

ROLE OF IDENTITY IN CREATING WORK CENTRALITY AMONG YOUNG SRI LANKAN MANAGERS IN THE ERA OF LATE CAPITALISM

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how contemporary young Sri Lankan managers value work, in terms of centrality in their lives and how this perception is shaped by their identities. Based on the social constructionist paradigm, we have used qualitative methodology to explore the issue. Purposive sampling was employed in selecting the respondents and multiple data collection methods, with in-depth interviews and group discussions were used. Respondents placed a high value to their work roles, which is mainly due to the identity created through work. The concept of identity fragmentation in postmodern social theory was used as the theoretical lens of the study to understand the implications of late capitalism on work centrality. Even though some respondents' views indicated a form of identity fragmentation, they were not directly linked with the consequences of contemporary postmodern, late capital social conditions. Having identified these perspectives, finally we analyzed the dominant role of identity formation in creating work centrality and the lack of identity fragmentation among Sri Lankan young managers in the light of the existing literature about national culture where it was revealed that national culture does plays a dominant role in shaping the work centrality among young Sri Lankan managers even in the era of late capitalism.

Keywords: identity, work centrality, late capitalism, national culture, Sri Lanka

1. INTRODUCTION

Studies across different socio-cultural settings, different time periods and different age groups have indicated that work values of employees are affected by culture, society, and generational experience (Ali & Al-Kazemi, 2007; Harpaz & Sharabi, 2007; Holt, Kai-Cheng, Ralson, and Terpstra, 2007; Li & Madsen, 2010; Lipset, 1980; Smola & Sutton, 2002). Thus, employees of different generations, different cultures and different societies would think and behave differently. Among these employees of different generations, cultures and social contexts,

understanding the younger or new employees' thinking pattern and values is very important for organizations as they represent the future of organizations as well as the future work force.

Properly understanding work related values of employees by the management can lead to improvement of job satisfaction of employees through the various interventions management can make. This in turn, will make the organization a better place to work, increasing employees' work performance, and thereby increasing organizational

performance and profitability. Thus, it is very important for organizations to pay special attention to the work related values of employees.

Contemporary young managers at Sri Lankan workplace can be treated as a cohort of people that represent some unique generational characteristics. Many of these generational characteristics are consequences of the socio-economic changes that took place during the late 1970s such as market liberalization, emergence of multi-national capitalism, increased labour migration, expansion of informal economy and Non Government Organizational sector, and the resulting alteration of traditional value system. In this new situation, social status and individual identity are increasingly defined, not in terms of social position or education, but rather, in terms of life-style (Hettige, 2004; Liyanage, 2003; Sarachchandra, 1982). "Good life" is increasingly defined in terms of consumption patterns and acquisition of status symbols (Liyanage, 2003). However, the work values of these young Sri Lankan managers have not been researched significantly.

A broader understanding about the employees' work related values can be obtained by looking at their work centrality or the moral importance given to work over other aspects of their life. Work centrality among employees will determine their commitment as well as performance. As indicated by the preliminary survey we conducted in six leading manufacturing and service organizations, difficulty of understanding work values of contemporary young employees has resulted difficulties in attracting and retaining them.

The present literature about young employees (Barling & Loughlin, 2001; Cole, Lucas & Smith, 2002; Nicholas, 2009; Iyer & Reisenwitz, 2009;

Smola & Sutton, 2002) are mainly based on western social setting and do not clearly explain the work centrality of Sri Lankan young managers. As indicated by the studies on Sri Lankan youth (Hewawasam, 2007; Hettige & Mayer, 2002; Liyanage, 2003), the value system of contemporary Sri Lankan youth is quite different from the youth in the western world due to the dominant role played by the traditional culture. Study by Ranasinghe (1996) indicated high degree of work centrality among Sri Lankan employees, even though they are not aligned with the materialist gains indicated by Protestant Work Ethics. The same result was indicated in our preliminary study as well. Literature on work values in colonial Sri Lanka (Davy, 2002; Peiris, 2001) indicates that identity formation has played a dominant role among Sri Lankans. Considering these facts, this study explores the role played by identity in forming work centrality among young Sri Lankan managers in the present context.

2. LATE CAPITALISM, YOUNG MANAGERS' WORK CENTRALITY AND NATIONAL CULTURE

The socio-economic changes during late 1970s in Sri Lanka, indicate a distinct stage in the development of capitalist production system. Mandel (1976) uses the term "late capitalism" to denote the period of multinational capitalism where capitalism transcends national country boundaries. "When capitalist commodity production conquered and unified the world market, it did not create a uniform system of production prices, but a differentiated system of varying national prices of production and unified world market prices, This allowed the capital of the most developed capitalist countries to achieve surplus-profits, for its commodities could be sold

above their 'own' national price of production and yet below the national price of production' of the buying country. In the final analysis, this internationally hierarchized and differentiated system of varying commodity values is explained by an internationally hierarchized and differentiated system of varying levels of labour productivity” (Mandel, 1976, p. 83).

People’s values and views are changed when the societies enter into era of late capitalism (Jameson, 1984). This shift in culture or peoples’ values is also known as a move from modernity to postmodernity (Jameson, 1984; Lyotard, 1984). Considering the socio-economic changes that took place during late 1970s we can identify the social setting of contemporary young managers as the era of late capitalism.

Spiro (2006) who explore and compare work centrality of young employees in the era of late capitalism with the previous generation, states that “unlike the previous generations, they tend to balance their other non work activities with work. The more psychologists and social scientists study this generation, the more they realize that Generation Y members are most drawn to flexibility and balance in their day-to-day life ” (p.17). Similar observations had been made by some others scholars who also studied young employees in US (Cole, Lucas & Smith, 2002; McCrindle Research, n.d.). The study conducted by Iyer and Reisenwitz (2009) among a regional sample of southeastern United States indicated that even though there is not a significant difference between work centrality of past and present generation, it can be expected that there is reduction in the centrality of work in the future. Carraher, Forret, Mainiero and Sullivan (2009) who carried out a quantitative study to find the work

values of young employees in across North, South, Midwest and Western USA, found out that contemporary young employees feel higher need towards work life balance when compared with the previous generations.

The above discussed reduction in work centrality can be seen as a consequence of the conditions of late capitalism and resulting changes in life styles. People’s identities in the era of late capitalism become fragmented. “If identity is a social production, identity will be relatively stable in homogeneous and stable societies with few dominant discourses. In contemporary, heterogeneous, global, teleconnected societies the available discourses expand greatly. They also change rapidly. The individual comes to be spoken by so many discourses that fragmentation is virtually inevitable” (Alvesson & Deetz, 2005; p. 87) This definition on fragmentation suggest that many discourses are emerged in the contemporary global, teleconnected or late capitalist societies to give different identities to people. These ever changing fragmented identities are created because of the globalization, development of internet and other telecommunication as well as expansion of consumption.

Popular literature about young employees indicate that their lack of work centrality is linked with the leisure and social life spheres among those young adults (Cole, Lucas & Smith, 2002; Spiro, 2006). This can be seen as a result of the fragmented identities. Due to the rapid flow of images through the media in the postmodern culture, people assume different identities. Identities created by activities in leisure culture reduce the prominence of the workers identity as a worker.

However, studies conducted among Sri Lankan youth in the era of late capitalism has indicated that the values among them are highly influenced by national culture (Hewawasam, 2007; Liyanage, 2003). Considering these findings, it can be suggested that work values of the traditional Sri Lanka may play a dominant role in Sri Lankans' work values.

Main work value in the traditional period was the creation of identity (Peiris, 2001). People who lived in the colonial Sri Lanka should perform certain duties—*Rajakaaree*—to pay their debt for the king. These different duties were performed by different families or castes. This caste system was highly influential in all social relationships in pre-colonial Sri Lanka (Davy, 2002).

This traditional value system is altered when the society enters into capitalist production system. In his discussions on primitive accumulation, Marx (2007) indicates how the traditional value systems are replaced by modern values with the emergence of capitalism where mode of production is changed from feudalism to capitalism. However, in societies where the capitalism is developed through merchant capitalism one cannot see a such a radical alteration of value systems. As indicated by Kay (1975), merchants generate profits by controlling the existing markets, instead of radically changing the production system. Jayawardena (2000) explains the emergence of capitalism in Sri Lanka as a process of merchant capitalism. Based on these literature, it can be suggested that identity creation does play a leading role in shaping the work centrality of young Sri Lankan employees today.

Here we can identify two types of identities: self and social identities. While self identity is someone's awareness and identification of him or herself as a

unique personality, social identity is the recognition obtained from others for belonging to a particular group or society (Hogg, Terry & White, 1999).

These aspects of the identity creation and identity fragmentation among young Sri Lankan managers in the era of late capitalism will be further explored in-depth throughout the present study, in terms of work centrality.

3. METHODOLOGY

The present study assumes that people's work values have been constructed in people's mind according to their own cultural patterns. Work values are not something externally given to individuals, but something that is created by the people's interaction with others in the society. Therefore the ontological position of this study is social constructionist (Ponterotto, 2005). In this study, we attempted to explore people's lived in experience. In addition, we attempted to understand their work centrality through the interaction with research participants to get and in-depth understanding about their point of view. Therefore, we adopted social constructionist-interpretive epistemology (Ponterotto, 2005) for this study.

Followed by the social constructionist ontological and epistemological assumptions, we adopted the constructionist or the qualitative research methodology for the study. It allowed us to view work centrality of these young managers from their point of view and provided us an in-depth understanding as well.

As we have moved away from the positivistic paradigm and adopted the social constructionist paradigm, we needed to ensure the richness of our

data. Since the sample size is not determined by the size of the population, we had to make sure to select a set of respondents that ensures the richness of the information, thereby overcoming the crisis of representation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In order to do so, the respondents must be excellent participants who experience the phenomena, who have time to share their experience, who are willing to share them, and who have the ability to speak articulately about them (Morse, 2007). Following this line of thought, this study adopted purposive sampling for the study. To get in-depth understanding, we employed interviews and group discussions as the main modes of information collection for the study. Interviews provided us elaborated and detailed answers which improved the richness of data. The group discussions elaborated the way the respondents collectively construct meanings to work. In addition, the interaction between the team members in group discussions helped new ideas to emerge, emerging new insights to the study. Furthermore, it facilitated easy expression of their views as the members selected for each group were friends known who knew each other.

The interviews and discussions were conducted at convenient places and times to the participants. The respondents' convenience was highly taken into consideration as it will have a direct impact on the results of the study. Within the interviews and group discussions, the respondents were allowed to freely express their views with minimum intervention by me. These interventions were made only to clarify details about the questions and in the cases where the participants seemed extremely deviating from the topic.

Four group discussions with 16 respondents and two in-depth interviews were conducted. All the respondents were below the age 30. And they had studied from leading schools in Colombo, who are familiar with internet and electronic media, lived in Colombo or in the suburban areas for more than 5 years, and were currently employed in leading government or private institutions. These characteristics ensured the respondents' exposure to the conditions of late capitalism.

Qualitative data analysis was carried out following the six steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarizing with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report.

Familiarizing with the data started with the transcribing process itself. Once the interviews were digitally recorded, the recorded interviews were transcribed personally. The transcribed interviews were checked again to check for accuracy and missing data. Thereafter, the transcriptions were read again to have a rough idea about the initial codes. As a result, we were very much familiar with the data before coding.

Once the data became familiar, we started doing initial coding, identifying interesting points of all the responses. We tried to identify interesting features within data that may form repeated patterns in the data set. The coding system used was open ended coding. After the coding was done, the entire initial code set was recorded in a separate sheet and initial themes were identified by carefully going through the coding sheet, keeping the research questions in mind. Then the generated themes were refined considering the concepts used in postmodern literature to identify those phenomena. Once the themes were refined and

reviewed, they were named using the concepts of postmodern literature. Ultimately it could be stated that the study used inductive codes, where emergent codes, followed by borrowed codes were employed in the analysis.

4. FINDINGS

Contrast to the previous literature about young adults at the workplace, the respondents of the study expressed a high moral value to work roles in their lives. The moral importance given to work over other aspect of life was mainly derived by the respondents' need to have an identity through work. This identity formation could be seen along four dimensions: (a) Creating self-identity (b) creating social identity (c) disciplining identity and (d) fragmentation of identities.

4.1 CREATING SELF IDENTITY

Self identity is someone's awareness and identification of him or herself as a unique personality (Hogg, Terry & White, 1999). The study revealed that the young Sri Lankan managers place a significant importance to the self identity, which is created through work. This self identity was mainly created out of the personal satisfaction which is obtained through becoming productive and being creative.

Subash (Age 25, graduate from a leading university), who is working at a leading software corporation;

We should have a commercial return to the work we do. And also, we need to have a personal satisfaction as well. As a person, we should have a satisfaction. If I am not satisfied with the work I do, then I do not exist as a man, live as a man. Rather than

anything else, I think about the personal satisfaction.

This respondent indicates his willingness to have a *commercial return to the work* he does. It is similar to the materialistic needs that are indicated by the protestant work ethic. However, the driving factor for him to work is not the materialistic needs, but the satisfaction he derives through work. That gives a sense of identification to himself. Through work, he understands that he is existing, he is living as a man. That creates a self identity for him (Hogg, Terry & White, 1999). This self identity is more important to him more than anything else.

Kavindra (Age 28, graduate from a leading university) who is working as a University lecturer;

I think work is necessary for a person. I sustain through work. I can't function without having it in my life. I feel crazy without work. So, I sort of need to work. For me, I think work has to be there... I think when I am not doing anything – there were periods that I did not do anything and was at home – I felt totally useless. I felt that I am not doing anything productive in this world. So, I think work is really necessary for me.

During the times she didn't have a job, she didn't have a sense of existence or a self identity. she identifies her current job as an activity which helps to occupy in some productive work and make a sense of her. For her, work is an activity needed for individual existence. By occupying in some productive and satisfactory work, she creates her self identity.

Both the respondents above, indicate their willingness to work for the self identity created through their work. This factor is further visible in

Kavindra's statement when she does a comparison between domestic work and professional work;

If we take a case of a woman, she spends every minute of her life to cooking, washing clothes, and everything. No appreciation will come for such work and also no exposure is received through such work.

Here, the respondent indicates two choices she has to make in order to become satisfied about herself. Either she can become a 'good mother' or become a 'good professional.' By comparing both the identities, she prefers to become a professional.

4.2 CREATING SOCIAL IDENTITY

Social identity is the recognition obtained from others for belonging to a particular group or society (Hogg, Terry & White, 1999). The study revealed the fact that young Sri Lankan managers are highly interested in the social identity they obtained through work. When working in a particular organization or a particular profession, they were recognized by the others as individuals who belong to that particular organizational or professional community. That social identity worked as a stimulant for them to work in their current profession.

Dasun (age 25, studies at a leading boy's school) who is working at a leading private firm:

I think especially a male should do a job. That gives stability for a boy. Then only he will be able to emphasize things. Especially when a boy becomes an adult, he should do a job as it gives him a certain power and respect.

Traditional cultural norms in Sri Lanka have depicted the male as the breadwinner of the family (Peiris,

2001). That role makes him a powerful and respectable person as indicated by above respondent. Therefore, the social identity through work acts as a dominant factor in the case of males.

Sayuri, who works as a university lecturer:

I think work creates a self for us. When I go to my home town, all the people [family and friends] are happy. I know that is solely because of the work I do. It is due to work, that I get the status, celebrity, and the respect. Recognition from friends, relatives... all this come from work. Therefore, I think work as a necessity for a person.

Here, the respondent explains her status as a lecturer among friends and family members. She is celebrated and recognized by others as a member of the 'academic community.' This indicates a social identity that is created through work discourse. "As discourses structure the world they at the same time structure the person's subjectivity, providing him/her with a particular social identity and way of being in the world. The person... is always social first and only mistakenly claims the personal self as the origin of experience." (Alvesson & Deetz, 2005; p. 85) Thus, a social identity is created through work and that social identity functions as a drive for her to work.

Ayomi (age 28, studied at a leading girls' school in Colombo) who works as Project Manager at an IT firm:

In personal life, if people close to you respect you that's enough. I would not care whether anybody respects me or not, but if people close to me respects me that means a

lot. I know my job helped a lot in gaining the respect I receive now from my closest friends and even the family.

Gangani (age 25, studied at a leading girls' school in Colombo), who is working at a leading international bank:

To me, being respected by my community is more important than the satisfaction. When we become older and mature we feel being respected by other... As an example, my father and mother still do jobs. At the beginning their main concern was .earning their living. But now, self esteem is the driving forces that drive them for jobs.

These respondents' close friends and family members respect them as members of 'professional community.' Thus, the social identity created through work, functions as the main stimulant for working. Furthermore, that identity creation is shaped by their family orientations.

The above respondents views indicate how the social identity created through work become a major cause for the work centrality among the young Sri Lankan managers. For females, that social identity help them to to gain more recognition from their families. For males, that social identity helps them to strengthen or stabilize the identity given to them by the traditional culture (Davy, 2002; Peiris, 2001).

4.3 DISCIPLINING THE IDENTITY

Work place surroundings act as mechanisms for the employee to achieve the preferred identity (Brown & Thornborrow, 2009). Respondents of the study elaborated how work disciplined them to obtain their preferred identity.

Ayomi:

It's a discipline actually. If you work at a place that adheres to the code of ethic and work ethic and the standards, everything will groom you and it will build a... mm... It will give you discipline actually. So, that will help in your personal life also to respect the other person, do your duties properly, and gain their respect as well in return.

Gangani:

When compared with the time I was out from the campus and stayed at home, now I feel there are a lot of things that have come to my life by doing a job... how to live in the society, how to face problems, I have learnt all these things with the exposure I got by doing a job... It help me to become the professional I want to become.

With the advancement of technology, people in the late capitalist era have become more and more social beings. Apart from being a member of a certain organization, people are members of the broader society. Both these responses indicate the way the work disciplines a person in a broader level. In addition to their social identity as members of certain professional community in the eyes of others, they indicate how the exposure through occupation has disciplined them to become members of the broader society.

4.4 FRAGMENTATION OF IDENTITIES

Above findings on the views of young managers in Sri Lanka indicates that they highly value the identity they derive through work. However, literature suggests that peoples identities in the era of late capitalism become fragmented(Alvesson & Deetz,

2005;Dholakia, Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). This fragmentation is due to the impact of the electronic media as well as changes in the lifestyles. The respondents of the study too, indicated a certain degree of exposure to the electronic media and urban leisure culture. However, these conditions did not play an influential role in fragmenting the identities of the respondents.

Sankha (age 24, studied at a boys' school in Colombo), a software engineer in a leading IT firm:

I do have facebook accounts and all. Facebook is something... like.... It's not face to face, it is not the reality. If you go into virtual world, you can move deep into it. But finally you won't know what will happen at the end. It's a stimulated environment. It's a kind of addiction. I spend lot of my time in facebook. But, that is only when I am working. But in my leisure time, I used to spend with my friends. I prefer to go to visit friends and be with my family. I do not like to spend the leisure time with such social networks.

As a software engineer the respondent is highly involved with the electronic media, internet and social networking. However, that exposure does not have a considerable impact on him. For him, electronic media is something he had to use "only when he is working". . So, it can be assumed rapidly changing images in the electronic media does not play a major role in constructing his identity.

In addition, the respondents indicated a similar attitude towards their leisure activities. Even though they participated to the leisure activities at their workplace, they tend to see those activities as some

duties that they have to perform, in order to not to get highlighted at the workplace. Considering these factors we can see that conditions of late capitalism such as internet or the leisure culture does not play a major role to fragment their identities. This can be seen as another reason for the respondents' willingness to have stable identities from their work roles.

5. CONCLUSION

Findings of the study indicated that young Sri Lankan managers in the era of late capitalism expressed a high moral importance to work. However, the reason for this moral importance towards work or work centrality was not materialist gains that were indicated by Protestant Work Ethic, but the identity. First, the work created a self identity for them: work give them a sense of existence; work became a means for themselves to understand who they are. Second, the work gave them a social identity. This social identity acted as a main determining factor for the high moral value the respondents placed on work. They highly valued the recognition they obtained from their families, close friends and relatives, by doing a job. In addition this social identity was shaped by the traditional cultural norms in the country (such as men as the breadwinner of the house). Third, they viewed work as a site to discipline their identities. They voluntarily submitted themselves to the order in the workplaces, with the hope of disciplining themselves to achieve the preferred social identity. Finally, even though they were highly exposed to the conditions of the late capitalism, their identities were not significantly fragmented. Their identities were mainly determined by their family and the work they do.

Based on these findings, it can be identified that there is a dominant role played by identity when shaping the work centrality among young Sri Lankan managers in the era of late capitalism.

6. DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Since this study restricted the exploration of work centrality among young Sri Lankan managers to respondents from Sinhalese nationality, a further research could be undertaken to explore the work centrality among young managers from other nationalities such as Tamil and Muslim. Respondents of the study were educated from leading local and private schools in Western province. However, it is important to include respondents from international school in a future research as now we can observe an increasing tendency among parents to send their children to international schools. Furthermore, as technology, urbanization, media, consumerism and capitalist organizations are rapidly expanding to remote areas, an exploration in which include respondents from rural areas too can shed more light to the findings of the present study.

7. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Findings of the study indicated several implications for the practitioners. First of all, the study indicated that uncritical adaptation of knowledge in a different social context will not be helpful to understand the young Sri Lankan managers. Understanding these young adults through some generalizations such as Generation X or Y would avoid the specific nature of these employees and they will be more distanced from the organization. This can be seen as one of the reasons behind the respondents' view that present organizations are unable to grab new people.

Second, the study indicated that the young Sri Lankan managers are driven to work mainly by the identity created through work. On one hand, the work should make a self identity for them. They should be satisfied about their work. Work needs to be designed in a way the individual has a space for his creativity. On the other hand, they valued the social identity created through their work. When designing jobs in HR planning, the managers need to pay attention to this aspect as well. Furthermore, the results of the study indicates that social activities or leisure activities by the organizations do not act as a major stimulant among young managers in Sri Lanka. However, being empathetic and paying more attention to the family related matters are much important when managing them. Especially, keeping a soft corner for the family related matters is an important factor when managing young females.

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