

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**Sense of Identity among Samoan Migrant Women  
at Work and Living in Auckland, Aotearoa/New  
Zealand**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology  
at Massey University**

**Karin Menon  
2009**

## Abstract

This study, leaning on existential phenomenology, explores how the experiences of 'being working women' have helped to shape the identities of Samoan women in Auckland. It explores how these women, who grew up within a strong cultural framework and who migrated to New Zealand to engage in work, perceived their transitional processes and how these processes shaped their sense of identity. The focus of the research lies on positive aspects that constitute opportunities for personal development. The objective is to make understood the relationship between being a migrant, being a woman and being at work with regard to identity formation processes.

In semi-structured in-depth interviews, twenty Samoan migrant women shared their experiences about coming to Auckland and taking up work. Their accounts were audio-taped, transcribed and analyzed by using a hermeneutic interpretation approach drawing on Heideggerian concepts. In this process, the researcher moved back and forth between the themes evolving from their stories, key patterns and relevant literature about work, migration and sense of identity. The explicated themes and patterns were then compared for consistency with the original accounts of the participants. The study showed that, for women in this study, work played an important part in their identity processes.

During the interpretation of the data, the following major domains involved in identity formation by way of 'being at work' crystallized: 1) changes in self-views through introspective processes, 2) transformed self-views through relationships with others, 3) self-processes linked to lived space over time.

The data analysis showed that the processes in these domains were of an interacting, reciprocal nature. It also showed that the changes in the participants' sense of identity were created by reflective processes such as internal dialogues. Having reassessed and changed some of their ways of 'being and doing' created changes in the participants' roles in relationships with others. As their status changed from being positioned as not-knowers to being acknowledged as employees who had unique skills to offer to their colleagues, the participants underwent changes from being 'outsiders' to becoming 'insiders' at work. The participants' increase in status at work, in return, gained them status as experts, advisors and advocates in their families and community. Elders and males who

initially opposed these women's career ambitions at work now acknowledged them as experts in their field of work or as professionals who were in a position to assist and support them in a number of ways. The changing understanding in the wider socio-cultural environment about Samoan women's choices shaped how they experienced their life-worlds and, ultimately, perceived themselves. These identity processes continued 'over time in historical space'; they changed the participants' — and ultimately other Samoan women's — social standing at their workplaces and in their community.

The participants' accounts indicated that being in paid work served a number of purposes, such as financial and personal autonomy and having more control over their choices about the ways they wanted 'to be' and 'do things'. Over time, for the participants, the benefits of being in paid work in relation to their self-development were: a) moving from shyness and insecurity to increased levels of assertiveness, autonomy and control over their lives through exploring and applying their strengths, b) moving from not-belonging and being 'strangers' to being part of the 'home-group' through affiliation with others at work, and c) increased social status and roles as change agents at work, in their family and community through transferring cultural knowledge and work skills across these domains, and thereby contributing to changes in their cultural environments over time and across space.

In conclusion, for the Samoan migrant women in this study, 'being in paid work' was experienced as more than a source of sustaining their existence. In particular, 'being skilled working women' added to their sense of identity via opportunities to explore their latent skills and develop new competencies. Likewise, for women in other cultures, migration and work can provide opportunities for personal development not accessible in their country of origin.

## Acknowledgments

Thank you to my friends who have supported me all along during the arduous process of my thesis research and writing. Thank you to Anja, Kim, Craig, and especially Dianne for the many hours of support, empathetic listening, encouragement, cooked meals, sensible advice, and shared laughter. Thank you Gordon, for being in the right place at the right time.

I would like to acknowledge the supervision of Stuart Carr, Graeme Macrae, and Kerry Chamberlain. I fondly recall the times when I had my office next to Stuart's and could walk over any time to ask questions. His door was (nearly) always open. I am equally grateful for Graeme's compassionate guidance and advice in times of confusion.

Thank you to all those academics at Massey University for sharing their knowledge, especially to Cluny Macpherson for his guidance in fa'asamoa, to many others from various faculties and schools of thought, and to those whom I have met at conferences and the Pasifika seminars.

Dankeschön to my mother who never once asked, 'So when do you finish' and, even though my studies and thesis writing process were foreign to her, showed some pride in her daughter becoming a 'doctor'.

Fa'afetai to you participants who generously gave their time and information, for their warmth and kind words, and for your alofa. Thank you to my Samoan friends for their cultural guidance.

Last but not least, thank you to BRCCS (Building Research Capability in the Social Sciences) for the BRCCS Doctoral Completion Award, which helped me through times of financial hardship.

***'...The knowledge of the man who acts and thinks within the world of his daily life is not homogeneous; it is (1) incoherent, (2) only partially clear, and (3) not at all free from contradictions.'***

Schutz, A. (1964). *The stranger: an essay in social psychology*. In: *Collected papers*. Vol. II. *Studies in social theory*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
<b>Abstract</b>	i
<b>Acknowledgment</b>	iii
<b>Table of contents</b>	iv
<b>Figures and Tables</b>	viii
<b>Key to transcripts</b>	xi
 <b>INTRODUCTION</b>	
My interest in migrant women, work, and identity as a research topic	1
Thesis outline	5
 <b>Chapter 1</b> THESIS FOCUS: WORK, MIGRATION, AND WOMEN	
Introduction	7
Work	
Work in the informal sector	8
The meaning of work	10
Work and psychological well-being	14
The work deprivation model	16
Women	
Work and women	18
Migration	
Migration decisions	22
Migration and work	23
Migration, work, and women	29
Migration, women, work, and sense of self	33
Summary	37
 <b>Chapter 2</b> AN EVALUATION OF THEORIES AND APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING ‘SENSE OF IDENTITY’	
Introduction	39
Identity theories	39
Identity as the link between individuals and their socio-cultural environment	41
Identity from a phenomenological perspective	44
Summary	47
 <b>Chapter 3</b> SOCIO-CULTURAL HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: SAMOANS, WORK, GENDER, AND SELF	
Introduction	48
Samoans coming to New Zealand: demographic data	49
Samoans in New Zealand’s workforce	49
History and culture	50
Samoan women and fa’asamoa	53
Samoan women and work	57

	Samoan women within their community and family	58
	Samoan migrant women in New Zealand	60
	Samoans and the concept of self	61
	Samoan people, work, and identity	64
	Exploring Samoan migrant women at work and sense of identity	65
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK AND UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS</b>	
	Introduction	68
	Phenomenology - exploring the meaning in lived experiences	68
	Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology	69
	Hermeneutic existential phenomenology	70
	Meaning making in phenomenological research	72
	Phenomenological framework and assumptions	74
	Methodology	77
	The researcher's core beliefs	78
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>RESEARCH APPROACH AND PROCESS</b>	
	Overview	80
	Cultural considerations	80
	The research approach	81
	Participants	81
	Demographic information	82
	Potential benefits for the participants	83
	Participant-researcher relationship	83
	Rationale for data gathering	83
	The interview principles and processes	84
	Pilot study	85
	Procedure	86
	The interview questions	86
	Data Management	88
	Explication of the data	89
	Authenticity	91
	<b>ANALYSIS</b>	
	<b>Organization of analysis chapters</b>	
	Introduction	93
	Chapter synopses	
	Chapter 6	94
	Chapter 7	95
	Chapter 8	96
<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>EXPERIENCING THE SELF: INTROSPECTIVE PROCESSES</b>	97
	1 Reconciling Samoan way and palagi way	97
	Getting out of my shyness	98
	Respect towards elders and duties as a supervisor	99
	Overcoming language barriers at work and at home	100
	2 Taking more control over my life - making my own choices	102
	Financial independence - My ticket out of home	103
	Making my own decisions' and 'expected gratitude'	104
	Dreaming about power positions: 'the police uniform'	107
	3 Exploring competencies	108

	Reconciling humility with self-appreciation	108
	What I called 'my natural talents' are valuable skills	110
	My inner potential	111
	Reconciling 'being for others' and 'self-fulfillment'	112
	Others opposing my goals: internal voices as an ally	114
4	Experiencing my 'self' in many identities	115
	Covert rebellion turning into overt rebellion	115
	The 'good Samoan daughter' and the 'bad daughter'	117
	Being true to myself: switching between identities	119
	Leading from the back - leading from the front	120
	Summary	122
<b>Chapter 7</b>	<b>EXPERIENCING THE SELF IN RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS: INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND COMMUNITY</b>	<b>125</b>
1	Myself amongst others at work - being different	126
	Exploring otherness - the constant look into a mirror	127
	In-between tradition and newness	129
	Otherness as a way to inclusion	130
	Becoming part of 'others': people who made the difference	131
	Creating my position at work	134
	A prestigious standing: myself as a teacher at work	136
2	Myself amongst Samoans in New Zealand	138
	From criticism to praise: being welcomed back	138
	Building bridges with knowledge	140
	Giving a voice to how I think and feel	141
	Being a role model - blessing and burden	143
	Becoming advocates to others	145
	Summary	147
<b>Chapter 8</b>	<b>EXPERIENCING THE SELF IN TIME AND SPACE</b>	<b>149</b>
1	Where I come from	150
	At home, fa'asamoa ruled	151
	If you do a job you do it right	152
2	Gendered work and power distribution back home	153
	Daughters at work	154
	Mum's work	155
	Dad's work	157
	New possibilities of doing and being	159
3	Unfolding of the process: downward spiral - upward spiral	161
	The honeymoon phase seems over	161
	Not the land of milk and honey	163
	Finding the door leading into the upward spiral	165
4	How the meaning of work changed for me over time	166
	I worked to survive - now I follow my vocation	167
	Culture traversing time and space: fa'alavelave	168
	Dipping into the past, the present, and the future	170
	Summary	172
<b>Chapter 9</b>	<b>SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSION</b>	
	Introduction	174
	Acculturation involves transitional processes over time	175
	Acculturation is mutually experienced by migrants and hosts	176
	Interpersonal relationships at work	176



Theory of work, identity, and acculturation	178
1. Self	179
2. Relationships with others	181
3. Socio-cultural space over time	182
Wider implications of this research for the world of work and communities	184
Conclusion	185

<b>LIST OF REFERENCES</b>	186
---------------------------	-----

### **APPENDICES**

Appendix 1 Ethics approval	
Appendix 2 Information sheet	
Appendix 3 Consent form	
Appendix 4 Interview questions	

<b>Figures and Tables</b>		<b>page</b>
Figure 1	Work, women, migration, and sense of identify	7
Table 1	<b>Proportion Employed (2006 census)</b> <i>Samoa, total Pacific and total New Zealand populations</i>	50
Table 2	<b>Proportion Unemployed (2006 census)</b> <i>Samoa, total Pacific and total New Zealand populations</i>	51
Figure 2	Processes in the areas of self, others, and the socio-cultural environment are continuously related with each other	179

## Key to transcripts

The following abbreviations and conventions have been used in this thesis, including the excerpts from the interview transcripts:

<i>Italics</i>	the words used by the participants themselves; the words in Samoan language
[ ]	words or comments added by the researcher to provide clarity and explanation
...	material edited out
' '	phenomenological terms
<u>Underlined</u>	words emphasized by the participants
Names	pseudonyms were used for all participants

Samoan terms used in this thesis are accompanied by the corresponding English term