**Title**

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**Journal**

World Cultures eJournal, 18(2)

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**Publication Date**

2011-08-02

Peer reviewed

# A Comparative Investigation of the Self Image and Identity of Sri Lankans

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*The current study explores self image and identity of Sri Lankans in different social and cultural settings. It focuses on the role of major social identities in two ethnic groups: Sinhalese (the majority) and Tamils (the minority). Participants consisted of four groups: Sri Lankan Sinhalese, Sri Lankan Tamils, Sinhalese in USA, and Tamils in Canada. Seven self statement tests, ratings of the importance of major social identities, and eight common identity items under seven social identities were used to examine self identification. Findings suggest that religious identity plays a significant role in Sinhalese, whereas ethnic identity is the most significant in Tamils. All these identity measures suggest that the role of each social identity is different when it associates with different social settings, depending on how individuals value their social identities in particular social contexts.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Self image and identity are central to the ways in which people understand the world. Self image influences thoughts, feelings, behaviors, relationships, goals, and plans across the life-span. Every person has a sense of self, a sense of "who they are", which is comprised of physical, psychological, and social aspects of his or her life. The self has been described as the internal organization of external roles (Hormuth 1990). Matsumoto and Juang (2004) believe that the self concept is the organization of a person's psychological traits, attributes, characteristics, and behaviors. An individual's self concept encompasses their view of themselves and the roles they possess in society.

People develop divergent perspectives of self image as a consequence of different social and cultural experiences and interactions. Studies have indicated that people in western industrialized societies tend to emphasize a more independent component of the self, whereas people in other parts of the world are more inclined to promote a more interdependent aspect of a self (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Redford, 1999). The personal self is seen to be embedded in cultural contexts. Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934) first wrote of the importance of understanding the self from a social and cultural framework. According to these symbolic interactionist theorists, the self emerged out of social dialogue. An internal self image gradually evolved in response to interactions with others. From this perspective self image can be understood as primarily a social product.

Identity is a significant component of self image (Hormuth 1990; Mead 1934). People possess multiple identities which form their self image. "Identity is the pulling together of

who one is and who one can become, which involves compositing one's past, present, and future" (Piotrowski 2003:785). The process of identity formation is dynamic. Identity emerges through continuous interaction between persons and their socio-cultural environment (Sevig and Adams 2000). In this process, individuals recognize themselves in relation to others in various social contexts.

Erik Erikson, an early development theorist, focused on the construction of identity across the life span. In his theory, Erikson (1968) postulated eight stages of psychosocial development ranging from birth to death. Individuals experience interactions with significant persons and a crisis in each development stage (Green and Piel 2002). Especially in adolescence, individuals acquire skills and behaviors that direct them to form the foundation of their identities (Zimbardo and Weber 1997).

In the identity development process, individuals tend to identify themselves in relation to their membership with different social categorizations. "The various roles in life--depending on or defined by gender, occupation, family, social life, how one perceives oneself in relation to others, and feelings of duties to self, family and society--are all parts of an identity that functions from deep within, at the core of one's being" (Somasundaram 1998:92).

Accordingly, the social structures provide social contexts for which individuals develop different social selves. Individuals tend to possess multiple social selves depending upon memberships in different social groups. "People identify with others by ethnicity, race, nationality, culture, religion, gender, sexual orientation, class, disability, age, ideology and other social markers" (Gutmann 2003:2). Given that an increasing number of individuals are moving from country to country, migration networks also play a role in formulating different identities of individuals who settled in divergent social settings (Fuglerud 1999). Hence, individuals develop different social selves with respect to the culture in which they live and the social experience they gain by being actively engaged in different social circumstances.

Social Identity Theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), emphasizes that a person possesses several selves as a consequence of being identified members in different social groups. "Social identity is defined as that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel 1981:255). Self-categorization theory by Turner and his colleagues (1987) also states that people tend to identify themselves in relation to their membership in different social groups and that this membership affects their self image, thoughts, emotions, and behavior. Compared to social identity theory, self-categorization theory focuses on social structures and inter-group relations. As mentioned by Turner et al (1987) group formations pave the way for interpersonal experiences that describe people's day to day experiences.

According to social categorization theory, self-categorizations develop at different levels. Primarily, individuals tend to identify themselves as humans, which is considered to be the superordinate level. The second level of self-categorization takes place when individuals

categorize themselves as members of social groups and when they behave in accordance to their social identity. The third level, when individuals characterize themselves in relation to specific traits and attributes, is related to persons' perception of their personal identity (Ruble et al. 2004).

Multiple social identities can be observed in cultures where people have many social categorizations. For example, people who live in more ethnically, religiously, socially, and culturally diverse societies develop divergent social selves. In societies such as these, people will identify themselves as members of various religious groups, ethnic groups, racial groups, as well as by social class, caste, and gender.

The current study reflects the role of different social identities such as ethnic identity, national identity, religious identity, etc., in two ethnic groups, Sinhalese (the majority) and Tamils (the main minority) living in Sri Lanka and North America. Sri Lanka is an island, which covers a land area of 65,610 square kilometers at the southern tip of the Indian subcontinent. It is officially called the "Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka." The population is 20,222,240 (2006 estimate).

Ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, and occupation are some major social domains influencing individuals' identities. The nation plays a significant role when individuals express "who they are" (Worchel 1999). Ethnicity also plays a role in establishing unity and common feeling among individuals who may be geographically dispersed (Silva 1999). "Ethnicity refers to large groupings based usually on a shared way of life, culture, language, religion or territory" (Somasundaram 1998:93).

In Sri Lankan society, ethnic group identification is based on the language and religion (Blood 1991). As an ethnically diverse society, Sri Lankans make up four major ethnic groups: Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, and Burgers, based on language and religion. The majority of the population (74%) is Sinhalese, with Tamils (18%) and Muslim (7%) is the main minorities. The Sinhalese speak the Sinhala language. Tamils speak the Tamil language as their native language and Muslims speak Tamil or a type of Arabic Tamil (Blood 1991). The ethnic identity of Sinhalese is associated with Buddhist religion and Sinhala language. Language, territory and religion (Hinduism) are important elements of Tamils' ethnic identity (Somasundaram 1998).

The history of the present ethnic consciousness in Sri Lankan society arose in the mid 19th century. As cited by Hettige (1998), ethnic identity played a significant role with political movements in early history in Sri Lankan society. According to Eller (1999), as a consequence of British Colonialism, the consciousness of ethnicity became a more salient issue among Sri Lankans. Contemporary Sinhalese ethnic identity, along with the religion identity (Buddhist) developed in part, as a reaction to the Christian missionaries and the Westernization of the 19th century. Tamil identity emerged, in part, as a reaction to the Sinhala-Buddhist identity (Somasundaram 1998). Even though Sinhalese and Tamils distinguish themselves by their major religions and languages, there are commonalities,

which are shared by both groups. They both possess similar characteristics of customs, traditional caste, religious cults, kinship and some other elements (Tambiah 1986). In fact, throughout the early history of Sri Lankan society, there were many circumstances which indicated ethnic harmony of these two groups (Eller 1999).

Religious identification has been identified as one of the strongest and most persistent factor influencing one's self image (Gutmann 2003). As members of a multi-religious society, Sri Lankans distinguish themselves as Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians. Of the entire population, 70% are Buddhist, 15% are Hindu, 8% are Christian, and 7% are Muslim (Sri Lanka 2003). The great majority of Sinhalese practice Buddhism and the majority of Tamils are Hindus. Some Sinhalese and Tamils are Christian. For almost all Sri Lankans, religious and ethnic identities coincide. Hindu identity is also intertwined with Tamil ethnic identity.

Caste is another social categorization that differentiates individuals within their ethnic groups in Sri Lankan society. In this culturally defined framework, they are subcategorized into different castes depending on birth. Caste was originally related to occupation. These sub groups; those tend not to intermarry and are governed by a variety of ritualized behaviors (Blood 1991).

## 2. OBJECTIVE

The major purpose of this study was to investigate the self image and identity in two major ethnic groups: Sinhalese (the majority) and Tamils (the minority) who live in Sri Lanka, the United States, and Canada. As mentioned before, Sri Lankans are raised and live in diverse socio-cultural milieu, which form the basis for developing different social identities among them. The first aim of the study was to explore how different identities express themselves among Sri Lankans. There were few hypotheses on which this study was based. One, it was assumed that Sri Lankans would mention more social attributes than psychological attributes. This hypothesis was based on the collectivist nature of Sri Lankan society. It was also anticipated that individuals who express stronger group identification would be less likely to express psychological attributes. Third, that Sinhalese who live in Sri Lanka would state more psychological attributes than social attributes compared to Tamils as they are the majority in the community. Finally, Sri Lankans who live in the United States and Canada, both individualistic cultures, would be more likely to list more individualistic psychological attributes than social attributes.

Another point of interest was to examine the general importance of five major social identities: religion, nationality, ethnicity, caste, and occupation to Sri Lankans. Among these social identities, it was presumed that minority group participants would identify more strongly with their ethnic identity than their national identity. Another hypothesis was that caste identity would weaken in relation to the ethnic identity. The relationships among major social identities in different social settings were also explored.

# 3. METHODS

## *Participants*

Participants in this study consisted of four groups of volunteers: 97 Sinhalese in Colombo district, the Western Province in Sri Lanka; 99 Tamils in the Jaffna district, the Northern Province in Sri Lanka; 64 Sinhalese in New York City in the United States; and 91 Tamils in Toronto, Canada. The Sinhalese group in Sri Lanka included 48 females and 49 males. Participants were recruited through a Buddhist temple and a government office in Colombo District in Sri Lanka.

The Tamils group in Sri Lanka included 46 females and 53 males. The participants were recruited in their place of employment and Hindu temples in Jaffna district in Sri Lanka. Sinhalese participants in New York City consisted of 28 females and 36 males. They were recruited through two Buddhist temples. The Tamils group in Toronto, Canada was comprised of 42 females and 49 males and participants were approached in public places in Toronto.

## *Measures and Procedure*

A survey packet was designed, which included the "Who Am I" test. This consisted of a series of seven self-statements which followed the same format as the 20 statement test (TST) of "Who Am I" (Cousins 1989; Gordon 1968; Sunar 1999). The first question of the "Who Am I" test stated:

> "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 someone else. Write your answers in the order they occur to you. Don't worry about logic or importance."

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

In order to understand the nature of the participants' social identities: Sri Lankan nationality, ethnicity, religion and caste, along with South Asian, American and Canadian identity, participants also answered eight questions about each identity. These items included questions such as "How proud are you to be a (Sri Lankan)", "How much do you talk about (Sri Lanka) with your family and friends." Participants rated their responses to these questions by using a five-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*).

In addition, participants were asked questions such as "How would you feel if the next Nobel Prize won by a member of nine social groups: a South Asian, a Sri Lankan, a Canadian, a American, a Sinhalese, a Tamil, a Hindu, a Buddhist and a member of one's caste. The participants rated their feeling using the 5 point scale. They were also asked whether they owned or wore signs of their group membership and how many of their four best friends belong to each social group. The questionnaire was translated into the Sinhala and Tamil languages and then back translated into English. Sinhalese in the United States were administered the Sinhala or the English version of the questionnaire depending on their preference. The Tamils groups in Toronto, Canada were also administered either the Tamil or English version of the questionnaire, depending on their preference.

## 4. RESULTS

### *Analysis of "Who Am I?" Responses*

Data were analyzed according to the method introduced by McPartland, Cumming, and Garretson (1961) and revised by Hartley (1970) all responses were classified into four major 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. father, son, wife, bank officer, 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)

The above coding scheme was further divided into subdivisions to clarify self-statements in details (see Table 1 for the coding scheme). Given that the major focus of this study was the self-identification of Sri Lankans, only the sub divisions of the social category (B) were taken into consideration.

**Sri Lankan Sinhalese**

Six hundred and fifty five responses were received out of 679 possible "Who am I" responses (7 x 97 of participants) to the self-statement test in the Sri Lankan Sinhalese group. Of them, almost half (49%) were psychological attributes. Forty-three percent of the participants' responses were social attributes (B). Of the social attributes (B), 70% indicated the participants' major social identities such as national identity (BN), ethnic identity (BE), religious identity (BR), occupation (BO), membership of the family (BF), and social-self (BS) represented by an individual's name, for example, Sujatha. In addition, 6% of all responses included physical attributes (A) and global attributes (D). Of all responses, 2% did not qualify for any category.

Findings suggested that the membership of the family (BF) was the most common social attribute among the Sinhalese group (see table 2). The second most common social attribute was religion (BR). Occupation (BO) and nationality (BN) became the third and forth common social attributes followed by ethnicity (BE). The BS-self category (individuals' own name) was the least common social attribute.

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 |

## Sri Lankan Tamils

Five hundred and eighty-one responses out of 693 possible responses (7 x 99 of participants) were received to the self-statement test in the Sri Lankan Tamils group. Of them, the majority (55%) was social attributes. Seventy-four percent of all social attributes were major social identities such as national (BN), ethnic (BE), religious (BR), occupation (BO), and membership of the family (BO). Thirty-six percent of all responses were psychological attributes whereas 6% included physical attributes (A) and global attributes (D). Three percent of all responses did not qualify for any category.

Table 2. *Frequencies of Responses to "Who Am I?" Frequency and Percentage*

| Sri Lankan Sinhalese N=97 | Sinhalese in the US N = 64 | Sri Lankan Tamils N = 99 | Tamils in Canada N = 91 |
|---|---|---|---|
| | *BN Social-Nationality* | | |
| 30 (31%) | 19 (30%) | 30 (30%) | 28 (31%) |
| | *BN2 Social-Other nationalities* | | |
| 0 | 2 (3%) | 0 | 27 (30%) |
| | *BE Social-Ethnicity* | | |
| 26 (27%) | 4 (6%) | 37 (37%) | 47 (52%) |
| | *BR Social-Religion* | | |
| 45 (46%) | 14 (22%) | 25 (25%) | 16 (18%) |
| | *BC Social-Caste* | | |
| 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | *BO Social-Occupation* | | |
| 42 (43%) | 8 (13%) | 51 (52%) | 23 (25%) |
| | *BF Social-Family member* | | |
| 51 (53%) | 11 (17%) | 35 (35%) | 37 (41%) |
| | *BS Social-Self (own name)* | | |
| 1 (1%) | 1 (2%) | 47 (48%) | 6 (7%) |
| | *BW Social-related to the war* | | |
| 0 | 0 | 9 (9%) | 2 (2%) |

In contrast to the Sri Lankan Sinhalese group, occupation (BO) was the most common social attribute in the Tamils' self-statements (see table 2). Their social-self (BS), ethnicity (BE), membership of the family (BF), national identity (BN), and religious identity (BR) were in the second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth place respectively. Many Tamils who live in the Northern and the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka have experienced the ethnic conflict for more than two decades. Unlike the Sri Lankan Sinhalese group, the Sri Lankan Tamil group indicated particular social attributes that are related to the conflict situation for example, refugee, victim, displaced person and so on. These social attributes were sub categorized as BW (Social-relates to the war). This was the least common, but specially mentioned social attribute in the Sri Lankan Tamils group. Like the Sri Lankan Sinhalese group, no one mentioned their caste (BC) in their "Who am I" self-statements.

**The Sinhalese Group in the United States**

In the Sinhalese group in the United States, there were 372 responses out of a possible 448 (7 x 64 of participants). Similar to the Sri Lankan Sinhalese group, the majority (55%) of this group was psychological attributes. Thirty-one percent were social attributes. Of them, 17% percent represented major social identities: national (BN), ethnicity (BE), religious (BR), membership of the family (BF), occupation (BO), and American identity (BN2). Nine percent of all responses included physical attributes (A) and global attributes (D). Five percent did not qualify for any category.

With reference to social attributes, national identity (Sri Lankan) became the most common social attribute in this group (see Table 2). The second and third most common social attributes were religion (BR) and membership of the family (BF). Occupation (BO) and ethnicity (BE) were in the fourth and fifth place. American Identity (BN2) and the social-self

(BS) were the least common social attributes. Similar to the Sri Lankan Sinhalese and the Sri Lankan Tamil groups, no one mentioned their caste (BC) in their "Who am I" self-statements.

**The Tamils Group in Canada**

There were 459 responses out of 637 (7X91 of participants) to the "Who am I" self-statement test in this group. Similar to the Sri Lankan Tamil group, the majority (53%) was social attributes. Thirty-one percent were psychological attributes. In addition, 14% of responses included physical attributes (A) and global attributes (D). One percent did not qualify for any category.

The most common social attribute in this group was ethnicity (BE). The second most common social attribute was the membership of the family (BF). Nationality (BN), Canadian identity (BN2), and occupation (BO) became the third, fourth and fifth most common. Religion (BR) and the social self (BS-own name) became the sixth and seventh place respectively. Similar to the Sri Lankan Tamil group, the least common social attribute was BW category, which related to the war. Like every other group, no one mentioned their caste in the "Who am I" self-statements.

In order to understand the relative salience of the critical social attributes in all groups, the "Who am I" responses of all four groups were scored from 7-1 depending on the place in which each participant mentioned each type of social identities in the seven blanks. For example, if a participant mentioned his or her religious identity in the first blank of self-statements, it would be scored as 7; if he or she mentioned his or her national identity last, it would be scored as 1. Likewise, all social categories were scored for further exploration of the strength of social identities of the participants. These scores were again transformed to 0-1 based on whether the participants mentioned any particular type of social identity or not in their self-statement tests. For example, if someone indicated any social identity it was scored as 1 and if he or she did not mention any social identity it was scored as 0.

This method (score 7-1) also indicated that family membership, religion, and occupation were mentioned as the most common social attributes in the self-statements of the Sri Lankan Sinhalese group. The most common social attributes mentioned included: nationality, religion, and membership of the family in the Sinhalese group in the US. The most common social attributes in the Sri Lankan Tamil group, were occupation, BS-self category (own name), and ethnicity. In the Tamil group in Canada, ethnicity, membership of the family, and nationality became highly mentioned social attributes.

After transforming the score from 1-0, the results remained the same in both the Sinhalese groups. In the Sri Lankan Tamils group, occupation, social self (own name), and ethnicity became most common social attributes respectively. Ethnicity, nationality and Canadian identity became the most common in the Tamil group in Canada (see Table 3).

Table 3. *Mean (SD) of "Who am I" Score 1-0 (1 If Social Identity Was Stated, 0 Was Not Stated)*

| Sri Lankan Sinhalese N=97 | Sinhalese in the US N = 64 | Sri Lankan Tamils N = 99 | Tamils in Canada N = 91 |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Nationality- Sri Lankan* | | | |
| 0.31 (0.47) | 0.30 (0.46) | 0.30 (0.46) | 0.31 (0.46) |
| *American/Canadian* | | | |
| 0 | 0.03 (0.18) | 0 | 0.30 (0.46) |
| *Ethnicity* | | | |
| 0.27 (0.45) | 0.08 (0.27) | 0.37 (0.49) | 0.53 (0.50) |
| *Religion* | | | |
| 0.46 (0.50) | 0.22 (0.42) | 0.23 (0.42) | 0.18 (0.38) |
| *Caste* | | | |
| 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| *Occupation* | | | |
| 0.43 (0.50) | 0.13 (0.33) | 0.55 (0.50) | 0.25 (0.44) |
| *Member of the family* | | | |
| 0.37 (0.49) | 0.19 (0.39) | 0.22 (0.42) | 0.29 (0.45) |
| *Social self- own name* | | | |
| 0.02 (0.14) | 0.02 (0.13) | 0.47 (0.50) | 0.07 (0.25) |
| *War related attributes* | | | |
| 0 | 0 | 0.08 (0.27) | 0.02 (0.15) |

The participants' responses for the "Who am I" data, the score from 7-0, were analyzed with a 2 (ethnicity: Sinhalese, Tamils) x 2 (place: Sri Lanka, North America) ANOVA (see Table 4). Results indicated that the effects of participants' social-self category (own name - BS) were significant with regards to ethnicity, $F(1,347) = 53.86$, p < 0.001. This shows that Tamils mentioned their own name more than Sinhalese. With reference to place, participants in Sri Lanka were more likely to mention their own name than participants in North America, $F(1,347) = 38.00$, p < 0.001.

Table 4. *Two Way ANOVA for 'Who am I' Responses (Score 7-0)*

| Social Identities | Ethnicity | Place | Interaction |
|---|---|---|---|
| Own name | 53.86*** | 38.00*** | 36.13*** |
| Member of the family | 0.06 | 0.25 | 8.90** |
| Nationality | 0.20 | 0.01 | 0.02 |
| Ethnicity | 35.31*** | 0.13 | 16.85*** |
| Religion | 9.36** | 12.31** | 3.77 |
| Occupation | 5.84* | 32.47*** | 0.01 |
| American/Canadian identity | 16.99*** | -- | -- |

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

The interaction between ethnicity (Sinhalese, Tamils) and place (Sri Lanka, North America) has an effect on likelihood of mentioning membership of the family, $F(1,347) = 8.90$, p < 0.01. Sinhalese in Sri Lanka more frequently mentioned family membership than Tamils in

Sri Lanka whereas Tamils in the Diaspora community indicated membership of the family more than Sinhalese in the United States.

Tamils more frequently mentioned their Canadian identity (BN2) than Sinhalese who mentioned American identity $F(1,153) = 16.99$, $p < 0.001$. It is important to note that Tamils indicated their ethnicity (BE) more, relative to Sinhalese, $F(1,347) = 35.31$, $p < 0.001$. Sinhalese stated their religion (BR) more than Tamils, $F(1,347) = 9.36$, $p < 0.01$. Considering the place, participants in Sri Lanka frequently mentioned their religion more often than participants in North America, $F(1,347) = 12.31$, $p < 0.01$. Further analysis indicated that occupation (BO) was mentioned by Tamils more frequently than by Sinhalese, $F(1,347) = 5.84$, $p < 0.05$. With reference to place, participants in Sri Lanka tended to mention their occupation more than participants in North America, $F(1,347) = 32.47$, $p < 0.001$.

After transforming the "Who am I" data to 1-0, correlations were calculated to examine the relationship among five major social identities: nationality, ethnicity, religion, caste and occupation. Inter-correlations indicated a significant relationship between nationality and ethnicity in Sri Lankan Sinhalese, Sinhalese in the United States, and Sri Lankan Tamils. Significant inter-correlation was also found for nationality and religion in Sri Lankan Sinhalese and Sinhalese in the United States. Ethnicity and religion was highly inter-correlated in Sri Lankan Sinhalese, Sinhalese in the United States, and Sri Lankan Tamils (see Table 5 for complete matrix).

Table 5. *Inter-Correlations among "Who Am I" Responses of Five Major Social Identities after Transforming Score to 1-0*

| Who am I responses | Sri Lankan Sinhalese (n=97) | Sinhalese in the US (n=64) | Sri Lankan Tamils (n=99) | Tamils in Canada (n=91) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Nationality and ethnicity | 0.35*** | 0.45*** | 0.54*** | 0.15 |
| Nationality and religion | 0.59*** | 0.57*** | 0.11 | 0.13 |
| Nationality and occupation | 0.14 | 0.07 | 0.03 | -0.11 |
| Ethnicity and religion | 0.60*** | 0.41** | 0.42*** | 0.21 |
| Ethnicity and occupation | 0.04 | 0.07 | 0.20 | -0.01 |
| Religion and occupation | 0.15 | -0.09 | 0.31** | 0.13 |

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

## ***Importance of Five Major Social Identities***

Sri Lankan Sinhalese and Sinhalese in the United States rated general importance of five major social identities: national, ethnic, religious, caste and occupation in the same order. Religion was the most important social identity in both the Sinhalese groups. Ethnic identity was the most important social identity to both the Tamils groups. National identity became the second important social identity to all four groups. Also, caste identity was the least important social identity for all four groups (see Table 6).

Table 6. *Mean (SD) of Rated Importance of Social Identities for Four Groups*

| Groups | Religion | Nationality | Ethnicity | Caste | Occupation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sinhalese SL (n=97) | 4.63 (0.98) | 4.32 (1.21) | 3.99 (1.45) | 2.67 (1.71) | 4.23 (1.22) |
| Sinhalese US (n=64) | 4.16 (1.36) | 4.06 (1.32) | 3.69 (1.33) | 1.92 (1.31) | 3.83 (1.29) |
| Tamils SL (n=99) | 4.07 (1.31) | 4.16 (1.36) | 4.30 (1.17) | 3.56 (1.57) | 3.91 (1.49) |
| Tamils CA (n=91) | 3.67 (1.57) | 4.13 (1.29) | 4.28 (1.19) | 2.55 (1.62) | 3.77 (1.40) |

Ratings of the importance of each social identity were also analyzed with a 2 (ethnicity: Sinhalese, Tamils) x 2 (place: Sri Lanka, North America) ANOVA. The ANOVA results showed that Tamils tended to rate the importance of ethnicity higher than Sinhalese, $F(1,347) = 10.43$, $p < 0.01$. The results also indicated that participants in Sri Lanka rated the importance of ethnicity higher than individuals in North America. There was a main effect of ethnicity on the importance of religion to oneself. Sinhalese rated the importance of religion higher than Tamils, $F(1,347) = 13.43$, $p < 0.001$. ANOVA on the importance of religion also has an effect for place. Individuals in Sri Lanka rated higher than individuals in North America, $F(1,347) = 8.53$, $p < 0.01$.

With regards to the importance of caste, results of ANOVA showed an effect for ethnicity. Tamils tended to rate the importance of caste higher than Sinhalese, $F(1,347) = 19.53$, $p < 0.001$. There was a main effect for place as well. Individuals in Sri Lanka are more likely to rate the importance of caste higher than individuals in North America, $F(1,347) = 26.25$, $p < 0.001$. Even though none of the participants mentioned their caste in their self-statement tests, Tamils tended to rate the importance of caste to them higher than did Sinhalese.

In the Sri Lankan Sinhalese group, calculated inter-correlations of the rated importance among five main social identities were significant for all but the relationship between ethnicity and occupation (see Table 7 for the complete matrix). With regards to the Sinhalese group in the United States, the inter-correlations of the general importance among five main social identities were significant for six variables.

Table 7. *Inter-Correlations of Rated Importance of Social Identities for Four Groups*

| Social Identities | Sri Lankan Sinhalese (n=97) | Sinhalese in the US (n=64) | Sri Lankan Tamils (n=99) | Tamils in Canada (n=91) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Religion and caste | 0.29* | 0.31* | 0.52*** | 0.57*** |
| Religion and nationality | 0.46*** | 0.60*** | 0.32** | 0.43*** |
| Religion and ethnicity | 0.44*** | 0.59*** | 0.53*** | 0.49*** |
| Religion and occupation | 0.26* | 0.12 | 0.20 | 0.29* |
| Caste and nationality | 0.50*** | 0.36** | 0.29* | 0.22* |
| Caste and ethnicity | 0.56*** | 0.52*** | 0.40*** | 0.31** |
| Caste and occupation | 0.22* | 0.22 | 0.10 | 0.19 |
| Nationality and ethnicity | 0.53*** | 0.76*** | 0.68*** | 0.78*** |
| Nationality and occupation | 0.30** | -0.03 | 0.19 | 0.51*** |
| Ethnicity and occupation | 0.03 | 0.10 | 0.22* | 0.52*** |

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

The inter-correlations of the general importance among five main social identities in the Sri Lankan Tamils group proved significant for seven variables. In the Tamils group in Canada, the inter-correlations of the general importance among five main social identities were significant for all but the relationship between caste and occupation. Of them, six variables strongly correlated. Nationality and ethnicity, caste and ethnicity, religion and ethnicity, and religion and nationality were highly correlated in all four groups.

## *Eight Common Identity Items*

All participants were asked to rate eight common identity questions under South Asian identity, Sri Lankan nationality, ethnicity, religion and caste. The same identity questions under American and Canadian identity were only asked of Sinhalese in the US and Tamils in Canada. Among all, ethnicity became the most significant identity in both the Tamils groups and Sri Lankan Sinhalese. Nationality was in second place in Sri Lankan Sinhalese and Tamils in Canada. Ethnicity and religion came in second place in Sinhalese in the United States and Sri Lankan Tamils respectively. Religion was in third place in all but Sri Lankan Tamils. South Asian identity was in fourth place in all with the exception of Sri Lankan Tamils. Caste, which was the least important social identity in all four groups, came in last in all but Sri Lankan Tamils. When considering the inter-correlations of averaged common identity items, it is important to note that except for the relationship between caste and nationality all the other relationships were highly correlated (see Table 8).

Table 8. *Intercorrelations among Averaged Eight Common Identity Items*

| | South Asian Identity | Nationality | Ethnicity | Religion |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Nationality | 0.36*** | | | |
| Ethnicity | 0.25*** | 0.54*** | | |
| Religion | 0.20*** | 0.39*** | 0.41*** | |
| Caste | 0.17** | 0.07 | 0.25*** | 0.29*** |

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

## 5. DISCUSSION

As stated by James (1968), people tend to possess multiple social selves. This study focused on the identification of different social identities of Sri Lankans: Sinhalese (majority) and Tamils (minority), living in Sri Lanka, United States, and Canada. The findings indicated that Sri Lankans possess multiple social selves as they live in an ethnically, religiously, and culturally diverse social milieu.

When comparing all four groups, Tamils indicated more social attributes than Sinhalese, regardless where they live. Tamils tended to identify with their ethnic group more than Sinhalese did. Both social identity theory and social categorization theory suggest that people tend to identify themselves in terms of their membership with different social groups (Sani and Bennett 2004). The hypothesis that people who are more group identified compared to less group identified in general across an array of social identity scales and measures would list fewer psychological attributes than social attributes was supported by the above findings.

Another hypothesis was that Sinhalese living Sri Lanka would state more psychological attributes than social attributes compared to Tamils, as they are the majority. This was also supported by findings. When comparing two groups which live in an individualistic culture: Sinhalese in the United States and Tamils in Canada, findings suggested that Tamils still tend to mention more social attributes as they group identified with their ethnic group. Similar to Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, Sinhalese who live in the United States also mentioned more psychological attributes than social attributes.

Findings indicated that religion plays a major role in Sinhalese, the majority of the Sri Lankan society. This supports the ideas of Gutmann (2003) and Worchel (1999) that religious identification can be seen as the strongest identification of humankind and a vital constituent of many individuals' self-identities. It is important to note that even though Sinhalese are away from their homeland, they consider their religion as important as other social identities. However, Somasundaram (1998) stated that, as a whole, Sri Lankan society

has detached itself from the fundamental teachings of all religions over time. With regards to the Sinhalese group, it is clear that they still highly value their religious identity.

Tamils, by contrast, tended to value their ethnic identity as their most important social identity. It was assumed that Tamils would identify with their ethnic identity rather than their national identity as they are the main minority in Sri Lankan society. Responses of the Tamils group in Canada also suggested that ethnic identity is the most common social identity in their self-statement tests. This provides evidence for the fact that Tamils' ethnic identity has been strengthened with the formation of the Diaspora in Canada (Cheran 2001). Sri Lankan Tamils identified themselves with their names. Tamil language is a major component of the definition of Tamil identity (as cited in Cheran 2001). The usage of Tamils' own names may also indirectly indicate their ethnicity.

Results of rated importance of social identities indicated that Sri Lankan nationality was the second most important social identity mentioned by both Sinhalese and Tamils. Given these findings, it appears that Sinhalese, the majority, consider their nationality to be of more important than their ethnicity. Sorensen (1996) notes that people's identities are greatly embedded in place. The place where they live plays an influential role in formulating their self-identity. For Sri Lankan Tamils, however, national identity was listed in the fifth place in their self-statement tests, even lower than in Tamils in Canada that their consideration of themselves as Sri Lankans was not of significant importance.

Caste plays a significant role in both Sinhalese and Tamils societies in Sri Lanka (Eller 1999). However, it seems that this has changed over time with social movements both in Sinhalese and Tamils societies. Caste identity was mentioned as the least important social identity to both Sinhalese and Tamils. It is also important to note that none of the participants mentioned their caste identity when they responded to the question "Who they are" in their self-statement tests. The hypothesis that the role of caste identity in Sri Lankan society has weakened over time as a consequence of social and political movement still appears to hold true. Silva (1999) stated that the caste identity was becoming less important in the contemporary society, whereas ethnic identity was gaining importance. Findings of this study support this notion.

Sinhalese, especially in Sri Lanka, more frequently mentioned family membership than Tamils. Unlike Tamils who are dispersed due to the social conflict situations, Sinhalese may identify themselves as members of the family because their families are for the most part intact. Tamils in Canada tended to indicate membership of the family more than Sri Lankan Tamils. According to Tambiah (1986), Tamils in Diaspora communities recall past memories of homeland and other traditional customs, which guide them in the development of their social identity. In addition, they tended to maintain their social relationship with members in Sri Lanka. Thus, the aforementioned results might be a reflection of their attachment to the family and to homeland. Tamils in Canada mentioned their Canadian identity more frequently than Sinhalese in the United States mentioned American identity. The implication of Canadian identity may indicate the formulation of a new identity within the Diaspora

community. A person from a particular ethnic group generally associates his or her identity with a particular "homeland," (Worchel 1999).

Consistent with social identity theory (Tajfel 1981) and social categorization theory (Turner 1987), this study demonstrates that Sri Lankans tend to identify themselves in relation to various social groups. As a consequence, they tend to possess multiple social identities that form their self image. Overall, it appears that Sinhalese, the majority of Sri Lankan society, tend to value their religious identity, whereas Tamils, the main minority, highly consider their ethnic identity. Consistent with Silva (1999), the role of caste identity appears to diminish in contemporary Sri Lankan society.

The study has several limitations, which should be taken into consideration when interpreting findings. The Sinhalese group in the United States had fewer participants than the other three samples. This may limit the ability to compare results of all four groups. In addition, participants were given only seven blanks in their self statement tests. If they were given twenty statements consistent with the actual twenty statement test, the results may have changed.

There are relatively few studies that have examined the self image and identity of Sri Lankans living in Sri Lanka and North America. Therefore, the present study has contributed to the literature addressing this topic. Future research focusing on more qualitative methodology should be important to understand the new trends of the self image and identity of Sri Lankans.

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