On being Australian: Second-generation Sri Lankans’ narratives of national identity

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Abstract

In this paper I examine the ways children of Sri Lankan immigrants in Australia understand and interpret their national identities. My study focuses on an immigrant cohort characterised by middle class dwelling, employed in white-collar professions and/or following higher education with the intention of pursuing white-collar professions in future. It is important to explore how this group which demonstrates a high socioeconomic integration to Australian society understand their national identities. Through an analysis of thirty interviews, I argue that the children of middle-class non-white Sri Lankan immigrants in my study dwell in a paradoxical condition of visible difference and high socio-economic integration which directly impact on their identity formation. This paper focuses mainly on participants’ narratives on their ‘Australianness’ and I examine the ways the children of Sri Lankan immigrants describe their sense of belonging to Australia as well as the meanings, practices and limitations accompanying these labels.

Key words: Second-generation, Sri Lankans, ethnic identity, national identity, racialisation

Introduction

Children of immigrants’ identification with the host society has gained far less consideration in migration research compared to studying immigrants’ ethnic identification (Phinney, Berry, Vedder, & Liebkind, 2006). The relationship and interplay between the ethnic and national identities are important to understand the complex process of hybrid identity formation of descendants of immigrants. In this paper, I examine the ways children of Sri Lankan immigrants discuss their national identities.

The scholarly work on marginalisation and assimilation assume that becoming middle-class would result in declining issues related to racial discrimination and minority groups’ assimilation into the mainstream society (Alba & Nee, 1997; Gordon, 1964). Gordon (1964) hypothesises that “Once structural assimilation has occurred...all of the other types of assimilation will naturally follow” (p. 81). It is only recently that scholars (Kibria, 2002; Tuan, 2002) have started to focus on the children of middle-class, non-white immigrants to see whether this viewpoint is accurate across all groups (Purkayastha, 2005). This recent scholarship has demonstrated the importance of examining race in identity studies, which is a perspective, lacking in most of the studies on ethnicity and identity formation of children of immigrants. However, most of this research (Espiritu, 2002; Kibria, 2002; Purkayastha, 2005; Tuan, 2002) explores middle-class immigrant groups in the American society and is
relatively limited in Australian scholarship. The second generation Sri Lankans in Australia – being highly educated children of middle-class, non-white immigrants in the contemporary multicultural Australian society – provide an ideal case study of the particular predicament of immigrants with the freedoms of high social capital and the constraints of visible difference to the majority white population.

Social construction of ethnic identity

This study is founded on the social constructionist perspective of ethnic identity, based on Jenkins’s (1997) argument that “ethnicity is both collective and individual, externalized in social interaction and internalized in personal self-identification” (p. 166). Jenkins (1997, p. 14) writes that social construction of ethnic identities encompasses four key processes: cultural differentiation, social interaction, flexibility and individual and collective influences. This definition highlights the importance of ethnic identity as a social identity, which involves both self-identification and external categorisation. Accordingly, two dimensions of ethnicity – individual and collective – guide the framework of this research. The individual dimension of ethnic identity refers to the way persons relate to and understand themselves. The second dimension is the collective aspect of ethnicity; ethnic identity is socially supported and learned through the social structures of the ethnic group as well as the host society. For example, being middle-class, highly educated, affluent professionals, the Sri Lankan second-generation may see themselves as Australians but the question is do outsiders consider them ‘Australian’ as well and how self-identification is adapted, transformed or altered in response to such structural circumstances? With this argument in the background, this paper conceptualises ethnic identity as having two intrinsic and interrelated dimensions as individual and collective.

Methodology

This study utilises a qualitative research design to investigate the identity formation of the second-generation Sri Lankan immigrants in Australia. The paper is based on analysis of in-depth interviews with 30 participants belonging to three Sri Lankan ancestries in Australia, namely Sinhalese Tamil and Burgher.

At the time of the interview, all except three participants have either completed or enrolled in tertiary level education. Twenty one participants had already completed or enrolled in Bachelor university degrees, five had completed postgraduate degrees, and one was reading for a PhD. Moreover, fourteen participants were full-time undergraduate students and sixteen were employed full-time in ‘white-collar’ professions mainly administrative and managerial positions. As evident from the residential pattern, educational qualifications and employment this study sample constituted significant numbers of middle class individuals who maintained a high level of social mobility.

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1 Following Purkayastha (2005) in this study the term middle class does not to connote a particular income group. It refers to the high level of education, linguistic proficiency, white-collar employments and suburban residences of the participants.
Prominent markers of national identity

A number of studies dealing with ethnic identity of second-generation immigrants have illustrated that second-generation identities often encompass a hybrid character; rather than adopting one ethnic or national label, the second-generation tends to claim a wide range of ethnic identities (Kibria, 2000; Noble & Tabar, 2002; Purkayastha, 2005). The majority of the sample of this study also saw themselves as ‘partly Sri Lankan and partly Australian’ or as they commonly put it, ‘Sri Lankan-Australian’. They gave precedence to both the migrant label as well as the national label in describing their sense of self and belonging. They considered that both aspects are equally important in describing who they are. Not only did they label themselves ‘Sri Lankan-Australian’, they were mostly aware and conscious about characteristics of Sri Lankanness and Australianness in them. The majority of the respondents gave precedence to Sri Lankan culture and cultural belonging as the core elements of their ethnic identity: ‘I feel like I am Sri Lankan culturally but I am Australian in every other way’ (Tarangini, Tamil). This participant, as well as others with similar responses could name the characteristics of their dual identities in relatively straightforward manner (See also Poynting, 2009). They constructed their ethnicities by creating and recreating their cultural practices as opposed to Australian ethnicity, which they commonly talked about with reference to Anglo-Celtic culture.

Although the participants in this study strongly identified with their migrant culture mainly through close family ties, values of life and food, all the participants contended the importance of Australian identity or ‘Australian side’ in describing their sense of self and perceptions of belonging. The migrant Sri Lankan identities made up only a part of who they are; their Australianness was a significant marker upon their understanding of themselves. While acknowledging that the children of Sri Lankan immigrants in my study self-identified with hybrid, migrant-national identities, this paper focuses on discussing how they conceptualise their national identities and social, cultural and physical characteristics that they perceived to encompass the core of their Australianness.

Linguistic cues – ‘my accent is Aussie’

All the respondents in my study considered English language, particularly the Australian accent as a signifier of their Australianness. Use of Australian idioms in day-to-day life and particularly the Australian accent was a prime dimension of their Australianness since that visibly differentiates them from their parents’ generation and recent migrants from Sri Lanka. Particularly when they travel overseas, the Australians accent helps them be seen as Australian because when people hear them talking, they are naturally identified as Australians. Very interestingly, they mentioned how they unconsciously ‘put on’ their ‘Aussie accent’ when they wanted others to see them as Australians and while talking to parents how they deliberately change their accent to match with the audience. All the participants in my study proudly mentioned their ability to speak fluent English with Australian accent as one of the main characteristics of their ‘Australian side’.

Emotional attachment to Australia – ‘Australia is my home’

The majority of participants saw Australia as ‘home’ and that attachment made them feel a part of Australian identity: ‘I feel like I am very much at home here. That’s how I feel like I am part of it’. Being born in Australia and/or grown up in Australia were often pointed out as reasons for this attachment.
The participants vividly described their emotional attachment to Australia and often mentioned ‘I love Australia’ which suggests the positive feelings they have towards the country, which may have derived from their sense of belonging to the Australian nation state. Furthermore, familiarity with Australian society and knowledge of Australian history were other frequently mentioned factors for their emotional allegiance to Australia. They felt positive about being born and/or grew up in the Australian society and talked about the Australian citizenship with pride. The majority of them planned to stay in Australia, raise their children in Australia and establish their careers in Australia, in particular to engage in a government job. Their structural integration to Australian society particularly in terms of white-collar occupations encouraged to see themselves as Australians. Uma, a final year Arts-Law undergraduate described ‘I am going to the public service next year in Canberra, so I certainly see myself as an Australian and I am grateful for that’.

Return visits to Sri Lanka not only reinforced their belonging to Australia but also at the same time presented them with an opportunity to understand the Australian characteristics in them with comparison to Sri Lankans and their practises. As the narratives suggest, the complex interplay between local and transnational ethnic identities – that they are seen as Sri Lankans in Australia but Australians in Sri Lanka – promoted their allegiance to Australia.

*Everyday culture— shared civic values, westernised ideas & leisure*

Shared civic values were another prominent marker of their national identity. The majority of participants believed that Australian society is egalitarian and they described qualities such as being non-judgemental, equal treatments to all, mateship, a fair go, loyalty and democracy as their characteristics of Australianness:

I am really nonjudgmental. I think that comes more from my Australian side, that whole sort of egalitarian side of Australia (Amal, Sinhalese, age 28, male).

Everyday cultural factors like clothes they wear, the kind of entertainment they enjoy, activities they do outside of work, were seen as Australian. Australian sports were another symbol of their Australian identity. The participants perceived the Australian culture in a very stereotypical manner mainly in terms of barbeques, beers, surfies, and being laid back. Primarily the male respondents declared their interests and pastime engagements are ‘Aussie’ and drew upon interests such as ‘going down to the beach’, loving Holden cars and fondness for outdoor activities such as barbeques and camping when describing their Australian identity.

Multiculturalism in Australia has given the children of immigrants some legitimate space to articulate their dual identities. The majority of them believed that Australia is a multicultural nation and therefore there is no longer a typical Australian. The majority of participants in my study believed that integration between cultures is important and at the same time, so as ‘not to be an outcast’ in the Australian society, it is vital to adopt certain elements of Australian culture. As Taraka explained:

Even though I am a Sri Lankan I have merged into Australian culture, I haven’t changed my culture or I haven’t totally adopted Australian culture but I have created the common interest and I believe I am there (Taraka, Sinhalese, male).
Discussion

As evident from the above narratives, the children of Sri Lankan immigrants in my study engaged in discursive construction of national identity through language, everyday culture and sentiments of belonging to Australia. They actively constructed their national identity by othering the first generation immigrants, recent migrants and persons living in Sri Lanka, who were perceived different to them. As opposed to transnational literature that suggests that transnational immigrants tend to have weak attachments to the nation state (Hall, 1991), my study demonstrates that the children of Sri Lankan immigrants felt a strong sense of belonging to cultural conceptions of Australian national identity. More importantly, none of the participants categorically rejected their national Australian identity, a finding that differs from some pertinent literature (Butcher & Thomas, 2003; Zevallos, 2008) that notes some second-generation immigrants tend to claim that they are ‘not Australian’. I argue that their strong identification with Australian national identity is directly related with their middle-class character. Their middle-class background – predominantly living in white neighbourhood, attending schools with a white majority and white-collar careers – promoted high social assimilation in second-generation Sri Lankans. They formed friendships mainly with whites and the majority of them preferred whites or non-ethnics as dating or marital partners. The social inclusion which happened through their fluency in English and high level of education prompted them in considering themselves as Australians in their everyday life. Therefore it is vital to explore why this group who maintained a high socioeconomic integration and positive sense of belonging to Australian nation state concurrently identified themselves as ethnics or with hybrid, migrant-national identity.

Even though the second-generation Sri Lankans refer to themselves as Australians at different points of the interviews and perceived Australia as a multicultural country, all the respondents had the preconceived ideas about racial construction of Australianess: ‘but I know that I am not Australian like white Australian and I can never be, no matter what I try to do.’ (Dulani, Sinhalese). They considered their appearance and skin colour are something that is not Australian, as Nathan said ‘….even I forget until I look in the mirror that I just sort of see myself as a normal Aussie person’ (Nathan, Burgher). The way of painting national identity based on ‘white Australianness’ excluded the children of Sri Lankan immigrants from being completely Australian or fully belong to the nation.

Their perceptions on racial categorisations regarding Australianess were often reinforced through their experiences of racial discrimination and everyday encounters of otherness. In spite to their unaccented Australian English diction, Australian citizenship and ‘Australian way of life’, participants in this study reported being subjected to racialisation in everyday life based on their non-white appearance. Being subjected to name calling such as ‘blackie’, ‘brownie’, ‘chocolate cover’, ‘poo-poo’ particularly during the school period was a common experience of racialisation for the majority of participants. Most participants attended middle-class schools with a white majority and as Tarangini described ‘I was like this alien person dropped into a sea of white people’. They were implicitly conscious of their apparent difference from the majority in the classroom and these negative comments made their difference pronounced.

In spite of their high socioeconomic standard of life, the narratives of many of my participants reveal the ongoing impact of race upon their identities. Studying young Australians from culturally diverse backgrounds Ang, et al. (2006) notes that the experiences of racial discrimination and prejudice determine the extent to which they ‘feel’ Australian.
Similarly, the Sri Lankan Australians in my study also felt that their ethnic identity is continually reinforced by their inescapable ‘reality’ of being ‘non-white’ in a ‘white’ dominated Australian society. This constrained the extent to which the second-generation feel a sense of belonging to Australian national identity:

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, female).

Regardless of how strongly they may be grounded in Australia, they were often viewed through a prism of otherness by the wider society and marked as non-Australian. There is increasing evidence that the visibly different ethnic minorities do not exercise the same identity choices as enjoyed by whites (Espiritu, 2002; Kibria, 2000; Purkayastha, 2005; Song, 2003; Waters, 1990). As the findings of my study confirm, the identity options available for the second-generation Sri Lankan immigrants were substantially limited and bounded due to the continuing salience of racialisation in Australian society. Vasta (1993) argues that racial construction of Australian identity as a main factor behind the hyphenated identities of immigrants and the ‘Australian’ identity of Anglo-Australians. Similarly, my participants also felt that a single identity label is inaccurate as they were aware and made aware that they are ‘not only Australian but something else as well’. Besides their allegiance to Sri Lankan culture, everyday encounters of otherness (questions like ‘where are you from?’), experiences of racial discrimination and ideas of whiteness reinforced their ‘partly Australianness’.

Conclusion

This paper affirms that Australianness was a significant part upon the Sri Lankan-Australians understanding of themselves and their sense of belonging. I found that the participants in this study articulated their national identity though language, everyday cultural elements and claiming an emotional belonging to Australian nation state. Overall, migrant identities and national identities were not completely consistent and stable but generated differently in different contexts.

As the social constructionist perspective used in this paper emphasizes ethnic identity of my participants is a complex construct, determined by the interplay between individual self-identification and external ascription. On the one hand they had positive sense of belonging and a strong emotional attachment to Australia. On the other hand, the same respondents felt that they are excluded by the larger society and no matter how hard they try; they cannot be ‘real Aussies’. This reflection raises the question, despite being a multicultural society: a white body is the basic constituent to claim an authentic belonging to the state. My contention is that that the children of Sri Lankan immigrants experienced concurrent inclusion and exclusion as a result of the interplay between structural assimilation and visible physical differences.
Reference


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