

Audience Analysis

The primary audience for this paper would be the members of the Sociology Department, mainly because this department focuses on different people and their cultures. They would discuss questions pertaining to the development of people's behavior in a society and the evolution of the society as a whole. Members of the sociology department generally include college professors with prestigious PhD degrees, as well as post-doctoral students and social workers who work with groups of people in order to learn about different lifestyles and cultures. The main age range for these people is mid-thirties to mid-sixties. Primarily this range of ages can cause a generation gap amongst the audience which will bring different perspectives and points of view when members of this department read this paper.

To Assimilate or to Acculturate?

The United States of America has always been seen as a safe haven of opportunity. For this reason, many immigrants flock to this country in search for new beginnings and better lives. With this belief, when I was two, my family moved to the U.S. from India. My parents were the first of their generation to immigrate to America. Thus, they faced immense pressure getting accustomed to the new land. Initially, my parents wanted to adhere to a traditional Indian way of life, but due to the new atmosphere, they were forced to assimilate into the American culture with the hopes of becoming socially accepted. At the time, they did not realize how it would impact their own Indian culture, but as I grew older, they noticed the changes in my very own lifestyle.

Fearful that I would lose my entire Indian heritage, they sent me back to India to live with my grandparents, hoping that I could build a strong cultural foundation. After returning to America, I entered grade school. At first I felt like an outsider coming from an Indian home. Students used to stare in bewilderment when I brought *handvo*, a traditional Gujarati snack, to lunch. Pointing fingers, they maliciously asked “Eww what’s that? What’s it made of? Why does it smell like that?” as I slowly pulled it out of my lunchbox. Slowly I found it easier to disguise my Indian background by eating sandwiches and cookies, what “normal” American children ate for lunch. It was an easier task for me to adapt to my host nation rather than my host nation adapting to me. By doing this, I was assimilating, and this way I felt more comfortable being a part of society and no longer felt like an outsider.

Many studies have been made about the roots of assimilation. Migration and the need to feel welcomed into a new nation leave no choice for the immigrants except to assimilate. In the article, “Migration, cultural bereavement and cultural identity,” Dr. Dinesh Bhugra, Dean of the

Royal College of Psychiatrists, and Dr. Matthew Becker, a practicing Psychiatrist in San Diego, CA, examine the cause and effect of migration and assimilation into the United Kingdom.

Immigrants migrate due to a variety of reasons, including political, socioeconomic and educational motives. Assimilation is an innate behavior caused by migration. Some Immigrants “choose” to migrate and willingly interact with the majority culture of their host nation (19).

Refugees, on the other hand, are forced to migrate, but still associate with the “majority” population unwillingly (19). My understanding is that regardless of the motive of migration, it is evident that this initial relocation initiates the process of assimilation.

The distinct loss of a certain part of one’s cultural background in the process of discovering one’s cultural identity can be referred to as assimilation. Bhugra and Becker claim that when immigrants feel “isolated from his or her culture, unaccepted by the 'majority culture' and has a lack of social support, a consequent sense of rejection, alienation and poor self-esteem may occur” (Bhugra and Becker 19). To avoid such feelings of despair, immigrants attempt to blend in with the rest of the society. Joining the major society gives immigrants an initial feeling of being welcome into the new nation. Due to the difference in cultures, gaining acceptance by the major culture forces immigrants to resort to assimilation. While this initial assimilation may be beneficial allowing immigrants to fit in, it also comes at a cost, the loss of one’s unique cultural identity.

When I began to bring sandwiches and cookies more often to lunch, the other children were more willing to talk to me about other things, rather than ask questions about the whereabouts of my food. This social support from my peers made me feel more accepted. Slowly the sheer bliss that came from fitting in made me more enthusiastic towards going to lunch every day. From my own experience, as I began to adopt the American culture, I felt more comfortable

among others in American society. Similar to the American society, many nations foster assimilation and readily welcome immigrants who want to follow their way of life. However, while these immigrants are engrossed in establishing this new culture, they are unaware that they are slowly losing their own identity in the process.

While primarily assimilation leads to a loss of cultural identity, it can also have severe psychological effects on the immigrant. At first assimilation might appear to be the best choice for immigrants but eventually, they come to terms with the loss of their own culture and begin to see the costs of becoming too influenced by the American way. The effects of assimilation range from depression, loss of identity, homesickness and even mental illness. Bhugra and Becker assert that migration leads to cultural bereavement, which is a form of psychological grief caused by the loss of one's culture (19-20). They state that, one's identity is defined "one's [own] perception of self" as well as "how we as individuals view [themselves] as unique" when compared to others (Bhugra & Becker 21); one's cultural identity encompasses his/her background and builds one's character. Thus, losing cultural identity to join the majority culture does not enhance one's uniqueness but can lead to misery due to lack of cultural identity in one's existence.

Languages and dialects are very unique to each culture. When one loses his/her culture, he/she also loses the various languages learned. Bhugra & Becker explain that these languages are seen as "cultural marker[s]" (21). These markers are specific traits that distinguish between various cultures. I reaffirm that once these markers are eliminated, immigrants are left as one amongst a uniform crowd. Reflecting back on my experience, I once had learned to speak both Gujarati and Hindi, two Indian languages, while I was growing up with my grandparents in India. Ever since I returned to the U.S., the infrequent use of these languages resulted in the loss

of this fluency. By only sparsely expressing these languages, I understand that I am losing my culture. I am also beginning to see how my attachment to my homeland is withering away as I struggle to communicate with my relatives from India. Assimilation not only makes immigrants miss their culture abroad, but also widens the gap between immigrants and their families back home. In the end, this yields further misery for the immigrants.

Fascination about western culture urges immigrants to assimilate quickly. Dr. Russell A. Kazal, Associate professor at the University of Toronto Department of History writes in the Journal “The Immigration and Ethnic History Newsletter” about the effects of assimilation into the “white” American society. This article discusses how immigrants of multicultural backgrounds are lured into the American way of living by the “white” American society. Assimilation causes immigrants to abandon their own culture and become part of the larger crowd. Kazal claims that this process unifies the culture of the United States by creating greater homogeneity within society. Captivated by the superior crowd, assimilation forces immigrants to lose their cultural diversity and ways of their homeland. Because they feel like the minorities in the population, immigrants shun their own culture and attempt to be a part of the American society. Not only does assimilation affect the interactions of people of different races, but it also leads to a dilemma within one race; assimilation has been shown to have increased over time and is creating a large generation gap amongst immigrants. While the younger generations seem to be ready to embrace the culture of America in order to gain *easy* acceptance in society, the elder immigrants are left to worry about preserving their traditions.

The overall impact of assimilation discussed can only be observed from an amalgamation of several personal experiences from the many immigrants. Wearing Indian clothes, eating Indian food, speaking an Indian language, all of these things made me a *unique* individual, but

moreover, it made me a different individual. Since I was seen as different, I was hesitant to even participate in class or even talk to the other children. Fearful that they would judge me because of my background, I was mostly quiet throughout the early years of grade school. In order to lessen the daunting feeling of being an outsider, I chose to assimilate to the American lifestyle. While I built a relationship with my American peers, I subconsciously lost touch with the elders of family moreover my own heritage.

In order to cope with the nostalgia, Bhugra and Becker suggest that some immigrants resort to “acculturation” (21). This is a process in which an individual absorbs the culture of the host country, while retaining the traditions of their original heritage. I reaffirm that this is the best means of getting situated in a different environment while maintaining one’s inborn culture. Usually when an individual is placed into a new culture, he/she is forced to incorporate the ways of the new culture into his/her own life in order to be welcomed. By continuing to practice their own culture, immigrants cannot only stay in touch with their homeland but also add diversity to the new nation. Attending temple weekly for the past 10 years, I have been able to consistently maintain my heritage while also living in America. By acculturating, I am now able to express my culture comfortably while interacting in and appreciating the American society. Hence, I believe that by learning to acculturate, immigrants, like me, can avoid the negative consequences of assimilation.

Assimilation undeniably helps immigrants acclimate to a new land and feel more welcomed. However, looking back, though assimilation was preferred by the immigrants of my generation, my parents’ generation took this assimilation process to be a desperate transition just so that I could “fit in.” My parents were appalled at how easily I chose to cast away from my Indian culture and embrace the American culture. Growing older, and after becoming more

involved in my local temple, I began to understand that assimilation contributed to abandoning my culture as well as my family. Hence, I realized that culture is a vital part of one's life. In short, I believe rather than resorting to assimilation, immigrants should acculturate and in this way add to diversity of their new host nation; otherwise, they merely become one among an alien crowd, eliminating their true heritage.

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