Mindful identity negotiations: The acculturation of young Assyrian women in New Zealand

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

In recent decades many Assyrians have fled their homeland in Iraq to escape religious and ethnic persecution. This study explored how young Assyrian women in New Zealand manage and negotiate identity dilemmas in everyday situations. It was informed by 400 h of participatory action research-inspired ethnographic work with 60 young women (between 16 and 25 years) and 72 Assyrian adults (53 women and 19 men); six interviews and a series of five focus groups with young Assyrian women; four interviews with Assyrian parents and two interviews with teachers of Assyrian students. A thematic analysis was employed to analyse transcripts and field notes. Participants conveyed complex feelings about their attachment to Iraq, New Zealand and the Assyrian community and attempted to attain optimal inclusion in these in-groups by carefully positioning themselves in a manner that intercultural communication theorists describe as 'mindful identity negotiation' (Ting-Toomey, 2005). This highlights the contested and negotiated nature of the acculturation process, which is rarely illustrated in quantitative studies focusing on acculturation orientations.

1. Introduction

Despite the abundance of research examining how migrant and refugee young people respond to moving into a different culture (experiencing a process of change known as *acculturation*—see Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001), our understanding of how they actually integrate and become 'bicultural' has remained vague. Accordingly, this paper takes a close look at how young Assyrian women in New Zealand manage expectations and assumptions about how they should 'adapt' or 'maintain' their culture. New Zealand's small Assyrian community has grown considerably since a number of refugees settled here in the early- to mid-1990s, when Assyrians were dispersed around the world in the aftermath of the first Gulf War (Veitch & Tinawi, 2006). Little research has been undertaken to explore how Assyrians are adjusting to this relocation.

Studies examining how migrants and refugees respond to the acculturation process often employ Berry's (1997, 2001) framework of acculturation orientations. This framework consists of four categories (integration, assimilation, separation and marginalisation) depicting the extent that people identify and are involved with their heritage and national ('host society') cultures, respectively. The most preferred and adaptive acculturation orientation among migrant populations is typically *integration*, which represents a desire for both the maintenance of one's heritage culture and the adoption of aspects

of the national culture. Conversely, *marginalisation* – a rejection of both cultures – is seldom preferred and is generally associated with the least adaptive psychological and sociocultural outcomes (Arends-Tóth & van de Vijver, 2003; Berry, 1997; Phinney, Berry, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Ward et al., 2001).

Whilst studies examining the incidence and correlates of acculturation orientations provide a broad picture of the attitudes that migrants hold towards their national and heritage cultures, they typically offer little explanation of how people manage cultural differences in everyday life. Arends-Tóth and van de Vijver (2006, p.54) ask "*Does* [integration] *mean that immigrants combine both cultures in all their behaviour or that they switch between cultures*?" Reports of 'blended', 'fused' and 'alternating' biculturals indicate that they may do a combination of both (e.g. Deepak, 2005; Hedegaard, 2005; Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997).

Some migrant youth combine and switch between two cultures with apparent ease (e.g. Kim, Brenner, Liang & Asay, 2003), whilst others report conflict and tension from trying to reconcile cultural differences (e.g. Hamilton, Anderson, Frater-Mathieson, Loewen, & Moore, 2000; Hedegaard, 2005; Lee, 2001; Schapiro, 1988). This has been described as 'identity conflict' (Stuart, 2008). Cetrez (2005) notes that Assyrian youth in Sweden find it difficult to be and act integrated, for Swedes often treat them as foreigners, even when they had lived in Sweden for their entire lives. On the other side, they are pressured not to act too Swedish from members of their ethnic community who fear assimilation.

This example highlights how the acculturation orientations that people consider to be possible and preferable are influenced by dominant attitudes within their ethnic community and the general public. Indeed, some migrant youth report dealing with cultural differences by identifying themselves and behaving according to the culture that is dominant in a particular situation (Cetrez, 2005; Gow, Isaac, Gorgees, Babakhan, & Daawod, 2005; Hedegaard, 2005; Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997). This strategy has been labelled 'bridge-building' and 'alternating biculturalism.' Young migrants have also described overcoming gaps between the cultures by 'blending' or 'fusing' cultures, such as by dating but remaining a virgin until marriage (e.g. Deepak, 2005; Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997). Yet, our knowledge about *how* migrants reconcile, merge or switch between two cultural identities in their everyday life remains vague.

Ting-Toomey's work in the field of intercultural communication provides insight into what might drive attempts to fuse or alternate between different cultural identities in interpersonal conversations. Intercultural communication theorists study how people engage in communicative strategies (known as 'facework' and 'identity negotiation') in everyday conversations to validate the group- and person-based identities to which they align themselves (Imahori & Cupach, 2005; Ting-Toomey, 2005). Drawing on Brewer's (1991, 1996) optimal distinctiveness theory, Ting-Toomey (2005) explains that in order to attain this validation in everyday conversations, people strive to attain a balance between a sense of inclusion and acceptance on one hand (positive face), and autonomy, differentiation and freedom from imposition on the other (negative face).

According to Ting-Toomey (2005), people engaged in intercultural encounters may find it particularly difficult to attain a balanced sense of optimal distinctiveness. She notes that some people (known as 'dynamic biculturalists' or 'dynamic cultural transformers') learn to creatively manage the inclusion–differentiation identity dialectic through attuning to their own and other people's identity issues in a conversation. Such people are said to demonstrate *mindful identity negotiation*, which refers to a "*readiness to shift one's frame of reference, the motivation to use new categories to understand cultural or ethnic differences, and the preparedness to experiment with creative avenues of decision making and problem solving*" (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p.226). People who do not engage in identity negotiation consciously, and continually draw on familiar categories and frames of reference, are said to be undertaking *mindless identity negotiation*.

1.1. Acculturation in New Zealand: the experience of young Assyrian women

New Zealand's *National Settlement Strategy* (NZIS, 2004, p.3), like that of many other nations, recognises the benefits of migrants feeling accepted and being connected with both their national and ethnic cultures. It proposes that immigrants and refugees should "*feel safe expressing their ethnic identity and are accepted by, and are part of, the wider host community*". Likewise, the Office of Ethnic Affairs states that it is important that "*Each ethnic community is celebrated as part of New Zealand society, and diversity in culture, language and religion is valued*" (Office of Ethnic Affairs, 2002, p.15).

The principal researcher's involvement in a small research project with Assyrian boys in Wellington, New Zealand under the supervision of the second author led her to question the extent that these policy goals were being realised for Assyrians in this country. The boys participating in this study experienced difficulty being both Assyrian and Kiwi at school and at home. At school, they felt that their teachers and other students discriminated against them. At home, they felt that their parents would not accept their desire to participate in social activities with other New Zealand teenagers (Armstrong et al., 2005). At the end of this project, some Assyrian adults informed the researcher that Assyrian girls experienced similar – but also quite distinct – challenges adjusting to life in New Zealand, especially with the changing expectations for role of Assyrian woman in society. These women encouraged the researcher to conduct research to better understand the settlement experiences of young Assyrian women, and to explore how they can be supported to achieve their potential in New Zealand (see Collie, 2007 for details on the full research project).

Inspired by the principles of participatory action research (PAR), both community and academic-oriented goals were formulated for the research. PAR emphasises the value of conducting research *with* (rather than *on*) people to share knowledge and stimulate action to achieve positive outcomes for the target group (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005; Pain, 2004; Williams, 2004). PAR originated in Kurt Lewin's work in the industrial relations sector in the 1940s (McNiff, 1988; Gustavsen,

2001; Pasmore, 2001; Walsh et al., 2001). Lewin's action research process involved testing theory through engaging in a cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting with all involved.

In subsequent decades, researchers inspired by participatory development and research theory (e.g. Park, Brydon-Miller, Hall, & Jackson, 1993) called for the emphasis of AR to shift towards challenging social inequalities and achieving change on *participants*' terms, rather than for the development of academic theories that are not always applicable in the 'real world' (Gustavsen, 2001). PAR recognises that people have privileged knowledge about how their life situations could be improved and have a right to contribute to research and development projects that affect them. Therefore, PAR practitioners strive to maximise participant control and ownership over the design and implementation of the research (Pain, 2004; Kindon, 2005), and have moved away from the more top-down theory-testing research process advocated by Lewin.

Accordingly, the design and focus of the current research was developed in consultation with members of Wellington's Assyrian community. The academic aspect of the study was refined over the course of the research to focus on how young Assyrian women manage and negotiate identity dilemmas in everyday situations. Additionally, a community objective was developed, which stated intent "*To facilitate a research process that is a positive experience for the participants, in which their views are heard and respected, and there is an opportunity to initiate and/or participate in a project to address issues concerning them.*" The first author worked closely with research participants to interpret the research findings and identify the desired outcomes—including the possibility of engaging in an action project.

1.2. The relevance of identity negotiation for young Assyrian women

Prior to the present research few studies internationally – and none in New Zealand – had been conducted to investigate the acculturation experiences of young Assyrian women. Assyrians represent an important case study in terms of identity negotiation, because they are not widely known outside the Middle East and often have to explain their ethnic identity to others.

Assyrians[2] are an ethnic group of Christian faith who originate from Iraq and surrounding countries, which once made up the ancient region of Mesopotamia. Whilst they may look Middle Eastern, they have a distinct culture and identity that differentiates them from the Arabs and Muslims that people typically associate with this region. Almost 60% of New Zealand's total Assyrian population of 1680 reside in Wellington, where the research took place (Statistics New Zealand, 2007).

Modern-day Assyrians place much importance on retaining their culture and language, for they have suffered considerable religious and ethnic persecution throughout the centuries, which has left their population fragmented and dispersed around the world. Assyrians adults in Sweden, Australia and the United States of America report concern that future generations will forget their Assyrian culture and language (Badal, 2001; Cetrez, 2005; Gow et al., 2005). Yet these fears may be unfounded, for Assyrian young people in these places indicate that they strongly identify with their ethnocultural heritage (Armstrong et al., 2005; Cetrez, 2005; Gow et al., 2005).

At the same time, many of these Assyrian young people are eager to fit in with their peers from other ethnic groups and adapt to the local culture. Like other migrant and refugee youth (e.g. Kegler, Young, Marshall, Bui, & Rodine, 2005; Lin, 1986; Schapiro, 1988; Zhou, 1997), they tend to adopt the language, norms and values of a receiving society at a faster rate than their parents (Armstrong et al., 2005; Cetrez, 2005; Gow et al., 2005), thereby creating an 'acculturation gap' in their families. Cetrez (2005) and Gow et al. (2005) observe that Swedish- and Australian-Assyrian youth deal with these cultural differences by identifying themselves and behaving differently when they are at home as opposed to when they are with their peers at school (i.e. they engage in 'alternating biculturalism'—Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997).

However, Cetrez's (2005) research revealed that others did not necessarily recognise that the young people could (or should) alternate between the cultures in this way—with Swede's treating them as foreigners and with Assyrians criticising them for engaging in assimilationist behaviour. This is in line with Hermans' (2001) observation that it may not be evident to a migrant which culture is or should be dominant within a particular situation. In such cases, it could be that these new settlers engage in communicative strategies such as mindful identity negotiation. The present research explores how young Assyrian women express and negotiate their identities in everyday conversations in New Zealand.

2. Methodology

An ethnographic methodology was employed to allow the researcher to get to know young Assyrian women living in New Zealand and observe how they negotiated, fused or alternated between their identities in situations in which they were relaxed and comfortable. The first author spent approximately 400 h with members of the Assyrian community over the course of a year at their Church, homes, parties, weddings and picnics. Focus groups and interviews were conducted to delve deeper into the young women's settlement and school experiences; whilst informal conversations allowed the researcher to build relationships with participants, gain a thorough understanding of the their everyday experiences, and explore opportunities for applied research outcomes.

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[2] Assyrians are also known as Suroyo (Suroye in plural), and refer to themselves with this term when speaking in their own language. The term 'Assyrian' is used here because the researcher was introduced to the community with this term and used it (and heard it) throughout her English-language discussions with members of this ethnic group and the teachers who taught them.

At the conclusion of the research, participants indicated that they wanted their teachers and Assyrian adults to better understand the challenges they faced as young Assyrian women in the New Zealand educational and social system. For a number of reasons discussed in Collie, Liu, Kindon and Podsiadlowski (under review), participants chose to do this anonymously in the form of a research report, which was drafted by the research team and reviewed and edited by participants.

2.1. Participants

The principal researcher spoke with 60 young women (between 16 and 25 years); 72 Assyrian adults (53 women and 19 men); three teachers who taught Assyrian women in public and private spaces in the course of the research. This included semi-structured interviews with six young women; a series of five focus groups with young women at their school; four interviews with Assyrian parents (two mothers and two fathers) and two interviews with teachers of young Assyrian women. This multi-pronged approach was undertaken to get a holistic perspective of the young women's experiences of life in New Zealand, and with the recognition that issues identified in the research could not be addressed by working with the young women alone.

Participants had lived in New Zealand for between 18 months and 20 years, with most having resided in this country for between 3 and 11 years. The young women who were interviewed had lived in New Zealand for between 3–16 years, with an average length of 7.5 years. All research conversations with the young female participants were conducted in English, which was spoken relatively fluently by all of those who had lived in New Zealand for over 2 years.

A core group of eight young women came to all – or almost all – focus groups, whereas other young women came just once or twice. This meant that participant numbers ranged from 4 to 13. The focus groups were held approximately a week apart at a school with a considerable Assyrian student population, during the lunch hour. Three of the young women who were interviewed privately (Esther, Gina and Lisa[3]) also attended the focus groups (although Esther only attended one). The other three young female interviewees (Joanna, Laura and Kelly) no longer attended high school. Two of these participants had left school when they were 16 years old; the other had finished high school and had gone on to study at university.

2.2. The interview schedule

The questions posed to the participants throughout the ethnographic conversations, individual interviews and focus groups were guided by an interview schedule that covered three broad topics: *perceptions of school*; *future aspirations and expectations*; *family relationships*. Introductory questions were included to allow the researcher to get to know participants, such as "*Can you tell me a bit about yourself and what your experience has been like coming and living in New Zealand*?" The questions were developed in consultation with members of the Assyrian community.

Questions regarding *perceptions of school* focused on the participants' experiences of school in New Zealand and their perception of what influences the decisions that young Assyrian make to stay at school and go on to tertiary education. Questions regarding *future expectations and aspirations* were oriented towards exploring the future career and educational pathways that the young women were considering, and what they felt would make it easier or more difficult for them to reach their goals. Questions related to the research topic of *Family Relationships* explored how members of the participants' families were adjusting to life in New Zealand and their views about what are key aspects of the Assyrian culture that they would like to pass on to future generations. For example, participants were asked "*How are your parents coping with life in New Zealand*?", "*What impact does moving to New Zealand have on Assyrian families*?" and "*If you were a parent, how would you bring up your children*?"

At the beginning of each focus group and interview the researcher attained permission for the conversation to be taped and transcribed for use in the research. Interviews lasted from 1 to 2 h, and were held at the participants' home or a local café, according to the participants' wishes.

2.3. Analytical approach

The research team undertook a thematic analysis to organise and interpret the data attained through participant observation, interviews and focus groups. Thematic analysis is based on the identification, organisation and interpretation of patterned responses (or 'themes') within a data corpus (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was selected for its flexibility, because the corpus included diverse data types (e.g. field notes, transcripts, personal critical reflections). This approach also allowed more focus to be placed on common concerns and ideas than on individual accounts and interpretations.

2.4. Identification and validation of themes

Themes were selected inductively, through identifying repeated ideas and response patterns across the various datasets. Firstly, the most basic – but meaningful – segments of the data items were coded using NVivo software. The principal researcher then considered the relationship between codes and grouped associated codes together into themes and sub-

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[3] In order to protect participants' identities, pseudonyms have replaced actual names.

themes. A thematic map was drawn to explore how these themes fitted together in a meaningful way in order to identify broader, overarching themes, which were reviewed and critiqued by the research team.

In the course of this process, the principal researcher also engaged in 'member checking' (Herr & Anderson, 2005) with members of the Assyrian community to ensure that the research findings accurately captured their views, in accordance with the research ethics of participatory action research. This involved holding a follow-up interview (or interviews) with research participants to clarify and discuss points from the previous interview. The researcher also discussed emerging themes with other members of the community to refine and verify interpretations being made. Additionally, she worked through parts of the focus group and interview transcripts with members of the research team so that they could assess the dialogical validity (or 'research integrity'—see Herr & Anderson, 2005) of the conclusions being drawn.

3. Results and discussion

The following paragraphs explore three themes that illustrate how participants articulated what they saw as key elements of their culture and described their attachment to Iraq and New Zealand. The young women negotiated the expression of complex feelings on this topic through moving between describing Iraq as a place of beauty and happy memories, and as a place of fear and hardship. Similarly, they alternated between on one hand portraying New Zealand as a familiar place of safety, freedom and opportunities—and on the other hand expressing concern about the discrimination that Assyrians face in this country. The young women also provided careful responses to questions posed to them about their feelings about the Assyrian and Kiwi cultures, so that they conveyed how they both want to change and stay loyal to the Assyrian culture.

3.1. Theme one: Iraq as a beautiful place of happy memories… and fear and hardship

Participants seemed eager to share their positive memories of Iraq. Assyrian young women and adults often nostalgically described the large Assyrian communities, pace of life, caring neighbours, beautiful places and delicious food that they had in Iraq. However, after making such statements, they typically shook their heads and said that it is a "*hard life*", and "*not safe*", and "*scary*" there. For example, for much of her interview Gina spoke very fondly of Iraq. Consider how she described the church she attended there.

Extract 1:

361	Gina:	… we had bells church bells oh God I miss our church
362	Philippa:	Yeah
363	Gina:	So beautiful (.) like a really big church like not like than this one
364	Philippa:	Yeah yeah
365	Gina:	It had a big garden
366	Philippa:	Cool
367	Gina:	And you know at the top there were like these windows and there were like these angels and when the sunshine oh my God it looked like heaven was open so beautiful I miss it

(Gina Interview, 18\09\06, Lines 361–367).

Yet, just moments later, Gina gave a much less positive portrayal of life in Iraq, as she explained why she thinks there are less Assyrian men than women in New Zealand and in Iraq.

Extract 2:

381	Gina:	I mean they all died
382	Philippa:	They died in the war
383	Gina:	Many of them didn't come ba:ck (…) they went missing [?]
384	Philippa:	It's hard aye
385	Gina:	Some people believe they are like out there (…) our neighbour (.) she had her son he was missing for fifteen years
386	Philippa:	Oh
387	Gina:	He went to Iran and then he was missing like those Iranian people they catched him (.) and then like they used to torture him a lot

(Gina Interview, 18\09\06, Lines 381–387).

The manner in which many of the young women rapidly shifted between different constructions of Iraq had parallels with Hermans' (2001) metaphor of multiple identity positions sitting inside participants' heads and competing for dominance over each other. These contrasting identity positions may have arisen as the young women drew upon representations of Iraq

associated with different points in time. For example, several adults remarked that they were once good friends with Muslims, but that it changed when the Gulf War and/or the American invasion began and Assyrians were suspected of siding with the foreign enemy.

Additionally, the variable views that the young women expressed towards Iraq may reflect uncertainty about how they felt about this country, given that most had left Iraq when they were small (between five and eight) and had little memory of it. The statements that such participants made about Iraq were probably influenced by various positive and negative stories they had heard from relatives and friends about Iraq. In turn, the prevalence of these stories may have been influenced by the following points that Wellington-based Assyrians wanted to get across to their children and to the New Zealand public. Firstly, that the dominant construction in New Zealand of Iraq as a barren, war-torn and deprived country is false; secondly, that Assyrians were victim to many injustices in Iraq at the hands of Muslims.

It is perhaps significant that the only cases identified in the literature review in which participants expressed mixed attitudes towards their country (or culture) of origin and settlement within the course of an interview were with another group of Assyrians (Badal, 2001) and with Lao refugee adolescents (Schapiro, 1988)—who were also from a small community of people who had suffered marginalisation in their country of origin. It could be that people from such backgrounds have learned to be mindful of the way that they identify themselves (in response to discrimination in their country of origin and settlement); and/or are particularly likely to have mixed memories about their country of origin.

That said, the studies reviewed about other refugee communities which considered feelings towards their country of origin tended to describe participants as *either* nostalgic or holding negative attitudes towards it (Al-Rasheed, 1994; Barnes, 2001; King & Ganuza, 2005; Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2005). It could be that descriptions of more clear cut attitudes towards one's homeland and culture are a product of participants giving a coherent narrative over a single interview, or of authors focusing on *general* impressions they were given. In the present research, the Assyrian participants clearly had two narratives that they wanted to convey about their home country.

3.2. Theme two: New Zealand as a place of opportunities... and discrimination

Whilst a number of participants indicated that they considered New Zealand to be their home, some Kiwis made it difficult for them to feel this way. The young women explained that most Kiwis have never heard of Assyrians, and constantly ask where they are from (even if they have lived in New Zealand for most of their lives). Once they learn that Assyrians are from Iraq, people often assume they are Muslims and associate them with stereotypes they hold about Middle Eastern peoples. Consequently, participants typically hastily informed new acquaintances that Assyrians are Christian, are 'peaceful people', and are very different from Muslim-Iraqis.

For example, consider the following extracts.

Extract 3:

261	Philippa:	Um (...) oh yeah (.) and imagine you meet someone who doesn't know anything about Assyrians [[both laugh]] like you might have experienced this!
262	Laura:	Yes
263	Philippa:	Um so what do you tell them?
264	Laura:	The first thing I say is we're not Muslims we're Christian! [[laughs]] Because most of them think Assyrians from Iraq are Muslim (.) they all think we're gonna attack us whatever and it's like ok we're not th:at (.) we're totally different people (.) we're Christians we're not Muslims (...) and there is no country called Assyria (...)

(Laura Interview, 12\03\07, Lines 261–264).

Extract 4:

209	Freya:	Whoever asks like what nationality are you I never say Iraqi because they'll think you know Arab but I always say Assyrian and they say "what, Assyrian?"
210	Gina:	Yeah (.) yeah
211	Philippa:	And so what do you say then?
212	Freya:	I say oh no I'm still from Iraq but I'm Assyrian they say "oh what's that?" I say (.) Christian Iraqi
213	Gina:	=They think you'll have a bomb around you [[laughing]] (.) Exploding any minute

(Focus group 3, 04\09\07, Lines 209–213).

Participants were clearly aware that Kiwis tend to fixate on their ethnic identity and hold stereotypes about them. They quickly disputed these stereotypes (such as that they are terrorists, do not value gender equality or are overly strict with their daughters) whenever something that they or the researcher said could be seen to perpetuate them. For example,

consider how Lisa quickly assured me that a lot of women graduate in Iraq, immediately after disclosing that she was happy that she had undertaken her schooling in New Zealand.

Extract 5:

49	Lisa:	…I don't ever really wish that I went to school in Iraq really (.) 'cause yeah (.) we have more opportunities for studying and doing what we want (.) so (.) yeah (.) I really like school here (.) its great
50	Philippa:	What kind of opportunities do you like [?]
51	Lisa:	Oh (.) like (.) for example (.) like (.) women can do more men jobs here (.) if you know what I mean? (.) Yeah but I mean (.) a lot of women did graduate (.) in Iraq

(Lisa Interview, 03\09\06, Lines 49–51).

Similarly, when the young women informed me that some of their Assyrian peers married at a young age, most couched this information with statements like "*It's their choice*" (Julia—Focus group 4, 12\09\06, Line 288), "*You're not forced to get married at a young age*" (Lisa–Julia—Focus group 4, 12\09\06, Line 245) and "*You're allowed to get married to some other* [non-Assyrian] *guy*" (Focus group 4, 12\09\06, Lines 520). This ensured that the researcher did not presume Assyrian parents forced their daughters into arranged marriages, thereby perpetuating the stereotype that Assyrian parents were overly strict with them.

The manner in which the young women anticipated and counteracted potential face threats in these conversations can be seen as examples of mindful identity negotiation. These pre-emptive assertions ensured that the researcher understood that they are not *so* different from other Kiwis and did not reproduce stereotypic views of their experiences as young Assyrian women.

Importantly, at the same time as the young women counteracted stereotypes and informed me about discrimination and other challenges they experienced in New Zealand, they often added positive statements about this country, such as that it is safe, the people are friendly, and that there are many opportunities here. Most of those who perceived discrimination in New Zealand indicated that they would remain in this country rather than return to Iraq, because they are used to the Kiwi lifestyle and can no longer speak Arabic. The young women's reflection on more positive feelings about New Zealand may have helped them to reconcile this decision.

Additionally, the juxtaposition of contrasting views of New Zealand seemed to be driven by the desire to maintain good interpersonal relationships, through preserving the 'face' of other people and seeking their approval in return. The friendly relationships that the researcher developed with many participants may have meant that the young women wished to avoid hurting the researcher's feelings (as a Pākehā or European New Zealander) when they gave their opinion about living in New Zealand. This might explain Hannah's sudden change of position in the following extract.

Extract 6:

267	Philippa:	What advice would you give to an Assyrian girl like living in Iraq who was going to come here (.) and study?
268	Hannah:	Get ready for the worst [[laughs]]
269	Philippa:	Get ready for the worst really?
270	Hannah:	I mean she'll be in heaven when she comes she'll be safe (.) yep
271	Philippa:	So (.) so that's one good thing but then there's lots of bad things as well?
272	Hannah:	Mmm
273	Philippa:	So how what kind of what kind of the 'worst' things does she need to prepare for?
274	Hannah:	There isn't any bad stuff actually I'm just making it worried but (.) if you look at it like (.) I think when you come here it's good…

(Hannah Interview, 18\09\06, Lines 267–274).

The interview recording revealed tones of dismay and concern in Philippa's voice as she repeated Hannah's comment that an Assyrian girl coming to New Zealand should "*Get ready for the worst*" (line 269). It seems that Hannah responded to this concern by abruptly altering her position, reassuring Philippa that "*she'll be in heaven when she comes*" (line 270) and that "*there isn't any bad stuff actually*" (line 274).

Participants also changed positions within a conversation in reaction to statements their peers made on the same topic. For example, in the third focus group Emily went from stating that there are more job opportunities in Iraq than New Zealand, to arguing that Middle Eastern migrants do not have problems attaining employment in New Zealand if they have qualifications from this country (Focus group 3, 04\09\07, Lines 172–181). These statements were made in the context of a discussion about discrimination of Iraq and New Zealand, in which the collective opinion moved from stating that job opportunities were limited in New Zealand, to acknowledging that Assyrians also experienced discrimination in Iraq, and that Assyrians could get jobs here once they gained New Zealand qualifications.

3.3. Theme three: New Zealand as a threat to the continuity of Assyrian culture

The young women also positioned themselves mindfully when questioned about Assyrian cultural traditions that they would or would not like to continue in the future, and how they would like to raise their children. Whilst many approved of certain practices they associated with the Kiwi culture, they did not necessarily openly engage in or advocate for them. They were aware that if they did, older people in their community would accuse them of turning their back on their Assyrian heritage and culture.

Accordingly, several participants reported alternating between cultures and hiding their participation in 'Kiwi' activities (such as having boyfriends; going out with their friends at night) from their parents and other Assyrian adults. Similar alternating behaviour has been described by Assyrian youth in Sydney (Gow et al., 2005) and young people of migrant origin from other cultures around the world (see Hedegaard, 2005; Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997).

The young women wished that the older generation understood why they wanted to engage in these 'Kiwi' activities. Eva suggested that this research should "*explain to the old people that they [young Assyrian women] have to act a bit differently with English people so that they fit in with them—it's not that they are bad, they just want to fit in…*" (Field notes—Eva, 01\06\07, Paragraph 4).

At the same time, many young women expressed sympathy with their elders and understanding about their position. They remarked that the Assyrian culture and language is all that the older people have left now that they have been relocated to New Zealand, and that is why they want their way of life to change as little as possible. Furthermore, many echoed their elders' concerns that the Assyrian culture and language might one day be forgotten, given that they are ethnic minorities in every country that they inhabit. In one focus group, Eva exclaimed "*We're losing our culture like day by day*" (Focus group 4, 12\09\06, Lines 476–488).

Their culture and community seemed to be a strong source of support for many of the young women. The experiences and background that they shared with other Assyrians created a sense of solidarity that they could draw on when faced with discrimination and stereotyping from (other) Kiwis. Therefore, it was of utmost importance to participants to maintain their loyalty to their community—even if there were some aspects of their culture that they wished to modify to fit a New Zealand lifestyle.

Many participants who expressed a desire to adopt Kiwi customs showed their commitment to retaining their culture by subsequently moderating this desire, adding that they would not stray from Assyrian ways *too much*. For example, when they remarked that they wanted to be allowed a boyfriend, they made it clear that they still would follow the Assyrian norm to remain a virgin until marriage. Similarly, they suggested they would give their children more 'freedom' than they themselves were allowed—but would have discipline rules and ensure that they respected their elders.

In this way, the young women generally showed no sign of being oriented to one culture or the other in the researcher's presence, even if they described themselves as switching between the Assyrian and Kiwi cultures across situations. They altered the way they identified themselves and the attitudes they expressed towards the Assyrian and New Zealand cultures *within* as well as *across* interpersonal encounters.

To illustrate, when Joanna was asked how she would bring up her children if she was a parent, she initially espoused an assimilationist point of view, stating that she would bring them up "*completely not like a Assyrian*" (Joanna Interview, 20\03\07, Line 344). However, she immediately modified this assertion: "*I would give them freedom (.) but like a good way of freedom (.) not like whatever whatever whatever (.) so they don't respect me (…) I would give them whatever they need (.) whatever they want whatever they want to do (.) but not too bad things like going out drinking wearing slutty clothes*" (Joanna Interview, 20\03\07, Line 346). Joanna subsequently suggested that she would like her children to go to the Assyrian church and show respect to their parents and older relatives, indicating that she *did* want her children to adopt some Assyrian values. Thus, in the course of the conversation she moved from endorsing assimilation to expressing support for an integrated acculturation orientation.

It could be argued that participants who resolved discrepancies between the Assyrian and New Zealand cultures by expressing the desire to adopt some Kiwi customs *but not too much* can be equated with 'fused' or 'blended' bicultural youth identified in previous research (e.g. Deepak, 2005; Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997). However, cultural fusion/blending solutions were only provided for selected topics, such as regarding their future parenting style and how they would enter into a relationship with a member of the opposite sex. The young women did not necessarily describe combining both cultures to a great extent in their everyday lives or give a sense of being equally Assyrian and Kiwi—as implied in descriptions of 'fused' or 'blended' young migrants in the literature (Arends-Tóth & van de Vijver, 2003; Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997).

Indeed, Hannah expressed a much greater affiliation with the Assyrian and Iraqi cultures than with the New Zealand culture. She remarked: "*we come here with so many [?] so many memories from our Iraq good memories (.) I just don't think you could feel that this is your country yeah* (Hannah Interview, 18\09\06, Line 700)." Yet, she suggested that she would give her children more freedom than her parents currently granted her.

Whilst *other* Assyrian young women associated allowing children to have greater freedom with New Zealand culture, Hannah deemphasised this aspect by describing her parents' parenting style as "*the old Assyrian way*". This allowed her to position her desire for change as a desire for *generational* change (towards the 'new' Assyrian way) rather than *cultural* change, thereby preserving her professed loyalty and commitment to her Assyrian identity. Hannah further ensured that her desire for a different kind of relationship with her own children was not taken as a rejection of her culture or her parents by adding "*I would have discipline rules*" after stating that her parenting style would be different to her parents' (more strict)

approach. Hannah expressed a desire for change popular among her peer group, whilst also proclaiming the importance of staying true to her Assyrian culture and maintaining loyalty to her parents that can be seen as an example of mindful identity negotiation.

Hannah's remarks illustrate how a new settler's desire to adapt (some) of their heritage culture customs does not necessarily reflect identification with the national culture. In making them, Hannah rejects the static, essentialised notion of culture constructed in popular discourse and upheld by the older people in her community, in favor of a more dynamic interpretation of the meaning of 'culture'. From this perspective—described by Hall (2003) and widely accepted among cultural and cross-cultural psychologists (e.g. Berry, 2002; Reese, 2002; Rudmin, 2003; Strauss & Quinn, 1997), cultural identities undergo constant transformation, as shared values and traditions rise and fall with the interaction between ecological changes and the decisions that humans make about what they want to transmit to the next generation.

On one hand the changeable opinions that participants expressed about whether it was possible or desirable to change Assyrian customs and/or adopt Kiwi customs may reflect the desire to show loyalty to various people and achieve positive interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, it can also be attributed to the complexity of their feelings and the broad range of notions they might conjure when thinking of what characterises Assyrian and New Zealand culture. The young women participating in the research may have never sat down and made a conscious decision about how they would 'maintain' and 'adapt' their culture. The variation in responses attained from individuals over the course of the research may have been a sample of their thought processes as they worked through such questions.

These observations correspond with those made of a group of migrant youth in the International Comparative Study on Ethnocultural Youth (ICSEY) who were identified as having a 'diffuse' profile. These young people were described as being uncertain about their place in society, endorsing multiple acculturation orientations in the space of one survey (Phinney et al., 2006).

Considering that in the ICSEY study the diffuse profile was most prevalent among adolescents who were of a similar age (15–18 years) to the young women participating in the research, it could be that the variable views voiced about cultural maintenance and adaptation was a product of the young women's developmental stage—a stage in which they are searching for clarification of their identity (Erikson, 1968). On the other hand, it could also be linked to the relatively short length of residence that many participants in the present research had spent in New Zealand—which is another factor that the ICSEY researchers linked to the prevalence of the diffuse profile (Phinney et al., 2006).

That said; it is important to note that some participants who had lived in New Zealand for most of their lives also made statements that could be interpreted as signalling quite different acculturation orientations. Furthermore, the ICSEY survey respondents who were categorised into the diffuse profile reported a marginalised acculturation orientation (indicating low levels of affiliation with both their heritage culture and the receiving society); whereas the participants of the present research almost always went on to affirm their allegiance and loyalty to their ethnic culture.

4. General discussion

The manner in which the young women carefully positioned and re-positioned themselves as they described their experiences in New Zealand and how they felt about the Assyrian and New Zealand cultures illustrates how combining the New Zealand and Assyrian cultures together or stating a preference for one over the other is a contentious subject.

Quantitative surveys that categorise participants according to Berry's (1997, 2001) four acculturation orientations have shown that people alter how they approach questions of cultural maintenance and adaptation across different life domains (e.g. Arends-Tóth & van de Vijver, 2003; Clément, Noels, & Deneault, 2001; Taylor & Lambert, 1996). Yet, they do little to reveal the complex ways in which people negotiate such questions *within* an interpersonal situation, as demonstrated in the present research.

Previous research has suggested that bicultural youth may resolve tensions between their national and ethnic cultures by either 'fusing' (blending) them together, or by alternating between them across situations (Deepak, 2005; Hedegaard, 2005; Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997). Many of the young Assyrian women involved in this research described adopting – or expressed the desire to adopt – both of these solutions. However, in contrast to Phinney and Devich-Nevarro's (1997) findings with bicultural African- and Mexican-American youth, the young women indicated a preference for one or other of these strategies according to the particular situation at hand, rather than expressing a dominant preference for one approach.

The manner in which many of the young women altered their position about how they intended to continue or adapt Assyrian cultural practices in the future may indicate that they were uncertain about their opinion on this complex matter, which they may not have previously considered. The ethnographic methodology employed meant that close relationships and relaxed, free-flowing discussions developed between the participants and the researcher. It could be that this research approach created situations in which the young women felt more comfortable voicing opinions that they had not yet fully thought through than they would have in a formal interview or a survey setting.

Participants may have modified their responses as they became aware that expressing one view towards the Assyrian or New Zealand cultures could potentially compromise another perspective that they also wanted to convey. To Assyrians, they were driven to affirm their commitment to their shared identity and culture, whilst also rationalising the adaptation of some aspects of this culture with their peers—which some members of their community regarded as a sign of cultural erosion. To

New Zealanders, they were compelled to counteract stereotypes and act in a way that would help them 'fit in' with their Kiwi peers—whilst not denying their ethnic background.

The way that the young women oscillated between expressing allegiance with the Assyrian and Kiwi cultures supports Hermans' (2001) theory of the dialogical and multivoiced self. Hermans (2001) proposes that people internalise multiple 'I' positions that include aspects of the self (*internal I positions*, e.g. 'I as a mother', 'I as an optimist') and relevant people in their environment (*external I positions*, e.g. 'my father', 'my colleagues'). He describes these positions as internal and external voices arguing, negotiating and competing for dominance over one another inside a person's head, inducing them to reposition themselves as various identities become salient.

Hermans (2001) observes that people who move into a new cultural environment experience positioning conflicts as they come into contact with new cultural norms and different expectations. This suggests migrants may feel compelled to validate divergent identity positions *within* (rather than merely across) interpersonal situations. It may not be evident how they can reconcile, fuse or switch between multiple cultural identities.

Accordingly, Hermans (2001) remarks that academics who describe acculturation orientations as linear end-goals ignore the impact of power asymmetries between immigrant and host groups in the acculturation process. Hermans recommends that acculturation researchers "*shift from a focus on developmental end-states (like 'integration' or 'competence') towards a more process-oriented notion of acculturation that can account for situated, negotiated and often contested developmental trajectories*" (Hermans, 2001, p.272).

A useful approach for understanding a process-oriented notion of acculturation can be found in the analysis of everyday conversations advocated by intercultural communication theorists. Ting-Toomey's (2005) identity negotiation theory suggests that research participants may have modified the attitudes they expressed towards the New Zealand and Assyrian cultures in order to maintain positive relationships with people they knew (present or absent) who had a range of opinions on these cultures. Through positioning themselves carefully (engaging in what Ting-Toomey, 2005, describes as 'mindful identity negotiation'), participants validated their relationships with their family, members of the wider Assyrian community, and their (Assyrian and non-Assyrian) peers at school, whilst engaging in a pleasant, mutually supportive conversation with the researcher.

The way that people strengthen and redefine their identification with a stigmatised group, or shift allegiances to other groups to maintain a positive self-concept in the face of discrimination has been termed 'social creativity strategies' in social identity research (Reicher, 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The flexible discourse offered by the young women about their historical experiences in Iraq as they employ these strategies support the notion of agenda-driven rather than fixed social memories (Liu & Hilton, 2005) and accord with more constructionist readings of social identity theory (see Reicher & Hopkins, 2001) in dealing with national/ethnic identity. These strategies can be seen as a form of mindful identity negotiation.

The observation that the young women engaged in social creativity strategies when their identity as an Assyrian or as a citizen (or resident) of New Zealand was threatened supports Ting-Toomey's (2005) suggestion that oscillations of the inclusion–differentiation identity dialectic triggers such communicative strategies. Brewer (1996) explains that people seek to balance their sense of inclusion with and differentiation from other people so that they attain *optimal distinctiveness*. This terminology implies that a sense of inclusion is taken for granted, and that the challenging aspect is attaining an optimal level of differentiation from others. However, the young women in the present research seemed more concerned about gaining *optimal inclusion* in New Zealand society and the Assyrian community than being (optimally) distinctive or unique.

Many participants were attempting to achieve and maintain membership in multiple in-groups—as a member of the Assyrian community, as a New Zealander, and as a member of the Assyrian-Kiwi youth culture that they have formed among their Assyrian peers (i.e. a blended or fused identity—Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997). Considering that each of these in-groups contain members that considered membership to be exclusive and double identification to be impossible, it seems that their simultaneous inclusion in each of them is not necessarily secure.

4.1. Implications for acculturation theory

These findings highlight how the manner in which people act in accordance with the culture of their ethnocultural group or receiving society – and believe this is important – is influenced by their social milieu. This influence occurs on a macro-level, as they are exposed to the attitudes that their family and members of the receiving society hold towards the desirability and possibility of cultural maintenance and adaptation. It also occurs on a micro-level, as people are motivated to behave and identify themselves in a way that elicits the approval of others and promotes mutual respect and validation—even when speaking with others whom they do not perceive to share a common identity.

Without doubt, Berry's (1997, 2001) typology of acculturation orientations and the concepts of 'cultural fusion' and 'alternating biculturalism' are useful for identifying *general tendencies* in the way that people orientate towards their heritage and national cultures, and the positive and negative acculturation outcomes that can be linked with these trends.

However, it seems that in everyday encounters the lines between Berry's (1997, 2001) acculturation orientations become blurred. It is apparent that the single category of 'integration' can represent a myriad of different ways of combining two cultures and appraising the role of these cultures in one's life. Whilst young migrants may describe combining their heritage and national cultures in a way that fits the concepts of cultural fusion and alternating biculturalism, the manner in which they do so in conversation is likely to be highly selective and is influenced by the dynamics of interpersonal situations. An

intercultural communication approach presents a useful way to examine the complex and dynamic ways that people negotiate conflicting norms and expectations of different cultural groups.

4.2. Suggestions for future research

It would be worthwhile to increase our understanding of the role of mindful identity negotiation and feelings of ambivalence and uncertainty with regard to questions of cultural maintenance and adaptation in the acculturation process. Are ambivalent or uncertain feelings on this topic more prevalent among people of refugee background and/or young people? What implications do they have for psychological and sociocultural adaptation outcomes?

A related question is to assess how common mindful identity negotiation is among members of marginalised groups (including those from refugee backgrounds) and people who perceive discrimination, compared to other members of the general population. It could be that young Assyrian women develop a tendency to engage in mindful identity negotiation after settling in New Zealand, as they learn to avoid eliciting negative reactions from other Assyrians for acting too 'Kiwi', and become adept at counteracting stereotypes from New Zealanders. It is also likely that Assyrians negotiated their identities mindfully in Iraq, as they managed their position as an ethnic and religious minority.

Mindful identity negotiation needs to be more tightly conceptualised in order for questions about prevalence to be addressed. For example, it is not clear to what the extent the shifting identity positions evident among many of the participants in the present research can be attributed to 'mindful identity negotiation', as these identity shifts could represent uncertainty rather than a conscious attempt to negotiate one's multiple identity positions.

Another subject for future research is whether mindful identity negotiation is associated with better sociocultural competence and intercultural communication effectiveness; or with identity conflict (see Stuart, 2008) and a marginalised acculturation orientation. The manner in which the young women moved between supporting different acculturation orientations in their speech has similarities with the young people categorised as 'diffuse' in the ICSEY project (Phinney et al., 2006), who were identified as having a marginalised acculturation orientation. Yet, the young women involved in the present research indicated that they placed high value on the maintenance of their culture, which is not concordant with a marginalised orientation.

Ting-Toomey (2005) implies that people who engage in mindful identity negotiation have superior intercultural effectiveness, suggesting that it is a characteristic tool of 'dynamic biculturalists'. Such biculturals are said to have knowledge of different value systems; have acquired a "*comfortable and coherent*" sense of identity; can *effortlessly* shift among "*multiple cultural mindscapes*" (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p.225). The young women who participated in the present research certainly seemed aware of values important to New Zealanders and shifted their frames of reference to manage the identity dialectic of inclusion–differentiation, as 'dynamic biculturals' are said to do. Yet, given that this often occurred from a position of defensiveness against identity freezing and stereotyping, it seems that this process was not particularly "*effortless*", and that the young women had not necessarily worked out a "*comfortable and coherent*" sense of identity (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p.225).

That said, young women who had lived in New Zealand for most of their lives seemed to be more 'comfortable' with their identity, which fits with Ting-Toomey's (2005) suggestion that such identities develop over time. At the same time, 'comfortable' should not be mistaken for 'automatic' or for 'without awareness'; 'coherent' should not be mistaken for 'consistent.' These young women were careful and conscious in certain situations as they conveyed how they can be *both* Assyrian and Kiwi; similar but distinct. It would be valuable to further investigate the role that mindful identity negotiation plays in the establishment of 'comfortable' identities.

4.3. Conclusion

This study has illustrated how young Assyrian women may attempt to convey and affirm allegiances to multiple groups within an interpersonal situation. Further research could determine the extent that other young people from ethnic minorities share these negotiation patterns. Such knowledge could be usefully incorporated into intercultural awareness training, to help people understand how difficult it is to attain 'optimal inclusion' when faced with people on both sides who consider group membership to be mutually exclusive. Optimal inclusion rather than optimal distinctiveness may be the keyword for successful identity management among some migrant groups.

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