

Research on Punjabi American Students Discourse Community

Introduction

The discourse community analyzed in this paper is that of Punjabi American students. More specifically the ways in which these students are able to navigate between the traditions of Punjabi discourse communities as well as the demands of academic discourse found in American college campuses. Some values that are promoted on American college campuses are at odds with their primary discourse. Those in this discourse community often switch between their primary discourse (Punjabi) and their secondary discourse (American student) in everyday interactions. The identity kit of the Punjabi discourse, the primary discourse community of most Punjabi Americans, include things such as adherence to tradition, social appearance, and education. Most Punjabi American students are taught to adhere to this identity kit throughout adolescence, but often deviate during high school or in college learning a secondary discourse. Academic discourse in American colleges is one that values independent and self-fulfilling behaviors, encouraging students to choose their own path, explore, and discover yourself. This is a departure from the Punjabi discourse community's identity kit which emphasizes family and adherence to social and cultural norms. However, instead of just integrating Academic discourse as their only discourse, many Punjabi American students form a secondary discourse which features a combination of values that exists on a spectrum. In other words, students in this community have a spectrum of values which intersect and other values that remain separate. This paper aims to discuss how Punjabi American students cope with variations in values between their primary discourse and secondary discourse using acculturation and enculturation as a means of analysis.

Methodology

I feel it is important to explain my positionality as a researcher so readers will understand my interest in this community. I am second generation Punjabi American female, yet while growing up I always felt like an outsider in this discourse community since as I never practiced any cultural traditions and did not know the language. However, during my freshman year I made friends with people who are from this community and to some extent have begun to integrate this discourse's identity kit and values into my daily life. I have chosen to study this community as I feel that it has influenced me so much in a short amount of time, making me reconsider what it is to be a member of a community. I found through my interview and research into this community, many of the values and ways of viewing the world were unique to members of this community which connected me to this community in a way that wasn't possible before.

I conducted the research through a single interview with a member of this community. I choose to interview one of my friends who is involved with the Punjabi American community on campus. I would like to preface that in choosing a friend from the community, it introduces a selection bias as I did not select a random member of this discourse community. However, I tried to reduce any further bias by creating questions and an interview environment that was well controlled for additional variables. The interview was conducted via Skype for the interviewee's convenience as it was done over Thanksgiving break. I made sure she was available for the entirety of the interview and was able to stay in an area with no audience so as to minimize any distractions or interruptions. The interview was recorded on a recording device and the questions (see findings section) were open-ended and worded in such a way to reduce bias and asking leading questions. The interviewee has consented to the use of her answers during the interview

for the purpose of this essay. However, she prefers to not give her actual name out, so for the purposes of this paper we will call her Samira.

Literature Review

In American colleges, the process students go through to acquire the identity kit of their campus's academic discourse can occur in a number of ways. In a university, such as UC Davis, the identity kit can be acquired through the classroom, on-campus organizations, clinics, or internship/research positions. If you are a student whose primary discourse is a dominant discourse (SEWE for example) this acquisition process can be fairly smooth as their discourse is similar to the Academic discourse found in college. However, a student coming from a non-dominant discourse community, such as the Punjabi discourse community, their ability to adapt to and integrate academic discourse into their own identity kit may be more difficult. This may cause them to either embrace the new discourse alongside their primary discourse, learn enough of dominant discourse to get them by, or abandon their primary discourse and only use the dominant discourse. These different levels of acquisition may occur due to the differing levels of salience their primary discourse has on their secondary discourse.

One factor that may affect this salience is the fact that many members of the Punjabi American Student discourse community learn their primary discourse in a multigenerational household. I would like to preface that much of my secondary sources focus on other Asian groups as there is not a lot of research, cultural or discourse, available for the Punjabi community. First and second-generation immigrant children are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. child population. According to the 1990 Census, young immigrants are heavily concentrated in five states – California, New York, Texas, Florida, and Illinois, and 45% of immigrant children enrolled in school are enrolled in California alone (McDonnell & Hill, 1993).

Punjabi American students come from a “diverse immigration history” which could include those who immigrated to the United States as recently as yesterday, those who were raised by immigrant to the United States, or those who are 3rd of 4th generation (Tewari, 2009). This difference in generational status is important as it effects the level to which these students identify with their Punjabi discourse community and how salient these values are to their everyday interactions. One’s generational status can be simplified further when discussed using the terms “enculturation” and “acculturation”. It is important to note that although the terms acculturation and enculturation are generally associated with culture, I am using them in a broader sense as they also encompass the system of beliefs and values found in these discourse communities and their respective identity kits.. In order to provide a richer understanding of this community, I would like to define and describe the difference between enculturation and acculturation and how they affect members of this discourse.

Acculturation: Is defined as, “The extent to which people are participating in the cultural norms of the dominant group (US) while maintaining the norms of their original culture” (Tewari 2009). For example, a fourth generation Chinese American may be very acculturated to the academic discourse on their campus and join an archeology club and not be interested in joining a Chinese club on campus as they feel more comfortable with the expectations set in American college discourse communities. Those who are partly acculturated may share similar values in terms of cultural practices with their parents, but may differ from their parents in what they value such as with career expectation or relationship ideals. Enculturation: Is defined as, “The process of socialization to and maintenance of the norms of one’s indigenous culture, including the salient value, ideas, and concepts” (Herskovits 1948). This process of socialization may occur at any point in life and the level of enculturation (and acculturation) is a spectrum in which you can

be high or low on (Tewari 2009). One way in which students in this community are able to achieve success in navigating both discourses successfully is through code-switching. Code-switching occurs when someone who is familiar with more than one discourse community is able to tailor their interactions with a community in order to “fit-in” to the expectations set by said community. Anjali Patannayak in her work “There is One Correct Way of Writing and Speaking” argues that “While Instruction in code-switching is valuable because it teaches students that they can adopt different linguistic choices to appeal to different audiences, it is deeply problematic that the impetus is still placed on minority students with non-standard dialects to adapt”(Pattanayak 2017).

Findings

The interview with Samira revealed that there are many facets within this community and in her case she felt that she was able to clearly separate how she was at home and school, only being able to truly “be herself” when she is around other Punjabi students from her Punjabi dance team she joined her second year. In the interview Samira’s answer to the question (Q: How do you think you are at home versus how you are in college?) was that she felt she feels as she automatically shift gears when she speaks to her family. She elaborated saying, “I sometimes even catch myself speaking in a Punjabi accent while on the phone. I didn’t even notice until one of my classmates I studied with told me. It made me feel weird because I speak perfect English in class and don’t even have an accent anymore.” She also mentioned that she tends to be more social at school and is very involved with running the dance team on campus as well as different social movements put on by her campus’s women’s center. This demonstrates the difference in acculturation for Samira in particular, for Samira she seems to have selectively integrate Punjabi values she found salient, such as pursuing a university degree and maintaining cultural

traditions—such as traditional dances. She seems to be slightly more acculturated to the values promoted in academic discourse as she subscribes to most of the ideals that most academic discourse communities promote. This is not to say the values that her parents taught her are not a part of her values system, but while in school she adapts more to her environment. For the second question (Q: What topics do you feel comfortable talking about with Punjabi students that you wouldn't talk about with your American students?), Samira's answered simply "Family." She detailed that when talking to her classmates she doesn't feel explaining what she calls, "the crazy dynamics of Punjabi families." She noted that with her dance team friends she never has to explain nuances in family structure such as which aunt or uncle has done something. However when with peers at the women's center, she admitted she would feel odd to talk with them about family with them as she felt, "It is just easier to keep them separate since I wouldn't be able to explain my family dynamic." The separation she employs between these two communities I feel is a clear example of the code-switching that Pattanayak refers to in her work. Despite Samira being fairly comfortable in both her discourse communities, her responses indicate that this separation is something that is normal to her and shows her fluidity between both communities.

Conclusion

Through the primary and secondary research conducted in this paper it became apparent to me that the Punjabi American student community is a complex one and the interaction between tradition and succeeding in academic discourse in American colleges is a very fine line many members find hard to do. However, for the student I interviewed this doesn't deter her from embracing both of her communities. This research also showed how important it is to consider how one's level of acculturation and enculturation affects their ability to navigate, adapt, and maintain both Punjabi American and academic discourse in American colleges. The primary

research done in this paper revealed to me how little qualitative data is available for the Punjabi discourse community. Most of the depictions of this communities values are based off the interview conducted for the purpose of this paper. I hope that researchers begin to look into the Punjabi American student community as a viable population to study as their presence in the United States is becoming increasingly publicized in the media due to hate crimes being perpetrated by American anti-Islam groups. These groups are not only ignorant to the fact that Punjabi culture is not related to Islam, but also are ignorant to the values and the culture of the people that they are attacking. I hope that this paper can shed a light on the Punjabi American Student experience and hopefully make the reader understand more about the members of this unique discourse community.

References

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