# Identity Exploration in PhD Journey 'Who Am I?': An Auto-ethnographic Inquiry

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## ABSTRACT

*This auto-ethnographic inquiry offers a careful investigation of identity during the PhD research, shedding light on the complex interactions between personal experiences, scholarly activities, and social influences. It uses an auto-ethnographic qualitative research design that explores insights, reflections and experiences of the author from initial perturb to prolonged enthusiasm through introspective contemplation and active scholarly efforts, ultimately leading to a profound sense of fulfillment. Academic pursuits, such as writing research articles and presentations, become essential sources of inspiration for both professional and personal development and help to define the researcher's identity as both a practitioner and a scholar. Furthermore, a deeper awareness of overlapping identities and their larger implications for research, practice, and policy is gained through the researcher's connections with schools and community involvement projects. It has a significant academic accomplishment that is the result of intense study and persistent commitment. Working together with mentors and peers enhances the process by providing a variety of viewpoints and encouraging creativity. Even in the face of academic difficulties, celebrations and moments of unity serve as vital sources of inspiration. Additionally, PhD research addresses important issues and advance knowledge, offering insightful perspectives to academics and society alike. The PhD path ultimately demonstrates the transformative power of tenacity, teamwork, and intellectual contribution, leaving a lasting legacy on both individual and academic development and social implication.*

**Keywords**: Academic engagement, Auto-ethnography, Identity exploration, PhD journey, social implication

## Introduction

This paper explore an understanding how pursuing a PhD research impacts both the personal and professional identity development of the researcher. It also investigates how challenges and milestones shape personal identity, how academic experiences influence professional identity, and employs an auto-ethnographic approach to provide a reflective, personal account of these processes. Additionally, it examines the interplay between personal life and academic responsibilities, aiming to offer insights into the complex dynamics of identity exploration during the PhD journey through the researcher's narrative.

Auto-ethnography become popular among academics because of its exceptional capacity to combine academic research with personal experiences (Adams & Herrmann, 2023), offering deep insights into intricate phenomena. Academics at Tribhuvan University (TU) have realized in recent years the shortcomings of conventional research methodologies in capturing the complex character of human experiences. By enabling PhD students to reflexively interact with their experiences, emotions, and identities throughout their academic journey, auto-ethnography provides a persuasive choice. TU academics find this technique appealing since it enables them to investigate the complexities of identity development and self-discovery within the framework. Auto-ethnography allows researchers to connect with their identities, feelings, and experiences in a reflective manner (Ellis et al., 2011). Anderson (2006) aforesaid auto-ethnography helps researchers become more critical, reflective, and self-aware, which helps them comprehend the struggles and successes of their academic endeavors on a deeper level.

Furthermore, auto-ethnography is consistent with the university's mission to support critical reflexivity and self-awareness among its faculties. Through the process of critical reflection on one's own experiences during the PhD research, auto-ethnography helps to gain a better understanding of the obstacles, victories, and life-changing events that influence academic endeavors. This reflective technique offers nuanced insights into the human aspects of knowledge production. Denzin (2014) said the value of using a range of voices and viewpoints in academic writing, a concept that auto-ethnographic methods exemplify. According to Wall (2008), auto-ethnography enables researchers to close the knowledge gap between academic study and personal experience, adding nuanced perspectives to the scholarly discourse.

Scholarly inquiry is increasingly realizing the value of including a range of voices, viewpoints, and life experiences in an progressively interconnected world. This ethos is embodied by auto-ethnography, emphasizes the researcher's subjectivity and recognizes the intrinsic importance of personal narratives in forming academic research (Adams & Herrmann, 2023; Thelwall & Nevill, 2021; Walford, 2021). The importance of personal narratives in forming qualitative research is emphasized by Kozak (2021). Luitel and Dahal (2021) asserts that auto-ethnography provides an alternative to conventional research techniques, especially when it comes to capturing the complex nature of human experiences in scholarly pursuits. TU scholars are interested in auto-ethnography because of its

ability to connect between academic research and personal experience, its alignment with the university's values of critical reflexivity, and its resonance with broader trends towards qualitative and participatory research methodologies.

The objective of this auto-ethnographic study is to explore the complex process of self-discovery and identity building that a researcher went through when applying for a PhD research. My path is influenced by distance from home, family history, and willpower. It is based on the distinctive story of a middle-class student from Arghakhanchi, Nepal. My road to academic achievement was paved with tenacity and fortitude, having started from modest beginnings in a distant village with agricultural livelihoods and illiterate parents. Even with the difficulties of traveling long distance for school and getting over financial difficulties, my path progressed step by step via academic turning points, from earning a Bachelor, Master and M.Phil. degrees.  Notwithstanding challenges, earning the M.Phil. degree was a noteworthy accomplishment that helped me land a profession as a teacher at the Department of Science Education, Central Department of Education, TU and set the groundwork for future academic endeavors like earning PhD degree.

Over the course of my PhD journey, my identity changed in lockstep with professional and academic achievements, demonstrating the dynamic interaction between my experiences, socioeconomic circumstances, and educational goals. It is critical to demonstrate the value of comprehending identity exploration in the PhD research, both for individual scholars and for academia as large. Doctorate researchers' academic careers are greatly shaped by identity exploration, which has a significant impact on his/her research interests, methods, and intellectual accomplishments. Through exploring my own identities, the researcher acquires a more profound understanding of his motivations, values, and epistemological stances, which in turn contributes to a more varied and inventive scholarly landscape. By providing background knowledge, referencing prior research on auto-ethnography, identity formation, and obstacles faced throughout doctorate studies, one can get important insights into the complex and multifaceted character of the PhD path.    Within the framework of my academic endeavors, auto-ethnography provides with a singular opportunity to reflexively engage with my personal experiences, emotions, and identities. Academics that have emphasized the transformative power of auto-ethnography in shedding light on researchers' lived experiences and enhancing academic work with personal narratives include (Washbrook & Beacon, 2022). Furthermore, research on the

construction of identities in doctoral studies, highlights the dynamic interaction of institutional, social, and personal elements in determining the identities and academic paths of researchers (Thelwall & Nevill, 2021). Furthermore, scholarly works concerning the difficulties encountered in doctoral research emphasize the psychological, emotional, and socio-economic stresses that researchers encounter, underscoring the significance of comprehending and tackling the individual aspects of the PhD process (Izak et al., 2023; Ploder & Hamann, 2021).

In order to provide light on the personal experiences, thoughts, and transformations that PhD researcher (author) undergo the study aims to offer detailed insights into the difficulties of identity creation within the framework of doctoral studies by using auto-ethnography as a methodological approach. By means of a comprehensive investigation of personal accounts and contemplation, the research aims to enhance comprehension of the subjective aspects of the doctoral study experience and provide recommendations for promoting the overall growth and welfare of doctoral scholars in higher education, particularly in Tribhyvan University.

**Methodology**

Conducting an auto-ethnographic investigation the study approach places emphasis on a reflective interaction with the researcher's personal experiences, feelings, and identities during the research. This entails a critical analysis of my experiences, such as early anxieties and difficulties resulting from a lack of resources, contrasted with the progressive normalization of feelings and the growth of self-assurance over time. Employing a reflexive lens, I turn over deep into moments of uncertainty, resilience, and personal growth encountered during the PhD research journey. Afterwards, narrative construction is a crucial scientific strategy in which the author creates vivid narrative descriptions to clarify subjective experiences. The researcher uses narrative approaches to weave together triumphant, humbling, and self-discovering moments while capturing the lived realities of negotiating the complex landscape of PhD study. The study attempts to provide nuanced insights into the complex process of identity exploration within the framework of earning a PhD by using an auto-ethnographic lens, emphasizing the researcher's subjective viewpoint and lived experiences.

Identity exploration in PhD journey is examined via an autoethnographic lens, and a thick description technique is used to provide in-depth descriptions of significant experiences, conversations, and changes that the researcher

encountered while pursuing his doctorate study. There are many opportunities for contact with national and international professionals as well as the learning community in the field as a PhD scholar of the NORHED/Rupantaran project. The researcher's identity as a scholar and practitioner is shaped by these encounters, which might take the form of conferences, seminars, or cooperative projects. These interactions are crucial to the researcher's journey. Additionally, the concept of participatory action research (PAR) is applied, especially when it comes to school gardening programs in a public school. Through embracing this iterative process, the study aims to illuminate the intricate interactions between individual experiences, academic endeavors, and community involvement by capturing the nuanced dynamics of identity creation within the context of doctoral studies.

To guarantee rigor and credibility when starting an auto-ethnographic exploration, a number of methodological considerations are crucial. First, the researcher discusses the field's body of work on doctorate studies, auto-ethnography, and identity development. This conversation adds theoretical depth and enhances the interpretation of data by placing individual experiences within larger scholarly frameworks. When it comes to the sharing of personal information and how other characters are portrayed in the story, ethical issues are carefully considered and respected. In order to promote openness and reflexivity in the research process, reflexive writing approaches are utilized to critically assess the researcher's biases, assumptions, and positionalities. Using a peer review procedure to get input from peers who have experience with auto-ethnographic methodologies increases methodological rigor and boosts credibility. The process of cross-referencing personal narratives with additional data sources, including field notes, interviews, or papers, is employed to strengthen the study's validity and validate the results. Documenting methodological choices, reflexivity activities, and analytical insights helps to preserve transparency throughout the research process and makes the study findings more replicable. Together, these methodological factors enable a thorough and rigorous investigation of identity within the framework of the PhD journey, providing sophisticated insights into the intricacies of academic journey of the researcher.

## Results

The researcher's changing identity of introspective reflection, successfully navigates the uncertainties and fears that are inherent in the PhD journey, finally emerging with a heightened feeling of conviction and self-assurance. Furthermore,

as the researcher moves from being a lone scholar to a member of the academic community, the investigation of academic identity becomes a major theme. The researcher's increased visibility in academic circles as a result of paper publication and presentations are noteworthy moments. In addition to forming the researcher's identity within academia, these encounters also support a more general sense of contentment in his career. The findings also shed light on how the researcher navigated changing professional responsibilities during his PhD journey. Researcher encounter challenges in taking on new roles and duties in the academic setting as I move through the different stages of my PhD study.

As a student and also an emerging scholar, the researcher navigates the opportunities and problems that come with moving from being a knowledge consumer to a knowledge producer. As the researcher takes on leadership responsibilities in research projects, shares discoveries through academic publications and presentation, and participates in mentoring and knowledge-sharing activities, this transition is characterized by moments of empowerment and agency. By means of these experiences, the researcher not only solidifies his identity as a professional but also makes a significant contribution to the academic community, emulating the diverse tasks and responsibilities that come with pursuing a doctorate degree. Regarding the finding provides insight into the researcher's experiences negotiating the complex terrain of academic environments during their doctoral pursuits.

The findings highlight how important the connections are in forming the researcher's identity and sense of place in the academic community. The researcher builds a sense of unity and common purpose through cooperative projects and intellectual interactions, creating bonds that cut beyond institutional and disciplinary boundaries. These contacts support the researcher's professional development as well as his changing identity as a scholar and practitioner in the academic setting. In the end, the results emphasize how important academic environments are for promoting identity discovery and forming a researcher's sense of agency and belonging in the academic community. I faced difficulties while pursuing my PhD are listed in the auto-ethnographic investigation which added to the intricate process of identity discovery. The most significant of these difficulties is the financial restriction related to school gardening programs, which created administrative difficulties and constrained the project's execution scope.

Furthermore, scheduling these activities proved difficult because it called for careful planning and priority in order to strike a balance between personal

activities and academic obligations. Additionally, the researcher had to navigate different levels of enthusiasm and engagement within the school community in order to encourage student interest and parental motivation towards the school garden project. Another difficulty that surfaced was the administrative function, as the researcher's capacity to effect significant change within the educational institution was hampered by bureaucratic procedures and power structures. In spite of these obstacles, the researcher experiences triumphant and resilient moments that mark his path and foster personal development and identity formation. The researcher overcame time and financial constraints by using inventive problem-solving and ingenuity to come up with novel approaches to maximize the benefits of school gardening initiatives.

The exploration during the PhD journey illuminates the complex emotional terrain the researcher had to navigate. The researcher's experience has been colored by a range of emotions during the study, from the first fear at the beginning of the PhD journey to ongoing exhilaration that has permeated various periods. There's a noticeable presence of frustration, with practically every milestone being accompanied by a persistent sense of fulfillment. The researcher's developing sense of self and identity have been greatly influenced by these feelings. The researcher's routine is typically punctuated by moments of delight and relaxation amidst the rigors of academic study, often entwined with the basic joys of familial connection, like exchanging talks over beers. These emotional experiences highlight the complex interactions that occur during a researcher's journey between academic pursuits, personal fulfillment, and familial ties.

Through an auto-ethnographic lens, identity discovery throughout the PhD journey is examined, highlighting the significant influence that research and scholarship have on the academic career of the researcher. The researcher has developed ten research articles that have been published in national and international peer-reviewed journals. Through active engagement in scholarly endeavors, the researcher has not only added to the body of knowledge but also shaped his own identity as a practitioner and scholar. The researcher's place within the academic community has been solidified by these intellectual endeavors, which have acted as catalysts for the refinement and crystallization of the researcher's research interests. Of particular significance is the researcher's dedication to disseminating the results of his work to a broader academic audience a practice that became more intense in the third year of my doctoral study. This pledge highlights the researcher's commitment to knowledge and scholarly

dissemination, highlighting a crucial component of his identity as a rising academic.

The study provides insightful information that goes well beyond the experiences of individual researchers and opens up new avenues for future practice, policy, and research approaches. The results highlight the need for more research into the nuances of identity creation in academic endeavors and encourage researchers to explore the intricate relationships between personal and professional development. Additionally, the researcher's involvement in additional research projects such as faculty research contributions and national priority research initiatives highlights the possibility of a wider effect within academic circles. Furthermore, the focus on promoting knowledge transfer through entrepreneurial endeavors and sharing knowledge with the larger society highlights the potential of academics to function as a catalyst for constructive societal change.

## Discussion

The researcher's journey of self-perception and identity transformation is one recurring subject that shows up. The research indicates a path characterized by early conundrums and doubts that progressively progresses to a point of clarity and assurance. This conclusion is reinforced by the researcher's introspective reflection, which helped them to overcome the difficulties that come with completing a PhD and come out on the other side with more confidence and conviction (Sparkes, 2020; Thelwall & Nevill, 2021). Furthermore, the researcher's narrative prominently features the exploration of academic identity, which mirrors the shift from being a solitary scholar to a contributing part of the academic community (Adams & Herrmann, 2023; Denzin, 2013). The conversation also focuses on how the researcher managed to adjust to changing responsibilities in his career as he pursued his PhD. The difficulties of taking on new duties and responsibilities in the academic setting present himself to researcher as he moves through the various stages of his PhD study (Beňová, 2014). Moments of empowerment and agency define this shift from student to emerging scholar, as the researcher actively participates in research projects, shares findings through academic publications and presentations, and assumes mentorship responsibilities (Adams & Herrmann, 2023; Hayes & Fulton, 2014). These encounters help the researcher develop a stronger sense of self as a professional and enable him to make significant contributions to the academic community (Qutoshi, 2015; Thelwall & Nevill, 2021).

Furthermore, the findings highlight the wider consequences of the researcher's experiences for upcoming academic research, practice, and policy. The study promotes further investigation into the intersections of personal and professional growth in academic endeavors by illuminating the complex nature of 'identity exploration' during the PhD journey (Alsop, 2005). Furthermore, the researcher's engagement in knowledge dissemination and community outreach activities highlights the potential for academia to drive positive societal transformation through entrepreneurial endeavors and knowledge transfer initiatives (Adams & Herrmann, 2023; Riedler, 2016 ). It provides the challenges of professional growth and identity formation in the context of PhD research, opening the door for further research projects and useful interventions targeted at improving the PhD experience and encouraging academic success (Riedler, 2016; Thelwall & Nevill, 2021).

This study explores the researcher's dynamic interactions with  mentors, students, and co-workers. These interactions serve as pivotal points of engagement, facilitating knowledge exchange, collaborative research endeavors, and scholarly discourse (Harrison, 2012; Thelwall & Nevill, 2021). Through these encounters, the researcher not only seeks guidance and mentorship but also contributes to the academic community, enriching the discourse with diverse perspectives and insights (Hayano, 1979). Such collaborative ventures foster a sense of camaraderie and shared purpose, transcending disciplinary boundaries and institutional affiliations (Faifua, 2010; Ploder & Hamann, 2021). This communal engagement plays a pivotal role in shaping the researcher's sense of belonging and identity within the academic landscape, underlining the integral role of academic spaces in facilitating identity exploration and professional growth (Riedler, 2016).

Additionally, the auto-ethnographic investigation sheds light on a number of difficulties the researcher had while pursuing his PhD, each of which added to the intricate process of identity development. One major obstacle that has surfaced is the constraint of inadequate resources, specifically the budgetary constraints (Adams & Herrmann, 2023; Roth, 2005). The researcher had to negotiate alternate tactics and look for innovative solutions as a result of these limitations, which presented logistical difficulties and limited the project's execution scope (Adams & Herrmann, 2023). Furthermore, time management became a recurring issue since juggling academic obligations required careful planning and setting priorities (Ploder & Hamann, 2021; Yoon, 2020). Furthermore, the researcher faced a complex problem in encouraging student and parent involvement in the

project, as different levels of excitement and motivation within the school community needed to be navigated (Walford, 2021). In addition, the researcher encountered power struggles and bureaucratic barriers in the school setting, which limited his capacity to implement significant innovation and change (Adams & Herrmann, 2023; Morsi, 2021).

The auto-ethnographic investigation provides insightful knowledge about the intricacies of academic involvement and identity development in doctoral programs. A sophisticated perspective of the dynamic interplay between human experiences and institutional environment is provided by the study, which looks at the researcher's interactions inside academic spaces and outlines the difficulties encountered along the route. These results highlight the value of teamwork, resiliency in the face of difficulties, and the transformative power of doctoral education in defining identities and promoting career advancement in higher education (Adams & Herrmann, 2023; Nowicka, 2023). The study opens the door for additional investigation into the complex dynamics of PhD education and identity discovery, thereby advancing future studies and useful interventions meant to improve the doctoral experience and promote academic achievement.

It is an auto-ethnographic investigation that provides a deep insight of the doctoral trajectory of the researcher, interspersed with triumphant moments and moments of perseverance in the face of major adversities (Silvast et al., 2020). The researcher's journey is characterized by instances of innovative problem-solving and ingenuity, while confronting barriers such as administrative hurdles, time limits, and budgetary constraints (Beach & Vigo-Arrazola, 2021). Additionally, the researcher's tenacity in navigating power dynamics and overcoming administrative roadblocks emphasizes jis support for experiential learning and environmentally friendly teaching methods (Adams & Herrmann, 2023; Lester, 2020). These victories demonstrate the researcher's fortitude in the face of difficulty and help comprehend his changing identity as a scholar, teacher, and change agent both inside and outside of academia (Ploder & Hamann, 2021).

Simultaneously, research on crossing identities in academia offers deeper understandings of the intricate interactions between different aspects of the researcher's identity and how they affect academic experiences (Nowicka, 2023). The researcher documents a cooperative effort in the school garden through participatory action research. It offers valuable insights into the dynamic interplay of personal experiences, institutional contexts, and intersecting identities within doctoral studies (Reed-Danahay, 2021). By examining moments of triumph and

resilience amidst challenges and reflecting on the complexities of identity negotiation, the researcher contributes to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of academic journeys (Denzin, 2013). These findings not only enrich academic discourse but also advocate for the integration of experiential learning, community engagement, and sustainable practices in doctoral education, paving the way for transformative change within academia and beyond (Nowicka, 2023; Ploder & Hamann, 2021).

According to Asante and Abubakari (2021), the study shows that the researcher's experience was coloured by a range of emotions, from initial worry at the start of the PhD journey to ongoing exhilaration that pervaded several periods. Feelings of dissatisfaction are conspicuously absent, with a ubiquitous sensation of fulfillment preceding nearly every milestone in its place (Ploder & Hamann, 2021; Riedler, 2016). These emotional encounters are crucial in molding the researcher's developing sense of self and identity, highlighting the connections between the researcher's journey and personal fulfillment, academic pursuits, and familial ties (Jensen et al., 2020).   Moreover, the investigation of identity formation during the PhD research highlights the significant influence of research and scholarship on the researcher's scholarly path (Dalmer, 2020). The researcher has actively participated in academic pursuits, developing ten research articles that have been published in national and international peer-reviewed journals. The researcher's dedication to disseminating the results of his work to a broader academic audience is also remarkable; this practice became more intense in the third year of their PhD program (Riedler, 2016). This pledge highlights the researcher's commitment to knowledge and scholarly transmission, highlighting a crucial component of his identity as a rising academic (Ploder & Hamann, 2021; Thelwall & Nevill, 2021).

Furthermore, the research reveals an intriguing story of personal development and metamorphosis entwined with the researcher's PhD path (Jones & Garcia, 2018). Examining critical junctures in personal growth and understanding, the researcher's observations highlight the enormous influence. According to Riedler (2016), the PhD experience fosters both personal and professional progress by acting as a catalyst for comprehensive growth. The researcher's claim that the PhD has given them constant support and served as a pillar for his academic and personal aspirations is essential to this transformational process (Acharya et al., 2022; Thelwall & Nevill, 2021). This mutually beneficial interaction between professional and personal development highlights the connection between identity creation and academic pursuits, and it represents a critical turning point in the

self-realization and academic advancement path of the researcher (Jensen et al., 2020; Ploder & Hamann, 2021). The results highlight the need for more research into the intricate relationships between identity formation and academic endeavors and encourage researchers to continue exploring these complex intersections (Yoon, 2020). In the same line, Nepalese scholars wrote that Dharma and Karma in auto-ethnography as a transformative educational research methodology is a must (Luitel & Dahal, 2020).This means that Nepalese scholars, specifically Luitel and Dahal, discussed the concepts of Dharma (duty, moral responsibility) and Karma (actions, deeds) within the context of auto-ethnography, presenting it as a transformative educational research methodology. Their work likely explores how these philosophical principles can guide and influence the process of self-reflective research, contributing to personal and academic growth, much like the identity exploration described in the PhD journey.

## Conclusions

This study provides insightful information about the complex process of developing an academic identity while pursuing a PhD degree. Through self-reflection and active participation in academic pursuits, the researcher successfully negotiates the ambiguities and difficulties that come with being a scholar, emerging from the process with a stronger feeling of conviction and assurance. Moments of empowerment and agency accompany, the shift from being a knowledge consumer to a knowledge producer, as the researcher assumes leadership positions and supports the academic community through mentoring and research dissemination. Additionally, the value of relationships in forming a researcher's identity and feeling of community within academia is emphasized, emphasizing the necessity of collaborative efforts and intellectual exchanges. The researcher shows tenacity and inventiveness in conquering difficulties, even in the face of financial limitations and bureaucratic processes, which aids in identity building and personal growth. This study not only clarifies the difficult emotional landscape of pursuing a PhD, but it also highlights the researcher's dedication to sharing information and having an impact on society, opening up new directions for academic research and practice.

This study provides insightful information about the complex process of developing an academic identity while pursuing a PhD. Through self-reflection and active participation in academic pursuits, successfully negotiates the ambiguities and difficulties of being a scholar, emerging from the process with a stronger conviction and assurance. The shift from knowledge consumer to

knowledge producer, marked by moments of empowerment and agency, illustrates the researcher's growing leadership and contribution to the academic community. Additionally, the value of relationships and collaborative efforts in forming a researcher's identity is emphasized, highlighting the importance of community and intellectual exchanges in academia.

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