Identity Matters: A Social Psychology of Everyday Citizenship

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Abstract
This paper takes as its focus the need for psychologists to take issues of culture seriously. In doing so, it is important that psychologists adopt a critical approach to many widely held and taken-for-granted assumptions about culture and cultural processes. In particular, there is a pressing need to explore the ways in which constructions of culture routinely feature in the marginalisation of minority group members. Using examples drawn from the UK, I explore how cultural diversity can be represented by majority group members to question others’ belonging within the national community. In turn, I consider the implications of this for minority group members’ everyday (informal) experiences of citizenship (e.g. their ability to be heard in discussions about the nation and the challenges it faces). I also consider minority group members’ experiences of such marginalisation and the various ways in which exclusionary constructions of culture and belonging may be contested.

Keywords
Culture, minorities, identity, citizenship, belonging, misrecognition

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Introduction

This paper explores the social inclusion of minorities. In doing so, I will touch on issues concerning culture and belonging and how these impact minority group members’ ‘everyday citizenship’—that is, their abilities to speak and be heard as members of the wider national community. I believe these are issues that Professor Durganand Sinha would regard as worthy topics for our discipline. Indeed, I believe they raise important issues concerning our approach to culture and the societal relevance of social psychology—concerns that Professor Sinha articulated many years ago.

Culture

In a famous essay, Tajfel (1972) cautioned against the tendency to interpret social psychological experimental research as if the behaviour of those involved were not shaped by societal norms and values. Indeed, Tajfel observed that our experimental conditions are always ‘contaminated’ by norms and values and the nature of that contamination ‘is one of the principal objects of our study’ (Tajfel, 1972, p. 76). Sadly, such advice as to the interpretation of experimentation has rarely been followed (Condor, 2003), with the corollary that experimentation has ‘paved the way for the emergence of a culturally decontextualised science of behaviour’ (Misra & Gergen, 1993, p. 227).

Professor Sinha was keenly alert to these failings and lamented the irrelevance of so much social psychological theorising for the practical challenges facing societies undergoing significant social change (Sinha, 1984, 1989, 1997). In particular, he highlighted the need to take culture seriously. The challenges involved in doing so are many, and a variety of intellectual trajectories have developed (Greenfield, 2000; Miller, 2002), including the development of indigenous psychologies (see Tripathi, 2013). Of particular importance is the call to move beyond dimensional approaches to culture in which cultural processes are only of interest to the degree they reveal local limitations of otherwise universal assumptions (Misra & Gergen, 1993). Rather, we need to develop process models of culture and how culture shapes behaviour (Miller, 2002).
Culture: Heterogeneity and Contestation

Any serious process model of culture requires attention to the complex ways in which meaning is actively constructed, contested and transformed through reference to symbolic resources and cultural products. In turn, this requires a reappraisal of how we typically conceptualise culture. As Handler (1994) observes:

> the very idea of culture has been elaborated in terms of boundedness, homogeneity, and the idea of immutable natural essence. We speak more readily of culture as a noun—“a” culture, “this culture”, ”our culture”—than as a verb indicating process, intercommunication, and the ongoing reconstruction of boundaries that are symbolic and not naturally given. (Handler, 1994, p. 29)

Put another way, rather than culture being fixed and functioning as a background factor in behaviour, culture is a site of dispute in which social actors are active participants in constructing meaning. Indeed, viewed from this angle, cultures may best be understood as constituting ‘reserves’ (Reszler, 1992) of symbols to be interpreted, appropriated and deployed, in the ongoing construction of meaning and behaviour.

Inevitably, such a dynamic conception of culture problematises essentialising assumptions about identity. Indeed, despite the rhetoric of an unchanging essence, all our socially significant identities—whether ethnic, national, religious, or whatever—are sites of ongoing dispute (Hopkins & Reicher, 2011; Reicher & Hopkins, 2000). In addition to highlighting the issue of human agency in the invocation and interpretation of cultural resources and products, such an approach draws our attention to the question of whose constructions of identity are privileged and the implications of such a privileging for others’ abilities to act on terms that are their own.

In what follows, I explore the issue of how culture and identity are contested, and how such contestation is consequential. In keeping with Sinha’s (1989) identification of a ‘felt-need for problem-oriented research, making psychology relevant to national needs’ (p. 105), I take as my focus an issue that each and every national community must address—the issue of everyday citizenship (by which I mean the ability of community members to speak and be heard as bona fide community
members). My examples will come from the UK—a former colonial power with a deeply problematic history with regard to its accommodation of the many diverse communities its colonial enterprise brought to the UK. As will become apparent, this will entail exploring two readings of the ‘identity matters’ wording in this paper’s title. On the one hand, I will explore several matters relating to culture and identity. On the other hand, I hope to show that these matters also matter in the sense of being socially and psychologically consequential.

**Culture and Citizenship**

Contemporary analyses of citizenship throw issues of culture and identity into sharp relief. Marshall (1950) describes a historical progression in conceptions of citizenship in which civil rights (e.g. the right to hold property) were followed by political rights (e.g. the right to vote), and then, the social rights (e.g. access to education and welfare) necessary for the realisation of the former. More recently, researchers recognise ‘a more diffuse “social-cultural” form of citizenship’ that is ‘wrapped up in questions of who is accepted as a worthy, valuable and responsible member of an everyday community of living and working’ (Painter & Philo, 1995, p. 115). Moreover, growing sensitivity to the significance of cultural diversity has brought to the fore a latent tension between ‘the actuality of a plurality of social identities’ and the singular identity implied by citizenship’ (Purvis & Hunt, 1999, p. 458), motivating broader conceptualisations of citizenship in which people’s diverse identity commitments are valued as psychologically important. Indeed, a concern with racism and xenophobic exclusion has prompted awareness of people’s needs for ‘recognition’ and the violence of ‘misrecognition’ (Taylor, 1994). The result is that as Modood (2005) puts it, we have moved from:

an understanding of equality in terms of individualism and cultural assimilation to a politics of recognition, to equality as encompassing public ethnicity, that is to say, equality as not having to hide or apologize for one’s origins, family or community, but requiring others to show respect for them and adapt public attitudes and arrangements so that the heritage they represent is encouraged rather than ignored or expected to wither away. (Modood, 2005, p. 134)
Diversity and Belonging

Addressing the accommodation of different identities in institutional and civic life has prompted much debate over who belongs and on what terms, and it is here that we find culture invoked as a resource in identity definition. Take the contribution from a leading UK political commentator who argued that cultural diversity prompted psychological responses that had enormous social and political consequences—including an undermining of the social cohesion necessary for a strong welfare state. As he put it, cultural diversity prompted people to ask ‘Why should I pay for them when they are doing things I wouldn’t do?’ and continued that this had enormous political implications:

You can have a Swedish welfare state provided that you are a homogeneous society with intensely shared values. In the US you have a very diverse, individualistic society where people feel fewer obligations to fellow citizens. Progressives want diversity but they thereby undermine part of the moral consensus on which a large welfare state rests. (David Willetts, cited in Goodhart, 2004)

Much can be said about such a formulation from the vantage point of political science (see Meer, 2016). So too, much can be said from a psychological perspective attuned to the constructed and contested nature of culture and identity. Culture and cultural differences can be represented in all manner of ways, and it is important to explore minority group members’ own understandings if we are to understand their identifications. These are diverse (Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, 2006; Kahani-Hopkins & Hopkins, 2002), and here I focus on the ways in which minority group members advance conceptions of culture and cultural differences which imply their heartfelt membership of the national community and their commitment to contribute to it. More specifically, I draw on research conducted with British Muslims in which they reflected on issues of culture and identity (Hopkins, 2011; Hopkins & Blackwood, 2011).

Take for example one Muslim interviewee who represented the issue of a cultural difference between Muslims and non-Muslims in prayer in a manner which identified higher-order commonalities. Speaking of the obligation to pray five times a day, they argued:
Now that’s not a problem really because one prayer lasts 10, 15 minutes, so if you can’t give up altogether 1 hour and 15 minutes of solitude, peace, now most people do spend that time in Yoga in the morning or exercise, physical exercise or something. (Cited in Hopkins, 2011, p. 259)

From a social psychological perspective, the striking feature of such a construction is the way in which cultural difference is represented. At one level, difference is acknowledged. Yet, at another, a commonality of routine and purpose (e.g. the pursuit of a sense of peace and reflection) is advanced which counters any sense of cultural clash. The implication is clear. What some may construe as a ‘problematic’ cultural difference can be represented in alternative ways to imply a superordinate commonality.

It is also appropriate to note that cultural differences can be represented as allowing debate and as creating the potential for societal improvement. Thus, another explained ‘This is my society. This is a country that I want to help develop’ before proceeding to describe the societal challenges associated with alcohol in Britain:

I’m hoping over time that you will come to my way of thinking that alcohol is not good for you. It might never come to that. I’ve been through the process, but hey, it will give us room for discussion—that’s the way it is. I can’t shun you because you are doing something I don’t approve of because that’s not Muslim values, that’s a human value to stop talking to somebody because you don’t like what they are doing. All you can do is counsel them, advise them, speak to them, talk to them. The minute you walk away from somebody, that’s you lost contact with them [ ]. We have to discuss those issues. (Cited in Hopkins, 2011, p. 262–263)

As before, such a construction of culture implies both cultural difference and superordinate commonality. Indeed, far from difference being problematic, it is represented as allowing debate as to how best to develop the national community. Doubtless, some may be tempted to counter that such a cultural stance on alcohol ‘really’ is culturally alien and thus problematic. However, a moment’s reflection cautions against assuming an overwhelming cultural divergence on this issue. Writing in the city of Dundee, I am reminded that the city used to have Winston Churchill (the future war-time leader) as its Member of Parliament but that he lost his seat (1922) to Edwin Scrymgeour who represented the Scottish Prohibition Party on a manifesto that was explicitly anti-alcohol (see Tomlinson, 2020). Such a history makes the simple point that
cultures are not monolithic but characterised by heterogeneity and dispute. Moreover, such within-group diversity challenges the assumption (apparent in the quote from David Willetts above) that a heterogeneity of opinion is necessarily problematic. It is part and parcel of community life. Indeed, it suggests that the depiction of difference as inherently problematic is an exclusionary political argument masquerading as a psychological fact.

**Category Construction: Inclusion and Voice**

If Edwin Scrymgeour’s criticism of the role of alcohol in Scottish society was accepted (such that he beat Churchill), we can ask would the same criticisms be so successful if articulated by a minority group member? The answer to this likely depends on whether they were judged to ‘really’ count as a member of the national community. It is one thing for minority group members to claim their wish to contribute to the national community, but it is another to have such claims accepted and much depends on the criteria invoked as membership-defining (Hopkins et al., 2015). Although enormous analytic energy has been devoted to identifying the necessary and sufficient criteria for national belonging, comparative research shows there are no tangible characteristics essential for maintaining national consciousness. Rather, as national groups are self-defining, the weight given to various criteria (e.g. ancestry, language and subjective identification) depends on public opinion and varies according to the nation. Moreover, in any one national community these criteria are contested (Reicher & Hopkins, 2000). For example, whereas some may subscribe to the view that ancestry or descent is key (as in so-called ‘ethnic’ conceptions of belonging), others may counter that subjective identification regardless of one’s origin trumps others (as in more inclusive, ‘civic’ conceptions of belonging: Manzo, 1996).

These identity-defining criteria matter. Between-nation comparisons show the more the prevailing definition of the national in-group is couched in ethnic terms, the greater the prejudice towards migrants (Pehrson et al., 2009b). Moreover, within-nation studies show the more individuals endorse ethnic over civic criteria, the more they adopt anti-immigrant attitudes (Heath & Tilley, 2005; Pehrson et al., 2009a). Research also shows that the adoption of ethnic versus civic criteria for inclusion impacts individuals’ abilities to receive the benefits of
community membership (e.g. the ability to speak and be heard as a co-national). This is well-illustrated in experimental research reported by Wakefield et al. (2011) and conducted in Scotland (where ethnic and civic criteria for national belonging coexist: McCrone & Bechhofer, 2008). Wakefield et al. (2011) explored how manipulating participants’ understanding of the criteria for national inclusion impacted participants’ evaluation of criticisms of the Scottish in-group made by a target who either had a traditional Scottish name or a Chinese-heritage name. The manipulation of national inclusion implied either a (national) cultural norm in which family genealogy was important (ethnic condition) or a norm in which subjective identification trumped ancestry (civic condition). As predicted the ethnic/civic manipulation had no impact for the individual with the traditional Scottish name. They were always seen as Scottish, and their criticisms well-received. In contrast, the manipulation impacted the reception of the Chinese-heritage target’s criticisms of Scottish society. That is, the civic definition of belonging encouraged participants to accept the Chinese-heritage target’s identification as Scottish and bestow on them the benefits associated with in-group membership (in this case, the right to criticise the group and propose innovation).

Such research shows that an individual’s right to speak and be heard as a community member cannot be taken for granted but is dependent upon the criteria employed in defining belonging. This is an issue of culture, but as with all things ‘cultural’, it is not a fixed given (as our ability to manipulate it shows). Indeed, looking beyond the confines of the social psychological laboratory, we find that the criteria for belonging are the stuff of community debate and contestation (Hopkins & Reicher, 2011; Reicher & Hopkins, 2000). Again, the point is clear. A properly cultural psychology must attend to the ways in which community identity is constructed and contested and so must pay particular attention to how cultural norms and products are invoked and interpreted to either include or exclude (see too, Reicher et al., 2006).

The Experience of Misrecognition

The research described above serves as a timely reminder that ‘social identity is never unilateral’ (Jenkins, 1996, p. 21) but requires validation
by others. Drawing on this logic it follows that we can conceptualise social identity in terms of an identity claims-making process in which people actively lay claim to group membership, but that membership depends on others’ recognition of such claims (Hopkins et al., 2015). Minority group members are well aware of their vulnerability to being judged as ‘aliens’ and routinely seek to communicate their belonging through various cultural performances, e.g. performing their cultural knowledge of the national community (Cheryan & Monin, 2005), modifying their clothing (Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013) and even their food preferences (Guendelman et al., 2011). However, such performances are not guaranteed acceptance, and the resulting experience may be distressing (Huynh et al., 2011).

In a series of interviews conducted with British Muslims (Hopkins, 2011; Hopkins & Blackwood, 2011), many reported experiences in which their attempts to speak and be heard as members of the national community were compromised by others’ reactions. For example, one referred to her involvement in a UK-wide campaign against Britain’s involvement in overseas military operations (e.g. in Iraq) and explained how this routinely elicited the response ‘Oh, because you’re a Muslim’ to which she replied ‘No, because I just don’t agree with the policies.’ She continued that this reaction was painful because it revealed a distinction ‘between being British and being Muslim whereas for me there’s no distinction’:

They’re our soldiers. I don’t see them as the British, the British soldiers, as if it’s something apart from me, you know, I don’t see that. I’m part and parcel of this society. They’re out there protecting British interests, which are my interests because I’m a citizen and so all these issues affect me and to say, ‘well, actually, you’re Muslim, you’re Pakistani, so stay in your box.’ No. (Cited in Hopkins, 2011, p. 258)

In many ways, this experience reveals a double misrecognition of her identities. On the one hand, she is simply seen as a Muslim with her Britishness overlooked. On the other, this failure to recognise her Britishness also involves a misrecognition of her Muslim identity in the sense that it assumes her interests as a Muslim are alien to and discrepant from her interests as a British citizen (which she explicitly denied).

Similar experiences are revealed in another interview in which a prominent community leader explained:
I would like to be called for a discussion on the state of our education in our country, the health service, you know, equality of pay for men and women. You hardly hear a Muslim voice. It’s as if Muslims don’t have a view on mainstream life of our country. (Cited in Hopkins, 2011, p. 264)

Here again we see something of the pain and frustration associated with not being seen as a national citizen willing and able to contribute to discussions of everyday issues and challenges. Moreover, as the interview continued, we get a glimpse of the hurt associated with the misrecognition of their Muslim identity. The interviewee argued the only time Muslims were invited to speak ‘is when they have to come and say sorry for somebody else’s bombs or to come and face the music for something they’re not guilty of.’ Taken together the misrecognition of both their British and Muslim identity results in a (painful) experience in which they feel unable to speak and be heard on terms that they regard as their own.

**The Burden of Proof**

Time and again, minority group members are placed in positions where they have to prove their loyalties to the national community. The nature of these loyalty tests is varied. Even something as mundane as which cricket team one supports can be invoked as diagnostic of where one’s loyalties lie. In the UK, a well-known Conservative government minister (Norman Tebbit) advanced the idea of a ‘cricket test’ in which only those cheering the English team over their Indian, Pakistani or West Indian opponents could really count as English. That is, citizenship was to be offered on assimilationist grounds. People were to be given rights in return for their conformity to certain ‘cultural preconditions’ (Andrews, 1991). The arbitrariness of such tests brings yet another frustration—a frustration well expressed in the words of one local politician from a minority group background who reflected on how difficult it was to respond to others’ demands to prove their real commitments:

What is the proof? You see the proof is you abide by the law of the country, you live here peacefully, you are causing no offence to other people, and you paying your taxes, you’re not trying to escape your duties as a citizen. That’s about it. I mean I don’t think you’ve got a proof. (Cited in Hopkins & Blackwood, 2011, pp. 223–224)
Having to orient to others’ expectations is a draining experience, and it should come as no surprise to find examples of resistance and contestation. Take, for example, the actions of a minority group businessman returning to the UK from an overseas business trip. He explained that as soon as he entered the airport, he was approached by two plain clothes police officers conducting a ‘routine’ passport inspection (Hopkins & Blackwood, 2011; see too Blackwood et al., 2013). The businessman replied that the routine processing of passports would take place further down the corridor where all arrivals would show their passport and that whilst he would happily show his passport there, he would not do so now. The upshot was that he was arrested. At first sight, such a refusal to comply with a police request may appear to fall short of what one expects from a citizen—cooperation with authority. However, from the vantage point of the individual concerned, it had a different meaning: An assertion of his right to be treated in a similar manner to others. Indeed, his behaviour could be seen as constituting a demand to be recognised and treated on terms that accorded with his own self-definition as someone deserving the rights of everyday citizenship.

The wider point is again simple. Identity involves more than subjective identification. It entails a claims-making process and others’ recognition of such claims (Hopkins et al., 2015). Moreover, the membership criteria implied in such a process are sites of contestation. Sometimes this contestation may be progressed through arguments referencing culture and cultural difference. On other occasions, it may be progressed through identity performances that disrupt and challenge others’ abilities to act on their assumptions about who belongs and on what terms.

**Conclusion**

As culture and identity are subject to ongoing debate it should come as no surprise to hear calls for the ‘re-establishment’ of ‘traditional’ culture. Yet, Isin and Wood (1999) caution that such calls should not be taken at face value for there never was a common culture of which citizenship was an expression. Rather, and as they put it, ‘there are dominated and dominant groups between which citizenship is a mediating institution and a contested field’ (p. 63). Addressing such issues demands a social psychology that takes culture seriously. As described above, this requires
a process model which explores the ways in which culture and cultural differences are constructed to advance definitions of belonging that impact individuals’ abilities to speak and be heard. Such a social psychology must also consider the asymmetries in power that mean that some are more able to make their versions of culture and identity count (and so shape the social context experienced by others).

Visions of culture and identity are everywhere, and a social psychology that aspires to be socially relevant must be sensitive to the many and varied ways in which these are everyday articulated and subject to contestation and change. Take the statues in our parks and the naming of our streets. In the UK, movements such as Black Lives Matter have prompted a belated reckoning with a colonial vision of culture and identity that continues to permeate the fabric of everyday life. Most obviously there have been debates as to the appropriateness of historical statues erected to celebrate the (now discredited) achievements of Empire (for examples of earlier debates on the appropriateness of colonial statuary in a newly independent India, see McGar, 2015). Such debates and the campaigns they engender underscore the individual and collective agency in the ongoing construction of culture and the practical significance of making more inclusive imaginings of the community manifest in the wider public sphere. Writing in Dundee, one obvious example of the latter springs to mind. In 1919 a young man—Jainti Dass Saggar—arrived from India to study Medicine. On graduation, he became a local doctor, a prominent figure in the Indian freedom movement in Scotland and a campaigner on public health, poverty and education. In 1936 he was elected a Dundee City Councillor and held his seat until his death in 1954. Such was the respect in which he was held that a city street was renamed in his honour with the Lord Provost of Dundee declaring ‘He was a man of compassion for everyone in need… he came to Dundee from halfway across the world but no son of Dundee had greater love for its people or worked harder in their interest. Dundee is much poorer by his passing.’

In addition to bringing a psychological lens to such everyday practices of community construction (whether inclusionary or exclusionary), it follows that our own disciplinary culture requires attention. Across the discipline, there is increasing awareness of how so much of our discipline is rooted in the experiences of a distinctively WEIRD demographic (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic world: Henrich et al., 2010) and the need for psychological theory to respect cultural variation (Bradya et al., 2018). Indeed, calls for the thorough-going
decolonisation of the psychology curriculum are now widespread (see Fernandez et al., 2021, Macleod et al., 2020). Needless to say, such contemporary concerns echo those articulated long ago by Professor Sinha. The challenges involved in developing a socially relevant psychology that takes culture seriously are significant. However, I believe the struggles around everyday citizenship provide a practical context in which to explore the everyday construction and contestation of culture and identity, and that such a project has relevance across the globe.

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