Intersectionality and Identity in an Asian Context: The Case of Pakistani Youth in Hong Kong[1]

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Abstract

Minorities always struggle to assert their cultural priorities and values in societies where dominant cultural groups, either purposely or inadvertently, assume that all groups in society will adopted the values of the majority Growing up in a multicultural society that does not recognize multicultural values can pose a threat to cultural minorities. Yet in this study that focused on a sample of Pakistani students in Hong Kong there was a particular resilience about the interviewees who, while recognizing the context and its potential for racism and exclusion, found ways to overcome alienation and feelings of being 'outsiders'. Local language acquisition helped them to integrate with the local society while pan ethnic identity and religion contributed to a distinctive identity. These young people also saw themselves as 'Hongkongers', a local term that itself signals distinctiveness. Yet by adopting it, Pakistani youth signaled identification with local values. While none of this posed a direct challenge to the dominant culture, it did show the agentic nature of acculturation processes in a society that barely recognizes cultural diversity.

Cultural diversity is a common feature of many societies. Sometimes it is a reflection of historical processes that leave their mark by expanding the multiplicity of cultural groups in a city, a region and throughout an entire country. Often it is trade and commerce that leads to population mobility but in the case to be discussed here it was part of colonial policy in British dominated nineteenth century Hong Kong that saw, over time, Indian police officers, Pakistani traders and Nepalese Gurkhas join the colonial administration. But this 'Empire narrative' came to an end on 1 July 1997 when Hong Kong was returned to China and with it the British subjects, or at least their families, that had served the Empire. Those of Chinese descent automatically

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became Chinese citizens. Those of non-Chinese descent, however, (such as Indians, Pakistanis and Nepalese), were not offered Chinese citizenship and despite the fact that on 30 June 1997 they had been British subjects, they were not offered British citizenship (Dummett, 2006). The purposes of this paper, therefore, are to:

- Identify and explore theoretical frameworks that help to understand identity construction;

- Explore the identities of a sub-sample of ethnic minority youth in Hong Kong;

- Assess the relative influence of institutional and personal influences on the identity construction of ethnic minority youth in Hong Kong

The Contexts

Ethnic minorities in Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, "ethnic minorities" refers to "people from non-Chinese ethnicities" (Census and Statistics Department 2002, 2007, 2012, p. 2). According to the latest 2016 by-census in Hong Kong, 8% of the total population in 2016 was ethnic minority population (584,383) (Census and Statistics Department, 2017, p. 43). Different ethnic minorities groups are: Filipinos (31.5%) and Indonesians (26.5%), followed by Whites (10.0%), Indians (6.2%), Nepalese (4.4%), Pakistanis (3.1%), Japanese (1.7%), Thais (1.7 %), and other Asians (3.4%) (Census and Statistics Department, 2017, p. 43).

Pakistanis in Hong Kong

Pakistanis are one of the biggest South Asian groups in Hong Kong. In 2016, total Pakistani population was 18094, which was 3.1% of the total ethnic minority population, and 0.2% of the total HK population (Census and Statistics Department, 2017, p. 43). Pakistani population in Hong Kong increased by 62.8% between 2006 and 2016 (Census and Statistics Department, 2017, p. 43).The median monthly income for Pakistanis is lower compared to whole working population in Hong Kong (Census and Statistics Department 2012, p. 88).

The child poverty rate is the highest for Pakistanis among all ethnic groups (Cheung & Chou, 2017).The school attendance rates for Pakistani young people are the lowest among all ethnic groups at pre-primary, secondary and senior secondary levels (2011 population census, 5% sample dataset). The attendance rate at post-secondary level is the second lowest for Pakistanis. "Out of school" or school failure or dropout phenomenon is more prevalent for Pakistanis and Nepalese in Hong Kong (Bhowmik & Kennedy, 2016; Bhowmik, Kennedy, & Hue, 2017).

Theoretical frameworks

Our main concern was with how Pakistani youth identity developed within the contexts described above. We were aware of the multiple ways in which identity construction has been identified in the literature as shown in Figure 1. We chose to frame the study in two complementary ways by using both intersectionality theory as well as neo-institutional theory as described below.

Intersectionality theory

"Intersectionality" refers to the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power. Originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality was intended to address the fact that the experiences and struggles of women of colour fell between the cracks of both feminist and anti-racist discourse (Davis, 2008). This means for the present study that while ethnicity was a key focus it cannot be considered in isolation from other possible influence that may interact with it to produce negative consequences. Drawing on intersectionality theory we sought to understand the effects of race, gender, religion and class and their interaction in the experiences of Pakistani youth in Hong Kong.
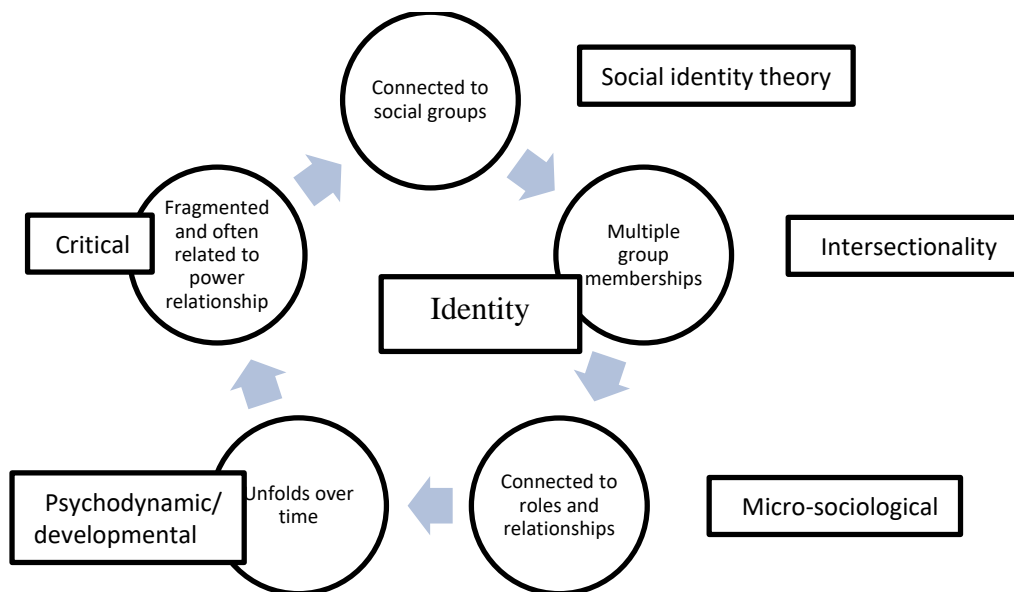

Figure 1. Different theoretical perspectives for understanding identity and identity construction

Neo-institutional theory

We were also interested in the role of institutions in identity construction. Weldon (2006) has argued that key institutions in society - policies, citizenship requirements, racism etc. – impact directly on identity construction. This represents another level of influence that has not been considered previously in the Hong Kong context.

Methodology and methods

Qualitative in-depth interviews were used as the research method.20 participants from five ethnic minority groups participated in the study. Of them seven were Pakistani, five were Indian, five were Filipino, one was Bangladeshi, one was Nepalese, and one was mixed of Filipino and Nepalese. Among seven Pakistanis, three were males and four were females. Their ages ranged from 16 to 24.

Data were coded and salient themes were created from the coding categories to answer the questions (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) raised in this presentation.

Results

"Ethnic minority" identity

Some participants identified themselves as "ethnic minority" while some did not like to be identified in such way.

> "Why we shouldn't like to be called ethnic minority? We are ethnic minority like everyone has their own name. Therefore, if you are Chinese you have your Chinese name. We are ethnic minority, so that's why we have this name." (Participant S)

> "No, I don't like to be called like ethnic minority student. You know it makes you stand out because I was born here. I know Chinese. I know how the values here. Like, basically, I know many things about Chinese and everything and you know the ethnic minority term makes us like an outsider here. Makes us feel like an outsider. As for me, that's my opinion. I don't know about other. I don't like that, you know, it's like people seeing you in a different way. It's like they don't consider you Chinese. You know like people say, you… I was born here, obviously I'm Chinese. I know a lot. But, you know the word, like you can

say maybe because of how we look and how we are make us an ethnic minority here. And that's why." (Participant T)

Pakistani identity

All participants identified themselves with their heritage culture Pakistan.

"Pakistan is my country. We were born there and everything is there. All our older generations like our grandparents are still there. Pakistan is good for us, like we can do some jobs there. We can spend time meeting our family there." (Participant S)

Dual Hongkonger and Pakistani identity

All participants displayed dualistic identities of both heritage culture and Hong Kong.

"I was born in Hong Kong so I think I am a Pakistani in Hong Kong. Just the fact that I was born in Hong Kong makes me think I am a Pakistani in Hong Kong. Both Hong Kong and Pakistan are important to me. I like both of them. That's why I said I am a Pakistani in Hong Kong. I am both Hongkonger and Pakistani. It's like half-half on both sides." (Participant A)

British identity

A third national identity came in for some participants due to their holding of British passport or BNO but it appears to be ambivalent.

"I live in HK with British passport. However, I think I would be loyal to HK if something bad happens in HK. We live here, you know. I would be loyal to Pakistan as well, if something happens in Pakistan because we are from Pakistan. These two would be top priorities. Pakistan and China are good friends, you know." (Participant R)

Chinese identity

Participants mostly did not identify with the Chinese national identity.

"I don't know much about China and I haven't been to China. I didn't even cross the border. How can I say I am a Chinese? As I have always been in Hong Kong, I see myself as a Hong Konger instead of a Chinese." (Participant A)

Religious identity

All participants strongly identified with their religion Islam.

"We are Muslim. We Muslim has our own culture. For girls we pray at home, for boys, they go to mosque. We have to pray five times a day. First one is at 4:00am at the morning, the second one is at 2:00pm, third one is around 4:30pm, and then around 7pm, and then the last one is around 8:30pm at night. We also soon start fasting from early June for one month. That means we don't eat anything all day, we can eat from 7:00PM, whole day we cannot eat anything and not even drink. After one month we will have a celebration called Eid." (Participant S)

Summary

Some participants identified themselves as "ethnic minority" while some did not like to be identified in such way. All participants identified themselves with their heritage culture Pakistan. They all participants displayed dualistic identities of both heritage culture and Hong Kong. Some identified equally with both countries while some more with either Hong Kong or Pakistan. A third national identity came in for some participants due to their holding of British passport or BNO but it appears to be ambivalent. Participants mostly did not identify with the Chinese national identity. All participants strongly identified with their religion, Islam.

Interaction between identity and race, gender, religion, class and other factors

Racism

Many of the participants experienced racism of different kinds. Typical forms included:

- getting a dirty look
- hearing a derogatory word

- labeled as lazy
- Blamed for misbehavior
- not sitting next to ethnic minorities in the public transportation
- getting no response from employer
- frequently checked by police

Racism negatively affected participants' Hongkongers identity.

> "I have seen an advertisement of a vacancy with the requirement of English and basic Chinese skills. I called them up and was asked about my country of origin. I told them Pakistan. Then, they hanged up. I sensed a discrimination against me. The advertisement did not indicate anything about races. I know both English and Chinese. I guess that there is racism in many workplaces. It is an obstacle for me. I also know some people who have better education and Chinese skill but they could not find an ideal job. " (Participant R)

> "I and my friends were crossing a road after table tennis one day. There was a police car on the road. We walked normally on the crossing. The police car turned and stopped in front of us. I felt racism because the police did not stop other people but us. I definitely felt being discriminated because they purposely turned their car and stopped us. They did not check others but our ID. They have stereotype of us." (Participant R)

Gender

Gendered practices at heritage country negatively affected female participants' Pakistani identity.

> "In Pakistan they won't allow girls to go out or step out from their home unless you're covered fully. But in Hong Kong I can go out just wearing a mini-skirt. And yah, that is more comfortable, cause I'm born here, I am used to be like this here. I went to Pakistan when I was young for a month or two. And this is my first time going back again last year. It was a big gap, like, although the spaces are bigger there, but then, I can't adopt to their norm." (Participant P)

"In Pakistan they have something called honour killing. Maybe you know if your daughter chooses to marry someone, on her own will, her family might kill her. And then here in Hong Kong there's no such thing. You know, you have your own right. You're 18, you have your right, you can fight for that." (Participant P)

Religion

Religion significantly affected all participants' identity.

"There are 5 things that we must follow. First of all, a testimony of Muhammad as the greatest prophet of god. Second, we need to worship or pray to god every day. Third, we need to perform charitable acts. Forth, we need to fast. Fifth, we need to attend Islamic pilgrimage. There are many things for us to follow and be better as we try. We need to follow the examples of our prophets and the norms they have set for us. We try to follow." (Participant R)

"We can be very successful as a person if we truly follow religion. We would miss many things if we don't follow our religion. It helps us to know what it right and wrong. For example, drinking. We should not drink alcohol but we try and drink it here in HK. However, we are told that alcohol is not good for us. Some people might try first and realized it is bad but some people are told not to do something but still want to do it. Religion tells us many things which are beneficial for us. They are not only for Muslim believers but for the rest of the world as well. Muslim must be friendly with their neighbors regardless if they are Muslim or not. We have to be nice to them. There are so many things. It is about the personality and about following the religion. We might be taught with the same doctrines but our personality alters the religion. The religion teaches good things but some people cannot follow and it creates stereotypes. We need to try to follow as much as we can when we have a religion. We should not only do it in words but in works. I am trying to improve myself." (Participant R)

Pan-ethnic identity

Religion also helped develop a pan-ethnic identity.

> "The Muslim Student association is quite new association. It's actually very similar to all other clubs or other society in the university. We have membership campaign in September. People come and we have a booth outside the canteen. Our society focuses on 3 things: physical, spiritual and community development. All our events focuses on these. We have some orientation activities and we have lectures and we have some sporting events like racket tournament, football tournament. We celebrate some Muslim festivals like 'Eid'. We have big prayer on every Friday.....It's a small community of 150 members but we know each other and we care for each other. That's very good. Most of us like 70% are non-local Muslim. Then we have local Muslim as well, we have Mainland Muslim as well. Different and diverse Muslims come together. It's good to stay together, tie and keep things together." (Participant M)

Poverty

Poverty interacted with some participants' identity.

> "I was very scared when I saw our house in Hong Kong. Actually houses are very small here, it doesn't matter if it is tall building but when we go inside it is very small. Many people have to stay together. It was very difficult because in Pakistan we have very big houses. But it's small in Hong Kong. You have to share your room with brothers and sisters. If we stay at home for longer maybe we will get stress or something or will get bored. And maybe that's why when we go out it was feeling like some kind of small." (Participant S)

Language skills

Chinese language skills positively affected participants' Hongkonger identity.

> "I was born and raised here in Hong Kong. I am used to this environment. It's more convenient for me because I have learnt Cantonese. This is like major language for me. So I can work here. I have more opportunities here

than I do there in Pakistan. Because I can't really speak Urdu, the main language of Pakistan." (Participant P)

Summary

Racism negatively affected participants' Hongkongers identity. Gendered practices related to participants' heritage country often negatively affected participants' Pakistani identity. Religion significantly affected all participants' identity. Religion also helped develop a pan-ethnic identity. Poverty interacted with some participants' identity. Chinese language skills positively affected participants' Hong Kong identity.

Conclusion

While we can clearly identify multiple identities that reflect how Pakistani youth in Hong King see themselves, we do not get a sense of how these identities interact or whether there is a hierarchy of identities. We do see, for example that strong commitments to religion do not prevent these young people from interacting with a modern city such as Hong Kong. It seems that religion is more like a comportment of their lives rather than something that drives their daily living although this is an issue requiring further investigation. Many of the participants were also aware that some aspects of their cultural background that were related to religion had no place in Hong Kong (for example honour killings or forced marriages).

We do, however, see the influence of institutions such as, racism, language policy and citizenship that lead these young people to reflect on their status in Hong Kong as residents rather than citizens. While they were aware of negative community attitudes such as racism, they did not seem to be over whelmed by them or even intimidated. In addition, not all participants felt racism in the same way and often those who could speak Cantonese, the local language, had fewer racist experiences. Overall, while the participants were aware of institutional pressures they did not seem to be overly influenced by them. It may be that their multiple identities protected them from being too sensitive and encouraged a sense of resilience. Intersectionality may offer the best theoretical explanation since different identities simply seem to coexist – almost beneath the surface – and sometimes invisible. Identity is not worn like a sign – it is an inner state; a way of being; a recognition of who individuals are at different times in different contexts and for different purposes. Our participants reflected this kind of flexibility. This individual disposition, however, does not obviate the need for institutional reform that recognizes the negative impact of particular policies on some groups in the community. This remains

an important issue for future government policy if Hong Kong is to become a fairer and more tolerant society.

Acknowledgement

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