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Learning Race: School as a Site of Racialization

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to understand how South Asian Americans (SAAs) learn, understand, and make sense of their racialized experience, and how school impacts the racialization of adult learners. Learning was defined from a sociocultural perspective using Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). Feminist ethnography was the research approach used and data was collected using participant observations and life history interviews. School was a site of racialization and racism for the four participants in the study. Hence when we engage in anti-racist pedagogy with adult learners, we need to take into account their racialization and identity formation in schools and the ensuing implications for adult learners and educators.

Keywords: Cultural Historical Activity Theory; Race; Adult Learning; Critical Race Theory, South Asian Americans

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand how South Asian Americans (SAAs) learn, understand, and make sense of their racialized experience (Gnanadass, 2016), and how school impacts the racialization of adult learners.

The primary research question was: What is the relevance of the concept of race in the South Asian American (SAA) experience (Gnanadass, 2016)? The secondary research questions were: What conceptions of race do SAA participants' life histories reveal (Gnanadass, 2016)? How have SAA participants' conceptions of race shaped their experiences? How did the SAA participants learn these conceptions of race (Gnanadass, 2016)? I defined race socially, not biologically, since there is no biological basis to race (Graves, 2015). I used Graves' (2015) definition of race: Race is an arbitrary combination of certain physical and social characteristics, the characteristics and combination are dependent on the context, to categorize human beings and this categorization "*always operate[s] in the service of social-dominance hierarchies*" (para. 7; italics in original).

Theoretical Framework

Following Schueller (2003), I used critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2005, 2012; Harpalani, 2003, 2013; López, 1994; Taylor, 2013) as an intervention into postcolonial theory (Chakrabarty, 2000; Chatterjee, 1993; Narayan, 1997; Prashad, 2000; Said, 1979; Sinha, 2000) to explore the relevance of the concept of race in the South Asian American (SAA) experience in the U.S. and how SAAs learn to become racialized (Gnanadass, 2013, 2016) .

Learning was defined from a sociocultural perspective using Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (Engeström, 1987, 1999, 2001; Sawchuk, 2003). CHAT provides a descriptive framework to explain the ‘what,’ ‘how,’ and ‘why’ something is learned by using human activity as the unit of analysis to understand human actions and operations. 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. In CHAT, learning happens in everyday life and is an outcome of an object-directed activity. It is important to note that learning is not necessarily the outcome of every activity.

Research Design

Feminist ethnography was the approach used to capture the thick descriptions of the SAA experience. Feminist ethnography is the contextualized, cultural interpretation of the routine, everyday experiences of a cultural group informed by a feminist stance (Buch & Staller, 2007; Creswell, 2007; Fetterman, 1998; Skeggs, 2001; Wolcott, 1989) which makes the researched ‘subjects’ with agency (Lal, 1996) and acknowledges the politics of representation to mitigate the power differentials between the researcher and researched (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Stacey, 1988; Visweswaran, 1994), and the inherent biases in the doing and writing of ethnography.

The research was conducted for over a year at Summer located in a northeastern state in the United States. “K,” an Indian restaurant, a meeting place for SAAs was the primary research site. Field notes from 74.41 hours of participant observations at “K” and 13 life history interviews with four participants totaling 14.55 hours and 604 pages of transcription were the sources of data. The key informants were the owners of the restaurant. Purposive criterion sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to identify the four SAA participants in the study.

Multiple case study (Stake, 1995, 1998, 2005) was used as a process and product of analysis (Patton, 2002, p. 447). Thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993, 2008) complemented by CHAT, postcolonial feminist theory, and critical race theory were the analytical lens used in this study. First, the racialized narratives of each participant were

identified using thematic narrative analysis, then those narratives were analyzed using CHAT, postcolonial feminist theory, and critical race theory to describe the relevance of race in the SAA experience and how the participants learned their conceptions of race.

Findings and Conclusions

School was a site of racialization for all four participants in the study. Gallifrey and Satya, as students, were racialized in the K-12 system through their interactions with fellow students, parents, teachers, and administrators. Persis and Gnana, as mothers of children in the K-12 system, were racialized through their children's racialized and racist experiences. Gallifrey, Persis and Gnana's racialization took place in predominantly white schools in largely white areas. They all became brown – named, ascribed, perceived, and identified, therefore, not white, not American.

In predominantly white areas, there seems to be a conflation of white with American both on the part of the SAA participants as well as the white Americans. This is consistent with Mazumdar (1989) and Prashad's (2000) argument that SAAs conflate white with American and Goldberg (2009) that white is American. On the other hand, it is the perception of the SAA participants, that white Americans see them as black depending on the context, brown, or *other* on the basis of their skin color, appearance, and name. The perceived racial categories of SAAs changed even within this study and the racial categories given to SAAs in the U.S. Census changed historically (Harpalani, 2003; Murti, 2010). This is juxtaposed with the identification that is agentially taken on by the participants themselves which is not homogeneous either. The racial categories used most often in this study to self-identify are Indian, American, and SAA. This shows that race as conceptualized by the participants in this study is a sociohistorical process called racial formation (Omi & Winant, 1986, 1994). Racial formation refers to "the process by which social, economic, and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings" (Omi & Winant, 1986, p. 61). The racial category of SAA is formed through social, economic, and political forces. SAAs agentially determined the content and importance of this racial category for themselves. In turn, not only are the SAAs themselves shaped by its racial meanings, they also shape its racial meanings, as evidenced in this study.

Implications

Participants in this study do not identify as white. This is because they claim a South Asian American or Indian identity which is distinct from the black or white racial identity. But racial

relations for this group of SAAs are spoken primarily in relationship to whites. This is problematic in a post-Ferguson, Black Lives Matter, and post-2016 election era when racial tensions in the U.S. are high and there is a need for coalitions across different racial groups.

Although race in adult education is a topic that has been written about (Alfred, 2010; Bowman, Merriweather, & Closson, 2014; Brookfield, 2003, 2014; Closson, 2010; Closson, Bowman, & Merriweather, 2014; Flowers, 2010; Gnanadass, 2014; Johnson-Bailey, 2002; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2000; Lee, 2010; Ngatai, 2010; Sheared, Johnson-Bailey, III, & Brookfield, 2010a, 2010b), we continue to struggle with anti-racist pedagogy (Gnanadass, 2016). When we engage in anti-racist pedagogy with adult learners, we need to take into account their racialization and identity formation in schools and the ensuing implications for adult learners and educators.

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