

Running Head: THROUGH THE EYES OF IMMIGRANTS

Through the Eyes of Immigrants: An Analysis of Three Life Histories

Introduction

In this paper, I intend to examine three interviews conducted by myself and two other classmates of three separate people who were not born in the United States using the topics of immigration that we have recently learned in our class. The participants come from very different parts of the world, but there are some common topics that have affected all of them throughout the course of their lives. Such matters include the part that gender has played both in their home countries and while they have been here, the role of their families in the structuring of their identities, how generational differences influence their transition into American society, and how transnationalism has affected their concepts of who they are. This paper will attempt to discuss all of these issues in the lives of all three participants and come to a conclusion about what immigrants face by coming to America, no matter where they originally came from.

The first part will outline the concepts that I plan to use to analyze the interviews with textual support from the articles in the course pack and the book by Mahalingam (2006). I will use my own interview as a starting point to see how well they relate to an actual immigrant's experience. Then, I will introduce the other interviewees and compare their life histories to my participant's life history to see if any common themes emerge along the lines of the different theories. I will follow that with a discussion of what the consistencies or inconsistencies in the stories mean and how my life relates to that of the immigrant participants. I will conclude by mentioning the limitations of the study and giving a summary of the main points.

Gender Dynamics

An immigrant's experience is always colored by the gender they identify with. For a large portion of the men, they may undergo a negative change in social status due to economic and social discrimination from the dominant culture, so they attempt to control everything that

they can in their lives in order to regain some of that prestige (Espín, 2006). Immigrant women usually are the targets of the male's attempts to dominate their lives in addition to dealing with outside prejudice of their own, so they are doubly affected by their gender in the new social setting. Also, women, more so than men, have to live up to their culture's idealized cultural identity, which serves as both a source of strength and stress for them, and therefore might play a critical role in gendering the immigrant experience (Mahalingam & Haritatos, 2006).

My interviewee's experience with gender has to do with the apparent gender differences in career expectations in his family. He and his brother have always been pushed along a certain occupational path while his sister has never had the same kind of pressure placed on her. She seems to have more freedom to decide what she wants to do with her life, and as my participant pointed out, "she's the lucky one." Contrary to the cultural gender roles described in Mahalingam and Haritatos (2006), however, his sister does not seem to be the one that is expected to carry on the family's cultural traditions. She does not know how to read or write Bengali, so it appears that it is actually up to the men in the family to pass down their written heritage to their children. The difference seems to stem from the fact that the two boys immigrated here after they had at least finished middle school in Bangladesh and the girl had only attended up to second grade, so it was a matter of exposure to the language that might have prompted the inconsistency with gender theory. Still, it is interesting to see a time when the men are entrusted with the values of the culture after learning about how important women can be in that domain.

Function of the Family

The role that a person's family plays in how they handle the stresses of immigration and develop or rework their identity is often the most important one. An immigrant's identity is

formed around the decisions that their family makes in how to raise them and teach them their cultural background, and quite often the discrepancies between the two cultures makes for some interesting ideological conflicts (Dion, 2006). Matters such as the level of involvement that the parents should have in their children's lives and how closely they want to adhere to the values of their home country become major topics, and it is up to the parties involved to navigate these influential identity issues to form a coherent sense of self in their new society. Whether the whole family is together in the new country or just one member has moved on, family members often affect a person's level of cultural adaptation in such a way as to influence their identity formation (Sakamoto, 2006).

The influence that my participant's family had on him seemed to be especially concentrated on his choice of a career. Everyone from his grandmother to his aunts to his parents wanted him to become a doctor, so that is exactly what he is going to school to be. He claims that "they (his family) pushed [him] to be a doctor, but it wasn't like it was that strict." However, he also mentions that "when [he] was born, [his] mom decided [he] was going to be a doctor," so it is obvious that he was pushed from a young age to go into medicine. He internalized his family's expectations for him and incorporated their vision of what he was supposed to be into his identity, and now it has become an important part of who he is.

Another aspect of his life that has been shaped by his parent's cultural teachings is the emphasis he places on the language and religion of his home country. They are the two things that he would like to pass down to his children, and it reflects the influence that his parents had in making sure he maintains the traditions of his homeland. During this same process however, he has gotten used to speaking English almost exclusively and embraced some of the cultural trappings of his new culture, such as watching American football. In this way, he has been able

to “achieve bicultural and bilingual competency that became an integral part of [his] sense of self” (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). His technique of integrating the two dominant cultures in his life shows how supportive his family has been in allowing him to explore his host culture while keeping him grounded in their native beliefs, and it has led to his success so far in living up to both cultures’ standards.

Generational Differences

A topic that goes along with the issue of family dynamics is the apparent discrepancies that exist between different generations of immigrants. The conflict seems to occur when the older first generation parents try to impose their traditional values on their unwilling children in the more Americanized second generation; when the kids realize they actually have more power in the family due to this connection, they rebel against their parents and refuse their traditions (Zhou, 2006). The children of immigrants usually have more social opportunities open to them than their parents, who had to struggle in the new culture just to survive. The new freedom afforded to them by the relative inclusiveness of American society leads to a clash of family values.

The reason that immigrant children become acclimated to the new culture so quickly seems to be the exposure they get while in school. They are quickly introduced to social groups and trends as they are passed down from peers, and it becomes a defining experience for them in how they handle the often overwhelming situation (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Since the parents can not relate to such an experience, the children are left to make sense of this new information by themselves, and this generational gap in knowledge may lead to family conflict and an eventual breakdown in the family relationship (Zhou, 2006).

However, the relationship that my participant described with his family did not seem to follow this generational conflict model present in Zhou (2006). I know that he has had more direct exposure with American life than his parents since he arrived here before them, but nowhere did he mention that he had to somehow help them along through the acculturation process nor clashed with them on cultural matters. He points out that they were all exposed to American culture in Bangladesh because of cable and satellite TV and had a chance to get accustomed to it, but I do not think that it explains why there is little generational conflict. Watching TV does not equate to the experience of actually being involved in American culture, so I believe it was his technique of integrating the two cultures in a rather successful manner that prevented any such family discord from occurring.

Transnationalism

The international connections that immigrants make between their home country and the US carry a lot of different implications for both cultures. Such connections can be made by either the immigrant traveling back to their home country or through some form of verbal communication. Whatever the case may be, the political, economic, and social contacts they have influence everything from trade policies between the two nations to the mental well-being of the immigrant, so the transnational nature of immigration is an important issue to understand. Communication with one's family members back home seems to have the most observable effect on these domains (Murphy & Mahalingam, 2004), and it appears that technological advances in the efficiency of electronic messaging with one's relatives will have a huge impact on the psyche of people who come here and on the entire global community.

My informant's transnational ties were most evident in his traveling back to Bangladesh almost every summer since he has moved to America. He has maintained a close connection

with his aunts and uncles that live there, and he is often updated on the social climate of the country while he is talking with them. This family-oriented connection with his home country has shaped a lot of his personality because it allows him to maintain some of the traditions and values that he grew up with, and it provides him with a psychologically satisfying connection in his life. He can practice his home culture when he is back with his extended family in their native land, and he is aware of what is going on in their political arenas even if he does not vote in their national elections. His family is well enough off that he does not need to bring back money for them to survive, but the other transnational contacts he has supports Murphy and Mahalingam's (2004) inferences about the societal implications for foreign nations and the immigrant's mental health.

Conclusion of Concepts

These theoretical concepts of immigration will be the framework for studying the interviewees' responses, and I believe they will be effective in drawing out the most significant topics from the conversations. Any major similarities or differences between participants will be explored in these four areas, and I think that they all have major implications for a large variety of people. Each one provides a different part of the immigrant experience, and by putting them together into one analytic argument, I will be able to effectively understand what is most important for people who come to America.

Methods/Participant Biographies

Interviews were conducted with each participant at a place and time convenient for them as determined by the interviewer. Two of the interviews were taped with a tape recorder and later transcribed on the computer; Vidal, the third informant, preferred to not be recorded and

requested that the interviewer type what he said directly during the course of the interview. All of them signed consent forms for participating, and no direct compensation was given.

Benji, the participant I interviewed, is twenty-one years old, and he is currently studying biology at the University of Michigan. He moved to America from Bangladesh about seven years ago with his older brother. He originally lived with his aunt in Pittsburgh for two years, but then he moved to New Jersey when his mother, father, and younger sister settled there after immigrating also. He identifies himself loosely as a Sunni Muslim, and he is very devoted to his faith. He plans on going to medical school in the near future.

Vidal is a fifty-seven year old immigrant from Istanbul. He immigrated in 1980, right after he married his wife, and he has two college-aged daughters. He is very proud of his family, especially of his daughters, and he recognizes how much support he has received from them over the years. His whole family is Jewish, and he makes sure that his girls practice their faith as much as they can since he did not get a chance to back in Istanbul.

Mila emigrated from Macedonia in about 1970 and settled in Detroit almost immediately. Although the interview does not explicitly say how old she is, I would estimate her age to be at least sixty-five. She originally came with her husband and their son, but they divorced in 1988 when she noticed that he had become “a different person.” She did not know English when she arrived in America, but she learned it by watching television and talking with the kids that she babysat for fifteen years. She now has three grandchildren of her own, and she maintains very close ties with the local Bosnian community.

Results

Gender. Many of the stories that the participants told of their immigration and subsequent relationship with American culture appeared to follow the gendered pattern of most

immigrants. Benji and Vidal were the first to come over from their immediate families to establish a connection here in America, but Mila had to wait for her husband to get settled here first before she could follow two years later. Also, she was expected to be the “good daughter” and “faithful wife” during her marriage while her husband went carousing around the city with other women, and she felt like she had to maintain that image for the sake of her family (Mahalingam and Haritatos, 2006). She did not know English and could not get a good-enough job to become financially independent, so she had to wait to get a divorce until her son was old enough to take care of himself and support her as well. Benji and Vidal had no such restrictions placed on them, and they were in control of any decision that was made about their lives.

However, one aspect that is contrary to Espin’s (2006) theory about gender is that Benji and Vidal seemed to suffer no loss in social or psychological status because they were able to remain in the middle-class level of society. Vidal got a job on Wall Street that could easily support his family, and Benji’s father was so successful that he is now self-employed. Therefore, they did not find themselves wasting their talents in jobs that most immigrants are reduced to, such as the housekeeping done by Mila. Also, they had both been taught English in their home countries, so they were able to maintain their economic and social integrity with the help of good connections and a strong knowledge of the dominant language, which allowed them to stave off any detrimental impacts to their character.

Family. The importance of a good family support system in their home country and here in America was evident in the interviews. All of the interviewees thanked the close-knit families they belong to for either allowing them to come here or supporting them in some way since they have arrived. They realize how lucky they are compared to other people from their home country, and they understand that it was all of their family members that allowed them to

experience the opportunities of the United States. Furthermore, all of them relied on members of their extended family, such as aunts, cousins, and grandparents, who were already here to help them with housing and employment. With these kinds of resources available, it is apparent they had many people watching out for their well-being, which they could not have survived without.

In addition, they all recognized the importance of passing down their native language and some aspects of their home culture, especially their religion, to their children. All of them mentioned how they have tried or will try to instill the traditional values of their culture in the younger generation so they know where they came from, which seems to be a consistent theme present in many immigrant families according to Dion (2006). Their experiences revealed good connections with the most important people in their lives, and the importance they have placed on these relationships seems to have prompted them to pass down as much of their familial and cultural teachings as they can.

Generational Differences. The most obvious difference that is apparent in the interviews is the age of the participants and the amount of time since they have emigrated. Benji arrived here just seven years ago and is still making his way through college; Vidal and Mila have been here for at least twenty-five years and have adult children of their own. With this kind of generational gap, the information that the older participants provided about their pasts might be less reliable than Benji's. For example, Vidal says of those first months and years: "I forget about them now, you know because things are so different, things are easy. The girls don't know how it was for us because we even forget sometimes." This kind of selective memory to block out unpleasant thoughts is more prevalent among those who have lived farther past them, so the age difference is a very salient feature of the interviews.

An aspect of the interviews related to this age gap that is consistent with Suarez-Orozco's (2001) finding on generational differences is the acculturating influence of school. Benji was the only one to go through any kind of formal schooling here in America, and he is the one that has immersed himself the most in the American way of life. Vidal was connected with American society through work, but he was not as exposed to the social trends and groups as much as Benji was. As a result, his socialization into the dominant society was limited to his family and work contacts. Mila did not attend any kind of school and only learned English after coming here, so she tends to relate exclusively with her own ethnic group. This type of result shows how powerful formal education can be in introducing immigrants to the society, and it illustrates how cultural gaps can form between people of different generations.

Transnationalism. The transnational nature of the participants was marked by their frequent trips to their countries of origin. Benji and Mila admitted that they travel to see their relatives in their respective locales at least once a year, and Vidal said that he takes his family back to Istanbul several times a year. These kinds of vacations may be good to keep the family ties strong, but none of them seem to want to ever move back to their home countries. They are satisfied with visiting when they can, and even Benji, who planned on returning to Bangladesh after finishing medical school, acknowledged that he is unsure if that is what he still wants to do.

However, the extent of the participants' transnational ties appears to end at social and family-related travel and communication, as defined by Murphy and Mahalingam (2004). Mila takes some money back to relatives when she can afford it, but they do not seem to rely on her income in order to live. All of their immediate families are at least middle class, either here or in the home country, so there is no need to support them economically. None of the participants are

actively involved in their countries' politics either, so the extent of the connection with their homelands is on a psychological, personal, and communicative level.

Discussion

The theories that have been used to examine these interviews have provided me with a good basis on which to make some inferences about the various topics. For example, on the issue of gender, the differences between the males and the female in their immigration experiences reveals how much more difficult it can be for women coming to America. Mila was dependent on her husband when she moved to this country, and she remained dependent on him for half of the time she lived here. Even after she left him, she had to rely on another man, her son, who could take care of her while she tried to navigate the public domain in her search for work. Her lack of cultural skills greatly hampered her social and economic mobility, and her experience is probably echoed by thousands of women with the same background.

The reason Vidal and Benji were able to overcome their lowered status as immigrants and contradict the traditional theories about male immigrant experience is two-fold. First, it has to do with the cultural capital they arrived with; second, it has to do with the level of responsibility placed on them in their immediate families. The first one was addressed earlier in the results section, but the level of responsibility is important also because it gave them a strong impetus to succeed in America. Vidal was supporting his wife with his high-paying job on Wall Street, so he knew that he could not let the negativity get to him if he was going to start a family. Benji's family relied on him to get a good education, and he did not want to feel like he disappointed them by not attending a good college. Both of the men were able to overcome the obstacles that were placed in their way by remaining dutiful to the people that supported them.

As much as issues of gender were ever present in the interviews, talk of a person's family seemed to pop up with most of the questions. There were many instances of a participant saying how much their wife or brother was instrumental in the transition period between countries and how they could not have survived without them. I think that these experiences described by the interviewees about how supportive their families were have to do with the stereotypically close-knit nature of family units outside the United States. The cultures that the participants came from are known to emphasize loyalty and honesty with people in their bloodline, and that kind of mentality carried over to the people who have traveled here. It is hard for most Americans to understand this connection, but it is a major part in the lives of people from foreign countries.

Related to the issue of family relations is the transnational conduct of the three participants. First of all, the purpose of the interviewees' adherence to some of the ideas of transnationalism seems to be for their own sense of family commitment. They know that they will probably never live in that country again, so they use every chance they get to see their family members and enjoy their time together. However, I also believe that they wish to maintain those ties in the event that they ever need to use them again. They were able to receive so much assistance from the people back home during their time of adjustment that they know they can rely on it if it is ever needed again. They just have to preserve those connections, and keeping in constant contact with the ones they love will accomplish that.

Although generational differences are usually analyzed in the context of families, I believe that the huge age discrepancy in this study warrants a closer look. With that in mind, the fact that Benji is so much younger than Vidal and Mila makes for an interesting comparison of their views on life. They each arrived in America under completely different historical circumstances, and it would be very hard for them to relate to each other in what they

experienced socially. Their subsequent levels of cultural involvement are directly related to that because the opportunities that Benji had available to him when he arrived far outweighs what the other two had, even after accounting for Vidal's connection to the working world. It comes down to how issues of discrimination and race relations have changed in this country, and the various generations of immigrants each have a unique experience to speak of.

These life history interviews have had an impact on my life and my perception of immigrants because they show me how hard some people have worked to live in this country. They labored for long hours while they were separated from family and friends just to live comfortably, and they had to change their entire perception of the world around them in order to function properly in society. Although there are much worse examples of immigrants who had a harder time here, these interviewees still made sacrifices in a couple different domains to be successful, and it teaches me to be thankful for the social position I am in.

Limitations

A limitation of the study was that the same questions were not asked of all three participants. Some questions were phrased differently or may not have been asked clearly enough, and this probably lead to some confusion or misunderstandings on the part of the participant. Another limitation was the different styles in collecting and transcribing the data. One person had to type the dialogue directly onto the computer, so I am sure she omitted parts of answers when she could not type fast enough or she did not deem them worthy of inclusion. Even for the people that transcribed, there might have been problems with the tape recorder or with a section that was hard to hear, so it is not guaranteed that all relevant parts of the interview made it into the final transcript.

Conclusion

The immigrant experience is a diverse and complicated one. There are so many factors that go into each person's unique understanding of the world around them that it is hard to capture what they think and feel with just a few key topics. However, I believe that showing how gender, family relations, generational differences, and transnationalism fit into this expansive field provides a good start for exploring any of these ideas more in-depth in subsequent analyses. We might further explore the gendered nature of immigration and how we can stem some of its negative effects, or we can see what the traits are of particularly successful and supportive families. We could design studies to better examine immigrants from different eras and see how their cultural skills changed, and we can investigate what parts of a transnational identity are most effective for the immigrant's personality. No matter how we study these, they are all important in appreciating people who come to America.

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