

IS SIMILARITY LESS THREATENING THAN DIFFERENCE? THE CULTURE DISTANCE HYPOTHESIS REVISITED

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine interactions between two groups who outwardly appear to have a shared cultural heritage. Specifically this study has observed interactions between Indian nationals and Malaysian Indians in Malaysia. Observations based on a very specific sample of Indian IT programmers working in Malaysia on short stay assignments show very limited interactions between the two groups. It appears that the encounter between these two groups has threatened pre-existing self-definitions as ethnic Indians whether in India or Malaysia. The Indian nationals appear to experience a higher level of discomfort as evidenced in their use of defensive strategies aimed at preserving social identities. The Malaysian Indians on the other hand appear to have a more balanced response that includes acknowledgement of the competencies and work ethics of the Indian nationals yet as the same time carries overtones of incipient mistrust. These results suggest the need for a re-examination of the applicability of the culture distance hypothesis and at the same time supports the robustness of social identity and social categorization theories in explaining intergroup processes.

Keywords: Social identity, culture, Indian nationals; cross-cultural encounters

A paradox of cross-cultural encounters is that it offers opportunities for learning about others and at the same time learning more about one's self. Immersion in the host culture provides abundant opportunities to learn about the cultural mores of a foreign culture. At the same time the inevitable comparisons and disconfirming encounters stimulate re-examinations of both personal beliefs and social stereotypes. Migrant workers, students, aid workers and business personnel are the traditional groups represented in sojourners adjustment studies. These groups have been more recently joined by Indian IT workers who travel to places as distant as the United States (Friedmann, 2006) as well as places closer to home such as Malaysia. The launching of the Multimedia Super Corridor in 1996 has attracted a large number of Indian IT professionals working in Cyberjaya and Kuala Lumpur. Specific figures for the number of Indian IT workers in Malaysia are not available; however unofficial estimates put the number at around 50 to 70,000. This amounts to a significant presence and presents an opportunity for studying the cross-cultural context of social identity within a group not as yet represented in studies of cross-cultural adjustment. This article examines the impact of group membership on perceptions of social identity and intergroup interactions. The focus is on perceptions and encounters between Indian IT workers and members of the Malaysian Indian

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minority group. The question to be answered is: does the presence of a Malaysian Indian community facilitate the adjustment of Indian IT workers in Malaysia? The article begins by introducing social identity theory before presenting observations of the interactions between Indian IT workers and Malaysian Indians. It ends by discussing implications for theory as well as practice.

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY AND INTERGROUP PROCESSES

Social identity theory falls within the category of social cognitive theories of behaviour which posit that cognitive structures such as schemas have considerable influence on how information is selected, interpreted and subsequently impacts behaviour. Once formed these mental structures remain fairly stable and have considerable influence on behaviour. The core of social identity theory revolves on two pertinent questions: first, How does my group membership affect my social identity? and second How does my group membership impact my interactions with members of other groups? (Ward, Bochner and Furnham, 2001; Jenkins, 2006). True to its location within the broader discipline of psychology, the unit of analysis in social psychology remains focused on the individual.

Identity can be represented as a continuum between personal identity on one end and social identity at the other end. The question of Who am I? can be answered by describing unique attributes of the self (personal identity), or it can be answered in terms of our group membership (social identity). This article focuses on social identity. Social identity consists of descriptions of ourselves with respect to the characteristics of our group membership. Aspects emphasized include ways in which we are similar to members of our own group and ways in which our group differs from other groups (Baron, Byrne and Branscombe, 2006). Identities develop through social interactions and each individual would have multiple identities arising from the multiple social roles and relationships in a person's life. The choice of identity in use at a particular moment is determined by situation as well as identity salience and commitment (Bernd, 2004). Multiple identities are thought to be arranged in a hierarchy of salience with one common determinant of hierarchy order being the frequency with which particular identities are used. Identity salience indicates the location of an identity such that more frequently utilized identities are located higher in the hierarchy and therefore more likely to impact behaviour. Commitment to an identity is negatively defined as costs to the person if a particular role is no longer available. An example would be the cost of identity loss contingent on retirement denoting the loss of role as wage earner as well as that component of social identity defined by profession.

The relationship between social identity and behaviour is mediated by identity salience and commitment such that commitment impacts salience which then impacts role performance (Bernd, 2004). In practice this means the greater the commitment to a particular social identity, the greater the salience of an identity and therefore the stronger the motivation to perform behaviours consistent with that social identity. For example the more committed a person is to the identity as leader, the greater the frequency of perceived opportunities to act as leader and the greater the actual number of leadership responses. Thus the factors of salience and commitment are able to explain individual differences in behaviour by providing a mechanism whereby individual perceptions of the meaningfulness of social identity are instrumental in determining behaviours in relation to a particular social identity.

Social categorization and intergroup processes

The answer to the second question, How does my group membership impact my interactions with other groups? is based on processes of social categorization and social comparison. Social categorization “defines a person by systematically including them within some, and excluding them from other related categories” (Turner, 1982:18). In practice social categorization is evident in the identification of ingroups and outgroups. Ingroup includes all members belonging to the same group as the individual whereas outgroups consist of everyone else not a member of the personal group. Once formed these groups then influence behaviour through the process of social comparison. Turner (1982) initially suggested that the determination of social categorization is motivated by the need for positive self-esteem. This need is thought to motivate social comparisons such that positive comparisons are made between the ingroup and outgroups so as to provide ingroup members with higher subjective status or prestige and thereby positive self-esteem. Subsequent empirical studies have only moderately supported this position and it is now suggested that positive self-esteem may be more likely a by-product rather than motivational mechanism of intergroup comparisons (Brown, 2000). Nevertheless the concept of positive self-esteem is closely linked to processes of social categorization.

Social identity and social categorization theories are in fact two different explanations. The former focuses on personal organization of identity based on group membership, whereas the latter examines the impact of group membership inclusion and exclusion on social behaviour. When applied to explaining social behaviour these two perspectives frequently occur together to provide complementary explanations towards more comprehensive understanding of social behaviour.

In practice social categorization adds another layer to social identity whereby the self is defined by both the characteristics of group membership as well as those derived from differentiations between ingroup and outgroup. Once these group categories are established, social comparisons inevitably lead to either favourable or unfavourable comparisons that have consequences for self-esteem. Group members are more often motivated to make favourable social comparisons thereby serving self-esteem needs. Examples of such intergroup bias are the occurrence of ingroup favouritism and outgroups derogation (Baron, Byrne and Branscombe, 2006). Social psychological research has demonstrated that group members are more likely to make internal attributions for positive behaviours displayed by members of their own ethnic, cultural or religious ingroups whereas external attributions are made for the same behaviours displayed by outgroup members. It has also been shown that outgroup derogation increases when identity is threatened either by outgroup devaluation (Ward et al., 2001) or by perceived similarity between groups that threatens distinctiveness (Hornsey and Hogg, 2000).

In addition to devaluing outgroups, two other strategies of social creativity and social competition have been identified by Tajfel (1982) to restore self-esteem when faced with unfavourable group identity. Social creativity occurs when ingroup members seek to increase positive distinctiveness by comparing ingroup and outgroup on new dimensions or reevaluating attributes assigned to the group. Social competition occurs when group members seek positive distinctiveness through direct competition with outgroups intending to reverse relative positions on salient dimensions (Ward et al., 2001). Both

strategies again appear to reinforce the motivational properties of self-esteem as group members strive to bolster social identities.

The next section briefly reviews the results of empirical studies of cross-cultural adjustment among expatriate business personnel. Results of previous studies are highlighted as a foundation for the current study.

SOCIAL IDENTITY AND SOJOURNER ADJUSTMENT

Empirical studies of sojourner adjustment primarily among expatriate business personnel have equally emphasized psychological and sociocultural factors (Ward and Kennedy, 1994; Selmer, 1999). The psychological characteristics approach is based on the idea that having certain personality and relationship building abilities would predict better adjustment. For example neuroticism and an external locus of control have shown significant positive correlations with acculturative stress, while extraversion and a positive attitude towards socializing with host nationals are reported to have an inverse relationship with stress (Furnham and Erdmann, 1995). Other personal indicators facilitating cross-cultural transitions include the expatriates' ability to find substitute interests and activities in the new culture, technical competency and effective utilization of stress reduction techniques as well as relationship development and communication skills (Mendenhall and Oddou, 1985; Selmer, 2001). Cultural identity has emerged as the strongest sociocultural factor mediating cross-cultural experiences. The general pattern emerging is that strong home identity (Sussman, 2002) or strong co-national identification (Ward and Rana-Deuba, 1999) strengthens psychological well-being. Strong host national identification appears to have a double-edged effect in that it predicted smoother sociocultural adjustment in the host country however it was also associated with higher repatriation distress on returning home. Both researchers report that individuals able to incorporate aspects of both home and host cultures experience less adjustment difficulties (Ward and Rana-Deuba, 1999; Sussman, 2002).

Empirical findings such as the above have led to the formation of the culture distance hypothesis. Culture distance refers to the extent of differences in values, language, religion and traditional practices between the culture of origin and host culture (Ward et al., 2001). The culture distance hypothesis predicts that the greater the cultural dissimilarity, the more acculturation difficulties experienced by participants. Empirically it has been shown that perceived culture distance was a predictor of both the presence and absence of stress reactions. In terms of effect strength, culture distance was fourth in significance behind length of residence in the host country, command of host language and knowledge about the host country (Furnham and Erdmann, 1995). Another related term is cultural toughness used to denote the gap between home and host cultures (Mendenhall and Oddou, 1985). Expatriate managers reporting perceptions of greater cultural gap were also reported to find it more difficult to adjust.

The primary group of respondents in the studies above has been Western business personnel working either in China or other nearby Asian countries. A different picture however emerges when expatriate personnel are more similar in ethnic identity with host nationals. A comparison of the adjustment experience of western and overseas Chinese expatriate managers in China showed differing patterns of adjustment between the two groups (Selmer and Shiu, 1999; Selmer, 2002). Western expatriate managers reported

higher levels of cultural novelty and experienced significantly greater difficulties at the initial stage of adjustment. However overseas Chinese expatriate managers who reported less cultural novelty experienced greater adjustment difficulties in the long term. Western managers who stayed longer showed better work and general adjustment compared to Occidental expatriate managers who reported persistent difficulties in work adjustment. Two explanations were suggested; firstly that overseas Chinese expatriate managers through perceptions of less cultural novelty were in fact less prepared for change and therefore less successful in adjustment. Second it was suggested that local Chinese counterparts had more negative perceptions of overseas Chinese expatriate managers and were less tolerant of a group who were expected to know better when compared to Western expatriate managers. Similar findings were reported in a three-way comparison between Asian and western third country national as well as western parent company nationals (Selmer, 2002). The term third country national refers to employees working temporarily in a host country who is neither a national of that host country nor of the country in which the corporate headquarters is located. The rationale for the use of third country nationals is mainly economic in that this group of expatriates are mainly short term appointees who have lower salary and benefit advantages compared to parent country expatriates. An added advantage is when they are sourced from within the same regions as the host national with the expectation that cultural similarity would enhance work performance through smoother cross-cultural adjustment. In the study above, two groups of third country nationals were compared, the first comprising Asian expatriate managers from mainly Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Vietnam, Cambodia, India, Korea and Malaysia, while the second group consisted of western expatriate managers who were predominantly British or American with fewer French, Australia, German, Canadian, Austrians and Belgium nationals. The parent country nationals were all western. The results showed the group of Asian third country nationals to be less adjusted to work in China as compared to western third country nationals or parent country nationals. Thus this group of respondents has failed to live up to expectations of better performance arising from cultural similarity. A possible explanation suggested was that senior level third country nationals were resented by local staff as they were perceived as blocking promotion opportunities for host nationals. Lower or mid-level third country nationals were perceived to be less threatening as they tended to have shorter stays and to make more effort to forge good working relationships with locals in effort to impress their superiors in the parent country. A second explanation as to why resentment was more directed to senior level appointees is that senior third country nationals on sensing the aversion of local staff may choose to respond by asserting their managerial status, which in turn would further arouse the antipathy of local staff.

This brief review above shows that cross-cultural adjustment can be influenced by many factors including both psychological and sociocultural factors. While cultural identity has emerged as a significant influence it must be noted that its importance ranks well below the more practical considerations of training and preparation, competency levels, relationship and communications skills. Of interest to this study is that thus far previous researchers have not used social identity or social categorization theories to explain their findings, preferring instead to identify the antecedents of successful cross-cultural adjustment. The relevance of these two theories becomes particularly salient in considering the two studies reporting on sojourner adjustment among expatriates with shared cultural identities. The next section presents observations of the encounter between expatriate and host nationals within the Indian community in Malaysia.

SOJOURNER ADJUSTMENT AMONG INDIAN IT WORKERS IN MALAYSIA

The results reported in this paper are from a qualitative study aimed at understanding the nature of interactions between foreign Indian IT workers and Malaysian Indians. Interviews and observations were conducted over a four month period at Cyberjaya and Brickfields (a predominantly Indian suburb of Kuala Lumpur). Thirteen Indian nationals (nine male and four female) and six Malaysian Indians (3 male and 3 female) were interviewed. Of the Indian nationals, 10 were IT professionals, one was employed as a lecturer at a local private college and two were employed in commercial establishments in Brickfields. The age of the IT workers ranged between 23 to 28 years and duration of stay was from three months to six months. The pattern emerging was of multiple short stays usually working for the same local or multinational company. Longer stays of over six months incurred greater cost to the employing company as they were required to sponsor family members for long term postings; thus whether married or not all Indian nationals interviewed were single and staying with fellow Indian nationals in rented apartments. Their location of choice in Kuala Lumpur was Brickfields for two reasons: first because it is near KL Sentral which houses their principal means of transportation to Cyberjaya, the KLIA Transit; and second because Brickfields is home to many Indian eateries, grocers and video outlets.

Interviews were conducted by the author and colleague who was a visiting American Fulbright scholar with the unique ability of being able to converse in Tamil. Although the interviews were mainly conducted in English, this unique ability often served as an ice-breaker to obtain the consent of Indian nationals to be interviewed. The procedure for the interviews was to approach groups or individual Indian nationals at Cyberjaya as they were having lunch. Subsequent interviews were carried out in Brickfields by the author, again at either eating places or shopping centres.

In each case the researchers started by introducing themselves, ascertaining that the respondent was indeed an Indian national, explaining the purpose of the study and then obtaining permission to continue the conversation. The interview questions covered two main areas, namely their work situation and their activities and interactions with Malaysian outside work. The main interview questions are presented in the diagram below.

1. What is the work that you do here?
2. In what way is it similar or different to what you have done before?
3. How do you feel about working here?
4. What were your impressions when you first arrived in Malaysia?
5. Where do you stay and with whom?
5. Can you remember any outstanding experience within your first month here?
6. How do you spend your time after work?
7. How often and in what ways do you keep in contact with people back home?
8. What pointers would you give to someone who has just arrived to work here?

Figure 1: Core interview questions used in this study.

Responses were written down in point form during the course of the interview, with more detailed notes written up within the same day of the interview. The interviews were analysed first to identify emerging categories and then themes as presented below. Pseudonyms are used to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

LIFE STYLE IN MALAYSIA

The predominant reason for being in Malaysia was the advantage of being paid in Malaysian currency and at a better rate than in India. A stint overseas was perceived as a step up the career ladder and for all respondents this was their first experience of working abroad. Malaysia was described as clean, efficient and with plenty to do after work. About half the respondents had previous experience of working in Malaysia. The pattern seems to be that after 3-4 years in their parent company they are offered a change of location. As Vikram said, "we are given the choice of working in Bangalore, Chennai or Malaysia and of course Malaysia is the popular choice".

The pattern emerging was of working long hours, about 8.30am to 10pm, from Monday to Friday and then spending the weekend window shopping, watching Indian DVDs and sleeping. This trend of working long hours was true for all Indian respondents including the lecturer working in a private college. Local and regional tourism were the choice activity for long weekends and public holidays. All the respondents, with the exception of two male respondents, had visited tourist destinations within the country, Penang and Malacca were popular destinations, as well as in Thailand (Phuket and Haadyai) and Singapore.

On the negative side, three male respondents reported being stopped several times (4-6 times) for passport inspections in Brickfields as well as in the Masjid India area in Kuala Lumpur town centre. This was a particularly irksome burden because the police were not satisfied with the employment IDs issued by the Malaysian Immigration Department and instead insisted on viewing their Indian passports on-the-spot. The misjudged Palm Court raid is a constant reminder to Indian nationals that they "always need to be careful", hence the tendency to move around in groups.

Interactions with Malaysian Indians

A most surprising finding from interviews and observations was the almost complete absence of interactions between foreign Indians and local Indians outside office hours. Observations of the workplace showed six IT programmers working independently; they were the only ones in the office at Cyberjaya while the rest of the company was located in Bangsar. This group stated that when necessary they would interact with local colleagues and in fact had a close relationship with a senior member of the company, a Malaysian Indian. They had been out for dinner and movies with him and been invited to his home, yet Raman said "we still maintain a distance". Within the same group the head of the unit Mohan admitted to having relatives in Malaysia but he said that he would never visit them because "there is no reason to look for friends outside, we already have our group". The opposite point of view was expressed by a young lady lecturer Suseela who said: "You know I like to cook. When I cook I invite my colleagues and they will come but not with their families ... and they never invite me to their homes".

During the interviews it also emerged that none of the respondents had developed social ties with Malaysian colleagues outside office hours or even with their Malaysians neighbours or even people from their immediate community. A variety of reasons were given such as "it is not polite to just walk up to someone and start a conversation without an introduction" or that there was no time after work and that weekends were for sleeping and window shopping.

Among the factors unique to this group of respondents is that they are actually working with and staying with fellow colleagues from their parent company in India. Thus their collegial relationships are actually long term going well beyond their short placements in Malaysia. Another observation is that computer programming work appears to be project based, that is they work around the clock when they have a project and they work in teams. It is common to see a group of 3-4 IT workers crowded around one workstation. These two factors combined with the fact that all the respondents were 'single' in the sense of not having accompanying family members, may all contribute to their choice of lifestyle in Malaysia. Thus the social distancing observed may be due to a combination of choice as well as circumstances. The story changes somewhat when respondents were asked direct questions about their impressions of Malaysian Indians.

Perceptions of Malaysian Indians

The unanimous view of all foreign Indian respondents was that their presence here is resented by locals. Vikram used the word 'racism' when he said that he felt their presence was resented by locals, in his words "...they are coming from India and dominating". Suseela the lecturer felt that Indians were viewed as competitors in her college. This feeling of resentment also extended to her interactions with the Malaysian public. A particularly distressing incident she remembers was when she was distributing publicity flyers about her college in the city centre and "people would not even take the flyers from my hand"; an incident which she has interpreted as personal rejection rather than lack of interest. When asked their views of Malaysian Indians specifically again the comments were negative. One of their shared criticisms was of the low standard of Tamil spoken locally. Comparing Malaysian Tamil with Madurai Tamil, Nathan said: "the Tamil spoken here is simple Tamil ... use simple words. Someone who doesn't know Tamil can easily pick up Tamil as it is spoken here".

There were also observations that "a lot of people speak Tamil here but they don't know how to read or write it". These comments were specifically directed at spoken Tamil because none of the respondents read local Tamil newspapers or even listened to local Tamil radio stations. When asked if they perceived themselves as different from Malaysian Indians the reply was "obviously yes. We are different in every way, dressing, speech". The foreign Indian respondents offered term 'original Indian' to distinguish themselves from local Indians.

A major problem for these Indian nationals was their perceived lack of proper vegetarian food. This hardship was felt in two ways; first the search for 'pure-veg' food and second the difference in taste. A shared complaint among respondents was that it was difficult to find pure vegetarian food. As one respondent put it: "even when the sign says pure vegetarian it is mixed with non-veg. The shops here mix both veg and non-veg there is no separation of cooking pots". It was observed that lunch for many IT workers at

the Cyberjaya cafe consisted of only rice, yoghurt and lime pickle, although there was a counter offering Indian vegetarian food. Regarding the second complaint about taste, a female respondent said: "Saravana Bhavan is high class vegetarian food, but it cannot compare to Saravana Bhavan in Chennai. The cooks may be from India but the food tastes different".

None of the respondents cooked for themselves and explanations offered included that they were all men staying together and therefore "the trouble is washing up" or because they are here for a short stay and living in a hotel where cooking is not possible. Only one respondent, a Muslim female, had sampled the local food. She loved Malay food and felt quite at ease here because she "...cannot be recognized as a Moslem, therefore I do not feel under pressure". This respondent from Pune in Hyderabad, also noted that religion is not as enthusiastically policed in India as it is here and that there was more interaction between different religious groups, for example she celebrated Diwali in India.

The last item up for comment was girl watching which was described as their third favourite activity after window shopping and bowling by the group working at Cyberjaya. Mostly their attention was caught by Chinese girls and some Indian girls. The well-known taboo about Malays girls tended to somewhat dampen their enthusiasm in that direction. When asked if they would consider marrying a local Indian girl, their reply was "definitely not" because "they are too westernized with short brown hair". Their explanation was that this was due to the environment, "Indian girls are trying to keep up with the Chinese and Malay girls".

Malaysian Indian perceptions of Indian nationals

Two Malaysian Indian respondents with IT training acknowledged Indian nationals as the better programmers. They explained that local IT training was general whereas the Indian IT graduates were better trained in specific areas with many of them having MTech qualifications. They also acknowledged that the presence of Indian nationals did make it more difficult for them to get jobs because the former were better qualified and willing to work for lower wages. In 2004 when the interviews were carried out one Indian respondent estimated that the difference in salary was as much as two thousand Malaysian ringgit. The current situation is different. A Malaysian Indian manager working in the IT sector when interviewed in 2007 said "Indian IT workers are no longer cheap they are still sought after for their value". Specifically this value is related to their ability to think very logically which is thought to be an asset in programming, they work very hard and are able to work effectively in groups.

When Malaysian Indian respondents were asked about their general perceptions of Indian nationals it appeared that local opinions were similarly negative to those of Indian nationals. Sam a Malaysian Indian and production manager who travels frequently to Chennai on business stated: "I can identify an Indian by dress the way they walk ...the way they talk 90% of the time I am right". Other differences observed were that foreign Indians are cautious spenders, insular in their hesitance to form business networks and their strict observance of hierarchy. Sam observed that in India: "a professional employee would wear sandals and not shoes so as not to be on the same level with the boss". In spite of these differences local Indians were able to also recognize some similarities. Sam who had been very critical in his previous comments said: "I will help anyone who is

Indian regardless of where he comes from because I am Indian. My parents came from India the links to the home county are strong”.

When asked if these links were growing stronger, the reply was that “they have always been strong”. From the Malaysian point of view there appears to be recognition and perhaps even some pride in the knowledge and IT competencies of the Indian IT workers, however social distancing still occurred caused by what was described as their ‘Indianness’. This included a tendency for IT workers to be introverted and lacking in social skills.

Thus the overall picture emerging from the observations of the interactions between Indian nationals and Malaysian Indians appears to be one of maintaining the distance. While work and social transactions were cordial there was a tendency among Indian nationals to keep to their own groups and treat the Malaysian Indians as ‘foreigners’. The view from the other sides appears on the one hand to be more balanced. Malaysian Indians appear to recognize with pride the superiority of Indian nationals’ IT programming skills and work ethics, yet comments also reflect a latent mistrust combined with recognition of a shared cultural heritage.

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY AND THE INDIAN INDIAN-MALAYSIAN INDIAN IMPASSE

The observations reported above suggest that the encounter between Indian nationals and Malaysian Indians has tended to throw their social identity of ethnic Indian into sharp contrast. What is intriguing in this study is that the counter-positioning of host culture and culture of origin is observed even when both groups have a shared cultural heritage.

Using the framework of social identity theory it can be argued that identity commitment and identity salience are both high in the lives of the foreign Indian IT workers living in Brickfields. The foreign IT workers spend much of their time working and living in groups. Respondents in Cyberjaya were observed brainstorming as a group while programming. Outside of work they live together in shared apartments, have meals together, go window shopping and bowling together and travel together in groups when they visit local and neighbouring tourist destinations. The core attribute forming these groups is their identity as Indian nationals; thus considering the extent to which group dominates the life of these respondents, it can be concluded that commitment to their social identity as Indians from India is high.

Identity salience is can also be rated as high for two reasons. First it is clear that the outside community has bestowed on them the general label of ‘Indian IT worker’; this is how their presence here is understood and also the basis for the local community’s response towards them. Second their daily interactions bring them face-to-face with another group of Indians which threatens their exclusive ownership of the identity as Indian. The similarity of cultural characteristics between the two groups may have served to threaten the distinctiveness of being Indian and in this way increased the motivation for action directed at restoring the positive self-esteem associated with their social identity of Indian. In such circumstances, social identity theory posits that the tendency is to re-establish the distinctiveness and value of their own Indian identity, therefore it is only natural that the Indian nationals strive to emphasize the Indianness of their social identity. One example

of this inclination is their reluctance to eat local vegetarian food and instead bemoan the lack of 'pure-veg' food. Of course it could be that these sentiments are based on strong religious sentiments and practices that emphasize the purity of food preparation.

However when the complaining extends even to taste in statements such as the "cook may be from India, but the taste still differs" then it is possible that the actual cause of complain is the discomfort of maintaining Indianness in the face of diverse manifestations of Indian. Bernd's formula of identity commitment impacting identity salience which then impacts role performance appears to be true to life in this instance. Foreign Indians appear intent on identifying as many differences as possible and maintaining a lifestyle that eschews interaction with Malaysian Indians as a means of bolstering their faltering self-esteem. The situation for the Indian nationals may be particularly stressful when the local boss is also Malaysia Indian, the person with whom they claim to maintain a distance. Unfortunately it may be that this very emphasis on Indianness that aggravates the social distance between these two groups of Indians. The antipathy however is not completely one-sided. Malaysian Indians also appear to have adopted a similar strategy of focusing on differences such as in appearance and attitude towards money. Thus both groups have tended to emphasize differences as a means of reasserting their distinct social identity. The foreign Indian IT worker's answer to the question of 'Who am I' is a resounding 'I am an Indian Indian' while the Malaysian Indian's reply might be "We are all Indians and I am also a Malaysian Indian" reflecting the complexity of social identity appropriate to the experiences of living in a multicultural society.

The answer to the next question of how social identity affects intergroup relations lies in the processes of social categorization and social comparison. In the situation described above Indian nationals appear to constitute the minority ingroup whereas Malaysian Indians comprise the majority outgroup. This minority group perceives itself to be at a disadvantage as reflected in their statements of being temporary foreign workers here to earn wages in Malaysian currency and not Indian rupees, having to be cost conscious, their perceptions of being resented and their experience of being subject to random checks by the authorities. This perceived difference in status would be especially obvious in comparison with the many successful Malaysian Indian entrepreneurs found in the Brickfields area and also working as senior managers or company owners in the IT field. On the other hand, reflecting their occupation of the majority position for a change, Malaysian Indians appear to have a more balanced outlook that acknowledges the skills of Indian IT programmers, yet is condescending at the same time in their negative comments about hierarchy and leading the development of business networks.

In this position of perceived inferiority the shared cultural background which should in fact have facilitated adjustment appears to have been entirely disregarded by the foreign Indians. Instead the cultural similarity between the two groups, which in other circumstances would have become the basis for cordial relationships, has in this instance been perceived as a further source of threat. In such a situation social categorization theory posits that the motivation to restore positive self-esteem for the disadvantaged group becomes the prime determinant of interactions between the two groups. Hence it is not surprisingly that interactions between the two groups are characterized by mutual antipathy. Further evidence of the social inequality between these two groups comes from the minority group's use of the strategies of social creativity and competition.

Social creativity is observed in the introduction of a new dimension for comparison, namely the dimension of originality. By using the term 'original Indian' the minority group of Indian IT workers are claiming possession of and asserting their ownership of the label Indian and in this way enhancing their feelings of superiority. The strategy of social competition is evident in their disparagement of the standard of spoken Tamil without any attempt to test the veracity of their impressions by either listening to local radio stations or viewing the local Indian TV channel. By asserting the superiority of their command of the Tamil language, the minority group can be viewed as reasserting dominance and bolstering threatened social identity.

This analysis is an attempt to explain the baffling stand-off observed between these two groups of Indians using social identity theory. The processes of identity salience, identity commitment, ingroup favouritism and outgroup derogation can be observed in the situation described and to that extent social identity and social categorization theories are successful in providing a plausible explanation. It is by no means however suggested that this is the only explanation or that this phenomenon is restricted to the situation described above. Similar face-offs have been described between overseas Chinese expatriate managers and Asian third country nationals working in Shanghai and Beijing and local Chinese (Selmer and Shiu, 1999; Selmer, 2002a, Selmer 2002b) leading to the conclusion that sending expatriate managers to similar cultures can be "as much if not more trying then sending them to a very different culture" (Selmer, 1999:447). In this situation where the context of work is IT programmers, it appears that work performance and organizational effectiveness may not be as much affected as suggested in the Selmer studies. Instead the burden or cost may be more in terms of acculturative stress and the possible emergence of biases and prejudices arising more from the circumstances than any mistreatment or discrimination.

This study has attempted to make two contributions to knowledge in the field of sojourner cross-cultural adjustment and social identity theory. First it has provided additional data to the existing Selmer studies suggesting the need to develop a corollary to the culture distance hypothesis. It is not necessarily true that smaller culture distances would result in better cross-cultural adjustment. The culture distance hypothesis may prevail when there is equal status between host and transnational managers, thus allowing for more equitable interactions. The presence of status inequality however may trigger processes of social categorization and social comparisons strategies designed to redress the perceptions of inequality thereby further exacerbating already tense relationships.

The second contribution this study attempts to make is to reinforce the subjective nature of social perceptions in social identity. In the observations reported in this study it can be seen that both parties have based their conclusions and responses on perceptions of superiority and inferiority without actually experiencing instances of prejudicial or discriminatory actions. Social identity is defined to be based on group membership however this study suggests that characteristics of group membership may be both subjective and objective at the same time. While social psychology does address the issue of biased perceptions, it has yet to do specifically in the context of social identity and social categorization theories.

This study has several limitations that need to be noted in the interpretation of these results. First a very specific sample has been used in this study, namely Indian nationals who are

all IT programmers with the exception of two respondents. The unique characteristics of their tasks and the pattern of repeated short stays, all create very specific circumstances that limit the generalizability of the conclusions drawn in this study. The second limitation is the small sample size among Indian nationals and even more for Malaysian Indians. It is possible that opinions and views may differ when the sample size increases in a qualitative study.

The third caution in this study is that there has not been any indicator of acculturative stress included, thus it is not possible to conclude that the circumstances of social distancing have in any way led to undesirable consequences for either party. Thus a major recommendation for further study is to firstly expand the size and diversity of the sample used and secondly to include quantitative sociocultural and adjustment measures so as to obtain more specific results

CONCLUSION

This study attempted to answer questions of whether the presence of a Malaysian Indian community would facilitate the adjustment of Indian nationals working in Malaysia as IT programmers. The sample in this study was drawn from a very specific location, that is Cyberjaya and Brickfields and from a very specific occupational category. Observations appear to suggest that encounters between these two groups have resulted in the use of defensive strategies aimed at bolstering existing definitions of social identity. The limited interactions eschew any possibility of redefining social identity based on commonalities or even compromise. In terms of theoretical utility, social identity and social categorizations theories appear to be robust in their ability to explain this encounter between Indian and Malaysian nationals who have a shared cultural heritage. The results also suggest the need to consider the impact of status differentials on the culture distance hypothesis.

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