



Who am I?

By Joris Janssen



GEETHA REDDY

Everyone's identity is made up of different components. For example, you can be a loving mother, a vicious left-back on the football pitch and a proud Dutch person who was born in Turkey, all at the same time. Nevertheless, it is possible that you are still given a one-dimensional label, such as 'immigrant'. Geetha Reddy is a social psychologist at the University of Groningen. She studies how identities are formed in multicultural societies and how this knowledge can make societies more inclusive.

'Multiculturalism is a fact of life'

How do people form an identity in a multicultural society?

'Identity construction is largely strategic. Individuals construct their cultural and ethnic identity depending on the requirements of a situation and the possibilities. These requirements and possibilities differ when you are in contact with members of your own community, with government agencies, with colleagues or with friends outside your community.'

What are the problems with identities?

'People sometimes end up in situations in which there are limits to the accepted identity. I conduct research in Singapore and Malaysia, where you can only register one ethnic identity with government agen-



cies. You are Chinese, Malaysian or Indian. There is no in-between. This is very limiting when you identify with multiple ethnic identities.'

What is the problem with those kinds of labels?

'Labels can be useful: they are convenient cognitive shortcuts that we use to understand a situation quickly. But labels can be problematic when they concern marginalized identities. They can attribute many negative characteristics to someone, often based on just one aspect of a person's identity. This creates tension and conflict.'

Can you mention an example of a problematic label?

'Take the label 'migrant'. This label is often only used for people from specific countries who look different from the local population. Many migrants in the Netherlands are from Germany, France and the United Kingdom, but they are regarded differently than migrants from other countries. Migrants are often blamed for budget cuts and unemployment. But in reality, increased numbers of migrants lead to increased employment, because migrants use services such as healthcare and schools. Marginalized groups often do not have the opportunity to change the narrative. This creates problems.'

How can science improve the situation?

'By studying individuals' experiences, we learn to better understand different forms of diversity. Multiculturalism is one form and simply a fact of life. We, as scientists, must make sure that everyone can live in a safe, happy and welcome environment.'



NINA HANSEN

Newcomers to a society often have trouble getting a job. Just having an exotic-sounding surname sometimes means that you are discounted in an application process. However, labour market discrimination is more than that. It often happens unintentionally because cultural differences lead to misunderstandings. Nina Hansen, social psychologist at the University of Groningen, studies this phenomenon and together with the Lemat Foundation, she has developed a training course that enables employers to prepare for the recruitment and integration of Eritrean employees.

Why is having a job so important when you are a newcomer to a society?

'Neighbours or new colleagues can help with learning to understand a new culture. New friends also help to make you feel at home. Integration is therefore a two-way interaction between different cultures. Migrants must discover the new culture, but the receiving society also plays an important role.'

How can receiving societies take up this role?

'At present, the focus is mainly on educating migrants. In the Netherlands, migrants are offered an integration course, for example, in which they learn about different

aspects of Dutch culture. But it is not explained to them *why* there are behavioural or cultural differences. Employers can help by explaining the norms and rules of the receiving society.'

What things go wrong?

'A surname is sometimes already the first barrier. The next barrier is faced once people have a job. Cultural differences often lead to miscommunication in the workplace. For example, Eritreans often walk behind their manager and listen more than they talk. In their culture, that is a sign of respect. However, Dutch employers expect people to provide clear input and ask questions. Employers may therefore undeservedly think that someone is lazy.'

How are migrants doing in the labour market?

'The facts are rather shocking. A recent study showed that after two and a half years, only 11 percent of the residence permit holders who arrived in 2014 had a paid job. This shows that much still needs to be done, for example through fostering mutual understanding.'

Can science contribute to a solution to this problem?

'We have developed a training course that prepares Dutch employers for appointing Eritreans. In this training course, they can learn what these people have gone through and what the cultural differences are. Employers are often very happy to learn this. Due to a shortage of workers, they are increasingly interested in employing migrants, but have received little support in doing so thus far. With this training course, we wish to contribute to mutual knowledge and understanding.' ■

'Integration must be a two-way interaction'