

Learning in a bicultural context: a biographical case study

Dorathy Hoy
Graduate
University of Technology, Sydney

This article reports on a study focussed on the identity formation of a second generation male Australian Chinese. Learning was a major part of his adult life: from poor beginnings he studied repeatedly to achieve his goals. It was posited that education was the potent force throughout the individual's development. The study, a life story, was underpinned by two theories: (i) Psychological impact of biculturalism: evidence and theory by La Fromboise et al. (1993) and (ii) The seasons of a man's life by Levinson et al. (1978). The factors explored were family and attachment, gender, ethnicity and religion.

The identity of adult education as a field of study is largely premised on the identity of the adult and also that adult development can only have meaning in a given social and historical context (Tennant and

Pogson, 1995, pp.5, 69). The application of research methods to the literary genre of biography has enlarged the human dimension and contextualised the qualitative data obtained from triangulated research methodology and from historical facts. Reflection upon an individual's identity in a bicultural situation is helpful to reveal the differentials of how they 'were positioned' (ascribed status) and the way they 'positioned themselves' (achieved status) in society and understanding how and why this was acquired. This research was generated by two theories that assisted in finding answers to the purpose of the study. So the theories *Psychological impact of biculturalism: Evidence and theory* (La Fromboise *et al.*,1993) and *The seasons of a man's life* (Levinson *et al.*,1978) provided a supportive structure to consistently and simplistically integrate knowledge of the subject (Feist 1994, p. v).

The purpose of the study was, first, to investigate the experiences of an Australian Chinese male centred in the Australian and Australian-Chinese society, from 1926 until the end of the Twentieth century. Secondly, it was to determine what experiences were implicated in the various aspects of his bicultural context, including personal, social, cultural and historical aspects. In a bicultural setting, the sense of self creates cognitive dissonance when competing cultural and social values are different (Markus and Kitayama 1989, p.24). The individual in this biographical study lived within a closeknit household where four dialects or languages were spoken and there was a diversity of cultural practices and educational levels. He faced the dilemma of which Chinese cultural practices he should follow and the Western educational standard he should seek. His sense of personal identity evolved contextualised in its historico-socio-cultural settings.

The notion of identity was explicated in the work of psychologists (Gergen 1993, p.251) on personal identity, in concern of sociologists (Burkitt 1991, p.189) with the social identity and the minority groups, as well as the literary expressions of many cultural identities (Gilbert

et al. 2000, p.44) and viewpoints and was inclusive of evolving concepts of an Australian national identity (McCarthy 1999, p.94). Thus, there emerged a number of dimensions related to the formation of identity: personal, social, cultural and historical. The personal was inevitably set with social, cultural and historical domains and the dimensions of their interactions highly individualistic.

Figure 1 illustrates the interaction between the socio-cultural contexts in which a person functions, the perceived historical events that impact upon them, and their personal experiences. A slice cutting across these interactions could be themes such as as language or clothing or in this case the religious aspects that may be explored.

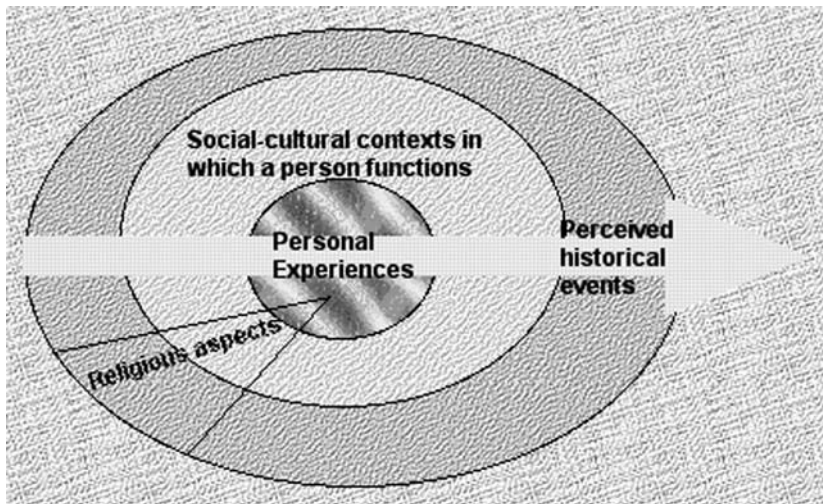


Figure 1: *Psychological – Sociological – Historical – Interaction*

Burkitt's (1991, p.205) study of the formation of personality emphasised the enmeshed link between production, communication and power. Thus cultural identity was positioned within the context of time and place, of history and culture, during the life course of a person's experiences. The questions, "would the individual's

personality be perceived differently by others, when in different work roles?” and “would the individual’s personality or achievements be presented differently when coloured by the background of the commentator?” were drawn from his concern with work and social relations reconstructing our social selves. Burkitt drew attention to the fact that our learnt habits are accepted as a part of our disposition or our tastes, when they were unlikely to be common to the social class or religious or ethnic group in which they were reared (Burkitt 1991, p. 206). He concluded that, “the basis of human difference and individual identity is to be found within society, in the social relations that exist between individuals” (Burkitt 1991, p.189). Just as Jarvis (2004, p.83) stated that “the processes of learning appear in interaction between people, and between individuals and experiences.”

The Study

Adult development is based on expertise gained from dealing with concrete problems and situations at work, in the home, and in community life (Tennant and Pogson 1995, p.33). The notion of identity is intertwined in the concept of an Australian-born Chinese that developed in the Australian post-World War II society. This concept distinguished Chinese families who had remained from the colonial period from those who came later as part of Government Plans, or as migrants or refugees. The term was worn as a crown by these early families to symbolise their acceptance by mainstream Australians and distinguish them from newer Asian arrivals whose accent was obvious. In the multicultural climate of the 1970s, these families were regarded as model assimilated Australians rather than the earlier enclaves that had formed Chinatowns. As a sub-cultural group they had ensured that almost every Australian country town had fresh vegetables and later that each such town had a Chinese restaurant. Walkey and Chung (1996), who examined Chinese stereotypes in America and New Zealand stated,

“studies have shown that stereotypic attitudes toward the Chinese have undergone dramatic changes over the past century, from undesirable immigrant to model minority. The Chinese appeared to fit better into the family ideal of middle class Europeans than do many other minorities” (Walkey and Chung 1996, p. 283).

The interaction of the personal and social formations of identity in a bicultural context adds an interacting dimension to the problem. Within this context of an individual's personal identity, they might or might not choose to have labels applied to them. In terms of an individual's beliefs, from whichever culture, labels are vital factors in how people perceive their identity and what labels are acceptable or not. Some people have adopted derogatory labels as their own, such as pride in being black. While others rejected identifying with a label such as *banana* for Asians who felt white inside, a description of their assimilation. Consequently, individual identity in a bicultural situation was perceived and negotiated through the process of acculturation and fusion models. Early work by Park (1928) and Stonequist (1935) dealt extensively with marginal people, who were born in one culture, raised in another and belonged to both. They both portrayed a marginal person as a negative stereotype and concluded that “living in two cultures is psychologically undesirable because managing the complexity of dual reference points generates ambiguity, identity, confusion, and normlessness” (La Fromboise *et al.*, 1993, p. 395).

This negative viewpoint was not shared by Goldberg (1941), who saw marginal people as having advantages “living at the border of two cultures”. Analysis of the psychological influences of biculturalism crossed four disciplinary boundaries. Initially, it was the discipline of psychology, which dealt with the individual, emotional and behavioural characteristics. Then education encompassed the relationship with human social structures and sociology followed, examining groups and diverse socio-economic systems and lastly ethnology looked at cultural heritage.

Cultural competence was a multilevel continuum (La Fromboise *et al.*, 1993, p. 396). There were seven variables that our subject dealt with competently. These variables are listed below in italics and exemplified by excerpts from our subject's biography.

- a) *Possessed a strong personal identity* and knew what he wanted to do and did it. He came from an impoverished background but with positive attitudes and did not feel disadvantaged.. He became part of the church and early assumed a leadership role and later a community role as a local alderman.
- b) *Acquired knowledge and beliefs and values of the culture* of a lower socio-economic area in Sydney. He moved from schooling at a Secondary Technical School to a Technical Trade course becoming a Fitter and Machinist.
- c) *Displayed sensitivity to the affective processes of the Australian culture* and readily adapted to this culture so different from his own. He realised that further formal learning was necessary, so he studied part-time to reach Matriculation standard. During this time, his interest in religion accelerated and caused his family great concern. They, through hard work, had acquired a substantial house in a lower middle class suburb. "Why would he want to live "off the plate" (i.e. church collection)?" said his father. Our individual left home. It was an unhappy parting for the No 1 son.
- d) *Was able to communicate clearly in the English language.* He spoke and sang well with no trace of accent derived from the Chinese dialects he heard at home. He had attributes but still wished for further learning. The Central Church Mission provided food, lodging, and access to study, in exchange for certain work duties and solved his need.
- e) Was accepted, *his behaviour* was such that he melded seamlessly into this new life
- f) *Maintained active social relations with his (Anglo-Australian) cultural group*, tutored other students and believed that if you don't look for racism you don't see it.

g) Negotiated the institutional structures of that culture by passing the examinations required by the Church Board, and he was granted entry into the Theological College to acquire formal Theology qualifications.

Now an adult, he did not have a long-term plan but took opportunities as they arose and each learning phase was a step that prepared him for the next. His equable personality and social skills allowed him to function competently in two cultures. However, his absorption into the dominant culture was rapid. He had rarely been into an Anglo-Australian home and when he did it was indeed a developmental learning situation. He faced the dilemma of what cutlery to use and when, the processes of the meal and differing behaviour patterns – all in strong contrast to his Chinese home life. Jarvis (2004, p.83) reminds us that learning is in the first instance a process of receiving and processing any element of culture, received in any way. Our subject observed, listened and learnt.

Gordon (1964,1978) described this ‘acculturation’ period as where the subject enters the structures of the host society and he used a special term ‘amalgamation’ for intermarriage and marital assimilation. This ‘amalgamation’ came about when our individual was appointed as a Probationary Minister to a large Eastern Suburbs Mission. There were no Asians at all in this diverse congregation. Here he met and married an Anglo-Australian, much to the consternation of both sets of parents. This fitted Levinson’s entering the ‘adult world’ period. Then, our individual was appointed to a rural mining town in New South Wales, the first Chinese minister, in that denomination to be sent to a solely Anglo-Australian parish. Gordon (1964, p 71) noted that the assumption of all assimilation models was that an individual lost their original cultural identity as they acquired a new identity in the second culture. They were ‘aliens’ until fully accepted in the second culture. If our subject was not accepted in any way, it was not apparent. He sounded Australian and though he may not have looked Australian, he was welcomed without reserve.

Summarising Chinese settlement and migration in Australia, Choi (1975, p.105) cited Robert E. Park's Race relations theory, as a cycle, "that is, a transition from 'contact' to 'competition' to 'conflict' to 'accommodation' and finally to 'assimilation'." He illustrated this by noting that though the Chinese earlier had clustered together, after World War II, they dispersed into the suburban areas. That was exactly what happened with our individual's family of origin and his extended family. They still kept their inner city Chinese networks and established others within their new Anglo-Australian communities.

Gamage and Mahon (1993, p.119) stated, "that ethnic identity has a static element defined by one's ancestral and genetic links, and a 'dynamic' element defined by the cultural group and territory within which one grows up, works and lives." Our subject clearly showed the 'dynamic' element to be the stronger as his time spent in the Anglo-Australian environment was dominant. Gamage and Mahon also noted, "that migrants of the second generation do feel affected by the tug-of-war between their primary socialisation influences and the secondary ones of their new home." Our subject did not feel any dislocation, so intent was he on his chosen pathway of learning. As with culture, language, understandably, is a crucial factor in the formation of identity and it was vital in this study to determine what language was most used in everyday transactions, and what language competency factors had influenced our subject's work, marriage or choice of other social activities over his lifetime of roles.

Levinson (1978, p.9) in his study 'a season in a man's life' supported Karl Marx's (1969) viewpoint that work was a major social site of identity. The four characteristics named by Levinson were social class origins, racial-ethnic-religious origins plus education and marital status.

Levinson's well known study dealt with three eras – the early 17 to 45 years; middle 40 years to 60 years; and late adulthood covering 60+ years. His overlapping eras he labelled 'times of life'. Each era

brought predictable tasks and the transition periods predictable challenges. This core development theory was criticised for its structured view of adult life. (Knowles 1998, p.173). However, our subject's lifetime events comfortably slotted into, in fact matched with Levinson's Life Task Developmental Model, as noted below:-

- a) in the early adult period our subject moved from a trade course to church activities and formal study;
- b) as he entered the adult world, he was committed to the church and married life;
- c) on his ordination he assumed greater work responsibilities and challenges in this transition period;
- d) at the age of 33 years he created his 2nd life structure and moved to the Far West of New South Wales. Then, he returned to the city and with three children was again within the 'family -fold'.
- e) at the age of 40 years, in another transition period , he experienced a mid-life crisis. He left the church but with the help of church, family and friends secured a house and clerical work, while he studied at night. He created a new life structure, was elected a local alderman and completed his university studies;
- f) during the next transition period he moved jobs , then settled into teaching with great satisfaction for the remainder of his working life; and
- g) he prepared for retirement with further study but shortly afterwards ill health created a greater challenge.

The close relationship of the researcher to the subject provided a greater depth of information to his biography and a verification of facts.

Methodology

The content of this study was the deciding factor in the determination of the method (Flick 1998, p. 5) used in this qualitative research of the

life course of an individual. Biography was particularly suitable. It allowed for a reflection on a myriad of realities and aspects, and was inclusive of the subject, other participants and the researcher (Burns 2000, p.388).

The strategies for sampling the subject's friends, acquaintances and family were threefold. First, a survey was conducted of the subject against which, his own and other's perceptions could be compared. Second, a set of questions was sent for considered written responses that could easily be correlated. Third, a group of interviews was undertaken, that explored his character, personality and the times in his life in greater depth. The subject was aged 74 years, so participants were of a similar age and chosen for their knowledge and experience of him. They provided specific insights of the subject and were willing to give the time to an interview or questionnaire. Geographical distance and the mobility of the participants were also determinants in choosing whether a face-to-face interview or a questionnaire was the most appropriate format. The interviewees were asked their age, gender, cultural background and educational level in case those factors might prove to be notable variables. Both interviews and questionnaires were transcribed in total.

This three-pronged technique provided both quantitative and qualitative information and allowed the researcher to look for convergence, inconsistency and contradictory evidence. The triangulation was specifically achieved by an amalgam of

- (a) cross-cultural Adaptability Self-Administered Inventory (Kelley and Meyers 1995) that psychologically surveyed the subject's adaptability tendencies;
- (b) mailed self-administered written questionnaires to former colleagues and friends who were unable to be interviewed in person;

- (c) audio-taped and transcribed oral face-to-face open-ended interviews (plus one by telephone) that involved the subject, members of his family of origin, colleagues and friends;
- (d) factual documentation of primary and secondary sources, the Family History CD-Rom, original documents, newspaper articles and photographs as a cross-check; and
- (e) analysis of the triangulated data was a stepped process that matched questioning with the underpinning theories. This triangulated methodology, using many sources, disposed bias and provided an empirical link to the theories.

Results and Conclusions

Was education the key factor in the continuous learning of this individual? The in-depth result was a surprise to all involved. It was religion. In mid-life he had moved from preaching to teaching and in retirement is still learning and involved in helping others, in the general community, with his latest interest, that of computers.

Levinson (1978) emphasised the importance of work in a man's life and our individual's working years were made known through the interpretation of the subject's own story and comments of his contemporaries and work colleagues. Each contribution exposed some facet of a chronological period in the subject's working life. Where possible, specific aspects were contrasted and counterpointed with the material from the subject's personal biography.

By immersion in the interview material, as Levinson had done, there developed an intuitive understanding of the man and his life (Tennant and Pogson 1995, p. 71) Religion dramatically changed his life but provided him with opportunities, as through church contacts he obtained an apprenticeship. Church activities and influence inspired his intense reading and a desire for more learning. He attempted the Matriculation certificate by private study and failed. Not deterred, he worked in the City Markets as a salesman in the mornings so that he

could go to a coaching college in the afternoon. His second attempt at Matriculation succeeded. He changed allegiances and moved to a Central Mission church, and some local friends followed him. He was intensely driven to learn more and when he told his parents that he was to train in the church institution, they were appalled. He had rejected his father's way of life at a time when his father had provided better living conditions for the family. His father had lost 'face' because of his eldest son's decision and our subject was no longer welcome in the family home.

However, caught up in his new life, his learning was both formal and experiential. He pursued his prescribed studies in theology, New Testament, New Testament Greek, homiletics and public speaking meanwhile absorbing this 'other world' of Anglo-Australians. He was strongly motivated; he set his goals and took responsibility for his own actions. He presented a positive image of an Asian-Australian identity assimilated to the point of fusion.

Most of our subject's study periods were pedagogical but his learning patterns moved from *dependency to independency*; he accumulated a *reservoir of experiences on which further learning was constructed*; he was in a *state of readiness* to develop socially and he moved *from subject to performance proficiency* (Knowles 1980, pp.43–45). In the study, there was an ample amount of data to counteract bias. Knowles (1998, p.152) made the point that "learning is a complex phenomenon that defies description by any one model". In conclusion, as Jarvis said, (2004, p. 83) "everybody's experience is unique and as individuals grow older so their uniqueness is even more apparent".

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About the author

Dorothy Hoy is a lifelong learner and has taught in classrooms and school libraries, from preschool to tertiary levels, in positions of responsibility. Her particular interest is Chinese in Australia. She is a graduate in adult education (BEd Hons) from the University of Technology, Sydney.

Contact details

(Mrs) D. Hoy, 10 Dock Road, Birchgrove, NSW 2041

Tel: (02) 9810 7446

Email: hoy@easy.com.au