

# Navigating panethnic categorization in the workplace

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# **Navigating panethnic categorisation in the workplace: a study of British Sri Lankan employees**

## **Abstract**

*A wide range of ethnic groups make up labour markets in most advanced economies. However, we lack a nuanced understanding of how specific groups experience minority ethnic identity within the workplace. This article addresses how an underrepresented minority ethnic group, British Sri Lankans, experience being assigned a broad Asian panethnic identity in their workplace, which is both positively and negatively stereotyped. Drawing on theories of social identity-based impression management and self-stereotyping we highlight how individuals responded to panethnic stereotypes imposed on them by both claiming and rejecting a broader Asian identity, and at the same time attempting to carve out a more distinctive British Sri Lankan identity. We advance knowledge of the multi-level nature of ethnic identity, demonstrating ways in which movement between superordinate and subordinate levels of ethnic identity can occur. Counter intuitively we suggest that individuals' positive self-stereotyping efforts may, over time, contribute to a more constricted career path that may leave them less prepared for senior management positions.*

## **Practitioner points**

- To help facilitate the development of genuinely inclusive organisations and maximise the use of available talent, practitioners need to be vigilant about the prevalence of ethnic group stereotypes in contemporary work-settings.
- Practitioners should not discourage conversations around ethnicity and culture at work, but they should make it clear that the aim is not to encourage the proliferation

of group stereotypes. Proliferation of group stereotypes may contribute to unconscious bias.

**Keywords:** ethnicity, panethnicity, identity, stereotypes, impression management, model minority, career

## **Introduction**

Ethnicity, defined in terms of socially constructed shared perceptions of common cultural heritage (Smith and Silva, 2011) frames an individual's identity, influencing how she is perceived within the organisation and how she conceptualises herself (Kenny and Briner, 2007). Ethnic identity becomes salient when individuals feel assigned to a particular ethnic group by others and/or when they experience awareness of a specific cultural heritage themselves (Kenny and Briner, 2013). Feeling 'ethnically assigned' and considered only in relation to one's ethnic group membership can be problematic. Individuals may worry about being seen as conforming to negative group stereotypes (Steele, 2010; Steele et al. 2002) and losing claims to their professional identity on the basis of this (Clair et al. 2012) and therefore experience a significant threat to their sense of self (Petriglieri, 2011).

A limited but emerging number of studies address how individuals respond to experiencing ethnic assignation at work. Whilst these studies provide valuable insights into how people mobilise various social identity-based impression management (SIM) strategies in response to negative ethnic stereotypes (Kenny and Briner, 2013; Roberts et al. 2008; Roberts et al. 2014), a limitation they share is their lack of attention to the effects of 'panethnic' assignation. When individuals are ethnically classified by others, they are often categorised

by broad panethnic categories such as Asian and Black rather than to their distinct ethnic group (Trytten et al. 2012). However, we have a limited understanding of how individuals from minority groups experience being ethnically assigned to a panethnic category that they may not wholly identify with, and one which also has positive stereotypes attached to it.

We address these significant theoretical and empirical lacunae by examining how a group of British Sri Lankan employees experience being ethnically assigned at work to a panethnic Asian identity that is both positively and negatively stereotyped. British Sri Lankans are an underrepresented minority ethnic group in the United Kingdom in contrast to better known Asian counterparts such as British Indians and British Pakistanis

We draw on ideas of social identity-based impression management (Roberts, 2005) and positive self-stereotyping (Latrofa et al. 2009) to gain a conceptual understanding of individuals' responses to ethnic identity assignation and understand the career implications of their responses. Given that organisational psychology as a discipline aims to improve the occupational and organisational experience of all workers (Kenny and Briner, 2007; Lukazewski and Stone, 2012), organisational psychologists must increase understanding of the distinct ways in which ethnic identity plays out at the workplace for different minority groups.

In what follows we will first review four literatures that we draw on to frame our study. We will then explain our use of social identity-based impression management and positive self-stereotyping and introduce our methodology and the ethnic group we study. Our findings provide rich insights into how members of an under-represented minority ethnic group

struggle to position themselves in relation to the panethnic identity assigned to them. We make three key contributions. First, we advance knowledge of the multi-level nature of ethnic identity, demonstrating ways in which movement between superordinate and subordinate levels of ethnic identity can occur. Second, we extend the model minority literature (Niwa et al. 2014; Rosenbloom and Way 2004; Fiske et al. 2002; Shen et al. 2011) by considering how individuals from a privileged minority group draw on intersecting social locations of ethnicity and social class (Cole, 2009; Holivino, 2010) to strategically construct themselves. Third, we develop existing understandings of minority ethnic careers by showing the potential of individuals' positive self-stereotyping efforts to lead to paradoxical career consequences for them. We conclude by highlighting the implications of our work.

### **Minority ethnic identity in organisations**

In the UK the term minority ethnicity is often used to refer to people from non-European backgrounds (Mason, 2000) who possess a 'visible' difference to the majority due to skin colour. Ethnic identity refers to the extent to which someone feels they belong to a particular ethnic group (Smith and Silva, 2011). It is a pervasive social identity (Jenkins, 2008) and one through which judgements about 'in-groups' and 'out-groups' are often made (Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

Minority ethnicity in organisations was traditionally examined through inter-group relations approaches (Proudfoot and Nkomo, 2006) which explored how individuals judge, categorise and relate to each other as in-group and out-group members (Shore et al., 2009), and how people from lower status groups attempt to align themselves to higher status groups (Hogg and Ridgeway, 2003). While early US research focused on black and white employees and

tended to be quantitative (Cox and Nkomo, 1990), more recent research adopts a qualitative approach to examine the experiences of a broader range of ethnic groups (Lui, 2016; Proudfoot and Nkomo, 2006). Scholars have explored how composite 'black and minority ethnic' (BME) groups (e.g. Atewologun and Sealey, 2014; Johnson and Kyriceau, 2011; Tomlinson et al., 2013) and employees from specific ethnic groups (e.g. Collins and Fakoussa, 2015; Lui, 2016; Rogers, 2013) experience minority ethnicity in the workplace.

A more limited number of scholars go further to provide a conceptual understanding of how ethnic identity plays out in work settings. As previously noted, Kenny and Briner (2013) argue that one way in which ethnic identity becomes salient is when individuals experience ethnic assignment and feel considered by others only as a member of a particular ethnic group. Ethnic assignment suggests to individuals that others may view them through a more limited and stereotypical ethnic lens that may contradict their own understanding of their strengths and capabilities (Kenny and Briner, 2013). It may even present a challenge to their sense of belonging in an occupation or particular profession (see Clair et al. 2012). Ethnic assignment can be a problematic experience and lead to identity threat i.e. - 'experiences appraised as indicating potential harm to the value, meanings or enactment of an identity' (Petriglieri, 2011: 644).

Scholars address how particular minority ethnic groups draw on various social identity-based impression management techniques to respond to negative stereotypes that often influence how they are perceived (Roberts et al. 2014; Roberts et al. 2008). Often people try to improve the way in which their group is regarded (e.g. Kenny and Briner, 2013). A significant limitation in existing understandings is that they fail to recognise that individuals

are often classed as belonging to broad ethnic categories such as Asian and Black rather than to their distinct ethnic group (Trytten et al. 2012). Arguably, these broad categories may be built around assumptions about the numerically dominant minority groups rather than underrepresented minority groups, and therefore people may not feel reflected within the meta categories that they are classified under (see Waters 1994, 1999; Fraga et al. 2012). However we have limited understanding of how minority group members experience ethnic assignation when they feel it is to a meta category that they do not wholly identify with. In what follows we review the literature on panethnic identity which addresses meta ethnic processes of how people are classed and how they identify.

### **Panethnic identity**

Coined by Espiritu (1992), panethnicity is a concept used to group together related ethnic minority groups perceived to share similar values, experiences (Louie, 2012) and/or a common regional origin. Local contexts characterised by ethnicity based exclusion are argued to influence panethnic identification (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001), encouraging individuals and groups to coalesce with others who experience similar treatment (Massey and Sanchez, 2010). Furthermore, second generation minority ethnic individuals who are more incorporated into life in their new contexts, are seen as more likely to identify panethnically as a way of belonging than their first generation predecessors (Masuoka 2006). Some scholars argue that residential proximity to similar minority groups leads to heightened panethnic identification (Kim and White, 2010). However this view is challenged by others who suggest that frequent interactions between similar ethnic groups serves to highlight differences, discouraging panethnic identification (Schachter, 2014; Bhatia, 2007; Brettell and Reed-Danahay, 2012; Joshi, 2006).

Panethnic identities are also imposed on people. Waters (1994; 1999) shows how West Indian migrants in the USA experience being assigned to the black American meta category. These individuals had highlighted their original ethnic heritage (e.g. Haitian or Jamaican) to try to shield themselves from the negative stereotypes associated with black people in America. Similarly Cuban Americans were found to be more likely to reject assigned Hispanic or Latino panethnic identities than Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans.

Notwithstanding the important insights offered in this literature, we identify two key limitations. First, the majority of scholarly work focuses on unravelling the factors that lead to people wholly identifying with or altogether rejecting panethnic labels, implying that this happens in a dichotomous manner. Indeed we have limited understanding of how people make sense of their ethnic identity with reference to their distinct heritage and the panethnic identities made available to them. Second, we have little understanding about the experience of feeling assigned to a panethnic identity which is underpinned by positive stereotypes. Certain minority groups are positioned as possessing a significant number of positive characteristics. However the literature on panethnicity has been slow to recognise the effects of positive stereotypes on processes of panethnic identification and assignation. In what follows we will review the literature on the model minorities which provides useful insights into the dynamics of minority groups who are positively stereotyped.

### **Model minorities**

A model minority is a demographic group perceived to have attained a higher degree of socioeconomic success than other minority groups. The concept is mainly used in the United



States where Asian Americans are seen as a model minority group who achieved success due to their perseverance, work ethic, determination to succeed and family centrality (Kiang, 2002). Although being portrayed as a model minority is arguably advantageous, scholars have argued that it elicits negative treatment from peers (Niwa et al. 2014; Rosenbloom and Way 2004), envy and social rejection (Fiske et al. 2002), and puts pressure on incumbents to live up to high standards (Shen et al. 2011). Furthermore this stereotype has the effect of homogenising the experiences of many minority ethnic individuals who may not necessarily share the same benefits as their more privileged counterparts (Wong and Halgin, 2006) and therefore disguising the problems that they experience. For example, South East Asian Americans have some of the lowest levels of education and household income of any ethnic group in the US but are often included in the model minority stereotype (Ngo and Lee, 2007).

It is important to recognise that model minority stereotypes are also underpinned by negative assumptions. For instance, Asian Americans are stereotyped as passive, lacking creative expression and social skills (Fiske et al. 2002) and showing a general unwillingness to take risks (Kiang et al. 2016). They therefore continue to be seen as 'foreigners' who are unsuitable for higher-level leadership roles (Susuki, 2002). Fiske et al. (2002) argues that the need to build cohesion with colleagues is especially salient to Asian Americans because they know that they are negatively stereotyped in ways that cast doubt on their social skills. Nevertheless most Asian Americans view the model minority image as advantageous (Thompson and Kiang, 2010; Whaley and Noel, 2013).

Stereotypes, whether positive or negative, means that perceivers are viewing incumbents as group members rather than as individuals (Siy and Cheryan, 2013; Emerson and Murphy, 2014). Some studies suggest that ethnic minorities experience higher levels of negative emotions even when others endorse positive stereotypes about their groups (Siy and Cheryan, 2013). The literature on model minorities usefully illuminates the paradoxical experiences of meta ethnic groups that are associated with positive stereotypes. However our knowledge of how distinct ethnic groups outside the US experience being perceived as a model minority is limited.

### **Minority ethnicity and career**

In the previous sections we reviewed literature on minority ethnic identity in organisations, panethnic identity and model minority communities. In this section we address the literature on minority ethnicity and career. A plethora of studies indicate that ethnic minorities in the UK are disadvantaged in their careers in terms of access to jobs (Kline, 2013; McGinnity and Lunn, 2011), pay structures (Zimdars, 2010), entry into prestigious areas of work and progression to senior posts (Jaques, 2013). As a numerical minority, black and minority ethnic (BME) employees often occupy a token status, experiencing heightened visibility, intense scrutiny and greater pressure to perform in their work (Kenny, 2018). Furthermore they are seen as receiving less organisational and peer support (Taylor, 2010) and having little access to mentoring (Law society, 2010) and challenging work tasks (Ross, 2004). Studies also indicate that BME employees struggle to enter powerful organisational networks dominated by the white majority (Tomlinson et al. 2012; Ross, 2004) and this acts as a significant career constraint. In part because they are often excluded from the spaces in

which such career advancing relationship building takes place such as sporting events, exclusive clubs and drinking engagements (Bolton and Muzio, 2007; Tomlinson et al. 2012).

A significant obstacle encountered by minority ethnic professionals is the cultural bias underpinning understandings of the ideal professional, the prototype for which is usually white Anglo Saxon (Alvesson and Billing, 2009). Although minority ethnic groups are stereotyped in different ways, organisational decision makers often view ethnic minority candidates as less competent and capable of leading organisations compared to white men (Rosette et al. 2008). Notwithstanding a few notable exceptions (e.g. Kenny and Briner, 2013; Lui, 2016), many studies do not address how specific minority ethnic groups account for interplay between their minority ethnic identity and their professional identity, and how they manage potential tensions between these. Indeed, studies tend to report on minority communities as a homogenous whole (Tomlinson et al. 2012; Ross, 2004) and fail to draw out the distinctive nature of various ethnic group's career experiences. We aim to further develop knowledge of the interplay between minority ethnic identity and career by using theories of social identity-based impression management and positive self-stereotyping to examine how a group of British Sri Lankan employees experience their minority ethnic identity within the Finance and IT sectors in the UK.

### **Social identity-based impression management**

Social identity-based impression management (SIM) is the process of strategically influencing the perception others have of one's own social identity in order to construct and project a desired identity (Roberts, 2005). SIM may be used to enhance one's professional image by increasing the likelihood of being associated with positively stereotyped social

identity groups and decreasing the likelihood of being associated with negative stereotypes about one's social identity groups. SIM is based on social identity theory (SIT) which addresses how individuals make sense of their group identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). When a group an individual belongs to, or is perceived to belong to, is at risk of denigration, this may be processed as an 'identity threat' (Roberts, 2005) triggering social identity-based impression management.

Roberts (2005) discusses SIM by distinguishing between two approaches: a) social re-categorisation and b) positive distinctiveness. Social re-categorisation involves decategorisation (trying to avoid categorisation by de-emphasising social identity and stressing uniqueness) or assimilation (highlighting similarity to the majority group and difference to one's own ethnic group). Positive distinctiveness strategies focus on increasing the status of one's own group through integration and/or confirmation. Integration involves "...attempts to incorporate a given social identity into one's professional identity by communicating the favourable aspects of the identity and challenging others' simplistic and negative stereotypes of that group" (Roberts, 2005: 696). Confirmation involves taking advantage of existing stereotypes about your group and using them to further your aims. Robert's framework is useful to understand how individuals manage a minority ethnic identity within diverse organisational settings responding to stereotypes and identity threats. These ideas recognise that the process of identity construction does not happen in a social vacuum, enabling us to take a contextually sensitive approach to gain a conceptual understanding of how a minority group constructs and communicates a distinct ethnic identity at their workplace.

Scholars have drawn on these ideas to examine the professional image construction activities of employees with various social identities (Little et al. 2015; Ward and Ravlin, 2017). Our focus is on the SIM strategies of employees from minority ethnic backgrounds. Roberts et al. (2008) found that women scientists and black medical students high in social identity centrality (gender and racial identity respectively) were more likely to exercise positive distinctiveness strategies. They also found that the black medical students high in centrality of an alternative and socially valued identity (in this case the medical profession) were more likely to use social re-categorisation. This research suggests SIM strategies are shaped by the importance of particular identities to an individual's sense of self. While the focus of SIM is largely on inter-personal aspects of identity management, some of this research addresses the influence of intra-personal constructs. Kenny and Briner (2013) examined how British Black Caribbean professionals respond to ethnic assignation and some of their use of SIM. They suggest some participants tried to de-emphasise their 'blackness' and increase their professional behaviour in a bid to improve the way they felt their ethnic group was perceived. Kenny and Briner (2013) argued that this approach may have combined elements of decategorisation with social identity integration.

In contrast to the studies above, Roberts et al (2014) examined racial identity impression management (RIM) strategies of a more positively stereotyped minority group: Asian Americans. They highlight affiliation and racial humour as strategies more likely to be used by their respondents who were negatively stereotyped as having poor social skills and were seen as 'foreign' (Susuki, 2002). The scholars argue these strategies aimed to increase cohesion with other ethnic groups.

In addition to demonstrating the distinct impression management strategies of different ethnic groups, Roberts' work demonstrates that social identity-based impression management techniques may have different outcomes for different ethnic groups. Their research on black medical students indicates that the use of enhancement or positive distinctiveness strategies is related to higher levels of career commitment and a lower intention to quit medical school (Roberts et al, 2008). Yet there appeared to be no link between the use of racial identity management strategies and job satisfaction for Asian American journalists (Robert et al, 2014). Because black medics encounter more negative stereotypes, the use of enhancement strategies is perceived to have more impact for them. Furthermore it is suggested that Asian Americans' use of avoidance tactics to de-emphasise their racial identity may be disadvantageous for them in terms of the loss of positive stereotypes (Roberts et al, 2014). These studies highlight the importance of gaining insights into the specific ways in which particular minority groups are stereotyped, the distinct strategies they choose to navigate these dynamics and the implications of these strategies. For groups who are also positively stereotyped, self-stereotyping may play a role in how they navigate organisations as a minority ethnic employee. We explore self-stereotyping below.

### **Self-stereotyping**

Self-stereotyping refers to the process of defining prototypical characteristics of a group one belongs to. It is drawn from self-categorization theory (SCT) which originates from social identity theory (Turner and Onorato, 1999) and recognizes that the way we categorise ourselves varies with in-group and out-group comparisons (Guimond et al., 2006). Comparisons between the self and outgroup are to seen as more likely to contain

prototypical features of one's group and thus more likely to lead to self-stereotyping (Guimond et al., 2006). SIT and self-categorization theory (SCT) research has found that people from 'low status' groups (Latrofa et al., 2012) and people who identify with stigmatised groups (Latrofa et al., 2009) are more likely to use stereotypes of those groups to describe themselves. Self-stereotyping also occurs when one's identity becomes salient (Cadinu et al., 2013) or is under threat (Latrofa et al., 2009).

Self-stereotypes can be positive or negative. Negative self-stereotypes can lead to unintentional fulfilment of the stereotype by targeted members, setting off a dangerous cycle of reinforcement and self-perpetuation (Ambady et al., 2004). Positive stereotypes (Czopp et al., 2015) are linked to group identification and a positive effect on well-being (Latrofa et al., 2009). However, positive stereotypes can also be depersonalizing, increasing pressure to perform well in the stereotyped domain and steering the individual away from opportunities that seem discordant to their group stereotype (Czopp et al., 2015). Self-stereotyping is associated with viewing success and failure as the result of individual dispositions rather than circumstances (Proudfoot and Kay, 2014), and therefore leading to individuals overlooking possible bias underpinning social structures and perceiving them as largely reasonable and just (Jost and Banaji, 1994). With respect to Asian minority groups, self-stereotypes that stress inherent competencies that are not always associated with management and leadership positions (such as technical competence rather than leadership skills) (Trytten et al., 2012) may lead to people accepting the status quo which sees Asians under-represented in leadership and management positions in Western organisations, and militate against change. We expect self-stereotyping to be useful to understanding how a minority group construct and communicate their ethnic identity

because it recognises that individuals are not only assigned prototypical group characteristics but can also impose both positive and negative prototypical group characteristics on themselves, which may subsequently shape their career-related behaviour.

### **British Sri Lankans**

In the UK, people of Asian descent make up 7% of the population (Office for National Statistics, 2013). The Sri Lankan-born community in the England and Wales is only around 127,000 people (ONS, 2014). This is in contrast to other migrant Asian communities such as British Indians (1.45 million) and British Pakistanis (1.2 million) in the UK (ONS, 2013). The first main wave of immigration from Sri Lanka occurred between the 1950s to the 1980s. In the 1960s, a large community of Sri Lankans migrated to the UK for employment opportunities. Understaffing in the National Health Service opened up the opportunity for many Sri Lankan doctors to find employment in the UK. The second wave of immigration happened in the 1980s with the start of the Sri Lankan civil war which resulted in many individuals from the Tamil minority seeking asylum in the UK. The third wave of immigration is still ongoing with professionals coming to the UK on highly skilled migrant visas. The Sri Lankan community is relatively skilled and educated (Anitha and Pearson, 2013).

As with other South Asian cultures, Sri Lankan culture is largely collective, prioritising strong community bonds (Kailasipathy and Metz, 2012) and respect towards elders (Herath, 2015). Buddhism is a key social institution in Sri Lanka, forming a core part of the national identity of the Sinhalese, the major ethnic group in Sri Lanka. Despite these conventional characteristics, Sri Lanka distinguishes itself from other South Asian countries in terms of the



relative social status of women in the country. For instance, the population had an adult literacy rate of 92.63% in 2015 (Department of Census and Statistics, 2015) and there is no significant gender disparity in the country's literacy rates. Within the UK, the Sri Lankan diaspora attempts to maintain a distinctive identity. People get together at the numerous networks of Sri Lankan Buddhist temples throughout the country, celebrating national events of significance and teaching their children about traditions and customs. However, the scholarly community knows very little about Sri Lankans as a group. Indeed, they are often subsumed within 'Asian other' in official categorisation. Our interest in this community is their experience of minority ethnicity as a distinct community. We develop this interest by answering the following research question:

*How do British Sri Lankan employees construct and communicate their ethnic identity at the workplace as an under-represented minority ethnic group, and what are the implications for their careers?*

## **Research design**

Our study is based on one-to-one interviews conducted with 30 British Sri Lankan early career employees who worked in Information Technology, Auditing, Accountancy, and Investment Banking. Respondents worked for FTSE 100 organisations as analysts and engineers. Snowball sampling was used to identify participants. We were interested in accessing a group of British Sri Lankans and, as this was such an under-represented ethnic group, the first author, who was born and raised in Sri Lanka, mobilized her personal contacts in the Sri Lankan diaspora to access Sri Lankan British professionals in the IT and finance sectors. Employees from South Asian backgrounds are over-represented in the UK

tech industry making up 9% of its workforce (Tech Partnership, 2016). They are also over-represented in the financial and insurance service industries making up 10% of employees in that sector (Department for Work and Pensions, 2015). In these occupational sectors where Asian employees are well-represented, we might expect a higher propensity on the part of individual employees to construct and maintain a distinct minority ethnic identity (see Schachter, 2014; Bhatia, 2007).

The respondents we recruited were aged 21-26 years. None of them were in people management roles (see Table 1 for more demographic details about respondents). All respondents were born in England and their parents were professionals. Most respondents' parents had migrated in the 1980's to work for the NHS as doctors. They were educated in well-regarded comprehensive, grammar and independent schools and had studied at leading (i.e. 'research intensive') universities within the UK. They belonged to the dominant ethnic group in Sri Lanka – the Sinhalese and identified themselves as Buddhists. None of them were married. More demographic details of respondents are available in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

The first author conducted the interviews. These were held at restaurants and coffee shops close to respondents' workplaces and lasted for an hour. In the course of their interview respondents were asked to reflect on their ethnic identity, explaining how they perceived themselves and how others perceived them. We then asked them about their perceptions of prevailing stereotypes and the extent to which they saw themselves as confirming to them. In turn, respondents provided insights into identities that they claimed, identities

they rejected and those they attempted to reconstruct. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The main data analysis technique was template analysis. This involves organising and analysing textual data according to themes. We chose template analysis because it is an effective method of reducing large amounts of interview text to a relevant and manageable form easier for evaluation.

The first level of coding was descriptive. We examined the data, looking for emergent themes, and for key differences and similarities between them (Gioia et al. 2012). We gave these 'codes' descriptive labels, and assigned data extracts to them. As we worked through the transcripts, we reviewed these descriptors and the data within them, amending them accordingly, to ensure both consistency and manageability. From these descriptive codes we developed more generic, more conceptual second order themes (Silverman, 2015). See Table 2 for the coding template.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Our analysis further developed as we considered our respondents' use of second order conceptual codes. To cite an example, we found that people drew on positive Asian stereotypes to position themselves as technical experts, and drew on their Sri Lankan heritage to reject stereotypes of backwardness (i.e. unprogressiveness). When we noted such dynamics we further explored them across all the transcripts. Respondents were given pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

## **Findings**

All of our respondents experienced ethnic assignation (Kenny and Briner, 2013) in terms of feeling assigned to a panethnic Asian identity. In addition they were often assumed to be Indian or Pakistani as opposed to Sri Lankan. In what follows we first address how participants made sense of the panethnic identity imposed on them and the associated stereotypes. We then draw on SIM and self-stereotyping to explore participants' responses to ethnic assignation.

### ***Panethnic assignation in the British IT and Finance sectors***

The panethnic identity assigned to our respondents had both positive and negative stereotypes. Participants felt positioned as ultra-conservative, backward (Fiske et al. 2002) and clannish (showing preference for in-group members over out-group members), while also seen as technically competent and hardworking (Kiang et al. 2016). Female respondents in particular felt that they were often stereotyped as ultra-conservative by colleagues and clients who did not know them on a personal basis:

*There have been so many times that so many people at work have asked me 'do you drink' and I am like yeah why are you just asking me and not anybody else. Some people have asked 'is it okay with your religion' and I am like yeah I don't even have a religion. It's disturbing on a personal level you know – you feel like a stranger (Diane)*

Financial analyst Diane highlights how, as a person of Asian heritage, she is stereotyped as religious and backward in line with dominant perceptions of Asian Muslim communities (Allen, 2012). Diane worked in an audit firm so it was essential to her progression that she was perceived as being able to build relationships with clients and bring money to the firm (Whiting et al, 2015). From this perspective, being seen as religious and backward could act

as a barrier to being recommended for leadership positions (Susuki, 2002). Furthermore the stereotyping she experienced made Diane feel like an outsider. She and many others were concerned about the career implications of such stereotyping and specifically what it meant for their chances of securing senior positions:

*I always think – will I ever be able to be partner of our prestigious firm if they think that I am backward like most south Asian migrants out there. It's worrying you know*  
(Warna)

Warna worked as an auditor for a prestigious firm. He described senior partners as highly social individuals. Therefore, he worried about how perceptions of backwardness would influence his chances of progressing to partnership in the future (Steele, 2010; Steele et al. 2002).

Respondents from the IT sector in particular, talked about being perceived as clannish or highly likely to favour one's own ethnic community over others. Network engineer Pula explains:

*I was talking about a job to one of my friends at work – a job at another division which I was interested in applying to and he was sure that I will get it just because the manager was an Asian guy and they prefer their own people* (Pula).

Pula's colleague thought that he would get the job due to his ethnicity rather than competence. Pula highlights how Asian people are perceived as being likely to disregard

meritocracy and award jobs to members of their own community. A number of male respondents in particular expressed their disgust at this perception:

*It's amazing that people from my own country might think that I am nepotistic. It's embarrassing to be seen as so backward and even disheartening sometimes*  
(Madura)

Systems architect Madura was annoyed by stereotypes of nepotism. Indeed such unmeritocratic representation is disadvantageous to progress to senior positions. Significantly, this perception appeared to be more prominent in the IT field in which large numbers of Indian migrants worked.

Notably there were also positive aspects to the stereotypical Asian identity. Asian people were seen as hardworking, competent and as possessing exceptional analytical skills, echoing existing stereotypes of model minorities (Kiang et al. 2016).

*I can remember my manager looking at one my work one day and saying 'you are brilliant with the numbers, how do you do it'. 'The Indian community can do wonders with numbers. He was also saying that Asian people are very hardworking in general, they get what they want somehow or the other regardless* (Amrita)

In the FTSE 100 company that financial analyst Amrita worked for, she was mistaken for being Indian. Many other respondents had similar experiences. However they did not experience negative emotions when others endorsed positive stereotypes about their groups (see Cheryan and Bodenhausen, 2000). Rather they felt that stereotypes of technical

competence and hard work were advantageous from a career point of view (Thompson and Kiang, 2010; Whaley and Noel, 2013) because they increased the likelihood of being assigned to critical projects and/or being given challenging tasks. However, as Amrita's excerpt highlights, there could sometimes be the insinuation of instrumentality tied to praise for hard work - implying that people who work hard place profound emphasis on reaching their own personal goals with less concern for the social costs.

### Navigating panethnic stereotypes

In contrast to previous findings (Kenny and Briner, 2013; Roberts et al. 2014), in our data, decategorisation (and assimilation) were not popular SIM strategies. Notwithstanding four notable exceptions, 26 out of 30 respondents engaged in both integration and confirmation. In what follows, we examine this.

### Integrating and confirming

Integration involves "...attempts to incorporate a given social identity into one's professional identity by communicating the favourable aspects of the identity and challenging others simplistic and negative stereotypes of that group." (Roberts, 2005: 696). Respondents integrated by drawing on their Asian identity and/or Sri Lankan identity to claim positive aspects of panethnic stereotypes while highlighting their distinct Sri Lankan heritage to reject negative panethnic aspects.

Network administrator Lucky integrated by drawing on his Sri Lankan heritage to reject stereotypes of clannishness, highlighting instead his 'collective orientation' (Niles, 1998) which he attributed to being Asian:

*I don't stick to only people from my ethnic community. I have close relationships with most people. Even my colleagues – I invite them home and talk to them openly. My relationships are not surface level and they are long term – that's my Asian part. But I am not exclusive – the Sri Lankan community is not at all exclusive – they mostly marry outside the community. Buddhism, which we follow has no rules. Most of my colleagues are from different ethnic backgrounds. I have developed very strong relationships with them. It becomes easy to work if you have strong relationships with people (Lucky)*

Lucky not only stereotyped the Asian community as collective (Adya, 2008) but he also applied the stereotype to himself implying that collectiveness enables him to build meaningful relationships at the workplace. He thus highlighted the consistency between his Asian identity and his professional identity, especially in terms of potential to provide support to others (House et al. 1988). However, he distinguished between collectiveness and clannishness. He drew on his Sri Lankan identity to make the point that as a Sri Lankan he is not clannish as other Asians might be. In other words, he attempted to distinguish individuals of Sri Lankan heritage from other Asian communities in Britain by positively stereotyping the former (Czopp et al. 2015).

Fana, trainee systems engineer, drew on her Sri Lankan heritage to reject stereotypes of self-centeredness, while claiming the hardworking and ambitious aspects of the Asian identity assigned to her:



*I work very hard – in this industry you have to work hard to get on. Asian people are very hard workers. I want to get to the top and I do whatever it takes – but I won't step on anybody else or focus on only my concerns. I am a good colleague and I care about others at work – I am a Buddhist after all so I focus on the collective good although I work very hard to realise my ambitions (Fana)*

Although Fana drew on an Asian identity to position herself as hardworking and ambitious and therefore well placed to progress a career in investment banking, she highlighted that she is not instrumental or self-centred in line with her Sri Lankan Buddhist identity.

A number of other respondents similarly drew on their identity as Buddhists to reject the primacy of individual achievement, while highlighting their 'Asian work ethic' (Kiang et al. 2016). Carefully positioning Buddhism as a philosophy practiced by many westerners (Nyanatiloka, 2010), they made the point that they would never negatively impact another person, although they would work hard to achieve their goals:

*I am a very hard worker – I give anything my best shot, that's a defining characteristic of us Asians I think. But I would never use anyone as a means to end to get what I want or stop caring about people in the process. That's not consistent with Buddhism which is the grandest philosophy on earth practiced by many westerners (Anishya)*

Anishya's statement highlights how minority ethnic employees can use other group identities (in this case religion) to attenuate the effect of negative stereotypes within the

workplace. In attempting to integrate an Asian work ethic to her professional identity, Anishya drew on her identity as a Buddhist to reject stereotypes of achievement at any price. Furthermore, by highlighting the adoption of Buddhism by 'Westerners', she aligned herself to the British.

As we noted before, respondents who integrated also engaged in confirmation, taking advantage of existing stereotypes about their meta group and using them to further their aims (Roberts, 2005). Individuals drew on the Asian technical expert stereotype to position themselves as exceptionally competent. Computer architect Marga explains how he is best placed to achieve accelerated career progression:

*I am very strong analytically. Most Asian people are very strong analytically. In IT, all the difficult programming is done by Indian migrants. Our technical skills are untouchable. My ambition is to reach the highest possible level in my career. I think I have what it takes. I have been consistently ranked above target (Marga).*

Marga not only positively stereotypes the technical skills of the Asian community but also claims that identity to position himself. On one hand Marga and many others believed that exceptional technical skills guaranteed one's career progression. On the other hand, they suggested that perceived technical expertise might have a paradoxical effect on promotion. While respondents were optimistic about their prospects, almost half of them talked about being asked to 'look at the big picture' and not get too tangled up in details. Senior analyst Danuka explains:

*My feedback has been excellent, my analysis is really good. But I have to work on moving from analysis to look at the big picture which apparently should come through experience. I am confident of my career prospects. My boss always says that I can do wonders with numbers (Danuka).*

Notably many of our respondents mentioned that they needed to look at the 'big picture'. However it was not clear whether they indeed did over-emphasise analytical details in the process of trying hard to live up to their identity as technical specialists or whether their technical expert identity had led bosses to believe that they over-focus on analysis.

It is also notable that three respondents from the IT sector and one from finance felt that they were rather slow to be nominated for promotion even though their performance reviews are excellent:

*My reviews have been excellent so far but I have been slow to be promoted. I don't know why this is (Warna)*

Warna was adamant that he satisfied all the criteria to progress to senior auditor. While he admitted that promotion is generally slow in his organisation for all employees, his technical expert identity appeared to make him feel that he deserves to get promoted sooner than others.

Programmer Shantha similarly talked about his stagnant progression:

*I should have been promoted a year ago. I very much deserve it I think. But it hasn't been happening. I am an expert, everybody knows this. I deserve to be recognised* (Shantha).

Shantha firmly believed that he deserved some form of recognition from the company for his technical expertise. While our research focuses on the perceptions of respondents as opposed to interpretations of senior managers or third parties to the study, we might wonder if slow progression is an effect of the technical expertise identity which positions incumbents as excellent for their existing job, but less suitable for roles further down the pipeline which require a broader range of skills, especially the ability to 'think outside the box'. Or else, internalising a technical expert identity may have led to incumbents feeling entitled to an accelerated rate of progress than others.

Notably, a number of respondents drew on social class to strategically manage their ethnic identity by simultaneously claiming positive stereotypes and rejecting negative ones. Echoing existing understandings of socially privileged individuals (Black and Stone, 2005; Diemer and Ali, 2008; Lapor and Heppner, 2009), our respondents spoke about their high aspirations for career which were significantly shaped by their professional parents' expectations. Furthermore, they also talked about how they learned to manage their careers from a young age, doing what was needed to achieve their goals. In Chethiya's words:

*I obviously want to climb up to the top – my parents expect that from me too. My father is a consultant doctor. He did very well. Since I was small, I learned that you*

*have to work hard, understand where you are and what you need to do to get to where you want to go (Chethiya).*

Similarly Warna notes:

*I do my best and try hard. I have always tried hard – it's part of my upbringing which helped me to do very well at school and university. I have big hopes for my career –in an Asian family achievement is expected. And I can't do anything less because I have to keep up with the rest of my family members (Warna).*

In this insightful excerpt, Warna makes the point that Asian families place high emphasis on achievement. Furthermore he also states that his family taught him to work hard to achieve his goals and that he feels the need to keep up with the career achievements of his privileged family members. Warna drew on the intersecting social locations of ethnicity and social class (Holivino, 2010) to explain his career aspirations and his general approach towards career. He desired progression and was ready to do what was necessary to achieve his career goals and fulfil his family's expectations in the process. Many other respondents echoed Warna's sentiments. Based on this data, we argue that individuals' strategic approach to managing their ethnic identity through integration and confirmation, may be shaped by their privileged social status.

### Assimilation

Three female respondents in our sample talked about assimilating, highlighting their similarity to British culture and difference to Asians. All three individuals were new entrants

to their organisations. Thus we might expect them to feel a greater need to fit in. Furthermore, in contrast to other respondents, they were in relationships with white British men. On this basis, we might expect them to feel a sense of closeness to British culture. These women positioned themselves as 'die-hard drinkers' and 'partygoers' in line with what they saw as stereotypical representations of British youth, and attempted to overcome stereotypes of ultra-conservativeness and backwardness attributed to them. In Janaki's words:

*I drink like a horse – that's my typical Britishness. I hail from an island after all. In a tourist island drinks and parties are common occurrences. It is completely different to the ultra-conservative Indian Pakistani culture although it is a south Asian country. I am quite tight with the office crowd. Whenever we need to do entertaining at work, I do it, because I quite like socializing. It helps in this field because we have to keep internal customers happy and build relationships with them. You have to liaise with people from logistics, financial accounting all sorts of areas (Janaki).*

Senior analyst Janaki's assimilation effects involved reference to her Sri Lankan heritage. She aligned her British partygoer identity to her Sri Lankan heritage – emphasizing the entertainment culture in a tourist island and its impact on people's open-mindedness. Furthermore in contrast to previous findings of minority ethnic individuals' assimilation efforts (see Roberts et al. 2014), Janaki drew distinctions between her own distinct ethnic heritage and other Asian communities, reinforcing negative stereotypes of the latter.

Financial accountant Maya adopted a similar approach:

*I party like four days a week. Alcohol swims in Sri Lankan circles – we are party people. It is probably the island effect which is very similar to British culture (Maya).*

Maya similarly attempted to create a British Sri Lankan identity for herself. From a career point of view, it is notable that constructing oneself as a heavy drinker and partygoer might not be particularly helpful, as it may suggest a level of irresponsibility incompatible with senior management.

It is important to consider why respondents drew on their Sri Lankan heritage to explain their similarity to British culture. On one hand, this may reflect incumbents' strong identification with their Sri Lankan roots. Or else, these individuals may not have fully identified with the panethnic identity they felt was assigned to them, leading to their propensity to distinguish themselves from what they saw as negative stereotypes more applicable to Indian and Pakistani communities (Waters, 1999). Furthermore as a relatively unknown group, British Sri Lankans had leverage to construct Sri Lankan culture in the way that they wished. This could have also influenced respondents' propensity to draw on their Sri Lankan heritage to construct themselves.

It is also important to reflect on the gendered nature of assimilation. As noted before, all three respondents who assimilated in our sample were women. People with intersecting identities (Cole, 2009) may be seen as non-prototypical members of their identity group. Therefore minority ethnic women located at the intersection of ethnicity and gender may be more likely to escape the stereotypes targeted at prototypical members - to at least some

extent (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach, 2008). From this perspective, women may be better able to assimilate into the majority group than men who are marked as prototypical members (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach, 2008).

### Decategorisation

Only one respondent talked about attempting to avoid categorisation altogether. He was a male new entrant to an IT organisation:

*For some reason or the other they think that I spend all my time with my community just because I happen to know a lot of people around who happen to be brown – it's pure coincidental. They just assume that I like to spend time with other Asian people. I have never thought of my ethnicity. I focus on the person. I am curious, learning oriented, I read a lot. I travel – and I seek people who have similar interests. I believe that we need to broaden our horizons. This is important for any professional – broadening your horizon involves thinking of the different ways people can do things. In the IT field it is constantly about innovation and you need to think differently all the time (Akila)*

By portraying himself as a well-read individual who travels the world to further enhance his cultural knowledge, Akila constructed an intellectual identity for himself which he positioned as congruent with professional work in the IT sector. Furthermore he rejected stereotypes of clannishness by making the point that he sought friends with similar intellectual interests. As a man, Akash may have considered himself as too 'ethnically marked' to engage in assimilation, and therefore may have resorted to decategorisation as a



way of fitting in to his new organisation. As a new entrant, we might also expect to him to have less awareness and experience of ethnicity based stereotyping in the organisational context, to engage in more sophisticated SIM strategies such as integration and/or confirmation strategies.

The SIM strategies adopted by British Sri Lankan employees to navigate panethnic assignation in the British Finance and IT sectors is summarised in Table 3.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

### **Theoretical implications**

We drew on ideas of social identity-based impression management (Roberts, 2005) and self-stereotyping (Guimond et al., 2006) to examine how a group of British Sri Lankan employees experience ethnic assignation (Kenny and Briner, 2013) in the IT and Finance sectors in the UK. Based on our findings we make three key theoretical contributions. First, we advance knowledge of the multi-level nature of ethnic identity and demonstrate ways in which movement between superordinate and subordinate levels of ethnic identity can occur. Through confirmation strategies (Roberts, 2005) our respondents claimed positive Asian panethnic stereotypes complementary to their career aims. Simultaneously, they used integration strategies by drawing on an Asian panethnic identity and/or a Sri Lankan ethnic identity to claim positive *aspects* of panethnic stereotypes and highlighting their distinct Sri Lankan heritage to reject negative aspects. Respondents identified both similarities (Masuoka 2006; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001) and differences (Waters, 1999) between their Sri Lankan heritage and their Asian identity. Close proximity to other Asians in the ethnically

diverse IT and Finance sectors may have served to heighten sense of difference (Bhatia, 2007; Brettell, 2005; Schachter, 2014), although they also identified commonalities with them. The simultaneous sense of similarity and difference may have led to individuals' social identity -based impression management (SIM) strategies being characterised by movement between superordinate and subordinate levels of ethnic identity (e.g. Asian and Sri Lankan). By considering panethnic identity (by Espiritu, 1992) as a significant variable in our study, we were able to illuminate how people are stereotyped at the superordinate level, and how they move down to a subordinate level to reject negative stereotypes (Walters, 1994; 1999). We also show how they move upwards to the superordinate level and downwards to a subordinate level to claim positive aspects. Thus the construction of an ethnic identity involved dynamic movement between a superordinate Asian panethnic identity and a subordinate Sri Lankan ethnic identity.

While studies have addressed how SIM strategies are used by individuals to claim and reject aspects of ethnic identity (Kenny and Briner, 2013; Roberts, 2008; Roberts et al. 2014) they have depicted this as a single level phenomena. We extend prevailing understandings by providing insights into the multi-level use of integration and confirmation strategies in ethnic identity construction. Psychological studies of ethnic identity recognize that ethnic group labels are not always fixed and can occur at different levels of specificity (Phinney and Ong, 2007). By considering panethnic identity as a significant variable in our study, we were able to illuminate the multilevel nature of ethnic identity, answering calls for deeper understandings of how minority ethnic employees make sense of their ethnic identity in the world of work (Kenny and Briner, 2007). As cross border movement continues to rise and labour markets become more diverse with the entrance of second and third generation

minorities, we might expect more complexity and nuance around how people deal with ethnic identities.

Our second contribution is to the model minority literature (Niwa et al. 2014; Rosenbloom and Way 2004; Fiske et al. 2002; Shen et al. 2011), considering how privileged minority ethnic individuals draw on intersecting social locations of ethnicity and social class (Cole, 2009; Holivino, 2010) to strategically construct themselves. Drawing on their ethnic background and privileged social class status, our respondents explained their desire to progress in career and their readiness to do what is required to achieve their career goals. We argue that this orientation reflects in the way individuals strategically managed their ethnic identity in the workplace, moving up to a superordinate level to claim positive panethnic stereotypes, while drawing on their distinct ethnic heritage (which they saw as occupying a relatively better and/or rather unknown position) to reject negative aspects.

Examining minority ethnicity at the intersection of social class privilege, in a notable study Atewologun and Sealy (2014) suggest that socially privileged minority ethnic professionals experience heightened pride and self-confidence and they work actively to thrive in the intersecting social locations that they occupy. Other research studies similarly indicate that socially privileged individuals are generally more aspirational and motivated (Black and Stone, 2005; Diemer and Ali, 2008; Lapour and Heppner, 2009) than their socially disadvantaged counterparts (Archer et al. 2007), and that individuals from Asian backgrounds place high emphasis on career achievement (Shen et al. 2011). Our findings resonate with these arguments, providing specific insights into how socially privileged

minority ethnic individuals draw on intersecting ethnic and social class identities (Holivino, 2010) to strategically construct themselves in the workplace.

Striking here is individuals' use of positive distinctiveness strategies (Roberts, 2005) as opposed to avoiding categorisation altogether or attempting to into assimilate the majority. The prominence of positive distinctiveness strategies in this sample may reflect the significant positive stereotypes attached to model minority communities (Thompson and Kiang, 2010; Whaley and Noel, 2013; Shen et al. 2011) and individuals' reluctance to completely detach themselves from these aspects (Lui, 2016). Furthermore, because people were stereotyped as different, assimilation may not be an easy endeavour for especially men who are marked as prototypical members (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach, 2008). While the model minority literature provides useful insights into paradoxical experiences of minority ethnic individuals who are stereotyped both positively and negatively (Fiske et al. 2002; Kiang, 2002), it does not explicitly consider how minority ethnic individuals draw on intersecting ethnic and social class identities to construct themselves. Considering how a model minority group's ethnic identity construction may be shaped by intersecting ethnic and social class locations (Cole, 2009; Holivino, 2010), we make a significant contribution to this literature.

Third, we show the potential of individuals' positive self-stereotyping efforts (Czopp et al. 2015) to lead to paradoxical career consequences for them. Our respondents attempted to reinforce the belief that they, as Asians, are inherently technical and hardworking (Kiang et al. 2016). They embraced these 'positive' stereotypes as they confirmed that they possess valuable strengths that should assist the development of their careers. While it is extremely

important to demonstrate technical competency and an appetite for hard work in their occupational fields, if individuals subscribe to the trope of inherent Asian strengths lying in technical competence and capacity for hard work, their other strengths may not be nurtured in the process of trying to live up to their technical expert identity. From a different perspective, aligning hard work and technical competency to their Asian ethnicity, may result in individuals unwittingly feeding into a larger trope about their lack of eventual suitability for more senior roles which require a broader range of skills (Susuki, 2002; Post, 2009). Stereotypes serve a purpose, including system justification (Cichocka et al. 2015). If British Sri Lankan employees can be deposited into quality jobs that match their technical expertise, it may suit decision makers to make use of these stereotypes to not promote them to more powerful positions. While our findings are based on the views of respondents rather than managers, we argue that people who position themselves as technical experts may be less likely to be seen as natural contenders for roles that rely on a broader array of strengths. While scholars provide insights into negative (Rosette et al. 2008) and positive stereotypes (Kiang et al. 2016) associated with various minority ethnic identities, and recognise the incompatibility between minority ethnic identity and professional image (Roberts et al. 2005), there has been less focus on the career implications of individuals' attempts to navigate these tensions. In the case of more positively stereotyped minority groups, scholars have argued that Asian Americans' use of avoidance tactics to de-emphasise their racial identity is disadvantageous for their careers in terms of the loss of positive stereotypes (Roberts et al, 2014). We extend these understandings by suggesting that individuals' attempts to draw on positive stereotypes to positively self-stereotype themselves (Guimond et al. 2006) are also paradoxically disadvantageous because it can steer them away from opportunities that seem discordant

to their group stereotype (Czopp et al., 2015) and lead to them unwittingly restricting themselves to a specialized niche.

These findings contribute to the broader efforts of organisational psychology to address social issues such as workplace diversity, inclusion, and the career progression of minority ethnic employees. We advance knowledge on how ethnic stereotypes are claimed and rejected and how identities are positioned and projected by a particular group of professionals. Furthermore we also draw attention to the potentially damaging effects of even positive sounding stereotypes in the organisational sphere. We expect this knowledge to provide insights into how to better support minority ethnic employees, including those whom the organisation may view as being relatively advantaged by being considered to have specific valued competencies.

### **Practical implications**

Our findings have important implications for ethnic minority careerists and practitioners. Ethnic minority careerists should be wary of internalising positive stereotypes associated with the model minority myth (Shen et al. 2011; Yoo et al. 2010). As a result of stereotype internalization, people may assume that they should behave in ways consistent with the general stereotypes and thereby end up camouflaging their individual distinctiveness in the process. In other words, people may draw attention away from important individual attributes such as personality and team working skills that are crucial to build solid relationships in the workplace and to demonstrate potential for leadership.

By drawing on ethnic stereotypes to position themselves as specialists, respondents arguably enhanced their professional identity (Roberts, 2005). However by claiming, this particular ethnic identity, they risk reinforcing the idea that they belong in a particular ethnic niche and they are less suitable for roles that demand a broader range of skills such as senior management. The data shows that these young careerists are very concerned about their progression. This is in line with their status as middle class careerists and with research which indicates that, in the STEM fields at least, South Asian (migrant) employees may have higher levels of management aspiration than their Caucasian counterparts (Post, 2009). Thus by colluding with the technical expert stereotype there is a risk of negative consequences for all parties in terms of unrealised career aims, higher turnover and under-utilised talent.

We recognise the general difficulties and some of the challenges inherent in both not wishing to reinforce a positive stereotype, but feeling that there may be benefits from doing so. However we advise caution in this respect as for some individuals, although such reinforcement might facilitate career success in certain niches, they can shut down opportunities in others. Organisations also risk missing out on talented senior managers.

Practitioners should raise awareness of ethnicity based stereotyping within workplaces and its detrimental effects. This is important because it is psychologically healthier for people to view their cultural and professional identities as compatible than oppositional (Bell and Nkomo, 2001). While conversations around ethnicity and culture at work should not be discouraged, it should be made clear that the aim is not to encourage the proliferation of group stereotypes. Proliferation is dangerous because it may contribute to unconscious bias.

### **Limitations and directions for further research**

Our findings are based on a small sample of highly skilled early career British Sri Lankans and we realise that our respondents' experiences may not reflect the experiences of all other under-represented minority ethnic groups. Having said that, the purpose of our study was not to yield generalisable understandings but rather to provide conceptual insights into how an under-represented group makes sense of how they are perceived as an ethnic minority and how they wish to be perceived without their identity being subsumed by their membership of the larger minority group they belong to.

With regard to future research, scholars should examine the experiences of other under-represented minority groups to further theoretical understandings ethnic identity. It is important to uncover the nature of panethnic stereotypes apportioned to other under-represented groups, the extent to which incumbents claim and reject these, and whether negotiating distinction is important to them and, if so, how they go about doing this and with what implications. These understandings are important to develop our understanding of panethnicity, especially as it relates to organisational diversity and inclusion.

Studies should also examine how recent first generation migrant employees experience their ethnic identity in the workplace. In contrast to their second generation counterparts, these individuals arguably feel more strongly connected to their destinations of origin and may have a reduced sense of connection to the majority group. Hence it will be instructive to understand their experiences of ethnic assignation in the workplace.



Finally it is important to examine the extent to which senior post-holders encourage the proliferation of group stereotypes in organisations. In our data, managers felt able to make statements about 'Asians' and 'Indians' as a group, possibly because they reflected positive features of these groups. We call for consideration of whether and how conversations around ethnicity and culture in the workplace contribute to the proliferation of group stereotypes. Likewise we question the extent to which managers are reflexive about ethnicity-based bias (Post, 2009). We argue for the importance of increasing understanding of these issues because the proliferation of ethnic stereotypes could contribute to unconscious bias.

## **Conclusion**

We focused on how a group of British Sri Lankan employees make sense of their ethnic identity in the workplace. We provided insights into how people struggle to distinguish themselves from and show affiliation to the panethnic identities assigned to them, while also drawing on their distinct ethnic heritage and aligning themselves with the majority. Illuminating how people mobilise ethnic identities at different levels to construct for themselves a successful professional image, we argued that individuals' positive self-stereotyping efforts may lead to paradoxical career consequences.

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**Table 1: Demographic details of respondents**

	Gender	Sector	Age	Marital status	Parents	Current designation	SIM approach
Diane	Female	Financial Services	21	In a relationship with a white British person	Father: doctor Mother: stay at home parent	Analyst	Assimilation
Pula	Male	Information technology	26	Single	Father: lawyer Mother: stay at home parent	Network engineer	Integration and Confirmation
Madura	Male	Information technology	26	In a relationship with a fellow Sri Lankan	Both parents doctors	Systems architect	Integration and Confirmation
Amrita	Female	Accounting	24	Single	Father: lawyer Mother: stay at home parent	Financial analyst	Integration and Confirmation
Anishya	Female	Investment banking	23	Single	Father: doctor Mother: stay at home parent	Analyst	Integration and Confirmation
Akila	Male	Information technology	25	Single	Father: engineer Mother: lecturer	Programmer	Decategorisation
Chethiya	Male	Investment banking	26	In a relationship	Father: doctor	Analyst	Integration and Confirmation

				with a British Asian	Mother: Accountant		
Janaki	Female	Accounting	21	In a relationship with a White British person	Father: lawyer Mother: stay at home parent	Senior Analyst	Assimilation
Maya	Female	Accounting	21	In a relationship with a White British person	Father: doctor Mother: stay at home parent	Senior financial accountant	Assimilation
Lucky	Male	Information technology	25	In a relationship with a Sri Lankan	Father: lawyer Mother: lawyer	Network administrator	Integration and Confirmation
Fana	Female	Information technology	23	In a relationship with a non-British white European	Father: engineer Mother: stay at home parent	Trainee systems engineer	Integration and Confirmation
Marga	Female	Information technology	22	In a relationship with a British Asian	Father: engineer Mother: business woman	Computer architect	Integration and Confirmation
Danuka	Male	Investment banking	23	Single	Father: Accountant Mother: stay at home parent	Senior analyst	Integration and Confirmation
Jasmin	Female	Accounting	21	In a relationship with a white British person	Father: doctor Mother: stay at home parent	Management Accountant	Integration and Confirmation
Warna	Male	Financial services	26	In a relationship with a non-British white European	Both parents doctors	Auditor	Integration and Confirmation
Shanili	Female	Investment banking	25	In a relationship	Father: lecturer	Analyst	Integration and Confirmation



				with a white British person	Mother: lecturer		
Shantha	Male	Information technology	25	Single	Father: doctor Mother:	Programmer	Integration and Confirmation
Savithri	Female	Information technology	23	Single	Father: Engineer Business man Mother: stay at home parent	System designer	Integration and Confirmation
Janaka		Accounting	26	Single	Father: scientist Mother: teacher	Management Accountant	Integration and Confirmation
Bandula	Male	Accounting	26	Engaged to a British Sri Lankan	Both parents doctors	Analyst	Integration and Confirmation
Chanaka	Male	Information technology	24	Single	Father: Accountant Business man Mother: stay at home parent	Database administrator	Integration and Confirmation
Divya	Female	Financial services	22	Single	Father: Accountant Business man Mother: teacher	Auditor	Integration and Confirmation
Ranjan	Male	Information technology	25	Single	Father: doctor Mother: stay at home parent	Trainee engineer	Integration and Confirmation
Shiran	Male	Accounting	22	In a relationship with a non-British white European	Both parents doctors	Management trainee	Integration and Confirmation
Deva	Male	Accounting	24	Single	Both parents doctors	Senior management accountant	Integration and Confirmation

Lankesh	Male	Information technology	23	Single	Father: doctor Mother: lawyer	Senior engineer	Integration and Confirmation
Sujeewa	Female	Financial services	24	In a relationship with a Sri Lankan	Father: engineer Mother: stay at home parent	Auditor	Integration and Confirmation
Dhammika	Male	Financial services	25	Single	Father: lawyer business man Mother: homemaker	Auditor	Integration and Confirmation
Sisil	Male	Information technology	26	Engaged to an British Asian	Father: engineer Mother: stay at home parent	Programmer	Integration and Confirmation

**Table 2: coding template**

<b>Descriptive codes</b>	<b>Conceptual codes</b>
Analytical skills Hardwork	Positive Asian stereotypes
Clannishness Backwardness Instrumental	Negative Asian stereotypes
Struggle to see the big picture Slow promotion Good performance reviews	Perceptions of career
Buddhism Partying Drinking Collectiveness	Sri Lankan heritage
Open mindedness Meritocracy Easygoing	British culture
Curiosity Reading Travel	Other

Food Music	
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**Table 3: Navigating panethnic assignation: Social identity-based impression management strategies of British Sri Lankans**

	<b>Confirmation</b>	<b>Integration</b>	<b>Assimilation</b>	<b>Decategorisation</b>
<b>Negative panethnic stereotypes rejected</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Self-centeredness</li> <li>- Clannishness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ultra conservativeness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Clannishness</li> </ul>
<b>Positive Panethnic stereotypes claimed</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Technical competence</li> <li>- Hard work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Collectiveness</li> <li>- Hard work</li> </ul>		
<b>Use of distinct ethnic heritage</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Buddhism to reject self-centeredness and clannishness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Island lifestyle to reject conservativeness</li> </ul>	
<b>Professional image</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Positive self-stereotyping as technical experts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Positive self-stereotyping as technical experts</li> <li>- Positioning oneself as relational and well placed to support others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Positioning oneself as socially permissive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Positioning oneself as broad minded and intellectual</li> </ul>
<b>Perceived career progress</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Slow career progress</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Slow career progress</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-</li> </ul>
<b>Other strategies used simultaneously</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Integration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Confirmation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- None</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- None</li> </ul>
<b>Profile of users</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Established employees</li> <li>- Asian partner</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Established employees</li> <li>- Asian partner</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Newcomers to the organisation</li> <li>- European partner</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Newcomers to the organisation</li> <li>- European partner</li> </ul>