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Exploring Sri Lankan Immigrants' Identity Work Strategies: Towards A Research Agenda

Gayani Gunasekera

School of Management, Operations and Marketing, Faculty of Business,
University of Wollongong, NSW, 2522, Australia
Email: gkg917@uowmail.edu.au

Professor Mario Fernando

School of Management, Operations and Marketing, Faculty of Business,
University of Wollongong, NSW, 2522, Australia
Email: mariof@uow.edu.au

Associate Professor James Reveley

School of Management, Operations and Marketing, Faculty of Business,
University of Wollongong, NSW, 2522, Australia
Email: jreveley@uow.edu.au

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Summary

This developmental paper aims to open a scholarly dialogue on the identity work strategies employed by Sri Lankan immigrants in Australian workplaces. Following Ashforth et al. (2008), we suggest sensebreaking and sensemaking as two temporal states in immigrants' identity construction processes. Our thesis suggests that identity work is the link between these two states manifested through identity work strategies. The paper identifies diverse identity work strategies from the identity literature and suggests which strategies are likely to be used by Sri Lankan immigrants in shaping their identities in Australian workplaces.

Key words: Identity work strategies, immigrants, Sri Lankan immigrants, Australian workplaces

Word count: 1968 (excluding tables and references)

Introduction:

This paper examines identity work strategies employed by Sri Lankan immigrants in Australian workplaces. We propose sensebreaking and sensemaking as two sequential states of immigrant identity construction. Thereafter we introduce identity work as the interface linking the two states of sensebreaking and sensemaking. Intention here is to open a scholarly dialogue on the potential identity work strategies employed by Sri Lankan immigrants. The paper concludes by introducing a future research agenda on immigrant identity work strategies in Australian workplaces.

The role of the immigrant

Global migration trends show large movements of people across continents leading to greater cultural diversity in workplaces. Geographical relocation introduces significant uncertainties into the daily lives of immigrants. This makes the 'immigrant' population group a potentially vulnerable segment of the workforce. Immigrants' identities are likely to be threatened, challenged and questioned in host countries (Valenta, 2009). Workplaces have become prominent outlets of social interaction for recent immigrants, where the process of identity threat, challenge and acceptance are generated and acted on. Consequently workplaces inevitably have become arenas for immigrants' identity construction.

Identity construction and reconstruction by immigrants are strongly affected by past, present and future contexts, while their sense of self is largely representative of cultural contexts they originated from (Molinsky, 2007; Lee et al., 2015). Hofstede's national cultural index provides a promising example of how different cultural and social contexts shape identity development. Reflecting on Hofstede (2001), Ashforth and Schinoff (2016) have identified the three cultural dimensions of individualism-collectivism, power distance and long-term orientation as the most influential dimensions towards shaping one's identity.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016), there are about 124,000 Sri Lankan immigrants residing in Australia. This makes Sri Lanka the 11th highest migrant sourcing country for Australia. Sri Lankan migrants to Australia can be exposed to unfamiliar cultural codes and conduct in Australia. Such exposure may sometimes instigate the potential for Sri Lankan immigrants to amass a sense of insecurity and sense of cultural subordination given the post-colonial mentality towards a white nation (Bhatia & Ram, 2001). Coming from a non-English-speaking background, they could experience hesitancy in their daily communication and an alienating experience in the host society (Nesdale & Mak, 2003). In the face of insecurities of identity, immigrants may attempt to re-evaluate their sense of self to achieve an identity that aligns with their expected identity (Valenta, 2009). In order to develop new or repaired identities, Sri Lankan immigrants in Australian workplaces could potentially employ one or more different combinations of identity work strategies. This would depend on several factors including the role played by immigrants' nationality, culture, profession, ethnicity, religion, social situations and relationships. These factors could act concurrently to influence and immigrant's choice of identity work strategies. Therefore, it is important to explore the contextuality surrounding the sense of self when studying the identity work strategies of immigrants.

Identity

Identity as a concept has been developed to answer an array of questions that would point at the fundamental question "who am I?". Scholarly work has often referred to identities as

performances which are dramaturgical in a broader sense and are directed both at the self itself and the external audiences of daily interactions (Down & Reveley, 2009). Management scholars have defined identity in various ways. For example, Brown (2015, p.20) defines identities as "people's subjectively construed understandings of who they were, are and desire to become…". Ashforth and Mael (1989) refer to identities as subjective interpretations by individuals of who they are, based on socio demographic characteristics, roles, personal attributes and group memberships. Ashforth et al. (2008) extend this articulation by stating identity is a self-referential description that provides contextually appropriate answers to the fundamental question of the sense of self. The question 'who am I?' quite often arises when individuals attempt to make sense of their position within social contexts, associations or affiliations that have influence or meaning on the conceptualization of the sense of self (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016).

Studies suggest that the nature of the organization culture and its relationship with its employees could influence the degree to which an employee would identify or enact identification in alignment with the desired identity of the organization (Clarke et al., 2009). To understand the execution of identity work strategies among the subtleties of the identity construction process, we have adapted Ashforth et al.'s the process model of identification (2008) to propse a sequence of events incorporating identity work strategies. Figure 1 illustrates identity work as a result of the sensebreaking and sensemaking processes. Ashforth et al. (2008) have identified sensebreaking and sensemaking to originate at two levels: i.e. at the organization and individual levels. Following Ashforth et al. (2008), we propose sensebreaking and sensemaking to be two states of an individual's identity construction process. Identity work is thus proposed to be the interface connecting the two states where identity work strategies are employed within the identity work process.

[Insert figure 1 about here]

Identity work
Identity work and identity construction appears synonymously in the identity literature referring to the process by which an individual evaluates and alters their stigmatized identity. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) state identity work as the continuous act of forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening and revising of one's identity to achieve a sense of coherence and distinctiveness. Watson (2008, p.129) conceptualizes identity work by closely examining the identity work of two managers and notes that "identity work involves the mutually constitutive processes" where one's self-identity is a continuous process of shaping and reshaping their notion of who they are in relation to various social identities.

As suggested, identity work occurs after the state of sensebreaking of the identity where the current identity is challenged and questioned but before the state of achieving heightened meaning through sensemaking.

Studies in the area of identity work have identified numerous identity work strategies. Some of the most prominent identity work strategies that appear in the literature are presented in Table 1. These include passing (Goffman, 1963), covering (Yoshino, 2002), revealing (Clair et al., 2005), embracing (Snow & Anderson, 1987), concealing (Goffman, 1963), distancing (Valenta, 2009), identity narratives (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), resisting (Boussebaa & Brown, 2017), selective disclosure (Marvasti, 2005), emotional detachment (Clarke et al., 2009), redefining

stigma (Zikic & Richardson, 2016), redefining situations (Marvasti, 2005) compensation (Valenta, 2009) and humor (Valenta, 2009). Studies have suggested that these strategies are able to assist in creating a sense of self that is congruent with the desired identity at workplaces (Down & Reveley, 2009; Reid, 2015; Boussebaa & Brown, 2017).

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Passing and covering (Goffman, 1963) are identity work strategies that often come up in the identity work literature (Reid, 2015). Passing assists an individual to suppress a discreditable identity (Denton, 1975) and allows to present him/her self as a non-holder of the discreditable identity attribute. Reid (2015) however suggests that passing in an organizational context involves more than information control and concealment; that passing also involves constructing identity to align one's self with organizational values so that the actor can minimize harm. Yoshino (2002) has well-articulated the enactment of 'covering' as an identity work strategy. Yoshino, reflecting on Goffman's work describes how one can selectively pass and cover at the same time but to different audiences (Yoshino, 2002). This illustrates how identity work strategies may be employed by an immigrant as a standalone strategy and also as a blend of strategies to make sense of their selves.

Narrative identity work has received scholarly attention as a strategy widely used in identity construction (Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Watson, 2008; Down & Reveley, 2009). Narrative construction is a retrospective process which allows revisiting key events and incidents and relies on memories and feelings associated with those memories. Narratives can be prospective as well. These are then futuristic projections of the desired self of the individual imbuing identity aspirations (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). This agile nature of narratives supports the fluidity of identity construction facilitating alterations and adaptations as required. Identity narratives serve as stepping stones on which future identity enactments are built on with evolving perceptions of the self (Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Watson, 2008).

Describing the complaining and protesting behavior by French academics at international conferences against the pressure to use English language in routine academic work, Boussebaa and Brown (2017) show how resisting is employed as an identity work strategy within workplaces. Proactive expression of positive attributes of an identity allows the actor to redefine the stigma and the situation (Valenta, 2009). This strategy is often selectively employed by actors to create favourable situations during social interactions (Zikic & Richardson, 2016). Marvasti (2005) describes humor as an identity work strategy, explaining how Middle Eastern Americans negotiated identity (i.e. by incorporating jokes into conversation that lighten the mood or by creating positive affiliations to the discrediting identity attribute).

Thus Sri Lankan immigrants in Australia might employ an array of identity work strategies that could potentially assist them to make better sense of their life experiences in the host country.

Developing a future research agenda

Identity work scholars repeatedly highlight that despite the conceptual contributions to identity work processes, there is a dearth of scholarly work exploring identity construction empirically at the personal level (Brown, 2017). These scholars particularly identify ongoing struggles around creating the sense of self (Reid, 2015), challenges to identity construction amidst organizational

demands (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) and identity work strategies employed (Brown, 2015) as areas that require more empirical work.

We propose several avenues for future research. First, although the multi-faceted nature of identity has been acknowledged (Ramarajan, 2014; Caza et al., 2018), organizational research has often focused on identities in isolation (Caza et al., 2018). Isolated observations of attributes may not reflect on the overall sense of the self of an immigrant (Ramarajan, 2014). Adoption of an intersectionality lens to explore the sense of self of immigrants will benefit in conceptualizing relationships between multiple identity attributes and the chosen identity work strategy.

Second, organization scripts are attempts to regulate identity and impose reconstruction to create an ideal worker (Zikic & Richardson, 2016). Strong organization cultures and the need for organizational identification encourage employees to feel the need of being part of a greater collective (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). However, the expected identity construct of the organization may or may not always align with an employee's sense of self or the desired self in a futuristic mindset. The sensemaking process of a conflicting identification within the organization comes with substantial psychological investment from the immigrant employee. In the presence of various organizational influences, such significant investment calls for measures that could provide sense of security in the process of sensemaking. Existence of numerous identity work strategies validate the different expectations and outcomes of the enactor engaging in identity work. Recent immigrants have to navigate through a complex and unfamiliar labour market, that often has localized rules of conduct and customs that define respective professions and institutional practices (Zikic & Richardson, 2016). The influence of organizational scripts on the choice of identity work strategies may inform interpretation and impact perceived by employees. This will potentially inform the emotional labour and dissonance involved in identity work process and strategies employed. As highlighted by Brown (2017), despite the attention to individual level identification processes in organization, there exists a conceptual overlap between organization identification and identity work. For example: how much of identity work is enacted in response to organization scripts or unrelated identification factors (i.e. family circumstances, personal preference etc.)?

Third, by highlighting the importance of context and its dependencies, future research on the cross-cultural influence on identity reconstruction of immigrants in workplaces could further extend our understanding of the identity literature.

Views expressed in this developmental paper are part of a PhD research project aiming to examine identity narratives of recent Sri Lankan immigrants in Australian workplaces.

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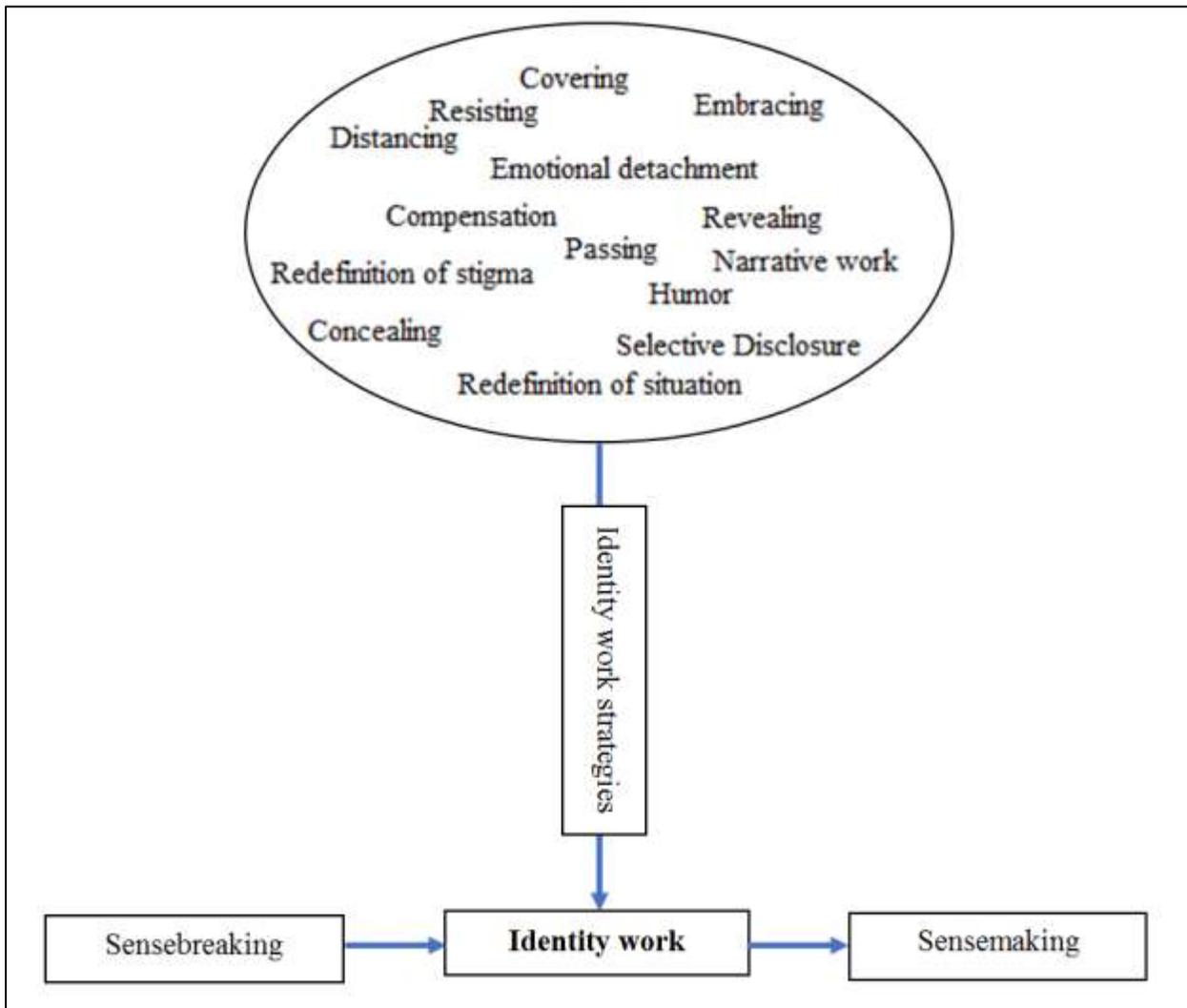**Figure 1: A model of the process of identity work enactment incorporating identity work strategies**

Table 1: Prominent Identity work strategies across identity literature

Identity work strategy	Representative citations	Definitions of strategies
Passing	Goffman, 1959; Goffman, 1963; Marvasti, 2005; Reid, 2015	The act of engaging in information control and concealment of stigmatizing attributes of the identity, to appear to have not held the stigmatized attributes.
Covering	Goffman, 1959; Goffman, 1963; Yoshino, 2002	The act of downplaying of stigmatized attributes, while holding on to the attributes.
Revealing	Clair et al., 2005; Reid, 2015	The act of public disclosure of the stigmatized attribute of the identity otherwise invisible.
Embracing	Snow & Anderson, 1987; Reid, 2015	The act of verbal and expressive confirmation of acceptance of an identity.
Concealing	Goffman, 1963; Renfrow, 2004; Clair et al., 2005	The act of concealing information that act as cues for an identity attribute meant to be hidden.
Distancing	Snow & Anderson, 1987; Valenta, 2009	The action of distancing roles, social associations and institutions that are inconsistent with the (socially) desired identity.
Identity narratives (Story telling)	Snow & Anderson, 1987; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008; Down & Reveley, 2009; Brown & Lewis, 2011	The narration of stories about one's past, present and desired future experiences and accomplishments to make sense of their sense of self.
Resisting	Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Renfrow, 2004; Boussebaa & Brown, 2017	The act of resistance towards external influence shaping construction of an identity, implying the unwillingness to let go of the current identity.
Selective disclosure	Marvasti, 2005; Clarke et al., 2009	The act of selective expression to chosen audiences of stigmatizing attributes of an identity.
Emotional detachment	Clarke, et al., 2009	The act of creating an emotional distance between the self and the expected identity.
Redefinition of stigma	Marvasti, 2005; Zikic & Richardson, 2016; Clarke et al., 2009; Slay & Smith, 2011	The act of proactive expression to project other or more affirmative attributes of their stigmatized identity.
Redefinition of situation	Marvasti, 2005; Zikic & Richardson, 2016 ; Clarke et al., 2009	The act of carefully choosing the projection of identity attributes in favour of the situation.

Compensation	Valenta, 2009	The act compensating behavior in a socially skillful or stereotype-disconfirming manner.
Humor	Marvasti, 2005; Valenta, 2009	Usage of humor as a way of shifting attention away from stereotypes that threaten the identity.