



NAVIGATING THE PLURAL SELF: EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES OF MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

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Abstract

The idea of a singular self has been replaced by the plural self in the age of globalization and migration, a dynamic interaction between multiple identities and hybrid selves that are negotiated on a daily basis. This qualitative research focuses on how students of the university in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, Pakistan, describe and interpret their multiple identities on their day-to-day lives. Based on anthropological theories of plural self and hybrid identity, the study utilized in-depth interviews with 24 students of four major universities, (Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad, Fatima Jinnah Women University Rawalpindi, COMSATS University Islamabad, and PMAS-Arid Agriculture University Rawalpindi) as well as four focus group discussions (one per university) and seven in-depth case studies. This paper only presents the data of in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis of the data shows that people occupy several identity positions simultaneously religious, ethnic, gendered, linguistic, digital, and socioeconomic positions and are able to negotiate their identity in reaction to different social circumstances. The participants have given an account of a fluid, dynamic sense of self which does not settle into one, coherent, identity but rather functions as a plural set up. Hybrid identities were born specially at the crossroads of traditional cultural norms and the new, globalized forces through the social media and tertiary education. The results also add to the wider anthropological and social psychological discussions of selfhood, identity plurality and hybridity and highlight the role of the socio-cultural context in the development of identity narratives in the Global South. It provides some recommendations to teachers, counselors and policy makers to acknowledge and affirm plural identities within academic and institutional contexts.

Keywords: *Hybrid Self, Identity Negotiation, Multiple Identities, Pakistan, Plural Self, Qualitative Research, University Students.*

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1. Introduction

Who we are, how many selves we possess at the same time, is a question which philosophers, psychologists, even anthropologists, have long been pondering. In the modern world, which is characterized by globalization, digital connectivity, migration and cultural exchange, people move through more and more confusing social environments that do not require the adoption of one, fixed identity but rather a constellation of identities that move, overlap, and at times come into conflict. The plural self-concept is essentially a critique of the Western liberal humanist theory of a coherent, independent subject and suggests that identity is diverse, interpersonal, and situational (Hermans, 2015; Vignoles et al., 2016). This is a developing awareness of the plurality of identity, which has far-reaching consequences not merely to a social theory, but also to the ways in which institutions, educators and policy makers treat the individuals whom they serve.

The anthropological approaches to self-have been shifting away more than ever before to adopt a more performative, negotiated and hybrid view of identity. A highly fruitful approach to interpreting how different people occupy multiple subject positions at once to create identities neither exactly this nor that but as products of a constant social interaction, Homi Bhabha has introduced a powerful concept of the so-called third space – the intermediate zone where cultural meanings are translated, challenged, and renegotiated (Pieterse, 2015). Likewise, the dialogical self-theory of Hermans (2015) states that the self is made up of an internal plurality of I-positions, which express various elements of personal and social identity and are involved in active internal and external conversation.

The literature on hybrid identity has developed significantly over the past few decades, specifically in the postcolonial world where the colonial history, religious background, ethnicity, and Western modernity have complicated intersections (Dervin, 2016; Collins & Bilge, 2020). Pakistan is one such place that offers a rich study of such intersections. Having more than 70 languages, multiple ethnic groups, profoundly rooted religious identities, and the rapidly growing urban youth population, immersed in digital culture, Pakistan can be viewed as a good example of the socially complex environment where people have to manage multiple, even conflicting, claims to their identities on a daily basis. How do young Pakistanis make sense of these multiple claims is not an academic question but addresses the question of national cohesion, educational policy, mental health, and social justice.

The students of the Pakistani universities, like Islamabad and Rawalpindi, hold a very educative place in this picture. They are both enmeshed in conventional family and community systems with high expectations of religion, gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic position, and in contemporary learning systems that facilitate critical thinking, professional ambition, and cosmopolitan ideals. They interact with social media

platforms on a daily basis where curated digital selves meet with culturally mediated content flowing globally, despite a return to homes based on local and regional practices. The way these students construct their understanding of their multiple identities is thus critical to anyone who wishes to know how identity is formed in modern Pakistan.

The given research falls in the crossroads of cultural anthropology, social psychology, and identity studies. This investigation aims at gaining insight into how people explain and make sense of their multiple identities in everyday life.

2. Methodology

The present study used the interpretivist paradigm of research design, focusing on the interpretation of identity as a socially constructed phenomenon based on subjective meanings of the participants and the experiences they have in contexts. An inter-method design was used (in-depth semi-structured interviews with n=24) for data collection. The sample was purposely selected 24 university students based on four different institutions in Islamabad-Rawalpindi: Quaid-e-Azam University, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, COMSATS University Islamabad, and PMAS-Arid Agriculture University, Rawalpindi. This guaranteed representation on gender, discipline, ethnicity and socioeconomic status.

Self-descriptions across contexts, identity salience/conflicts, and the role of education and private/public selves were investigated using interviews, peer expectations, social media, and transitions plus social media reviews and journal reviews. Data in audio form were transcribed, translated and analyzed using the reflexive thematic analysis: familiarization, coding, theme generation/review/refinement, and reporting. Analysis was inductive but sensitized to theory and employed constant comparison across sources, a reflective journal and member-checking to enhance rigor. Results were obtained inductively, providing more subtle data about stratified identities of Pakistani students. In this research paper, author only used data of in-depth interview to write thematic analysis.

Data collection was carried out with ethical approval of the respective institutional review boards in the involved universities. Before any data collection activity, all participants gave written informed consent. Participants were also told the voluntary nature of their participation, of their right to withdraw at any time, and of the mechanisms that would safeguard the privacy of their data.

3. Results and Discussion

The in depth interview data were analyzed thematically to come up with six thematic statements that can be used to describe overall how the Pakistani university students at Quaid-e-Azam University, COMSATS University, Fatima Jinnah University and PMAS-Arid Agriculture University perceive, experience and maneuver their multiple identities. The themes are introduced in a sequence, but they are to be perceived as

analytically linked aspects of one and one complex identity landscape, but not discrete or separate categories.

3.1. Student Identity as the Focal point of Academic life

Participants in all four institutions and both genders always prefigured themselves as students when characterizing themselves, their daily activities, and social location. Academic affiliation - in terms of their major, their school, and their year of study - was the most accessible and easily offered frame of self-definition in the interview situation. Student identity was not, though, worked through as a neutral or passive label. Participants define it as an activity that is done and also frequently assessed by academic accomplishments, classroom activities, interaction with peers, and how it handles the academic workloads. This performative aspect was particularly acute in the case of the first-generation university students in the sample: their entry into the university was a disruption of their biographical path, and their role as a student was both inspirational and full of anxiety. Gender added another dimension of distinctions. Female participants - especially those of Fatima Jinnah University and PMAS-Arid Agriculture University - defined their student identity as a sort of social assertion, a silent declaration of being in an educational situation where their presence was not necessarily presumed. Male participants more frequently defined student identity in terms of the future and related it to career goals, professional mobility, and ultimate performance of family anticipations with educational qualifications.

3.2. Home Guiding Identity Family Role

There was another, equally strong identity that was constant in the data: the identity of family roles. Sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, first child and would-be breadwinners--they were characterized as not biographical background but as active elements of the sense of self of the participants. The family home was a separate arena of identity, with its own standards of deference, duty and emotional solicitude, which were qualitatively different to, and sometimes in conflict with, those of the university environment. Majority of the respondents reported a natural, near automatic recalibration in the process of moving between campus and home where the student identity shifted to the background and the family identity shifted to the foreground. Family identity was defined by moral gravity and pride more than by reluctant obedience and in the case of most of those who participated it was a grounding element in the ambiguities of the academic life that helped hold them together and give an emotional sustenance. A structurally important variable based on this theme was gender. Women participants spoke of their roles in the family in a more multidimensional way, balancing between expectations of homemaking and caring and keeping family honor and their educational goals. Male subjects more often defined their family identity prospectively, as future providers and sources of family stability, in accordance with gendered cultural scripts of

responsibility, which are socially organized, not an individual choice. Among the participants of the lower socioeconomic ranks, family identity and student identity were not perceived as parallel but rather as closely embroiled: university attendance was in itself a family duty and academic success could be understood as a way of rewarding family sacrifice.

3.3. Religious and Cultural Identity as a Permanent Reference

Of all the dimensions of identity that were formed as a result of the information gathered during the interview, the most structurally distinct was the religious and cultural identity. In contrast to student identity, which was determined by the university setting, or family identity, which was triggered to its fullest extent at home, religious identity, based in Islam, was a reference point that could not be circumscribed by any one setting or social role. The respondents had not defined their faith as a category to which they had been assigned, but as a living and active aspect of who they themselves understood themselves, as moral compass which helped them make decisions, as a source of emotional stability in times of academic and social distress, as a sense of continuity that no other dimension of their identity could give them. Cultural identity, which was based on ethnic, linguistic and regional affiliation such as Punjabi, Pashtun and Kashmiri traditions, was deeply interconnected with religious identity in majority of the stories, but was not reducible to it. Gender once again influenced the manifestation of this theme in significant ways. Women participants mentioned religious and cultural identity in tactile and visual forms, such as mode of dress, behavior on campus, and coping with conflicting demands on religious modesty and social engagement. Male participants more often expressed their religious and cultural identity in terms of the language of moral conduct and community duty and combined expression of Islamic and Pakistani cultural virtues of honor, elders respecting and community duty.

3.4. Peer and Social Identity as a Space for Expression

The fourth theme was analytically different in an important sense in that the student, family and religious identities were mostly bestowed to students by institutional membership, kinship, and cultural bequest but peer and social identity grew out of the data as being mostly constructed. The college campus offered the participants the broadest and most diverse contact with peers of various geographic backgrounds, socioeconomic backgrounds, and ways of thinking, and it was within this peer context that participants spoke of their most active and voluntary identity experimentations. Friendships were found to be qualitatively different compared to pre-university relationships; more selected, more intellectually stimulating, and more identity-defining. Societies and extracurricular groups at universities were especially fertile arenas of social identity formation, because participants could simultaneously enact several different facets of themselves. The experience of peer identity was influenced by gender in unique ways. Female participants,

particularly those in the single-gender Fatima Jinnah University, wrote about same-gender peer space as a setting of odd authenticity - a place where they perceived themselves as less scrutinized and felt less compelled to be modest or restrained and where they could more spontaneous and self-expressive versions of themselves could emerge. Male participants talked about peer identity more focusing on reputation, social positioning, and common ambition, and the development of social capital, but emotionally meaningful friendships were reported in both groups.

3.5. Conceptual Change in the significance of identity

The fifth theme does not deal with the content of any one of the four identities but with the dynamics between them all. The participants explained a dynamic and mostly automatic mechanism of foregrounding various identities based on a social situation, emotional pressures, and relational requirements of a particular situation. The most stable and well expressed change was between the university campus and the family home - a transition that majority of the participants made on a daily basis or a few times a week and which was explained as a perceived psychological realignment and not an act of contradiction. Religious identity worked in a different way than the rest of the dynamics: it was not completely foregrounded or backgrounded by circumstance, but a structural constant-- a background structure that became most prominently salient at the point of moral choice, spiritual practice or in situations where the participants were aware of values that were dissonant to their religious affiliation. It was especially informative how the emotional aspects of the contextual identity were changed. A number of participants explained identity strain as a feeling of tiredness or existential confusion due to the continuous process of adjusting themselves to changing contextual needs. This tension was strongest between those participants whose identity contexts posed especially contradictory demands, such as those in the context of having to move between socially liberal campus settings and conservative family pressures. Women always reported the experience of contextual identity shifting as more socially interrogated and more emotionally taxing than their male peers, which is an asymmetry in the identity work demanded on both sides of the gender boundary. Meanwhile, a large number of participants also reported that the experience of transitioning between various identity contexts enriched them as well-- as a sign of belonging to various social worlds that valued them, and each of which added something of significance to a multi-dimensional self.

3.6. Individual Importance of Every Identity

The sixth theme deals with the most personal and philosophically deep aspect of the data: not what identities the participants had, but how personally meaningful and emotionally significant each of the identities were to them. Religious identity was always found by the participants to be the most personally relevant of all their identity dimensions not simply due to the number of time they practiced religious faith but the richness of self-

definition that faith offered them. Islam was not to many participants a layer that the rest of the identities were based on, but rather the core of identity that gave all other identities their meaning and moral legitimacy. The identity of the roles of the family was given a personal meaning, unconditionally embodied, and, as it were, the most pained by losing, the one that the participants of identity would attribute the greatest value to, the one that would be nearest to love and to specifically and uniquely human relationships. Student identity was given more ambivalent personal definitions: in the cases, where students had joined their programs out of actual intellectual engagement, it was perceived as a place of self-discovery; in the cases, where students had joined their programs due to instrumental or family pressure, it held great practical implications but less personal ones. Peer and social identity were the most variable in personal meaning among the sample, indicating how much it was not reliant on the type of identity itself but on the quality of the relational experiences in it. The participants also reported what I could also term identity significance hierarchies - implicit rankings of their identities based on what they would be least willing to lose - and these identities were again and again ranked higher than student and peer identities, implying that the latter were more provisional and transitional and would ultimately yield to the adult identity of professional, spouse, and parent.

4. Discussion

The results of the present research provide a highly contextualized description of the ways in which Pakistani university students deal with numerous, overlapping identities in the social complexities of the university. Combined, the six themes validate and extend theoretical frameworks that exist and produce new analytical knowledge that is particular to the cultural, religious, and gendered circumstances of Pakistani university life.

The ongoing future anticipation of student identity in the university environment recorded in Theme 1 is in line with the social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), which states that people base a large part of their self-concept on the social groups to which they belong, and that membership in positively valued groups elevates self-esteem and leads to a stable sense of self-worth. The social value of admission to a university like Quaid-e-Azam or COMSATS ascribed academic membership with a social value that went beyond the practical purpose of a student to a symbol of status and desire. The dramaturgical model of social life developed by Goffman (1959) is the most appropriate to explain the performative aspect of student identity presented in the data because it views social life as a constant performance of contextually suitable versions of the self. The specific degree of this performance among the first-generation students is congruent with the existing literature on identity discontinuity in non-traditional entrants to universities (Stephens et al., 2012), and it indicates the specified social and psychological costs that the students who are also developing a student self and dealing with the discrepancy

between that self and the identities they bring to the university as a result of their family and community backgrounds

The most fruitful theoretical approach to the strength and nature of family role identity, as reported in Theme 2, is the original differentiation between independent and interdependent self-construals by Markus and Kitayama (1991). The orientation of interdependence was clearly present in the participants of this study: they could not define themselves without defining who they were to the rest of the world: to their parents and siblings, and to their wider kinship. This observation is in line with the general literature on identity in collectivist cultural background (Triandis, 1995) and with particular studies on the relationship and family aspects of self-understanding in South Asian communities (Qureshi et al., 2012). The gendered aspect of family identity, especially the added layer of domestic expectation, emotional caregiving and handling family honor that the female participants elaborated on, indicates the well-reported gendered division of domestic and relational responsibility in Pakistani cultural life, and it is an indication of the identity labor difference between male and female students which this study repeatedly recorded across themes. The intergenerational aspect of family identity, whereby the university experience of the current generation is construed in terms of the continuation and fulfillment of the family narrative of aspiration and sacrifice, can be interpreted as per the redemptive narrative formulated by McAdams (2001) as a life story in which individual progress is conceptualized as the resolution of a bigger family story of struggle and deferred fulfillment.

The observation that the religious identity was a structural constant and organizing principle, some of the most significant identities, not one of many of equally great importance, is one of the theoretically most important ones of this study. The existing literature on the religious identity among Muslim youthful population has come to appreciate the fact that Islamic identity is more likely to be a superordinate identity that gives meaning to and interpretive framework to other more situational specific aspects of identity (Saroglou & Muñoz-García, 2008). The present results substantiate and enhance this observation. The multi-motive model of identity put forth by Vignoles et al. (2006) posits that individuals are compelled to have identities that fulfill simultaneously their fundamental psychological needs such as continuity, belonging, self-esteem, distinctiveness and meaning. Religious identity, recorded in this paper was unparalleled in meeting all these needs at the same time, continuity across situations and times, belonging to a ritual and moral community, self-esteem through belonging to a valued and coherent tradition, and, perhaps most fundamentally, an overall frame of meaning within which all the other experiences were finally interpreted. This multi-dimensional nature of religious identity offers a theoretically consistent answer to its regular appearance at the top of the personal significance hierarchy of participants, even in an institutional setting where the

student identity dominated organizationally. This combination of religious and cultural identity in the majority of the participants narratives whereby the Punjabi, and Pashtun, and Kashmiri and other regional cultural identities were construed through and defined by an Islamic moral code is indicative of what Nasr (2001) has described as the profound historical amalgamation of Islamic and Pakistani cultural imaginary in the post-partition national consciousness.

Theme 4 analysis of peer and social identity productively interacts with the Erikson (1968) idea of the psychosocial moratorium, which is the comparatively restricted period of identity exploration that late adolescence and early adulthood provides. The university campus was, to the subjects of this experiment, such a place: a place distinct in its own right, and open enough in its social potentials, to allow them to experiment with new identities and modes of being, and populated with individuals of enough variety to open up their self-apprehensions in ways that their lives before university did not allow them to do. The key qualification though is that this moratorium was not absolute. It was bargained inside - and framed by - the cultural, religious, and family restrictions recorded in the previous themes, and participants knew at all times where their social identity experimentation was framed. The discovery that female peer groups in single-gender institutions were characterized as places of uncommon authenticity, where those involved felt less critiqued and more free-expressive, has direct implication on how universities create inclusive social spaces, and confirms the argument by Nasir and Cook (2009) that identity-affirming social spaces are not peripheral to educational development, but central to it.

The contextual identity salience shift that is observed in Theme 5 can be seen to confirm and expand the identity salience framework initially theory by Stryker and Serpe (1982) that people simultaneously hold multiple identity positions, although certain identities are activated in situations where they are most salient, threatened, or socially anticipated. The existing evidence confirms that salience was context-sensitive in the way theory suggests, however, it also demonstrates a more dynamic and emotionally colored nature of this process than cognitive explanations of identity salience generally have tended to admit. One finding that can be usefully related to the concept of emotional labor as developed by Hochschild (1983) is the experience of identity strain, the fatigue and existential uncertainty of participants who described having to travel especially broad social distances between the various contexts of their identities, but in this case, extended to the context of managing multiple identities across multiple social worlds. The asymmetry of gender construction in identity strain as the female participants report the experience of contextual shifting to be more socially subject to scrutiny and more psychologically challenging is corroborated by the intersectionality framework as elaborated by Crenshaw (1991) that states that the interplay of social identity dimensions

including gender, religion, and cultural background results in qualitatively unique experiences that cannot be well explained by focusing on a particular dimension. This intersectional asymmetry is not merely theoretical in importance: it has direct practical consequences on the ways universities in Pakistan plan their student support schemes and academic advising and wellbeing provision, all of which risk being inadequate when they assume that the identity terrain of male and female students is a similar one.

The meaning hierarchies reported in Theme 6 complement and further elaborate the theoretical model of identity centrality, as proposed by Rosenberg (1979) and operationalized by Sellers et al. (1998) in their multidimensional model of racial identity. The ongoing placement of religious identity at the peak of personal significance hierarchies of the participants, even in the setting of a study in a university where the identity of students prevailed in an organizational sense, has significant implications in the way Pakistani universities perceive and react to full inner lives of their students. When the most personally significant identity that a student may possess is one which the institution refuses to recognize, respond to, and/or provide space, then there will be a systematic difference in the ways that universities understand their students and students understand themselves. The personal significance-emotional vulnerability linkage, in that most personally relevant identities had been equally most identified with impairment, echoes the terror management theory (Greenberg et al., 1992), which hypothesizes that highly valued cultural and self-identities serves an existential protective role, insulating individuals against the uncertainty and vulnerability anxieties that young adulthood typically creates.

Collectively, these results have three main theoretical implications to the general literature on multiple identities in non-Western, religious, and collectivist cultural settings. First, they show the inefficacy of the flat or parallel models of multiple identity - models that presuppose that all identity dimensions have the same structural importance - and provide empirical evidence of a hierarchical and foundational model where religious identity is the organizing principle on which other identities draw their sense and coherence. Second, they record the affective and emotional aspects of identity salience and switching in a way that builds upon largely cognitive explanations of these processes. Third, they offer empirical support to the idea of identity complexity (Roccas and Brewer, 2002) in a particular cultural and institutional background, demonstrating how the differentiated management of numerous discrete social identities was not only the source of adaptive social competence, but in some cases, a real source of real psychological cost to the members of this study.

5. Recommendations

The findings of this study have provided the following recommendations to educators, counselors, institutional leaders, and policy makers dealing with young

Pakistanis in the university environment. First, schools and colleges ought to build programs and pedagogy that expressly recognizes and supports multi-identities of students. Instead of asking the students to put their ethnic, religious, linguistic, and socioeconomic identities at the classroom door, teachers must establish intentional spaces that allow these identities to be recognized, explored and engaged in fruitful dialogue with the academic material. Second, university counseling services are to be trained in a particular manner to identify and respond to the psychological issues that are connected with identity plurality. These are the emotional work of lifelong context-switching, the sensation of identity conflict in the various social fields, the social and psychological cost of identity change that comes with first-generation higher education, and the specific stresses of women who have to move between conservative family conditions and liberal schooling. Third, the institutional policies ought to clearly cover the needs of first-generation students and students with marginalised ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Fourth, national education policy must be vigorously supportive of the worth of linguistic diversity and multilingualism as intellectual assets and not as liabilities to be transcended. Policies that allow regional languages a space in educational institutions, policies that subsidize the production and instruction of the minority languages of Pakistan, and policies that publicly laud linguistic diversity as a national resource would add to the more favorable identity outcomes of students who belong to the minority language groups. Last but not least, the field needs more research. The students of Islamabad and Rawalpindi have been of major interest in this study at a certain historical point; students of other cities and regions in Pakistan should be compared with this group of students.

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