

How young South-Asian Australians negotiate their identity

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Abstract

South Asian Australians are encapsulated in plural socio-cultural circumstances and identities pertaining to their “origins” and their existence within the Australian context. South Asian Australians need to make relative sense of their existence in Australia as ‘ethnic South Asian’ and as ‘a minority’ in order to ascertain their self and identity within Australia. Drawing on the perspectives that self-identities are plural, mutable, and a matter of personal choice (Sen 1998, 2005, 2006) and that identity construction involves social reflexivity (Giddens 1991; 2006), this paper explores how ethnic South Asians in Australia define their self identities. We discuss ‘Australian identity’ and ‘ethnic identity’ as two entities which together constitute an individual’s personal identity. Utilising qualitative data from case studies we explore how ‘Australian’ and ‘ethnic’ identities interact in the construction of selfhood and personal identity.

Keywords: Identity, Ethnic Identity, Australian Identity, South Asian

Introduction

This paper explores some general themes in self and identity amongst first and second generation young adults of South Asian decent in Australia. Many South Asian Australians are bound by not just their ethnic cultures and their Australian everyday reality, but also by the fact that they were immigrants from a former non-South Asian society. We take the stand that South Asian migrant self and cultural identities are pluralistic. The themes in this paper explore the aspects of plural identification, South Asian identity, Australian identity and ethnic identity.

The paper is divided into two broad sections; the first section focuses on how South Asian Australians view themselves as part of the larger Australian fabric. This research shows that the structure of Australian society was important for whether young South Asian adults felt like they were an integral part of the Australian landscape. It was also found that one's perceptions of equal standing with other Australians, common interests and values, as well as being able to 'feel' that they are part of a multicultural system that characterises Australia were the prime determinants for self identification with the Australian society, and contributing to the perception of the self as an "Aussie". The second part looks at perception of ethnic and cultural identity. This section shows that lived experiences within one's own ethnic culture do impact on personal ascription to ethno-cultural identity. Liberal and traditional cultural upbringings were found to have significant relevance to their identification with their own ethnic cultures and integration into Australian society.

The South Asian diaspora refers to the scatter of people of Indian/South Asian origin who are presently living in various parts of the world outside of the Indian Subcontinent (Clarke et al. 1990:1). An ethnic South Asian/Indian overseas is taken to be someone who falls within a Subcontinental heritage or ancestry¹. South Asians outside South Asia are generally defined as a singular collective (as *ethnic* South Asian) despite the multifarious differences between South Asian groups. They are however not viewed in terms of their former host society (Fijian-Indian) or present society (Australia), nor are they regarded by their distant Indian ethnicities (i.e. Punjabi or Tamil) (Schermerhorn 1978).

Clarke et al (1990: 23) found that ethnic identities in overseas South Asian communities have evolved differently from one another, and from their original homeland. South Asians settled in Australia are not homogeneous in their culture and

followed different migration patterns in their diversified histories. Though most were direct immigrants from the Subcontinent, many departed from a second or third country. Diasporic peoples who find their lineage to be based on secondary or multiple movements are termed as “secondary” or “tertiary” migrants (Bhachu in Mukhi 2000: 6).

Perspectives on Identity Construction

Some argue that ethnic and community identity is a non-negotiable singular affiliate into which people are born (Taylor 1989). This belief is even more contentious among diasporic communities where intercontinental movement and livelihood must inevitably bring about intercultural exchange and the need for adaptation to new cultural circumstances. According to Varvin (2003: 175-6) “The host country represents a new reality, removing many of the conditions that previously underpinned identity and sense of belonging”. Bhachu (in Mukhi, 2000: 6) contends that multiple migrant backgrounds “bring with them the traces of the domiciles they left, as well as their skills and savvy for the game of migration”.

The dynamics of importing “native” ethnic cultures into a new culture entails negotiation of one’s ethno-cultural identity and personal self with the wider society (Brown and Coelho, 1987:3; Appadurai, 1996: 48). The plural circumstances and hence the possibility of multiple identities are but a necessary precursor of diasporas and its people (Brown & Coelho, 1987: 7; Appadurai, 1996). However, the extent to which native traits are affected is highly dependent on a broad host of factors particular to the host society. These include the experience of one’s ethnic situation within the host society (Bhatia 2006), the legacy of one’s diasporic trajectory (Bates 2001 & 2006; Chatterjee 1993; Prashad 2005; Sarkar 2002), the saliency of former

tertiary homeland identities, the weight and importance placed on ethnic culture and tradition, and also, the subjective negotiations of the individual in constructing their personal identities.

According to Sen (2005: 352) individual identities are negotiated and generated with intent. We negotiate, ascribe to, and select our identities through the interplay of *reasoning* and *choice* (Sen, 2006), and we construct our identities through the dialectics of circumstances, constraints and necessity (Sen, 2005). According to Mead “people’s selves are social products, but these selves are also purposive and creative” (cited in Giddens, 2006: 23). Giddens’ theory of social reflexivity suggests that we “constantly think about, or reflect upon, the circumstances in which we live our lives” (Giddens, 2006: 123). Reasoning and choice (agency) are thus inextricably linked by the situations/societal contexts. Individuals are hence said to be in ‘reflexive relation’ to and in constant interchange with the externals (Giddens, 2006). By the same token, human identities (as social agencies) are negotiated and constructed as a reflex of one’s knowledge, awareness, and interaction.

In this paper we explore individual perspectives on their personal and cultural identities. Interviews with participants were audio-recorded, and each session lasted around 2 hours. We recruited through the snowballing approach 8 first and second generation migrant young adults who were resident/citizens of Australia (5 females, 3 males), all university educated or uni-goers, of South Asian ethnicities. The participants were linguistically, religiously and culturally diverse. Also 6 of the 8 participants were of a ‘secondary’ migrant background; that being their immediate forefathers were based or living in a non-Indian Subcontinental country (i.e. South Africa, Fiji, Malaysia) for several generations prior to their relocation to Australia.

Negotiating the Australian Identity

The definition of the self and identity was found to be heavily dependant on the dynamics of one's present context. We found the need to delve into one's experience and engagement in the Aussie context as an ethnic South Asian in order to find out how self-identity is constructed out of ethnic-self and the Australian reality.

Many South Asian Aussies are able to identify themselves with the broader Aussie mainstream with respect to some shared aspects of Australian (national) life. Even though the idea of what constitutes Aussie culture is contentious, ascription to one or another dimension of *Australianness* has the effect of promoting cohesion and inviting national endorsement. This works positively for an ethnic minority's sense of belonging in society, as well as serving to narrow the *divide* between one's cultural self and one's national identity.

The sense of social inclusion is central to the self perception of ethnic minorities and their integration into Australian society. Being able to find one's ethnic-self and minority status on equal and objective footing with the dominant group (or other groups) in a complex society takes the notion of inclusion further than just 'being included' to 'self inclusion' of the proactive nature. Such social inclusiveness can only impel further participation in Australian life.

Australian civic values on 'equality' and 'meritocracy' were considered as enhancing of minority feelings of inclusion and participation within the Australian society. The belief in an egalitarian Australia that is transcendent of ethnicity and cultural differentiation is vital for the reassurance and perceived sense of compatibility for immigrant groups. Positive experiences of immigration, settlement, and of the ethnic-self within mainstream society are central to integration, and hence the individual's

comfort and ease with staking their personal claim to the Australian fabric and national identity. As Vishal, born and raised in Australia, explained:

I don't feel like I belong anywhere else near as what I feel with the Australian culture – Just the way of thinking, acting, doing things, understanding - Like number one in being me is definitely the Australian... not necessarily Aussie rules and Footy, or Pies, which is like the commerciality part of being Australian. But rather things like; “a fair go” and “equality for everyone”.

There was another significant way in which South Asian Australians were able to perceive themselves in Australian terms. For many participants, the Australia that they grew up to know was not one that was strange, Anglo, and unfamiliar in which everyone coexisted with little to do with the other. Far from this, they reported that the one way they knew they could be sure they were *Aussie* is the fact that Australia constitutes a very multiethnic population. The Australia that it is today is the Australia built by immigrants of all sorts who gave and in giving, became *Aussie*.

Recognising the diversity in the make-up of Australia and Australians is the first step in moving towards accepting that everyone is Australian. What fuels a sense of identification with the Australian fabric is the sense that they themselves are contributors to a multicultural Australia. As Anuskha said:

I identify with the multicultural Australian culture. We're Aussies, but we're from different countries, and we all really like each others cultures.

In addition, participants reported that their part in multicultural Australia does not end with the belief in its ideologies. They were social and national actors in perpetuating the multicultural nature of Australia. Participants were not inclined to remaining within the confines of ethno-cultural borders in terms of social and friendship networks and in day-to-day life. Their social networks were diverse ranging from acquaintances, to mates, to the more intimate modes of friendships and partnerships.

Intercultural participation and relations are effective indicators of acculturation and integration into the receiving society (Tajfel 1978). As a respondent narrated:

My parents don't expect me to marry a Sinhalese person. My first girlfriend was Australian; they didn't really have any problems with that. Our friends who grew up around, a lot of Maoris and South African, then there's Australians, there's pretty much everyone and Italians as well, Irish; but yeah, so we don't really put any sort of judgments.

Upbringing and Ethno-cultural Identity

Immediate family and extended community relations play an important role in the transmission of cultural values, norms and practices. Parents who challenge certain elements of their culture and tradition in their negotiation of the Australian reality facilitate rather than impede the cultural integration of their children. We thus need to differentiate between rigid traditional upbringings and culturally liberal backgrounds of our South Asian participants in order to highlight the consequences for both their Australian identities and ethnic identities.

Some felt that a fairly relaxed cultural background had effectively made personal and cultural values much more compatible with that of the Aussie culture. Liberal upbringings that facilitate individual freedom for self-determination, identification and practice helped the 2nd generation South Asians to cope with inconsistencies between the Australian and the ethnic cultures in negotiating their identities. Liberal childhood socialising makes the embracing of the Australian way of life and identity less problematic. As one participant reports:

We don't really take our culture seriously as a lot of other [South Asian] families... So as far as values and things like that go, I think we're pretty much the same [as Australians], I don't think we've got any real conflicting values or anything [...].

Liberal cultural-family upbringings had additionally enabled my participants to strike the delicate balance between the Australian values and ethnic practices. Culturally

liberal participants perceived their own ethnic cultures and traditions in objective and detached ways for their “virtues” or “pitfalls” in relation to the Australian culture. Some participants felt that they were very much culturally assimilated into the Australian society on account of their negotiated and culturally diffused upbringing, and were able to objectively express an appreciation and interest for their ethno-cultural heritage. They had also expressed a sense of pride, awe, longing, and even idealism for aspects of their ethno-cultural legacies that they felt were lost to them living in the Australian context. As one participant put it:

You don't get the Sinhalese culture, which is one thing I would've liked to have learnt ... I guess it'll be nice to have both, to sort of know the [Sinhalese] culture and to know the Australian culture as well.

Conversely, the generally negative experience of the self within one's own ethnic culture is seen to give rise to disenchantment with one's culture. The pressure to adhere to strict cultural practices was felt to be suffocating and restricting. Two participants consequentially felt adversely towards the values, ideologies, practices and social behaviours of their community. The participants also reported withdrawing from interacting with people of their ethnic backgrounds altogether, and dissociating generally from their ethnic and cultural activities. This extends to keeping away from material aspects of culture and community such as music, film, entertainment, and festivities.

The dissociation from one's culture and community can be seen to be a mechanism of self protection. It is an attempt to liberate the self from (continual) subjection to the limitations and constraints of the engagement with the ethno-cultural. While resentment of ethnic identities results in de-identification of the self from one's culture, it does not necessarily entail a proclivity for the Australian culture or a more liberal system. One may however assume that a surrounding normative (Western) culture

may have formed the grounds for comparison and reflection (Tajfel, 1978: 9), and spawned the disenchantment with the features of one's own ethnic cultural practices. Naidoo (2007a: 55) talks about her identity in terms of recognition: "without Australian culture as a reference point, I would not have had a better and more concrete understanding of the meaning of Indianness".

Although all the participants had claimed a number of cultural affiliations and multiple points for identification, it was found that ethno-cultural identity had its unique place in the construction of the self. The primary sense of belonging and identity that is founded on the grounds of 'socialisation' through family culture becomes an integral part of one's self. This form of identity is however rationalised independently of ethnic attributes and practices. And while individual identities are ongoing processes of negotiations, shifts, and changes through contexts in life, an individual's culture of primary socialisation is entrenched in one's identity. Participants saw that their ethnic cultures were salient in their value system and identity. They reported that on a daily basis they carry their culturally instilled values and beliefs with them.

Conclusion

South Asian Australians were found to be much aware of their ethnicity and the implications it may hold for their Australian identity. This research has shown that in constructing individual identity, considerations of 'Australian identity' and 'ethnic identity' are not incompatible. The participants were able to see themselves as *Australians* as far as they were able to identify similarities with other Australians, with the general Australian way of life and with the common national/cultural values. Identifying with one's own ethnic culture comes primarily through the realisation of

ethnic identity in their self. However, the degree with which the self is able to identify with the *Aussie* or with the *ethnic* is determined by social circumstances and personal experiences. These are just as much affected by experiences from within one's ethnic group as it is within the broader Australian society.

Notes:

- 1 'South Asians' for the purpose of this paper is meant in reference to people who are able to trace their ancestry to the Indian Subcontinent which comprises of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh (former East Pakistan), Sri Lanka (former Ceylon), Nepal, the Maldives, and Bhutan

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