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VARIATIONS ON THE THEME OF SOMALINESS

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Stigma and Social Identities: The process of identity work among Somali immigrants in Canada

This article represents a study of identity work, and as such seeks to elaborate on the process of perceived identity devaluation and counter-devaluation among Somali immigrants in Canada. The main questions raised here are, how do Somali immigrants perceive themselves, believe they are perceived, and perceive how they are actually perceived by the majority group members in Canada? The theoretical framework through which these questions are framed is derived from Social Interactionism as articulated by Blumer (1969) and Mead (1934), as well as from Cooley's (1902) and Goffman's (1963) classic stigma concept. The guiding principle in social interactionism lies in the proposition that both society and the self must be treated as a process rather than a structure (Blumer 1969). This idea fits well with the understanding that identity categories must be perceived as an ever changing phenomenon that can be created and recreated indefinitely. Mead (1934), for example, suggests that identity and self as meaningful categories arise from making the role of significant as well as generalized others.

However, this process becomes very problematic when individuals are confronted with alien social environments that make once familiar significant others less meaningful for identity construction purposes. In other words, when immigrants are detached from their home environment, individuals face a sort of fragmented identity that does not allow them to affect a valued sense of self. This idea is further illustrated by Strauss (1959) who suggests that identities must be understood through the process by which adult persons are struck by changes in their sense of self when they move from one situation to another within and between social structures. More specifically, Strauss points out, identity transformations are ignited by what he refers to as 'turning points'. A turning point refers to a change in social relations initiated by a change in one's environment such as that created by a migration from one social environment to another. This way of conceptualizing identity transformations fits very well with the experience of the Somali community in Canada. One question that needs to be considered, though, is what kind of identity categories do Somali immigrants face as black Africans in Canada. Part of the answer to this question can be found in Goffman's (1963) articulation of stigma and social identities. According Goffman, the only non-stigmatized individual in North America is 'a young, married, white, northern, heterosexual protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and recent record in sports' (Goffman 1963:128). This definition, thus, clearly categorizes the Somalis as black African immigrants as stigmatized and therefore, facing a devalued identity category in Canada.

Given these statements, this study makes the general argument that, while it is justifiably sound to generally assume the existence of stigma-normal distinctions and to concentrate on how stigmatised groups manage, to use Goffman's phrase, information given off in order to affect positive identities, it is unacceptable to ignore Goffman's argument regarding other dimensions about the complex relationship between self and social identities as a result of interactions between individuals. In other words, little attention has been paid either to the possibility that the process of stigma-normal relations are historically conditioned, and that at

some points, those we now consider stigmatized so in fact counter us with their own belief that the normal ones actually are the stigmatized ones. The process of stigma can also be applied to groups, as Blumer points out:

> 'The interpretation of him might be different than what you call the label, particularly when it is done to a group of people, because they can talk among themselves about how they have been characterised, and offset, let us say to use Erving's term, they can offset whatever stigma may be involved in that area. What you have to realise is that individuals are in a position of interpreting the gestures of others and the acts of others. And where those gestures and acts of others are directed toward one, what you have to put your finger on is not what the gestures are but how the individuals interpret those gestures.' (quoted in Maines 1997:151.)

Data

The data for this study is derived from fieldwork carried out in Toronto in 1996-1997. Thirty in-depth life history interviews were collected. Respondents were interviewed at their home or at an agreed upon location that was convenient for the respondent. The primary interview schedule comprised thirty-nine open-ended questions. Following the open-ended questions, a face sheet containing several structured socio-demographic and substantive questions were given to the respondents. The main purpose of the structured questions in the face-sheet was to provide a triangulation for the data. For example, some questions were asked in both the interview schedule and the face-sheet so as to increase the richness of the data as well as the reliability. The design of the interview guide was developed on the basis of current literature on migration and ethnicity, as well as my knowledge of the Somali community in Canada.

Sample characteristics

The average age of the respondents range from 19 to 49 and are equally divided into male and females. Almost all the respondents, except those who did not respond on this matter, were born in an urban city. The educational level of the respondents range from less than high school to masters degree. What is clear from the education level of the respondents, though, is that even if we count the 'no' responses as less than high school, more than 83% of the respondents graduated from high school before migrating to Canada. 43 % of the respondents graduated from college before migrating to Canada, while almost 7% of the respondents had a master's degree before leaving Somalia. However, when we look at the income level of the respondents, almost 57% of the respondents make less than 10,000 Canadian dollars per year and only one person (3%) of the respondents make 70,000 and over. 43% of the respondents are married, while 40% of the respondents are single.

Identity categories in Somalia

Generally, Somalis in Somalia regard their identity as a natural, unconstructed category that is lodged in the belief that they are descended from a single ancestor. This belief leads to the assertion by the Somali people that they are of both biologically and culturally one ethnic group. Thus, 'Somaliness' entails a collective self-conception of culture consisting of one language, one religion, and similar physical characteristics. However, sometimes it becomes very difficult to objectively define what a Somali is without references to other identities. Moreover, the Somali identity is sometimes defined as nationality, as the following respondent suggests:

> I: What did you consider yourself ethnically when you were in Somalia?
> R: I considered myself a Somali.
> I: What is Somali?

R: Well, a Somali, like there is Chinese, Indian, or even the whites have different types, they don't all look alike, maybe we think that they look alike, but they don't. So, I consider myself a Somali, I did not consider myself as black, white, Chinese, or Indian, I considered myself as Somali and only Somali. That was my race.

Sometimes the Somali identity is constructed through its merger with other more global identities, which can provide an affinity with other groups that are seen as similar. This process, especially when it involves Islam, allows identity holders to remove themselves from racial categorizations. The following respondent suggests this process:

R: Well this whole thing must be perceived in terms of the larger family based on the Muslim point of view. In other words, all Muslims are brothers and all Muslims are sisters. It is a phenomenon that has been emphasized in my upbringing. It is a tenet that I grew up with. Again, I grew up in a Somali community that holds to that tenet.

I: Did you grow up as a Somali or as a Muslim?

R: You see my point, the point that I stress is that Muslims, as I said, are very extricably related people in terms of ideological and cultural phenomena and the perception is that every Muslim family is your family, and that, you know, if you are conversant with the teaching of Prophet Mohammad, peace be upon him, and the Sunna, they are described as brothers and sisters, and therefore when you look at it, it is a bigger, a larger umbrella to the Somali identity. The concept Somali is blood relations in my view, but Islam provides an ideological and cultural relationships.

I: Did you have that conception of things before you came here?

R: Yeah.

Somali identity exists as *Somalinimo* that can not be understood in terms of color or racial categories. Somalis are just Somalis and their identity is neither black, white, Asian, or African, at least when they are in Somalia. In other words, blackness is merely a condition of existence in Somalia and as such does not have any relevance to everyday roles and interactions. Moreover, racialized or ethnicized identity categories do not provide accepted social categories. They are not part of the social awareness context (Glaser and Strauss 1964).

Although Somalis do not use racial criteria for classifying themselves, we were interested in the extent to which they were aware that other societies use those criteria. By and large, the majority (57%) of the Somalis respondents were not aware of or did not experience racialized identity categories. The following respondent further supports this assertion:

I: In Somalia did you ever think about issues related to race, ethnicity, or color?

R: No, it never occurred to me, I never even heard about the problems between blacks and whites. Even when I was in India, I never heard about issues of black and white, or that blacks are the minority people.

I: What do you think is the reason?

R: Because we didn't have anybody that was white. All of us were 100% of the same religion, color. We never had anybody was superior or inferior in terms of color. But, if I think about ethnicity in terms of tribes, we had that problem, but not color.

Encountering racialized identity categories

Some of the respondent, roughly 8%, show some awareness of the existence of racially based

identity categories, but as we will see later, it is not something that they have experienced in their everyday life or something that has an impact on their own identity. The largest majority (76%) of the respondents selected Somali to be their preferred identity also in Canada, while 10% selected Somali-Canadian as their preferred identity. The reason why the majority of Somalis insist on being just Somali may have something to do with their perception that accepting minority status such as refugee, immigrant, and ethnic minority, as Hein (1994:283) puts it, 'connotes social and/or political inequality because of the group's inferior status in a racial or ethnic hierarchy'. For example, in his study among the Hmong in the United States, Hein suggests that the process of moving from a previous identity to ethnic minority may result from a learning process. This learning process is mediated by the accumulation of discriminatory experiences of the immigrants which makes individual immigrants change their identity world view in an instrumental fashion (Portes 1984, Hein 1994). Our results, however, do not corroborate the findings of Hein, perhaps due to the fact that Somalis in Canada are a very recent group and they have not accumulated many experiences of discrimination.

However, once they arrive in Canada they start to realize that the Canadian society is racially and ethnically categorized. The process of becoming aware and being confronted with racialized identity categories creates some problems among the respondents. As the following respondent points out:

But when I was growing up, I didn't see like being told even by my mum, the issues of not to play with these kid or that kid, or you should go here and not go there, so I think when in this society that I am in now, you see kids are not playing with certain kids, they are not going out with certain kids, and what they think is just a matter of everyday thing looks very strange to me. See, it is not them not knowing, it is just a matter of this systematical thing, it is a chain of this system itself. People may not consciously decide to do so, but the system itself structures the society. But back home, there was nothing like it, the system does not create such situations. It is just an open thing where people can come and do things together and leave, no problem.

Another respondent points out:

Well, that is a very interesting question because, I really, I have learned what racism is in this society. I did not know about it. That could be my own experience, but I mean I only thought about it what the idea of color differences is, only when I came to this society.

This awareness suggests that the Somalis start to perceive that they are placed into identity categories that are different than what they assigned to themselves in their home environments. Sometimes, the encounter of such racialized identity categories, especially among ethnic immigrants, may create a high level of unease. The main worry of immigrants in general may be related to the everyday problems, such as settling and finding a job. However, for ethnically and culturally different individuals, the worries rise one level beyond these everyday worries to include concerns about how he or she will be accepted in these new societies. As the following respondent points out:

Well, since I saw different people, specially whites, then I realized their point of view, the way they see us, when they say black. Now when they say black for example, I feel a little hurt. I understand that it refers to me, but when I was in Somalia, I never saw any one referring to me as black.

Based on these anticipations and the understandings of the racialized nature of the Canadian society, once the Somali immigrants stay in Canada for sometime they start to engage in a process of personal evaluation based on how they are perceived by the majority groups in the host society, and create their own sets of counter evaluations similar to what Cooley (1902) has referred to as the 'looking-glass self'. According to Cooley, the looking-glass self may confirm expected identities or at other times produce undesirable identities. In situations where the expected identities are confirmed, then there is no conflict with the self and the identity of the individual, or in his or her interactions with the rest of the society. But when the resulting identity placement is not what is expected, conflict is inevitable. Moreover, these unexpected negative identities begin to raise issues that Goffman has referred to Stigma.

Somali perceptions of how they are perceived

In what follows we will examine the elements of what we refer to here as the process of identity devaluation and counter devaluation between the Somali community and the majority white Canadians through the eyes of the Somali respondents. The majority of the respondents (60%) perceive that white Canadians perceive them in terms of devalued identity categories. Another 10% responded that that white Canadians perceive them neither positively nor negatively, but as being indifferent in terms of their perceptions about Somalis.

Thus, generally, the respondents in this study perceive that they are perceived through a stigmatized and/or devalued identity be it cultural or racial. Our interviews indicate the existence of several forms of perceptions. Some of the respondents emphasize racial categories, others emphasize refugee, immigrant and class based perceptions. Each category within the scheme of how respondents perceive they are perceived indicates a certain form of stigma and identity devaluation. The perception, for example, that one is perceived as a refugee may give one the feeling of helplessness, as Dorsh (1981:89) pointed out ' a victim,... a client in need of assistance' As one of the respondents also suggested, 'once Canadians have seen the famine and the horrible things that occurred in the country, they see Somalis as poor and lacking the intelligence to settle their own conflicts'. Also the perception that they are perceived in terms of racial categories such as black/African creates the impression that white Canadians perceive them as lazy and uncivilized.

These perceived perceptions fall into what Goffman (1963) referred to as the 'tribal stigma of race and religion'. In other words, these respondents, at least based on their perception, are encountered with a tribal stigma that renders all of their attributes, be they immigrant, refugee, African, black, or Muslim somewhat devalued.

The nature of how the process of stereotyping and devaluation is perceived is intelligently put by the following respondent.

> I: What do you think is the perception that the majority of white Canadians have regarding Somalis?
> R: Well, I don't know about the majority, but what I have experienced and seen is, and I don't want to generalize because there are a lot of good people. But what I have experienced is a lot of intolerance, a lot of rejection like you are not welcome. I am beginning to realize that it has something to do with the identity and label of color, having a different heritage, being from a different race, being black and all the above. So when we come to perceptions, all of these labels are playing part of it. And there are a lot intolerance to acceptance based on either one or all of these labels. You can read that from the way that you are portrayed in the media, from the way you are accepted in the general society, from the way you are treated in the streets.
> Each label has its connection. Remember I gave you some labels and fortunately

> or unfortunately, I don't know which one of these labels is behind the view. But what makes things more difficult is that the Somalis are first blacks in Canada that do not speak English as opposed to the Caribbeans who used to come to Canada before. They are the first blacks who are not Christians. So it is an African, non Christian, it is an African and Somali. It is an African with a different religion and they are black.
> So there are all of these combinations in Canada for the first time. Again it the complexity of each label having its own connotations. On the one hand, we are labeled as Muslims who are sexist people who don't like women, and terrorists at the same time. We are all Mohammads and no body can deal with these Mohammads. When you walk into a job interview, before you could say my name is.... that perception is already there. On the top of that you say my name is Mohammed and you have this heavy ascent. Then if you are asked where are you from and you say Somali, and then the perception of warlords is there. So I don't really know, but all these labels each and everyone has its own inferiority attached to it, its own inheritance and it is so complex to a point where the perception of the Somali society was not so warm. They are labeled as people who are in fraud, people who are praying in the system, people who are not hear to settle, and that perception has been portrayed in the media and the government. So, yes, a lot of stuff can cook in there.

Given these perceived external placements of devalued identity categories, the majority of the respondents engage in a process of counter identity devaluation targeted towards the majority whom they perceive to held negative evaluations of them. The perceptions of the Somali respondents regarding the majority groups can be divided into negative, positive, and neutral and/or indifferent. The category negative is derived from responses that portray the majority as having devalued identity categories whether cultural and/or religious. This category also includes responses from the respondents who see themselves as superior to Canadian majority. The category neutral/indifferent is based on those responses that somehow embody neither negative nor positive perceptions towards the majority, or who are in general indifferent altogether. The category positive is derived from responses that assign positive values to the culture of the majority.

Half of the respondents in the sample perceive the culture of the majority as not having any positive values, as the following respondent indicates:

> I: So what do you think of them, given their perception?
> R: Oh, I think of them to be very ignorant, very ignorant, because if somebody is in that position not wanting to know about you, people asking all this funny question, and the only thing is that they are superior and that they have everything. But to my knowledge, most of them are in this system, on welfare and not working. So, to them they feel it is all right to be there but for the new comers it is not O.K. they are very ignorant people, very ignorant.
> I: So do you think they are superior to you?
> R: No, no, no, no they are never, I don't feel, I have never felt like that since I have came to this country. I am a good fighter, but maybe people who have low self esteem they may think that way, they may feel these people are superior than us, they think these people are here to give them some of their earnings, and assistance and everything, but no, they are entitled to everything until they can make their next move. But I have never, never felt like that, I have never felt like that.

I: Do you sometimes even think that they are inferior to you as a Somali individual?

R: I will say sometimes for what they do and how they act and when it reaches a point where they think they are superior, I kind of reverse it on them. I always reverse what they are thinking of me into them, because I think that is not right for one to think of another human being like that. We are all human beings, it doesn't matter of your skin, if you can do it I can do it too. It is not a matter of your color, it is your brain.

I: Since Canadians perceive Somalis as such what is your perception of yourself?

R: Well, I see myself as better than them, who has a better religion, better color, and better culture who came from a good country and are quality people. For example from what I have seen from the *gaalo* so far, they don't even have family values, so I see them as very inferior to me. Everybody is going on their own way. The father is walking in one direction, and the son in the other direction. Everybody is only working towards their individual interests, so they don't even have families or any values. Therefore, we are different from them and are very happy that we are not *gaalo*.

Others perceive that the two identities can not be compared because the two cultures are different. The following respondent also indicates that she is the newcomer and that she is not interested in worrying about which identity is valued or which one is devalued. This is how she explains it:

I: Well, now, what do you think of European Canadians yourself.

R: Well, you know, when we say *gaalo*, usually we think of, we think about, I mean, there is like two different sides to it. On the one hand, growing up within Somali community, growing up in Somalia, I mean, and also the differences of religion, when I think about *gaalo*, usually, there is that initiative to separate ourselves from them in order not to assimilate. On the other hand, I don't think much about that. It has never really been an issue where I assess what I think of Canadians, or Europeans, I mean, I came to this country, I know I am the one who has left, I mean my own country. So, I am always that outsider and I go about their own business, I mean I am the one who is really visiting. So, as far I am concerned, they exist and don't pay any mind to them. I know they exist, I mean, and you can't just generalize, it is hard to really come up with, with a generalized perception of a collective people is really hard.

Another respondent sees all human beings as being equal. As she explains:

I: What is your perception of *gaalo* yourself?

R: It is just a human person with a different color, he has his own religion I have my own religion. They have a different idea, I have a different, they have a different culture, I have a different culture, big time, the way they are thinking, the way I am thinking, the way they behave, the way I behave is totally different.

Another respondent says:

R: Yes I do, but they have their own values, and I have my own. Everybody is right in their own.

I: What do you think is the perception that white Canadians have about Somalis?

R: Well, to begin with, what is missing from the discussion is that we do not get exposed to Canadian people, you know. For example, the Metropolitan Toronto is

mainly comprised of a multicultural society. There are many different ethnic groups all over the area who came from many different countries. This multicultural thing creates barriers between groups. Also we don't get exposed to whites at all. Every community is in its own cage, so there is no interaction between the cultures. So if you don't have any contact with them, then how can you have any perceptions about them.

The above process of devaluation and counter-devaluation must be understood in terms of how the Somalis perceive themselves, in terms of the value that they attach to their own identity and the challenges they face in terms those identity categories. Thus, the responses must be seen as a general reaction to how they perceive that they are perceived. Despite the fact that Somali immigrants experience some sort of devaluation targeted towards their self and identity, they generally refuse to accept it as a social reality.

For example, the majority of the respondents (86%) reject the idea that they may be perceived as stigmatized. None of the respondents perceive themselves in any way as carrying stigmatized identity, and about 10% of the respondents responded in a neutral manner. In other words, they perceive themselves as humans and that all human beings carry a positively valued identity. Unlike Goffman's position on stigma *management*, here we see a *rejection* of the stigma: do not engage in stigma management, but instead they reject it all together. As the following respondent points out:

I: So, given that perception, what do you think of yourself?

R: Think of myself as inferior to whites? Of course not, no, never, I mean that is really, no, I think it is a problem that they have to deal with and the thing is I can understand given the history of slavery and colonialism, I can see where they are gathering the information from and the scope of things. But internally, what I am experiencing myself, if any body is inferior, I would think it is always the other guy, and not, not me, no, no. The other guy meaning other races.

Others regard the whole idea of identity perceptions, devaluation, and counter-devaluation as meaningless issues and that all people are the children of Allah. As the following respondent explains:

I: O.K., since you think that they separate themselves, do you feel that you are inferior to them?

R: No, I don't feel anything, lower or higher than them. They are human beings just like me from a father and mother. So, sometimes when they get to know, they realize that you are gentle and generous. I used to take a big thermos of coffee during the break time because I couldn't go out. So I used to offer the tea to whoever wanted, then they started to come to me and I started to take my whole coffee maker to school and also used to offer to the teacher and then she liked my coffee. So let me see, I think we are all the children of Allah you know, we are all equal.

Discrimination

The respondents are almost equally divided between those who said that they have experienced discrimination in Canada and those who say they have not. The responses of those who said they have experienced discrimination range from those who say 'every day' and those who have learned from second hand experiences such as talking to other people who may have experienced discrimination. Here is what one respondent says:

I: Have you experienced any discrimination since you came to Canada?

R: Yeah a lot of times. First of all it was when I applied for a job. When they call you for an interview, the first thing they do is find out who you are because when they look at your resume and your work experience they always imagine maybe they are getting somebody who is white and when you show up and they see you that you an African woman and apart from being black, being a Muslim that counts too, and sometimes you with your *hijab* and from there, they tell you point blank we have a dress code. They ask is this the way you are going to dress. If the answer is yes, then you won't get the job. See when I first came, I used to think it was O.K. I thought because maybe that there is a policy until I found out it was not O.K. If you have the experience and you can do the job, then they should not restrict you from what you believe and that is the time I visited, I think, the human rights office and read their code and everything. So there was a time after that when I applied for a job and they took me, after taking me they decided I should put my *hijab* down, I agreed to put the large cover but I kept a small *hijab* and then they said no you can't work with that thing, it is too bothersome for you, and this and that. But I said it does not bother me or anything. So I went to this human rights group who intervened. It took a while for them to understand the situation, but after everything was O.K. I still thought I had to leave the job because I was too uncomfortable. I thought I won't, it was still uncomfortable for me to work for them.

I: Does your son talk about racial issues encountered outside the home?

R: Oh, yes from the school, he is a very outgoing boy, he likes everyone. I think it was last year when he started grade five, there was a new student in the class, but I would say I won't blame the student. He was, I think, he is from Sarbia, Sarbia, {Serbia} something of the sort. He is very new to the country maybe six months or something like that. This boy didn't see any blacks maybe in his country, he has never seen any other skin colors apart from white. So I think this bothered him and he went to talk his mom or somebody else and then he was told not to play with those people he doesn't know and are the different color. So one time, my son was just playing with other boys whom he plays with every time and he pulled one boy and suddenly told him don't play with that one he is not your kind, you should play with us we are your kind and talking about skin said we are white, he is dark and you should not play with him and that really bothered my son. I told him that maybe he is new so don't worry about him, but if it happens again let the teacher know. So then it happened a couple of times again and then my son went and spoke with the teacher and the teacher said she can't do anything about it. So I said no, you have to do something about it, you have to call the mother and make sure this child doesn't say that again because this is the way he is going to grow up and if this school says that it does not encourage discrimination you have to stop it right now because this child is growing big. So it was intervened and the problem was solved.

Others while recognizing the existence of discrimination try to ignore it. As the response of the respondent indicates:

I: Okay great, have you experienced any type of discrimination whether it is job related or other since you came to Canada?

R: I think yes I have seen it. I have a lot. Umm, I think it has different scales, some of them I deliberately ignored them and I tried to convince myself that it is not a racism but, umm, umm, I think because of my faith and background and

belief I came with, it doesn't affect but I see it in a daily basis. Maybe daily basis, that could an exaggeration, but I see it a lot, I encountered and it has different scales and a lot of those I see I ignore it to some extent. Umm, yes but I have personally experienced, I have seen it. I have experienced as a member of the community, as a Somali, I have experienced it in more covert ways, jokes, I have experienced in job interviews and job expectations, umm, I have experienced in regular life when I wanted to rent an apartment or I heard other people who are in that problem. I have experience in my job well my job is to help people to find housing and some daily basics. There was an instance where I was told that elderly people call and say look I have a problem with this colored person in my place I don't like any colored people here even if the person who is talking to him at the other end is colored too. And even if they know, I think they are careless about what they are saying, and that is what they believe. I participated in a lot of discussions about race relations and defining antiracism and issues which related to my job. I work for the ministry of public housing which have a lot of social housing issues particularly senior housing and they try to help people to live coherently. I have witnessed discussions of sixty, seventy year old white men who have participated in the first or the second world war who have their own thinking and perceptions, who now live in a government subsidized senior housing and who don't get along with the seventy or sixty year old black person. Because of early beliefs and say I don't want see these people, these people smell or whatever clearly and there are these conflict daily in my job. On the one hand, I try to help people to live together and get along and on the other hand to set up policies.

I: Umm, so discrimination doesn't affect you?

R: It doesn't affect me, I ignore it. So far I try to succeed that it doesn't affect me, it don't internalized but it continues. And if it keep on going people are not all safe. There are people whom it will affect in their self esteem. There are younger people who will internalize this. Older people, I don't know, ten, twenty years down the road whether I could be that patient.

The idea of ignoring the existence of discrimination among Somalis was also observed by a respondent who accused the Somalis of trying to ignore discrimination when they are experiencing it. The respondent explains her observation as the following:

R: And this is one of the problems, I can tell you this. Somalis are full of it, because they don't want to be seen as black. I am doing a research now, where there are hundreds and hundreds of Somali professionals with their credentials being unrecognized, they are being literally curtailed and excluded, yet, I took a questionnaire, have you experienced racism, more than fifty percent say no, because, and I wonder if this is a data conducted on other group of black refugees, they would have said, like Ugandans, seventy or eighty percent yes I have experienced racism. He apologies for the racism, because he thinks the person is mistaken, because of him as black, and of course he is not black, he is Somali. Somalis are in for big, big surprise, because they full of it I can tell you this. Because, they themselves, if I today walk into the street with a black man, they will call me names and give me a dirty look. If I walk with the same type white guy they wouldn't mind.

I: Where do you think they are getting these ideas from?

R: Because, they are full of it, they think they have a straight nose, and they are not Africans. So some of them are realizing after all that the white man will call

them a Nigger, it doesn't matter, so the Somalis are now in a kind of bitter sweet situation.

I: Have you experienced any kind of discrimination in your work, or anywhere else?

R: No, work? I always have literally what I want. People have always been nice to me. There were times, you know, but not overtly, I think people have been kind to me.

Discussion

Somalis emerged out of a traditional social order that does not recognize race as a meaningful social category. Moreover, their identity is derived from a national identity that cannot be understood in terms of the conventional Western understanding of social differentiation and racial stratification. Of course, within the Canadian social structure, Somalis are considered as black African immigrants. But what does that mean? In other words, does race conceptualized in terms of biological determinism mean anything? Or should we conceive race and racial categorization as social phenomena? Or is the conception of a group as race different from other ways in which a group can be conceived? These questions rest inside of Blumer's conception of the idea of race and racial categorizations. As Blumer (1954:5) points out:

> 'To conceive a group of people as a race is obviously only one of many ways in which that group can be conceived. It might be regarded as a set of dwellers, social class, a territorial group, a nation, or one of countless other groups....But it is biological grouping only in the sense that it is conceived as such by those who regard it as race - and not on the bases of established biological evidence....This definition of the term 'race' serves realistically, I believe, to identify races when studying or analyzing race relations. *As a concept it requires us to go to the people themselves to see how they categorize each other....*' (emphasis added)

This work has attempted to go to the people and see how they categorize themselves. The result of this endeavor, shows that Somalis do not categorize each other on the basis of racial categories. This does not necessarily mean, though, that they are not black in terms of skin color. It only means that skin color is not a relevant category for understanding social reality among Somalis insofar as race is concerned.

For the concept of race to become a meaningful category for social understanding, all parties to the interaction must share a single definition of the concept. In other words, how are we to understand the concept race if one of the groups involved in the interaction has no culturally relevant expression for the concept race. The dilemma here is, as Blumer suggests, is that 'such classifying or grouping of individuals may be made without the people actually having in their vocabulary any word that corresponds to the English word 'race''. (Blumer 1954:5).

This point leads to the further assertion that racial categories are neither biological nor just a 'social construction', but rather, a 'situated social construction'. That is, the social construction of race itself is determined by the social situation within which it is constructed. Our data suggest that even though both the Canadian and Somali conceptions of race are socially constructed, the situations within which they are constructed are different, and therefore, incomprehensible to each other. This is the case insofar as for the concept race to be constructed on the bases of color categories, these color categories must be available within the demographic distribution of the society. In other words, color classifications in Canada and in the United States are made available by the presence of groups with different skin colors. However, in the Somali situation, this demographic distribution is not available for that

society. Rather, what is available in Somalia is clan distribution. Here, again, we can easily see the validity of Blumer's (1954) contention that race is only one of many ways that a group can be conceived and classified.

The data of this research point out that racial classification is not available for the Somali society, while clan classification is not available for the Canadian society. Clan differentiation, albeit a meaningful classification, doesn't drive its meaning from racialized and color-based categories. The Somalis, as mentioned earlier, do not perceive themselves in terms of black and white. The idea of being black does not in itself provide a category for social understanding of reality for Somalis (see Rawls 1996), in that categories for understanding social realities are derived through socially enacted practices. According to Rawls, Durkheim argued that the categories of understanding enter into the minds of individuals through collectively enacted practices. Rawls' discussion deals with how social categories of understanding are created in the first place, but her discussion provides an interesting theoretical angle for our data in that we can assume that if some categories are not enacted in certain social situations, they do not provide a readily available category of understanding, at least as far as the Somali community in Toronto is concerned.

These issues raise the question of how people coming from societies that do not employ racialized categories see themselves in a place where race is a primary category? Although Somalis have a rather stable, non-racialized self-conceptions, their identity is somewhat challenged once they arrive in Canada due to the overwhelming existence of the Western color-based classification. Thus, Somalis start to realize and become aware of the fact that the Canadian society, unlike their own, is racially and ethnically categorized. That is, they start to perceive that they are placed into identity categories that are different from the identity categories of Somalia. These identity placements, according to the immigrant's perception, take several forms. Some of them are seen to tie the respondents into racialized and devalued identity categories. Sometimes they perceive that they are perceived as helpless refugees, or as Muslims who carry non-Western values.

Each category within the scheme of how respondents perceive they are perceived indicates, at least to them, a certain form of stigma and identity devaluation. Given these perceived external placements of devalued identity categories, the majority of the respondents engage in a process of counter-devaluation. This counter-devaluation can be conceptualized in terms of negative valuations or total indifference towards the values and systems of the Canadian society.

In other words, the majority of the respondents either see the Canadian ways of life and values as negative or are indifferent to them in that they do not pay any attention to the culture of the Canadian society insofar as race is concerned. Moreover, the respondents not only reject this perceived stigma, but also, impose their own stigma on the majority group. This counter-devaluation is possible because individuals who are labeled in a certain fashion can talk among themselves about how they are characterized and collectively engage in a process to offset that label (Blumer 1997), and even impose their own labels on the other group. This study supports that interpretation.

This kind of perceived devaluation and counter-devaluation initiated by the lack of culturally shared collective understanding of the concept race leads to interesting forms of identity work. Identity, as Stone (1962) shows, is public and structural but also has a private side to it. In other words, Somalis, given the differential structural arrangements, maintain identity work in terms of (a) their relevant public interactions with other Somalis versus with the white Canadian majority, (b) their rejection of accepting the Canadian identity, and (c) their rejection of the existence of racial discrimination. It is very important to understand these strategies as rejection strategies, different from Goffman's stigma management.

The first point was addressed in the data which pertain to social interaction between majority white Canadians and Somalis, on the question of whether or not Somali immigrants have or are willing to have white Canadian friends.

R: Actually no, I have friends, but we don't go to their house, that doesn't mean that we are not friends. We go to dinner or lunch we stay together, we laugh, but we don't go to each other's houses.

I: What do you think is the reason for that?

R: I don't know really, maybe it is cultural, but I never thought about that question before. Why don't I take my friends to my house and also go to their houses? If I invite them I take them to Somali restaurants.

I: So who do you spent most of your time with?

R: I spend most of my time with Somalis, because since I can get all the news about Canada from the media, from back home, you get from friends and relatives, and back home I have still my father and relatives that I support.

The majority of the respondents do not have any white Canadian friends with whom they associate. Individual interaction is mainly confined within the Somali community. The reason for this lack of white Canadian friends is varied. Some of the respondents point to cultural reasons that do not allow them to understand each other and thus become friends with others.

Others point to not having the chance to meet other individuals outside the community. This variation still comes back to the fact that individuals do not venture much beyond the confines of their community. In other words, individuals who mainly practice Somali cultural values and remain within the confines of the community will hardly encounter any friends from outside the community. Some of the individuals in the community do not in fact desire to associate with white Canadians. This was clearly shown by one of the respondents who provided an elaborate discussion of how he does not want to become friends with or go to the houses of white Canadians due to their unacceptable values.

I: So you will never invite a Canadian to your house?

R: Yeah and I want to keep it that way. I spent most of my time, almost 99% of my time, with other Somalis. To go back to the socialization idea one more time, you know, so many Canadian people have requested to take my kids with them so that you know, they play with their kids and I say no thank you for the invitation, you know, [laugh, laugh]. It is very funny, I mean I run into those kinds of problems.

I: You think they will steal or harm the children, or what?

R: I mean if they don't steal they could do bad things, so I mean, they might as well do anything, but I don't want to take chances.

I: What might you worry about for example?

R: Well, in the western society, the western societies we have a lot of funny things, not funny things, but a lot of scary things, you know, see what I mean. There are people who have been your next door neighbors for many years and then who are serial killers, I mean that we have been seen. We have seen it on the television and in the papers and from friends and others. You know, people who have, kids who have assaulted or abused and killed by people who are known to them. You see what the police are doing here is if a kid disappears, first of all they will go to their acquaintance, these are the suspects. Because of that most of associates are Somalis almost 90%. I have no problem going to Somali houses, men or women. I don't even have any second thoughts, but with white Canadians no, I mean you got to be very careful. Look at the incest, look at the people

coming to television claiming some one has sexually abused them seven or eight years ago simply to get attention, you know. Suppose you go with a white women to her apartment or she comes to your apartment, how do you know what will she say later on. We have seen so many black kids who have been implicated for rape and it is not rape. How many people are serving jail time for consensual sex and have been accused of rape, so I hope no body takes it personally and I want my Somali friends to be very conscious. Be fair with the whites, socialize with them, but be on the guard, expect anything, you know. And I think when you keep that distance the white men, the white women will respect you.

The second strategy is the collective rejection of the Canadian identity. This must be seen as a strategy to remain outside the Canadian social structure. Individuals reject Canadian identity placements because if they accept them, then they become part of the racialized stratification system of the Canadian society. For these individuals, accepting a Canadian identity implies accepting also the racialized stigma that comes along with it. Thus they stick with the only option available which is to remain outside the Canadian social structure.

I: Okay, do you think you will consider yourself Canadian?

R: I want to but I don't think so. I am in a constant fight with my identity and the host country's fight not to accept me. It is a two way street. The Canadians must also help or participate if I have to achieve a full Canadian identity. For now, I think logically and culturally, I will remain Somali. It is hard for any person to consider themselves Canadian. No I don't.

The majority of the respondents do not entertain the idea of considering themselves as Canadian. But even among those, their refusal of ever considering themselves as Canadian is mainly conditioned by circumstances found in the host environment. As the following respondent points out:

R: I don't consider myself and I will never consider myself Canadian because if you don't get your right as a citizen, if on the one side, they look at you like an immigrant, then there is no point of claiming citizenship as an indigenous person. My kids who are born here I don't tell them that, I tell them this is your country, this is your birth place, but deep in my heart I know, it is not their country, deep in my heart I know, this is a place they will never have the right to be a full citizen unless there are miracles which I don't think will happen. I don't think there will ever be a black prime Minister in the next two hundred years. So what is the point of calling yourself or assuming you are a citizen when you are blocked from all opportunities.

Another respondents explains his experience as the following.

I: Would you ever consider yourself a Canadian?

R: No. Why? Well, I don't know, maybe, I came to this country grown up. Since I have seen a lot of obstacles that do not allow me to integrate to this society, I think that is one of the main reasons that I can not count myself as Canadian by heart. Maybe, I might carry the passport, but I still believe that I am Somali, will remain Somali. So to be honest with you now, I don't think that I will ever consider myself a Canadian.

I: Is that because the Canadians do not consider you as a Canadian, or is it because you do not want to consider yourself Canadian because of your culture?

R: Since I came to this country as a grown up, my cultural beliefs do not allow me

to leave my identity and consider myself someone that I am not. The reason I came to this country is because of some problems. I did not come here to change my country and my cultural values, and also the fact that this society is predominantly white, and the fact that you are black, partially it is acceptance.
I: So you think that your color inhibits you from fully integrating into the Canadian society?
R: Of course that is true, because as you know, this country in terms of land is too big, but the population is very small, the resources are large, and nobody allows you to get part of it, so I don't think it is wise for one to consider themselves as Canadian and whether you came here or you were born, you will still be considered as a second class citizen. So I don't see a reason that I can become a Canadian while I am Somali.

The most enlightening response in relationship to the consideration of Canadian identity came from one respondent who rejects the idea of identity or citizenship tied to any group. This is what she said:

R: To be honest, I don't consider to be a citizen of any country at all, I think of myself as an intellectual, period, just myself.
I: Not even a Canadian intellectual?
R: Not even a Canadian intellectual, well I like something about Canada, like the people and the institutions here, but not like nationalist type thing. Because, I am a liberal, what you might call you know, I don't want to say libertarian, I am egalitarian, I like things like Medicare, free education, you know. If the United States had those things today, I would have loved to go there. So for me, it is a matter of social justice and issues like that and if Peru next year adopts much more progressive social outlook I would move to Peru.

What Mary Waters (1990) has called ethnic options are not available for the Somali immigrants in Canada. They are forced to maintain identities derived from the home environment, or else accept a racialized identity in which case, it seems that Somalis opt for the former.

The third rejection strategy is to deny the existence of discrimination.

R: Well, if it is what is said on the news, or the reality, I myself, I have no experience in terms of jobs, in terms of management positions, but the lower jobs, I haven't seen any discrimination, or that we are seen as inferior, or looked down upon, or something, no I haven't seen that. But a lot of people who came before us, who are black or Africans, the most things that I hear from blacks, those came before us, who faced some problem in 1970's or the 1960's who did not have any rights in this country. As Africans, the majority are people who came after the 1980's. By that time, governments have pressured organizations to reduce discrimination, so I haven't seen any discrimination in the public, maybe in the management positions, they may exist even now. Suppose, if you have a bachelor's degree, in order to compete with a white person who has the same degree, you have to have one degree more than him, but within the lower jobs, I don't know if that this exists.

This strategy results from both the first and second strategies in that once individuals impose their own counter-devaluation on the majority and reject the Canadian identity, then they are logically forced, at least, for purpose of consistent behavior, to reject the existence of

discrimination. The point is that acknowledging the existence of discrimination would imply the acceptance of a subordinate position along with its devalued identity.

Conclusion

The data in this research indicates that the degree of identification with the host environment is tied to the kind of identities that are available for the individual or the group as a whole. If the identities available in the host environment are not culturally and structurally compatible with that of the immigrant group, the strength of identification will be non-existent or very weak at best. Second, the degree of identification with the host environment depends on whether or not the identities available for the individual or the group are stigmatized or not. If they are stigmatized, then the strength of identification will be non-existent. The data indicate that the identity placements available for the Somali immigrants, be they refuge, immigrant, or black African, carry some level of stigma. And, as has been shown, the level of identification of the Somali immigrants with any of these is very weak.

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