Ties that Bind: The Strategic Use of Transnational Relationships in Demarcating Identity and Managing Difference

Melissa Butcher

Transnational migration is disrupting definitions of cultural identity as its processes of cross-border mobility unsettle associations between people and place. Relationships, as one element of everyday cultural practice that circumscribes identity and belonging, are also affected by this mobility. Using data from qualitative research with Australian transnational professionals working in Asia, this paper elaborates on the interaction between identity and relationship formation. The findings indicate that participants’ attempts to develop professional and social relationships in a new cultural context lead to a re-evaluation of identity and the development of mobile subjectivity to manage difference and re-find points of comfort defined by shared meanings. The analysis is placed within broader reflections on the processes of migration and the dynamics of cultural change that are taking place within transnational global flows, supporting arguments that processes of deterritorialisation do not necessarily equate with declining allegiance to a national identity.

Keywords: Transnationalism; Migration; Relationships; Culture; Identity

Introduction

Later on, in the office, the guy said to me, ‘Well you’re a turncoat because, when you’re with Westerners, you say one thing and when you’re with Asians, you say another thing!’ And I said ‘Oh, I take that as a compliment!’ (laughs). And he said, ‘No, you’re a turncoat. You need to decide where you are.’ (HR Manager, Asian Australian background, telecommunications sector, nine years in Singapore, returned to Australia).

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Deciding ‘where they are’ or where they belong is a conscious dilemma for mobile transnational professionals. Gina, the Australian manager quoted above, was already creating ambiguity because of her Asian appearance. Now she could no longer be identified as a ‘Westerner’ by her Australian co-worker because she had stepped beyond the limits of expected behaviour associated with that label, defined in part by a perception of appropriate relationships with local Singaporean staff. There is a need expressed in these comments to ensure correct practices are upheld as manifestations of more-deeply held values of belonging. In this case, those practices revolved around relationship formation and maintenance that demarcated shared meanings, familiarity and, consequently, identity.

I have suggested in earlier work that identity (for example, overarching cultural referents such as ‘Australianness’ or specific social identities such as ‘expatriate’) is constituted by a set of everyday practices, value recitation and recurring relationships (Butcher 2003). Transnational mobility impacts on all three of these facets but this paper will focus on the latter—on the role of relationships in the process of re-evaluating identity in order to manage the encounters with cultural difference that are inherent in transnational mobility.

I argue that relationships—human ties established in the repetition of social practices and reflective of particular shared values—demarcate an association with an identity. The networks of relationships within which people comfortably operate simultaneously reflect and reinforce associated identities. Transnational movement subsequently engenders a process of identity re-evaluation as mobility, and inevitable contact with difference, disrupt the familiar cultural frames of reference that underpin identities, including established relationship networks. The discomfort of difference, which often becomes evident in initial attempts to form intercultural relationships, is resolved through association within new relationship networks (which require adapting the understanding and performance of identities) or supporting and reinforcing the boundaries of existing relationship networks that reflect expected cultural norms. The ability to move between relationship networks indicates the development of more mobile subjectivities as a strategy to re-find points of comfort in new cultural contexts.

To examine this argument, this paper documents the dynamics of relationship formation and maintenance among a group of Australian transnational business-people working in Asia. An examination of the impact of transnational mobility on the dynamics of relationships allows for a further reassessment of its role in identity formation, the interconnection between place and identity, and further exploration of questions around integration and separation in settlement practices.

Identity and Relationship Formation

Relationships appear integral to a transnationalism marked by interpersonal connections that transcend national societies but do not necessarily exclude them (Ho 2006: 386; Kong 1999; Yeoh and Chang 2001). Conradson and Latham (2005),
Lessinger (1992) and Vertovec (2002) have all emphasised the importance of relationship networks for economic and social functions within transnational migration. Economic success and social status no longer depend on acculturation but, for some, on ‘cultivating strong social networks across national borders’ (Portes et al. 1999: 229). Vertovec (2002) focuses on the prosaic uses of these networks in recruitment and ‘brain circulation’. Nowicka (2007: 80) suggests that highly mobile transnational professionals organise home primarily around people, utilising relationship networks to reproduce familiarity. However, Ghosh and Wang (2003: 280) argue more forcefully for the importance of relationship networks in influencing the retention and expression of identities.

Participation in relationship networks not only suggests a shared identity but also the delineation of spaces of belonging associated with that identity. For example, there is a sentiment in some research that the mobile life of transnational professionals uncouples them from a relationship with the nation-state, creating denationalised identities and contributing to the nation-state’s decline (see Bauman 1998: 58; Huntington 2004; Sklair 1998). Others argue that all is not so fluid in the contemporary transnational social space, and that place, and its associated identity references, cannot be neglected even for a highly mobile managerial labour force. Faist (2000: 218) suggests that there is no ‘deterrioralised space of flows. [Dual citizenship and transnational syncretism] only makes sense when firmly tied to specific spaces in different nation-states’, with, I would argue, concomitant expressions of identity. This paper argues that those spaces of belonging are demarcated in part by relationships.

Wang and Kanungo (2004: 775) suggest that ‘human beings have a fundamental need to belong, which motivates the establishment of significant interpersonal relationships and frequent contacts with other people’. This need creates the basis of relationship formation which is operationalised through the workplace, the social sphere (e.g. friendship networks), and kinship. These interpersonal connections are marked by degrees of affective closeness and attachment. For Lawler (2001), social interaction between people tends to generate positive or negative emotions leading to stronger or weaker ties respectively. In other words, feelings of friendliness will engender behaviour that is more likely to develop close relationships, or affective attachment, while feelings of frustration or fear may engender distancing between people.

Wang and Kanungo (2004: 777) characterise relationship networks by size, diversity, localisation, intensity and frequency of contact (see also Vertovec 2001, for his broader summary). Intensity refers to the difference between relationships with ‘loved ones’ and more fleeting engagement with acquaintances—particularly relevant in the context of this study, where relationships in the transnational business sector can be fleeting. However, even transitory participants in relationship networks still adhere to expected norms, sanctions and reciprocal obligations, the elements that also underpin a sense of shared cultural identity. The mobility of transnational professionals is therefore juxtaposed by stoppages at local relational points along the
way, where identity and a concomitant sense of belonging can be expressed (Zsuzsa and O’Riain 2002: 272).

Ho (2006: 388) argues that local geographies, place and settlement are still salient issues, and Guarnizo and Smith suggest that ‘[transnational] relationships are mediated by trans-local understandings’ (1998: 14). They strengthen the idea that the local, with its associated set of meanings, still has a role to play in a global world and that this is connected to the formation of relationships. Yet while relationship networks may still exert a persistent pull as social spaces of identity, and ground that identity within particular places, the connection between transnational and local spaces is being redefined. It is being criss-crossed by multiple connections at differing scales of sociability: from the interpersonal to the local, to the national and to the corporate.

This stretching of relationships as a result of transnational mobility across various boundaries impacts on the subjective understanding and performance of identity as adaptation to new cultural contexts takes place. Former everyday practices, values and relationships on which previous understandings of the self and the collective were based are challenged. These processes of acculturation as a result of transnational mobility have been described and discussed by inter alia Anthias (2001), Conradson and McKay (2007), Glick Schiller et al. (1992), Guarnizo and Smith (1998), Hannerz (2002), Portes (1999), Velayutham and Wise (2005) and Werbner (2005). Hybridity, being ‘inbetween’, and the problematic identification with neither former nor new homelands, are recurring themes in this research. The work to date on transnationalism highlights that there is no simple equation between identity, nationality and ethnicity (Ommundsen 2003: 193), that identity is not static and that there can be a degree of strategic choice in its formulation. Identity is, according to Thrift (1997: 135), ‘polyphonic, that is, plural working in many discursive registers, many spaces, many times’. Because ‘identities cannot be understood as solid, anchored, and narrowly placed’, Dolby and Cornbleth (2001: 293), prefer to use the term ‘moment’, which ‘underscores our recognition that both social identities and transnationalism are varying, sometimes fleeting, conjunctions of time and space’ (2001: 294).

Despite this fluidity, there is also evidence that individuals can still refer to belonging to a unique, homogenous cultural identity (see Ommundsen 2003: 194). Werbner (2005) suggests that migrants first form ‘encapsulated communities’ within a host society delineated by adhesion to a normative cultural identity, but that, within these communities, culture is paradoxically hybrid. I argue that this phenomenon is also apparent among more transitory migrant populations such as expatriate professionals (see Butcher 2004). While Ang (2003: 141) suggests that reclaiming difference is a powerful tool of the marginalised, this paper will argue that it is also a powerful tool for ‘elite’ transnational migrants who need to re-find points of comfort in a new cultural environment that engenders uncertainty.

In the following sections I propose that these processes of identity re-evaluation, whether resulting in expressions of hybridity or revalorisation of cultural identity, are instigated by transnational mobility’s everyday cross-cultural interactions. Conversely,
the inevitable discomfort of this process of re-evaluation is resolved by the strategic use of relationships and associated mobile subjectivity that become part of a cosmopolitan repertoire of competencies to manage difference and cultural change.

The Research

This paper is derived from research conducted as part of the ‘Transnational Corporate Cultures’ research project, designed to explore the impact of culture and mobility in the global workplace. Conducted from 2002 to 2005, the research used a qualitative methodology, maintaining a focus on participants’ everyday experiences—i.e. the process of ‘settling in’, adapting to new workplace practices and establishing new social relationships. Fifty-four in-depth interviews took place primarily with Australian transnational professionals working in the Asia region.

Several participants from Asian and Asian-Australian backgrounds were also interviewed to compare their responses to those of their colleagues and to highlight potential areas of cross-cultural misunderstanding and conflict.

Participant observation in workplace and research sites in Singapore and India also took place in 2003 and 2005. The semi-structured interview schedule elicited discussion on attitudes towards work sites and projects in Asia; the challenges and benefits of working between cultures and within multicultural offices; the impact of workplace practices and organisational culture; transformations in relationships, work practices and business models as a result of cross-cultural interaction; and managing the processes of cultural adaptation, personally and in the workplace.

Two groups of participants were targeted. First were the more mobile transnational professionals based in Australia but managing regional operations by travelling throughout the Asia region. These participants were interviewed by phone or face-to-face, with follow-up questions via email over a period of one year. The second group of participants form the core of the data used in this paper. They are the more familiar expatriates, who, by the Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship definition, have left Australia for more than one year. However, the majority of these interviewees were also responsible for regional operations and would travel regularly from their base in Singapore or New Delhi, for example. Several participants from Asian and Asian-Australian backgrounds were interviewed to compare their responses to those of their colleagues and to highlight potential areas of cross-cultural misunderstanding and conflict. All interviewees quoted are Anglo-European Australian unless otherwise stated. Due to the focus of this particular research, the views of Asian colleagues working with the Australian contingent interviewed are absent—this is certainly an area for further research.

The research cohort was contacted through snowballing3 and their self-selected involvement was voluntary, with no restrictions other than that they had worked, or continued to work, in the Asia region. The material is therefore derived from a diverse group in terms of age (ranging from mid 20s to late 50s) and occupation, and this led to interesting observations with regard to the role of age and time in
managing adaptation. While working mostly in the services sector in Singapore, interviewees were from several categories within that field, including financial services, management consulting, media and law. In India, participants worked primarily in the health, government and infrastructure sectors.

The majority of respondents were based in India or Singapore, chosen as research sites to give a further comparative perspective. The two countries are vastly different in terms of economic and social infrastructure, which can also impact on adaptation strategies (see Nowicka 2007, who observed that certain levels or kinds of infrastructure enabled her participants to feel ‘good’ in a place). Participants tended to stay on average two to three years in an Asian posting, which could also be a staging post from or to other Asian countries, to Europe or back to Australia. Participants in Singapore were more likely to be unmarried and younger than their counterparts in India. One participant was based in Kuala Lumpur but was extremely mobile throughout the Asia region.

There are some arguments that transnational businesspeople should not be regarded as migrants per se as they often disappear in formal, legal labour regimes, for example, not requiring a visa if staying in-country for short periods of time (Guarnizo and Smith 1998; Sassen 2002). However, I would argue that this group is highly representative of transnationalism, given the transitory nature of their movement and a socio-economic position that often sets them above any pretence of assimilation in a host country. The participants in this study are within Smith’s (2005) category of ‘middling transnationalism’, that is, occupying a middle-class status. All worked within the corporate sector, in middle- to senior-management positions, generally sharing similar life-styles, levels of education (tertiary) and consumption habits. They also shared an outward-looking perspective that informed their decision to work internationally. Other motivations to work overseas included an element of tapping into ‘opportunities’ in Asia, career development, financial benefit, ‘adventure’ or some sense of excitement, and gaining cross-cultural experience. There was usually a suite of factors noted by each interviewee, although ‘cross-cultural experience’ and ‘professional development’ featured strongly. Corporate employment was used as a means to engage with, or at least assuage, curiosity about other cultures. Motivations could also change over time. As the research is qualitative in nature, the results are thematic and cannot be statistically generalised. The focus is an exploration of the interaction between identity, mobility and relationships among a cohort of Australian transnational professionals working in Asia.

**Demarcating Identity**

In this section I argue that expatriates’ interactions with local colleagues (primarily in the workplace and some social activities), the expatriate community (both Australians and other internationals, primarily English-speaking) and with ‘home’—i.e. remaining connections with Australia—impact on processes of adaptation and subsequent articulations of identity. The motivation for forming or
maintaining relationships with members of these three categories appeared to be twofold: first, the need to manage relocation in a new cultural context; and second, the need to re-create spaces of familiarity or comfort. Discomfort was created in the tension between cultural difference and the need to belong, as noted by Wang and Kanungo (2004) above, which drives a desire to form new relationships in host countries and to continue associations with former networks that permanently reminded them of other ‘homes’ and other ways of being. The management of difference and perceptions of ‘foreignness’ through the creation of inside/outside dichotomies, that is, inclusion or exclusion from particular relationship networks, appeared to be bound up with this affective dimension of cultural change: the need to feel comfortable.

Local Relationships

The workplace was the main arena of interaction between participants and host-country colleagues yet most participants found it challenging to build social relationships within this space. It was here that differences were the most noticeable, in communication styles, workplace practices and interpersonal interaction in particular. This at times generated negative responses such as ‘frustration’ based on misunderstanding and a lack of awareness of the drivers of cultural difference, but rarely was it articulated that there was no need to establish local relationships. The majority of participants wanted to do so, seeing it as part of ‘the experience’ of working overseas; however, they encountered degrees of difficulty, particularly initially.

I would have liked to have socialised more with Malaysians but it was difficult to be truly accepted. Although people were very friendly and we would go out sometimes, expats were always outsiders. Funnily though, I keep in touch with my Malaysian former colleagues more than the expats (Legal Counsel, utilities sector, four years in Kuala Lumpur, returned to Australia).

Another interviewee reasoned that this difficulty in interacting with local colleagues was as a result of the perception of expatriates as transient. Given the mobility of transnational professionals (sometimes only in a country for a few days or weeks) and expatriates (often moving on after two to three years), there is an ephemeral nature to relationships, marking out what Wang and Kanungo (2004) would describe as ‘low-intensity networks’.

Oh, they will be [transitory friendships]. Yes. ... And I’ve done enough travelling to know that often those friendships will continue with the Christmas cards, and that sort of thing. So, we all need each other at this point in time, for different reasons, and we’ll just see what the future brings for us. That’s fine (Manager, health sector, eight months in New Delhi, three-year contract).

Participants suggested that they may have known more people but they knew them less well: they tended to make more of an effort to form friendships; they were more
likely to include another expatriate they had just met in their social activities; and they might even have found themselves socialising with someone who ‘you wouldn’t necessarily hang out with at home’ (a recurring phrase from interviewees). These responses tended to occur less frequently the longer the stay in-country, however, making time a major mediating factor in the experiences expressed. Other reasons for difficulties in forming local relationships related to finding conducive spaces in which connections could be formed. Identity has become embedded in particular sites. For example, just as there is a Little India and a China Town in Singapore, there are also areas demarcated as spaces for the performance of expatriate identity, such as Clark Quay.

The more overt stumbling block, however, was the awareness of difference. A lack of shared cultural frames of reference and meaning became apparent in initial socialising. This created a sense of ambiguity and subsequently discomfort for both expatriates and local colleagues, hindering the development of local ties, particularly in the short term. For example, ‘Australian’ humour had to be curtailed as it was found by some that jokes were difficult to translate. It was often in sporting activities that interviewees seemed to have the most connection with host-country nationals, yet it was also using sporting analogies that Sarah expressed her frustration at being unable to find frames of reference on which to base local relationships.

I mean, swimming. (…) I mean, nobody … very few people in Singapore can swim, and I just find that really, really odd! And … I mean, I’m not saying they should be an Ian Thorpe, but I’m talking, like, they can’t even doggy paddle or float! So, it’s just really simple little things that really don’t matter, but it’s an example in terms of the difference of lifestyle (Project Manager, IT sector, one year in Singapore, second posting).

Studies in international human-resources management argue that developing local relationship networks assists with adaptation and integration into a host culture (Aycan 1997; Harzing 2001). According to Wang and Kanungo (2004: 777), ‘[a] large personal network in the host country signals that the expatriate has re-rooted his/her network in the new environment’, indicating a greater sense of belonging. Yet various studies, including this one, found that expatriates, particularly initially, are more likely to form connections with colleagues from similar cultural backgrounds with whom they can identify (see also Gudykunst 1983; Manev and Stevenson 2001; Tung 1998). The ease of understanding communication styles or other cultural facets generated more positive emotions than the initial struggles of cross-cultural interaction, which in turn appeared to generate stronger attachments to those who were culturally similar.

‘I didn’t come to India to interact with expats’. That was what I honestly felt and thought … but I gravitated towards that because, after two years, I missed the sharing of a similar kind of culture (Senior Manager, government sector, 2.5 years in Mumbai, three-year contract).
In general, social networks appeared to include mostly other expatriates—not necessarily Australian—and local ‘acquaintances’. There were various permutations but, for those who felt they had deeper relationships with local colleagues and friends, it was usually through long-term business connections or a local life partner. A respondent who had earlier noted difficulty connecting with Singaporean colleagues later stated: ‘I do tend to talk a lot more to the English girl and any other Anglo expats in my office than to anybody else. That’s because I feel more comfortable . . . it can be fun with her’. She also noted that, once she began to have shared experiences with local colleagues, those barriers began to break down.

The initial difficulties in establishing local relationships heightened an awareness of difference in workplace and social practices. This appeared to engender a tendency towards recreating and maintaining a sense of Australian cultural identity within the host country. In other words, participants created an ‘insider’ position to manage being an outsider. This perceived separation between the two is, I would argue, part of the genesis of the perception of expatriates as aloof, separating themselves from the local context. It is interesting to note here the comments of an Indian manager based in Singapore, who stated that it was only Western expatriates whom he had ever heard describing themselves as ‘expatriate’. This term has itself become an identity referent with a set of shared meanings understood by those who adopt the label, manifest in particular practices such as socialising in certain areas and sharing the challenges of working ‘offshore’. Events such as the Bali bombings (September 2002) also heightened a consciousness of ‘foreignness’ that, again, could possibly have contributed to the reinforcement of more-insular boundaries.

Reconstituting Australianness

Despite an emphasis on adjectives such as hybridity to describe the impact of global mobility on identity formation, transnational movement did not in this study necessarily guarantee cultural engagement or cosmopolitanism. For those who struggled with creating local relationships, the community of expatriates became the default position, with its cultural familiarity and easier, more comfortable connections based on shared meanings. Being in a position of ‘foreignness’, in a new, ambiguous context where uncomfortable intercultural contact occurred, at times led to negative feelings (expressed in stereotyping of local culture and colleagues) and withdrawal to relocated borders of identity. These distinctions were created through homogenising references to Australian culture and embodied association with other Australians in an attempt to remove discomfort and, I would suggest, regain a sense of control.

Nostalgia played a role here and the expression of longing for Australia often had gentle overtones of homesickness. Several of the participants in the research fondly reminisced about brunch at the beach, the weather, the landscape, the Aussie larrikin, as well as missing family connections. However, in both scenarios—overt
stereotyping and nostalgic reminiscing—there is a reassertion of identity connected to a geographic place, in this case Australia, defined by imagined shared national characteristics.

So although I feel global in some ways in that I’m sure we could move around the world if we wanted to, I would still feel like the only place we really fit in is Australia (Corporate communications, health sector, three years in Singapore, returned to Australia).

The idea of ‘fitting in’ demonstrates a paradox between being physically re-located but remaining emotionally fixed somewhere else. To resolve this dilemma, belonging to a place called Australia was reiterated through socialising within a relationship network that recreated key markers of Australian cultural identity. In other words, rather than being demarcated by territory, identity became constituted through relationships with other Australians who shared the experience of being a foreigner.

There are bodies such as the Australian New Zealand Association (ANZA) that attempt to fill the nostalgic gap, that is, the sense of loss or missing something expressed by some participants. They organise key functions such as ANZAC Day ceremonies and Australia Day Balls. In Singapore, AustCham (the Australian Chamber of Commerce) runs events that comprise both Australian, other expatriate nationalities and Singaporean participation. There are also the pubs and clubs where expatriates know they can always meet other Australians: the Embassy bar, the Wombat Football Club, the Wanderers Rugby Club and the cricket club, for example. This circuit circumscribes what was commonly referred to by participants as the ‘Western bubble’; a comfort zone consisting of the familiar—in particular, friends, language and humour.

Despite the sense of an ‘encapsulated community’ (Werbner 2005) created in these associations, it was indicative of the fluidity of identity that there were participants who deliberately avoided the ‘Western bubble’, feeling that it perpetuated a part of their cultural identity which they wanted to leave behind.

Half the time I forget that I’ve got a white face here. (…) I don’t hang out at the real, for want of a better term, ‘yobbo’ expat bars here (Consultant, IT sector, seven years in Singapore, resident).

Steve had become more embedded into the place of Singapore via a relationship with his Singaporean life partner. However, this generated a sense of ambivalence with regard to his identity, problematising the notion of Australianness and puncturing any idea that it is an immutable concept despite the recurring motifs in participants’ descriptions. Steve expressed ‘in-betweenness’, citing that he belonged wholly to neither Singapore nor Australia. While this could engender discomfort, it appeared that, over time, it also provided the possibility for him to move in and out of the ‘Western bubble’. He could use the connections within when necessary but was also quite comfortable operationalising relationships with host-country nationals that
developed over time, demonstrating the possibility of inhabiting different cultural contexts and negotiating identities accordingly. Steve’s response was reminiscent of earlier work on the compartmentalisation of everyday practices to manage ‘polyphonic’ identity (see Butcher 2004), and is discussed further below as part of the phenomenon of mobile subjectivity.

In instances where participants expressed a sense of comfort living in a new cultural context, they tended to be more embedded in localised networks. There is a marked difference, however, between the two key research sites, India and Singapore. Participants were more likely to refer to Singapore as ‘home’, expressing a sense of comfort in its surrounds, whether that be immersion in the expatriate community or, more rarely, deeper connections to the Singaporean community.

Well, I mean, Australia’s home when there’s a rugby test or test cricket or something like that. But my wife always says, ‘Home is where the dogs are’, and that’s Singapore (Businessman, twelve years in Singapore, resident).

This did not occur in India for reasons, it could be argued, which included greater cultural distance and poorer infrastructure in comparison to Singapore (see Nowicka 2007). In Singapore, a higher level of development ensures some degree of familiarity on every billboard and in every mall. However, while participants in India generally stayed or were staying only two to three years, they seemed more likely to have host-country nationals within their immediate social relationship networks than those in Singapore. This is possibly the result of critical mass; there are far fewer Australians or other expatriates available to socialise with in India.

For highly mobile professionals, ostensibly based in Australia, relationships were still important for grounding them in place.

Where you’re doing projects and staying in the hotels and stuff . . . you are removed from the normal environment, and . . . it’s very difficult for people to contact you, and you don’t have any friends, so you spend all your time either working or playing with your fellow colleagues. . . . if you can do it continuously, . . . you actually tend to lose all your friends, and all your friends become workmates. Yeah, because your friends would send you emails saying, ‘Do you want to go to a musical?’ or ‘Do you want go to see a movie?’ or something, and you’d say, ‘No, I’m actually travelling this week, and next week’, and so forth. And if that happens continuously, then you just don’t get invited anymore. I [made] a list of my friends that I’ve gone out with, and it just dwindled! (laughs) . . . I thought that a couple more years of that, and I wouldn’t be able to leave! . . . because if you leave, you’re not only leaving [the company], you’re leaving all your friends, because they’re the only friends you have! (Consultant, financial-services sector, based in Sydney).

While this may be more relevant for a discussion on the need for stable relationship networks to maintain well-being among transnational professionals, it is evident from the study that mobility at times endangered ties that bound participants to important sites of identity, in particular, their former home.
Redefining ‘Home’

The importance of maintaining ties ‘back home’ was emphasised in the findings, with several respondents citing a need to return for the sake of family and business networks. Some maintained connections through the media (particularly the internet), and through contact with family and friends, visits and holidays in Australia. However, there is evidence to suggest that, rather than Faist’s (2000) belief that transnational acts only make sense when ‘firmly tied’ to different nation-states, the relationship with one country appeared to become more tenuous and, concomitantly, the relationship with the other became more concrete. This process was connected to the strength of relationships in either place, and was more evident in Singapore. Ho’s (2006: 388) idea of ‘cultural citizenship’ is adapted along with permanent residency in Singapore, while this is much less an option in India given the different visa regimes. There is, as Andrew suggests, a transfer of ‘home points’.

I sort of feel like there’s a finite number of home points, and I’ve sort of transferred some of my home points to Singapore. Singapore feels more like home than it did before when I first came, and Australia feels less like home than it was when I first left (Lawyer, Singaporean Australian, one year in Singapore, resident).

For Andrew, those same markers that had constituted a sense of identity and comfort in Australia—friends, familiarity, ‘knowing the faces’—were re-established in the Singaporean context. If the conditions of comfort as defined by the individual can be met, according to Kivisto (2001), rather than simultaneously living in two worlds, the place the migrant is in is now counts for more and more over time. The findings of the study would concur, indicating that, over time, there is less engagement between some expatriates and the physical place of Australia. However, as noted earlier, the idea of Australianness can be re-created in another country through association and the relocation of everyday practices.

This idea of embedding home in another place was also driven by an overwhelming response of seeing Australia ‘differently’ (from a distance), and emotional responses of no longer feeling related to former anchors such as family and friends ‘back home’ because of shifting frames of reference between the expatriate, and family and peers who have remained in Australia.

I felt completely out of place for the first few months [back in Melbourne] and still find aspects of it quite alienating. . . . If you take to the Asian culture, as many of us did, it can be quite hard to adjust back to the old ways. Although I have settled back here, I still find aspects of Australian culture offensive (aggressiveness, serious swearing, advertising standards, chucking business cards on the table, feet on the desk etc. etc.—some silly little things but I still find them difficult to accommodate). I don’t recall even noticing all these things before I moved away (Legal Counsel, utilities sector, four years in Kuala Lumpur, returned to Australia, email response).
Again, the inability to find common frames of reference, this time with other Australians ‘back home’, created a sense of dislocation, and identity was again, by necessity, re-evaluated. In fact for many participants there was a greater sense of dislocation on return than when arriving in their ‘Asian’ culture, where there was at least the shared experience of being an expatriate—of being different—to bind relationships. This has implications for repatriation, as choices either to return to Australia and go through the process of adaptation again or to become ‘a permanent expat’ can be problematic, impacting on psychological well-being. Signs of restlessness, irritation and dissatisfaction among repatriates are well documented in international human-resources management and cross-cultural studies (Adler 1986; Aycan 1997; Yuen 2003).

A further issue that arises that could potentially drive the affective need for closer ties with former homes is the awareness of a resentment towards ‘foreign talent’ (for Singapore see Velayutham 2003). As noted earlier, the freedom to move, both physical and reflexive, is still hindered by local stoppages along the transnational way, including national regulatory regimes and cultural differences. These refuse to allow foreigners to forget who they are and that they come from some other place, even those very few who rejected the label ‘expat’ and imagined themselves as ‘local’, based on some unspecified time-limit in the host country. This reaction to expatriates was often infused with the sound of colonial pasts being inverted. Perhaps it is also for this reason that some transnational professionals reiterate their Australianness and find greater comfort in the ‘Western bubble’ that nestles often conspicuously within global cities in Asia. However, for the most part, participants adopted more supple responses that reflected the generation of what I describe as ‘mobile subjectivities’.

Mobile Subjectivities

I argue that moving in and out of relationship networks not only reflects the capacity for mobility between different cultural contexts, but also the capacity to develop flexible, mobile subjectivity; that is, an understanding of the fluidity of the constituents of identity with appropriate adaptations of everyday practices and relationships depending on the cultural context within which an individual is operating. This appeared as a practice to enable expatriates and highly mobile transnational professionals to operate effectively in several cultural contexts. In particular, participants from Asian-Australian backgrounds and those who had lived for longer periods of time overseas and who had experience of living with their difference, were more adept at expressing this ability.

Deploying mobile subjectivities was at times a deliberate strategy to enhance economic and social capital (see Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Ong 1999; Yeoh and Willis 1998). For example, Melinda ‘ockers things up’ when socialising with Australians, but shifts her approach to accommodate local cultural sensitivities, at least by referencing place if not mannerisms, when interacting with Singaporeans.
Even Asians will say ‘Where are you from?’ but the funny thing is, when Asians ask me, I say ‘Singapore’. When expats ask me, I say, ‘Sydney’ (Businesswoman, retail sector, six years in Singapore, returned to Australia).

Melinda’s quote demonstrates that identity can be an answer to a question depending on the context and on who was asking. She adopts a strategic position with the overt understanding that belonging in Singapore assists in developing business ties in that country. But this strategy could also be deployed simply in an effort to remove feelings of discomfort, without greater awareness of the underlying causes. Levels of conscious awareness of the impact of cultural difference on workplace and everyday practices appeared quite low among this research cohort.

Narratives became convoluted at times, as participants attempted to describe their mobility between cultural frames of reference, utilising different relationships for different purposes and reflecting different identity strategies to provide optimum comfort in the process.

I’m more Australian and I mix with a lot of white foreigners when I’m overseas, because that’s my travel mode. Yeah, I suppose I’ve got a travel personality. Apart from the fact that if I come across an Asian person, then I’ll be Asian with them (Lawyer, Singaporean Australian, one year in Singapore, resident).

The idea of developing mobile subjectivity to manage processes of adaptation that result from transnationalism highlights the potential use of mobility—physical and psychological—as a way to become history-less, to renew or reinvent the self. This was something that was, at times, attractive to participants who had the social (and financial) capital to engage in this mobility. Conradson and Latham (2005: 290) note in their study of New Zealanders in the UK how the liminality of travel is used as part of this project of self-creation. One interviewee felt that, each time she moved to a new country or back to Australia, it was an opportunity to recreate herself. In Singapore, Melinda was free from the stereotyping that is associated with the place she grew up in, Camden (an outlying suburb of western Sydney, regarded in the general parlance of other Sydney residents as an area lacking in sophistication). In Singapore, when asked the inevitable question ‘Where are you from?’, she needed only to respond that she is Australian.

However, therein lies another tension associated with balancing the possibilities of transnational mobility with the realities of statically, by appearances, ‘being foreign’. While the ability to renew is attractive, there is still that need to feel a sense of belonging, to share humour and common frames of reference, as noted above—i.e. to express an identity. The difficulty with developing chameleon-like reflexiveness is the potential for the anxiety that comes with loss of certainties. Yet while some did assert more strongly a sense of Australianness, many participants adopted the more agile response of mobile subjectivity, particularly those who had lived longer in the host country. While still nominally ‘Australian’, they engaged their mobility to recreate Australia and redefine home to differing degrees at different times and places. They
demonstrated different levels of belonging, impacted on by the strength of their insertion into the relationship networks that demarcated their own understanding of the key terms of identification: Australian, ‘expat’ and ‘home’.

Conclusion

The findings from this research indicate that the formation and maintenance of relationship networks among these transnational professionals reflected two sets of goals: personal aims, such as the desire for a better understanding of a host culture; and more broadly and often less consciously, to manage difference and cultural change. For example, when early attempts to form local social and work-based relationships met with difficulty, spaces of familiarity and comfort in which an homogenous cultural identity could be articulated were delineated by relationships with culturally similar expatriates. This phenomenon is also indicative of Lawler’s (2001) point that, when positive emotions are generated in social interaction, this creates stronger ties. Negative emotions of frustration and confusion created by cultural difference generated weaker ties. Time and familiarity resolved some of these issues, although a general lack of awareness on the part of participants as to how their own cultural practices are implicit in poor relationship formation exacerbated difficulties.

The findings also support Wang and Kanungo’s (2004) arguments on the importance of relationships in maintaining well-being. Even highly mobile professionals built up networks along their routinised itinerary. It could be argued that, when there is no grounded place per se, relationships are even more necessary as markers of identity. The operationalising of relationships in this way shifts the definition of identity from the exclusive domain of territory to also include networks of affective human ties.

For those who, over time, were able to develop more localised relationship networks this appeared to embed them more comfortably into a host country and their sense of belonging shifted towards re-defining home within that context. Ties with Australia could therefore become more tenuous, but this did not necessarily diminish the strength of ownership or display of Australian identity. Also paradoxically, this group of participants would almost certainly still be regarded as ‘foreigners’ because of appearance, lifestyle and contextual issues related to attitudes towards ‘foreign talent’ in Asia.

The reconceptualisation of identity as part of the material and social practices of transnational relationships makes more concrete the connections linking together ephemeral spatial binaries such as local/national, home/host, Australia/Asia. This perhaps reinforces Jess and Massey’s (1995) conceptualisation of place not only as something settled, enclosed and coherent, but also as a meeting point and an intersection of activity such as relationship formation, although still with deeply felt motifs of identity attached.
In line with other research on the impact of transnationalism on identity, the findings reflected the formation of encapsulated communities, hybridity, ambivalent in-betweenness and the strategic deployment of identity through the development of mobile subjectivity. Relationships could be forged within nostalgic activities and used in the recreation of home and spaces of comfort marked by familiarity. They could reflect processes of identity re-evaluation through practices of adaptation (changing to be able to make local connections), ossification or perhaps amplification (reiterating Australianness, ‘lockering’ things up), and strategic mobility (the ability to use relationships to pragmatically fulfil needs and re-find comfort). Mobile subjectivity reflected the ability of people to move between different frames of identity, that is, being Australian, ‘expat’ and, for a few, ‘local’, where necessary, or express hybridity by being both Australian and local, utilising imaginative practices of reconceptualising home in the process.

Encounters with the ‘stranger’ that generated frustration could result in the reassertion of an identity of comfort, Australianness. A sense of identity therefore also developed through ‘othering’, the creation of difference and inside/outside dichotomies bound up with power relations. This response was especially apparent in the strategic use of nostalgia and reinvented traditions by participants, and negative stereotyping of host-country practices. In this sense reclaiming difference is not just a tool of the marginalised, but also a tool for elite migrants such as transnational professionals. From these findings a cohort with high levels of financial capital can be in a position of marginalisation, lacking social capital when in a new cultural context, with all its ambiguity and the possibility of subversion by those with local cultural knowledge.

The possibility of reinvention, at first seemingly liberating, also created an ambiguity that delineates the life of a foreigner. There was the opportunity to be history-less and to renew the self, but there was still a need to feel a sense of belonging, to share humour and common frames of reference. The friction between the two states highlighted the tensions between obligations and actions of an extant order (embedded in notions of identity), and the desire or aspiration for release from those parameters (Bell 1973). This juxtaposition of forces acknowledges a restraint of existing cultural dimensions and the release offered by new structures of possibility (for example, mobility).

Restraint is created by the constituent practices of cultural norms, including those that assert the ‘correct’ practices that demarcate identity, such as appropriate relationships. These practices are manifest in place-making activities such as circumscribing expatriate spaces in the city or in relocated national ceremonies. Place is, therefore, an unrelenting concept even for hyper-mobile professionals. It must by necessity be engaged with if the transnational professional is to maintain (e.g. with Australia, with ‘home’) or form new (within the host country) relationships, as the members of that network will be joined in part by a shared association with a place.
The strength of place-making by members of this transnational elite would work against the thesis that ‘denationalised’ identities developed among this group of participants. Deterritorialisation of capital and corporations exists, but for the individuals impelling this movement and these corporations I would suggest that place still matters, imbued with meaning and shaped by cultural context, including history, economic and social organisation. The shared meanings embedded in relationships reaffirmed the practices of identity associated with that place.

In terms of the possibility of transnational identity—whether it is possible to feel about the world in the same way as one feels about home—I would argue that there is no evidence in this research that the attachment to being a ‘global citizen’ (which is a descriptor used by some participants) overrode the need to ascribe to a national identity. As noted above, there is still an impulse to belong to a place that is marked by characteristics of familiarity and comfort, including elements of the national imagination. This is supported by the maintenance of particular relationships to confirm that this identity and its associated practices and values are shared and therefore of value.

Notes

[1] ‘Affect’ here is taken to mean the embodied response to emotional stimuli. This is based on the work of Terada (2001), who suggests that emotion is a psychological experience whose physiological aspect is affect.

[2] It is acknowledged that identity is not a static phenomenon for settled non-migrants either but, for the purposes of this paper, the focus is on the dynamics of transnational migration.

[3] Carried out through personal contacts—the author having worked in a transnational financial-services company in Sydney and Singapore—and through networking associations such as Asialink (University of Melbourne).

[4] As reported by Asian participants, the behaviour of Australian expatriates could also generate frustration for local colleagues. I would argue that intercultural engagement is rarely without some degree of tension.


[6] On average, 60 per cent Australian and other expatriate nationalities, 40 per cent Singaporean. Thanks to Philip Forrest, former President, AustCham, for this information.

[7] For some, even preferred values could begin to shift but this third element of cultural identity is perhaps the most resilient to change. See Peter Worsley’s (1984) discussion.

[8] ‘Ocker’ is Australian slang for behaving in a stereotypically Australian manner.

References


