

Social Scrutiny in India

An online survey experiment to examine the effect of social scrutiny on identity-related behaviour in India

Poorvi Iyer, Department of Methodology, LSE - P.Iyer1@lse.ac.uk, Presenter
Ivan Deschenaux, Department of Methodology, LSE - I.Deschenaux@lse.ac.uk

Aims

The study's overall aim is to examine how behavioural intent varies with social scrutiny in India. We select three social identities that are salient in South Asia (caste, gender, and religion) and, based on our prior qualitative research, we identify various behaviours which are influenced by these identities (e.g., intercaste and interreligious contact, gendered displays of deference, compliance with norms of propriety, etc.). We then ask the overarching question:

How do these behaviours vary with social scrutiny?

The present study is our first attempt to address this question systematically. The study itself is currently data analysis stage following a pilot phase. It consists of an online survey experiment in which 1200 participants (college students and recent graduates in India) were asked to answer the same set of questions under different conditions of hypothetical scrutiny.

Background and relevant literatures

Regional background

Previous ethnographic studies focusing on South Asia have documented the effect of space (e.g., urban vs. rural, public vs. private) on behaviour related to caste, gender, and religious identity (Thiranagama, 2019). For instance, industrial workers in Chhattisgarh strictly adhere to caste norms at home but ignore such norms inside the factory (Parry, 1999). Students in rural Nepal adopt different gendered and caste-based attitudes in school and at home (Skinner & Holland, 1996; Caddell, 2005). Nepali migrant workers in the Gulf interact with each other seamlessly but revert to traditional caste-based avoidances when returning home (Adhikari & Gellner, 2019).

What these studies only partly address is *why* space has an effect on behaviour in the first place. Our own qualitative research in Nepal and India suggests that the type of social scrutiny prevalent in a given space is key to answering this question. That is, space may be important because of the kind of social scrutiny it elicits.

Theoretical background

Existing social psychological literature on identity performance largely focuses on the

positive functions of performance. One of the field's foundational pieces (Klein et al, 2007) suggests that these functions include affirming, conforming, or strengthening individual or group identities, persuading audiences, and coordinating social action in ways that are beneficial to the group.

This misses another key motivation or function of performance - that it can result from obligation and coercion. Identities are often performed to avoid social sanctions. Previous sociological and ethnographic work in South Asia tells us that this is especially true of the performance of caste, religious identity, and gender (Gorringe & Rafanell, 2007), and it is considering this observation that we choose to conduct our study with Indian respondents.

To begin to assess the extent to which avoiding sanctions motivates performance, our study operationalises specific types of scrutiny to understand the pressures that arise from them, and the various gradations of sanctions imposed.

Overall, the present study aims to initiate a better link between theories within social psychology and sociology that speak to the concept of identity performance.

Methodology

While there is a great deal of ethnographic evidence for the themes we plan to explore, the question of how one operationalises these findings remains an open one. Furthermore, the framing of these findings seems to suggest causality. For instance, Gorringe and Rafanell (2007) briefly discuss that the existence of sanctions explains the durability of caste. Hence, our aim is to build upon current scholarship and to explore and test some of these suggested causal links using experimental methods.

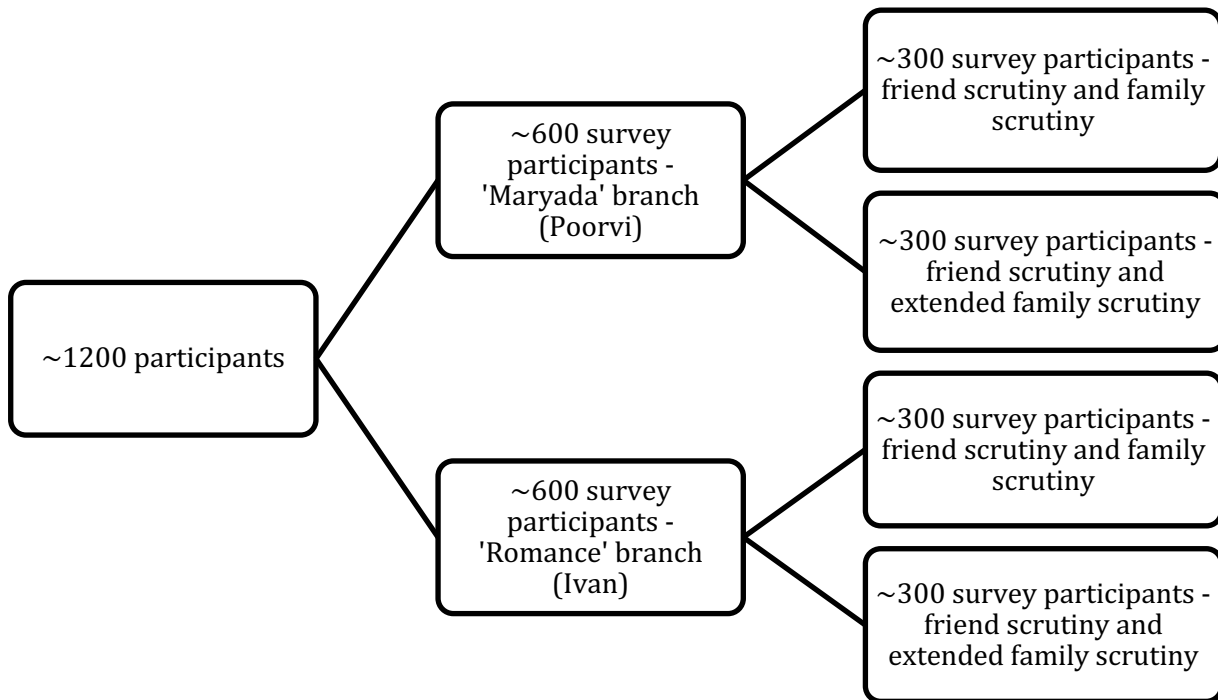
The research design primarily consists in an online survey experiment. 1200 participants answered the same set of questions related to their identities under two of three conditions: friend scrutiny AND family scrutiny OR extended family scrutiny. Within these conditions, participants were asked to imagine that 2 members of their friend group/mother and father/aunt and uncle will read their answers.

For our pilot phase, the survey experiment was followed by focus group discussions covering participants' overall impressions and points of confusion, and whether the survey questions, primes, and treatments worked as intended. While our pilot sample size was too small to conduct any inferential analyses, it proved useful in ensuring that our questions were appropriately framed.

After completing the pilot, we rolled out the survey online and recruited participants using Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter advertisements. Data collection took place between 1st of April – 1st of May and we hit our goal of 1200 participants with the desired gender and caste balance. The proposal for this research was reviewed by the Research Ethics Committee at the London School of Economics and Political Science and found to be in line with the university's ethics policy. Additionally, this study was also cleared by the Monk Prayogshala Institutional Review Board and Ethics Review Committee based in Mumbai, India.

Sampling

All participants will be Hindu college students or recent graduates between the ages 18-30



Experimental treatments

Friend scrutiny

Prompt:

Please write down the first names of two of your close college friends:

Friend #1: _____

Friend #2: _____

Please describe (insert piped text for friend #1), in a few sentences:

Please describe (insert piped text for friend #2), in a few sentences:

“Your responses to questions in this first part continue to be anonymous.

We now want you to imagine that (insert piped text – friend names) are reading your answers to questions in this section.”

Family scrutiny

Prompt:

Please write down the first names of your mother and father

Mother: _____

Father: _____

Please describe (insert piped text for mother), in a few sentences:

Please describe (insert piped text for father), in a few sentences:

“Your responses to questions in this second part continue to be anonymous.

We now want you to imagine that your (insert piped text – parent names) are reading your answers to questions in this section.”

Extended family scrutiny

Prompt:

Please write down the first names of your aunt and uncle

Aunt: _____

Uncle: _____

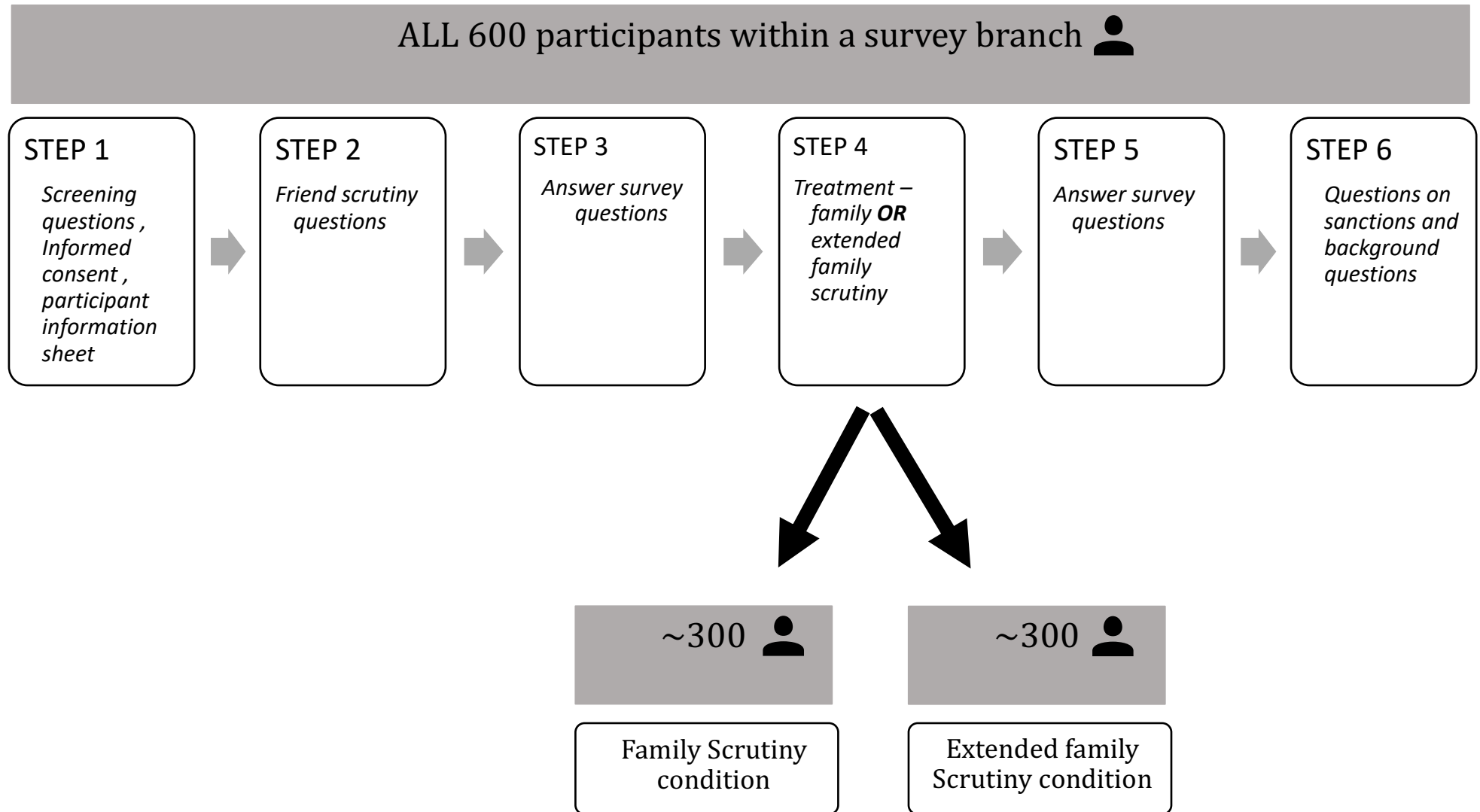
Please describe (insert piped text for aunt), in a few sentences:

Please describe (insert piped text for uncle), in a few sentences:

“Your responses to questions in this second part continue to be anonymous.

We now want you to imagine that your (insert piped text – aunt and uncle names) are reading your answers to questions in this section.”

Procedure



Survey branches**Branch 1: Maryada or performance of respect**

- Questions on maryada (the idea that explores how social distinctions are made using performed acts of deference) include questions related to clothing, servitude, restraint, language and showcase of respect. Some questions are repeated across space to understand, for example, how the need to accord respect is different in college versus the native place

OR**Branch 2: Romance and marriage**

- Questions on romance and marriage include questions related to prior and current romantic relationships, marriage intent, preferences related to arranged v/s love marriage, homogamy and endogamy

Predictions

At the present stage, this study is exploratory and will pave the way for a future set of independent studies with their own sets of research questions and specific hypotheses. We aim to frame hypotheses that explore how the effect of scrutiny on behavioural intent is mediated by

- Demographic / identity characteristics of respondents (caste, gender, religion)
- Severity of anticipated social sanctions for transgressions
- Characteristics of a respondent's social network

For instance:

- Extended family scrutiny will have a stronger effect for female respondents than male respondents for questions on performance of respect, romance and marriage
- Friend scrutiny and family scrutiny (and extended family scrutiny) will have opposing effects for questions on cultural traditionalism, independence and romance and marriage

Selected References

- Adhikari, K., & Gellner, D. (2019). International labour migration from Nepal and changes in inter-caste relations. *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, 46(2).
- Caddell, M. (2005). 'Discipline makes the nation great': Visioning development and the Nepali nation-state through schools. In V. Bénéï (Ed.), *Manufacturing citizenship: Education and nationalism in Europe, South Asia and China* (pp. 76–103). Routledge.
- Gorringe, H., & Rafanell, I. (2007). The Embodiment of Caste: Oppression, Protest and Change. *Sociology*, 41(1), 97–114.
- Klein, O., Spears, R., & Reicher, S. (2007). Social Identity Performance: Extending the Strategic Side of SIDE. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 11(1), 28–45.
- Mines, D. P., & Lamb, S. E. (2010). *Everyday Life in South Asia, Second Edition*. Indiana University Press.
- Parry, J. (1999). Two cheers for reservation: The Satnamis and the steel plant. In R. Guha & J. P. Parry (Eds.), *Institutions and inequalities: Essays in honour of André Béteille* (pp. 128–169). Oxford University Press.
- Skinner, D., & Holland, D. (1996). Schools and the cultural production of the educated person in a Nepalese hill community. In B. A. Levinson, D. E. Foley, & D. C. Holland (Eds.), *The cultural production of the educated person* (pp. 273–299). State University of New York Press.
- Thiranagama, S. (2019). Rural Civilities: Caste, Gender and Public Life in Kerala. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 42(2), 310–327.