

Conversational Difficulties, Cognitive Distortions, and Leadership Efficacy of Minority Students in Sri Lankan Public Universities

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ABSTRACT

The politicized nature of Sri Lankan public universities negatively influences the leadership self-efficacy of Tamil-speaking minority (TSM) students. Similarly, the language barrier between Sinhalese and TSM students makes pursuing leadership in public higher education institutes (HEIs) cumbersome for TSM learners. Although substantial contemporary research is available about the government's ethnocentric role in enacting majoritarian policies and the consequent reluctance among minority students to lead within campuses, research that exclusively focuses on the key cognitive patterns associated with the efficaciousness of the individual learner is sparse. To fill this dearth in literature, the present study aspired to explore and explain how conversational deficits produce distorted thinking that alters the leadership self-efficacy of TSM students in public universities. The exploratory study utilized interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and chose a purposive sample of 14 minority students. Seven learners participated in one-on-one interviews and the remainder took part in two focus group discussions. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings indicated a variety of maladaptive thoughts and dysfunctional attitudes about leadership commonly held by minority students. Moreover, a noticeable proportion of informants regarded unfavorable cognitive patterns as an outcome of the language barrier. Although most participants, as expected, implied doubts about the integrity of university administration, some still anticipated the assistance of campus management to bring more representation to TSM students within campuses. Overall, the study provided psychological insights to elucidate minority experiences within public universities in Sri Lanka. Through such comprehension, the university regulators could improve the existing administrative processes, student welfare mechanisms, and the learning environment to create favorable outcomes for minority students to display leadership.

Keywords: Language-barrier, cognitive distortions, dichotomous reasoning, minority leadership, self-efficacy

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Leadership is a commonly documented phenomenon. However, the application of psychopathological models to explore the nature of human thought processes associated with leadership is minimal. As a result, the authors of the present inquiry conducted an in-depth exploration to unravel dysfunctional attitudes and maladaptive thoughts linked with leadership efficacy. Further, the research focused on the prevalence and nature of such thoughts among TSM students in Sri Lankan public universities. Generally, in the face of conversational difficulties, South Asian students hesitate to enthusiastically take part in activities within HEIs (Young, 2017). This inability to successfully communicate often pushes minority groups to interact within ethnically homogenous circles (Eckstein, 2018). Further, most Sri Lankan students in public HEIs are ethnically divided. The majority of researchers view the civil war that existed in the island nation as a contributing factor to prevailing ethnic divisions within learning spheres (Wedikandage, 2014; Pieris, 2019; DFAT, 2021). These divisions get augmented as the politicians of Sri Lanka continue to engage in partisan majoritarian politics (Selvaratnam, Keat, Tham, 2023). While the aforementioned barriers negatively impact the capacity of HEIs to foster leadership mastery in Sri Lankan students, the lack of inter-ethnic communication makes campuses spread subtle forms of racism (Eckstein, 2018; Pieris, 2019). On top of the existing biasedness of political leadership in the country, the university also falls short in supporting TSM students. For instance, the emphasis given by universities to improve student welfare is deficient (Asian Development Bank, 2016). Lack of emphasis on such welfare (i.e., leadership, diversity training, etc.) has made a student body that fails to recognize and appreciate multiculturalism and pluralism. A prime example of this is the student brawls that continue to occur within universities. Most of the student violence is politically motivated

in which ethnicity plays a critical role. While all these problems impact Sri Lankan students in general, minority students are more vulnerable. The simultaneous existence of poor learning outcomes within a turbulent sociopolitical landscape makes learning and efficacy in pursuing leadership arduous for minority students. Further, it is unclear how universities could welcome minority students with open arms and make them leaders of the future the nation demands. This ambiguity burgeons as discourse about Tamils in Sri Lanka is discouraged (DeVotta, 2021).

In view of all of the above, the authors of the present study have reasonable grounds to believe minority students possess dysfunctional thoughts associated with campus leadership due to continuous impediments to equitable outcomes in education. Since the mentioned dysfunctionality in key cognitive processes makes the TSM learners in Sri Lanka reluctant to pursue leadership in HEIs, this qualitative exploration attempted to analyze lived experiences of a group of minority students across multiple study programs in Sri Lankan universities. The resulting analysis of student elaborations may provide valuable suggestions and recommendations for university regulators to be more sensitive toward enhancing the leadership efficacy of minority students within HEIs.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The following exploratory inquiry is grounded in social cognitive theory. To shed light on the key thought processes of minority students pertaining to leadership, the authors considered the theories of self-efficacy and cognitive distortions.

2.1 SELF-EFFICACY AND LEADERSHIP

A person's belief in their capacity to successfully achieve goals is self-efficacy (Bandura, 2000; Warner & Schwarzer, 2020; Street, Mahlberg, Stylianides, 2022). Persistence in pursuing such goals is a determining factor in leaders (Quintana, Barriopedro, Perez, 2022). Even though a person is generally efficacious, the same may not translate well to domain-specific situations. For instance, leadership is a self-directed behavior preceded by a conscious decision-making process. In the demonstration of such behaviors, one has to constantly navigate the external environment (*Figure 1*). There needs to be an inherent element of agency in making a person execute a series of actions to pursue leadership. As per Bandura's social cognitive theory (SCT), self-efficacy is a primary driving force of such human agency (Cannon & Rucker, 2022).

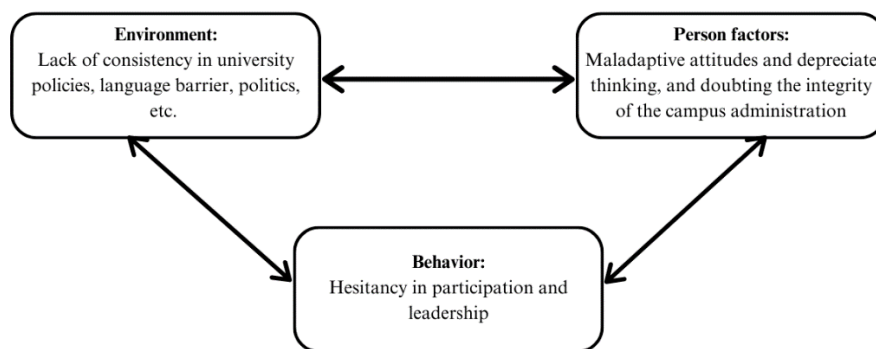


Figure 1: An example demonstration of reciprocal determinants of student leadership efficacy

Considering the nature of the present study, there could be numerous environmental, personal, and behavioral barriers to efficacy in leadership within HEIs for minority students despite their interest and motivation (*Figure 1*). The resulting nexus of these factors could restrain a student from seeking leadership positions within the university. Further, unproductive learning environments tend to make students doubt themselves which in turn could accentuate the hesitancy to effectively engage in campus activities. Considering Sri Lanka's ethnic tensions over the last half a century, there is a possibility that the majority of Tamil-speaking students are afraid of enthusiastic participation in leadership activities within their respective faculties. As Machida & Schaubroeck (2011) posit, past experiences are a vital component that directly impacts one's capacity to lead. Experiencing the language barrier, and negative outcomes of Sri Lanka's political landscape are all part of the past experiences that gives rise to maladaptive thoughts and attitudes among minority students.

However, to form a clear idea about how minority students react to difficulties or failures, one should comprehend the present context of minorities in Sri Lanka. The island nation's Tamil-speaking community primarily lives in North, East, and Central Provinces (*Figure 2*). As a result, university regulators tend to place minority students mostly in the Northern and Eastern campuses. In certain instances, Tamil students willingly go to universities in the North and East due to the ease of communication and interactions.

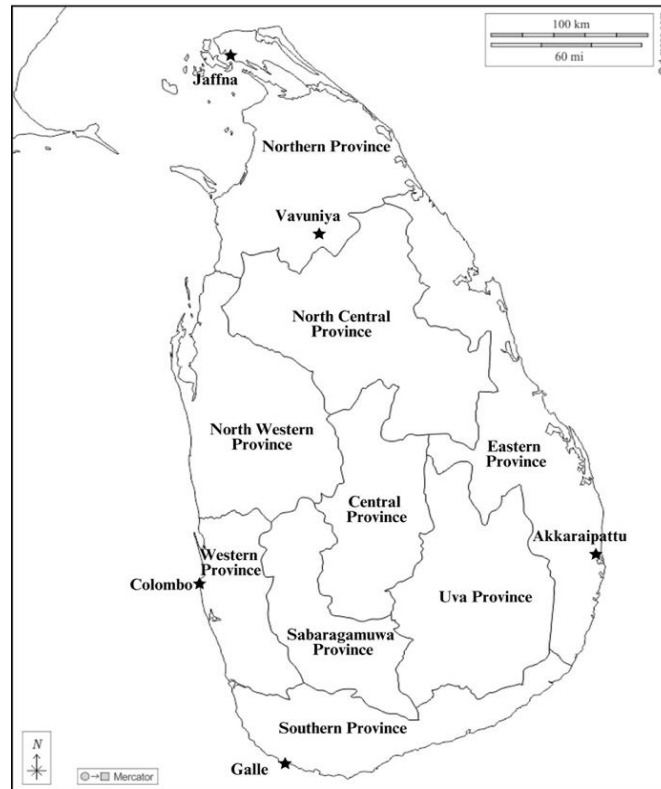


Figure 2: Major provinces of Sri Lanka. Adapted from D-Maps (Depose, 2023)

The Northern Province of Sri Lanka is heavily militarized and students are constantly under the supervision of military personnel (Immigration and Refugee Board, 2017; Oakland Institute, 2021; Tamil Guardian, 2023). This limits the civic involvement of students. Moreover, active engagement to address the collective concerns of society is a fundamental aspect of efficacious leadership. Similarly, lack of access to resources, religiously segregated school systems, and racial discrimination within public institutions are all factors that continue to unfavorably impact Tamil-speaking students in Sri Lanka (Duncan & Cardozo, 2017; Wijesekara, Alford, Mu, 2018; Eckstein, 2018; Liyanage, 2019; Herath, 2020; Satkunanathan, 2020; DFAT, 2021; Russell, 2022). These are all problems the entire minority community in Sri Lanka experience. As a result, even if some students are placed in universities outside of North and East, the majority of those learners still find it difficult to assimilate into a common academic culture and successfully engage in the campus community. This lack of engagement is a key reason for the diminished interest in leadership.

Despite the difficulties encountered, there is still a noticeable group of TSM students who hold beliefs about inter-ethnic interactions. These students are more hopeful and optimistic about their capacity to lead diverse groups even in Sinhala-dominated universities. As Wang (2016) postulates, individuals with higher levels of efficacy have better-coping strategies and emotional intelligence which are all reasons for the successful demonstration of leadership. Similarly, Richard, Ellis, and Powers (2021) highlight the importance of socialization and positive experiences in creating key cognitive schemas conducive to leadership. In that sense, witnessing the successful demonstration of leadership by same-ethnicity seniors within universities could positively impact the leadership self-efficacy of minority freshmen. Such observations are also identified as vicarious experiences which in general are considered a major source of efficacy (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020; Warner & Schwarzer, 2020). Similarly, academic instructors could also play a key role in improving student engagement within the campus (Senarath, 2014; Gamayanaka, 2020). Students usually experience fluctuations in their overall performance within academic spheres, and ordinarily, this is not considered a bad sign as it provides a chance for students to reappraise efficacy

beliefs (Shea & Howell, 2000; Machida & Schaubroeck, 2011; Celebi & Kaya, 2022). These fluctuations then create efficacy spirals that may go upwards, downwards, or at times even could be self-correcting (Shea & Howell, 2000). Although there are some minority students who are willing to enthusiastically engage and lead within campuses, the majority of TSM students hesitating could be a result of downward efficacy spirals. Not being able to receive adequate mentorship from academic advisors and positive experiences from seniors could also be reasons for this hesitancy to lead. The mentors could further assist students in this regard by encouraging students to learn key tasks associated with leadership. Such persuasion boosts learning efficacy and it tends to remain during preparatory situations. This learning efficacy positively influences metacognitive strategies one uses to successfully achieve tasks including leadership (Hayat et al. 2020). Further, good interpersonal relationships between students could also continue to supplement leadership, and both individual and collective self-efficacy (Salanova, Rodriguez-Sanchez, Nielsen, 2020).

However, considering the sociopolitical nature of Sri Lanka which is not typically appreciative of minority groups, it is not clear how minority students navigate themselves to fulfill their leadership aspirations. To explore, minority student's efficaciousness and reactions to this present academic environment, a cognitive model has to be utilized. In the proceeding section, a psychopathological model of cognitive distortions is elaborated to further comprehend the interpretations and reappraisal processes associated with the leadership of minority students.

2.2 COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS AND LEADERSHIP

Language difficulties are often a reason for increased shyness, embarrassment, and reluctance to participate (Young, 2017). Experiencing language difficulties is inevitable as the majority of public officials in Sri Lanka are monolingual (Eckstein, 2018). This forces Tamil speaking community to seek services in Sinhala even if they lack proficiency. Within educational spheres, this could be a reason why many minority students prefer to interact with students of the same ethnicity (Eckstein, 2018). The same trend was noted among Asians in American universities with predominantly White student populations (Nguyen, 2016; Young, 2017). Preference for homogenous groups fuels language issues as it puts Tamil-speaking students at significant risk of losing essential opportunities for success within campuses. For instance, exposure to diverse styles of communication is an important requirement for leadership (Henderson, Gilbert, Zimbardo, 2017; Udin et al. 2019). By the same token, limited interaction with Sinhalese students could also make TSM students more anxious and nervous to converse in Sinhala. Although mild anxiety is preferred to succeed in many aspects of life, not having any or having too much anxiety is often considered a problem (Celebi & Kaya, 2022). As Chandrabose & Logeswary (2019) describe, many TSM students experience fear, anxiety, and hopelessness. This prolonged exposure to anxiety may generate cognitive distortions (Franceschi, 2007). As per cognitive theorists, anxiety often results when individuals process or interpret information biasedly (Bandura, 1997; Beck, 2005; Yurica & DiTomasso, 2005). These erroneous processes of encoding information are a direct contributor to the activation of cognitive distortions (Beck & Haigh, 2014).

Distorted thought patterns can drastically change how a person perceives reality (Simsek, Kocak, Younis, 2021). These distortions, although irrational, seem always logical to the person who experiences them. These distortions often link with dysfunctional attitudes and tend to be rigid and approval-seeking in nature (Bibi et al. 2020). This inflexibility often makes individuals maintain perfectionist beliefs about their own performance (Stroian, 2021). Being overly concerned about performance makes people vulnerable to self-criticisms (Stroian, 2021). The resulting amalgam of all the aforementioned characteristics of cognitive distortions increases the likelihood of experiencing psychological disturbance (Brown, Delgadillo, Golino, 2023; Fausor et al. 2023). There are at least a dozen different types of cognitive distortions. However, this article details only one type of distortion named 'dichotomous reasoning.' The authors of the present inquiry utilized dichotomous reasoning as a framework to analyze participant narrations to dissect the nature of TSM students' thoughts and the resulting leadership efficacy.

Dichotomous reasoning is also known as black-and-white thinking colloquially. In instances a person feels anxious, a resulting stress response pushes the person under anxiety to further catastrophize his or her situation. As Ohst & Tushen-Caffier (2018) postulate, this catastrophizing occurs often due to biased interpretations of the stress response that comes simultaneously with the precipitation of anxiety. This biased interpretation could be a form of dichotomous reasoning as decision-making gets compromised in times of anxiety. To clearly understand how dichotomous reasoning takes place, its 3 ingredients named reference class, the criterion of duality, and the system of taxa should be understood (Franceschi, 2007). Reference class denotes specific events and facts of a person's life (i.e., assuming a leadership position in a university club). The person who has a specific intention views the element of the reference class within a chosen duality which can be written as A/\bar{A} . As demonstrated

in *Figure 3*, one's intention assessed through a duality contains a system of taxa. Essentially these taxa are objects of reality that are filtered through the duality to attain the facts identified in the reference class. In the paper by Franceschi (2007), 11 spheres are used to demonstrate the system of taxa. Since this is an arbitrary number, to demonstrate an optimal system of taxa, in this example only 7 spheres are used. Assuming each element contains a specific score, in an objective sense, the score (degree), $d[E_i]$ indicates the degree to which a specific element identifies a quality of a given polar of a duality. Referring to *Figure 3*, all elements within the duality can thus be written as $d \in [-1, +1]$. In a taxa system with 7 elements, this can be written as $d[E1] = -1, d[E2] = -2/3, d[E3] = -1/3, d[E4] = 0, d[E5] = 1/3, d[E6] = 2/3, d[E7] = 1$. The subjective ratings, $\Delta[E_i]$ a person may assign for elements will determine the correspondence they have with A/\bar{A} . As per the visualization in *Figure 3*, E1 – E3 aligns with \bar{A} while E5 – E7 with A . Here, Δ represents the subjective degree assigned by the participant which is also a form of notation.

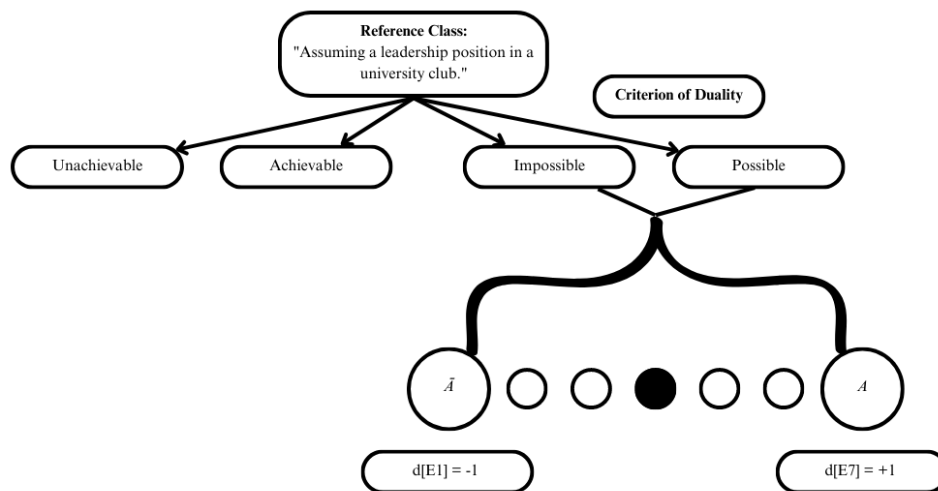


Figure 3: Dichotomous reasoning visualization

Dichotomous reasoning occurs when an individual focus on the two extreme opposites of the taxa $d[E1] = -1$ and $d[E7] = 1$. In such situations, the person omits other objects of reality. On certain occasions, the person may eliminate one polar (i.e., A) and E5 – E7 and considers only the negative polar of the duality and the elements that correspond with it. At times an individual may solely focus on one of the taxa eliminating all. In anxiety-provoking situations, these selections favor \bar{A} as attention span and decision-making gets compromised due to physiological changes accompanied by anxiety. Suppose a student who has always experienced conversational difficulties with Sinhalese students plans on applying for a student union position. Since the process contains a small election, negative encounters in the process may precipitate anxiety forcing him/her to eliminate all possibilities of success and consider only the extreme taxa that corresponds with the duality. Eventually, with the onset of anxiety, the student may stick to the negative polar where he/she will sooner or later consider refraining from active participation in the election process as the ideal choice.

Since the elaboration of dichotomous reasoning is applicable in the realm of leadership, in the present research, key cognitions associated with such cognitive distortions in minority students within Sri Lankan public universities were further explored. The utilized methodology in the exploration of study findings is elaborated in the subsequent sections.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

To display how depreciative thoughts could impact the leadership self-efficacy of minority students on government campuses, an interpretative phenomenological study was designed. Inductive studies help researchers explore the depths of problems to form general conclusions about the identified issues (Azam et al. 2021). Moreover, interpretivism assists inquirers understand the thought processes of individuals by analyzing and synthesizing social, cultural, political, linguistic, and cognitive elements of minority leadership (Azam et al. 2021; Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2022). To enable this in-depth qualitative analysis a purposive sample of 14 TSM students were recruited for this study. Such a sample helps the researcher as the informants in purposive samples provide the most essential data to explore the phenomena of interest (Azam et al. 2021). The sample of this study consisted

of students representing multiple provinces and they belong to three ethnic minorities, namely, Sri Lankan Tamil, Sri Lankan Muslim, and Indian Tamil. The demographic information of the chosen sample is summarized in *Table 1* and *Table 2* given below.

Table 1: Gender and ethnicity of participants

Demographic characteristics		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	12	85.71%
	Female	2	14.29%
	Total	14	100%
Ethnicity	Sri Lankan Tamil	7	50%
	Muslim	6	42.86%
	Indian Tamil	1	7.14%
	Total	14	100%

Seven one-on-one interviews and two focus group discussions were conducted. Most participants had more than a year of university experience and all participants possessed the capacity to communicate in English. All participants identified as native Tamil speakers. All participants were informed about the objective of the study and consent was obtained to proceed with the data collection and analysis. More demographic information about the study participants is displayed in *Table 2*.

Table 2: Academic related information of the study participants

Demographic characteristics		Frequency	Percentage
University of attendance	University of Sri Jayawardenapura	5	35.71%
	University of Ruhuna	2	14.29%
	University of Peradeniya	6	42.86%
	University of Wayamba	1	7.14%
	Total	14	100%
Program of study	Medicine	8	57.14%
	Engineering	3	21.43%
	Food science & technology	1	7.14%
	Tamil	1	7.14%
	Education	1	7.14%
	Total	14	100%
Level of study	Undergraduate	13	92.86%
	Post-graduate	1	7.14%
	Total	14	100%

A semi-structured interview developed by the researchers to understand the lived experiences of participants was used with all informants. All questions were open-ended; however, the researchers asked additional questions in instances deemed necessary to further probe into the dysfunctional or maladaptive thoughts students harbor. The majority of the interviews were conducted via Zoom platform, and later all video-recorded sessions were transcribed verbatim. All data were analyzed using the guidelines presented by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2022) for IPA. The transcripts were read a few times and experiential statements were first recorded. All noted statements were then listed and experiential themes were developed later considering the commonality of the identified statements. The salient findings are described in this article to reach the identified objective of this paper. Pseudonyms are used throughout to keep participants anonymous.

4.0 FINDINGS

The following interpretative inquiry generated three key themes to understand the dysfunctional attitudes and maladaptive thoughts associated with leadership self-efficacy. The majority of the students are fearful or anxious about taking part in leadership activities. Most students have doubts about the integrity of the university administration which is a major reason for this reluctance. At the same time, some students expect the administrators to intervene to increase the representation of minority students within the university leadership spheres. All these are new findings and the proceeding sub-sections that contain the findings are compared against contemporary socio-political problems of university education in Sri Lanka.

4.1 MALADAPTIVE AND DYSFUNCTIONAL THOUGHTS ASSOCIATED WITH LEADERSHIP

Most students displayed leadership within the faculty, but not in the main university. Maladaptive attitudes and self-depreciative thinking most students seem to possess is a reason for this selective display of leadership. For instance, Melvin, who is a 4th-year medical student, believes that one of his friends did not join a university club due to ‘fear’ of going alone. *“So as far as I know, many friends they don’t like to get involved in most of the things because a friend of mine who wanted to join GAVEL, she didn’t join GAVEL because she feared getting to it alone.”* Similar to Melvin, Rameez, who is a 2nd-year medical student also said that he refrained from attending certain events due to ‘language issues’, and further stated that making errors in language is slightly ‘embarrassing.’ In another instance, he mentioned that sometimes Sinhalese students do not like minority students leading. Rani, who is a 3rd-year medical student, also shared the same idea that student unions and some lecturers do not prefer active minority student involvement in university activities. She said, *“I know that if I become the rep, the whole support won’t be there. My batchmates will be okay, but students who are in the union and some of the lecturers they don’t like the Tamil student becoming a leader. I am sure about that.”*

Informants of the present study tend to hold onto such rigid maladaptive thoughts about their capacity to lead due to certain doubts minority students seem to have. For instance, Melvin said, *“In the start, I did not participate in most of the activities because I was not good in my Sinhala.”* He further believes that *“if one person who is minority gets to a leadership position or you know a top position, sometimes people not like it sometimes. They might like it; our people fear that.”* His statement implies that he considers the possibility of Sinhalese students accepting Tamil students for leadership positions in the university. Yet, he is further inclined to think that his colleagues are afraid of thinking about such proclivities. In certain situations, these doubts are validated when students experience problems. To elaborate, Vaibhav, a final-year medical student narrated how he had to let go of his sub-monitorship due to his inability to speak in Sinhala.

“I can tell one example. From my experience in the first year...there ‘rep’ and ‘areppa’.....monitor and sub-monitor for the whole batch. So, they chose one monitor and they chose me as the ‘areppa.’ Areppa means sub-monitor. I am too interactive with everybody. But, the next day they came and told me that machan (friend) there is a problem. There is a union and union...most of the conversations are done in Sinhala and you have to go to the union. Due to these problems we can’t make you a sub-monitor, they told. I told that’s fine. It is the university culture.”

Although Sinhala proficiency is a major determinant to become an effective leader in most Sri Lankan universities, it is not a requirement. Giving up one’s leadership position purely due to a language concern also implies how the overall Tamil-speaking community perceives them within situations where the majority speaks Sinhala. These are all examples of maladaptive thinking. For instance, Melvin said, *“So, if you ask me I might go and be the leader for certain clubs but not all. Because it depends, when it comes to large capacity, I am not sure whether I will be able to handle it because you need fluency in Sinhala, that’s the main factor there.”* In all the narrations of Melvin, Rameez, and Rani, more than the external environment, it is personal thoughts that impede their willingness to lead. Such thoughts impact self-efficacy negatively. Further, such maladaptive thoughts distort the perceived reality of those individuals. In the case of Melvin (Table 3), his intention to become a leader in a university club is a reference class that can be viewed within the duality of ‘can lead’ and ‘cannot lead.’ Depending on his existing beliefs of efficacy, confidence, and many other factors including but not limited to past experiences, prejudice, etc. the resulting choices under the duality forms. These choices are known as the system of taxa. In all examples including Melvin’s of all the objects of reality that are available within $d(\in [-1, +1])$, when the chances for evaluation $\Delta[E_i]$ are given, Melvin has disqualified one whole polar within the duality and considered the extreme taxon $d[E_1] = -1$ of \bar{A} . As per the recorded literature, disqualification of one polar in a system of taxa is often a reaction to stress and anxiety (Franceschi, 2007).

Table 3: Application of dichotomous reasoning framework to display leadership beliefs

Informant	Reference class	Criterion of duality	System of taxa $d(\in [-1, +1])$
Melvin	Intention to lead a student club	I cannot lead (\bar{A})	$d[E_1] = -1$ Informant’s choice
		<i>“I am not sure whether I will be able to handle it because you need fluency in Sinhala.”</i>	
		<i>“Yeah, I have seen certain people not joining certain things just because they are minority”</i>	
		Neutral option	

		<i>“it depends”</i>	$d[E4] = 0$
		I can lead (A)	$d[E7] = +1$
		<i>“So, if you ask me I might go and be the leader for certain clubs”</i>	

More supportive evidence to strengthen the dichotomous reasoning framework comes from Prakash who is a 3rd-year food science and technology student. He said,

“For me the personal thing is like first we should overcome our inner fears. First, we have to overcome the inner fears and the major fear that every university student have is their language. They are afraid to speak in another foreign language like they feel like they get teased or like get something like that. But, the university is not extreme...it is different. They support you, not everyone is perfect.”

Similar to Prakash, Imticab who is a first-year engineering student expressed “*Language is a barrier when someone is not trying their best to learn something new...that....it is not a barrier when someone really wants to learn or want to share their thoughts.*” He further stated that developing language skills is a personal choice one has to make. “*We can overcome these when we try to learn other languages and try to communicate with people. Most of people, they understand we have problems. They are not trying to laugh or do something, but we should understand that.... if we try we can do it*” Imticab added. Analyzing closely, the elaborations of Prakash and Imticab implies efficacy in reconciling pending issues one encounter in their academic life. Despite the problems Vaibhav faced when he intended to become a sub-monitor, his narrations still indicated efficacy (Table 4).

Table 4: Application of dichotomous reasoning framework to display leadership beliefs

Informant	Reference class	Criterion of duality	System of taxa $d(\in [-1, +1])$
Vaibhav	Intention to network	I should not (\bar{A})	$d[E1] = -1$
		<i>“They know...in the past history there is something happened. Everybody knows that they also know that.”</i>	
		Neutral option	$d[E4] = 0$
		<i>“As an educated community, they want to build healthy future generation”</i>	
		I should (A)	$d[E7] = +1$ Informant’s choice
	<i>“Now, they are about to give their hands towards us, so, we should give our hands as well”</i>		
	<i>“Eventually we can overcome that”</i> <i>“Because the thing is we have the responsibility of now knowing the language. So, many struggles will come. If we want to know that we should go forward forget those mocking and those things.”</i>		

However, when individuals exhaust coping mechanisms, their beliefs of efficacy get impacted negatively. In the present study, researchers also noticed the justification students bring to justify their diminished efficacy beliefs and alignment to dichotomous reasoning. For instance, Rani rejected accepting the batch representative position in her faculty and justifies her actions by stating “*They just wanted me there to talk. My talkativeness and my forwardness they just want me without even thinking what will happen to me if I become the rep.*” In addition to justifications, the present study also noticed some students considering their reluctance to lead and avoidance of interacting with Sinhalese students as a form of sacrifice towards pushing for one’s linguistic identity. These are dysfunctional attitudes that continue to pull Tamil students from mastering the Sinhala language. For instance, Jahangir, a post-graduate student pursuing Tamil explained that a common reaction of many Tamil students when he works with Sinhalese is “*Ah you are going to work with Sinhala students and you are forgetting us and forgetting our culture.*” This is an example of maladaptive thinking since speaking in Sinhala poses no threat to the rich heritage of Tamil culture. However, such statements also indicate the general displeasure among Tamil students in working with Sinhalese students. The worst possible outcome of cognitive distortions is the resulting self-depreciation which results in giving up leadership altogether. For example, Saran, a 4th-year medical student mentioned “*Leaders should have the capability to take care of himself as well as others as well. So, I lack that capability. I can’t concentrate on so many things at the same time. An important quality of a leader is he must be corporative in everything. That’s why I am saying I am not a good leader.*”

4.2 STUDENTS ARE DUBIOUS OF THE INTEGRITY OF UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATION

The conversational difficulties and maladaptive thoughts of minority students impact their leadership efficacy. In addition to the already identified problems, the researchers noticed a substantial number of students have doubts about the integrity of the university administration. For instance, Melvin thinks that university authorities do not offer a lot of support for their concerns. He expressed “...so maybe within our faculty it might help others because if you go and speak to a professor they might take an action there. But, when it comes to university authority I don't think they offer so much support. I think we have to resolve it on our own.” Rani also shared similar ideas. However, her experience seems a bit more bitter compared to that of Melvin as Rani was penalized by administrators when she raised concerns. She narrated:

“Consider my period here it is 2.5 years and I have been there in almost all the hostels in this town. Which means they will be sending us to a hostel and suddenly they change the decision and move. They ask us move with all the stuff and we have to move. So, I have been there in almost all the hostels here. But, we never talked against them, we packed the things and moved. But, at the end the last time, we got frustrated and we wanted to talk against it and we went to the dean and we were sending letter to the VC but they all penalized us.”

The experience of Rani is documented in some of the recent research by local researchers. As Perera (2013), and Hapuhinna, Amarasinghe, and Davinda (2020) explain, student accommodation, medium of instruction, teacher-student relationships, and inefficiency in documentation processes are all problems of most government HEIs. These problems add to the existing problems such as language barrier, bitter shared history between ethnic groups, etc. increasing the likelihood of minority students having maladaptive thoughts and dysfunctional attitudes. To add to this, “I don't think administration and student interaction is that much developed in our faculty still. But there are students interacting well with lecturers these days but my personal opinion is there is not that much interaction with administration” Rameez said. In some sense what Rameez experiences in his faculty is a much bigger problem that is observable in all public HEIs in Sri Lanka. The quality of universities is declining and the degree to which academics realize their accountability in making things right is doubtful (Herath, 2022). One good example is the sheer number of academics who have left Sri Lanka during the economic crisis for greener pastures. Hundreds, if not thousands of academics have left HEIs for foreign employment forsaking the already dysfunctional system and helpless students (Wijeyekoon, 2023). In that sense, this is no longer a minority problem; but, the Tamil-speaking community is extremely vulnerable to the negative outcomes of this broken system.

Another prominent reason for students to lose hope in the present system is the politicized nature of Sri Lanka's higher education system. For instance, Jahangir expressed:

“...People.....politically minded people use culture and language...I guess you know the problem. So, they try to use the people...politically they use language and culture and they earn their aims to do. So, that's also a problem with university environment. But, that peoples are not invisible to us. There are... they also some students or lecturers...or....non- academic staff...they work for it. So, that is the problem.”

In fact, in some universities, chancellors are appointed unsystematically for political gains. A prime example of this is the appointment of Ven. Muruththettuwa Ananda Thera as the chancellor of Colombo University. Ven. Thera is no academic, but the chief incumbent of *Abhayaramaya* in Colombo, and also the serving chairman of the Public Nurses Union (Daily Mirror, 2021). While Thera's capacity to serve as the chancellor is questionable, the students also seem dissatisfied with this political appointment. Some of the students during the graduation ceremony refused to take diplomas from Ven. Thera who was conferring them on the stage. In that sense, students doubting the integrity of the university administration is understandable. Also, appointing religious leaders to administrate HEIs which also is the norm in many other government universities is a dagger to the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion as such appointments imply Sinhalese-Buddhist hegemony Sri Lanka has maintained since the times of post-independence. These political issues have run deep into not just the administration, but also the student body. Similar to what Jahangir described, Gamanayaka (2022) also posits that the administration often blames student groups who align with left-wing politics as a critical factor for the majority of the problems in Sri Lankan universities. In all of this, considering the degree of discrimination and marginalization minorities experience in Sri Lanka, their thoughts being maladaptive is comprehensible. As a result, students have lost hope and respect toward the university administration. To strengthen student-administration relations, Gamanayaka (2022) proposes enhanced student representation in the decision-making

process in the university, and such representation is a much-needed update to existing administrative practices in the universities. Since a lack of good practices poses significant risks to HEIs, Perera, Rahmat, Khatibi & Azam (2021) recommend adhering to international standards-related management processes. For instance, establishing a clear diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policy will greatly benefit universities. While it helps in developing the rapport between the administration and minority students, it certainly will enhance the leadership efficacy of minority students.

4.3 MINORITY STUDENTS EXPECT SUPPORT OF THE ADMINISTRATION

Some of the participants of the present study stated that university administration has a considerable stake in ensuring opportunities are made available for minority students. For instance, Melvin said, *“I think what they should do is to ensure that at least within the.... there are boards and committees for each and every club, so I think they should ensure that there are at least one or two participants.”* Due to existing maladaptive thoughts and not-so-friendly administration, many minority students attempt to refrain from seeking leadership positions. As a result, some Tamil-speaking students expect policy amendments within the university systems to increase their participation and representation. Lakshmi, who is a 4th-year medical student stated that *“universities should ensure everyone is participating in certain events and they should ensure that like in certain universities, the same people will not be elected.”* She also recommended the following:

“I would say, having lot of group related activities, and frequent rotation of leaders than one person being the leader the whole time. If they have rotations, that would be better. Also, allowing students to take part in these extracurricular activities. Events with cooperation with international universities help us to learn about the education settings in other universities as well as the improve our leadership qualities.”

In some sense, ensuring equity is by no means a bad decision. However, if it annihilates the competitive spirit within the universities, that also negatively impacts the quality of leadership students may obtain within campuses. Similar to what Prakash said, students should overcome fears and consider university time an ideal phase to embrace multiculturalism and pluralism to assimilate into the common academic culture. As Nguyen, Jefferies, & Rojas (2018) describe, cultural exposure and diversity are key ingredients for successful leadership. Further good DEI policies within universities can boost inter-ethnic trust (Bosselut, Castro, Chevelier, & Fouquereau, 2020; Bai, Ramos, Fiske, 2020). Trust is a requirement for meaningful relationships that are the building blocks of leadership (Selvaratnam, 2019). Another ideal method to overcome fears is increasing the opportunities for students to have mutual interactions. Nabeel, who is a 2nd year engineering student and Jahangir highlighted the importance of sports as a mediating element to enable mutual interactions. Nabeel and Jahangir said, respectively:

“Another thing is sports. I think sports is the most helpful for this Tamil and Sinhala people to get closer. Sports teams they want to win a game so they can’t only pick a team from one ethnic group to win a match or something. Mostly....if you get a cricket match.....only in our batch they get into Sinhala different groups and Tamils different groups. When it comes to interfaculty or something they have picked the good players of each team and like put in one. In that period if we select a 15-member team for cricket, there 4-5 members will be Tamil. That’s also a good opportunity.”

“Practically the students are mutually connected in some places like ground, gym, also they go on trips and hikes. That times they connect with each other mutually. But like these programs...the aim is group work, sharing everything like that. So, that type of programs will surely cultural exchange will go well. They frankly say we did this, we did this program for ethnic...same ethnic and we are one...so that motto...it does not work. Practically we will go for the group works and subject related activities. So, this is the key to unlock multi ethnicity and multicultural society based on each other mutually.”

The above input entails good suggestions for university administrators to create newer programs to help minority students interact more and engage with Sinhalese students. Further, student mentors could be instructed to encourage students to actively get involved in activities as suggested by Nabeel and Jahangir. Through inter-ethnic interactions, TSM students could obtain the required assistance and exposure to overcome anxiety, shyness, and fears to become student leaders.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the present exploratory study, it was found that many minority students harbor maladaptive thoughts that stop them from successfully pursuing leadership positions within universities. To a greater extent, this is fueled by the politicized landscape of state universities. As a result of this unpredictable nature of the universities, students doubt the integrity of the HEI administration. Due to the existing difficult nature of making use of available opportunities, minority students expect more representation and support from the administration to succeed in leadership endeavors. Although a qualitative exploration to document a vignette of the minority psyche through phenomenology and psychopathological models are novel globally, linguistic difficulties faced by minorities are reported among minorities in contemporary research. For instance, Young (2017) explains embarrassment, shyness, and anxiety in conversing are common among Asian students in American Universities. Eckstein (2018), Chandrabose & Logeswary (2019), and DFAT (2021) also report findings similar to Young (2017) in Sri Lanka. In that sense, the present research further strengthens the exploration of Sri Lanka's ethnic divide and language barrier within HEIs by providing key insight into the lived experiences of students.

As per the findings produced through this research, improving existing student mentorship programs is recommended to help minority students integrate into a common academic culture. To reap the benefits of mentorship, mentors must be provided with accredited counseling training to support students who have deficits in campus engagement. These mentors then could provide academic support to help students feel included. Similarly, university regulators should adopt DEI strategies to help students feel secure and represented in the learning circles. However, the DEI strategies should not limit to students. Ideally, it should appear in the university's vision, mission, administration, and decision-making to deliver the right message to the larger campus community. Further, to enhance student interactions, university administration could create spaces for students to help and learn from each other (i.e., sports, gym). These recommendations will help TSM students to let go of any remnants of the silo mentality and work for the greater good of the self and society. On the same token, while establishing linguistic identity is a positive initiative for empowering marginalized groups, it needs to be executed mindfully to not to disrupt the academic and ethnic harmony.

Similar to the recommendations the study generated, this research also has many strengths. Firstly, this research is an addition to the scarce literature about minority leadership in Sri Lanka. Similarly, the present study amalgamates key cognitive theories and demonstrates their applicability in the realm of education. The research also has captured the ideas of minority students from all walks of life and brings concerns of a marginalized group into respective audiences. In terms of implications, this research adds to the ongoing investigations of how to improve administration processes in universities to enhance the quality of learning environments. As Hapuhinna, Amarasinghe, & Davinda (2019) and Gamanayaka (2022) have reasoned, the management processes should promote more efficiency to cater to the needs of students. Thus, this research provides more support to motivate university regulatory bodies to consider executing the required policy changes.

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7.0 DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that supports the findings of this study are available from the authors upon reasonable request and with the permission of the Post-Graduate Center for Management at Management & Science University (MSU).

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