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Journal

World Cultures eJournal, 19(1)

Authors

Dissanayake, Malathie P
McConatha, Jasmin T

Publication Date

2013

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The Interplay of Multiple Identities of Individuals across Multiple Domains

Malathie P. Dissanayake

Department of Psychology, West Chester University, West Chester, PA 19383; m_dissa1974@yahoo.com

Jasmin Tahmaseb McConatha

Department of Psychology, West Chester University, West Chester, PA 19383; jtahmasebmconatha@wcupa.edu

The current study explores multiple identities of individuals, particularly youth, and the importance as well as interrelations of those identities in particular social domains in Sri Lankan society. Participants consisted of 96 Sri Lankans who live in Sri Lanka. Participants completed seven self-statements (who am I), and closed ended questions, regarding five major identities: nationality, religion, ethnicity, caste, and occupation (university student). Explanations of the self-statements, analyzed by using a fourfold coding scheme, indicated that university student status is the most common social attribute among other social attributes in self-interpretations of individuals. Religion and nationality were second and third most common social attributes whereas caste was the least common. This is consistent with results of the importance of social identities. The importance of each social identity was different when it associated with different social domains, depending on how individuals value their social identities in particular social relations.

Keywords: Self-perception, Social identity, Social relations, Sri Lanka

1. INTRODUCTION

Beginning with the pioneering work of William James, much research has been conducted to investigate divergent aspects of the self. The 'self' consists of an individual's physical body, mind, and social world. The sense of self develops as a consequence of social experience and activity, which is gained through individuals' relations with others (Mead 1934). Similarly, Whiting stated that the sense of self and identity fundamentally derives from particular aspects of one's early childhood and his or her interactions with others (as cited in Chasdi 1994). Self-concept varies across cultures. With regards to western and non-western societies, Westerners highlight the independent component of the self while individuals in collectivistic societies emphasize the interdependent component of the self (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Redford 1999). These ideas suggest that the self-concept can be described as a social product, since it is characterized through social interactions within an individual's social milieu.

Individuals tend to categorize the self on different levels: self as a human being (abstract level), as a group member (intermediate level), and as a unique individual (subordinate level) (Turner et al. 1987). This categorization basically explains the personal and the social level of one's self-concept. According to Gordon (1968), the self-concept comprises both individuals' social categories and personal attributes. Social categories refer to culturally defined social types in one's society whereas personal attributes refer to characteristics or qualities of individuals. These social categories characterize social identities that individuals possess in society. In adolescence, the development of identity integrates an individual's personality, including thinking, emotions, and behavior

(Berger, 2003). Momentous changes in adolescence compel adolescents to explore “who they are.” The propensity to search one’s identity throughout this stage leads one through many identity statuses until one reaches the ultimate goal of identity achievement (Berger 2003). The achievement of the identity leads individuals to think, “Who they are” in various aspects. As stated by Erikson (1968), adolescents develop a sense of their religious, political, gender, and vocational identifications over time. This achievement process consists of four major aspects of identity: biological, social-cognitive, psychological and emotional (Germain 1999).

Individuals develop self-identities, which characterize their memberships in social groups. According to James (1968), an individual has many social selves since others in society recognize him or her as certain social selves and bring those images into their mind. “Social identity is achieved when an individual is aware of belonging to certain social groups together with some affective and value significance to him/her of the group membership” (cited in Germain 1999:407). For example, an individual can be identified as a male, a teacher, a Christian, a husband, a son, and so on. All these identifications are different social types. The way individuals perceive themselves determines the most important social identity for them among these social identifications.

If an individual self-identifies as a member of his or her own country (i.e. American, Indian, German etc.) then he or she displays his or her national identity. Ethnicity plays a role in establishing unity and common feeling among individuals who may be geographically dispersed (Silva 1999). If an individual identifies as a member of a religious group (i.e. Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, Jew etc.) he or she has a religious identity (Berger 2003). In addition, individuals living in some cultures have a caste identity. Caste is a culturally defined social category, which frames individuals in a hierarchical system. This hierarchical system creates caste differences among people within their ethnic groups. This appears especially in the South Asian social context. The degree of caste identification may play a significant role in the overall social identity of an individual.

2. OBJECTIVES

The current study explores multiple identities of individuals, particularly young adults in Sri Lankan society. Sri Lanka, officially called the “Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka” covers a total area of 65,610 square kilometers at the southern tip of Indian subcontinent. There are number of ethnic groups living in Sri Lankan society: Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, Burghers etc. and they are categorized based on their language and religion (Blood 1991). The population is 20,222,240 (2006 est.). Of the population 74% are Sinhalese (the major ethnic group) whereas 18% are Tamils and 8% are Muslim (the main minorities). All these ethnic groups in the society introduce themselves as Sri Lankans, which is their national identity. But as explained above they all have clear ethnic identities too.

Sri Lankans practice four major religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. Of the population, 70% are Buddhist, 15% are Hindu, 8% are Christian, and 7% are Islamic (Sri Lanka 2003). The majority of Sinhalese practice Buddhism. The majority of Tamils are Hindu whereas Muslims practice Islam. Some Sinhalese and Tamils are Christian. There is a modest overlap between religious and ethnic groups.

Within ethnic groups, individuals are divided into culturally defined sub categories called “castes”. Indian and Sri Lankan societies are categorized into subgroups that are ranked in relation to each other. These subgroups are governed by a variety of ritualized behaviors (Blood 1991). Traditionally, caste is determined by caste of parents, and is unchangeable. Individuals in both Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic groups are categorized according to their own caste systems. Traditionally, Sinhalese were categorized into two groups: Kandyan Sinhalese and low country Sinhalese. Both groups are hierarchically categorized into different castes. The Goigama caste, the highest caste in the Sinhalese caste system, includes about 50 percent of the Sinhalese population (Silva 1999). The other half of the Sinhalese population comprises about 15 caste groups. In the Tamil caste system, the Vellala caste is the dominant caste, and comprises more than 50 percent of Tamils in Sri Lankan society (Blood 1991). Individuals’ caste identities have weakened with respect to ethnic identities because of the socio-political movements that occurred within both ethnic groups.

The major objective of this study was to evaluate how individuals, particularly young adults in Sri Lankan society perceive themselves. This endeavor is based in past on the study done by Cousins (1989) on culture and self-perception in Japan and the United States. The aim of Cousins’s study was to examine how the cultural setting impacts on the self-perception of Japanese and American college students. Cousins’ data suggested that Japanese participants indicated social role and behavioral context when they expressed “who they are” more than American students. The current study focused on how individuals think, “Who they are”. We were also interested in determining the importance of five major social identities, religion, nationality, ethnicity, caste, and occupation to individuals. The next step of the study was to explore how four major social identities: religion, nationality, ethnicity, and caste vary in importance depending on social domains, such as family, friends, marriage, occupation and voting in a presidential election.

3. METHODS

Participants

The sample for this study consisted of 96 Sinhalese university students in the Faculty of Arts at University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. This group included 54 females and 42 males (age range 20 to 28, $M_{\text{age}} = 21.3$ years). Participants represented 18 districts of the country. Eighty-three percent of participants came from rural areas whereas 7% came

from urban and suburban areas. Ninety nine percent of participants were Buddhists. In this study, participants mentioned 11 castes. About 69% of participants belong to the Govigama caste, with the remainder belonging to other castes.

Measures and Procedure

Data were collected using a questionnaire, which included the “Who Am I” technique. In this study we used a series of seven self-statements, in the same format as the twenty-statement test (TST), (Cousins 1989; Gordon 1968; Sunar 1999) to evaluate individuals’ self-percepts. In the questionnaire, the first question was:

“In the seven blanks below please make seven different statements in response to the simple question (addressed to yourself), “Who am I?” Answer as if you are giving the answers to yourself, not to somebody else. Write your answers in the order they occur to you. Don’t worry about logic or importance. Go along fairly fast.”

Participants were asked to specify their nationality, ethnicity, religion, caste, and occupation. They were also asked to rate the importance of major social identities: nationality, ethnicity, religion, caste, and occupation. They rated the importance of each social identity by using a five-point scale (1 = *not at all important*, 3 = *moderately important*, 5 = *very important*). Demographic questions focused on participants’ gender, age, marital status, place of birth, and the place they live.

Next we focused on the importance of nationality, ethnicity, religion, and caste to participants’ other social domains such as family, friends, occupation, marriage, voting in an election, and being a member of one’s ethnic group. The format of these questions was, “How important is your (nationality) to your (family).” Participants rated the importance of nationality, ethnicity, religion, and caste to other social domains by using a five-point scale (1 = *not at all important* to 5 = *very important*).

In addition, feelings toward studying and working with someone of a dissimilar nationality, ethnicity, religion, and caste were also measured using the five-point scale (1 = *very bad* to 5 = *very good*). Participants were asked questions such as “How would you feel if you had to (study) with someone of another (nationality)?” These questions were repeated for each social identity. Finally, we gauged participants’ belief about remaining in the same nationality, ethnicity, religion, and caste throughout their life span. This included the question “If you are born Buddhist/Muslim/Hindu, do you think that you have to remain as a Buddhist/Muslim/Hindu?” The survey was administrated in a student residence hall. The questionnaire was translated into Sinhala and back-translated into English to ensure comparability.

4. RESULTS

Analysis of “Who Am I?”

All but three participants completed all seven blanks, each beginning with “Who am I?” All statements were categorized using a method introduced by McPartland, Cumming, and Garretson, and revised by Hartley (as cited in Cousins 1989). The coding scheme includes four categories.

Category A- physical attributes of self (e.g. 21 years old, thin).

Category B- social attributes including social roles, social status and institutional membership (e.g. daughter, university student, social worker, national identity, ethnic identity, religious identity and caste identity).

Category C- psychological attributes including ways of thinking, feeling and behavior (e.g. sensitive, happy, irascible)

Category D- global attributes that do not refer to individual characteristics of subjects (e.g. a human being, an organism)

Each A-B-C-D category was divided into subdivisions (see Table 1). Since the major objective of this study was to explore how individuals, particularly young adults in Sri Lankan society, perceive themselves and how major social domains impact on their self-identities and their social relations, the divisions of social category (B) are most relevant. If individuals described their social identities with a modifier (e.g. bright student), the item was still scored as a social category (e.g. student).

Six hundred and forty five responses out of 672 were received to the “Who am I” self-statement test. Of them, 57% of all responses to “Who am I?” were psychological attributes (C), which refer to individuals’ preferences, wishes, activities, qualified psychological attributes, and pure psychological attributes. Thirty-two percent were social attributes. Of all responses 4% did not qualify for any category.

Only the social categories were taken into consideration in analyzing the “Who am I?” The results suggest that occupation (university student status) is the most common social attribute listed, followed by religion and nationality with caste well below the others. Further analysis of “Who am I” statements led to an interpretation taking into account order of response. In this method, all social attributes including subdivisions were scored from 1 to 7 based on the place where individuals indicated each social identity within their seven self-statements. For example, if someone indicated his or her national identity in the first blank of self-statements, it would be scored as 7 whereas if someone indicated his or her ethnic identity last, it would be scored as 1. Likewise all categories from A to D2 were scored in order to analyze self statements further.

Table 1. *Outline of Coding Scheme for “Who Am I?” Responses*

Code	Trait	Example
A	Physical	18 years old
MA	Modified Physical	Too short, too fat
B	Social	Social worker, friend
MB	Modified Social	Good wife, very good friend
BE	Social-Ethnicity	Sinhalese, Tamil
BN	Social-Nationality	Sri Lankan
BN2	Social-Other nationalities	American, Canadian
BO	Social-Occupation	Teacher, Bank officer, Technician
BR	Social-Religion	Buddhist, Hindu, Catholic, Christian
BC	Social-Caste	Govigama, Vellala
BF	Social-Family member	Father, Mother, Daughter, Son
BS	Social-Self (name)	Chandra, Nimal
BW	Social-relates to the war	Victim of the war, refugee, orphan
C	Attributes	
C1	Preferences, interests	Like to live with parents
C2	Wishes, aspirations	Wish to become a teacher
C3	Activities, habits	Read books, watch movies
C4	Qualified psychological attributes, which refer people, time, locale and events	I am afraid of live alone (locale), I am sensitive to others (people), I am selfish sometime (time), I am happy when I won something (event)
C5	Pure psychological attributes	Honest, irascible, sensitive, selfish
D	Global	Human being
D1	Existential	Myself
D2	Universal statement	A unique product of my environment
Other	Self-statements	Not qualified for any of above categories

This analysis also offered significant evidence of the importance of individuals' occupation (university student status) among five major social identities in their self-statements ($M = 3.3$, $SD = 3.1$). Religion and nationality were in the second ($M = 2.0$, $SD = 2.7$) and third places ($M = 1.8$, $SD = 2.7$) respectively with ethnic next ($M = 1.3$, $SD = 2.5$) and caste a distant last ($M = 0.1$, $SD = 0.6$), mentioned at all by only 3 participants.

Importance of Social Identities

The rated general importance of each social identity to oneself, is consistent with the “Who am I?” results. These findings again show that individuals' occupation (university student status) is the most important social identity to them. Religious and national identities are second and third most important, followed by ethnic, and again, with caste as the least important (see Table 2).

Table 2. *General Importance of Social Identities*

Category	Religion	Nationality	Ethnicity	Caste	Occupation
Mean	4.2	3.8	3.0	2.0	4.5
SD	1.1	1.6	1.4	1.2	1.0

The intercorrelations of the importance of the five main social identities (Table 3) were significant for two variables: the importance of ethnicity and caste ($r(96) = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$) and the importance of ethnicity and nationality ($r(96) = 0.57$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 3. *Intercorrelations among Importance to Respondents of Five Major Social Identities*

	Religion	Caste	Nationality	Ethnicity
Caste	0.19			
Nationality	0.31**	0.28*		
Ethnicity	0.33**	0.58***	0.57***	
Occupation	0.09	0.03	0.16	0.15

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Major Social Identities in different social domains

Next, we focused on the interrelationships among four major social identities (i.e. religion, nationality, ethnicity, and caste), with respect to their relative importance under different contexts (see Table 4). Occupation aside (since it was not included among the identities rated by domain), it appears that religion is the dominant identity across all domains except voting, where national identity is most prominent. All identities (including caste) rate as more important to families and religious identity, national identity and ethnic identity rate about equal among friends, in one's occupation, and in marriage. In pattern and strength (determined by taking the sum of the absolute differences between overall and any particular domain of each of the four identity importance ratings), family is closest to overall (summed differences: 1.7), followed by marriage (which is, of course, close to family: summed differences: 2.2), followed by both friends and occupation (3.5), with the voting context last (4.7). This difference order reflects both the absolute level of identity importance (highest in families) and the relative strength of the identities.

Table 4. *Mean of Rated Importance of Major Social Identities in Different Social Contexts*

Situation	Religion	Nationality	Ethnicity	Caste	Occupation*
Who am I	2.0	1.8	1.3	0.1	3.3
Overall rating	4.2	3.8	3.0	2.0	4.5
Family	4.2	3.5	3.4	3.0	
Friend	2.6	2.5	2.6	1.8	
Occupation	2.8	2.7	2.4	1.6	
Marriage	3.2	3.2	3.2	2.4	
Voting	1.9	2.7	2.3	1.4	

* Occupation not listed as an alternative in the domain specific identity ratings

Multiple regression models were used to evaluate the relationship of four major social identities to oneself and six other social relations. Dependent variables were importance of four major social identities to oneself. Predictors were the importance of each major social domain to one's family, friends, occupation, marriage, and voting for an election. When considering all predictors importance of religion to one's family is the significant predictor for four major social domains to give evidence for the importance of religious identity to oneself (see Tables 5-8).

Table 5. *Multiple Regression: The importance of Religion to 6 Variables (n=96)*

Variable	Standardized Beta	T	P	Tolerance
Importance of religion to				
One's family	0.49	5.18	0.00	0.79
One's friends	-1.03	-0.33	0.74	0.66
One's occupation	0.19	1.92	0.06	0.72
One's caste	0.10	1.16	0.25	0.91
One's marriage	0.11	1.20	0.23	0.79
When voting in an election	-0.18	-1.94	0.06	0.80

Adjusted R-squared for model: 0.33; p-value: 0.001

Table 6. *Multiple Regression: The Importance of Nationality to 6 Variables (n=96)*

Variable	Standardized Beta	T	P	Tolerance
Importance of Nationality to				
One's family	0.28	2.46	0.02	0.66
One's friends	0.01	0.11	0.91	0.53
One's occupation	0.15	1.11	0.27	0.46
One's caste	-0.10	-0.89	0.38	0.71
One's marriage	0.24	1.90	0.06	0.56
When voting in an election	-0.05	-0.39	0.70	0.64

Adjusted R-squared for model: 0.18; p-value: 0.001

Table 7. *Multiple Regression: The Importance of Ethnicity to 6 Variables (n=96)*

Variable	Standardized Beta	T	P	Tolerance
Importance of Ethnicity to				
One's family	0.11	1.01	0.32	0.49
One's friends	0.09	0.96	0.34	0.70
One's occupation	-0.01	-0.06	0.95	0.73
One's caste	0.11	1.51	0.13	0.57
One's marriage	0.23	2.12	0.04	0.52
When voting in an election	0.04	0.44	0.66	0.71

Adjusted R-squared: 0.399; p-value: 0.001

Table 8. *Multiple Regression: The Importance of Caste to 6 Variables (n=96)*

Variable	Standardized Beta	T	P	Tolerance
Importance of Caste to				
One's family	0.47	4.52	0.00	0.55
One's friends	-0.02	-0.16	0.87	0.61
One's occupation	0.11	1.11	0.27	0.62
One's marriage	0.23	2.23	0.03	0.56
When voting in an election	-0.08	-0.87	0.38	0.80

Adjusted R-squared: 0.423; p-value: 0.001

5. DISCUSSION

Self-percepts vary across cultures. As stated by Markus and Kitayama (1991) individuals emphasize different components of the self, based on their socio-cultural environment. The main interest of this study was to evaluate how individuals, particularly young adults in Sri Lankan society perceive themselves and the socio-cultural environment they live in. To this effect, the self-percept of individuals was explored using a seven-statement test. Individuals tend to categorize the self on different levels (Turner et al. 1987). Cousins's (1989) study suggests that individuals in non-western cultures think of social role and behavioral context when expressing their self-percept. However, our Sri Lankan participants stated more psychological attributes than other attributes on their seven-statement test.

Since we were interested in examining the influence of major social domains in individuals' self-interpretations, only the social attributes were taken into consideration. The "Who am I" results support the idea that occupation (university student status) is the most significant self-perceived social attribute of individuals, with caste least mentioned. As mentioned by Silva (1999) it appears that the caste identity of individuals has been weakening and/or shifting toward the ethnic identity with the social and political movement in Sri Lankan society.

The second purpose of this study was to explore the importance of five major social identities to individuals. The evidence on the importance of the major social identities to oneself corresponds to “Who am I?” results. Occupation (university student status) was the most important social identity to individuals whereas religious identity and national identity were second and third in salience. Caste identity was the least important. In this study, participants were asked to consider their studentship as their occupation. Their studentship is very important to them since it is the way to achieve their future goals. Religion is a significant social domain to individuals in Sri Lankan society from birth to death and turns out to be more important (as rated) than nationality, ethnicity, and caste.

The third step was to evaluate the intercorrelations among five social identities. The analysis suggests that the association between the importance of ethnicity and caste, as well as the importance of ethnicity and nationality are the most significant. In Sri Lankan society, caste is a hierarchical framework within Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic groups. Even though both of these ethnic groups have their own caste system, each caste implies internal differentiation within each ethnic group. Thus, caste can be an influential social category within one’s ethnic group. The findings of the study underscore the importance of caste identity to ethnic identity. Also, ethnicity can be an important social category in relation to nationality for Sinhalese. As the major ethnic group in the society, they may tend to value both national and ethnic identities.

The final step of this study was to evaluate the relations among four major social identities (religion, nationality, ethnicity, and caste) in the social domains of family, friends, marriage, occupation and voting in a presidential election. These findings suggest that identity salience changes to some extent in different domains, but with religion remaining important in all domains except voting. Identities are most important in the family domain, and relative importance of identities is less differentiated in the friend and occupation domains. For example, the importance of caste to oneself is highly associated with the importance of caste when one gets married. However, when one votes in a presidential election the importance of caste is not as important as marriage. Ethnic identity can be highly associated with voting in a presidential election. Likewise, the analysis of correlation suggests that the importance of each social identity differs in different social relations based on how individuals value each social identity in relation to social situations. The obtained results of the regression model suggest that the family is the most significant predictor of the importance of each social identity. In summary, the endeavors of the current study predicted the impact of major social domains on self-identities and other social relations of individuals, particularly youth, in Sri Lankan society.

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