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Application of Anonymous Communication in the Sri Lankan University Context

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Abstract

A psychosociological inquiry was conducted into anonymous communication/letters (*Kellapattara* in Sinhala) circulated in Sri Lankan state universities, an increasingly common phenomenon observed in the recent past. A qualitative inductive approach and critical discourse analysis were used to examine primary and secondary data. According to the text content, anonymous letters were categorised into 15 interrelated themes. Two main thematic clusters were identified: (1) Role of sexuality in new recruitments to academic staff by administrative body; (2) Corruption and fraud in research publishing and financial matters. Psychosociological inquiry into the text used an integrated model incorporating both social and psychobiological approaches. In pure sociological terms, anonymous letter writing could be identified as resultant of hatred of the writer towards the object of others' desire: the desire of the writer for the desire what s/he fantasizes the other

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desires for such as ‘sexual pleasure’ ‘power’, ‘rank’, ‘promotion’ ‘status’, or ‘income’. Capitalism, with its promotion of individualism and competition, leads to social jealousy in the feudal-capitalist bourgeois, of which most Sri Lankan university academics are members. Social jealousy generated by comparison and desire for upward mobility motivates an individual to write anonymous letters to defile the public image of ‘the other’. A bioevolutionary analysis of this particular use of language indicates an attempt to increase one’s fitness by a dissocial use of language as an informational warfare to shock the system to obtain access or prevent others from accessing limited resources.

Keywords: Anonymous letters, Communication, Language, Psycho-sociology, University, Sri Lanka

Introduction

Why and how people resort to anonymity in their communication with others is an area of inquiry that has sociological, psychological and legal ramifications. The topic has been increasingly discussed recently, especially in relation to new online communication media. The right to communicate anonymously is generally viewed as a part of basic right to free speech—an interpretation generally upheld in United States courts (Bowman, 2001). Major rationales and contexts proposed for anonymity include free communication and individual protection, while identifiability promotes accountability and reciprocity (Marx, 1999). Anonymous communication in Sri Lanka (Vijayasriwardana, 1997) has a long history, and survey of previous work shows that the process of writing and circulating anonymous letters or *Kelapattara* probably first originated in village communities. When villagers’ literacy levels increased, they opted to express their emotions by means of anonymous writings, displayed at communal places such as public well, village boutique etc. The writings were very conversational and offensive language was used and most of the time were about sexual misbehaviour of other villagers, especially the village elite. This acrimonious practice has emerged in urban middle-class territories with many variations (Vijayasriwardana, 1997). It could be argued that rural individuals who were fortunate enough to climb up the social ladder through free education brought this malevolent social trait that they have learned from the village culture to the urban middle class when they crossed social class lines. Thus, the culture of writing and circulating

Kellapattara in the university context could be considered as a mere adaptation of its original practice prevalent in the village context.

Anonymity is best considered as an interdisciplinary category and multiple theoretical perspectives could be used to approach it. As language is a uniquely human ability and its primary use is in social communication, anonymity could be approached both sociologically and biologically. Discovering 'truth' from anonymous communications has been an area in sociology and generally it is found to be difficult and impractical, since reliability of this communication is debatable (Douglas, Ang, & Deravi, 2017). 'Truth', 'Knowledge' and 'Ideologies' are in many ways constructed phenomena (Deutscher, 2014; Dubuisson, 2003; Syrotinski, 2007; Kumara & Jayawardhana, 2018, Hasin, 2018) and these phenomena, as common to any other creations, are developed depending on numerous social, political, economic or other circumstances relevant to constructors' own agendas (Stoddart, 2007; Elden, 2016; Kumara & Jayawardhana, 2018). However, it is also known that anonymous communications arise when the hierarchy in a system does not welcome open discussion of the subject at hand.

It has been argued that the content and style of anonymous communication is influenced by the psychological and sociological background of particular anonymous writers and this influence could be visible in the anonymous text. In criminology, the texts have been analyzed to zero in on the source, though many studies in forensics have shown that interpreting this kind of evidence is prone, especially for confirmation bias (Haas et al, 2014). This research study particularly looked at the hypotheses from a psychosociological perspective while keeping the limits of these biases in mind.

Theoretical framework

Language, written text and knowledge construction

In the human history, human beings have become more distinguished from other animals for their use of language to communicate (Locke & Bogin, 2006). They could develop spoken languages and discover writing systems to record their oral or gestural language, which helped them communicate their thoughts more efficiently. The inquiry into the evolution of human language has led to numerous proposals for its biological role. The leading theory is that language evolved to facilitate social bonding. It achieves this mainly because it allows us to increase the size of our broadcast network (the number of people

with whom we can communicate directly and indirectly) and exchange information about changes within our social networks (Pinker 1990). Even though human beings have used their languages to create ideas, ideology, or discourses (Kroskrity, 2004), there has been debate that whether ‘reality or comparative truth’ is possible by oral explanation or written text by humans (Montero, 2002; Samuels, 1991).

According to social theory, people’s oral explanation or written texts are based on their ‘positionality’ and ‘needs’ which are vastly different from one another. Positionality of the person is based on diverse range of factors such as gender, living space, economic class, caste, culture, education, age, political view, occupation, power, beliefs, religion, mental situation, experiences etc. (Camicia, 2015; Muhammad, et al., 2015). People describe objects based on their own positionality and needs. This social explanation is easily accommodated in the evolutionary biology theory that deception is the primary evolutionary function of language ultimately to promote self-interest (Oesch, 2016).

On the other hand, listener/reader understands and re-reads the particular object according to their own ‘positionality’ and ‘needs’ (Beedham, 2005). As a result, a gap is created between a ‘real’ and ‘described’ object since different people differently interpret it and have different perceptions of the same thing based on their own life experiences and beliefs and later assign different meanings to what they perceive. Thus, during the process of communicating using language, different people can interpret/read the same text differently by giving it different meanings. This can be considered one of the problems humans encounter when communicating realistic ideas. This problem is usually not encountered in animals when they communicate using their basic communication methods. In mixed species bird flocks, it is observed that there is a clear connection between particular alarm sounds they make when they see a danger and the real situation which makes other birds to identify the danger soon without miscommunication (Goodale&Kotagama, 2005; 2008). However, use of alarm calls in a deceptive manner has been described among birds to distract other birds, thereby increasing their chances of capturing arthropods as foods indicating the adaptive function of deceptive communication. (Munn, 1986; Satischandra, 2010)

Regardless of considerable gaps between ‘real situation’ and concurrent ‘language creation’ by humans, most people tend to believe the language

creation be the ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ while developing and creating ideas using a language. This frequently becomes socially accepted ‘truth’, for instant, it is commonly accepted fact that ‘flowers are beautiful’ or ‘rabbits are innocent’. Yet, if the question is raised ‘are flowers essentially beautiful? / are rabbits truly innocent?’ one can argue that this is a commonly attributed value given to flowers/rabbits or a common reading widely accepted by the society. On the other hand, the role played by power relations and socio-political hegemonic power in the development of dominant ideas in language creation and variances in social relationships cannot be ignored. As Fairclough explains, “social relationships which determine them are sustained by the use of language. Conversely, in so far as dominant conventions are resisted or contested, language use can contribute to changing social relationships” (Fairclough, 2001:20). When ‘readings’ are created within a social group, particular society absorbs and interprets particular reading according to power relations and hegemony and re-creates the ‘reading’ consistent with the need/want of the powerful, yet, if an individual chooses the written form of language to create a ‘reading’, the creator/writer has a responsibility of mentioning his/her own position to assure the credibility of his/her reading. However, when the writer wishes to conceal his/her identity or position from the text, in this invisible and unreachable stances/he can freely create any ‘reading’ without accountability. Thus, studying the construction of ‘reality/truth’ through anonymous communication is interesting due to this unavailability of identity to infer the positionality of the writer in the text.

Anonymous Communication

Anonymity is often seen as a dichotomous phenomenon, either present or absent however the most useful way is to see it as a dimensional construct. Knowledge about the identity of the author has multiple components and there are degrees of identifiability with complete identifiability with legal name at one end and to complete anonymity at the other end of this spectrum. Marx defines anonymity as one polar value of a broad dimension of identifiability and no identifiability (Marx, 1999) and anonymity is a ‘fundamentally social’ construct that ‘requires an audience of at least one person’ (Marx, 1990:100). According to Scott (1998:387) ‘anonymity is the degree to which a communicator perceives the message source as unknown or unspecified’. This definition conceptualizes anonymity as a continuous construct. Occasionally,

message senders are not simply completely anonymous, which means the sender can appear partially anonymous (Rains, 2005). Both readers and receivers can indirectly identify who the sender is since the writer gives clues for that (Scott, 1998). Sometimes an anonymous communicator can use a fake name or alternative identity called ‘use of a pseudonym’ which may be perceived as factual or fictitious (Scott, 1998; Rains & Scott, 2007).

Fictitious pseudonyms, such as those found in most online chat rooms, are perceived by the audience to be untrue. Factual pseudonyms, such as those used as an alias, leave the message receivers unable to detect that the apparent source is not the actual source. Some degree of anonymity may also be perceived by the ultimate message receiver under conditions of confidentiality, where source identity is known to some (e.g., a journalist who knows the source) but kept hidden from most (Rains & Scott, 2007:64).

Many researchers have paid their attention to anonymity and anonymous communication (Rains & Scott, 2007) and examined different type of areas of anonymity such as ‘anonymous communication and group decision making’ (Pinsonneault & Heppel, 1997), ‘anonymous communication and journalism’ (Wulfemeyer, 1985), ‘anonymity and presidential rhetoric’ (Erickson & Fleuriet, 1991), ‘anonymous communication and whistle-blowing’ (Near & Miceli, 1995). Most of the researchers have examined and analysed anonymous communication from the sender’s perspective to identify the central features of constructed ideas (Rains & Scott, 2007). Some researchers have attended to study on the influence of anonymous communication on a sender as well as receiver’s behaviour and social life (Rains, 2005).

Cyberspace and Anonymous Communication

When communication occurs in the cyber space, anonymity plays a major role since the majority prefers to present their readings while concealing their identity (Levine, 1996). As Rains and Scott (2007:62) explains, “the explosive diffusion of new communication technologies made available by the Internet has made it easier than ever to communicate anonymously. Remailers, chat tools, certain blogs, group decision support systems, tip lines, caller identification blocking, and many Web based discussion boards are just some

of the technologies making it possible to send and receive not to mention log and detect anonymous messages”.

“A field experiment explored whether "anonymous" comments entered through a group support system could be identified by members of standing groups. Four groups of co-workers reported on the identification of other group members' specific comment submissions during anonymous brainstorming sessions. Each group's social network was built from a measure of group-member prior communication. The quadratic assignment procedure was used to determine the significance of the social network and the ability to identify comments. Although members were able to make attributions of authorship for a sample of their submissions, they were highly inaccurate, and this inaccuracy was associated with individuals' prior total or pairwise communication” (Hayne, Rice & Licker, 1994:22).

At present, anonymous communication within the cyber space has heavily contributed to create ideas, knowledge and construct socio-cultural and political power and hegemony. Since this can create many issues, people have concentrated more on privacy and security (Chawki, 2010). Anonymous communication within the cyber space has subsidized to criminal and unethical practices and generated social and political issues in societies (du Pont, 2000). Thus, establishing a legal accountability for anonymous communication in cyberspace has become a contemporary social discourse (Levine, 1996).

Anonymous letters

Anonymous letters are one of the oldest forms of anonymous communication and are commonly called ‘*Kelapattara*’ in Sinhala but this term often refers or is limited to libels/poison pen which is defined as a ‘published false statement that defame/damages a person's reputation’. Anonymous letters are however not limited to publication of false statements or libel. For instance, it can be a situation where an informant/whistle-blower exposing a fact that s/he may be unable to come out openly without risking s/her own status. The use of anonymity can be essential if one needs to get sensitive or controversial information from vulnerable sources, especially to media. Unsigned letters may expand the topics discussed in newspaper forums by encouraging criticism of government or semi-public institutions and allowing more people

to participate in public discourse, both of which are considered socially valuable functions of letters to the editor forums (Blankenburg, 1992). Whistle-blowing, a form of disagreement with a majority or authority policy, can express dissent in an organizational situation with a retaliatory culture to open expression.

An argument against anonymous letters has been that this practice promotes the distortion of “truth”, yet, an issue could be raised on the notion of truth especially when it involves nonfactual information and the ability for an organization to manufacture truth to serve one’s own ends. The receivers’ response to anonymous letters is also an area of interest. The receiver can select to ignore the communication altogether or ignore the source’s identity and concentrate on the content. Alternatively, receiver can actively seek to identify the source. By far the commonest response is receiver attempting to identify the source because most of our communicative interactions with others involve identifiability, many have a natural tendency to attribute a source to all messages. This happens especially when a source’s anonymity threatens the status of a receiver (Hayne & Rice 1997).

Psychology of Anonymous Behaviors

There has been a long history in the study of relationships between anonymity and behaviors. Focused areas include increased self-disclosure under conditions of anonymity, reduced feelings of responsibility towards victims on the part of anonymous bystanders, and social loafing in small groups. Many studies in the exploration of psychology of anonymity were based on deindividuation theory as a theoretical foundation. Deindividuation theory suggests that anonymity induces deindividuation, a psychological state of decreased self-evaluation, leads to disinhibition and subsequent anti-normative behavior. (Zimbardo, 1969). The opportunity and temptation to transmit falsehoods is high with anonymity. There is experimental evidence to suggest that mere feeling anonymity regardless of actual anonymity leads to dishonest and self-interested behavior (Zhong et al, 2010).

Anonymous Letters in Sri Lanka and in Sri Lankan State Higher Education Sector

Publishing anonymous letters/ Kelapattarahas has a long history in Sri Lanka. Anonymous letters were more popular in rural areas than urban areas during the early years. Anonymous documentation adopted in rural areas was mostly published as posters and revealed in public places where people gathered. Anonymous letters in this context were used to educate others about immoralities, fraudulence, or scandals of a particular villager/s, especially the village elite. Thus, anonymous documentation can be considered a silent attack on the dominant elite power hegemony by the non-elite (Vijayasriwardana, 1997). Gradually Kelapattara spread into the country's urban middle class cultural space from the country side. At present, Kelapattara have become more popular in urban middle class cultural space of the country than in socio-culturally peripheral areas (pilot survey of between this research, have been conducted October to December, 2018)

When the Sri Lankan state university context is considered, *Kelapattrra* have been circulated for various forms for multiple purposes. In general, anonymous letters are displayed as posters in public areas of a university, for instance, in canteens or common rooms. On certain occasions, Kelapattara are circulated via e/mail and subsequently staff and students spread the letter's content by discussing it among them. Even though anonymous letters are considered illegal/unethical, they can create a 'system shock/scare'. Vijayasriwardana's (1997) research on socio-cultural background of Sinhala *Kelapattara* is an in-depth socio-cultural analysis of this context, yet, the originality of present work lies in the fact that to best our knowledge there has not been any published work on use/misuse of anonymous communication in university sector or any other organizational settings in Sri Lanka.

The study looks into two research questions :(1) what topics are addressed in anonymous letters circulated in the Sri Lankan state university cultural space? (2) What psychosociological backgrounds and issues can be observed behind the text of anonymous letters? Based on these questions, the research aims to explore the psychosociological background portrayed in anonymous letters theoretically circulated within the cultural space of Sri Lankan state universities while categorizing the topics focused in anonymity and analysing possible objectives for being anonymous in communication.

Methodology

Since our research focuses on socio-psychological phenomena, we use a qualitative methodology and an ‘inductive research approach’ (Bryman 2008). Qualitative research methodology is employed in many academic disciplines that focus on collecting an in-depth understanding of human facts as it aims to examine social reality and lived experience, which is increasingly recognized as important in biopsychology (FHI 2004; Kahn 2011; Levy 2005; RDSU 1998).

Reflexivity and Positionality

Reflexivity and positionality have major implications in this research since it applies a qualitative research methodology. Reflexivity can be considered an attitude of questioning knowledge construction, especially the effect of the researcher at every step of the research process (Bourke et al. 2012). As a human being, the researcher also has his/her own values, beliefs, feelings and thoughts, which may be represented in their research work as research bias (RWJF 2012). As Malterud states: “A researcher's background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions”(Malterud 2001:483-484 cited in RWJF 2012:01). Moreover, the process of reflexivity is useful to identify transparency, capacity and limitations of the research; it is as if the researcher watches him/herself at work (Robertson, 2002). Therefore, reflexivity can be considered as an attitude of questioning knowledge construction, especially the effect of the researcher, at every step of the research process (Bourke et al., 2012):

“Reflexivity involves critical reflection of how the researcher constructs knowledge from the research process; what sorts of factors influence the researcher’s construction of knowledge and how these influences are revealed in planning, conducting, and writing up of the research. A reflexive researcher is the one who is aware of all these potential influences and is able to step back and take a critical look at his or her own role in the research process. The goal of being reflexive in this sense has to do with improving the quality and validity of the research and recognizing the limitations of the knowledge

that is produced, thus leading to more rigorous research” (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004: 275). Since this research uses qualitative methodology, we (researchers) were concerned about our (researchers’) ‘positionality’ through reflexivity.

Scope and Limitations of the Research

Although this study is an ‘Application of Anonymous Communication in the Sri Lankan University Context’ it also has several limitations. The most significant limitation of the study would be its representativeness. There are 15 government universities and a large number of private universities in Sri Lanka, however, this research was limited to one state university as the site of sample for data collection. Though the university community includes academics, non-academics, and students, the present study did not consider anonymous letters written by /circulated among students and non-academic members.

Data Collecting and Analysis:

Anonymous letters received by academics and departments were collected from the selected state University X of Sri Lanka (University name is withheld) as for primary data for this research, which was subjected to thematic analysis. A sample of recipients were interviewed to obtain their responses to letters and determine their effects on the system. The recipients' opinions on the letters' appropriateness were also obtained. The permission for the study was obtained from the ethic committee of the relevant university, before embarking on the project.

Qualitative interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted and all participants were well informed academic members of the selected state university. Altogether 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted and each interviewee was provided with a consent form. Semi-structured interviews were presented by code, for instance, ‘**SSI10**’ stands for ‘semi structured interviewing number 10.

Data Analysing Process: A Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

A critical discourse analysis (CDA) method is used to examine both primary qualitative data and secondary data. The data has been analysed using steps such as data understanding, categorizing, coding under themes, connecting with theories and discourses and described narratively (Description/Interpretation/Explanation) (Becker, 1958; Dewalt, 2011; Dey, 2003; May, 1997). Classification of themes from the collected primary data can be recognized as a process (Bryman, 2012). As a procedure to identify patterns in the data to recognize separate themes, the data was intensively and carefully read and re-read (Boyatzis, 1998; Fereday & Cochrane, 2008).

Discourse is shaped by power relations connected with ideologies (Fairclough, 1992) and considered a 'flow of knowledge through time' (Wood & Kroger, 2000). According to Schiffin et al. (2001), the study of discourse mainly focuses on the language used and anything 'beyond the sentence' (Schiffin, Tannen, & Hamilton, 2008). Theoretically, a discourse is created by society that supports the build-up of specific knowledge, social relations and social identity. When analysing discourse, the notion of 'social power' and 'dominance' should be considered. Social power is based on position, status, gender, education, political connection, caste, class etc. According to Dijk (1990, 2000), social power can directly lead to social dominance. Moreover, social power and social dominance can usually be seen as organized and institutionalized. Thus, lack of social power can directly cause a lack of confidence to write or talk openly (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Van Dijk, 2001).

According to Kaplan (1990), a socio-cultural statement (the text or discourse) displays a multidimensional structure and layers. As Kaplan's explains; "it is just like a sheet of thick plywood consisting of many thin sheets lying at different angles to each other. The basics of a text (spoken or written) consists of several discourses" (Kaplan 1990 cited Dellinger, 1995, p.01). Therefore, discourse analysis is most helpful in examining and understanding hidden social phenomena (Wood & Kroger, 2000). For instance, *Kelapattara* in the university context provide multi-dimensional socio-cultural viewpoints and

ideas relevant to university matters. Therefore, CDA is useful in this research to examine anonymous writers' socio-psychological background and issues.

Ethical Consideration of the Research

Prior to data collecting, we (the researchers) obtained a formal ethical consent and permission to accomplish this research work. We also agreed to collect and keep data according to rules, regulations, and conditions imposed by the relevant institute. The research proposal which has outlined the basic elements of the research is submitted to the university authority in advance to obtain consent and the ethical clearance. The information providers (University staff and relevant stakeholders) were given sufficient time and opportunity to consider whether to participate or not in the research. On the other hand, the Vice Chancellor or/and university ethic committee or any other who provide data were allowed to withdraw any information provided for the survey or database within three weeks of collection. The data were anonymised to protect the identity of participants.

Results and Discussion

Based on the text content, the selected sixty-two (62) anonymous letters received by academic departments were categorised under 15 topics after a precise examination even though all are interrelated (Refer to table no 01), subsequently two main clusters were identified such as (1) role of sexuality in new recruitments to academic staff and dominancy of administrative bodies (2) fake publications, financial anomalies and corruption. The temporality of the receiving anonymous letters could see a clear pattern, with number of letters received peaking around time of new recruitment to academic departments. The letters falling to first cluster were markedly more commonly received around the time of new recruitments to the university staff.

Table no 1: Topics based on the content of anonymous letters

Topic	Numbers of anonymous letters (out of 62)	Percentage
1. Sexuality	32	51.6 %
2. Ragging	05	08%
3. New recruitments to academic staff	18	29%
4. Unethical academic behavior and fake publications	09	15%
5. Traducing based on caste	03	05%
6. Financial irregularities and Corruption	12	19%
7. Objection to authority and administrative bodies	21	34%
8. Exam frauds	07	11%
9. Favoritism/Nepotism	05	08%
10. Warnings on upcoming issues	02	03%
11. Theft and Corruption	04	06%
12. Exposing other anonymous writers	02	03%
13. Official misconduct	09	15%
14. Harassment	05	08%
15. Direct threats	02	03%

Sexuality, new recruitments to academic staff and dominance of administrative bodies

Higher percentage of the anonymous letters circulated within the university context comes under this theme in which the apparent aim of writing anonymously is to expose correlation between sex at workplace and new recruitments to the academic staff. Anonymous writers complain that alleged offering of sexual favours to gain a position in the academic staff or sexual bribery s expected by academics in executive positions of the university (see table no 1). As stated in anonymous texts, male academic members in the university with administrative powers abuse their position to favour female members who offer sexual favours over other applicants during the selection process of new academic staff (Refer to followingsample anonymous letters).

Sample anonymous letter no 02:

Regardless of the number of qualified candidates participating in the interview, only the mistresses of the Vice-Chancellor, Dean of the xxxx Faculty and department heads would be appointed to lecturer positions (topic: unethical and illegal appointments to academic posts by Vice Chancellor, Dean – xxxx Faculty and heads of academic departments in the absence of the university council (received date 2019.08.12).

Sample anonymous letter no 03:

Regarding the interview at (Department name) on (date) for academic Cadre: X (male name) comes as a close friend of Mr. Y (senior lecturer's name) and C (female name) goes for sexual relation with Mr. Y. (received date 2019.01.07)

Sample anonymous letter no 04:

Basic qualifications to be a lecturer – A female: willingness to sleep with authorities; male: indirect ball licking/apple polishing from a different university; senior lecturer: have slept with senior academic members in executive positions (VC, DVC, Dean) or won their hearts. (Received date 2019.01.04).

Sample anonymous letter no 30:

Regarding an attempt at illegal recruitments: Dear Vice-chancellor, A (name of the head of an academic department) of B (particular department name) keeps a brothel in the department with C (newly appointed female lecturer's name) and D (newly appointed another female lecturer's name) (Received date, 2019.01.02).

Out of all 62 anonymous letters, 32 were about consensual sex at the workplace: unethical sexual conduct of academic members and 18 letters out of the 32 were about the correlation between new recruitments and sexual misconduct. However notably, the academic staff who was interviewed for the study denied the possibility of recruitments based on favouritism,

nepotism or sexual favours. The study identifies a gap between ‘reality’ described in anonymous letters and what is “real” according to the academics in the system.

Question: *What is the scheme of recruitment to an academic position in the university?*

Answer: *In order to recruit a new staff member, there should be a cadre vacancy approved by the University Grant Commission (UGC). Then applications are called through an open advertisement. Upon receiving applications, the Registrar of the Academic Establishment Branch forwards them to the heads of relevant departments for reviewing and short-listing the qualified applicants based on the criteria set out by the relevant UGC circular for an interview. Successful applicants are then called for an interview in which they prove their employability for the vacant position. The interview panel appointed by the university Senate consists of six members namely, the Vice Chancellor, Dean of the relevant faculty, Head of the relevant department, a Senate nominee (a senate member with expertise on the particular subject), two council members (appointed to the council by the UGC) grade the candidates by an interview evaluation criteria sets out by the council paying attention to specific areas such as education qualifications, work history, research work, teaching skills, personality, extracurricular activities, language skills, subject and general knowledge etc. Score given to each area by individual interview panel members is then added up and a total marks given to each candidate is then divided by 6 to get an average mark for each. Then the candidates are ranked according to the average marks achieved and the one(s) with the highest average mark(s) is recommended to the relevant post(s). The selection then is subjected to the confirmation of university council*

Question: *Is there a possibility for favouritism/ nepotism in the interviewing process?*

Answer: It is not that easy. Actually, it is the grading system used in the interview evaluation criteria. It ensures fair hiring and transparency of the whole process. If a member of the panel seems to be biased against or in favour of scoring a particular candidate, other members can easily notice it. Then, that particular interviewer must justify his ranking of the candidate to the panel. On the other hand, we never know who is going to get highest average mark, do we? It's after finalizing the mark sheets we get to know it[SSI09: 63 year old male senior professor and an interview board representor, 2019.07.21].

According to the above statement, it is noted that being biased in favour of/against someone in an interview is problematic, especially when academia is aware of the recruitment process. If any candidate finds that the interview panel has been biased against him/her, s/he can file an objection through proper channels.

After the selection and recruitment of a candidate for a lecturer position in an interview, if other unsuccessful candidates have doubts about the selection or simply unsatisfied and have complaints against the interview fairness, they can file an objection through the UGC or civil court of Sri Lanka [SSI10: Senior Assistant Registrar, 2019.09.02].

If the above explanation is “true” then the question arises why people tend to write anonymous letters questioning new recruitments to academic positions, especially with reference to sexuality. This scenario could be sociologically analysed using a number of theories and discourses such as social discourse of culture and sexuality, colonialism, post-colonial Sri Lanka, free education system, capitalism and super imposed capitalism in Sri Lanka. At the outset, the concepts of sexuality, sexual freedom, sexual behaviour, and sexual norms are based on socio-cultural settings, time, space and power domination (Foucault, 1990; Ortner & Whitehead, 1981). The repressive hypothesis holds the common belief among westerners that through the European history, open and free discussion of sex and sexuality was socially repressed especially during the late 17th- early 20th centuries, including the Victorian era when the

British Empire expanded across the globe through colonization which resulted in the rise of capitalism and bourgeois society.

“Sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into home. The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction. On the subject of sex, silence became the rule. The legitimate and procreative couple laid down the law. The couple imposed itself as model, enforced the norm, safeguarded the truth, and reserved the right to speak while retaining the principle of secrecy. A single locus of sexuality was acknowledged in social space as well as at the heart of every household, but it was a utilitarian and fertile one: the parents' bedroom” (Foucault, 1990:03).

It is believed that Europe's church and dominant power system during these centuries used hegemonic energy to maintain Victorian regime. As for repressive hypothesis, in the ‘Victorian cultural hegemonic era’ in which Victorian morality is a refinement of the moral views of the middle class in 19th century Britain, human sexual behaviour was strongly controlled/repressed and extramarital sexual relationships were considered a ‘terrible sin’/ ‘perversion’ (Crow, 1971). This sexual ideology and schooling along with marriage systems, laws and regulations on human sexual life were super-imposed on colonies of British Empire like Sri Lanka by the end of the 19th century. Regardless of the fact that Sri Lankans had appreciated being sexually liberal with less moral influences in the precolonial period (Knox, 2018), they internalized Victorian morality and were compatible with legal framework of marriage when Victorian regime was superimposed on Sri Lanka, especially the rural bourgeois class was very much affected and this kind of bourgeois society exhibited ‘blatant and fragmented perversion’ (Foucault, 1990).

In the post-modern era, notion of sex and the truth of sexuality were questioned in many ways in the western world, hence, Victorian moral codes and virtues were gradually abandoned with greater understanding and identification of human sexual diversity and freedom (Weeks, 1998; 2002; Jackson & Scott, 2004). Consistent with Foucault “we must conceive of sex without the law, and power without the king” (Foucault, 1990:90), however, Victorian code of morality remained in Sri Lanka, especially this took deep

roots in residents in rural areas who maintained Victorian morality together with its hypocrisy- contradictions in Victorian morals/the gap between ideals and behaviour. Similarly, it is observed that most of Sri Lankans who pursue higher education through free education system of Sri Lanka are from these socio-cultural strata (Jayaweera, 1999) and the smallest group of them who becomes university academic members thus adapts double faced behaviour: on one hand they promote modern and post-modern pursuits which they have gained through western education and on the other hand they stick to Victorian virtues for moral support.

Most university lecturers, especially those in the Arts, Management and Science streams, come from economically deprived rural families. Their current position as a lecturer has given them licence to enter the bourgeois class, thanks to the free education system and now being in that achieved 'upper middle class' position they have much to lose in the eyes of the other, I mean the social cost of their behaviour. At the same time, they are emotionally inculcated in and compatible with Victorian morality and its hypocrisy too. For example, when it comes to sex or sexuality, they show a doubled faced behaviour. On one hand many of them are emotionally reserved about sexual matters and even scared to talk about it in public. As well, whatever they believe in to be licentious in public life such as extramarital affairs, prostitution, divorce, homosexuality etc. is a big no nofor them, yet, in privet life they secretly yearn for ways to satisfy the desires suppressed in their usual sexual lifestyles. As most of the anonymous letter writers have fantasized, 'the successful 'other' receives all the sexual pleasure, which the anonymous writer desires for but unable to achieve in his/her scope'. Thus, out of their sexual frustration and personal inadequacy they become envious and spiteful and then plan the revenge to blow the target and withdraw into hiding to await the results by writing/distributing anonymous letters. They are happy they are hidden under the robe of anonymity but don't know their writing is a reflection of their inner landscape [SSI02: 44-year-old male Senior lecturer, 2019.05.02].

(This statement was crosschecked and proved by SSI01, SSI03, SSI07)

Moreover, if the terminology used by anonymous writers in their writings to express alleged accusation of ‘unethical/immoral’ sexual behaviours is observed (see above sample anonymous letter no 02 and 04) it is vividly seen that certain language elements used here such as register, jargon and slangs are the terminology generally considered uncommon among the educated class compared to working class common man who would revel in vulgarity and foul language. This is a good example to identify double faced behaviour of this bourgeois class. Most importantly, it must be questioned that what scope of influence an anonymous writer has on new recruitments.

The Scheme of Recruitment of the university is very systematic and transparent and the university administrative body disregards anonymous letters at all times, before or after an interview. Every year the university receives a large number of anonymous letters after an interviewing process and the number keeps increasing each year, yet, whatever the content is, it has no influence on the process [SSI11: 64-year-old male university council member, 2019.02.22].

The two specific questions that arise here are:(1) Why do people keep writing letters anonymously if they cannot make a difference in the system? And (2) what are the hidden objectives behind writing anonymously? During the European colonization process, capitalism was superimposed on many peripheral countries including Sri Lanka making changes in their traditional feudal socio-economic structures (Kumara, 2016). The new “middle class / bourgeois” created in Sri Lanka by the impact of superimposed capitalism acquired its relative capacity to interact through colonialism, native hierarchies, nationalism and desire for upward mobility. By the end of the 19th century, many Sri Lankans were open to colonial education and thus were introduced to the British middle class. They not only imitated the Western social conduct of their British counterparts but also blended it with indigenous traditions rather than distancing themselves from feudal virtues. Accordingly, exposure to western-style education became the most important factor of entering the bourgeois followed by a number of other indicators such as income, occupation and consumption. Thus, the middle class in Sri Lanka vastly differ from the western bourgeois since it is a blend between feudal and capitalist modules (Kumara, 2016), which is called feudal-capitalism (Alavi, 1982).

Social mobility which means individuals from low-income backgrounds escaping from their working-class origins, is measured by their social class and professions are used to place them into social classes. Since getting an academic career ensures upward social mobility for a graduate from an underprivileged rural background, there is a huge competition among young scholars, especially, ones from the Arts, Management and Science streams to achieve this career goal, yet, a very few become successful in their attempt to become a lecturer in a state university leaving the majority to suffer from jealousy for their lost opportunity as well as the affluence of the 'other'. On the other hand, the academics who are already in this position have achieved their stand in the Sri Lankan privileged bourgeois, especially if they were from working class backgrounds, yet as suggested by Michael Kraus et al, 'the contexts we grow up in and are socialized in are an important part of what shapes the self' (Kraus et al, 2009). Western capitalism brought individualism, competition, and social jealousy, which is largely seen in the feudal-capitalist bourgeois.

Personality of the 'other' vs. desire for sex

With regard to referencing to sexuality in anonymous letters, it is observed that most of the writings are about obscene sexual behaviour of the powerful 'other' in authority and/or offering of sexual favours by the 'other' in their competition to gain a position in academia. The anonymous writers appear to have fantasized the sexual pleasure that they believe to be enjoyed by the powerful 'other' by abusing his/her position and have secretly desired for the same. Thus, when people fail to satisfy their desire to be in the other's position in the corporate rank hierarchy or to enjoy fantasized sexual advantages that they believed to be gained by their counterparts in top ranks, their desire (love) metamorphoses into revenge(hate) (Lacan, 1988; Salecl, 2000). Social jealousy generated on 'one's own desires motivates individuals to write anonymous letters to defile the public image of 'the other' who is fantasised to have satisfied desires that anonymous writer secretly craves (love) for, and simultaneously the writer's desire for revenge (hate) is channelled through anonymous letters though they are least influential in this context.

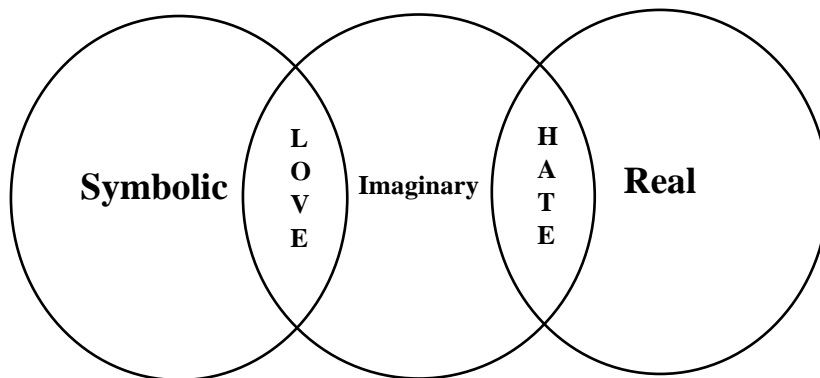


Figure 01: to hate love for their own desire (Source: Lacan, 1988:271)

It was revealed in the study that anonymous individual/s have wielded their objection to newly recruited probationary lecturers to an academic department in the university X in an obscenest manner in addition to sending anonymous letters.

A certain individual or several of them had decorated the whole department with unused sanitary napkins on the very first day of duty assumption of two female lecturers newly appointed to my department, and the two were very upset and stressed out about the whole thing [SSI06: 45-year-old, male, head of an academic department, 2019.03.04]

Moreover, a study into sample anonymous letters reveals that the writer is always ‘written into the text’- their own subjective positionality in the writing which they hide behind the text, yet, has influenced them to write the specific text (Conquergood, 1998; RWJF 2012). When an anonymous writer particularly highlights sexual lifestyles of the ‘other’, beyond the text the reader could instantly grasp the erotic pleasure fantasised by the writer what s/he believes to be the desire of the other and at the same time his own (Conquergood, 1998) and this state of mind would bring out distorted concept of reality.

Sample anonymous letter no 44:

Qualifications for a or a Temporary Assistant Lecturer: being a female student, having big butts, willingness to sleep with (received date, 2017.05.02)

If this is read beyond the text, sexual frustration and inner sexual desires of the anonymous writer can be observed, for example ‘having big butts’ is subjective to the writer rather than it is to the target/victim of the anonymous letter. The writer’s inner sexual desires which cannot be fulfilled in reality are reflected in his/her sensual fantasies and his/her desire (love) for the object of other’s desire transforms into desire for revenge (hate) (Lacan, 1988). As Lacan argues, one’s desire in its root and essence is the desire of the Other- the desire for what we believe the other desires. It is the most important part of human subjectivity: The fantasy helps the subject to survive from his troublesome, hate/love experience with the other in the imaginary, as Lacan says, ‘every fantasy is articulated in terms of the subject speaking to the imaginary other’ (Azari, 2016:04).

Question: *Why has [A] always been targeted in anonymous letters?*

Answer: *In my opinion, [A] has an appealing personality, particularly his sex appeal, being relatively tall, fair, smart, and handsome overall. He pays attention to personal grooming and of course has good dress sense compared to most of his equivalents. In his outer appearance he resembles elegant bourgeois when others look boorish, unpolished or simply common, irrespective of their attempts to look posh or whatever they consider the looks of an upper middleclass member. [A] became the head of the department when he joined the university and is well connected with the authority too. He is good at organizing, hardworking and playing dominant roles in university events. So, as usual many people seem jealous about him [SSI02, 44-year-old university lecturer, 2019.05.02]*

(This statement was crosschecked and was proved by SSI04, SSI05, SSI07)

This statement highlights some of the hypothetical desires of academics in the university X such as having ‘sex appeal’, ‘posh looks’, ‘administrative posts’, ‘social connections’, and ‘outstanding skills’, hence, jealousy about the ‘other’ - socially and physically dominant rival who is fantasised by the anonymous writer to have fulfilled the desires of his/her own, is channelled through anonymous letters with the intention to defile the public image of that other (Larsen & Buss, 2009). At the same time, the writer him/herself

experiences ‘ecstasy of obscenity’ (Baudrillard, 1983) through this whole process of writing obscenity.

Many of the samples analysed in the study could be described as motivated by hatred and envy, thus, allegations in the mail being fantasies, or plain falsehoods. However, the superficial power held by the anonymous writers over selected victims cannot be ignored here. The writer fakes a power that s/he doesn’t have access to in reality and experiences an inner feeling of superiority by writing this kind of texts. This behaviour specifies the anonymous writer’s inner feelings of sexual frustration, personal inadequacy, and anxieties which have been burdened on the other and especially writer’s cowardice- to lash the target hiding under the cover of anonymity and to await desired outcomes. The perverse structure, as Lacan says is an inverted effect of the fantasy. “It is the subject who determines himself as object in his encounter with the division of subjectivity” (Lacan, 1978:185). “The root of the scopophilic drive is to be found entirely in the subject, in the fact that the subject sees himself in his sexual member. Whereas making oneself seen is indicated by an arrow that comes back towards the subject, making oneself heard goes towards the other” (Lacan, 2018:194–195). It is observed in the study that in the university context certain individuals are identified as the authors of the anonymous letters and seen to operate as a close circle and often known to the target.

Financial irregularities, corruption and fake publications

The study shows that the second highest percentage of anonymous letters is about financial irregularities, corruption and fake publication (see table 01). To analyse this, attending to current economic systems, particularly capitalism and superimposed capitalism in colonial countries is important. Contemporary global capitalism is coming to an end due to emergence of irrational or/and magical markets and resultant ‘loss of essence’ in productions for excessively being profit-oriented (Žižek, 2014; Wasko, 2001). As Žižek stated, “the global capitalist system is approaching an apocalyptic zero-point. There should no longer be any doubt: global capitalism is fast approaching its terminal crisis” (Žižek, 2011). This phenomenon can be explained in relation to McDisneyization of contemporary society- the combination of two concepts of Disneyization (Bryman, 1999) and McDonaldization (Ritzer, 1983). This applies to the

academic world in which emergent notion of ‘academic capitalism’ is a segment of it (Bullard, 2007). As well, drastically spreading predatory journals and fake publications is identified as an outcome of the influence of magical and irrational capitalism (Bohannon, 2013; Beall, 2012) and such magical market has an immense impact on peripheral countries on which capitalism has been superimposed such as India and Sri Lanka (Kumara, 2016; Kumara, et al, 2017a). Research has ‘lost its essence’ while predatory journals publishing research papers simply in terms of quantity not quality to increase irrational profits, and branded journals and publishers following their counterparts to increase their profits by publishing boundless of papers and journals, even with large numbers of authors at one paper (Loannidis, Klavans, & Boyack, 2018), which has resulted in disqualifying of numerous branded publishers /journals by renowned universities and scholars (Whitfield, 2012). Searching for the quality and essence of research work in a capitalist structure is impractical when its core orientation seems increasing profits.

Sample anonymous letter no 29:

E [female, junior academic staff member] and [F- female, senior academic staff member] have published a research paper in a fake international journal and it is also amazing that temporary lecturers write books like magicians (Received date, 2019.01.08)

Sample anonymous letter no 53:

[G – Male, senior academic staff member] is a fake scholar who has submitted fake research papers for his promotions (Received date 2018.12.05).

Sample anonymous letter no 55:

You have caused a serious harm to the reputation of the department of H [a department name] since you have used others' research articles deceptively and deceitfully (Received date 2018.12.04).

Sample anonymous letter no 57:

Handouts as supplementary material for external examinations were fraudulently prepared to make money (Received date 2019.07.11)

Scholars have globally published a large number of research papers to explain and analyse issues of predatory journals and low-quality research productions (Beall, 2012; Bohannon, 2013; Bowman, 2014; Xia et al, 2015). Hence, it is interesting to study why individuals discuss the same phenomenon in anonymity in the university context.

Anonymous letter writers and victims of these letters are colleagues who share many common interests and secrets too. They exhibit a very good rapport at the workplace, but when it comes to inner feelings, these anonymous writers seem to suffer from jealousy, whether academic or personal. So, they pour their inner feelings which cannot be said openly into anonymous letters rather than damaging their so-called relationships with the targeted colleague in public. As well, since they are hidden behind anonymity, they are not accountable for the outcomes nor would they be charged against [SSI02, 44-year-old university lecturer, 2019.05.02]

(This statement was cross checked and proved by SSI04, SSI05, SSI06, SSI14, and SSI15).

Research output of university academics is in/directly related to the advancement of their career such as promotions, salary increments, increased rank and associated status and social capital etc. Capitalist culture is marked for possessive individualism, though it being dependent and variable, and competition (Berger, 2018). In this competitive individualist society, jealousy for socio-economic status of the 'other' is commonly observed, especially in feudal- capitalist social systems on which capitalism was superimposed (Kumara, 2016; Kumara, 2017b). Academic members of Sri Lankan universities who are commonly believed to be Sri Lankan bourgeois suffer from social and academic jealousy of the 'other' who is in their own social circles, in their competition to achieve socioeconomic status and to achieve what others have or desire to have. Many sample anonymous letters on this topic analysed in the research seem to be motivated by malice and spite of sufferers from a feeling of excessive jealousy.

Talented and influential people are often being victimized in anonymous letters and many of these victims are the promoters of dominant power in the university [SSI04, male Senior Lecturer with 16 years of service, 2019.05.22]

(This statement was cross checked and proved by SSI01, SSI02, SSI06, SSI09, SSI14).

An Evolutionary biology perspective

The sociological interpretation offered here however could equally be discounted by a biopsychological explanation of a low-ranking individual in a group challenging individual in higher position using anonymous letters because the system does not offer an open space to discuss these matters. The reluctance of the victims and higher academia to consider the situational factors and to see personality factors in the writer as responsible for the anonymous letters could be due to an error in attribution (Patry, 2011). The temporal pattern of letters peaking around the time of recruitment indicates a situational specificity than a personality variable Sexual theme in anonymous letters could also be described as an “informational warfare” (Hess& Hagen, 2009) waged by a low ranker to shock the system to achieve the target of eliminating the other contenders entering the race. Language is ideal for this purpose, exemplifying its role as a hidden deceiver (Oesch, 2016).

Conclusion

Anonymous letters circulated within the university context were categorised under 15 themes based on their content, but all these are interrelated must not be ignored. Two main clusters were identified :(1) sexuality, new recruitments to academic staff and dominancy of administrative bodies and (2) fake publications, financial anomalies and corruption. As for the theoretical analysis an integrated model using biological and sociological approaches is used. Jacques Lacan’s theory of ‘desire, love and hate’ is used to analyse psychosociological background behind the text of anonymous communication, since this theory shares insight on other discourses, theories and concepts such as feudalism, colonialism, capitalism, superimposed capitalism, feudal-capitalism, Victorianism, individualism, free education system, competition and metamorphosis social jealousy.

Capitalism has been superimposed on Sri Lanka in the colonial period making drastic changes in its traditional feudal socioeconomic system and then transforming it into feudal-capitalism. Along with capitalism Victorian morality was introduced similar to the situation in many other world peripheral countries. Although Victorian morality has gradually changed and progressed in the west owing to modernization and post-modernization processes, Victorian virtues remained in Sri Lanka, especially they took deep roots in the residents of rural areas who were compatible with Victorian morality and its hypocrisy. The free education policy of Sri Lanka ensured that students from all social backgrounds achieve successful education through primary to higher education for free by permitting most of these students from working class origins upward social mobility, which means people from low-income families escaping from their working-class backgrounds. Since social mobility is determined in terms of social class and one's career is used to locate people into social classes, most of the university academic members are categorized in Sri Lankan bourgeois. This social stratum unlikely to its western counterparts in the capitalist countries, holds on to Victorian virtues together with its hypocrisy, thus, adapt double faced behaviour: on one hand they promote modern and post-modern pursuits which they have gained through western education and on the other hand they stick to Victorian virtues for moral support.

The highest number of anonymous letters were aimed at exposing relationship between workplace sex and new recruitments to academic staff. This phenomenon is identified and analysed to be one's desire to take revenge on what the other has already achieved or desires to achieve as fantasised by anonymous writers. Possessive individualism and competition are features of Capitalism. In this competitive individualist society, social comparison has given rise to emotion of jealousy. Social jealousy towards socio-economic fortune of the 'other' is commonly observed, especially in feudal- capitalist social systems on which capitalism was superimposed. Academic members of Sri Lankan state universities in the upper middle class suffer from social jealousy in their competition to upward mobility with the 'other' in their own social circles and to fulfil the desires/ambitions what they believe to be of the other. It is observed that sample anonymous letters aimed to defile the public image of the 'other' who is successful in the eye of the anonymous writer, are motivated by malicious envy.

The second highest percentage of anonymous letters takes in the topics in the second cluster: fake publication, financial irregularities, and corruption. University is called a status system, and academic jealousy in highly competitive academia is common since many pursue academic careers, and academics already in the career seek promotion to increase their income as well as their rank and associated status. Thus, there is a correlation among career advancement, and career research, for example, presenting papers at international conferences, getting papers published in high index journals and earning big research grants/projects can improve one's status compared to status of immediate colleagues. In a situation where improved status of one member can result in relative decrease in the status of the other, the success of the other is resented. This academic jealousy among colleagues is expressed in anonymity in order to bring harm on the victim by preventing him/her pursuing desires which anonymous writers also desire for.

The sociological interpretations however could equally be discounted by a biopsychological and evolutionary biology explanation of a low-ranking individual using language in deceptive manner to obtain resources and fear the contenders away from the race.

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