

RESEARCH SUMMARY:
**The Role of Awareness and Agency
in Cultural Identity Construction**

What was done?

As part of my honours project in cross-cultural psychology, I decided to focus my research on exploring the nature of cultural-identity. Specifically, I wanted to see how individuals perceive and experience their cultural-identities when they are exposed to a new cultural environment. My research focused on answering two key questions:

- a) how aware are individuals of their cultural-identities, in the sense that they consciously consider and think about them?
- b) how much agency or 'choice' do individuals feel they have to construct their own cultural-identities?

To explore these questions, I conducted 11 one-on-one interviews with foreign-born Muslim women living in New Zealand. The reason I chose to work with the Muslim community is that, with the increasing Muslim population in New Zealand (and across the globe), it is of utmost importance that we better understand the nature of the Muslim cultural-identity so we can best accommodate for their cultural needs. I also wished to give voice to the Muslim population to help combat some of the negative information about Islam circulating in the media today. In the interviews, the women shared their perceptions around culture and cultural-identity and how these perceptions were influenced by their experiences of living in a foreign cultural environment.

What was found?

The results from the study showed that, on the whole, the participants varied in the degree to which they were aware of their cultural-identities. In other words, some of the women had consciously considered and examined their cultural-identities more than others. Interestingly, many of the participants expressed that, through their exposure to a culture different to their own, they became more aware of their own culture and cultural-identities. The following is the general pattern that emerged from the interviews:

- On being exposed to new cultural environment, the individual realises that their previous perspective of culture and cultural-identity was limited and that the cross-cultural experience broadened their view.

- The individual then seems to begin to consider their own cultural background and cultural-identity, examining why they think what they think and why they do what they do (becoming more aware of their cultural-identity).
- Following this, the individual then applies this to their new cultural environment, examining the behaviour and perspectives of others.
- This sort of consideration of alternative perspectives then seems to lead to a higher level of acceptance and tolerance of difference of other cultures and cultural perspectives.

Another significant finding that emerged from the results was that a possible relationship might exist between cultural-identity awareness and level of perceived choice in cultural-identity construction. The study showed that, on the whole, those participants who expressed a high level of cultural-identity awareness also seemed to perceive themselves as having more control in choosing how they wish their cultural-identity to be.

Those participants who felt they had more control over their cultural-identity construction also seemed to be more satisfied with it. These participants appeared to be more comfortable when faced with conflicting cultural views. It is important to acknowledge however that 'cultural-identity' meant different things to different participants and the way it was defined and expressed varied considerably across the interviews.

Overall, the results from this study allow us to better understand how it is that Muslim women perceive and experience their cultural-identities and how this is influenced by exposure to a foreign cultural environment. Importantly, this study suggests that through an increased awareness of one's cultural identity, one may feel they have more control in actively shaping their cultural-identity in a way that seems best for them.

What will happen next?

It is my intention to further this research by developing a cultural-identity awareness scale as part of my Masters thesis. In this research, I aim to examine whether the results found in this study hold true with a larger sample population and if the same patterns are found for individuals from other cultural-backgrounds.

I would like to thank all of the women who were kind enough to share their time and experiences with me. It was an enlightening and enjoyable experience and I hope that this work can be of some benefit to them and their community.

The article presented here provides an overall summary of the major findings of the study.

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