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Torn between two worlds: COVID, it’s your fault

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a global reach, impacting each one of us to varying degrees. Research is emerging on the medical, educational, social, and psychological effects of this pandemic; however, little has appeared yet on the impact on immigrant acculturation. We are six higher education immigrant academics in New Zealand and our collaborative autoethnographic study reports on the disruption to our immigrant selves caused by COVID-19. We present findings from our narratives written at two different times: a reflection after the initial eight-week New Zealand lockdown from March to May 2020, and a second meta-reflection one year later. We also illustrate, in graph form, our perceived stress levels associated with being immigrants during COVID-19. The narratives describe strong emotions linked to transnational connections that bound us to loved ones at home in COVID-ravaged countries. While we describe a stronger sense of belonging to our new society, we also identify COVID-19 as a disruptor and interrupter of the acculturation process regardless of our length of settlement in New Zealand. We argue that the increased stress of COVID-19 has triggered an interruption or oscillation that has disrupted our acculturation trajectories, surfacing emotions of acculturative stress even for those well adapted to their new society. These findings may resonate with immigrants in similar contexts and circumstances.

Introduction

The world is in its third year of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of writing, global infections stand at 525 million and deaths at 6.2 million (WHO, 2022). The success of the initial NZ COVID-19 elimination strategy of ‘go early, go hard’ with a nationwide, five-week lockdown in March 2020 (Baker et al., 2020) has been widely acknowledged (Kendrick & Isaac, 2021; Patel & Sridhar, 2020). The Prime Minister’s appeal to the ‘team of five million’ to ‘stay home and save lives’ (Mitchell, 2020) in a ‘unite against COVID-19′ campaign provided New Zealanders a period of 18 months to pursue their daily lives with few restrictions. The pandemic was managed through a closed border policy and managed isolation quarantine facilities to catch COVID-19 cases in returning NZ citizens. In the first year of the pandemic, Sibley et al. (2020) noted a high level of trust in the NZ Government strategy which they described as patriotism and “rallying around the flag” (p. 17). In December 2021 NZ government strategy shifted from elimination to ‘living with the virus’ (Menon, 2021). The Omicron variant began circulating in February 2022, and while infections continue to rise, the results of the drive to ‘slow the spread’ through a national vaccination drive has proved successful, with relatively low levels of...
hospitalisation and deaths (Ministry of Health, 2022). While all New Zealanders have felt the sociocultural impacts of COVID-19 as described in the literature on social behaviours related to stereotyping, lockdowns and social distancing (Chiang, 2021; Greyling et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021; Miconi et al., 2021; Serafini et al., 2021) NZ immigrants have experienced specific challenges.

Immigrants can be a vulnerable group during a pandemic with historical records evidencing discriminatory treatment. For example, Irish immigrants were blamed for carrying the cholera pandemic of 1849 to the U.S. (Jedwab et al., 2021). In similar scapegoating, Chinese immigrants have borne the brunt of blame for the spread of COVID-19 from Wuhan in China to Europe and the U.S. (Chen et al., 2020). Immigrant groups have also been identified as often the most vulnerable to disease infection, particularly when this intersects with pre-existing poverty (Aragona et al., 2020; Sibley et al., 2020; Singh, 2021). Kiester and Vasquez-Merino (2021) concluded that “those who have most needed services during this time (COVID pandemic) have been the least able to access them, leaving them even more vulnerable” (p. 83). While acknowledging the challenge of such discriminatory issues for immigrants during COVID-19, our participant group do not report these issues, rather we describe challenges more closely associated with acculturative stress.

Our motivation for an autoethnographic study on COVID-19’s impact on immigrants was triggered in late 2020 when academics at our university shared their experiences of lockdown and online teaching. Parisa’s presentation integrated being a new staff member, COVID-19 work challenges, and connections with her immigrant experience. This drew an emotional response from Anienie, who strongly identified her COVID experience with her recent immigration. Lyn, with her research interest in acculturation, saw an opportunity for collaborative research on COVID-19’s impact on immigrant acculturation. At a writing retreat the following month, we decided to extend an invitation to other immigrant staff members interested in the topic, and Celeste, Jyoti, and Martha were recruited. We decided to focus on our personal experiences of the first eighteen months of the COVID-19 pandemic and posed the research question: what has been the impact of COVID-19 on our immigrant acculturation experiences?

After reviewing existing literature, we realised we could align our research with calls for sociocultural research on the impact of COVID-19 (Pleyers, 2020). More specifically, Kulick et al. (2021) call for intercultural research on the social disruption wrought by COVID-19 on an immigrant sense of belonging resonated strongly with us. We will argue that the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a blip or oscillation in our immigrant acculturation trajectories, at odds with the expected trajectory of decreasing levels of acculturative stress with settlement over time (Lysgaard, 1955; Ward et al., 1998). Our sense of belonging in NZ was strengthened and simultaneously stretched by our transnational relationships.

There is a growing literature on the impacts of COVID-19 on immigrants with themes such as migrant autoethnographic experiences (Zhao, 2020), hostile media perceptions (Chu & Lu, 2021; Yen et al., 2021), and online learning challenges for parents of school children (Santiago et al., 2021; Schenkels et al., 2021). Few studies have directly addressed the acculturation experience and associated concepts such as acculturative stress, transnational relationships, and a sense of belonging. These are discerned by reading between the lines of the emerging literature. While the terms ‘migrant’ and ‘immigrant’ appear to be used interchangeably in the referenced literature; we define our use of ‘immigrant’ to refer to those with residency status in a host country, all of whom will undergo an acculturation process.

Selected concepts from the literature on acculturation

Acculturation refers to the process of sociocultural and psychological adaptation (Berry, 1997) or adjustment (Taylor et al., 2021) triggered by initial intercultural contact between an immigrant (minority ethnicultural group) and the mainstream culture of the new host society. Berry’s (1997) classic acculturation theory focuses on behavioural shifts (through cultural learning and shedding) in the minority group towards a closer fit with the mainstream culture. This unidirectional change could assume an outcome of assimilation (Gans, 1992). However, Berry (2005) provides three potential adaptation choices (assimilation, integration, separation) with the minority group towards a closer fit with the mainstream culture. This unidirectional change could assume an outcome of assimilation (Berry, 2005) as the preferred option due to its bicultural positioning. Berry’s model has been supported (Segal et al., 2010) and extended (Segal et al., 2014) and applied (Meca & Haritatos, 2005; Phinney, 1989) or multiple identities (Stuart & Ward, 2011). However, the model has come under significant critique and the acculturation space is increasingly contested. Bowskill et al. (2007) and Lewis (2021) critiqued Berry’s (2005) integration orientation as assimilation in disguise, Bhatia and Ram (2009) argued against the model’s universalism, while others have pointed to bi-directional influences on host and minority groups (Bourhis et al., 1997; Leong, 2014) rather than a unidirectional impact on the ethnicultural minority group.

Acculturation has been linked to social learning through intercultural contact (Ward & Geeraert, 2016; Ward & Masgoret, 2006). Increasingly, the significance of personality factors (Kosic, 2006) and context (Schwartz et al., 2010) is being emphasised in acculturation theory. In the face of altered contexts, self- and ethnic-identity are commonly re-examined (Brettell & Hollifield, 2015) often resulting in a blended bicultural identity (Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005; Phinney, 1989) or multiple identities (Stuart & Ward, 2011). Phinney (2003) argued that ethnic identity issues can be related to acculturation theory but should not be assumed. Therefore, it is unsurprising that Schwartz et al. (2010) argued for greater recognition of a complex multidimensional biculturalism, rather than a single acculturation theory assuming ‘one size fits all’.

Several acculturation concepts relevant to immigrant experiences of COVID-19 are now further highlighted.

A sense of belonging (or not) during the COVID-19 pandemic

A sense of belonging in a new country, while sought by immigrants, also evokes a complex set of feelings and emotions linked to identity and heritage. Klapcsik (2016) articulated this as a ‘neither here nor there’ experience, living in a state of in-betweeness. Noble (2013) similarly described immigrants’ lack of unconditional belonging to their host country as “it is home, but it is not home” (p. 341) and Cruz et al. (2020) shared a participant’s poignant statement of “the States of Me are scattered across the globe” (p. 281).
During their initial settlement, many immigrants have a sense of ‘belonging to two worlds’ (Alatrash, 2018; Goldin, 2002) and experience conflicting emotions of longing and belonging while developing new relationships in their new country. Over time, with increased sociocultural and psychological adaptation, stress levels reduce as immigrants adjust and find a balance between their two worlds, often managed through international travel to sustain home country connections.

Research findings on COVID-19’s impact on a sense of belonging are mixed. For example, Chinese immigrants in Chu and Lu’s (2021) U.S. survey reported that a strong bicultural identity (heritage and national culture) helped with pandemic stress, while at the same time, hostility from media and perceptions of racism damaged mental health. For others, COVID-19 appears to have been a mechanism to heighten a sense of belonging. For example, Dawson (2020) described his ‘psycho-national transition’ when his sense of belonging in Australia deepened in contrast to his former bond with the UK, while for others, such as the Chinese immigrants reported in Gao’s (2020) Canadian study, feelings of shame, a lack of belonging, and new questions about their identity were raised. Chen et al. (2020) noted the negative impact on intercultural relations from a reduced sense of belonging, and Ockhuysen (2020) commented that distance from home took on renewed meanings during COVID-19 for immigrants who belong to two worlds.

Transnational relationships

Transnational migrants retain significant links between their home and host societies. Levitt (2004) made a pertinent point when stating “Transnational migrants clearly live in multi-layered global worlds” (p. 6), while Vellanki and Prince (2018) argued for greater recognition of the impact of transnationalism on international student identities. Waters (2006) highlighted the role transnational students play in the accumulation of social capital, which benefits both home and host countries, and Rouse (1995) argued against a loss of connection with the home society. This connection is well illustrated in the transnational networks of Pacific Island immigrants in NZ who retain identity, belonging, and nationality while supporting home economies through remittances and circulation of people (Spooney et al., 2003).

The impact of COVID-19 on transnational links and relationships has been a significant stressor for immigrants. The literature contains some rich examples such as Camellia and Fattah (2021), new immigrants in Australia, who described being ‘torn’ between their two worlds as they struggled with concerns about elderly parents in India who may have needed their support. Yen et al.’s (2021) study on immigrants in the UK reported on the pull of transnational relationships and associated stress. One of their participants stated “we are more worried about the virus than the British, because we (Italian) have experienced it twice, once in Italy through parents and friends and then here!” (p. 1227).

Acculturative stress

The overriding emotions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic are stress and anxiety. While this expression may be similar for all who experience the pandemic (Serafini et al., 2021) the effects have exacerbated pre-existing acculturative stressors and added new stressors for immigrants. Ying (2005) named five types of acculturative stressors: physical, biological, social (including homesickness and loneliness), cultural (including discrimination), and functional (language, work, finances). All of these can be identified in the COVID-19 impacts on immigrants.

Acculturative stress can be discerned from Zhao’s (2020) vivid description of his experience of being Chinese in Austria, when he was often asked how far his hometown was from Wuhan. Zhao stated “a great anger grew, but, at the same time, I became afraid of my surroundings … I feared to go out at night as if I am the unwanted” (p. 1584). In NZ, additional acculturative stress may be discerned from the anguish of newly arrived immigrant families where members due to join a few months later, have been separated and trapped overseas for up to two years, due to NZ’s closed borders and travel restrictions (Newman, 2021).

Ward and Geeraert (2016) contended that the level of acculturative stress experienced depends on the immigrant’s coping mechanisms and social functioning, and patterns of stress over time are highly variable amongst individuals. Mitra Kalita (2020) agreed, arguing that immigrants display a mindset to “embrace uncertainty” (p. 1) and many have demonstrated resilience in the pre-COVID era. This was confirmed by Kim et al. (2021) who noted in their study that those who focussed on deepening relationships with others while in lockdown appeared to have beneficial personal growth outcomes. In an autoethnographic study of her lockdown experience, doctoral student Jiang (2020) described feelings of anxiety, fear, and being overwhelmed, but also articulated a greater understanding of self and her relationship with others.

Acculturation trajectories

The acculturation trajectory was initially proposed as a U-shape by Lysgaard (1955) and was supported by Oberg (1960). The U-shape trajectory involves four stages: an initial honeymoon period followed by a high-stress period of confusion, crisis, or cultural conflict. A recovery period finally leads to adjustment and an equilibrium state with easier integration into the host society. No recent research supports the U-shape trajectory, with longitudinal studies reporting a trajectory of high acculturative stress in the initial stages of acculturation, reducing over time towards lower stress levels (Ward et al., 1998; Ying, 2005). No literature reporting on COVID-19 impacts on acculturation trajectories has been sourced; however, our collaborative autoethnographic study contributes to this field.
Our study

The New Zealand immigration context

Immigration has been a major factor influencing the demographic make-up of NZ since the first wave of British settlers arrived following the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi signing between Indigenous Māori chiefs and the British Crown (Orange, 2013). By 1945, 96% of the population was of British descent (Fleras & Spoonley, 1999). The 1987 Immigration Act coincided with a shift in international migration movements towards settlers from non-traditional source areas in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and South America. From the 1990s, NZ experienced waves of multi-ethnic immigrants. The most recent census reported over 100 ethnicities with 27.4% born overseas (Statistica, 2019) and Auckland, the largest city in NZ is described as a super diverse, multilingual city (May, 2015). We were all part of this recent immigration wave.

Introducing the participants

We are six academics employed at an Auckland university. Selection was based on self-labelling as ‘immigrant’ and an interest in the research topic. We each introduce ourselves below with a short profile and comment on our pre-COVID-19 acculturation.

I’m Anienie, an Afrikaans-speaking South African. My family emigrated to NZ in February 2019. Although we were fortunate not to experience any violence or trauma in South Africa, emigration offered a better future for our young children. My initial settlement experience in NZ and COVID-19 are inextricably linked as they happened simultaneously. I am unsure if the post-traumatic stress I experienced in the first two years after we immigrated was due to COVID-19, immigration, or both.

I’m Parisa, a Persian-speaking Iranian and I arrived in NZ in 2013 on a student visa for doctoral study. Moving to NZ was very challenging for me. I struggled with my research in the new context, managing a young child, and finding a job. Another challenge was having no relatives in NZ. My brother lives in Europe and my parents in Iran. Before COVID-19, we visited each other every two to three years either in Iran or NZ but this hasn’t been an option during the pandemic.

My name is Martha and I am an English-speaking Canadian. I arrived in NZ in 2009 on a working holiday visa, and prior to this I lived in the USA and the UK. On each occasion when I shifted countries I did so on my own, arriving without connections to the country or its people. It was not my intention to immigrate to NZ, rather I saw it as an opportunity to experience a diverse culture and to teach. I am the only member of my family living in NZ, and prior to COVID-19 I made annual visits home to Canada. I decided to apply for NZ residency in 2015 and it was granted.

I’m Jyoti, a multilingual South African who speaks English, Afrikaans, Hindi, and Sanskrit. I came to NZ in 1997. Despite being actively involved in anti-apartheid protests, the escalating violence and the uncertain future for our young children forced us to leave. Over the next couple of years my extended family also emigrated. NZ is now home and every two to three years we visit South Africa or have family come over here.

I’m Celeste, an English-speaking South African. I arrived in NZ in 1996 with my one-year-old son and husband. Coming to NZ was a challenge for me as I had been involved in the anti-apartheid struggle during the 1980s. Leaving was a wrench and immigration was alienating. I ‘re-invented’ myself and have had a successful second career.

I’m Lyn, an English-speaking South African. I arrived in NZ in 1996. My husband and I decided to emigrate because of the violence and security issues. I adapted quickly, finding similar employment in higher education and appreciated my improved quality of life.

Data collection and analysis process

We each crafted a reflective narrative that focused on our personal response as an immigrant during the initial lockdown. These
self-narratives are descriptive, evocative, and reflective in exposing the self to introspection and critique in a search to understand our experiences. When the narratives were shared and examined collaboratively, it became clear that while the individual stories were unique, there were common themes related to our membership of the immigrant group.

The decision to write an additional narrative in May 2021 reflecting on the previous year aimed to investigate whether the identified impacts in the first narrative were ongoing, reducing, or increasing. In addition, based on the high levels of stress reflected in the narratives, we decided to record our individual perceived levels of stress from January 2020 to May 2021. Stress levels were rated on a scale of 0–10, with 0 being no stress and 10 being high stress. We hoped the graph would represent visually the patterns that were emerging in the narratives, particularly the spike of stress during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Each of our paired narratives were then synthesised into vignettes for analysis. We worked as a collaborative group to interpret each vignette and the graph (Fig. 1) through an acculturation lens and confirmed with each participant that the interpretation was accurate. Our focus was on the individual immigrant voice rather than losing the rich data in generalising at a group level. Once the individual interpretation was completed, only then did we identify themes using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) observational techniques of repetition, similarities, and differences. Analysis therefore, involved shifting between the self and the group, and between the personal and the sociocultural context of COVID-19 as we considered the research question: What has been the impact of COVID-19 on our immigrant acculturation experience?

Interpreting the narratives

Our vignettes are provided as is common in autoethnography and each includes a brief analysis incorporating acculturation theory.

Anienie’s COVID lockdown experience

Dear COVID,

COVID, you contributed to the fact that I experienced severe anxiety due to work-related stress during the lockdown. It was unfair of you to expect me to comprehend new systems in a country I had known for eight weeks. I doubted myself and my abilities every single day. I was apprehensive about my extended family’s safety back home. You crushed my dreams of reuniting with them for our first Christmas in NZ. Because of you, my elderly parents might never experience ‘my world’ due to travel restrictions. I am paralysed when I hear that loved ones have been admitted to hospital back home or turned away because of lack of capacity. I feel guilty for being in a privileged country where you, COVID, are locked away in managed isolation. Every time I speak with family I silently pray that it will not be the last time. I am torn between two worlds, and it’s your fault. You are not welcome in my world and that of my loved ones …

A year later: My daughter and I have a ritual of browsing in the mall. In February 2021, after hours of shopping, my daughter begged me for one more stop. While I opened my COVID tracer app, I mumbled how tired I was and how reluctant I felt to use the app because we live in a COVID-safe country. Only a few days later, we received an urgent call telling us we needed to isolate as we were a contact of a COVID-positive case. During the next fortnight we received twice-daily phone check-ins from Danny, a frontline worker responsible for contact tracing. He became a faceless friend with whom I shared my sorrows and fears. He provided a safe space, and slowly but surely, something inside me changed. One day, Danny’s words brought me to a standstill when he said “We appreciate you leaving your home country to start a new life with your family in NZ … you are one of us now” For the first time since I moved countries, it wasn’t ‘them’ and ‘us’ anymore. It became ‘we’. I felt a sense of belonging, NZ became home. My ashes are not scattered anymore;

Fig. 1. Acculturation trajectories during COVID-19 2020–2021.
instead, hope and a sense of belonging have arisen.

**Interpretation:** Anienie’s emotive narrative anthropomorphises COVID-19 which she blamed for her high levels of perceived stress during her initial period of settlement. Her feelings of anxiety and uncertainty accentuate acculturative stress responses of alienation, dislocation and marginality described in the literature (Berry, 2005; Pieh et al., 2021). Anienie was sharply aware of the distance between her two worlds, heightened by her sense of safety in COVID-free NZ compared with extended family experiences in COVID-ravaged South Africa. Her experience aligns with Goldin’s (2002) description of immigrants during initial settlement who mourn the loss of homeland and loved ones.

Anienie’s trajectory (Fig. 1) reflects her high acculturative stress in the pre-COVID period as expected of a new immigrant; however, there was an additional sharp increase in perceived stress in March at the start of the COVID lockdown. This ‘double-hit’ of stress took her to a level higher than other participants as her two stressors were undifferentiated. A new wave of stress was recorded when her family was forced to isolate in early 2021. Interestingly, a frontline worker’s inclusive comment gave Anienie a sense of belonging to her new society. This is reflected in a sharp reduction in perceived stress on her trajectory to an unexpectedly low level for the initial settlement period. In all likelihood, Anienie’s 18-month pattern reflects the highs and lows expected for new immigrants, while COVID-19 appears to have accentuated these oscillations.

**Parisa’s COVID lockdown experience**

As I left my office heading into lockdown, I had a weird, but familiar feeling. I knew lockdown would be another ‘immigration’ and I shivered. I am still wondering why I felt this. As an immigrant, I accepted the change of living far from family and friends, feeling isolated at times. I know how to connect with people at a distance. I have attended weddings, birthdays, and even funerals via my computer screen! Why did this lockdown make me feel stressed and anxious? For a few days I couldn’t do anything. It felt like I was homesick … I had concerns for my son’s birthday and if he would see his father who lives in another city. I was worried about my parents who live in Iran. With my brother and I in different countries, what if they got COVID? How would we reach them? What if I got sick, who would look after my young son? Being new to Auckland and not having many connections I felt isolated and lonely. Yet, part of me was happy because I felt safe in NZ. I found myself accepting uncertainty and adjusting to a new ‘normal’ – no borders between work and home as everything was through the computer screen. It brought me a sense of connection and isolation at the same time.

A year later: I am no longer in an individual bubble, but a country bubble. I am experiencing this as ‘fear’. Fear of this country-bubble lockdown, fear of not travelling anymore, fear of not knowing when I will see my parents and family. Yet I am happy about how safe we are here in NZ (I was able to celebrate my 40th birthday with my NZ family and friends). I realise I belong HERE and THERE, and it makes it hard when I can’t go THERE …

**Interpretation:** Parisa identified lockdown as “another immigration” with associated feelings of isolation, loneliness, anxiety, homesickness, and inaction, characteristic of the social and functional stressors described by Ying (2005) as part of acculturative stress. This suggests that Parisa was experiencing similar emotions to those she felt on first arrival in NZ. Her concern for her elderly parents living in Iran resonates with similar narratives on transnationalism emerging in the literature (Camellia & Fattah, 2021) and reactivates her sense of belonging to two worlds. COVID-19 tested Parisa’s resilience and coping strategies and found these less strong than she anticipated. Her trajectory (Fig. 1) shows a sharper rise than other participants at the start of lockdown, aligned with her description of a new immigrant experience and similar acculturative stressors. She depicts a return to a level higher than pre-COVID when she accepted what she described as the ‘new normal’, while retaining elements of stress related to her transnational relationships and her concern about fortress NZ.

**Martha’s COVID lockdown experience**

The timing of the COVID-19 lockdown coincided with my entitlement to apply for NZ citizenship. I have not completed it. I am hesitant for some reason, and I have not gotten to the why yet. COVID-19 felt immediate and close at hand, especially in those early days, because I was sharing the experience with my family overseas. Having a shared experience while so far apart was novel. In some ways it made me feel more connected to them. I got into the habit of calling home to mum and dad every morning, and I still do. We may only speak for 10 min, but it is enough to satisfy both sides that we are coping and well. This is an outcome from 2020 that is both positive and welcomed.

A year later: COVID-19 is living but not breathing, it does not feel but it evokes emotion, it is a master of extortion, grasping onto the human need for attachment. COVID-19 is a swindler, stealing parts of people’s lives and no one can escape it. NZ has been in a privileged position as we were the ‘team of 5 million’. There have been occasions during this year that I have felt pride in how our team has been scoring in popular opinion around the world. I feel unsettled by this sense of pride – it is not the right emotion. We have been winning against COVID-19, but it is not COVID-19 that is losing. It is our family and friends overseas that are losing because COVID is a swindler. Perhaps ‘grateful’ is a better word. ‘Grateful’ that the team of 5 million have been together, ‘grateful’ that my family and friends overseas are well. Yet, COVID-19 has stolen time and connection, so perhaps there is a bit of bitterness in there too.

**Interpretation:** While the COVID-19 lockdown is depicted with increased stress levels associated with Martha’s transnational relationships (Fig. 1), her stress levels were moderated by a sense of deepening these relationships. Kim et al. (2021) noted a similar positive outcome in individuals with strong resilience. Martha’s emotional narrative on the 2020–2021 period was unexpected, and her conflicting feelings reinforced her resistance to commit to NZ citizenship which surprised her and raised questions of national identity. It appears that Martha’s equilibrium was disrupted as she teased out a range of conflicting emotions which she reflected as an increase in stress during 2021.
**Jyoti’s COVID lockdown experience**

Since our arrival in 1997, there were moments of longing and questions of belonging, especially triggered by trips home to South Africa to visit friends and family. Strangely, our sense of belonging in NZ deepened, and apart from a few racial slurs because of our brown skin tone, our experiences were mostly positive. Then, COVID arrived to encage us all, and the world seemed like a very small place. The constant reminders of the ‘team of 5 million’ created a sense of national identity. We were no longer outsiders or brown-skinned immigrants; we were all facing the same uncertainty together as New Zealanders. COVID-19 does not discriminate but strongly dictates our way of being in the world. It has thrown everyone into unknown territory where we are all finding our way and supporting each other. It has created a deeper sense of being part of one world. The cost of this is huge. It has separated us from our loved ones in South Africa, quarantine and isolation have become a necessary part of international travel, and while we feel safe in our bubble of freedom in NZ, I feel anxious about the new strains and rising infection and fatality rates in South Africa.

A year later: While I know that COVID-19 continues to consume many parts of the world, I feel a strange sense of acceptance of its effects. A few months ago, COVID deaths were alarming, now it is less unusual and not unexpected when I hear of family or friends in South Africa becoming another statistic. Much has changed over the past year: I await my first vaccine; we remain in Alert level one; public transport still requires mandatory use of masks; and not all businesses are operating. We are fortunate that family members’ jobs are secure, and some continue to work remotely from home. While I feel safe, I am very mindful that things could change very rapidly.

**Interpretation:** After 24 years, Jyoti’s level of acculturative stress was low pre-COVID (Fig. 1) in a pattern predicted by Ward and Masgoret (2006) and Ying (2005) from high initial acculturative stress, reducing to sustained low levels, indicative of adjustment in the new society. Jyoti evidences an outward-facing, global perspective on COVID-19. She displayed the personal characteristics of internal locus of control and high psychological differentiation as described by Kosic (2006) for positive adaptation. Thus, she retains emotional equilibrium and finds acceptance of her ‘being’ in a COVID-19 world, with a pragmatic awareness of the uncertainty of the times, proving Mitra Kalita’s (2020) point that immigrants “embrace uncertainty” (p. 1).

**Celeste’s COVID lockdown experience**

Why did this time of relative silence in my life cause such anguish to surface? What was it that resulted in me feeling utterly bereft and alone? A foreigner in this land I have called home for almost 24 years. In my house, life was calm and peaceful, our bubble of four remained safe and settled. Long walks provided me with the necessary release of endorphins to prevent being fully submerged in my sadness, but it lurked just under the surface. My family looked on helplessly when for no apparent reason I would either be intensely angry or inconsolably sad. I could not explain what was happening. All the while I watched the news, worried about the impact of the virus on the rest of the world, on my family and friends. In the silence, thoughts of doubt about my identity emerged. I felt like I did not belong. Is it because suddenly I needed to be silent? Is it because I now have to accept that filling my life with being busy caring for others will not make it all okay? I am still a foreigner in this benign place, I am comfortable and have sufficient of everything, yet I realise that I will never belong. With the passing of the virus, perhaps then I will accept that it is okay not to belong.

A year later: COVID-19 still reigns supreme throughout the world. More and more people I know have had or have the virus. More and more people lose loved ones. I consider my early response and the way it shook my sense of stability, and I am surprised by the powerful feelings. Questions of my identity remain in the wings of my thought and continue to alter the way in which I view the world and my place in it. Genealogical investigation into my family history provides comfort and a level of solace in the knowledge of roots set down in new countries by previous generations who moved from place to place. My identity is tenuously more secure in the reluctant acceptance of this fact.

**Interpretation:** Celeste’s trajectory pre-COVID (Fig. 1) reflected low levels of acculturative stress identified by Ward and Masgoret (2006) and Ying (2005) for immigrants who are adjusted to their new society. However, COVID-19 appears to have exposed her hidden coping mechanism (focus on others, busyness, and distraction) which has kept questions of belonging and identity buried for two decades. Only now does Celeste ask the question of ‘Who am I in this place’? Phinney (1989) contends that immigrants question their ethnic identity in the early stages of acculturation and work towards a position of achieved ethnic identity or internalisation, which involves an acceptance of being different. Celeste’s lockdown experience suggests that this identity work is essential for adaptation to a new society. In the light of this insight, it was unsurprising that Celeste recorded a steep rise in perceived stress (beyond that of Jyoti and Lyn who have a similar length of settlement in NZ) and that this drops off at a slower rate. Like Jyoti, Celeste holds a global perspective on COVID-19 and claims both a national and global citizenship, with the latter bringing a sense of balance to her ‘unsettled’ NZ identity.

**Lyn’s COVID lockdown experience**

Although I have felt well settled in NZ for 25 years, the COVID pandemic has created a sense of dislocation which has pulled me in two directions. I have a stronger sense of identity and bond with my fellow New Zealanders after we supported each other through the anxieties and disruptions caused by lockdown … but I am trapped here as the pandemic has isolated me from loved ones who live in ‘another’ world which is being ravaged by COVID. I don’t want to belong to that world, but I am bound to them like never before. I am not homesick; I do not want to be in South Africa, nor do I question NZ as ‘my place’. It is the renewed awareness of distance and forced isolation triggered by COVID that reminds me of my close relationships with those back home. COVID has triggered a tsunami of emotions, it has interrupted and impacted the steadiness and predictability of my ‘being’ in NZ.

A year later: One year on … how do I feel now? I’m more resigned to the international travel constraints anticipating a barren travel
landscape ahead where previously there had always been a plan in progress. When I think of my transnational relationships, particularly with family, I continue to feel a sense of despair, isolation, and loss. Life goes on for all of us both ‘here and there’, yet a graduation opportunity in the UK lost, a family visit to NZ cancelled, and now a feeling of desolation at a wedding invitation which family members in South Africa are describing as ‘an event we wouldn’t miss for the world’. I couldn’t feel further away. The sense of yearning for connection in person with those I love in South Africa cannot be gratified by Zoom or WhatsApp. Yet, I also truly appreciate the privilege of living in a country that has COVID under control, where we continue with our everyday lives without anxiety. How lucky can I be? If only …

Interpretation: Lyn also had a pre-COVID trajectory (Fig. 1) associated with a positive adaptation to a new society (Ward & Masgoret, 2006; Ying, 2005). However, the pandemic restrictions exposed her deep emotional attachments to her transnational relationships. Rather than perceiving global distance as reduced by the pandemic as Jyoti and Celeste did, Lyn perceived greater distance and more difficult communication in transnational relationships. This is in line with Ockhuysen’s (2020) observation that during COVID-19, distance from home takes on renewed meaning. Her experience aligns with Ward and Geeraert’s (2016) findings that the pattern of acculturative stress may vary over time, and it raises the question of whether freedom of international travel may be a moderating factor associated with adaptation in a new country.

Narrative themes

While acknowledging the strength of autoethnography to present the individual lived experience, we tentatively move beyond the individual stories, to seek commonalities of a collective story of the immigrant group. This is based on Chang’s (2016) argument that the self is an extension of a community and autoethnography can bring understanding to a sociocultural context. In this case, we seek to understand COVID-19 impacts on acculturation. Three themes were identified.

Similarities of experience indicate an immigrant community response to the experience of COVID-19

NZ immigrants appear to have experienced increased levels of psychological distress similar to that noted by Serafini et al. (2021) as a worldwide trend. In line with broader findings (Chen et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2021; Peh et al., 2021) participant responses were generally negative during the lockdown period with emotions indicative of anxiety, loneliness, dislocation, and disruption. These were exacerbated by transnational concerns and renewed questions of belonging and identity. The sociocultural context appears to be an influencing factor in the participants’ responses to their COVID-19 experiences. Appreciation was expressed by all participants, for the NZ Government’s COVID-elimination strategy and the consequent safety and relative freedom in NZ during 2020–2021. The solidarity of belonging to the ‘team of 5 million’ was particularly meaningful as behaviours of ‘them and us’ become ‘we’ as national identity strengthened. This increased sense of belonging aligns with Sibley et al.’s (2020) research on trust and wellbeing in NZ during lockdown, but runs counter to research reports involving Asian populations feeling discriminated and unwelcomed (Chiang, 2021).

The lived experience of ‘belonging to two worlds’ with associated transnational links was heightened during COVID-19

Apart from the anxiety and uncertainty commonly associated with the COVID-19 lockdown, it appears that additional stressors usually associated with the initial acculturation period were re-ignited in the immigrant group as they navigated Levitt’s (2004) ‘multi-layered global worlds’ of the pandemic. The raw emotions of belonging to two worlds was exacerbated for new immigrants and re-ignited for established immigrants. Alatrash’s (2018) astute observation of “to leave a homeland is to leave a piece of one’s heart and soul behind” (p. 142) aptly describes the longing that Parisa described as “I belong HERE and THERE”. Similar concerns of health and wellbeing of loved ones as identified by Camellia and Fattah (2021) were specifically mentioned by the participants who retained close links with those in their ‘home’ country. This highlights the role that easy access to international travel played in the pre-COVID period to maintain transnational connections and for immigrants to belong to two worlds more easily.

COVID-19 disrupted theorised acculturation trajectories

The impact of the global pandemic on immigrants may leave an indelible print on acculturation trajectories in the form of an oscillation or blip larger than the normal ups and downs associated with the acculturation process over time. The two theorised trajectories of a U-shape (Lysgaard, 1955) and a sloping decline (Ward et al., 1998; Ying, 2005) are challenged by the impact of COVID-19. While the latter model is confirmed for those living in NZ for over 20 years, this only applies to the pre-COVID-19 period. Without exception, all participants recorded a sharp increase in perceived stress levels during lockdown, with reducing but sustained stress levels into the post-COVID-19 lockdown period, a pattern supported by other research findings (Greylng et al., 2021; Peh et al., 2021). Only two of us returned to a pre-COVID level of stress, while one reflected an increasing level of perceived stress. In some instances, the same stress triggers that caused sharp rises (transnational links) continued, in others, the challenge of resolving deeper issues of identity and belonging will take longer than a few months to resolve. We conclude that a COVID-19 oscillation or blip has interrupted the theorised acculturation trajectory.

Concluding thoughts

While the study was limited to a small sample of immigrant academics, the nature of autoethnography is not to seek generalisations to wider populations, but to share individual stories from which broader group experiences may be discerned (Chang, 2016). We reference Le Roux’s (2017) five criteria against which the rigour of autoethnographic research may be evaluated. We believe that each criterion is demonstrated in our research: subjectivity (the self is visible in the research), self-reflexivity (self-awareness, self-exposure.
and introspection by researchers), resonance (the audience can connect with the experience), credibility (involves academic judgement that trustworthiness and honesty permeate the research) and contribution (extends knowledge). The purpose of a qualitative study such as ours is to add value to the field of acculturation through an exploration of subjective lived experiences.

While we aimed to uncover new insights into the well-researched field of acculturation theory, our findings are tentative and explorative. We aspired to further research using other qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, and visual methodologies which would be useful to test the findings of our autoethnographic study, particularly if the sample size remained constant. Similar research in other national contexts and with other immigrant groups would be valuable to seek similarities and differences with this study. Tracking over a longer time period into a post-COVID-19 world to assess the impact of the pandemic on acculturation trajectories could paint a more complete picture of the COVID-19 oscillation and its subsequent shape.

Our contribution has been to challenge the view that an acculturation trajectory reflects initial high acculturation stress levels following which, apart from minor oscillations, the general trend is towards a sustained lower level of stress. We have argued that COVID-19 has been an interrupter and disruptor of the immigrant acculturation process, triggering an oscillation of acculturative stress far beyond anything that has previously been noted in the literature.

This article not only provides a window into the experiences of six participants, it also hints at possible acculturative impacts in the longer term, raising the following questions. What imprint will COVID-19 leave on acculturation trajectories? Will international movements return to pre-COVID levels, and if not, what impact will that have on transnational relationships? Will the distance from HERE and THERE rebound or are we moving into a ‘new normal’ where the reality of belonging to two worlds means living worlds apart?

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