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A Study of the Racial and Cultural Experience of South Asian Americans in the United States: A Preliminary Analysis

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Abstract: This study explores the relevance of the concept of race in the South Asian American (SAA) experience in the United States using critical race theory and postcolonial theory. By telling the stories of SAAs, this study complicates the conceptualization of race and the black/white binary, and proposes strategies for anti-racist praxis.

Purpose

Using critical race theory (CRT) as an intervention into postcolonial theory, the latter understood through the work of Subaltern Studies, my study explored the relevance of the concept of race in the South Asian American¹ (SAA) experience in the United States. The concept of race has been used by the U.S. state and civil society to *other* and subordinate SAAs; the SAAs have in turn responded to this racialization with racist responses invoking their racial, cultural and religious identities (Gnanadass & Baptiste, 2011). Yet, there is an ambiguity about the concept of race (Prashad, 2000) in the SAA scholarship. Furthermore, much of postcolonial theory is either silent on the question of race (Ghosh & Chakrabarty, 2002) and/or ignores or dismisses the validity of race as an analytical category (Schueller, 2003). Skin color, caste, and religion are used by SAAs to *other* people, but caste and race are not conceptualized as race. In other words, the language of race does not include human differences based on culture, such as religion and caste; race is still conceptualized on Western notions of biological or scientific differences (Ghosh & Chakrabarty, 2002; Loomba, 2009). SAAs are positioned in a binary when it comes to racism – they are either racist or the helpless victims of racism; there seems to be no racial continuum. This study's goals were to 1) complicate the SAA racial experience and recover their voices and stories to make them part of U.S. history and 2) understand how race and racism are learned and unlearned (Alfred, 2003; Sheard, Johnson-Bailey, III, & Brookfield, 2010). My overarching research question was: What is the relevance of the concept of race in the South Asian American experience? My sub-questions were: What conceptions of race do this particular group of SAAs enact (describe and exhibit)? How did they learn these conceptions of race? How have their particular conceptions of race shaped their experiences?

Drawing on CRT (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; López, 1994) and theorization of racial thought in South Asia (Sarkar, 2006; Trautmann, 1997) I defined race as a social construct used to mark and categorize human differences as *other* and most times to inferiorize the *other* by ascribing essentialized or inherent qualities based on biological and cultural differences (Sarkar, 2006, p. 73). It is a way of understanding, classifying, categorizing, and typifying people based on certain phenotypic and social characteristics, such as skin color, facial features, height, hair, religion and caste, and ascribing inherent characteristics to people based on these characteristics. Race structures, orders, and regulates relationships in a society and is perpetuated through legal, scientific, and political institutions (López, 1994). I also differentiated between race and ethnicity. Even though there is no biological basis to race, race is associated with both biological and cultural differences while ethnicity is primarily based on

cultural differences - shared culture and history (Murji & Solomos, 2005; Omi & Winant, 1994). In this study, I focused on race not ethnicity, since SAAs are classified and categorized as a race in the U.S., not an ethnicity (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

Research Design

As a research method, I used feminist ethnography to capture the thick descriptions of the SAA experience from an emic perspective. My research was conducted in College Town in State A in the North East. The key informants were the owners of an Indian restaurant, a meeting place for SAAs, and purposive snowball sampling was used to identify other SAAs. I used participant observation and semi-structured life history interviews to collect ethnographic data and Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and narrative analysis to analyze the data.

Findings and Conclusions

In this paper, I am drawing from the narratives of one participant, Gallifrey, a 22-year old first generation SAA male born and brought up in the North East. His parents are Indian immigrants who moved to the U.S. in the 1980s. Gallifrey is an IT major at a state university graduating in summer 2013 and an IT business owner with three other partners. The preliminary findings based on Gallifrey's lived experience complicate the conceptualization of race and racialization. I defined racialization the same way as Murji and Solomos' (2005): as the "processes by which ideas about race are constructed, come to be regarded as meaningful, and are acted upon" (p. 1)

"Who Let the 'Colored' Folk in?": School as a Site of Racialization and Racism

Gallifrey was racialized in school. He attended K-12 schooling in a rural town in State A with a predominantly white population. There were three Indian children at his school including him and his older brother and he rode the school bus with one African American student, John who attended the same schools as Gallifrey, till there was an inflow of immigrants of color into that area during high school. Although he grew up eating vegetarian food and speaking Gujarati, a Western Indian language, at home, he did not recognize that he was South Asian or brown till the second or third grade when he was asked by his white friends if he was black on the basis of his skin color. This was the start of his racialization.

G: I think I didn't realize that I was Indian. I knew that I was Indian I guess because we spoke a different language at home but I never thought that it was anything special or different. First it was the skin color aspect of it. It wasn't anything like my parents sat me down and said that you are brown because you are Indian or whatever. I went through school thinking that I was just a darker skin regular kid. And I guess a couple of kids from school were like, "Hey, are you black?" and I looked at my skin, "Well, I am darker than you, right so I guess I am." So for a little while I was thinking that I was black and not Indian. So one day my brother heard me say something like that I am black and he said, "No, you are not. You are Indian." That's when he told my parents. Then my parents sat me down and said, "We came from India" and showed it to me on the globe. "We moved here to the United States, so basically you are American but, you are Indian. That's where you are from. That's where your ancestry is." That's when they actually sat me down and explained it to me and that's when I realized that I wasn't entirely American or black. That I was actually Indian. There was actually a word for what I was.

Gallifrey realized several things from this incident: he is brown, he is Indian, and he is not entirely American or black, in other words he is racially ambiguous. Gallifrey had noticed skin color prior to this incident since he thought of himself as a “darker skin regular kid,” but this was his first realization that skin color put him in a particular category called race. Implicit in this narrative is “othering.” Gallifrey was not a regular kid, he was Indian. He was named and had a name for what he was. He was being racialized. Gallifrey did not see this interaction with his friends as racism. I call this racialization, the process through which Gallifrey starts to think about the concept of race and how it takes form and meaning in his life.

Gallifrey’s first encounter with racism was at a friend’s birthday party when he overheard one of the parents asking, “Who let the colored folk in?” referring to him and he remarked to me, “that was kind of weird.” I read this as racism based on his darker skin color, so does he because he brought this up when he started talking about the racism he experienced at school from the teachers and school administration while stressing repeatedly that the students were not racist. Although the students noticed his skin color, “the kids never really questioned why is he of another color” or treated him differently because of it. But this was not the case with the school administration. He was “singled out” and “treated differently” by them and they were “unfair towards me” as illustrated by the following two incidents: 1) when he fasted at school because he was a practicing Hindu and the school called the authorities before contacting his parents, and 2) when he and John, a fellow African American student, cursed on the school bus and it ‘became’ a racist incident.

Fasting. Gallifrey did not eat meat growing up since he is a Brahmin. The only vegetarian option at school was “a piece of bread with cheese” and he would “put potato chips in it for special flavor.” His family fasted on Thursdays, so he decided fast one Thursday.

G: So I had a banana and milk. I ate it and I was fine and I was just sitting there you know talking to my friends letting them eat their lunch when the teachers came over. They asked where my food was and I’m like “I ate it.” “What did you have?” I said, “I had a banana and milk.” And they called my parents and then they called the authorities and told them that my parents didn’t pack no food and stuff like that. They actually called the authorities first and then my parents and then my dad got mad because he was like, “What is this? Why are you questioning the way that we are doing things? He said that he wanted to fast and we let him fast. You know that he’s not going to die. It’s part of our religion, so you know you have no right to call the authorities before speaking to me about it.” So that one instance had a pretty big effect on me. My parents were really pissed after that and they didn’t really trust the school as much. Well, they called the authorities before contacting my parents. And you know, they already tried to file a complaint saying that I am being starved or whatever, but you know they never took the time out to see why I was doing what I was doing and that I was fasting. It was part of a religious thing.

Both Gallifrey and his father understood this as racism and anger was their response to racism.

Bus incident. In 11th grade, Gallifrey and the only other non-white student on the school bus, John, were overheard cursing by the white bus driver who reported them to the principal as yelling racist remarks and harassing individual kids.

G: The bus driver actually pulled over, and he called the heads of the school and said, “Hey, I pulled over because these two kids were screaming vulgarities on the bus.” They [the school

administrators] completely blew it out of proportion and they said that we were yelling, racist stuff at like some of the other people and harassing individual kids. None of that actually happened. It was our word against his and they refused to interview anyone else on the bus except for us and so they couldn't get anyone else's side of the story of what happened on the bus. It was just the bus driver versus us and at that time, we realized we were fighting a losing battle. We decided [that] we have the right to remain silent, so we just literally sat in the principal's office for three hours and not saying a word while they kept asking us questions. We just kinda sat there and shook our heads and were completely silent and they called my parents [and] they threatened to have me removed from the school, and we didn't do anything wrong. We ended up getting multiple Saturday detentions for yelling the F word on a bus.

The only two students of color were accused of making racist remarks and punished. The school administrators treated them differently and Gallifrey asserts that this was because of their skin color or in my words, their ascribed racial identity.

I was Black and then I found out I was Indian: Racial Ambiguity

Gallifrey's racial identity as brown or Indian complicates the existing black/white binary, in other words, the racial hierarchy. Although he too seems to hold this binary conception of race, he does not fit into this binary. Kibria (1996) argues that SAAs are racially ambiguous since they are not seen as white, black, or Asian (Asian gets translated as East Asian in popular usage and even in Asian American Studies). She labels SAAs as "ambiguous non whites" since they are definitely not seen as white. Gallifrey is an "ambiguous non white," as evidenced by his white friends in grade school and the parent at the birthday party; he is racially ambiguous. He did not recognize that he was Indian till he was named. This naming starts with skin color, but goes beyond it to language, culture, geography, and ancestry. Race in this conceptualization is more than biology; it is connected to both biology and culture. It is not a natural, given, or inherent identity. One is not born a race. One learns race. One becomes racialized.

While identifying as SAA, Gallifrey claims an American identity as well:

I'm American. I've lived in America my entire life. I'm accustomed to the American way of things, but I'm also Indian. I don't see an extreme divide between while I'm Indian and while I'm American. I'm both. I do things culturally that Americans don't do because it's Indian tradition. I don't know if you know Navaratri [Hindu religious celebration] and stuff like that. It's like Indian holidays. Actually just a couple of days ago we celebrated Indian Independence Day. We think [it's] the best way to engage in, and be a part of our town and I don't see that as separate from how I act, or the way that I am from around like my strictly American friends."

There is no duality in his identity; he is both American and Indian, a hybrid. He inhabits the borderlands (Anzaldúa, 1999) of political (American citizen) and cultural (Indian ancestry) identities. He is American in his way of life and Indian in his religion and culture.

Conclusions

As evidenced by Gallifrey's lived experience, race structures his life in the U.S. His racial identity is ascribed to him by his skin color and he is treated in particular ways based on that racial categorization. Yet, since the existing language of race is not robust enough to talk about the SAA racialized experience and their material reality, there is no language to talk about racial ambiguity. SAAs do not even fit into the category of Asians as pointed out by Kibria (1996). SAAs must identify as either

black or white, thus having to position themselves in the racial hierarchy. In turn, this racial category of the black/white construct becomes a good/bad binary for SAAs. So when SAAs want to identify as American or in this context white since American is conflated with white, are they good or bad and according to whom?

Once Gallifrey found out he was Indian, he used Indian religion (Hinduism) and culture to locate himself in this racial hierarchy. He identifies himself as a Brahmin (a Hindu caste), an Aryan, thus, disrupting the black/white binary and making it a continuum. He performed his Brahminness/Indianness as an American and conflated Hinduism with Indian culture by being a vegetarian, fasting on Thursdays, and celebrating Hindu holidays. This conflation of Hinduism with Indian culture is borrowed from the anti-colonial, nationalist discourse in India and embraced by the Hindu Nationalists in the U.S. (Prashad, 2000). In my understanding, Gallifrey's conceptualization of race beyond skin color to include religion and caste complicates the language of race and the material reality of racial identity which is what critical race theory argues race is, a social construct, a learned identity. This also ties into Schueller (2003) assertion that "in the United States questions of citizenship, rights, and national character have been fundamentally tied to race, which in turn is related, to, but not totally coincident with, skin color" (p. 50).

Implications for adult education theory and practice

When my final analysis is completed, I hope to contribute to the scholarly discourses on adult education, race, postcolonial theory, CRT, and SAAs. Based on the narratives of Gallifrey, this study contributes to postcolonial theory and anti-racist praxis. Since school is a site of racialization and racism, the implications of Gallifrey's narratives for adult educators is to help us devise strategies for anti-racist praxis. Race is ascribed based on skin color and race seems to be a given, an essential identity. This conceptualization of race as "pure" needs to be problematized. Race is a social construct as well as a learned identity (Sheared, et al., 2010; Soudien, 2012). In other words, since race is learned, it can also be unlearned, and schools are one of the spaces where both this learning and unlearning can take place. In order to engage in anti-racist praxis, adult educators need to understand how race is conceptualized, how it is learned and how it shapes the experiences of people. Race still structures U.S. society today and it does not operate in a value neutral way in our society. It is a concept that is relevant to the experience of all people, people of color and whites (Roediger, 1999; Sheared, et al., 2010). The dialectical union of CRT and postcolonial theory has the potential to expand the analytical category of race to include both the biological and the socio-cultural dimensions of race thereby making the language of race more robust, i.e. expand the notion of race from phenotypical characteristics to include other social hierarchies, such as religion and caste. Hopefully this will help to overcome the silence or dismissal of race in the SAA scholarship and be a corrective to postcolonial theorists who provincialize or de-emphasize "blackness and the black-white hierarchy" (Schueller, 2003, p. 49) and dismiss race as "simple chromatism" (Schueller, 2003, p. 50) or a mere marker of beauty (Prashad, 2000). This is also a strategy for anti-racist praxis, since a broader conception of race that includes both biological and cultural differences can help us to "re-theorize the idea of racial difference in a much more radical way" (Loomba, 2009, p. 508), since race does not operate the same way globally, i.e. "religion [not just skin color] has been central to the development of modern forms of racism all across the globe, and in ways that we need to engage with today" (Loomba, 2009, p. 508). As South African anti-racist activist, scholar, and educator Crain Soudien (2012) argues, we as educators need to understand and unlearn racial logic in order to realize our dream of a better world.

Notes: 1. The term South Asian American refers to immigrants as well as U.S.-born people from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and Maldives.

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