Identity in university students: The semiotic work of making sense of yourself

Authors

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Introduction

This paper examines how young adults create and understand their identities as a lifelong, semiotic process—meaning they interpret symbols and objects that represent who they are. Using a semiotic approach, the study analyzes objects students bring to represent their identity and explores how these objects symbolize and shape their self-understanding within social and cultural contexts.

OBJECTİVE

This paper brings together semiotics and psychology in an attempt to understand the semiotic work that students need to perform, at the development phase in which they find themselves, to create and express their identity.

METHODOLOGY

his paper reports on one aspect of a larger interdisciplinary study about identity that was funded by the University of the Free State, Selves within Selves on a University Campus: The intersectionality of student identity development in a transitional society. The project received ethical clearance from the institution. The project entailed semi-structured interviews with 57 students (see Table 1 for a summary of the biographic characteristics of the sample). The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 34, with most participants being in their early twenties. The diversity in the sample is evident from the 11 different home languages spoken by participants. The gender representation in the sample was skewed towards females.

Home language		
Afrikaans	4	7.0
English	2	3.5
isiXhosa	5	8.8
isiZulu	10	17.5
Ndebele	1	1.6
Sepedi	3	5.3
Sesotho	19	33.3
Setswana	7	12.3
Siswati	1	1.6
Tshivenda	2	3.5
xiTsonga	3	5.3

Analysis

Semiotic analysis reveals that out of 57 students interviewed, only 15 brought material objects representing their identity, with most students discussing memories or ideas instead. The materials included memes, earphones, photos, a rosary, beads, tattoos, and music.Thematic analysis of objects and interpretants:
For this section of the analysis, we focussed on participants' narratives to understand how they interpret personal meaning from the objects. Our coding practices were informed by the coding guidelines suggested by Saldaña (2016). During the first round of coding, we worked systematically through the complete data set with an explorative stance

Representamen — Interpretant — Object
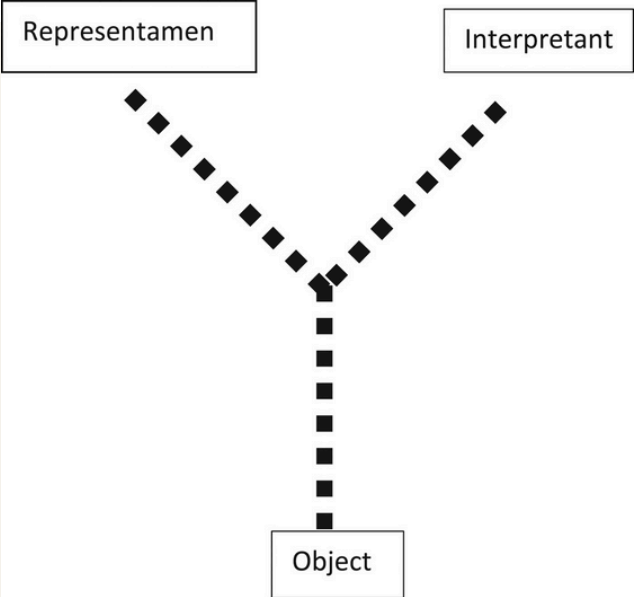
Conclusion

This study explores why many students did not bring material representations of their identity during interviews and suggests comparing this phenomenon across different backgrounds, such as geographic, socioeconomic, and cultural differences. It highlights that objects and symbols carry both personal and social meanings, reflecting students' relationships, cultural ties, and spiritual beliefs. The students' identity formation is portrayed as a continuous and dynamic process of meaning-making, involving both individual uniqueness and social interconnectedness. Their use of objects often represents their current selves and aspirations for the future, illustrating a fluid sense of identity and resilience, often shaped by challenges and societal pressures. The frequent references to nature and gospel music indicate cultural trends, which warrant further investigation for their broader significance.

"I don't understand why we have to favor just one ethnicity": Stigma and coping experience perspectives from ethnicminority students in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines

Authors

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Metrics

Introduction

Despite the growing movement towards inclusivity, the voices of ethnic minority students (EMS) in Southeast Asia (SEA) remain underrepresented, resulting in marginalization that hinders their academic pursuits, and well-being. However, past research often overlooked experiences of EMS and the role of sociocultural elements that drive oppression. This study seeks to explore the experience of stigma among EMS in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines.

OBJECTİVE

To examine how various socio-cultural elements have contributed to EMS' experience of stigma;
2. To understand how EMS managed their experiences of stigma.

METHODOLOGY

We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 37 EMS from university-based student organizations and analyzed them using the KJ method.
We used an inductive qualitative design to explore stigma and coping experiences among EMS in three SEA countries. Following phenomenological principles by Heidegger, our analysis prioritizes EMS' descriptions of their experiences (Jasper, 1994). We remained mindful of our preconceptions about stigma and engaged in reflexivity, and meaning-making (Parsons, 2010; Todres & Wheeler, 2001). This approach facilitated cross-country analysis and contextualized EMS' experiences (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022).

Table 2. Interview Schedule.

1. What particular experience(s) of stigma can you share as a student from an Indigenous and ethnic-minority group?

2. How did you react when faced with this/these experiences? What did you do?

3. In your opinion, what can be done to minimize or eradicate this experience(s) of stigma so other students from the same marginalized/ethnic-minority/Indigenous group as you would not experience this?"

Analysis

KJ Analysis' universal relevance in understanding human behavior aided us in comprehending EMS' stigma through aligned decision-making on the analysis and supporting social reforms (Scupin, 1997). We begin by forming KJ method teams of three to four members, drawn from our research team members. Our role was to achieve consensus on response cards and form clusters of similar responses. In each country, we conducted two key steps: 1) KJ Analysis following the outlined procedure, and (2) comparing identified clusters across countries to reveal shared and distinct themes. Our structured research process involved sorting and coding interview transcripts, compiling data into tables for each research question, and scheduling analysis sessions. Sessions included introducing questions, reading response cards, and facilitating discussions to reach a consensus and cluster similar responses.

Results

Our analysis revealed one overarching theme and three supporting themes. The overarching theme, Navigating Stigma: Context and Responses, described how EMS experienced stigma, how they responded to it, and their aspirations for addressing it. This theme encompassed participants' narratives of overcoming adversities and their hopes for reforms. The first supporting theme explored how participants articulated their experiences of stigma and discrimination. In the second theme, they elucidated their strategies for positioning themselves and others in response to stigmatization. Finally, the third theme discussed thei recommendations for addressing their experiences of stigma and discrimination.

Conclusion

This article examines how ethnic-minority students in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines experience stigma and marginalization. Their stories reveal how they suffer from these experiences and find ways to emancipate themselves. Experiences of marginalization motivate them to develop strategies to resist oppression. Contexts such as location and time are crucial for understanding the intersection of stigma with cultural and social elements. The study highlights how these lived experiences can inspire activism and leadership among ethnic-minority and Indigenous students. It also suggests that involving them in policy-making can lead to educational reforms, greater representation, and amplification of their voices.

Natural origins of social essentialism: Ethnic groups, identities, and cultural transmission

Author

Wolfgang Wagne

Introduction

This article argues that the concept of 'social essence' is overused in psychology and often extends beyond the true definition of essentialist thinking about living beings. It suggests that social essentialism can originate from natural contexts, where ethnic groups maintain identity through markers and endogamy, similar to animal reproductive patterns. This helps explain why group identities are stable across generations and serve to distinguish ingroups from outgroups. The paper also emphasizes that this enduring perception is maintained through enculturation, without needing innate essentialist tendencies.

OBJECTİVE

This paper develops a framework of how social essentialism can be conceptualised to originate in natural contexts.

METHODOLOGY

Review

Results

Cultural niche, identity, and essentialism

Recent approaches in the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis (Müller, 2017) emphasize that organisms actively modify their environments through behaviors like seeking shade or building nests, which in turn affect their evolution by shaping their niches and promoting beneficial traits.

Parenting, transmission coupling, and deep essentialism

Early age parenting and cultural learning are crucial for brain development and socialization in humans. During gestation and early postnatal life, environmental influences shape neural structures, with parental care and interaction playing vital roles in attachment, communication, and social behavior—processes reinforced by genes and biological pathways like oxytocin. This caregiving behavior creates an evolutionary niche that ensures cultural transmission, language acquisition, and group identity. Human groups evolved through cultural group selection, where norms, language, and behaviors help maintain group cohesion and success across generations. Conformity to social norms and shared language reinforce ethnic identity, which is often experienced as a natural, essentialist feeling, transmitted culturally rather than biologically. This deep sense of group belonging has been fundamental in human evolution, shaping social and political organization without requiring innate pathways for group identity.

Ethnic identities

Cultural niche construction influences the development of group and intergroup behaviors, similar to those seen in primates like chimpanzees and bonobos, where intergroup relations range from peaceful to violent. In humans, group behaviors include establishing social norms, identity, and favoring ingroup members. Ethnic identities are shaped by local customs, norms, and markers such as language, attire, and body modifications, which serve as symbols of belonging and cooperation. These markers form a lasting cultural micro-niche vital for group survival, reinforced through rituals and socialization. Ethnic identity is inherently relational, needing a name and distinguishable traits, and can vary in stability and homogeneity, depending on adherence to norms and loyalty.

Animal species, ethnic endogamy, and essentialism

There is a strong parallel between the reproductive organization of mammals and the social organization of ethnic groups, which suggests that ancient humans recognized this similarity as more than coincidence—what is called 'functional homology.' This concept links the biological function of species maintaining intergenerational stability through recognition signals to the social function of ethnic markers that sustain group identity. This naturalizes social essentialism, making group identity seem like a natural, unchangeable reality—an idea called 'deep essentialism'—which helps justify the group's lasting existence across generations. People may not consciously see this connection, but they feel a strong emotional and affective bond that makes group identity seem physically real and more stable than a random collection of individuals. This sense of naturalized group belonging is a fundamental part of human social and cognitive development.

Conclusion

Through the four article posters I prepared, I examined the fundamental factors that culturally shape an individual's identity. In my work, I demonstrated that identity is not merely a personal construction process, but rather a multilayered structure shaped within social, cultural, and digital contexts.

Text 1: Essentialism and Ethnic Identity
 This text addresses the concept of group-related essentialism as a fundamental building block in identity formation. Key points for young people include:
Parenting and the Enculturation Process:
 Young individuals shape their identities by learning traditional values from family and their surrounding environment. In this process, societal norms and language acquisition play a critical role. For example, coping strategies, social perceptions, and identity construction are all embedded in broader cultural narratives. Cultural identity is thus not a static label but a dynamic process influenced by deeply rooted values, social roles, and contextual expectations.
 Young people learn which groups they belong to—and which groups to avoid—based on essentialist thinking. This is combined with the need for group loyalty and social adaptation.
Modern Perceptions of Identity:
 Today, the construction of youth identity is shaped by modern elements such as race, geographical origin, and social media. Especially in the digital age, young individuals redefine their personal identities through these factors.

Text 2: Cultural Norms and Social Roles

 Cultural norms and individual social roles are critical in the identity construction process of youth. During adolescence, young people question the norms around them and either adapt to or challenge them:
Role Models:
 Family members, teachers, and peers play a significant role in shaping the cultural identity of young people.
Conformity and Rebellion:
 While trying to adapt to their social groups, youth may also rebel against these norms in order to form their own individual identities. This represents a balancing process in identity formation.

Text 3: Cultural Boundaries and Group Dynamics
 The preservation of cultural boundaries and the dynamics within groups increase the need for young people to feel a sense of belonging:
Group Dynamics:
 Youth learn cultural boundaries in order to understand their position within a group and to gain acceptance. This can reinforce a "we" versus "them" dichotomy in the process of identity formation.
The Impact of Social Media:
 In the modern era, young people experience cultural boundaries not only in physical spaces but also through digital communities. This allows them to explore their identities within a broader context.

Text 4: An Evolutionary Perspective on Youth Identity
 This text approaches the development of cultural identity among youth from an evolutionary perspective, placing it in a wider context:
Micro-Niches and Youth:
 Young people seek to find their place within social micro-niches. For example, school environments, peer groups, and hobby communities act as cultural micro-niches for youth.
Cultural Boundaries:
 Youth define themselves by making sense of cultural boundaries. This process may lead to the acceptance or rejection of cultural differences.

The findings align with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of development, which posits that human development is grounded in social interaction and therefore varies across cultures. From a sociocultural perspective, our psychological development is partly shaped by mentors — such as teachers and parents — who play guiding roles in our lives.
Furthermore, examining social identity development through an evolutionary lens supports Bronisław Malinowski's functionalist approach to cultural studies. Malinowski argued that cultural practices and institutions serve specific functions within a society, and that understanding these functions is essential to understanding culture as a whole.