives through their perspectives and viewpoints. These theoretical approaches acknowledged the participants' life challenges according to their circumstances or uniqueness, such as sexual identity, gender identity, racial or ethnic background, economic status, immigration status, nationality, physical and educational ability and otherness. This recognition of multiple identities and forms of prejudice was the primary step in this onto-epistemological approach to understanding the lived experiences of international female doctoral students in Australia. For instance, those international students dealing with challenges based on their race, ethnicity and language and those struggling on account of their gender identity, age, religion and marital status both faced the possibility of facing the intersection of their multiple identities (Syed, 2022).

Thus, this theoretical framework highlights the importance of valuing the voice of those most directly impacted because they are often excluded from mainstream conversations (Crenshaw, 2017; D'Cruz et al., 2017). By

valuing voice, this study lifted, promoted, and supported the participants' storytelling and recognized that multiple intercultural, social and academic identities are inseparable from each other. It acknowledges the uniqueness of each and every international female doctoral student's intercultural positions and circumstances, and identifies the existence of systematic and institutionalized layers of inequality that foregrounds the participants' perspectives on sharing their stories of their lived experiences.

## **SOCIAL AND INTERCULTURAL ADJUSTMENT ISSUES**

Moving to a new country has its benefits and struggles. International students often find it confusing and complex at the beginning because they focus on the cultural practices of their new country, while trying to learn new lifestyles and adjust to their study practices at the same time (Chira, 2017; Newsome & Cooper, 2016). For international doctoral students, cultural adaptation occurs while being required to sustain high academic performance. They may have to deal with the potential for financial insecurity, isolation from loved ones, confusion over academic and cultural requirements, linguistic misunderstandings, stereotypes, racial and cultural discrimination, and conflict between one's home nation and host country lifestyle (Pekerti et al., 2020).

For example, Ana's narrative reveals that she holds a unique identity due to her specific sociocultural context. Her sense of belonging is fluid as she moves between two disparate cultures during her PhD. Her cultural complexities seem to arise from the mismatch between expectations and experiences because international students who come to Australia to experience living in a multicultural society may find it challenging initially to mix with the locals and find like-minded people socially. Ana's narrative described how her position shifted in regional Australia from someone who felt welcomed and belonged in a social group to someone isolated from social support and healthy social life. Ana's social challenges were influenced by her culture and were further compounded by her changed economic situation, where she went from working full time to living on an international student scholarship or subsidy,

The story has been much different since moving to Australia. We (Ana and her Partner) both have struggled to find a network of people we can call "close friends". The people we do consider friends are mainly outsiders. This is a much smaller (regional) city...with less cultural diversity. I miss the sense of belonging and feeling welcomed into the community. There was no social life (unlike home country) because we did not really have money to go anywhere. Like we could

not go anywhere, and we could not really do much. So, it was a bit hard. (Ana, Guatemala)

Multiculturalism is the view that minority groups deserve acknowledgment of their cultural, racial and ethnic differences within a dominant political culture (Eagan, 2021; Koleth, 2010). Acknowledging minority groups' cultural, racial and ethnic identities confirms their contributions to the community and demands protection under the law for specific cultural groups (Eagan, 2021). A report published by Australian Human Rights Commission (2014) pointed out that although multiculturalism is largely supported, 18% of Australians experienced discrimination and exclusion in their neighborhood, shopping centers and work because of language, accent, skin color, ethnic origin or religion. Koleth (2010) suggested that multiculturalism largely depends on country-wide policies and practices. Thus for as long as Australian national policies and practices fail to effectively plan to accommodate, recognize and support the diversity of international students within the multicultural society, their struggles may be hidden and unrecognized within and outside Australian universities. Therefore, students like Ana, who comes from a vibrant community, will find Australian social life 'a bit hard' to adjust and could experience loneliness.

International students in Australia encounter additional complexities if their home country's culture is strikingly different from the dominant white Australian culture (Pekerti et al., 2020; Torrens blog, 2018). They deal with adaptation challenges, including a new organizational system, local people's attitudes, and the loneliness experienced when away from family and friends (Ward et al., 2001). Rosenthal et al. (2007) pointed out that these adaptation challenges largely depend on the lack of social connectedness, which the host country and the host universities should consider when working with such students. There is room to improve international students' sense of belonging, especially those who appear to be disconnected and without support. Cristiane's narratives, for example, describes how she felt the loss of social connectedness once she moved to Australia,

My current community is different. I do not have any family members in Australia, and my "family" became my Brazilian friends. I attend a church, but it is not the same as the church I grew up in – it feels like people do not like to get as involved as in Brazil, so when I first moved to Australia, I missed this sense of community...I did find it a bit hard to make new friends in the beginning, though – Australian people are very "friendly" and informal (similar to Brazilians), but as a whole, they feel like they do not need to establish bonds. Having lunch together in a work environment is a huge part of our (home)

culture, and this is possibly the thing I found the hardest to adjust when I first moved here – most of my co-workers (in Australia) either skip lunch or have lunch in front of their computers. (Cristiane, Brazil)

Students who fail to create a social connection after a significant effort may suffer negative physical and psychological well-being (Ward et al., 2001). Cristiane's narrative demonstrates that she was trying to establish a social connection at the workplace and in the community. However, her foreign status and contextual knowledge about the church and work culture hindered her from establishing that link. It explains how keen she was to make connections in the community before she realized that her experiences were mismatched with her expectations. Feminist standpoint theory helps us to see and understand the world through the participants' eyes by applying their vision and knowledge to social engagement and social changes (Pandey, 2016). So, when we read Cristiane's narratives, we see her world through her eyes, noting where she struggled to find and create social bonding due to her social positionality in Australian multicultural society.

The struggle can be more complex when students experience specific or individual challenges. Cristiane was emotionally vulnerable because she was missing the personal and social connectedness that she had in her home country. She needed more support, including friends or like-minded people with whom she could establish supportive social connections. However, creating individual support that could aid her needs is challenging for any organization, including universities and local/regional governments (Rosenthal et al., 2007). It is more challenging to support students from diverse backgrounds than domestic students because international students' social struggles have additional layers of complexity due to their varied sociocultural backgrounds (Koleth, 2010; Rosenthal et al., 2007). Female doctoral students are further committed to high academic and personal duties, thereby limiting their capacity to establish links in the community. As the participants struggled to establish their social connectedness in Australia, they felt unstable in their social and community life. Therefore, Cristiane experienced a lack of social connections and felt vulnerable and helpless.

Mary's narrative adds an additional dimension to our understanding of intercultural adjustment as she explains her concern and confusion about her 'today's' community. She explained that her social positionality as a foreigner created barriers to finding her place within a multicultural Australian community, where social connections do not appear to follow the norms, she was familiar with,

As for today's community, it is a bit more complicated. Being a foreigner, how do you define your community? Am I part of an international people community? Am I part of a French community here? A little bit of both, a little bit of none. Some French people have a family and settled here for some time living with Australian partners, or others are doing an exchange (program), so they are not looking to make a connection with people in the community. I met a couple of French people around my age with whom I hang out regularly, and I believe with are quite close now. As for the international part, you share some impressions of coming into a new country, struggling with differences in culture. There is a bonding link here. It can also be so enlightening to share experiences with people from different cultures. You can understand similar things but never really in the same way because of your history, your background, your belief and your personality. (Mary, France)

The societal exclusion and instability Mary experienced resulted from her unique positionalities, which evolved from her intersectional identities as she belonged to a minority social group. She could not identify herself as a migrant, like those who came long ago and had a stable life; neither did she belong to the more immediate international student group because the academic engagements of PhD students are significantly different from “coursework” students. Mary found French people around her age with whom she shared her social life. However, her confusion about finding her community is still prominent in her narrative, which indicates that her ethnicity, age, nationality, and citizenship status created a complex social location for her. She continued to seek out the benefits that a stable social life can bring.

In trying to find and build social connections, international students often start losing their connection with their home countries, which creates an image of societal exclusion in people's minds and make them feel unstable (Stroebe et al., 2002). As a result, international students try to hold their home culture by living in a parallel community of people with the same cultural background and being detached from mainstream Australia. While this practice may initially help international students settle, it proves ineffective in the long term (Gomes, 2015), as evident in Mary and Nahida’s narrative. Unlike Mary, Nahida was surrounded by the people she knew from her home country. Even though Nahida uses the social connectedness established through her home community to feel socially stable during her doctoral studies, she experienced exclusion and discrimination within that community,

I have a big friend circle...If that is not the case, I may be able to make more friends. I never got the chance to make new friends because I already had old friends here...There are many Bangladeshi (people) who are jealous of me because they are doing masters. I am doing a PhD...Bangladeshi community people - they are treating me differently...They are criticizing me face to face. Just because they are doing masters and I am enrolled in a PhD. I faced that many times. (Nahida, Bangladesh)

Being surrounded by Bangladeshi people and living in a parallel Bangladeshi community in Australia Nahida initially felt benefited. However, she experienced criticism, exclusion and discrimination by the people within that community for being a female PhD student, given that Bangladeshi women are traditionally less respected than men (Asaduzzaman et al., 2017). Thus, she did not achieve social stability. Instead, her intersectional identities, including academic, gender, nationality, and financial condition, inhibited her ability to integrate into Australian multicultural society.

Iskhakova (2018) and Pekerti, et al. (2020) suggest that integrating into Australian multicultural society by finding friends from other regional backgrounds can enhance international students' quality of life and is, therefore, worth the effort. Embedding multiculturalism into society has been an issue of concern for Australian policymakers (Koleth, 2010; Sepideh, 2017). To address this issue, Australian universities have established a number of support services that are invaluable in assisting doctoral students to build such a sense of belonging. However, migrants and international students struggle to be part of Australian multicultural society due the lack of personalization of these services and limited available information about them, as evidenced by examples from this narrative study. It should also be noted that the participants preoccupation with their academic roles and responsibilities left them with little time and opportunities to explore the Australian multicultural community.

## CONCLUSION

The intersection of participants' sociocultural identities, coupled with their academic positionalities, created complex social lives for them during their doctoral studies in Australia. Their sociocultural context shaped their PhD lives, which informed their expectations of doctoral studies in Australia. Participants often compared their current social life with their past experiences in their home countries. Their social and intercultural context shaped their expectations of Australian culture. A mismatch between expectations and reality obstructed their capacity to establish social

connectedness and deal with the complexities of PhD lives. Navigating through the varied experiences while maintaining sociocultural connections was an ongoing process of reflection, sometimes proving to be a significant challenge.

Moreover, their intersectional identities and complex social positionalities excluded them from mainstream students and negatively impacted their ability to build a sense of belonging in Australia during their studies. A sense of belonging in Australia could help them to deal with their intercultural issues and build social connectedness. The current Universities' systems have invaluable support services to assist doctoral students in building a sense of belonging. However, as previously noted, the lack of personalization of these services and limited available information about them have created barriers of access to those services, causing some students express notions of 'invisibility' within the University boundaries (Ferfolja et al., 2020; NSW Government, 2021).

Participants seeking a sense of belonging tend to develop their own coping mechanisms, to feel socially and culturally stable in a foreign country during their PhD (Syed, 2022). Due to the PhD structure in Australia, participants' academic and social lives differed from those of other international students pursuing coursework. Participants' visa status also positions them differently from the migrant community who live in Australia permanently. This combination of circumstances meant that participants in this research reported a different experience of social life during their PhD than other international students and migrants. This expressions of social isolation and exclusion were common and recurrent sentimental feelings in the shared narratives. The participants adopted strategies to create a social network by finding people from similar sociocultural backgrounds, but this only helped some find a social 'comfort zone'. Generally, the participants struggled to maintain a harmonious work-life balance.

Many circumstances that could play a significant role in students' social lives were beyond their control. These include a positive and supportive peer and the university community's failure to assist them in building their social networks within the University. Universities could further customize the support systems according to the student's needs. For example, offering direct support, including legal advice on academic and community rights, could ease students' social challenges. Further educational practice research can provide valuable information at multiple levels. Future research can explore how government officials can improve policies around international doctoral study, provide helpful strategies to deans of schools of graduate studies as they adjudicate on support for international candidates, benefit supervisors by alerting them to what enables and what discourages

international female candidates, and educate future candidates themselves to learning from others' experiences and be alert to what helps progress.

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**SABRINA SYED**, PhD, is in her early academic career. Dr Syed is passionate about teaching and researching equal rights and social justice in education and society. Dr Syed works as a Post-Doctoral Research fellow and Academic staff at the University of Newcastle. Her primary research interests lie in the area of academic integrity, higher education research, multiculturalism, diversity and equality in higher education. Email: [Sabrina.Syed@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Sabrina.Syed@newcastle.edu.au) or [shejuty\\_du@yahoo.com](mailto:shejuty_du@yahoo.com)

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