CHAPTER 2

South Asian? American? Confused?: Categories of Identification for Young Women of South Asian Descent

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INTRODUCTION

Literature on immigration often characterises children of immigrants as second-generation, which betrays an assumption of a primary identification with the national, religious or cultural affiliation(s) of their parents. This characterisation maintains a linkage between immigrant groups and their nation of origin, and the transition from being an immigrant to being a citizen has been a subject of critical debate in most western immigrant destinations. America, as a ‘nation of immigrants,’ is an interesting example of this tension, and the question of when immigrants become American has specific consequences in relation to citizenship and belonging for groups and individuals. Young American women of South Asian descent are no exception. In academic literature they are often described as South Asian, second-generation South Asian or South Asian-Americans, all of which privilege their identity as South Asian over their identity or residential status as American. This also assumes that their links to South Asia have primacy over their links to America, and that their South Asian identity is independent from American discursive structuring.

This paper examines the ways in which a particular group, young women of South Asian descent, use specific categories to describe their identity in an American context. Specifically, it argues that respondents’ utilisation of categories to describe identity and identification are diffuse, situational and often contradictory. Although categories like ‘Indian,’ ‘Muslim’ or ‘second-generation’ are produced within an American context, they are also challenged and complicated by other modes of identification like racialised discourse and feminist principles. Young women also participate in the creation of specific categories, like ABCD (American Born Confused Desi) and first-generation which reproduce and challenge the boundaries between American and South Asian cultural identity. In these narratives, young women replicate the tension between American belonging and immigrant identities in a myriad of ways, whilst simultaneously translating these debates into their own experience.

CONCEPTUALISING “SOUTH ASIAN” IDENTITY

Theories of migration are primarily concerned with identifying and discussing immigrant positioning and identity. The historical legacy of these theoretical frameworks is a measurement of when immigrants become American. In consequence, these studies operate on an assumption of immigrant difference from ‘American’ via specificities of culture, economic positioning and race, among other issues. Contemporary scholars of immigration have complicated this simple differentiation of ‘immigrant’ and ‘American’ but continue to rely on nationalist and generational constructions/differentiations of immigrant groups.

Theories of immigration, and particularly those focusing on the United States of America (USA), centralise the journey of migration in theorising the positioning and belonging of groups and individuals with migration in their history. Early theorists of immigrant belonging in the USA have argued for an assimilationist approach to understanding the positioning of migrants, where theorists in the early 20th Century expected that the children and grandchildren of immigrants would quickly become indistinguishable from the American majority (cf. Park 1930, first published 1910). Although this process was significantly impeded by various structural inequalities in American society, for example racism and class discrimination, social theorists refused to abandon assimilationist theory. They continued to argue that the descendants of immigrants move gradually away from being immigrant and towards becoming American.

However, in the late 1960s, a theory of ethnicity was constructed to account for the fact that immigrant cultural difference was not dissipating as rapidly as expected, although the descendants of groups of Eastern and Southern European immigrants were experiencing increased
equality in terms of economic and social integration. Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan’s collection *Ethnicity* was central in this re-theorisation of immigrant assimilation, especially given the increasing complication of racialised immigrant groups’ lack of parity in American society. Glazer and Moynihan argued that the shedding of immigrant culture was no longer necessary to become American, and instead the institutionalisation of some immigrant cultural groups, symbols and festivals was becoming increasingly apparent in the USA. Consequently, maintaining specific ethnic identities are no longer conceived of as being a barrier to becoming American and instead, being ethnic is understood as an important part of being American within a ‘nation of immigrants’ discourse (Waters, 1990; Slymovics, 1995; Behdad, 2005). This formulation seeks to highlight the American in hyphenated constructions like South Asian-American, where South Asian acts as a descriptor. However, ethnic identities are still often attached to specific national identities like Italian-American, Polish-American and Bangladeshi-American, and they still carry a trace of the distinction between mutually exclusive ‘American’ and ‘immigrant’ identities.

Furthermore, racialisation complicates this matter. While black Americans’ experience of inequality and exclusion is often blamed on cultural factors rather than a racialised social structure (Omi and Winant, 1994; Kelley, 1997; Ferguson, 2004), Alba and Nee (2003) argue that Asian immigrants are becoming assimilated into American society and that racialisation has not adversely affected their positioning in the US. Furthermore, scholars of segmented assimilation argue that parity with white Americans should no longer be the marker of assimilation. Instead, the children and grandchildren of immigrants might assimilate into a racialised underclass, where they are nonetheless American (Zhou, 1997; Portes et al., 2005). However, theorists of race, racism and area studies argue that racism has often functioned as a barrier to belonging in America, where racialisation impacts upon South and East Asian groups’ experience and construction of American identity (Lowe, 1996; Prashad, 2000; Collins, 2005). In particular, immigrants from Asia, and their descendants, are often assumed to be foreign because of their racialisation as East or South Asian, which undermines a construction of racialised belonging in America, as suggested by Zhou and Portes et al. Given this framework, narratives of belonging are often neglected in favour of ‘measures’ of integration and belonging like educational achievement and relative income.

Therefore, there exists an obvious tension within migration literature about the placement of immigrants and their descendants in America, with some strands arguing for the recognition of ethnic plasticity in belonging, while others assert that racial and cultural difference separates one from full American belonging. However, the focus of immigration scholarship on the moment of migration results in a repetition and reinforcement of a tie between the children and grandchildren of immigrants and their ancestors’ status as immigrants (or non-American). Thus, the descriptors second, third and fourth-generation within these discourses are not politically neutral.

A concurrent theoretical frame through which migrant groups are understood is via a notion of diasporic belonging that stresses connections rather than movement or disjuncture. Diasporic literature highlights the multiple, intertwined and situated nature of identity. Belonging is situated within the bounds of the nation, as well as transnationally with other diasporic groups. Thus, migrant groups maintain ties to their countries of origin, construct ties to their country of settlement and forge ties with co-ethnic diasporics in other locations. Diasporic theorists of South Asian identities call for a recognition that South Asians have ties to both their nation of settlement and the South Asian diaspora (Women of South Asian Descent Collective (ed.), 1993; van der Veer (ed.), 1995; Grewal, 2005). For Inderpal Grewal, the hyphenation of contemporary ethnic identities like Indian-American provides an additional, transnational belonging that troubles the boundedness of both South Asian and ‘western’ cultural categorisations. Instead, diasporic individuals are described as “subjects [that] are flexible and changing, moving from one subjectivity to another, able to coexist with contradictory and diverse subject formations” (Grewal, 2005: 200). Diasporic subjects are theorised as having dynamic and complex identities that they negotiate, where ‘American’ and ‘South Asian’ can coexist within an individual. Thus, women of South Asian descent experience and negotiate multiple ‘layers of identity’ (Rayaprol, 1997: 33).

These ‘layers of identity’ are similar to the
new ethnicities that Hall (1996) recognises in contemporary western societies. He constructs 'new ethnicities' as multiple and layered, where the achievement of any identity is incomplete because other layers of identity inhibit full identifications. Thus, for diasporic groups in particular, their location in the country of settlement inhibits their full belonging within a country of origin or ancestry, while their history of migration problematises full belonging in their place of settlement. Furthermore, when racialisation is taken into account exclusionary challenges to belonging in the nation of settlement become more apparent. Thus, diasporic populations are subject to multiple global and local power relations (Puwar and Raghuram, 2003).

Rather than constructions of migrant identity that define especially racialised migrants in opposition to the 'west,' diasporic conceptions argue that identities are constructed within the context of (im)migration to the 'west.' For example, 'South Asian' as a category only makes sense in an American context, where it references a racialised, classed and generational identification (Maira, 2002). Thus, 'South Asian' acts as a category through which the American children of South Asian immigrants can form community and commonality (Prashad, 2000; Maira, 2002). Therefore, despite their transnational links, the experiences of diasporic South Asians cannot be understood without attention to the national backdrop against which these identities are played out. In consequence, the experience of diasporic South Asians must be theorised with an attention to the national context within which they are situated as well as with an awareness of their transnational links to other South Asian populations.

Despite this focus on connections, diasporic constructions often deflect attention from the power relations that structure belonging, for example racial discourses. The conception of South Asian identities as diasporic or hybrid only elides the ways in which power relations are a significant feature of identity and identification, particularly in the contexts within which distinct populations are situated. Floya Athnias (1998) asserts that diaspora often fails to account for structural factors, specifically class and gender within groups, as well as structural factors that shape the context in which groups are situated, like racialisation. Diaspora has also been criticised for its potential to view differences as equivalent (Kalra et al., 2005). Thus, while diaspora enables an understanding of multiple belongings, it must address the specific ways in which belonging is constructed in particular locations.

This paper examines the ways in which young women construct categories like ‘American,’ ‘first-generation’, ‘Pakistani’ or ‘Bangladeshi.’ In particular, it asks, what is the relationship between culture, generation and national identity? How and when do young women identify as ‘South Asian,’ ‘Indian-American’ or ‘American,’ and what relationship do these identifications have to one another? Furthermore, the linkages between culture and authenticity are considered in this paper, and specifically related to the construction of a particular category identity amongst the children of South Asian immigrants – an ABCD, or American-Born Confused Desi.

**METHODODOLOGY**

This discussion is based on a qualitative study of the American daughters of South Asian immigrants between 2003 and 2006. The study consisted of in-depth interviews with 33 undergraduate and postgraduate students in the Northeast of the USA. I utilised university cultural organisations, such as the South Asian Students’ Association(s) to find initial interview participants, which I supplemented with a snowball sampling method. The respondents ranged in age from 18-27 and could trace their ancestry to various countries in South Asia: India – 22, Bangladesh – 6, and Pakistan – 5. Approximately 3/4 of the young women were born in America or spent a majority of their childhood in America, while a small minority had either split their childhood between South Asia and America or migrated to America in their teens. The purpose of the study was to explore the ways in which the daughters of South Asian immigrants negotiated multiple social identifications, for example race, class, gender, culture, religion, within a feminist cultural sociology framework. And it particularly focused on deconstructing the ways in which young women narrated belonging in reference to their use of particular categories. It is important to note here that ‘culture’ and ‘race’ are sometimes conflated, where Asian (in the USA and Britain) references a set of cultural practices and a specific structural positioning. This investigation separates the two and relies on a conception of ‘culture’ as a set of practices, ideas and products
that are historically linked with particular social groups (Kelley 1997). This is conceptually separated from race which is used to indicate a structural positioning in America with an attendant labour market position, set of rights and identity (Omi and Winant, 1994).

USING CATEGORIES

This section outlines the ways in which identifications such as ‘South Asian’ or ‘American’ were diffuse and situational, both between participants and within individual interviews. The title, ‘Using Categories’ is somewhat disingenuous as no ‘use’ of category is straightforward here. Instead, discussions of South Asian, Bangladeshi, Muslim and American categories often exposed disjunctures in their use and understanding. However, this section argues that despite the relative simplicity that is assumed in both theories of immigration and diaspora, the way these categories manifest in discussions around identity are anything but straightforward.

The term ‘South Asian’ is preferred in most (official) academic and political discourses as an inclusive term that references a particular immigrant diasporic group in America. In this context, ‘South Asian’ functions as a racialised sub-continental identification that was inclusive towards people whose heritage was from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal. For many young women looking to identify, create and participate in a community of similarly positioned young people, this category was often used in interviews to represent a shared, racialised identity in America. This is emphasised in ‘South Asian’ Students Organisations, ‘South Asian’ studies programmes and discussions of ‘South Asian’ identity. In fact, many young women in the interview used South Asian as a preferred term, and this was by far the most common referent during discussions with respondents.

However inclusive a term it is meant to be, Reena’s use of it highlights some problems. Reena, a woman of Indian Hindu descent uses South Asian as a signifier for her particular location within a heterogeneous South Asian category. She says, “Whenever I hear South Asian, I always like of course, I always think Indian. I always forget Pakistan and Bangladeshi [sic].” Here, South Asian is utilised as a category that primarily refers to an Indian, (usually) Hindu construction of South Asian identity that is hegemonic within American discourse. Consequently, other women, particularly those who did not share an Indian, Hindu heritage, challenged this inclusive category of South Asian. While they were willing, in most circumstances, to use it, they also qualified this use. Therefore, Nasha, a young woman of Pakistani, Muslim heritage states:

*I think it’s difficult to speak about, even though I’ve been using the term myself, South Asian, because […] there’s a big difference […] depending on your religion […] so I feel like, to generalise for South Asians is difficult.*

Thus, while South Asian functioned as a way to signal a shared location in America as a particularly racialised, classed and generational identity (Prashad, 2000; Maira, 2002), some young women challenged the assumed inclusiveness of that category though asserting the heterogeneity of South Asian identities. Therefore, despite its popularity, its usefulness was sometimes undermined from within using the divisions that it ignored.

Despite the stability and popularity of South Asian as a category, national affiliations were not abandoned by young women. However, their use was also complex and contradictory. For example, participants used national and religious categories like Indian, Bangladeshi and Muslim interchangeably. Nasrin is a Muslim woman of Bangladeshi descent who switched continually between describing herself (and her family) as Indian, Bangladeshi and Muslim. Specifically, a complex and contested definition of ‘Indian’ is used here instead of ‘South Asian’ to encompass a similar regional, cultural positioning. In the quotes below Nasrin attempts to approximate an ‘Indian’ identity for herself and her family.

Nasrin: I grew up in a very like white community and I was like one of maybe, like maybe 10 Indian-ish kids at my school…

RF: Do your parents have a particular Bangladeshi social group that they hang out with?

Nasrin: Sometimes I feel like they’re different from other Indian families…

In both of these instances, Nasrin uses or approximates an Indian identity for both herself and her parents that seems to be at odds with her parents’ country of emigration - Bangladesh. This is particularly apparent since I specifically sought to trouble this identification as ‘Indian’ through my asking about a Bangladeshi social group. In
these quotations, ‘Indian’ is utilised within its hegemonic status in a United States context in that Nasrin is able to conceive of herself and others of South Asian descent as ‘Indian-ish,’ regardless of their national origin. She does recognise that this is an incomplete or inaccurate identification through her use of the qualifier ‘ish,’ yet, this is acceptable and recognisable within an American context that uses Indian as an ethnic/racial category that sometimes subsumes Bangladesh within it.

However, in other contexts, Nasrin reverses this and constructs her identity as Bangladeshi.

Nasrin: [When I was young] I went to school for little Muslims, things like that, I took singing lessons in traditional Bangladeshi songs. [...] I have two much older brothers and they are completely gone from that culture, more or less. So [my mom] thought ‘OK, I have a baby girl, I’m going to make her, I’m going to try so she stays with this.’ Yeah I definitely, I hang out with my family a lot so I kept kind of in contact with that culture. Other people who obviously don’t want to assimilate that much into American ways so I was around that.

Here, despite her previous characterisation of herself as ‘Indian,’ Nasrin switches to describing herself using Muslim and Bangladeshi identifiers. For Nasrin, these categories and identifiers are not stable or mutually exclusive because she articulates an identification with all three (Hall, 1996). My question within a discussion of cultural activities prompted her to include both Muslim religious education and Bangladeshi songs as cultural activities, which were also gendered given that her brothers were not expected to maintain the same level of cultural engagement. For Nasrin, religion, culture and gender all interact in an American context, thus, she subsumes multiple and layered identifications within her interview narrative. However, these activities are exclusive of American cultural activities to which she sets Muslim and Bangladeshi identifiers in contrast. Thus, part of her engagement with South Asian religious and national categories is through people who are rejecting ‘American.’ Therefore, within these multiple and layered identifications Nasrin is making use of a conservative immigration discourse that separates ‘South Asian’ from ‘American.’

However, in another section of our discussion, Nasrin complicates her inclusion of Muslim religious practice in cultural identity, and accesses a separation of Muslim faith from Indian identity. As she explains:

Nasrin: I think I think of myself more in the cultural way like almost Indian and not a Muslim so much. So when I tell people, ‘Yes, I’m from Bangladesh. It’s next to India,’ they never think of me as a Muslim.

In this part of our conversation, Nasrin disrupts her original link between Indian, Bangladeshi and Muslim categories with regard to cultural identity. Instead, although she maintains the link between Indian and Bangladeshi cultural identity, here she participates in an exclusion of Muslim identity from that. She recognises that not only do ‘people’ (read American discourses) exclude Muslims from the category Indian, she uses Indian cultural identity as a vehicle through which to dis-identify with ‘Muslim.’ This practice is likely occurring in reference to a post-September 11th linkage of Muslim with terrorism, where Nasrin can excuse herself from that linkage by tying ‘Bangladesh’ with ‘India,’ which relies upon a certain amount of ignorance on the part of the general American population to distance her from ‘Muslim.’ However, she articulates this tie as incomplete in that she must qualify her Indian identification as ‘almost.’ Therefore, depending upon the context, Muslim identity can be either associated with or dissociated from national identifiers like Indian and Bangladeshi. Thus, for Nasrin the relationship between Muslim identity and culture is fluid and malleable. Also, the categories of Indian and Bangladeshi are similarly unstable and open to disruption.

Despite these shifts between national, regional and religious identifiers articulated by some respondents, one particular group that tended to identify consistently throughout the interview was a subset of devout Muslim women of both Pakistani and Bangladeshi descent. Like some other Muslim participants, Zarina consistently referred to herself as Muslim, often downplaying her relationship to South Asia. When initially asked about how she thinks of herself Zarina privileges her identity as Muslim.

Zarina: OK, first thing for me is my religion, so it’s Muslim, I go on the streets everyday and I attend college so second option is being American, because I was born and raised in this country and thirdly which is very last and put to the end because I’m not afraid to say I don’t have much pride of being Pakistani but the food we eat is affiliated with that and connected to
that and how we dress is connected to that, so those are my roots in a way, and um so it's Muslim, American, and Pakistani.

Zarina establishes early in the conversation that her Muslim identity is her most important affiliation, although she locates her ‘everyday’ in America and some cultural practice as Pakistani. Correspondingly, she often referred to “Muslim Americans” and “American Muslims” in her interview, constructing these categories and identifications as potentially able to incorporate one another. Interestingly, unlike hyphenated identities that signal dual national affiliations, religion seems to function here as a transnational descriptor. Certainly impacting upon this construction of ‘Muslim American’, is the teaching of a transnational Muslim community as part of the Islamic faith. Here devout young Muslim women are accessing a discourse from both their American experiences and Islamic teaching that argues for the possibility of multiple identities.

Another context in which ‘American’ identity was also accessed by young women was in relation to feminism. Although some Muslim women identified as American, this was fairly atypical across the spectrum of participants. Interestingly, discussions of gender identity were one of the very few contexts in which young women of South Asian descent were happy to refer to themselves as American. Although respondents occasionally located themselves within certain citizenship practices (like electoral politics or participation in state educational sectors) their positioning as women was the most common way through which they explicitly described their identity, values and culture as ‘American.’ For example, Syeda, a woman of Guyanese descent, says she “grew up with a lot of American values that told me that like because I’m a woman that doesn’t mean I have to stay at home or that I’m not as good as a boy.” Feminist identities, ideologies and practices were often positioned within narratives as linked with American, which conforms to a set of discursive practices that use women’s traditional locations within cultures to differentiate groups. Here, respondents are accessing a definition of American culture as providing ‘freedom’ for women that is often constructed in contrast to ‘traditional’ cultures, like South Asian culture, which are thought to oppress women. Participants use this distinction between American and South Asian cultures to narrate themselves into a more advantageous social location within American gendered discourses. Here, gender and religion are axes through which traditional immigration and diasporic discourses are used and undermined. While this relates to a diasporic notion of multiple axes of identity, these narratives illustrate the way these discourses function in relation to each other, which undermines an additive approach to theorising issues such as race, gender, culture and sexuality. Instead, in moments of complex identification, certain identities act as vehicles through which this complexity is processed and presented.

**COMPLICATING CATEGORIES**

However, significantly, it was not only women that used other identifiers like religion or gender to negotiate complex immigrant/diasporic locations, these locations were sometimes narrated without the mediation of other identities. In contrast to theories of diaspora that describe multiple belongings, narratives of identity and linguistic acts of identification often focused on situations of exclusion. Young women of South Asian descent also used their relative generational location within dominant discourses to narrate identity. They were ‘American’ in relation to their parents’ generation and, in contrast, they were ‘Indian’ in reference to their peers whose families could measure more generations in America. Thus, this narrative challenges assumptions about the inherent differentiation between South Asian and American categories, and illustrates some of the ways in which mediation and negotiation are accomplished.

One common way that participants managed the complex and contradictory identifications that they aligned themselves with was through an assertion of the ways in which they contrasted themselves to other people with whom they shared diasporic links. For example, like many other participants Roshini was fairly straightforward in the way that she negotiated her identifications as Indian, American and Indian-American. When discussing her friendship group in high school, Roshini says:

_I had so many South Asians in my school, like all my friends were Indian, I felt like I had, I didn’t even have to have any American friends because there were just so many Indian kids and I almost felt like so at home because we had the_
same culture, you know we were all in the same classes, I just felt so comfortable, I never even felt like I had to dwell or go outside of my culture necessarily and feel different.

Here, Roshni is contrasting herself and her friendship group from the ‘Americans’ in her school. By categorising herself and her friends as Indian and saying that they all share the same culture, she is contrasting herself to Americans who presumably have a different culture. Difference from American is affirmed here by saying that if she had to go outside of her culture to find friends this would have caused her to feel different. Thus, in the context of a discussion about American classmates Roshni, like other participants, separates herself from the category American, which suggests that being a child of Indian immigrant parents creates a necessary division between herself and other Americans. In consequence, Roshni’s other South Asian classmates tempered her difference from her white peers and allowed her to feel ‘almost’ at home. In constructing identification as ‘immigrant’ rather than ‘American’, the traditional separation between immigrant and American cultures seems fairly stable.

However, in reference to discussions about people who have a direct relationship to India, for example her parents and people who live in India, Roshni switches identifiers and refers to herself as American. Discussing the way that she expects to raise her children, Roshni says that she would change some things from the way her parents raised her.

Roshni: I want to be a little bit more open minded about certain things, which I think I naturally will be, because I was born here and I do consider myself to be American, even though I am Indian as well.

In this context, Roshni seems to move closer to the category American than she allowed herself to be in reference to her peers. Her identification as Indian remains fairly stable, but she problematicises it through a somewhat tenuous identification as American. Roshni’s discussion serves as an example of the participants who construct their parents as a touchstone for authentic South Asian identity (see also Prashad 2000). Parents’ knowledge and practice of culture is considered authentic because of their birth in South Asia, and those who emigrated from South Asia are assumed to privilege their identification as South Asian. Thus, Roshni describes that she is ‘naturally’ more open minded than her parents because of her upbringing in America. This suggests that immigrants’ identification with their country of origin is essential and fixed, as is their children’s identification with American culture. In this portion of the discussion, Roshni uses a fixed, essential notion of national identity common to traditional theories of immigration, where the children of immigrants become American through birth. Ironically, despite this traditional formulation the ability to switch between identifications actually signifies a diasporic belonging with both ‘South Asian’ (here Indian) and ‘American’. Depending on context, there exists opportunity to construct identity using both as referents.

In yet another context, Roshni strengthens her identification as American in a discussion about India. Discussing her experience in India, Roshni describes how she is perceived there:

Roshni: The Indians...they totally know I’m American. It’s a little weird because it’s like, it’s like over there you can’t really completely fit in. It’s like you’re an American no matter how you try to do it. I would go to the stores [...] and pretend that I was one of them, but they would just be able to tell [...] I mean I think that’s understandable. Obviously, I’m not going to be able to go to another country and just be like I’m one of them even though I know I’m an American.

In contrast to the distance that Roshni puts between herself and the category American in other portions of the interview, in the context of discussing people in India, Roshni firmly describes herself as American. Here, rather than her identity as Indian being stable, it is her American identity that is known. Both she and Indians ‘know’ that she is American, despite her earlier assertion that she only ‘considers’ herself to be American. Instead, it is her identity as Indian that is incomplete in this discussion. She’s ‘try[ing]’ and ‘pretend[ing]’ to be Indian in India whereas in the context of a discussion about her classmates in America, her Indian identity was secure. Thus, the way in which Roshni identifies with the categories American and Indian demonstrates that, for her, they are shifting and situational, but still often positioned in a discursive framework that separates ‘Indian’ from ‘American.’ Thus, when confronted with a secure and authentic Indian identity, these young women’s American identities are suddenly visible.
Their relationship with South Asia is highlighted as a tenuous, diasporic tie rather than a firm belonging. And, in a discursive situation where immigrant and American identities are often positioned oppositionally, the only recourse is movement towards American.

Finally, confrontation with both sets of exclusions at once results in a diasporic, hyphenated identification. Participants also described their identity as hyphenated in relation to their peers that they consider to be in a similar situation. Like other participants who express identification similarly, Roshni aligned herself with a hyphenated identification when discussing her positioning vis-à-vis her parents and non-Indian Americans. In the following quote, Roshni concludes the interview by identifying herself as Indian-American.

Roshni: Well, I guess because I’m really proud to be Indian-American. I feel like I just got the best of like all worlds, because I got to be an American, [and] I got a lot of the positive aspects of the Indian culture that’s made me who I am.

In this quote, Roshni also positions herself, as an Indian-American, in opposition to both those who do not have the benefit of being American and those who do not have the benefit of being Indian. Roshni positions herself through a difference from both non-Indian Americans as well as her Indian parents, which seems to signal a fairly straightforward diasporic belonging.

Roshni’s narrative illustrates the ways in which both diaspora and immigration discourses are unstable. Significantly, they are used to both undermine and support one another in a cyclical relationship. Respondents participate in and align themselves with both South Asian and American identities within a discourse that separates them. Diasporic discourse allows young people to construct an identity with South Asia as a South Asian as well as narrate a similarity with other South Asian groups. However, this linkage constructed within diasporic discourse also serves to separate these children of immigrants from America, thereby supporting a traditional immigration discourse and undermining a diasporic framework that links young women with both ‘South Asian’ and ‘American’. Thus, the opposition of these discourses enables the use of both identities.

CONSTRUCTING CATEGORIES

In the midst of reinforcing the tension between immigrant and diasporic frameworks, young women also developed their own categories through which to understand identity. Those constructed categories were set in tension where participants re-framed ‘generational’ discourse to locate themselves as first-generation (Americans) and reiterated a distinction between ‘American’ and ‘South Asian’ through the term ABCD.

Although immigration literature tends to refer to the children of immigrants as second-generation, many of the young women I spoke to discussed themselves as first-generation. In the first few minutes of my interview with Neha, she challenges my use of the generational identifications that are standard in immigration literature.

RF: So, what do you think with the third generation, [your potential children]…
Neha: Second generation. I’m first.
RF: I’ve noticed that different people say different things.
Neha: Well, my parents weren’t born here so they weren’t first-generation.

Neha explicitly aligns her identification as first-generation with her birth in the United States. This suggests that the distinction that is important to her identity is her status as American through birth as opposed to her parents’ migration from India. This sits directly in contrast to immigration literature that seeks to tie the children of immigrants to their parents’ country of origin as second-generation rather than recognise their location in America. These young women use generational identifiers to privilege their status as American rather than immigrant (Kalra et al., 2005).

Other young women described being first-generation American through a reference to their parents.

Sharmila: You know, being first-generation, that’s another thing that I didn’t realise was so… [...] I’ve had a lot of close friendships with people who are first-generation and I didn’t realise that there might be something to that, about being first-generation. [...] The first-generation experience of you know the, it was just little things that people understand. Like you know, your parents don’t drink beer and watch football. That’s like a big difference, you know?

Sharmila’s description of her identification as first-generation places her in agreement with Neha who privileges her location in America. Furthermore, Sharmila’s explanation of the significance
of being first-generation establishes her as different from both her parents as immigrants and her peers whose parents’ are not foreign born. Here, what creates identification as a community of first-generation people is their parents’ difference from ‘American’. This suggests that the different places from which first-generation people’s parents have migrated is of secondary importance to their negotiation between their parents’ “Otherness” and Americans. In this construction, immigrants are differentiated from the American majority, where immigrant culture excludes one from ‘American.’ Thus, a traditional immigration notion is being reinforced. Yet, it is simultaneously challenged through a location as ‘first-generation’ that places the children of immigrants in America as American. In these women’s challenge to immigration discourse, their birth in America becomes a central focus in their identification, rather than their parents’ journey. These young people are not ‘second-generation immigrants’, they are ‘first-generation Americans’.

Another site upon which South Asian identity is set against an exclusively ‘American’ identity in a complex formulation is through the construct of an American Born Confused Desi, or ABCD. An ABCD was defined by participants through the complementary constructs of a lack in relation to South Asian-ness or an excess in relation to American-ness. An ABCD, as someone who refuses to engage with South Asian culture, is defined by Roshini as someone who thinks Indian culture is ‘dumb,’ ‘stupid’ or ‘they’re embarrassed about it.’ Thus, they try to dis-identify with South Asian culture through a separation of themselves from it. ABCDs were also constructed through an excess in relation to American culture. Anjali explained:

We have a term for it. Like ABCD, have you heard about it? There’s just so many of them. [...] Like they mis-identify. [...] It’s just that they try to be something they’re not in that way. In a way it’s a problem when you’re, I guess, too American.

For Anjali, an ABCD is trying to be ‘too American,’ which means that they are trying to be ‘something they’re not.’ Her characterisation constructs people of South Asian descent as always/already South Asian, which also necessitates a rejection of American. Within this framework, people of South Asian descent are always imperfect Americans because they are ‘mis-identify[ing],’ and the attempt to perform belonging to ‘American’ is always incomplete and mis-taken. As such, an ABCD is trying to deny their innate status as South Asian and, instead, engage in a performance of American that is always inauthentic because of their South Asian identity.

Some participants characterised their South Asian identity as primordial and essential, where denial of their South Asian heritage enables an accusation of inauthenticity that necessarily pushes one towards American. The characterisation of South Asian identity as sedimented or innate is supported by the assertion that the lack of knowledge or understanding that ABCDs express is actually inauthentic as well.

Reena: Um, they um, it’s just that they act like stupid, sometimes they even know about what they’re talking about but I don’t know why they do that. Like they play dumb… (emphasis mine)

Reena’s understanding of ABCDs seems to suggest that their rejection of ‘South Asian’ is a feint in the sense that they are also trying to be something they are not. They ‘know’ what they are talking about but they ‘act’ as though they do not, they ‘play’ dumb. Reena also suggests later that perhaps ABCDs are people whose parents forced the culture onto them and they have rebelled. This assumption characterises ABCDs as having some knowledge of their South Asian origins. Their rebellion against their parents does not erase the knowledge, as evidenced by the idea that they are pretending not to know about holidays, it is simply a refusal to engage with that knowledge. Here, the turn away from ‘South Asian’ enacts a turn towards ‘American’, because the two are set in opposition via the construction of an ABCD as ‘too American.’ The refusal of one side of the binary necessarily orient[s] one towards its opposite.

The construction of ABCDs’ American-ness as false and South Asian-ness as innate is tied to notions of racialisation, in that race structures the authenticity of cultural performance. Anjali explains:

I don’t like anyone being, ‘Yeah I’m just American.’ You know, because it’s not, like it’s kind of written on your face and you can’t hide that.

ABCDs’ performance of American is seen as inauthentic because of their racialisation as South Asian. In discussions, ‘American’ is often used synonymously with white, and thus, the
characterisation of people of South Asian descent as American was hindered by their racialisation, partially because the mimic can only copy characteristics, s/he can never attain them. There is an imagined space between an ABCD’s performance of American and their identity as American that is occupied by their racialisation as ‘brown’ or South Asian. Only someone who is ‘truly’ American, i.e. white, can authentically perform American-ness. As a result the ABCD construct accesses an American discursive separation of ‘South Asian’ and ‘American’ through racialisation. Thus, performance is based on a notion of embodied authenticity, in which all possibilities for embodiment are racialised.

In effect, the categories of ABCD and first-generation are attempts to trouble common characterisations of South Asian identity. When young people sought to reflect a diasporic discourse that locates them in America, their only option for doing so was to fall back on a generational immigration discourse. However, their self-descriptions as first-generation Americans challenged a basic tenet of that discourse, which is linked to the centrality of the migrant’s journey. Yet, other groups of young people of South Asian descent construct categories that reflect a policing of the boundaries between ‘South Asian’ and ‘American’, where the two are inherently differentiated. In this paradigm, racialisation is a salient feature, and the racialisation of South Asians separates them from full belonging in America. Thus, the ways in which race structures possibilities for belonging disrupts a diasporic discourse that assumes unproblematic belonging with both. Again, in this construct, diasporic discourses of belonging and immigrant discourses of exclusion are oppositionally, but simultaneously, invoked to undermine and support one another.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper illustrates the complex ways in which both conceptions of immigration and diaspora are made use of by a particular group of Americans. Although these two theories of immigrant belonging have contradictory expectations about when an immigrant becomes an American, both seem central to participants’ narratives of being ‘South Asian’ and ‘American’. This suggests that rather than one or the other being correct, both frameworks are significant to groups’ understanding of their place in American society. As a result, it seems that immigrant ‘belonging’ is a complex and contradictory process of mediation. Interestingly, this paper highlights ways in which these children of immigrants were active participants in constructions and understandings of immigrant belonging. Although their narratives were reliant on hegemonic theories of belonging, they participated in the support of and resistance to theories by both using them, and also developing their own categories of identification outside of these discourses.

NOTES

1. Of course migration from non-Western countries to the ‘West’ is not the only type of immigration. Groups and individuals migrate between neighbouring nations and from rural to urban areas within nations and within regions.

2. In this piece, the term ‘South Asian’ is used to refer to those in America who can trace their ancestry to Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan or Sri Lanka. Although this definition disguises important differences between these populations and refuses important similarities between these groups and others not included in this definition, this use of the term South Asian does reference a particularly racialised group within American discourse See Prashad 2000 and Maira 2002.

3. What these theories often fail to highlight and/or consider is the particularly classed nature of recent immigration from Asia. After 1965, immigrants were given preferential treatment based on educational attainment and professional qualifications. Although this dismantled an immigration system based on racial privilege, it constructed a system based on classed privilege. Thus, many individuals of Asian descent enjoy a professional, middle classed location that was transported from their country of emigration (Prashad 2000).

4. This paper focuses on the first group of young women to analyse ways of being ‘American’ within a discursive environment that gives contradictory signals to people with migration in their recent history.

5. The sample did not include any Muslim women of Indian descent.

6. For a description of the ways in which this discourse is predicated on a disavowal of feminist policies and practices in South Asia see Prashad 2000.

REFERENCES


KEYWORDS Migration; young people; South Asian women; diaspora; belonging

ABSTRACT This paper focuses on young women whose parents migrated from South Asia to America in the 1960s. Via in-depth interviews with 33 young women, it examines respondents’ utilisation of categories like ‘South Asian’ and ‘American’ to describe identity and identification. While the use of these categories are diffuse, situational and often contradictory, I argue that young women reproduce a tension between immigrant identity and American belonging that is manifested in the distinct frameworks of immigration and diasporic scholarship. Within their discussions of identity and identification, issues such as gender or race are used at times to translate between them, and furthermore, young women create their own categories of identity that replicate and resist these theoretical frameworks.

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