

Who am I?: Identity changes in recent immigrants



RESEARCH

‘Identity development during cultural transition: The role of social-cognitive identity processes’

by Agnes Szabo and Professor Colleen Ward (2015)

Published in *International Journal of Intercultural Research* 46, 13-25.

Background

In a highly globalised world where more than 300 million people are living as international migrants, it is important to better understand how cultural transition from the home country to the host country affects migrants’ adaptation.

Previous research has indicated that a strong sense of identity helps a person feel good and balanced. However, to reach that point a person needs to have actively examined and questioned identity issues such as beliefs, aspirations, and values.

This type of identity exploration is particularly relevant to migrants who have to confront these issues when they make a cultural transition and become faced with contradictory demands from their heritage to host culture.

The Centre for Applied Cross-cultural Research, part of Victoria University of Wellington, undertook a study to determine how recent immigrants use different strategies to positively adapt to their new environment.

Main research findings

It was found that immigrants who think critically about their own and others’ views and are willing to adapt their identities to suit their new environment, are more likely to have higher self-esteem and feel more confident in who they are.

In contrast, immigrants who avoid considering alternative viewpoints and therefore are unwilling to consider adapting new identities, are more vulnerable to cross-cultural difficulties.

These immigrants who are more resistant to change and prefer to follow tradition and social norms of their heritage culture are more at risk of identity confusion. However, it is possible for immigrants to have a preference for the values and norms of the heritage culture, but at the same time develop commitments to the host society. This also leads to better adaptation such as greater self-esteem, self-acceptance, and self-confidence.

Relevance of findings to New Zealand

In a bicultural nation with a growing multicultural population, it is important for migrants and Kiwis with a bicultural identity to be able to navigate between their heritage and host society identities. By better understanding how cultural transition affects identity, we can help encourage positive and coherent identity adaptation.

These findings can be applied in a variety of settings including educational institutions and in work environments. Helping immigrants understand the New Zealand culture, while also encouraging the maintenance of their own heritage culture, can help build a strong identity and lead to better adaptation.