

Mutable Identities: Dimensions of Identity Shift of Sri Lankan Australians

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is to explore the broader social relations that constitute the process of changing, reinforcing and/or weakening ethnic identities within second-generation immigrants. This paper presents a case study of ethnic identity shifts based on qualitative data collected from children of Sri Lankan immigrants in Australia. The participants both employ and experience changes in their identity over time, in varied situations and in the presence of various audiences. Their self-identification ranged from- *Sri Lankans, Australians, Lankan-Aussies, South Asians* to *curries*. Most of them clearly identified focal shifts in their self-identification and the probable internal and external reasons and motives behind those changes. Notably, they saw some changes as temporal shifts in their ethnic identity but some as long lasting. The paper argues that these mutable identities demonstrate the agency as well as complexities of self and belonging in the contemporary world.

Keywords: Ethnicity; identity shift; agency; ambiguity; second-generation immigrants; Sri Lankans; Australian society

Introduction

Recent sociological literature on ethnic identity increasingly describes ethnic identity as flexible and situational that requires ongoing negotiations, construction and reconstruction through social interactions (Nagel, 1994; Verkuyten, 2005). This paper specifies several ways in which the children of Sri Lankan immigrants experience and assert their ethnic affiliations. It argues that understanding identity shifts is essential in examining the agency as well as ambiguity that is entailed in the processes of self-identification of children of immigrants.

The question addressed is: what are the means by which ethnic identity is changed, strengthened and/or weakened?

Despite the growing literature examining ethnic identity of children of immigrants, relatively little is known about the dimensions of ethnic identity shift. There is a serious paucity of research on the second-generation Sri Lankan immigrants in Australia, or indeed any other country, and very little is known about how Sri Lankan identity in Australia is produced and reproduced. This paper addresses this oversight by directly engaging in the views of second-generation Sri Lankan Australians.

The paper begins by outlining the theoretical framework on identity shift as it offers an understanding of the positioning of ethnic identity in a contemporary multicultural social context.

Conceptualisation of ethnic identity shift in a global context

Contemporary theories on ethnic identity emphasise the changeability of identity over time and context (Hall, 1990; Nagel, 1994) as opposed to the past insistence upon continuity of lineage and origin (Geertz, 1963). The main argument of these theorists is that the primacy of ethnic identity is socially constructed, variable, continuously negotiated and revitalized through social interactions inside and outside ethnic communities (Modood, Squires, & May, 2004; Nagel, 1994). Barth (1969) was the first to set up an opposition between a putative approach to ethnicity resting on fixed, unchanging cultural boundaries and identities, on the one hand; and, an approach that highlights the fluidity of these identities and cultures, on the other. He claims that “ethnic groups and their features are produced under particular interactional, historical, economic and political circumstances: they are highly situational, not primordial” (Barth, 1994, p. 12).

Contemporary theorists suggest that the ethnic identification change is commonplace in an individual’s day-to-day life as s/he encounters varied situations and different audiences (Bhabha, 1998; Hall, 1997). Assertion of an ethnic identity is partly determined by an individual’s perception of its meaning to different audiences and its significance in varied social contexts (Nagel, 1994). Working alongside these contemporary approaches on ethnic identity shift, this paper examines dynamics and processes of ethnic identity change by analysing identity narratives of Australian youth and adults of Sri Lankan background.

Methodology

This study utilises a qualitative research design to investigate the dynamics of ethnic identity shift of the second-generation Sri Lankan immigrants in Australia. The paper is based on analysis of interviews with 26 participants belonging to three Sri Lankan ancestries in Australia, namely Sinhalese, Tamil and Burgher. The participants were recruited by advertising flyers in various community organizations and university clubs and societies. The sample was composed of young adults and mature adults and the average age for the respondents is 27.6 years of age. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and coded for analysis. The participants were given pseudonyms, and all potentially identifying details were obscured in accordance with the NHMRC guidelines.

Dimensions of identity shift

Almost all the participants in this study contended that their identities have changed over time and they have consciously negotiated their identities in response to situations and audiences throughout their lives. Moreover, they were even well aware that the narratives they share with the interviewer are also not fixed and what they say is incomplete and changeable – ‘if you were asked me this question in 5 or 10 years time I think I have a different answer’ (Isuru, Sinhalese, age 20).

The identity shift of the children of immigrants signifies a range of processes, incidences and strategies relating to their identification. Although this paper discusses dimensions of their identity shift under several headings, they should be understood as aspects of complex processes of creation, recreation and transformation of self-identification of children of immigrants in the modern multicultural context. Based on the narratives of self-identification, this paper argues that the second-generation Sri Lankan immigrants’ identities are dynamic, positional and situational, that they constantly change over time, context and audience.

Identity shift over time

Empirical studies on ethnic identity of the second-generation immigrants from minority communities increasingly suggest that an individual’s ethnic identity changes in both its magnitude and in its content over time – from childhood to adolescence and adulthood (Espiritu, 2002; Rudrappa, 2002; Thai, 2002). Similarly, the majority of the participants of this study contended that their sense of identity changed over the life span, particularly in the phase of transition from childhood to adulthood. During childhood most of them had yearned

to identify themselves exclusively as ‘Australians’ and they had tried to ‘act white’ and ‘be white’ refusing their ethnic background and avoiding ethnic involvement:

I think when you are a kid, you are immature and you think you are Aussie or whatever. You think it is not cool to sort of keeping touch with your home bases. But I think as you grow older you really do have that yearning to go back and what’s it like (Kapilan, Tamil, age 25).

While refusing to associate with their ethnic culture, most of the participants had symbolically embraced an Australian identity through supporting Australian sports, engaging in Australian hobbies, speaking only English, and particularly adopting an Australian accent.

Generally, they described their identity change took place overtime with ‘maturity’, but other factors reflect that external social forces such as gradual changes in Australian social context with the end of the ‘White Australia’ policy in 1972 and subsequent exposure to cultural diversity in Australia as significant drives in these shifts. They explained that their primary schools were predominantly ‘white’ and they only started to encounter people from different ethnic backgrounds either at high school or at university, which was mostly operated as an opening point to ethnic sense of self or coming into terms with their ethnic identity:

In primary school, I tried to act like an Aussie and everything because there weren’t many Sri Lankans or Asians in my school. But the high school I went to had mostly Asians, Sri Lankans and Indians. I guess people act more like their own background when they are with people who are their own background instead of trying to act like an Aussie (Nadika, Sinhalese, age 26).

They (university friends) attend the events or watch Hindi movies and they talk about it – they are like ‘do you know this and that’ and a while ago I just laughed and say ‘no, not really’. You know this made me think about maybe I should look into it and embrace it little bit more too (Kapilan, Tamil, age 25).

Thai (2002, p. 66) emphasises that the university is a site of “ethnic recovery, and for some, ethnic discovery” where the “processes of “deprogramming the self” often take place within second-generation. Likewise, a majority of participants expressed that over time their sense of self shifted from ‘Aussie’ to ‘Lankan’ and more commonly to a hybrid Sri Lankan-Australian identity. Some saw this as a result of maturity whereas others identified it with other factors such as wide exposure to ethnic diversity, internal motives, influence of friendship groups and so on.

Experiences of exclusion and identity shift

As the interview data indicates, the second-generation identities were discursively constructed within power relations. The experiences of racism, perceptions of racial construction of Australian identity and everyday encountering of otherness seemed to have a direct impact on the identity shift of some respondents. These experiences have led some participants to realise that they cannot deny their cultural and physical otherness from white Australians, giving them the understanding that they should consider the ethnic aspect of their self as well:

Whatever said and done at the end of the day the white Australian people will think you are not Australian because you are not white. There is nothing you can do about that, so I thought why try to be something that you are not, so, yeah, now I happily say that I am Sri Lankan (Kelsey, Tamil, age 27).

The identity shift of some participants was intimately linked to diverse external pressures of ascribed identities impinged on them. Even though some participants saw themselves as exclusively Australian, the questions and comments of others resulted in symbolic change in how they label themselves:

In reality I am just very much Australian. But obviously, my appearance indicates I am not so and if someone asks I'd say I am Sri Lankan (Harris, Tamil, age 31).

The experiences of otherness and perceptions on racial construction of Australian identity, made them increasingly accept and identify with their migrant identities. Moreover, these inferences of identity shift explain the complexities entailed in hybrid migrant-national labels of the second-generation identity, and their ambiguous location within the Australian social landscape.

Contextual dimensions of identity change

Jenkins (1997) argues that “identity is produced and reproduced during social interaction, and interaction is always situated in context” (p. 63). The participants talked about temporal and subtle identity changes in reference to movement across cultural spaces such as ‘work’, ‘school’ and ‘home’ (see also Butcher, 2004). The majority of respondents mentioned that they are somewhat more Sri Lankan when they are at home and they accordingly adopt appropriate behaviours and even their accent slips into a Sri Lankan accent, when in the space

of home: 'it's definitely different kind of personality depending where you are – at home, at school or uni' (Dilini, Sinhalese, age 18).

The identities were not only situational but also positional. The participants defined their identities in relation to 'the other' and accordingly adopted strategies to sustain some sense of belonging across groups and spaces. An 'Australian' environment such as being with Australian friends, common recreation activities (playing sport, watching football or listening to music) and school, evoked their feelings of Australian identity, and at the same time, the home environment and other cultural engagements drew them to their ethnic belonging. Furthermore, when in a setting with South Asians they shared a sense of belonging with a pan-ethnic South Asian culture which included people from countries across the subcontinent and referred to themselves as 'curries'.

The identity labels they asserted changed, based on their awareness of the location and the audience. When they were questioned, 'where are you from?' outside Australia, they could easily reply 'Australia' whereas it was hardly the answer when the same question was asked in Australia:

When you are here in Australia and people ask you to describe yourself and you go 'oh...I am Sri Lankan' whereas if you go to Sri Lanka or overseas you go 'I am Australian', so it depends where you are (Basuri, Sinhalese, age 19).

Having an Australian accent and Australia being their home country made it easier for the participants to use the Australian identity label when they are travelling overseas. It becomes evident that as the contexts and audiences change, the ethnic options available to the individuals also change.

Interestingly, some participants described that they choose the most appropriate identity based on the situation and the audience and to some extent, they were capable of manipulating their individual identities. For example, Dulani, Amal and Kelsey explain that when they travelled Malaysia or India they wanted to be seen as Sri Lankan as they assumed that if the shop venders knew that they were from a Western country they might assume that they are rich and try to take advantage. They consciously subvert their identities to best match with the context, situation and audience. These inferences suggest that the children of immigrants exercise some agency in asserting ethnic identities and its active use for goal

attainment makes their identities further mutable and fluid. Changeability of identity appears as a strategy sometimes to tackle the two worlds they are seen to inhabit, as Natalie nicely summed up in narrating her story:

I guess you have got a foot in both worlds is the way that I see it, dependent on what situation you are in, you might have one foot a little bit more forward than the other (Natalie, Burgher, age 30).

Return visits to Sri Lanka and renegotiation of identities

The global and transnational perspectives provide some interpretation to continuing identity shifts of second-generation immigrants. The mutability of their identities was often expressed in their experiences of transnational visits to their parents' country of origin (see also Zevallos, 2008). For many participants, the visits bring about new insights into their self-conceptualization. For some, the cultural knowledge, the heritage and the hospitality strengthened their ties with the country and the ethnicity, reinforcing their Sri Lankan ethnic identities. On the contrary, for many others it was mentioned as a point of realisation their foreignness in their supposed land of heritage. For example, Isuru's comments about his visit to Sri Lanka provide an interesting indication of how a person's sense of self can change through such experience:

That was [visit to Sri Lanka] a realisation for me this is not my country. When I was there the fact that I am a foreigner is felt that very clearly. Even my cousins are very different from me... From then onwards my Lankan identity completely declined (Isuru, Sinhalese, age 20).

Natalie, who kept a diary during her return visit to Sri Lanka, is an ideal case study, to show the flexibility of ethnic identities. Prior to her visit, at the interview, she identified herself strongly as a Sri Lankan. However, some of her diary notes below imply both mobility and complexity of identity negotiation:

Sitting at the departure gate completing my immigration form, I suddenly didn't feel quite as Sri Lankan – I was definitely a foreigner amongst a lot of *saris*

Today something that stood out for me is Australians emphasis on honesty or being forthright, direct. It is very difficult to get a straight answer from Sri Lankans even about something simple like how much sugar they have in their tea.

I'm really starting to feel at home here and realise I am not Sri Lankan or Australia – rather a little bit of both ☺

This study reveals that individuals in postmodern society frequently recreate themselves, and their identity is continually being reinvented in response to the context and the audience. Further, transnational experiences, media and politics also seem to have an influence in changing their identities.

Conclusion

Informed by theoretical approaches to ethnic identity, which emphasise the situational and dynamic nature of ethnic identification, the paper explored the ways in which identity shifts were articulated and narrated by these young Australian adults of Sri Lankan background. The paper argues for a fluid sense of self, illustrating that the identities of the second-generation Sri Lankan immigrants are hybrid, relational and positional as well as constructed, reconstructed and revitalised over time, across spaces and in relation to audiences.

During childhood, the second-generation Sri Lankan Australians strongly identified with national labels as ‘Aussies’ whereas, during adolescence and adulthood they increasingly accepted their ethnicity and adopted migrant labels. Their identities constantly changed in relation to interaction with friends, travelling outside Australia, space of leisure and especially in the spaces between ‘home’ and ‘outside’. They identified themselves as ‘very Australian’ in relation to parents and adopted a Sri Lankan identity by consciously changing their accent and through various respectful behaviours in front of them. In contrast, some perceived themselves as ‘more Sri Lankan’ in relation to their ‘Anglo’ friends and at times fashioned some aspects of their behaviours according to the space. Moreover, they actively negotiated their identities over situation and context, displaying an identity, which they deem have positive outcomes for them.

Moreover, different identities were discursively constructed within ascribed identities, experiences of otherness and racial categorisations. Likewise, these narratives of identity shift signify the complex processes of identification among these Sri Lankan Australians. On the one hand, their ability to assert an identity according to context and audience demonstrate the agency they exercised in their self-identification. On the other hand, this shift is coterminous with the tensions of negotiating familial and wider social demands suggesting the ambiguity of identification and reinforced marginalisation.

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