

Indian American First Generation Immigrant: A Tale of Cultural Values

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Chosen Primary Identity Group

First generation American immigrants are tokenized as the diversity of America. The primary identity is not something these people are born with, rather something that develops as a result of immigrating to a new country. An interview provides me the opportunity to echo a voice, without altering it to fit an agenda. I have a multitude of friends and family belonging to the identity of first generation immigrants, however the story of their immigration is often left untold. They are still nurturing their individuality in this country, as we all are, and the story cannot have a distinct end nor can their story be properly told through words, but by learning their paths and their lives in this country can offer some insight, diversifying our worldview. Understanding this group's identity, struggles, and hopes can provide context into how American policies, material conditions, and sentiments must be reformed to better accommodate the diversity it so graciously touts.

Preparing for the Interview

When preparing for my interview with my first generation immigrant group, I mentioned the concept to my father. I, later, formally asked him whether he would be okay with contributing to my project in the form of an interview regarding his identity as a first generation American immigrant. He agreed, and mentioned that fall break would be his ideal time for the interview, as we would both be in the same city. We decided to set the date for November 28th, 2021 at 1:00PM. A week prior to the interview, I reminded him of our interview and made it clear that this interview would only proceed if he was comfortable with it, which he consented to. Before beginning the interview, I made it clear that he would only have to answer questions he felt comfortable with and asked him if it would be fine if we recorded the interview in voice

recordings. He approved the recording, and explicitly agreed to conduct the interview for a narrative for my SOCW300 class. I also made sure he was aware that he had the right to stop the interview and withdraw from the paper at any time he wanted to.

The Interview Narrative

Manish Joshi, a 48 year old first generation Indian American immigrant, sat down comfortably in his folding chair in his bedroom, which was decorated with memorabilia of his home country. As his hands held on to one another in a tight clasp, he described his identity with immense pride shining through his eyes. His mouth announced a single word: “culture.” The single word led to a fleet of emotions, “my culture is Indian American, it’s been preserved, it’s been adapted, it’s been pushed back, and it’s been reborn.” His culture has signified his personal rollercoaster in this community. His pride in his American identity paralleling his fear of letting go of too much tradition was apparent. His culture was the smell of cumin seeds being toasted, shoes being neatly tucked away before entering the home, the red knot tied to his right arm, and his family.

In 1999, My father found work in the U.S.-based country, allowing him entry into the country, but has emphasized that his move was mostly fueled by the stories he had absorbed as a child of America being a free country where equality was a right. His wife and daughter had to stay in India for the following few months until he was able to rent an apartment they could stay at. Having arrived in the country with no car, place of residence, or Social Security number, carrying only the clothes that would fit in his suitcase and a printed picture of his wife and daughter, my dad stayed with a colleague his first couple of months in New Jersey. Every weekend he traveled to New York, where he spent hours trying to get his social security number. My dad, knowing fluent English, spent months communicating with immigration and shared

stories of others with him who were communicating to the best of their abilities with tinges of their native tongues but were given trouble, regardless. While this travel was required weekly, he also had a career to attend to. On his first day of work, he noticed that every person had a cubicle, but each cubicle was unique. They were decorated in mugs and botany unique to each of his colleagues. Although he didn't have much with him at the time, he always describes how proud he was of the single picture he had decorated his office with: a picture of my older sister.

Looking at that photo of his daughter reminded him of his childhood in the country she was currently residing in. When recalling his childhood memories in his lifelong home in India, he talked about a time when he had to work at the young age of 10. With passion in his tone, he described the importance family has always held in his values, "I helped because I wanted to. There is a very unique joy in bringing home sweets for your younger brothers instead of eating it yourself." His selflessness is clear in his willingness to repeat these actions to this day, he still finances his parents' hospital bills, travel tickets, living expenses, and even offers his home to them. "Family is my strength," he emphasizes, "the people I love are my home, the country you're in does not alter this." His understanding of other first generation American immigrants from Asia is also based in family and the importance they hold in one another. "Research has demonstrated that South Asian clients tend to be reluctant to seek out counselling due to cultural stigma and an emphasis on keeping family matters" (Shariff, 2009). My father emphasized that he has never considered his problems as belonging to him, he feels an immense base of support from his family, and hopes he is able to provide that to his wife and children in a similar way. He recognizes that although he says it often, he shows a lot of his love through the time he spends with those he loves. "Traditional cultural values, such as duty to family, greatly influenced end-of-life care preferences and retained importance across generations...may be better able to

assess care preferences after exploring the complex interplay between traditional expectations and specific social realities for each patient.” (Sharma, 2012). A nursing home is not something that he has ever even considered living in. His parents have lived with him, and he hopes to be able to live with his children someday. He strongly believes his children have placed their families high on their values and has confidence that they will welcome him with open arms, as he did his, his wife’s parents, and his brothers throughout his life. His pace slows down as he explains that his relationship with the people in his life is “not a transactional” one, “the people in my life’s selflessness is present enough that connections lie deeper than the surface.”

He recalls September 11th, 2001. The date was stamped on memorials, news outlets, and postings. The Twin Towers had fallen, along with the lives of so many, the trust of the country, and the safety of my people. The terrorists were not identified as “terrorists,” they were identified as “Muslim Pakistani terrorists.” My father was proud of his American identity, but recognized that at the time all South Asian and Middle Easterns at the time shared one central identity forced upon them: “terrorist.” My parents had a one-year-old child and had to worry about seeing her again every time they stepped out of the house, “both private and public acts of violence against individuals perceived to be Arab or Muslim can be understood as two sides of the same coin – a coin made possible by the social construction of the Arab-as-Terrorist stereotype” (Lee, 2007). He stuck an American flag in the window of his home, his wife feared her safety and was no longer able to wear traditional clothing. “The country we loved, no longer loved us.” The country was no longer the “American dream,” it had now turned into the “American sleep terror.” He states that besides isolated challenges like that, he loves his country and is proud of the way it home him. A challenge he talks about facing 22 years later is “not being a native English speaker. There are still pockets of this country that will look at you like

you are different from your accent.” He lists off how professional and social advantages from your English can often create further hindrances and barriers to the way you foster your narrative. “Research about ethnic inequality emphasizes that economic stagnation and restructuring are troubling impediments to progress toward equality, and it shows evidence that employers may still use racial and ethnic queues in hiring.” (Waters, 1995).

My father noted that his identity was not restricted to a first generation American immigrant. “My religious identity is very important to me, I am a Hindu and that is where my values come from.” He was raised as a Hindu since he was a child, and he has always felt a connection to other worldly ideas, higher power, and hope through his religion. It was his first introduction to right and wrong, and something he has not let go of since moving to America. The country is not majority Hindu, unlike his home country, which was a bit of a culture shock, but he maintains his piety with a “mandir” he has created in his house, connecting with a community of other first generation immigrants, and celebrating festivals in the same way he used to.

He shifts in his chair with his eyes focused on remembering the first moment he felt like this country was where he belonged. “The first big holiday I experienced in America was the Fourth of July.” He describes it as the first moment he felt the “American Dream.” He had described how become acquainted with the individualistic nature of the country, a huge culture shock from the comforting group dynamic he grew up in, so seeing the communal excitement of the people around him was the first comfort he had felt in a long time. The people here felt so proud of their identities as Americans and for the first time in a long time, my dad felt part of a community. “It reminded me of family and pride in the way we were living and the way we were together for a moment.”

“Being the first generation raising children here was definitely a balancing act.” He wanted his kids to have a sense of community and not be fully dependent on the individualism of America. “People are important, real connection is success, and money is a necessity.” His values of education are apparent in the way he enforced understanding and learning to his children in lieu of good grades and school work. “Experience will take you much further than an A on a test.” One of his proudest moments as a parent is when he realized that his children had developed his love of “Seva, or service.” “South Asian culture is one in which family obligation and loyalty, as well as self sacrifice and obedience toward one’s elders, are paramount. These values can be different from those of the more individualistically oriented Euro-Canadian dominant culture, and can prompt challenges of cultural adjustment among Canadian-born South Asian youth and their immigrant parents.” (Shariff, 2009). The shock of living in a country that will not cook you dinner for no reason, provide their elders with the utmost comfort in their own homes, and their ability to help without a moment of hesitation was quite an adjustment to accommodate. Helping people was a big part of his life in India and coming to America, he joined many humanitarian non-profits, where he has donated to food drives, helped raise funds for rural schools in India, and packaged disaster aid kits. “My children carry the most important values in my culture, and I am very proud of them.”

Noteworthy, Interactions, and Reactions

My father revealed his smiling eyes and crow’s feet every time he had a story to tell regarding his response to the asked questions. His experiences pushed many of his responses, but in every hardship he recalled, he referred to them as isolated incidents. His ability to transport me into stories of India, his first few months here, and even scenarios I was present in was remarkable. His details, while being strong points in his story, were often overpowered by the

emotion he felt when reciting his takeaways from his situation. He often circled back to the opportunity America brought him, and it was apparent that he was grateful for his community in this country. When asked about his family, he would not take the normal 30 seconds to recollect his answer, he often knew exactly what he wanted to say. He was a very eloquent speaker, which helped him deliver the emotion behind his answers. I was quite taken aback when he talked about how he worked at age of 10. There was no sense of confusion, resentment, or even a doubt in his past behavior. He had an independence and confidence that has not faltered throughout his life.

Changes in My Perceptions

Prior to this interview, I had only heard stories of hardship, hopelessness, and isolation in regards to first generation immigrants. Although these experiences are rooted entirely in reality, many immigrants have stories of community, happiness, and family that are just as formative. My father is proud of his American identity. He finds happiness in his family, friends, and culture, and his hardships did not take that away. I had also always heard that immigrant parent's fears are about their children losing tradition, whereas it truly is about balancing tradition, and ultimately helping your children become good people who care about the world and people around them. Throughout the interview he pointed out photos in the room we were in, which often left me stunned. Many of the time periods I had previously associated with his time in the U.S. were altered, for brief moments it was as if time was not linear. First generation immigrants have to put up with the barriers this country has meticulously and maliciously set up, yet the joys they experience are much more deserved and appreciated, because, oftentimes, it is being celebrated by their whole community.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Required Interview Questions Developed By Instructors

1. In your own words, please describe your (insert the primary identity group you chose to learn more about when you wrote your Interview Planning and Preparation paper here) identity group.
2. Were there moments or situations in which you realized your identity might be different from others' identities? What do you remember about these experiences?
3. In what ways did your identity impact your childhood and upbringing?
4. What advantages, benefits, or strengths do you feel you have as a result of being a member of this group?
5. What disadvantages, struggles, or challenges have you or other members of your group faced?
6. What are some of the preconceived notions or stereotypes have you heard about your group?
How have these stereotypes affected you?
7. Do you consider yourself a member of more than one group, and if so with which group(s) do you identify the most?

Additional Required Questions Developed by the Student Author

8. How have you been able to preserve culture after coming to the United States?
9. What drove your decision to move to America, and did that drive change after living here?

10. Have you found a community of people who share the same identity as you? How have they contributed or altered your idea of this identity?
11. After moving to America, did you ever have a moment where you felt fully immersed in American culture?
12. How has your identity influenced the way you've raised your children?
13. What were your fondest memories of living in America?