

*Journal of International Students*  
Volume 15, Issue 2 (2025), pp. 127-146  
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)  
jistudents.org



## **Living in a fluid world: An autoethnographic account of navigating contradicting onto-epistemological worldviews**

Pashew Nuri  
*Monash University, Australia*

### **ABSTRACT**

*This article employs an interpretive autoethnographic approach to explore how the author navigates the paradigmatic contradictions between poststructuralism as a theoretical framework and his personal religious beliefs. It narrates and analyzes how the researcher arrives at specific understandings of reality, knowledge, and the self. The author then examines how these understandings were challenged by poststructuralism and whether they have been reconciled. The article contributes to ongoing discussions on colonial theories and the critical importance of Asia as a method and southern theory in higher education and social theory.*

**Keywords:** Autoethnography, Islam, Paradigmatic identity, PhD journey, Poststructuralism, Student identities

---

### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper emerged from a concern about how non-Western and nonsecular paradigms are overshadowed by the geopolitics of knowledge in the field of sociology of education, particularly in policy sociology. At the beginning of my PhD candidature in education policy at an Australian university in Melbourne, I noticed the overwhelming dominance of Western theories and frameworks shaping the conceptualization of research problems in my academic environment. Although this dominance was understandable given Australia's Western context, my unease with Western and secular ways of knowing stemmed not from their dominance but from their limitations in providing sufficient conceptual explanations for the research problems at hand. This observation is supported by scholars who highlight the hegemonic lens through

which education is theorized, often marginalizing alternative perspectives (e.g., Grace, 2020; Silova et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2015).

Almost all textbooks on research methodology in the social sciences emphasize the importance of theory in conducting research (Given, 2008). Every theory, as an expression of disciplined ways of thinking about a problem, resembles an onto-epistemological paradigm that informs how research is conducted and shapes its activities and outcomes. Consequently, it influences the student as both a researcher and a person. As a Middle Eastern Muslim PhD student, I experienced this influence. My ways of knowing and being, driven by Islamic and metaphysical interpretations of reality, agency, and knowledge, were often reinterpreted and marginalized by the dominance of Western institutionally mainstream theories and their inherent onto-epistemological standpoints.

Despite the disharmonies between the two, there were also intersections for relevance, mutations, and even reconciliations, as discussed later. During my PhD studies, I encountered significant theoretical literature informed by poststructuralism and postmodernism that posed onto-epistemological stances different from, and at times antithetical to, my personal beliefs about reality, knowledge, and myself as an agent in the research process. While the purpose of a PhD program is also to foster learning and challenge existing convictions—especially in a Western country—throughout this process, my understanding of reality and knowledge was stretched to its limits, potentially transforming me into a different person (Stanley, 2015), even at the cost of my own belief systems.

Consequently, contradictions between a student's personal onto-epistemological worldview and the theoretical traditions chosen for research become unavoidable. As depicted by Muhalim's (2021) personal narrative, a non-Western PhD student's onto-epistemological worldview might be sidelined. This paper aims to present personal reflections on how I, as an international non-Western PhD student in Australia, navigated this complex nexus. It is an autoethnographic account of how I dealt with onto-epistemological differences between poststructuralist theories used to conceptualize my research and my faith-driven worldviews.

The article is divided into five main sections. After the introduction, the first section discusses the context of the study. The second section presents the methodological considerations. The third section extends the study's context by recounting my educational history and how I reached this point in my academic journey. The fourth section explores the findings and analyzes the data through the concepts of arrival, divergence, and reconciliation, which serve as analytical themes to highlight key aspects of my journey before and during my PhD studies. The paper concludes that theories contradicting doctoral students' onto-epistemological worldviews can create ideological tensions and hinder the development of their paradigmatic identity.

## CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Australia has the highest proportion of international students, contributing \$36.4 billion to the economy from 2022–2023 (Australian Government, 2022). Most students come from China and other Asian nations, with a notable contingent from Muslim-majority countries. Scholars argue that developments in Australia's international education industry are tied to both economic and student desire factors (Maxwell & Smyth, 2011). These factors contribute to the attraction, subjectification, and construction of international students within Australian higher education institutions.

As higher education researchers, and more specifically as PhD students in social sciences and education studies, we are positioned within and challenged by what Macfarlane (2022) refers to as "ideological islands." In my experience and as discussed in this study, these are dominant contemporary philosophical and social worldviews characterized as postmodern and poststructural. While I explore these concepts in greater detail in the analysis section, a brief initial definition may be helpful here. Postmodernism questions absolute truths and fixed meanings such as metanarratives, emphasizing the subjective, fragmented, and socially constructed nature of reality (Lyotard, 1984). This perspective aligns with my academic experience, where I encountered theories that prioritize diverse viewpoints over unified explanations, encouraging me to consider multiple, sometimes conflicting, interpretations. Similarly, poststructuralism, which evolved from postmodern thought, challenges fixed structures of knowledge, authority, and power (Peters & Burbules, 2004). Poststructuralists argue that meanings are not static but shaped by power dynamics, language, and context. This framework was particularly relevant to my research, prompting me to critically examine how academic knowledge is constructed and whose perspectives are legitimized. These frameworks often contrast with my background and beliefs, leading to what I refer to as 'onto-epistemological differences.' By 'onto-epistemological differences', I mean fundamental variations in how reality (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology) are understood. For example, while postmodern and poststructural perspectives advocate fluid and subjective understandings of knowledge, my worldview is rooted in a belief in absolute truths and values informed by my religious background. These differences created a complex dynamic in my experience, as I navigated contrasting perspectives on the nature of reality and knowledge within my academic environment.

As illustrated by Muhalim (2021), the journey of doing a PhD involves the core of who we are, not only as researchers but also as individuals. One reason for this might be that the student is situated in a complex nexus of theoretical imperatives underpinned by distinct paradigmatic worldviews that favor specific interpretations of the world.

To provide a more comprehensive understanding of the context surrounding doctoral studies, it is important to acknowledge ongoing debates and discussions within higher education research. This includes topics such as identity conflicts and cultural difficulties (Ruto-Korir & Lubbe, 2010;

McAllester, 2024; Lin & Scherz, 2014), as well as adaptation challenges specific to international students in Western academia (Li, et al., 2022; Jia, 2017; Tran et al., 2012). Studies reveal that international students often negotiate identity tensions in a "third space" where they balance institutional norms with their own cultural frameworks (Li et al., 2022), whereas others highlight challenges unique to religious minorities, who may encounter stereotypes or anti-Muslim biases that complicate their academic and social integration (Anderson, 2020; Hussain & Bagguley, 2024). Additionally, research has explored the evolving nature of the student-advisor relationship (Maxwell & Smyth, 2011) and the role of mentorship in doctoral success, adjustment, and well-being (Kim, 2024; Lau & Pretorius, 2019). By engaging with this literature, this paper contributes to a broader dialog on doctoral education and provides insights relevant to both international students and institutions. Through personal reflections, I offer an autoethnographic account of my journey as a non-Western international PhD student in Australia, navigating the onto-epistemological tensions between poststructuralist theories and my faith-based worldview.

My doctoral education has been the most knowledge-intensive experience of my life. While this may be an intended purpose of doctoral programs in Australia (Usher, 2002), it is understandable that the candidature has influenced me in many ways. It has made me think more politically and honed my previously broad critical disposition into a more analytically accurate and intellectually deeper orientation. These learnings have also made me question things I took for granted, dive deeper into meanings, and reconsider the impact of both the social context and my worldviews. However, I have experienced ongoing onto-epistemological contradictions between the theoretical traditions I used for research and my personal beliefs about reality, knowledge, and the self.

The discourse of paradigms involves philosophical issues of ontology and epistemology. They constitute a "basic set of beliefs" (Guba, 1990, p. 27) that doctoral students use to conceptualize and conduct their research. A research ontology addresses the aspect of reality being researched, and a researcher's epistemology accounts for the relationship between the knower and what can be known. An individual's onto-epistemology determines their approach to life and its problems. The dominance of Western mainstream theories and their inherent onto-epistemological standpoints often reinterpret and marginalize ways of knowing and being driven by non-Western, particularly religious, worldviews.

During my PhD studies, I encountered significant theoretical literature informed by poststructuralism and postmodernism that posed onto-epistemological stances different from, and at times antithetical to, my personal beliefs about reality, knowledge, and myself as an agent in the research process. While the purpose of a PhD program is to foster learning and challenge existing convictions, throughout this process, my understanding of reality and knowledge was stretched to its limits, potentially transforming me into a different person, similar to Stanley (2015), even at the cost of my own belief systems.

## **AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS METHOD**

Building on the concerns and contexts outlined above, this study employs an autoethnographic approach to explore my doctoral journey. Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that connects personal experiences to larger cultural, political, and social meanings (Adams et al., 2022; Chang, 2016). It is particularly suited for exploring the nuanced and subjective experiences of individuals navigating complex onto-epistemological landscapes.

Autoethnography combines the personal experiences of the researcher with cultural analysis to explore broader social phenomena. It is rooted in the dual practices of autobiography and ethnography, where the author examines and narrates significant personal experiences within a cultural context (Ellis et al., 2011). Unlike traditional autobiography, which focuses on the personal story alone, autoethnography connects personal insights with sociocultural analysis, allowing the researcher to examine the relationship between self and society (Chang, 2008). Chang (2008) emphasized that autoethnography should not merely consider personal stories but should situate them within sociocultural frameworks and transcend the boundaries of autobiography. Adams et al. (2015) describe autoethnography as a method where researchers use their personal experiences to critique cultural norms and practices. It values the researcher's relationships and employs "reflexivity" to examine the links between the self and society. This approach shows that individuals understand their actions and find meaning in their struggles, balance intellectual rigor with emotional depth and creativity, and aim for social justice and improvement of life.

Autoethnography involves self-reflection and value relationships and dialogs with others, making it a tool for examining cultural beliefs and practices. Poulos (2021) highlights that autoethnography "recenters the researcher's experience" (p. 4), underscoring that the researcher's story itself becomes a vital aspect of knowledge production. Thus, autoethnography serves as a creative, rigorous, and socially aware approach to research that fosters a deeper understanding of both individual and collective experiences.

Autoethnography has been widely used to study PhD students' journeys, especially where personal narratives intersect with broader societal issues. For example, recent works have utilized autoethnography to examine academic identities. Recent works have utilized autoethnography to examine academic identities during global crises (de Caux et al., 2023), explore grief during thesis writing (Ridgway, 2022), and investigate the construction of international student identities (Xu, 2022). Scholars have also drawn on their lived experiences to understand decolonization and indigenous epistemologies (Lee, 2023), academic identities (Nordbäck et al., 2022), and academic imperialism (Kim, 2020).

In this study, autoethnography served several purposes. It highlights subjective knowledge about Western and secular theories, illustrating the themes of arrival, divergence, and reconciliation. It challenges research norms by using a non-Western and nonsecular perspective to interpret social phenomena. Additionally, it contributes to discussions on the importance of Southern theory

in higher education (Connell, 2017; R'boul, 2022) and the concept of Asia as a method in social theory (Zhang et al., 2015; Connell, 2020).

## DATA ANALYSIS

The data for this study include personal journal entries, supervisory meeting minutes, reading responses, and recorded conversations with colleagues during my doctoral studies. I use Chang's (2008) analytical/interpretive autoethnography, treating autobiographical stories as material for critical analysis. This method allows a systematic yet flexible examination of personal experiences within broader cultural and theoretical contexts.

Following Chang's (2008) ten strategies for autoethnographic data analysis, I engaged in an iterative process, capturing recurring topics and themes such as "seeking knowledge," "arrival," and "divergence." This approach enabled me to explore relationships with colleagues, contextualize experiences in the Australian academic environment, and frame reflections through social science constructs.

By reflecting on my experiences, I analyzed how I navigated contradictions between poststructuralism—the theoretical framework of my PhD—and my personal religious beliefs. This analysis examined where these perspectives conflicted or integrated, how they were reconciled, and how I conceptualized reality, knowledge, and self. This process led to three central themes, which I discuss next.

The following sections present the core insights and findings from my journey, organized into three themes: "Seeking knowledge," "Arrival," and "Divergence." "Seeking knowledge" provides biographical insights that set the stage for the study's findings. These themes reflect the evolving tensions and reconciliations that shaped my experience as an international PhD student navigating competing worldviews.

## SEEKING KNOWLEDGE: ONE INDIVIDUAL, SEVERAL PARADIGMS

In addition to learning the language, my bachelor's degree in English and literature at a public university in Iraqi Kurdistan (IK) introduced me to various forms of literature and intellectual traditions. Our studies spanned from Ferdinand de Saussure to Noam Chomsky, George Orwell, Samuel Beckett, Bertolt Brecht, and others. Although at an introductory level, this canon provided me with a whole new orientation toward society, politics, and life. However, these readings, as part of the college curriculum, were not originally designed to challenge students or critique the current state of things. For many institutional and other reasons, they did not delve deeply into the intellectual postulations and differing worldviews presented by these thinkers. For me, they were novel and disconcertingly galvanizing. First, I was new to English literature and Western thought. Second, I had only been familiar with a faith-driven worldview of reality and knowledge that naively saw these thinkers as foreign to their fundamental conceptions. Politically, however, they were not too

foreign after all. Given IK's historical and present political conditions, the Orwellian world made much sense to me. As undergrads, I remember crooning "Four legs good, two legs bad" from *Animal Farm* with my college friends, drawing parallels the inequities and injustices caused by different government policies in the region.

In 2013, I was accepted into the Fulbright Foreign Student Program to study for a Master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction in the USA. The intellectual foundation I built during my undergraduate studies and personal readings helped me adapt to this new academic lifestyle. Here, I introduced the critical theory and issues of class, gender, race, and justice, accompanied by readings of Western canonical works by John Dewey, Maxine Greene, bell hooks, Nel Noddings, and Paulo Freire. These thinkers connected education and society, particularly with respect to justice and oppression, resonating with Orwell's descriptions of totalitarianism. I began co-translating Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* into Kurdish but stopped when I learned someone else was already doing it. I found commonalities between my Islamic faith and social justice concepts. For example, Freire's idea that the oppressed must humanize the oppressor echoed Prophet Mohammad's (PBUH) teaching: "Help your brother, whether he is an oppressor or an oppressed," by preventing oppression (Az-Zubaidi, 1994, p. 526). This aligns with Freire's notion of humanization through critical consciousness.

However, these commonalities did not remain unchanged. Although Islam can be interpreted in various ways, I needed a better understanding of traditional Islamic thought, particularly within the Sunni tradition, which seemed insufficient for my understanding of the world. This is part of what I describe as reconciliation, which will be discussed later in the article. Tensions and contradictions emerged as I delved deeper into these ideas, particularly in their interpretation of reality and existence (ontology), knowledge (epistemology), and my own subjectivity in relation to both. This typically occurred after I graduated with a master's degree and worked as a lecturer at the Faculty of Education of a private university in IK for four years. More specifically, when I started my PhD in education policy in Australia. The first year of my PhD candidature was mostly reading theory, as I was trying to navigate postmodern poststructuralist onto-epistemology in relation to my research project.

There is a growing body of literature on PhD candidature experiences, with a focus on the unique academic, cultural, and social challenges faced by international PhD students. Research shows that doctoral studies have physical and psychological effects (Lau & Pretorius, 2019), influencing students' identities (Ruto-Korir & Lubbe, 2010) and personal beliefs (Muhaimin, 2019). Tandamrong and Ford (2019) described the PhD journey as a "twisting and turning maze" (p. 283). According to Kiguwa and Langa (2009), it requires changing roles, developing a scholarly identity, and establishing firm intellectual footings while also arguing for or against specific intellectual positions. For an established Western institution and an international Middle Eastern student unfamiliar with Western theoretical traditions, this process could cause

intellectual tensions, both theoretical and paradigmatic, involving the student's entire worldview.

Like Nikel et al. (2010), I see PhD studies as a complex and "unique process," not only because they require a high level of independence but also because they push the student into deep onto-epistemological issues. It is an experience "like no other study or later professional experience" (Nikel et al., 2010, p. 171). Although there are institutional requirements for originality and contribution to knowledge and a lack of research training and development (Nikel et al., 2010), institutionalized research traditions seem to overlook their influence on PhD students' personal onto-epistemological beliefs. Muhalim's (2021) depiction of how a non-Western PhD student's worldview might be sidelined or neglected is a recent example. According to Muhalim (2021), this led to internal conflicts requiring negotiation for his religious epistemological worldview. The PhD journey positioned international students through a Western point of reference.

My internal conflicts, tensions, and contradictions were similar to those experienced by Muhalim (2021). The intellectual tensions I encountered with paradigms arose from my concern for a transcendental and metaphysical analytical lens of self (the researcher) and the social world/affairs (the researched). The theories, philosophical concepts, and literature I dealt with were mostly (if not all) rooted in a conceptualization of the social, political, economic, historical, and cultural world in relation to the researcher and the researched, which were informed by a poststructuralist and postmodern paradigm. Underlying the foundations of the poststructuralist/postmodern paradigm are onto-epistemological assumptions about reality, knowledge, and self, which are points of interest for this article. These conceptualizations made sociological pretensions mostly in terms of the physical, altogether eschewing metaphysical and religious (in my case Islamic) scholarly interpretations that I believed. This is where I, as a researcher, experienced intellectual tensions, particularly in relation to the claims, definitions, and statements of knowledge and the self in the world.

I should clarify three things to support the arguments made in this article. First, I do not claim to represent or fully understand Islamic knowledge or poststructuralism. I am merely a learner trying to make sense of my PhD journey. Second, I do not wish to imply that I am on a crusade to defend my own opinions or beliefs. In contrast, this article also focuses on the process of seeking knowledge and discovery. In the process, I am prepared to be rejected, critiqued, or convinced otherwise. Third, the use of the words non-Western and Islamic should not convey that Islam is not Western. This is done only for technical purposes to indicate the other onto-epistemological standpoint with which I am showing personal contradiction. In fact, Islam, as a divine belief system, can be as universal as with any other belief system. If anything, I wish for this article not to ante up the "paradigm wars" (Denzin, 2008) but instead to contribute to the "paradigm dialog" (Guba, 1990).



## **ARRIVAL: KNOWLEDGE AS GUIDANCE FOR SETTLING INTO OUR BEING**

Pashew: It's challenging to deal with poststructuralism and other postmodern thoughts, knowing you think differently!

Jenna (pseudonym): hm, how so?

Pashew: You see, I have always thought that the purpose of knowledge, including philosophy, was to help us as humans settle into our own beings and understand ourselves better. Whereas what we are currently reading and seeing is all about deconstructing, which, unlike settling, is somewhat unsettling, where everything is um

Jenna: dangerous! Foucault would say (smiling)

Pashew: Yea, exactly. Which is like the purpose is the opposite!

At an Oceania Comparative and International Education Society (OCIES) event at the University of Melbourne, I had a memorable conversation with a friend. We both used Foucauldian (poststructuralist) conceptual tools in our projects. Jenna agreed with my questioning of the onto-epistemological interpretations posed by postmodern/poststructuralist worldviews. These worldviews are unsettling because they do not assist in unraveling the questions of our being; rather, they politicize them as dangerous constructs requiring constant alertness because 'always something to be done' (Foucault, 1997, p. 256).

As a Muslim, an Islamic worldview influences how I conceptualize reality and knowledge. In Islam, knowledge is highly valued. Seeking knowledge is a primary responsibility toward God. The *Quran* emphasizes the importance of knowledge, with the first word revealed to Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) being 'read' (*The Quran* 96:1). One of God's attributes is Alim (the ultimate knower). A person of knowledge is Alim, who shares the Godly characteristic of knowing. The knowledge given by God distinguishes humans from angels, Satan, and the rest of creation (*The Quran* 2:30–33). According to Rosenthal (2007), *ilm* (translated as 'knowledge') is 'one of those concepts that have dominated Islam and given Muslim civilization its distinctive shape and complexion. ... There is no branch of Muslim intellectual life, of Muslim religious and political life, and of the daily life of the average Muslim that remained untouched by the all-pervasive attitude toward 'knowledge' as something of supreme value for Muslims' (p. 2).

It is because of this attitude toward knowledge that I have always deemed knowledge and its pursuit critical in the process of becoming a person of knowledge. In my own experience, this attitude has been a culmination of beliefs, acts, and expectations. My mother has been the most persistent in ensuring that I obtain a degree. My father, though illiterate, never hid his desire for me to study religious knowledge and become a clergyman. Other people around me—teachers, relatives, and friends—always showed unimaginable support in my journey toward higher education. For example, when I finished primary school (1st–6th grade), our village had no middle or high school. An acquaintance of our family, Mama Sa'di, who was from a different village with a

middle school and later a high school, visited our home to tell my parents that he wanted to take me in to live with them so I could further my studies. My parents agreed. Mama Sa'di and his family fostered me for six years until I graduated from high school and went to college. This belief in the power of knowledge for the betterment of the self resulted in acts such as taking in a young man to continue his education for six years. More surprisingly, they expected absolutely nothing in return. Both the belief and the act carried many expectations for me to meet during my school and university life. These beliefs, acts, and expectations kept my thirst for learning unsatiated, driving me to seek better learning experiences worldwide. After being rejected in the first round, I received a scholarship to pursue my master's degree in the United States. My fully funded PhD study, which I undertook at an Australian university in Melbourne, also took me five years to secure, as I sought strong education studies and research programs. In retrospect, I can see how a PhD program at a Western institution, also rooted in a belief in knowledge and scholarships, may bring someone's lifeworld into question to affirm or recalibrate it.

The *public attitude* that Rosenthal (2007) described has set paradigmatic boundaries toward knowledge, beginning with the assertion that all knowledge in Islam comes from God. According to Attas (1979), knowledge in Islam is of two types: the first is revealed knowledge, which refers to the Quran, and the second is acquired knowledge, which is "acquired through experience, observation, and research" (p. 31). The first kind of knowledge is rooted in objective truths deemed necessary for human guidance. The first is a prerequisite for attaining the second, but both, according to Attas, unveil the mystery of being and existing (1979).

There is a clear connection between this description of knowledge and its onto-epistemological lens and my conversation with Jenna. It seems that the knowledge I am seeking establishes a bridge between the physical and the metaphysical worlds, which directly clashes with the foundational principles of poststructuralism. For me, the unsettling nature of poststructuralist thought is that it rejects, rather than engages with, this metaphysical aspect of knowledge in the name of metanarrative oppression. Instead, it sees knowledge as a social construct and problematizes knowing and the self in its multilayered sociohistoricity (Peters & Burbules, 2004).

Another aspect of my discussion with Jenna is that my understanding of knowledge is centered around having an inner (metaphysical or spiritual) and an outer (social) horizon to knowing. These horizons (or dimensions) of knowledge play an essential role in its conception and in how I interact with it. An onto-epistemological standpoint that "settles us into our own being" (my conversation with Jenna) combines these two horizons of knowledge in the research process rather than disconnecting them. In my experience as a doctoral student, the inner horizon, which is the metaphysical interpretation of knowledge, is sidelined and left for the students' personal affairs. Metaphysical worldviews are infrequently part of the theoretical interpretations of the social system. In agreement with Grace (2020), I argue that despite the progressive development of many analytical/theoretical research traditions, the religious

and/or inner dimensions of interpreting the social are largely ignored. As a Muslim believer, this has been a major factor in both my richer engagement with theoretical research and the tensions of living with uncomfortable disagreements.

In the next section, I discuss how postmodernism/poststructuralism theories have posed different and opposing onto-epistemological worldviews and how they have influenced me.

### **DIVERGENCE: THE FLUIDITY OF A SOCIOHISTORICALLY CONSTRUCTED WORLD**

It is quite strange to deal with Foucault. The world is fluid to Foucault; anything can happen at any moment with anything. I mean to just simply look at whatever has been believed in as historical constructs is just shockingly deconstructing! However, short-sighted, yet again scary. I do not want to live in a world where "everything is dangerous"! Why would I do that? This worldview is not constructive in how I see it! (Personal journal entry, 2021)

The previous section established my approach to understanding the world, rooted in an inner (metaphysical) and outer (social) conceptualization. My sense of contradiction with a poststructuralist worldview that characterizes itself as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv) lies in its rejection of metaphysics. In this section, I discuss my onto-epistemological journey in divergence, an internal disharmony with how I understood reality, knowledge, and the self before the PhD journey.

Let me begin with my point of departure. Postmodernism/poststructuralism proposes an obsolescence of metanarratives. Some theories (including metaphysical interpretations) consider historical, social, and cultural experiences. Postmodernism/poststructuralism involves a crisis in the metaphysical interpretations of established notions of the world (Lyotard, 1984). It considers all established forms of meaning as oppressive power and knowledge, as well as self/knowledge as a product of sociohistorical construction. Furthermore, moral codes are considered governmental techniques, and social bonds are considered sites for applying these governing techniques (Peters & Humes, 2003). Hence, all relations within the social realm are political. This paves the way for favoring self-interest over the public interest, tending toward suspicion instead of trust, and considering the individual overall. In turn, it asserts itself as systematic resistance to those established forms of meaning/truths (Peters & Burbules, 2004). It further presents itself as a system of distrust and suspicion that sees "everything as dangerous" (Foucault, 1997, p. 256).

This is akin to what I have expressed in my journal entry as a "fluid world" (Personal journal entry, 2021), specifically in comparison to my beliefs about metaphysics and what poststructuralism labels metanarratives. The fluidity (or the dissolution of categories) of this onto-epistemological

interpretation is that it considers knowledge, language, truth, and even the self potentially dangerous because they are seen as byproducts of an oppressive hegemonic agenda (Partridge, 2021). As Foucault (1997) described, this worldview places an individual on fertile ground for "a hyper and pessimistic activism" (p. 256). Activism, as it seems, against taken-for-granted truths.

However, despite its rejection of metanarratives, poststructuralism seems to have excused itself for being considered such. In another of my journal entries, I wrote:

"So much so in the rejection of metanarratives, and by taking the pervasiveness of poststructuralism and postmodern theories and concept in academia, their nuances and conceptualizations do seem to make a case for it to be a metanarrative itself - in my discussions with my PhD colleagues, PhD students seem to have taken these interpretations as axiomatic." (Personal journal entry, 2021)

Taking postmodern/poststructuralist thought as "axiomatic," as I have observed, shows a rendering of poststructuralism itself as a metanarrative because it defines itself as unquestionable. As a metanarrative, it is a system of suspicion that distrusts everything except itself. Instead, it presents itself as a truth that is antithetical to its own principles.

The contradictions I have experienced with this portrayal of reality, knowledge, and self are not in its *fluid* interpretations. Our social world, I believe, has multiple causes and effects: an assemblage of exchangeability and multiple functionalities (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004). This means looking for black-and-white interpretations "is turning a blind eye to limitless shades and colors created at diverse intersections" (Shah, 2000, p. 99). This also means that while poststructuralism offers a rich understanding of the complexities of the social world, it may be limited in its ability to provide a clear vision for the future beyond the dominant structures and power relations.

On the other hand, this has not meant that a metaphysical understanding of the world paints a black-and-white picture of everything. I have always thought, as influenced by the Quran, that the diversity in the human earthly condition is purposed toward *knowledge*. The Quran (49:13) states that mankind is created in different races and tribes so that they know and become *acquainted with* one another. When I put on the poststructuralist eyeglasses, the very act of *knowing one another* becomes political because it looks at relationships among ordering principles of social life in terms of power balances. Therefore, I see poststructuralism as myopic or "short-sighted" (personal journal, 2021) to extend beyond the horizontal world. The reason for this is that within the realm of metaphysical interpretations, reality, knowledge, and the individual exist not as sociohistorical byproducts of one another but "as impressions of that which lies beyond the category of the sociohistorical altogether; that is, they are impressions of the eternal" (Partridge, 2021, para. 6).

Having discussed how postmodern/poststructuralist ideas diverted me from how I conceptualized the world, I will turn to how I have come to reconcile and come to terms with those contradictions.

## IMPLICATIONS AND RECONCILIATIONS

This article has discussed how I arrived at certain conceptualizations of reality, knowledge, and self. It also addressed how these conceptualizations were questioned by other onto-epistemological standpoints, mainly poststructuralism, during my PhD journey. In this section, I briefly discuss the implications of those contradictions and how I reconciled these conflicting views.

One implication of such tension was fear—not of losing faith but of pessimism. As Foucault (1997) confessed, viewing everything as “dangerous” leads to pessimistic activism. In my faith-driven understanding, the world is about cooperation, trust, and eternity, not contestations, power relations, and constructs. Moreover, the fear was not of poststructuralism’s deconstruction and postmodernism’s cynicism but of their allowance for the deconstructive interpretation of the world to continue its myopic focus on metanarratives, namely, religious analytical traditions. This resonates with Jia (2017), who highlighted how international students often navigate the tension between dominant academic paradigms and personal beliefs, leading to intellectual uncertainty. In my case, because metanarratives are seen as oppressive, this incomprehension prevents one from seeing the world differently—a way of seeing that could be more powerful and hopeful.

Another implication of poststructuralism in my academic life is its Western orientation (Giddens, 1990). It offers Western-centric analyses that may fall short of explaining a non-Western social condition. In one of my PhD panel discussions, members expressed concern about the suitability of poststructuralist theories to conceptualize a phenomenon in the Middle East, specifically IK. They suggested that I look into Edward Said. Reflecting on this, I realized their suggestion, which rested on two incorrect assumptions: first, that a theorist from the Middle East or Asia represents an onto-epistemologically paradigmatic worldview conducive to analyzing a non-Western phenomenon; second, that the panel underestimated how convincingly poststructuralist/critical theories paint a realistic picture of reality and knowledge. These theories provide a language and intellectual background that makes it difficult to see things otherwise. The panel’s suggestion of Edward Said was misguided because postcolonial and poststructuralist theories heavily influenced Said’s work in explaining the Middle East to the West. This speaks to what Muhalim (2021) described as ‘epistemological fetishism,’ where researchers treat theories as objective and universally applicable, overlooking specific contexts and perspectives. This sustains hegemonic discourses, leads to epistemological conflicts, and hinders genuine dialog.

Now, I describe how I reconciled these contradictions and dealt with the subsequent tensions. During my PhD studies, despite the discomfort of epistemological disagreements (there were also pleasures of enlightenment), I reconciled these tensions in two ways. First, with respect to knowledge and the role of the self in building scholarships, all the analytical use poststructuralism offers are about what Attas (1979) labeled *acquired* knowledge. Postmodernism and poststructuralism disregard *revealed* knowledge as part of their rejection of

metanarratives, relying on self-sufficient rationality (John, 2013) and a self-conscious discount of the past (Ahmed, 1992). However, as Shah (2000) postulated, one approach to engaging with poststructuralism is to view it as a form of *acquired* knowledge. This aligns with Li et al. (2022), who observed how international students in Australia adapt by selectively incorporating Western academic frameworks into their existing cultural identities. The merging of acquired knowledge and a poststructuralist worldview forms *constructed* knowledge. Thus, poststructuralism serves as a methodology for problematizing constructed knowledge rather than an onto-epistemological framework for understanding the world on its own. By understanding poststructuralism as constructed worldviews/knowledge, it becomes a methodological toolkit for resolving theoretical contradictions (Attas, 1979). Second, as advised by one of my supervisors, theories can be viewed as thinking tools, not philosophies. While this view may reduce theories to their utilities and neglect their onto-epistemological underpinnings, it remains effective in resolving students' onto-epistemological tensions and contradictions. As theories, they do not define your human or knowledge boundaries but rather help enlighten them. As highlighted by Jia (2017), viewing theories as tools rather than truths allows international students to reconcile conflicting paradigms, enabling more productive intellectual engagement. They create spaces for improved thinking and allow for learning the diversity of human intellectual capacities.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper presents an autoethnographic account of my experiences as an international Muslim PhD student in Australia. This study argues that understanding PhD students' thought patterns underpinning their choice of theory is critical to learning, expressing scholarships, and completing research. However, the choice of theory during a PhD candidature is influenced by institutional preference, supervisor knowledge, and students' lack of intellectual experience. As my account demonstrated, theories that contradict a PhD student's onto-epistemological worldviews can cause ideological tensions. These contradictions and subsequent reflections are instrumental in developing students' paradigmatic identities.

I explored the contrasting worldviews of poststructuralism, chosen as the theoretical framework for my PhD research, and highlighted the onto-epistemological tensions with my faith-driven beliefs. The findings lead to three main conclusions:

- Theoretical choice is deeply personal and shaped by institutional and supervisory dynamics. Institutions and supervisors should support the diverse onto-epistemological foundations that students bring to their doctoral studies.
- Onto-epistemological tensions, while challenging, are crucial for intellectual growth and identity development. These tensions

encourage students to engage critically with contrasting paradigms, fostering deeper scholarly reflexivity and maturity.

- PhD programs must create inclusive spaces where students' paradigms and worldviews are valued. These spaces should allow students to negotiate between theoretical traditions and their beliefs without fear of marginalization.

This article aims to build spaces where PhD students' 'basic belief systems' are considered. This does not mean that the students' desired paradigm is a closer approximation to truth but could add a "more informed and sophisticated" (Guba, 1990, p. 27) paradigm than those entertained by higher education institutions or supervisors. I do not wish for the article to reject one paradigm and accept another. Contesting configurations of power in established theoretical traditions and acknowledging their role in forming a new self within me is a poststructuralist stance in itself.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

I thank Deana Leahy and Alan Reid of Monash University for their scholarly friendship in the past several years. They always challenged and updated my thinking and, most importantly, guided me through my PhD journey during a global pandemic. I remain indebted to both.

### **AI ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

*In the preparation of this manuscript, we utilized artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation with the following capacity:*

- ☐ None
- ☐ Some sections, with minimal or no editing
- ☒ Some sections, with extensive editing
- ☐ Entire work, with minimal or no editing
- ☐ Entire work, with extensive editing

*In the development of this manuscript, I used AI to generate a basic outline to assist in the initial stages of organizing the paper. AI was used solely for structuring purposes, and all intellectual content, analysis, and narrative within the paper are the original work of the author.*

## REFERENCES

- Adams, T. E., Jones, S. H., & Ellis, C. (2022). *Handbook of autoethnography*. Routledge.
- Adams, T., Holman Jones, S., & Ellis, C. (2015). *Autoethnography*. Oxford University Press.
- Ahmed, A. S. (1992). *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and promise* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Anderson, D. L. (2020). Muslim international students in the United States: A phenomenological inquiry into the experience of identities. *Journal of International Students*, 10(2), 299–317. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i2.965>
- Attas, S. M. a.-N. (Ed.). (1979). *Aims and objectives of Islamic education*. Hodder and Stoughton.
- Australian Government, Department of Education. (2022, September 5). International student numbers by country, by state and territory. <https://www.education.gov.au/international-education-data-and-research/international-student-numbers-country-state-and-territory>
- Az-Zubaidi, A. (1994). *Sahih Al-Bukhari summarized* (D. M. M. Khân, Trans.). Maktaba Dar-us-Salam.
- Chang, H. (2008). *Autoethnography as method*. Routledge.
- Connell, R. (2017). Southern theory and world universities. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 36(1), 4–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1252311>
- Connell, R. (2020). *Southern theory: The global dynamics of knowledge in social science*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003117346>
- de Caux, B. C., Pretorius, L., & Macaulay, L. (2023). *Research and teaching in a pandemic world: The challenges of establishing academic identities during times of crisis*. Springer Nature Singapore.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (2004). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (B. Massumi, Trans.). Continuum.
- Denzin, N. K. (2008). The new paradigm dialogs and qualitative inquiry. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 21(4), 315-325. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390802136995>
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, 273-290.
- Foucault, M. (1997). *Ethics: Subjectivity and truth*. The New Press.
- Giddens, A. (1990). *The consequences of modernity*. Polity Press.
- Given, L. M. (Ed.). (2008). *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods*. SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909>
- Grace, G. (2020). Taking religions seriously in the sociology of education: Going beyond the secular paradigm. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 41(6), 859-869. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2020.1755231>
- Guba, E. G. (Ed.). (1990). *The paradigm dialog*. Sage Publications, Inc.



- Hussain, M., & Bagguley, P. (2024). Exploring the experiences of Muslim doctoral students in UK higher education: Challenges, implications, and pathways to inclusivity. *Studies in Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2024.2357718>
- Jia, Y. (2017). Constructing an academic identity in Australia: An autoethnographic narrative. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(4), 614–628. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1303459>
- John, M. (2013). Foucault and religion - Guest editor's introduction. *Foucault Studies*, 15, 4-8. <https://doi.org/10.22439/fs.v0i15.3987>
- Kiguwa, P., & Langa, M. (2009). The doctoral thesis and supervision: The student perspective. *Perspectives in Education*, 27(1), 50-57. <https://doi.org/10.10520/EJC87509>
- Kim, H. J. (2020). 'Where are you from? Your English is so good': A Korean female scholar's autoethnography of academic imperialism in U.S. higher education. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 33(5), 491-507. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2019.1681551>
- Kim, S. (2024). Subjective well-being of international students: Interplay of perceived discrimination, health status, and community satisfaction. *Journal of International Students*, 14(4), 570–590. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v14i4.6480>
- Lau, R. W. K., & Pretorius, L. (2019). Intrapersonal wellbeing and the academic mental health crisis. In *Wellbeing in doctoral education* (pp. 37-45). Springer.
- Lee, J. T. (2023). Romanticizing decolonization and Asian epistemology: Reflections on identity and space. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 24(2), 187-197. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-023-09835-3>
- Li, B., Jiang, W., & Chakma, U. (2022). Negotiating identities in western academia: An autoethnographic study of international doctoral students in Australia. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 41(2), 312–325. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2022.2082388>
- Lin, S. Y., & Scherz, S. D. (2014). Challenges facing Asian international graduate students in the US: Pedagogical considerations in higher education. *Journal of International Students*, 4(1), 16-33. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v4i1.494>
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge* (G. Bennington & B. Massumi, Trans.; Vol. 10). Manchester University Press.
- Macfarlane, B. (2022). A voyage around the ideological islands of higher education research. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 41(1), 107-115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2021.2002275>
- Maxwell, T. W., & Smyth, R. (2011). Higher degree research supervision: From practice toward theory. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 30(2), 219–231. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2010.509762>
- McAllester, K. (2024). Transposed identity negotiation: A new conceptual framework. *Journal of International Students*, 14(3), 225–231. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v14i3.6132>

- Muhaim, M. (2021). Epistemological fetishism of a doctoral student. *Social Epistemology*, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2021.1980632>
- Muhaim. (2019). Prospering in thesis writing: From self-reflexivity to ideological becoming. In L. Pretorius, L. Macaulay, & B. Cahusac de Caux (Eds.), *Wellbeing in doctoral education*. Springer.
- Nikel, J., Teamey, K., Hwang, S.-Y., & Hart, P. (2010). Understanding others, understanding ourselves: Engaging in constructive dialogue about process in doctoral study in (environmental) education. In R. B. Stevenson & J. Dillon (Eds.), *Engaging Environmental Education: Learning, Culture and Agency* (pp. 165–197). Brill. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789460911613\\_011](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789460911613_011)
- Nordbäck, E., Hakonen, M., & Tienari, J. (2022). Academic identities and sense of place: A collaborative autoethnography in the neoliberal university. *Management Learning*, 53(2), 331-349. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13505076211006543>
- Partridge, E. L. K. (2021). Spirituality in the postmodern world: The reign of the nafs. *Renovatio: The Journal of Zaytuna College*, 5(1). <https://renovatio.zaytuna.edu/article/spirituality-in-the-postmodern-world>
- Peters, M., & Burbules, N. C. (2004). *Poststructuralism and educational research*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Peters, M., & Humes, W. (2003). Editorial: The reception of post-structuralism in educational research and policy. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(2), 109-113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093022000043119>
- Poulos, C. N. (2021). *Essentials of autoethnography*. American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000222-000>
- R'boul, H. (2022). Intercultural philosophy and internationalisation of higher education: Epistemologies of the South, geopolitics of knowledge and epistemological polylogue. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 46(8), 1149-1160. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2022.2055451>
- Ridgway, A. (2022). Love, loss and a doctorate: An autoethnography of grieving while writing a PhD. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2021.2019202>
- Rosenthal, F. (2007). *Knowledge triumphant: The concept of knowledge in medieval Islam* (Vol. 2). Brill.
- Ruto-Korir, R., & Lubbe, C. (2010). Locating the doctoral study in the 'paradigm skirmishes': Challenges and prospects for adopting a paradigm cradle. *Perspectives in Education*, 28(3), 99-109. <https://doi.org/10.10520/EJC87583>
- Shah, S. (2000). Postmodernism/poststructuralism: A theoretical perspective. *Lahore Journal of Economics*, 5(1), 99-110.
- Silova, I., Rappleye, J., & Auld, E. (2020). Beyond the western horizon: Rethinking education, values, and policy transfer. In G. Fan & T. S. Popkewitz (Eds.), *Handbook of Education Policy Studies: Values, Governance, Globalization, and Methodology, Volume 1* (pp. 3-29). Springer Nature Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-8347-2\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-8347-2_1)

- Stanley, P. (2015). Writing the PhD journey(s): An autoethnography of zine-writing, angst, embodiment, and backpacker travels. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 44(2), 143-168. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241614528708>
- Tandamrong, A. J., & Ford, A. (2019). The flow experience in the doctoral journey. In L. Pretorius, L. Macaulay, & B. Cahusac de Caux (Eds.), *Wellbeing in Doctoral Education: Insights and Guidance from the Student Experience* (pp. 283-292). Springer Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-9302-0\\_23](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-9302-0_23)
- The Qur'an* (M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, Trans.). <https://quran.com>
- Tran, L., Nguyen, T., & Lu, T. (2012). Three constructs of institutional identity among international doctoral students in Australia. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 17(5), 557–570. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2012.658557>
- Usher, R. (2002). A diversity of doctorates: Fitness for the knowledge economy? *Higher Education Research & Development*, 21(2), 143-153. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360220144060>
- Xu, X. (2022). An autoethnography of an international doctoral student's multidimensional identity construction. *The Australian Educational Researcher*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-022-00557-w>
- Zhang, H., Chan, P., & Kenway, J. (2015). *Asia as Method in education studies: A defiant research imagination* (1st ed.).

---

*Author bio*

Pashew Nuri, PhD, is a Teaching Associate at the Faculty of Education at Monash University. His major research interests include education policy, education reform, curriculum studies, and teacher education. Email: [pashew.nuri@monash.edu](mailto:pashew.nuri@monash.edu)

---