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Ethnography Study

Overview

Multiculturalism is affecting businesses and schools across the United States. According to the 2003 United States census data, 11.7% of the population of the United States is foreign born. A little more than half of those foreign born people are from Latin America and one quarter are from Asia. Even though families have immigrated to the United States, it cannot be assumed that they have assimilated into American culture. The purpose of this qualitative ethnography study is to discuss the acculturation and assimilation process of three different people with diverse ethnic backgrounds.

Participants

Three participants were used in this study. For confidentiality, they will be labeled Subject A, Subject B, and Subject C. The subjects were all of different ethnic groups—Chinese, Colombian, and Indian. They have been in the United States for varying amounts of time, from as little as 5 months to over 25 years. All three participants had different motivations for coming to this country, from political to economic. All participants were male and were employed by the same pharmaceutical company in New Jersey. Study results were obtained by using a written questionnaire (Appendix A).

Subject A

Subject A is a 59 year old Chinese man. He has been in the United States for 25 ½ years and has obtained United States citizenship. He is married to a Chinese woman and has one daughter who is in college. He left China due to political reasons and has no intention of ever returning to China to live because he feel that communists can not be trusted. Even though he is unhappy about the politics of Chins, he is extremely proud of his ethnicity and Chinese culture. After being in the United States for over 25 years and speaking English at work, Chinese is the language he feels most comfortable with; it is the language that is spoken exclusively at home. He regularly reads books, magazines, and newspapers written in Chinese. Even though most of his friends are Chinese, he feels strongly against living in a community with a high Chinese population. He feels that children should learn about their native culture but do not necessarily need to be fluent in their native language. While his family does not celebrate Chinese holidays, they do eat Chinese food exclusively. He has stated that he is not too knowledgeable of American customs but he views himself as being the same as other people in the United States and feels that the American culture has had a very positive impact on his life. He feels like he has successfully combined his Chinese identity with an American identity.

It would have been easy for Subject A to be one of the oppressed people that Paul Freire has written about in his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He left China with only \$30 in his pocket. Even though he was in his 30's, he realized that education was the key for his future. After coming to the United States, he struggled with living expenses and college tuition but succeeded in obtaining a degree from NJIT in Computer Science. He values education and has encouraged his daughter to go to college to improve her future.

Subject B

Subject B is a 40 year old male from Colombia who has been in the United States for 5 ½ years. He and his wife came to the United States for professional reasons; he was offered a transfer within his company. In *Letters of Transit*, Bharati Mukherjee has written, “It seems to me we have entered a supra-national age, in which traditional citizenship likely to be a murky identification, and where technical proficiency is the true passport to acceptance” (84). This statement seems to fit Subject B’s situation; he worked for a global company and had the technical proficiency to be able to work worldwide. When a position opened in the United States, Subject B was given the opportunity to transfer. The company did what it needed to do to get and keep Subject B in the United States. His company helped him and his wife with all their legal documents for immigration, opened their bank accounts, provided assistance with obtaining and paying for housing, and even enrolled his wife in an English class. He has a green card and is in the process of becoming a citizen of the United States. He has two young daughters who were born in the United States. He misses his family and friends in Colombia but has the intention of staying in the United States for as long as possible for the benefit of his daughters. This is reminiscent of *The Kite Runner*. Subject B is giving the gift of America to his daughters the same way Baba did for Amir. “I thought of all the trucks, train sets, and bikes he’d bought me in Kabul. Now America. One last gift for Amir” (115). Subject B made the following statement in a personal narrative, which has been edited for grammatical errors: “From a personal perspective, it is not easy to leave family, relatives and friends behind. You start missing all your culture, habits, food, etc. After some time you start getting used to the American way.” Subject B misses Colombia in the same way that Baba missed Afghanistan.

Spanish is the language that Subject B and his family speak at home; he feels very strongly that his children should be fluent in both English and Spanish. He considers himself fluent in English, though his personal narrative indicates otherwise. He feels that he never has had difficulty communicating with his coworkers and has always felt equal to his coworkers. On a few occasions, he has felt discriminated against outside of work. He is very proud of his South American culture and is passing that culture along to his daughters. He keeps his culture alive in his home through holiday celebrations and ethnic food. He prefers to read books, magazines and newspapers in Spanish. His friends are from Spanish and American backgrounds. He prefers to live in neighborhoods that were not predominantly Spanish. He feels that while he has mostly been able to combine his Spanish culture with a new American culture, he cannot identify with only one culture.

Subject C

Subject C is a 31 year old Indian native who has been in the United States for five months. His native language is Telugu. In his home he speaks Hindi, Telugu, Oriya, Kannada, and English; he considers himself fluent in English. He feels that he can communicate well with his coworkers. From his written narrative, he seems to have a tremendous difficulty with English grammar. Before coming to the United States he married; he has no children. He agreed that children should learn about their native culture but was ambivalent about them learning their native language. He is extremely proud of his Indian culture. He doesn't feel like he has strong ties to his ethnic group but does not feel like most people in the United States. He feels that he is familiar with American customs and that American culture has had a positive impact on his life. He continues to celebrate his ethnic holidays. He and his wife eat all types of foods and have friends of all ethnic backgrounds. He reads English books, magazines, and newspapers.

When he first came to the United States he was aided by Indian friends but has not chosen to live in an area with a high Indian population. He has no intention of remaining in the United States permanently. It was always his dream to work for IBM and to experience life in the United States. When he and his wife landed in the United States, they felt as though all their dreams had come true. Subject C will be returning to India after his job assignment in the United States is completed. Being that it is not his intention to live in the United States permanently, he is happily experiencing all that this country has to offer. In *Letters of Transit*, Eva Hoffman writes, “What is happening today is that cross-cultural movement has become the norm rather than the exception, which in turn means that leaving one’s native country is simply not as dramatic or traumatic as it used to be” (42). Subject C and his wife felt great joy leaving India because they knew that with the freedom for cross-cultural movement they will be going back to their homeland. They don’t feel the need to assimilate into American society. He has stated that he is here to experience some pleasant moments in his life and not to belong to a community. It is almost as if America is Subject B’s grocery store and he is picking out the best that it has to offer before returning home.

Analysis

The acculturation process is an evolutionary process and over time different psychological theories may be evident in the lives of immigrants. It needs to be remembered that a person’s life doesn’t fit neatly into theories. It may be possible that individual people within a family unit will have different experiences about their acculturation and assimilation process. It is important for to recognize the theories of intergroup dynamics to be able to alleviate potential conflicts in society.

One theory that attempts to explain intergroup dynamics is the Social Identity Theory. The Social Identity Theory contains four central concepts. The first concept is that a person

needs to acknowledge that they belong to a particular group and that they identify with that particular group. The second concept of this theory is that a person will develop a higher self-esteem by belonging to a specific group. The third concept is that a person will think that it is important for others outside the group to have a favorable impression of the group. The last concept is that the person has a desire for their group to be unique in some way and to have their group stand apart from other groups (Taylor and Moghaddam, 77-80). Subject A does not seem to meet the first concept in the Social Identity Theory. Subject A states that even though he doesn't identify with being Chinese, he is very proud of his Chinese ethnicity and socializes with many Chinese friends. There is a possibility that he doesn't fit all four of the central concepts of the Social Identity Theory because his political views against communism are prohibiting him from being able to identify fully with his Chinese background even though he had retained most of his native language and culture.

The multiculturalism hypothesis (Taylor and Moghaddam, 190) implies that as people get happier, more secure, and more confident with their identity the more receptive they will be of forming relationships with other people of different groups. Subject A, Subject B, and Subject C all seem to fit into the multiculturalism hypothesis. By looking at their responses on the questionnaire, all three of the subjects seem confident and secure with their individual ethnicity and culture. They are proud of their language and customs and at the same time are embracing the customs of the United States. They feel that they have combined the best of both of cultures in their lives. Subject A and Subject B view themselves like the rest of the people in the United States. Subject C, who has only been in the United States for five months, does not feel this way. This is probably due to the fact that he has only been in the United States for five months or possibly because he has never viewed the United States as his permanent home.

The term “melting-pot assimilation” is defined by Taylor and Moghaddam in *Theories of Intergroup Relations* as a “bidirectional process involving a give-and-take between all minority and majority groups” (187). All three of these subjects fit the definition of melting-pot assimilation. Even though they all had different motivations for coming to the United States, they picked out aspects of the American culture and made it part of their lives. It is hard to determine if the subjects of this study chose particular aspects of American culture and passed them down to their children or if the reverse happened—the children experienced the American culture either in school or with their peers and then passed it up to their parents. Regardless of which direction the assimilation started, it did change the lives of these families. All the participants felt that the American culture has had a positive impact on their lives.

The rate and extent to which assimilation occurs is dependent upon the level of interaction a person has with others outside of their minority group. The Relative Deprivation Theory states that people decide what they deserve in life and what they expect to get out of life by looking at the lives of members of other groups. They then compare themselves to the other groups’ members to determine how well they are doing in their own life (Taylor and Moghaddam, 120). In the workplace of a global company, there are many different groups of people. In this particular study, it is difficult to determine which group the individual subjects would look at to form expectations for their own lives. There are too many dependent variables to accurately predict a person’s response using the Relative Deprivation Theory. For example, would a Chinese person compare themselves to native born United States citizens? Would they compare themselves to all foreign born workers? Or more specifically, would they compare themselves to Chinese born workers who have been in the United States for a longer period of

time then themselves? Without knowing who they compare themselves to, the Relative Deprivation Theory is too speculative to discuss in reference to this study.

The subjects of this study were all professional men with careers; they may have reached a higher level of assimilation than their wives due to an increased contact with people outside their ethnic group. For assimilation to occur there needs to be motivation on the part of person within a minority group to accept different aspects of the majority's culture. In a work environment, there is this motivation. In order to succeed at one's job, receive promotions and receive salary increases, one must be able to fit into corporate society. This would hasten a person's desire and motivation to assimilate and acculturate into the mainstream of the United States.

Another theory that could be evident in the workplace is the Realistic Conflict Theory. This theory states that if there are limited resources, conflict over those resources could lead to discrimination and prejudice (Taylor and Moghaddam, 35). In a business setting, the higher a person moves up in the organizational structure of the company, the more competitive it is to obtain promotions. In-fighting between groups with different ethnicities may occur.

One weakness of this study was that it did not examine the acculturation of the families of these men. The men went out to work everyday. What did their wives do? If they were professionals and out in the workforce in the United States, they would probably have had the same acculturation and assimilation experiences as their husbands. If, due to their native culture, they stayed in the home, they would not have had the motivation and desire to assimilate into American life. This would be especially true for Subject C, who has stated that his time in the United States is finite.

Another weakness of this study is that it did not specifically address the assimilation and acculturation of the participants' children. English is the language of the classroom and the American culture is prevalent as well but how much does an educator know about the language, customs, and culture that go on in students' homes? Ethnic culture may have an effect upon students in the classroom. Students may feel torn between two cultures—the culture they experience in school and the culture of their home. It is important for educators to have understanding of the everyday life of their students. Educators in a multicultural classroom need to follow Freire's educational philosophy and create a dialog with students to find out as much as possible about students as individuals in order to create a curriculum that offers the best education possible. Teachers need to be understanding of different cultures and backgrounds that students possess and be cognizant of the language barriers that may be encountered when communicating to parents.

Conclusion

The United States has had long history of accepting immigrants from other countries and enabling them to assimilate into American society. For people that have always lived in the United States it is difficult to imagine the feelings, problems and difficulties that foreign born people face on a daily basis. It is important to understand the underlying psychological theories that are evident in society between all groups of people.

Appendix A

Acculturation Survey
(All information will be kept confidential)

1. What is your ethnicity? _____
2. What is your age? _____
3. How long have you been in the United States? _____ years and _____ months.
4. What was your first language as a child? _____.
5. Are you still fluent in this language? ____ Yes ____ No
6. What language do you speak at home? _____
7. When speaking to your parents or other older relatives, what language do you speak?

8. Other than your native language, what other languages do you speak?

Please answer the following questions by placing a check mark in the appropriate box.

9. I am fluent in English.
strongly disagree disagree neither disagree or agree agree strongly agree
10. I believe that my children should communicate exclusively in English.
strongly disagree disagree neither disagree or agree agree strongly agree
11. It is important for children should learn their ethnic language.

strongly disagree disagree neither disagree or agree agree strongly agree

12. I read books/magazines/newspapers in my native language.

strongly disagree disagree neither disagree or agree agree strongly agree

13. Children should learn aspects of their native culture.

strongly disagree disagree neither disagree or agree agree strongly agree

14. I am proud of my ethnicity and native culture.

strongly disagree disagree neither disagree or agree agree strongly agree

15. I celebrate the ethnic holidays that I grew up with.

strongly disagree disagree neither disagree or agree agree strongly agree

16. At home, I eat the ethnic food that I am familiar with.

strongly disagree disagree neither disagree or agree agree strongly agree

17. Most of my friends are from my ethnic background.

strongly disagree disagree neither disagree or agree agree strongly agree

18. I would prefer to live in a neighborhood with people from my native culture.

strongly disagree disagree neither disagree or agree agree strongly agree

19. I feel like I have combined the best of my native culture with the American culture.

strongly disagree disagree neither disagree or agree agree strongly agree

20. I feel as though I have two identities—my native cultural identity and an American identity.

strongly disagree disagree neither disagree or agree agree strongly agree

21. I identify with my ethnic group.

strongly disagree disagree neither disagree or agree agree strongly agree

22. I have American friends.

strongly disagree disagree neither disagree or agree agree strongly agree

23. I view myself as being like most people in the United States.

strongly disagree disagree neither disagree or agree agree strongly agree

24. I am familiar with American customs.

strongly disagree disagree neither disagree or agree agree strongly agree

25. American culture has had a positive impact on my life.

strongly disagree disagree neither disagree or agree agree strongly agree

26. I have difficulty communicating with others at work.

strongly disagree disagree neither disagree or agree agree strongly agree

27. What was your main reason for immigrating to the United States?

28. Do you feel welcomed in the United States?

29. Have you had any difficulty communicating with the teachers in you children's schools?

30. If you had the choice of staying in the United States for the rest of your life or returning to your native country, what would you chose? Why?

31. Please describe your journey to the United States:

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