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From Objects to Subjects: Voices, Perspectives, Histories, and Learning in the South Asian American Experience

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Key words: Postcolonial Theory, South Asian Americans, Cultural Historical Activity Theory, Race, Learning

Abstract: Using a postcolonial lens, this paper critiques scholarly discourse on the experiences of South Asian Americans (SAAs) in the United States as being too othering and too homogenized. In most of that discourse, SAAs are treated as objects who may only be reactive to dominant society and culture; their racialized experiences are also muted. Treating SAAs as subjects, this paper presents a way to enrich their experiences, paying particular attention to how those experiences have been racialized. Drawing upon, but also critiquing cultural historical activity theory, the paper presents an alternative way to think about and empirically examine learning.

Disciplinary Perspectives and Literature Consulted

Using a postcolonial lens, this paper divides the scholarship on the experiences of SAAs¹ into three broad perspectives: historical, historical-materialist, and social-cultural. In this section we briefly describe postcolonial theory and then use it to analyze the three perspectives².

Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory is a dialectic union of Marxism and Poststructuralism that engages the historical condition of postcoloniality to expose the material exploitation and cultural imperialism of colonialism as well as the complicity of the colonized with the colonizer. In so doing, the theory interrogates the bondage of the mind, self, and culture that remains invisible in the aftermath of colonialism; questions and reinterprets the East/West, Orient/Occident divide and modern/traditional binary—with their implication of Western technological and cultural superiority; and critiques “the enduring hierarchies of subjects and knowledges” (Gandhi, 1998, p. 15). All of that is done with the goal of learning from colonialism’s past in order to “make, but also to gain, theoretical sense out of that past” (Gandhi, 1998, p. 5).

Historical Perspective

SAAs have been in the US since the late 1700s, but significant South Asian immigration can be defined in three waves: the first wave of mainly manual labor to the West Coast between

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

² A detailed bibliography will be provided at the presentation.

1907 and 1917; the second wave of predominantly professionals, post-1965; and the third wave of mainly working class and family members, post-1980s. According to the US Census Bureau, there were 2.73 million Asian Indians³ in the US in 2008 and they are the third largest Asian immigrant group in the country.

The historical perspective on SAAs in the US locates their experience in the broader economic and political context of Asian American immigration. South Asian immigrants arrived in the West Coast in the early 1900s in an atmosphere of prevailing anti-Asian sentiment based on race and labor competition. Almost immediately, they faced widespread hostility and discrimination and demands for exclusion and reduction of their political and economic rights (Chandrasekhar, 1982; Takaki, 1989). SAA immigration was perceived as the invasion of the “Dark Caucasians” or the “Turbaned Tide” (Takaki, 1989, p. 295) and, even though their labor was wanted by industry, they were seen as competition by white labor (Jensen, 1988; Takaki, 1989). The exclusionists and white labor fought to pass the Immigration Act of 1917, which excluded South Asians from legally immigrating to the US. Then in 1923, when the Supreme Court ruled that even though South Asians were racially classified as Aryans or Caucasians, they were not ‘white’ by common definition, legal residents of South Asian origin were no longer eligible for naturalization and their citizenship rights were annulled.

Historical-materialist Perspective

Proponents of the historical-materialist perspective have noted that missing from the previous account is a critical analysis of capitalism and the ways in which it has influenced the presence, composition, and rights of SAAs in the US. Their analysis has unraveled the model minority thesis (MMT) in which SAA professionals post-1965 are typecast as persons of inherently superior professional, technical and academic abilities vis-à-vis other minority groups (Prashad, 2000). Exposing MMT for what it is—a racist construction created by the classist policies of the 1965 Immigration Act—proponents of this perspective have noted that the Act quickly transformed the composition of SAAs: “93% of the South Asians in the US were classified as professional/technical workers” in 1975 (Lal, 2008, p. 54). The MMT makes visible only the highly achieving professional SAAs while rendering those who do not fit it (undocumented workers, working-class-immigrants, and so on) invisible, thus imbuing SAAs with a false homogeneity. It also reproduces the idea of SAA foreignness, thus denying sameness vis-à-vis white society and ultimately, does not allow for parallels to be drawn across class and gender (Badruddoja, 2007).

Unfortunately for SAAs, history repeats itself, because even though the “model minorities” are positioned as solutions, they are only wanted in the US for their labor, not their lives (Prashad, 2000, p. 87). Today, there has been a systematic escalation of racial violence against SAAs and this violence seems focused on their growing numbers, their visibility, their cultural lives, and their success (Lal, 2008; Prashad, 2000). Discrimination against SAA professionals is subtle and takes the form of racial profiling, income disparity, and the glass ceiling (Lal, 2008; Takaki, 1989). As one Indian engineer recounts, SAAs seeking senior positions were told that they “were not sufficiently well-informed about ‘American culture’ to assume leadership positions, or that their own cultural upbringing precluded them from exercising effective leadership” (Lal, 2008, p. 60).

³ This paper focuses on SAAs of Indian origin from the Indian subcontinent living in the US, because it is the sub-group of greatest interest to the first author.

Social-Cultural Perspective

The social-cultural perspective acknowledges the responses of SAAs to the American state and civil society, but the perspective is limited by positioning those responses as *inevitable reactions* and not as agentive acts. Proponents of the social-cultural perspective address SAA responses by constructing two identities: a racial identity and a radical Hindu identity.

Racial identity: In the face of institutional racism and discrimination in the US, it appears that some SAAs have responded by claiming a mythical Aryan racial identity⁴, which locates them as Caucasian or white, therefore the same as, equal to, or superior to white Americans and other ethnic minorities in the US (Mazumdar, 1989; Prashad, 2000). The model minority thesis, accepted by many SAA professionals, is an example of how this superior racial identity is appropriated. By accepting the thesis, SAAs could claim racial superiority (as an essentialist argument) while making themselves immune from charges of racism (Prashad, 2000, p. 170). As Sinha has noted, it is a sort of updating of the Aryan myth for modern times (M. Sinha, personal communication, December, 15, 2009).

Radical Hindu identity: The Hindu identity discourse goes something like this: for the Yankee Hindutva (Prashad, 2000) otherwise known as the Hindu Right in the US, Hinduism is seen as the cultural essence of India. For them Hinduism is the ancient Aryan religion of spiritual India, because of its association with Sanskrit, the language of the mythic Aryans. This helps the Yankee Hindutva to construct a Hindu cultural identity that is synonymous with SAA identity and assert the racial and religious superiority of Hindus over Americans, who are positioned as material and inherently less spiritual than them. Moreover, these sectarian Hindus are claiming to represent all SAAs in the US even though they are invoking and favoring a particular religious identity. Indian culture and religion, portrayed as tools for the emancipation and equality of SAAs in the US, become tools for exclusion and oppression further perpetuating and reproducing hierarchies of inequality.

There is no agreement in the literature on whether SAAs come to this country already in possession of a racist tradition that is different from the white Anglo-Saxon version or whether their racism is a new-found response and/or accommodation to the racist tradition in the US. This uncertainty regarding SAAs' racist origins has, in turn, led to an ambiguity over the question of race and racism. Prashad, for instance, seems to dismiss the color prejudice of SAAs as not being relevant to analyzing the racialized experiences of SAAs by arguing that the SAA color prejudice is about notions of beauty and not about race. Prasad seems to assume that race is a Western concept (Rubinstein, 2001) and attributes the uncertainty about race to the South Asian scholarship's obsession with caste (Prashad, 2000, p. 98).

The scholarship described above has critiqued the racist state and civil society as well as the racist responses of the SAAs. The historical and historical-materialist perspectives focus on the actions of the state and civil society to analyze how immigration policy has influenced the presence, composition, and rights of SAAs in the US. The historical-materialist perspective adds the lens of capital to show that immigration policy was driven by market needs. The social-

⁴ Aryan race theory in the context of India conflates Aryan with ancient Indian race, ancient Indian civilization and Indian religion – Hinduism (Mazumdar, 1989).

cultural perspective uses the lens of culture to critically examine the racial, cultural, and religious identities constructed by SAAs as a response to their subordination by state and civil society.

Though valuable, all three perspectives have constructed SAAs as the ‘acted-upon’ - without agency. Although the presence, composition, rights, and experiences of SAAs have been historically, materially, and social-culturally shaped by race, there seems to be an ambiguity about using the concept of race to understand and describe the SAA experience from an emic perspective. The notions of caste and color consciousness among SAAs do not seem to be perceived as being connected to race; and the scholarship does not seem to go beyond Aryan race theory⁵ when critiquing the racial identity construction of SAAs. Therefore, 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. The complexity of their racialized experiences is muted in extant discourse.

Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)

CHAT is used in this paper as a framework to analyze the structural aspects as well as the day-to-day experiences of SAAs from the emic point of view (Roth & Lee, 2007). CHAT allows us to capture their histories, multiple perspectives and voices, revealing the complexity of their experiences, thus challenging the monolithic and “othering” construction described above. In addition, through its conceptualization of human activity, CHAT provides a tool to help us empirically examine SAAs’ learning (Baptiste, Nyanungo, & Youn, 2009).

Drawing heavily on Engeström (1996, 1997, 2001), we employ the following four principles in our examination of SAAs: 1) that human activities are our primary units of analysis; 2) that human activities are always mediated; 3) to adequately understand human activities we must pay attention to their historicity; and 4) that particular human activities are inherently fraught with multivoicedness and inner contradictions.

In CHAT, activity is defined as an object-directed, culturally mediated collective effort. Individual and group actions are embedded in and thereby made meaningful, in this collective effort.

Activity system [Figure 1] as a unit of analysis calls for complementarity of the system view and the subject's view. The analyst constructs the activity system as if looking at it from above. At the same time, the analyst must select a subject ... of the local activity, through whose eyes and interpretations the activity is constructed. This dialectic between the systemic and subjective-partisan view brings the researcher into a dialogical relationship with the local activity under investigation. The study of an activity system becomes a collective, multivoiced construction of its past, present, and future... (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999, p. 10)

The subjects of our activity systems are SAAs, so their agency is foregrounded in our analysis. Engeström (1997, 2001) has constructed the activity triangle or activity system (Figure 1) to graphically depict the dialectical relationship between the six key elements: subject, object, mediating instruments, rules, community, and division of labor. The object directs the activity; it is both material and ideal (Roth & Lee, 2007). The object is the “problem space” that the subject is transforming into an outcome (Engeström, 1996, p. 67). The mediating instruments are the

⁵ Harpalani (2003) uses critical race theory as his theoretical framework, but he too only analyzes the actions of the US state and civil society.

tools, signs, and symbols or repository of culture. The base of the triangle—community, rules, and division of labor—provides the cultural and historical context of the human activity.

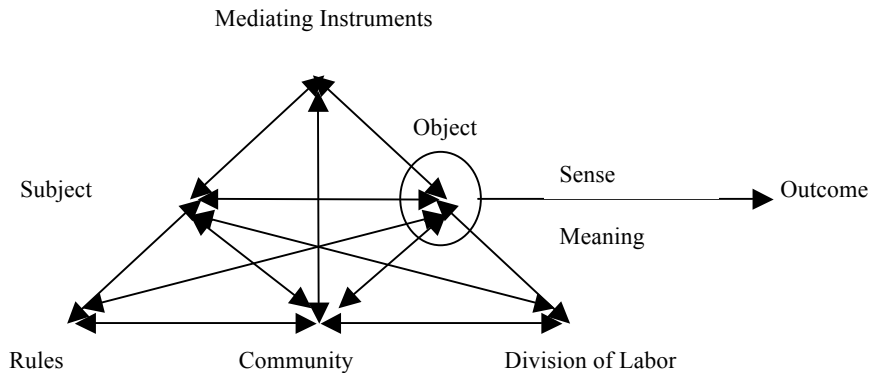


Figure 1. Engeström's Activity Triangle or Activity System

Mediation overcomes the state/civil society and SAA dualism described above by maintaining that subjects and objects are co-constituted; each takes its essence, not a-priorily, but *in activity*—i.e., through the use of material and symbolic instruments. In turn, these mediating artifacts are constituted by and constitute history and culture. In other words, “CHAT explicitly incorporates the mediation of activities by society” and “theorizes persons continually shaping and being shaped by their social contexts” (Roth & Lee, 2007, p. 189). Engeström (2001) describes this historical dialectic (historicity) this way:

Activity systems [Figure 2] take shape and get transformed over lengthy periods of time. Their problems and potentials can only be understood against their own history. History itself needs to be studied as local history of the activity and its objects, and as history of the theoretical ideas and tools that have shaped the activity. (pp. 136-137)

An activity is always evolving and changing due to inherent structural tensions (contradictions) between and among the six elements (Figures 1 & 2). One manifestation of such contradictions is the multiple perspectives and multivoicedness of participants in the activity. The multiple perspectives exist because they stem, inexorably, from the varying roles played by different sets of actors within the activity system, and correspondingly, from the different communities upon which the actors rely for guidance (rules) and material support (instruments). These internal contradictions are the “source of change and development” (Engeström, 2001, p. 137) in the activity system; their identification and resolution lead to individual and social change. One such change is learning, which this paper will tackle in the conclusion.

Challenges: We foresee two challenges in using CHAT as a framework to study the experiences of SAAs. First, some of the concepts in CHAT, such as objects and motives, remain fuzzy and contested (Foot, 2001). The distinction between objects as “problem space” and as “raw materials” (*things* acted upon) remains unclear; so too are the distinctions between motives and higher order goals. Then there is the difficulty of differentiating between mediating instruments and the cultural-historical elements that form the base of the activity system (community, rules, and division of labor), because these two sets of ideas are not mutually exclusive categories.

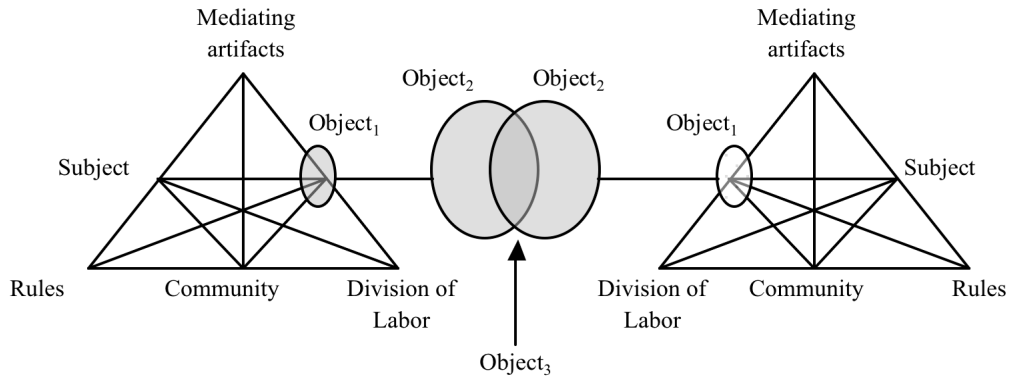


Figure 2. Two interacting activity systems (Engeström, 2001, p. 136)

Secondly, though central to its analysis, the notion of culture remains under theorized in CHAT. In our exploration of CHAT, the concept of culture seems to be taken for granted. This situation is unfortunate because the SAA experiences we examine shape and are shaped by culture. We would need a more robust notion of culture than the one provided by CHAT.

Conclusions: Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

In this paper, we attempted to demonstrate how postcolonial theory might be used to analyze and evaluate discourses on people who have been colonized (SAAs, in this case). The postcolonial analysis of the SAA experience uses the key themes of identity, history, and representation to reveal the role of capitalism and cultural imperialism in constructing and discriminating against SAAs as the subordinated or ‘other’; the ensuing resistance to this domination by SAAs foregrounding their cultural alterity; and the perpetuation of hierarchies of domination by SAAs through the accommodation and appropriation of the dominant discourses of race, culture, the East/West binary, and capitalism. Postcolonial theory makes a space for non-Western issues and scholarship in the Western academy and decenters the taken for granted margins and centers of knowledge and culture. Using postcolonial theory in this way is not new, but we hope that our paper makes the ideas more accessible to an adult education audience.

In our conceptualization of learning, we break ranks with some proponents of CHAT (such as Engeström, 1997) who regard the phenomenon (at least expansive learning) as a special kind of activity. With proponents of CHAT, we agree that human activities are distinguished, ultimately, by their motives. But the authors of this paper are not aware of any motives that may be distinctively associated with the phenomenon we call learning. Learning takes its motives from the particular activities in which it occurs. And those motives vary from activity to activity. So with Baptiste, et al., we are proposing, in this study, to treat learning, not as a special process or activity but rather as one possible (but not inevitable) *outcome* of human activity. We define learning as processual outcomes of human activities that take the form of new and/or improved human operations (Baptiste, et al., 2009, p. 301).

One major research implication for our assertion that learning is not an activity is this: to empirically examine learning, investigators need not search for any special learning processes or activities, as proponents of CHAT, such as Engeström, imply. All that is required is for them to

systematically analyze everyday human activities (and CHAT provides ways to do so) and ask: what new and/or improved repertoire of operations has this or that activity generated? Those new human operations are what the authors of this paper refer to as learning.

When the empirical phase of this project is completed, we also hope to contribute to adult education and other scholarly discourses in one other way. By treating SAAs as agents, subjects of their own experience and learning, our narratives will hopefully provide a richer, fuller picture—highlighting not only what is common among the group but also their differences. We hope also to highlight contradictions and their sources. SAAs are a significant and growing proportion of those involved in formal and non-formal learning in the US. A better grasp of their experiences as persons and learners could help us to better design and implement education and other social intervention, for them and those with whom they interact.

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