

An Asian Indian Student's Identity: Living in Two Worlds

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Using narrative inquiry, I tell the story of an Asian Indian student attending a large mid-Atlantic university who approached me in the summer of 2002 for my master's thesis interview. She was an Indian by birth who was adopted by White parents when she was an infant. She had not been to India since. Her story provided me with rich insights into her life including her childhood, identity formation, relationships with her adoptive parents and siblings, and social interactions outside home while attending school. I came to understand issues of meaning-making of her life and sub-culture through her story. I use narrative inquiry as a way to represent her story. Key Words: Narrative Inquiry, Representation, Identity Formation, Asian Indian, and Sub-culture

Introduction

I interviewed Suman (pseudonym) in the summer of 2002. During that time, I was collecting data for my master's thesis, *Reactions of First- and Second-Generation Asian Indian students to Racism at Schools in the United States* (Mittapalli, 2002). As part of the data collection process, my first stop to get a pool of interview participants was the Indian Students Association (ISA) situated at the university. As the topic of my thesis suggests, I was interested in interviewing Asian Indian students, who were either first or second generation. After about a week of sending the study participation¹ email through the ISA, I received a few responses from interested students, some of whom wanted to know more about the study, while some others wanted to meet me for a personal interview in the following weeks. Among the responses was the following from Suman. Her email read,

I am Suman Salkind, a junior at the Dept. of social work. I am an Indian by birth. I was adopted by White parents when I was four. I haven't been to India since. I know and have interacted with several Asian Indian students at the university. I am interested to participate in your study. When can we talk?

I read her email several times unsure of what to do with it.

¹ All the study participants signed a consent form at the beginning of the interview. The study was approved by the university's Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB). A separate HSRB permission was obtained for this study since it was not a part of the thesis and is being published after the completion of the master's program in 2003.

I was uncertain if given her background information, Suman fit the definition of a first or a second generation Asian Indian, and if I could use her interview in my study at all. I was unsure if she really wanted to participate in my study, or just wanted to talk to me about something related to the study. What I was sure about was that I was going to talk to her even if I decided not to use her interview for my study. I was curious to know what Suman had to tell me about herself and her Asian Indian contacts, even if it was not closely related to my topic. I decided to meet her. We met three weeks later at the university food court. My interview with her lasted about an hour and it turned out to be one of the most insightful interviews for my work. I used some of her information in my thesis.

Thesis: An Overview

During the course of more than five months between late Spring and Fall 2002, I interviewed 35 students (25 females and 10 males) who were attending a large mid-Atlantic university. My thesis included narrative incidents of racism that the two groups of students encountered while they were in school or when they newly arrived in the U.S. It also revealed facts about the friendship choices of the first and second generation Asian Indian students. A majority of first generation Asian Indian students preferred to have first generation Asian Indians as their friends, both in and out of school (Mittapalli, 2002, 2006) contrary to the second-generation, who said they made friends with anyone (including first-generation Asian Indians as long as they were “like” them). In addition, my analysis revealed friendship preferences between first generation Asian Indians (mostly males) with African Americans (mostly males) (Mittapalli, 2006).

Suman was not a perfect fit as a participant for my study since she was neither a first- nor a second-generation Asian Indian. She was adopted by White parents and was brought to the United States as an infant. She had no memory of India and she had not visited the country since. She said she listened to Indian music (mostly Bhangra, northern Indian music), enjoyed spicy Indian food, and watched Bollywood movies with friends when she got an opportunity.

Suman’s data in my thesis was useful because her insights regarding what she thought of Asian Indian students, in general, and their inter-relationships helped me think about my study more critically. I was able to look beyond the racial aspect that the two groups may have faced, while in or out of school, and critically evaluate their interpersonal relationships. Her data along with some of the other participants’ data revealed the love-hate relationships between the two groups and those with whom they preferred to move and make friends. Issues of identity came to the forefront when I spoke with first-generation students, some of whom felt they had to fit in to be friends with the Whites as well as the second generation Asian Indian students (both male and female participants).

Uniqueness of Suman’s Interview

Suman’s interview became separate from the rest of the interviews that I used for my thesis. While the thesis questions were aimed at either first-or second-generation Asian Indian students to learn about their social interactions with students of other

racess/ethnicities in/outside their schools, their personal experiences of racism in schools, and how they mingled with other Asian Indian students of their generation; Suman's interview primarily focused on her childhood, her relationship with her White parents and siblings, her life growing up in a White family in a primarily White neighbourhood, and her life in school.

Overall, her interview was about her making sense of her being and her identity formation while growing up. She hardly spoke of her opinions of first- or second-generation Asian Indian students or if she had encountered any racism while growing up or going to school. Suman talked about her personal and social lives. During the interview, I reworded several questions from my original interview guide to learn about her personal/social experiences with first and second generation Asian Indian students, but she kept steering the conversation towards herself. During the interview, it became apparent that she was not going to tell me much about the other Asian Indian students or her association with them, but about how she identified herself among the larger social groups in her life.

The Interview

Suman's interview was unique and a study in itself as her narration provided bits and pieces of her childhood, identity formation, relationship with her adoptive parents and siblings, and her friendship choices. I chose to ask some of the questions from the semi-structured questionnaire I had developed for the thesis, since most of the questions did not apply to her (e.g., first generation students' length of stay, experiences of going to school in the United States, if parents had attended school in the United States, primary language spoken at home, attending and participating in Indian social and cultural events, questions about inter-relations of the two groups and incidents of racism at school/university). My questions to Suman were related to her childhood in general, her school life, friends at school, relationship with her parents and siblings, friendships at school and university, and her opinion about Asian Indian students on campus in general (see Appendix A).

In this article, I use narrative inquiry to describe Suman's life, relationship with her adoptive parents and siblings, identity formation, and her thoughts about other Asian Indian students, in general, and those with whom she had interacted while attending school/university. My article is geared towards researchers and graduate students of various disciplines, who may read it as an example for analyzing transcripts of first-person stories or lived experiences.

Suman's story gave me a unique opportunity to peek into a young woman's sub-culture and identity formation as she tried to define it herself. My approach to narrative inquiry is biographical since it attends to the person in relation to the society and takes into account the influences of one's social position and family (Denzin, 1989). Through narrative, we can capture and investigate experiences as human beings, live them in time, in space, in person, and in relationship (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In the following section I make a case why narrative analysis befitted my method of inquiry.

Narrative Inquiry

Narratives are an increasingly popular focus of social research (Denzin, 1989). Perhaps this is because stories seem to promise human universality and accessibility, while analysis of them requires a rewardingly comprehensive attention to individual, social, and cultural dimensions of language and meaning. The study of narrative also seems to promise change, as those in the social sciences develop new theories, new methods, and new ways of talking about self and society (Denzin).

In narrative inquiry, the story is the center of the investigation. Narrative stories are told from a defined point of view, often the author's, so there is feeling as well as specific and often sensory details provided to get the reader involved in the elements and sequence of the story.

Personal Narratives as Data and Social Critique

Feminist researchers have been particularly adamant about the importance of using women's narratives as primary sources of data, as a corrective to centuries of androcentric narratives that negated women's experiences in society (Bloom, 2002). Although, not written in the flavor of feminist narrative, my interview tries to demonstrate that it is not simply the content of a narrative that is critical to narrative research, but the interplay between the narrative that is told and the structure of the telling that is critical (Bloom). Therefore, I try to understand and piece her interview together to show how Suman's personal narrative offers her a means of constructing herself through the act of self-stories. Data in narrative analysis are in the form of stories with a beginning, middle, and an end that tell first-person accounts of life and experiences. In narrative analysis, the perspective of the teller is of greater interest than the tale itself. This is accomplished by recording and interpreting the narrator's social positions, personal desires, and aspirations in this process of fulfilling particular needs (Bloom).

In this article, I have included Suman's short interview in its entirety to retain its full flavor. Through her interview, Suman told me her story; from her childhood, school days, to her current being. Her story weaves around her life instances, her interactions with her parents and siblings, and now with her friends in school. Her interview became a way for me to construct a social critique of her narrative. Although, her interview started as the center of the research, the focus of the study did not rest there. Suman is and will be always understood as a social being whose experiences are mediated by the social world in which she lives. As Bloom argues, narrative analysis, when used as social critique, helps us, as researchers, to construct social action at both personal and collective levels. He further comments, "it is imperative that we are dually conscious of the individual and the societal-cultural contexts in which h/she exists, and has experiences and interprets his/her life in his/her own way" (Bloom as cited in Merriam, 2002, p. 311). I realized that to fully understand the nuances of Suman's narrative, I must therefore explore it from a sociocultural lens.

Furthermore, Suman's story in its original form provided me a way to see how her narration imposed order on the flow of experience, to make sense of events and actions in her life (Reissman, 1993). As Reissman states:

Narrative approach examines the informant's story and analyzes how it is put together, the linguist and cultural resources it draws upon, and how it persuades a listener of its authenticity. Analysis in narrative studies opens up the forms of telling about experience, not simply the content to which language refers. We ask, why was the story told that way? (p. 2)

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) further argue that narrative is a form of representation rather than a mode of analysis. Human lives, they suggest, are woven of stories. Individuals construct their identities through their own and others' stories. They experience daily encounters and interactions as stories. Every moment has a storied past and a storied future. Social phenomena become a converging point for individual, collective, and cultural stories.

Suman's story formed fertile ground for beginning to understand her lived experience, and her sense of being. It seemed as if she seized every opportunity in the interview to tell me about her experiences. At the end of the interview and tape transcription, I found myself not wanting to fragment the long accounts of her story into thematic categories; there was a common structure beneath her life account. Her brief story was intuitively weaved into a coherent exposition of her life's experiences which demanded a detour from categorizing within the research process (Reissman, 1993).

The Setting

Suman was a petite, 25-year old junior at the Department of Social Work, at the university where I was working on my master's thesis. She was wearing a long black dress and had a black headscarf, which covered her hair and her forehead. She was medium build, about five feet tall. She had a red backpack hanging on her left shoulder and held a water bottle in her right hand. We met at noon on a sunny and warm day of June 2002. We sat at a round table in the food court area of the university. I tape recorded our conversation and took notes in a note pad while I interviewed. The interview lasted about an hour.

Suman's Story

I grew up in a metropolitan area, mainly which was pretty much White where we lived and where I attended my elementary school. There wasn't much diversity in school. I guess I was too young to notice and analyze that then. Now that I think of it. I was in an advanced writing class in grade six; there wasn't much diversity there either. When we moved to the city after my elementary school education, in middle and then in high school, there were a lot of refugees. They were from all over the place;; Somalia, Ethiopia, Bulgaria, anywhere. Tons of refugees. That was a whole different experience for me. It was so diverse and different. I came across people who had to run away from their place to come to the United States. It was terrible to hear some of their stories. Running for one's life...you know?

I came to this university and came across so many African Americans. I think emotionally, and mentally they seem to be on the same level as I am. I get along very well with them. The laid back attitude, the cool culture, maybe which resonates with me.

You know my mom is very obsessive about things in general, to be on time, to be very structured and all that.

The American culture of always trying to get ahead (as emphasized by Suman's tone). My mom's a workaholic and she wants all of us to be like that. Always trying to get ahead. Well, the African American culture has always been...like take life as it comes; it's going to happen when it's going to happen. Always take it easy. Enjoy life. I mean that's my mentality:, I don't get too emotional too often. I am very blunt, I am always like that. ,I think a lot of African Americans are like that. I don't have a fear of saying anything. You know...uh... I am like that. I do try to hold my tongue, but I think, a lot of times, I think look, that's not cool to say and you need to take that back. I mean, you know, you really want to know the truth. For instance, when I hear someone yell at someone for no apparent reason, I try to reason out with the person who did it and want a justification. Many people may not like it, but well, I am that!

I associate myself with African American music. I haven't lived in a ghetto or something ever. It's the rhythm, the beat and the music that moves me. You know if you add a bit of bass to the Indian music- Bhangra, you know, it will sound like hip-hop. They are similar in many ways. I have been to a couple of clubs; dance clubs in DC. Not too much, but I have seen them. I like to dance to their music, the beats. It's cool!

I often pass as a light skinned black person. As you see, I cover my head with a head wrap. People often ask me about it and I tell them, oh, it's just to hide my unkempt hair (laughs). Truth be told, it's my identity,- my head wrap. I don't remember when exactly I started wearing it, but it's been a part of me for a while now. I have real long hair and I like to keep it covered sometimes. But, that's what I am.

I have always kept my home life away from my school life. I never used to have my school friends over at home. My mom was concerned about this a bit and went to my school one day to talk to the teacher. My teacher told her that I had a lot of friends at school, I was quick at making friends and I moved with all kids. That assured my mom and she stopped worrying about my behavior.

I tend to keep to myself at home most of the time. My family is extremely political and they have strong opinions. They kind of have an opinion about everything...there is no middle ground for them...like always. They kind of get upset if someone has a different opinion. I am like...Man, you need to respect others' opinions too. You can't be right all the time. It's weird but it's like that.

I consider myself fortunate for not being an Indian of either generation theoretically, as I was adopted and I never went back to India after I came here. I am not aware of any of my relatives living there.

I was not discriminated or anything while I was growing up. Yes, I have had people asking me about my background when they saw my skin color. After I tell them that I was adopted and all that, they fall silent and often don't ask me any questions about my background. I think they understand that my background is what I formed after I came here.

I have had people stereotype me, since I am an Indian, they think I should be in computer science or I must be this or be doing that. I didn't learn math, I was never pushed to learn math at home. I am good at Math. I work at the bank. I am not excellent. I don't fit many stereotypes. My mindset is that I am inter-racial. I do adapt to things very well. I am not trying to be this way or that way.

I can go with so many groups. Sometimes, I don't want to be in any group, but I think there are many people who would want themselves to be where I am, in the sense of not belonging to one particular group. I try to take it as a blessing. I have accepted it as an opportunity. My parents brought me here; they gave me all that I could hope for. I could have had a terrible life back in India, who knows. I never had an argument with them about why you took me away from my culture, my people, and my country. They showed me a lot of movies, Hindi movies. They showed me videos of Indian places.

I have never asked my parents to teach me anything about India; the language or anything for that matter. I don't blame them either...I think I should have looked for someone, anyone to teach me Hindi. It's very important to be bilingual. You should know your mother tongue. It would have been Marathi if I were still in India. Neither they (parents), nor I made any attempt to know my mother tongue here. My mom, I think, should have made an attempt to introduce me to the Indian culture when I was growing up...they (parents) gave me the freedom of choice to do whatever I wanted to, which I think is good but at times, I think I don't really belong anywhere or I belong everywhere.

I don't want to marry a white boy. It's the personality, respect, honestly, without being physical that I like among Indians the most. I admire that in the Indian culture. It's a better system. Sexual relation is very open here; I think it's self-degrading. But, it's not easy to un-learn it. It's hard to go back after having a sexual relationship. You get so emotionally attached to that person and if it doesn't work out, you are crushed. It's hard to recover from that.

Among Indians, I admire their drive and work ethics. They are determined to finish their education. They are not here to do just any job, but work and have a lifestyle that they want. They are willing to help each other. I see that all the time. I work in a bank and I see them transfer money to help their folks in India. I kind of miss that in my family. For me, that will never happen.

The Indians seem to have a code to live by, you know the relationships of men and women, it's very...very...um... proper- I think. You don't be kind of all over somebody, sitting on one's lap. But sort of steal a kiss or something. I really respect that. I respect that a lot.

I like Indian food. I have tried all sorts of them. They are spicy, but it's okay. I like the Indian movies, they are really cute. I don't see a lot of sex scenes. I see a lot of singing and dancing. I see that in the culture more than I see it in any others.

I respect the concept of arranged marriages to some extent. They provide emotional and sometimes economic stability. The parents see the background of the boy and his parents. But, I think, one thing that a person misses in this kind of marriage is the love at first sight, the missing of a heartbeat when you see someone...Man! You are totally missing out on love. I do believe that you grow in love. But, you should date a bit and get to know that person.

I cannot differentiate between first and second generation. I am not really exposed to them that much. They can be like totally conservative, be totally religious and all or can be rash, you know, a rebel. It's hard to say that one group is like this and the other like that [referring to first and second generation], since they have just arrived from India and are thus better than those who are born and raised here. I haven't been able to differentiate. I move along with any and all of them, whoever likes me and I like them likewise. That's just me, I suppose.

Interpretations

The interview led to the unravelling of the many layers of identity issues that were embedded in Suman's narrative (e.g., "inter-racial," "belonging nowhere and belonging everywhere," "head scarf as a mark of my identity," "pass as a light skinned black person," friendship with African-American students, the urge to learn Indian language)—"you should know your mother tongue," "I like Indian food. I have tried all sorts of them," Indian way of life— "The Indians seems to have a code to live by...", sub-culture—listening to African-American music, having a way of life that is different from her family's, "a laid back life," "cool culture that maybe resonates with mine," and listening to Bhangra (northern Indian music and comparing it with hip-hop music—"You know if you add a bit of bass to the Indian music- Bhangra, you know, it will sound like hip-hop").

Suman's interview provided insight into how a person examines, and forms a personal identity and a sub-cultural life around her/himself that s/he can associate with, and which is different from one's home and school lives. I believe that through her interview, I have only peeked into the much larger, often complicated issues of a young woman's identity formation and sub-culture. I have presented her interview as a way to represent some of the feelings that she undergoes as she tries to define who she is in a larger social, cultural, and political context.

Suman's identity formation is closely associated with her friendship choices at school and at the university. In her interview, she talked at length about how she identified herself with African Americans in their attitudes towards life, how she considers her "headscarf as a mark of her identity," and how she is passed as a light-skinned black person. Often times, she mentions herself as "belonging nowhere and belonging everywhere" and that she "is inter-racial." She says she is grateful to her parents for giving her their best, giving her the freedom to choose what she wanted to be and not really forcing her to belong to a particular group. Her regret of not having an opportunity to learn her mother tongue, Marathi (an Indian language spoken mainly in the western part of India) and Hindi (India's national language) also gives us an idea about her inkling to identify herself as an Indian. As much as she likes Indian food, Indian music, and the Indian way of thinking and life, Suman realizes that not knowing the Indian language or its culture is a serious impediment to her identity as an Indian. At the same time, her appreciation for the African American "way of life" and her friendship with African American students on campus gave her a way to identify herself with them more closely. This process of making friends based on similarity is what sociologists call a socialization process (Lazarfield & Merton, 1954).

Closely related to Suman's friendship choices at school, and now at the university, are issues of sub-culture. Blake (1985) defines subculture as "meaning systems, modes of expression or life styles developed by groups in subordinate structural positions in response to dominant meaning systems, and which reflect their attempt to solve structural contradictions rising from the wider societal context" (p. iv). Suman experiences a sense of camaraderie with her African American friends who in her opinion have charted out a path that resonate with her beliefs and dispositions. As she mentions in her interview,

I associate myself with African American music. I haven't lived in a ghetto or something ever. It's the rhythm, the beat and the music that moves me. You know if you add a bit of bass to the Indian music-Bhangra, you know, it will sound like hip-hop.....Well, the African American culture has always been....like take life as it comes; it's going to happen when it's going to happen. Always take it easy. Enjoy life.

Researcher Sunaina Maira (2006) has delved deeper into the issues of Asian Indian youth and sub-culture. Specifically, Maira has studied Asian Indians and their associations with African-Americans within the context of gender, social identity and engagement, and popular culture (e.g., hip hop music, Bhangra remix). She comments that youth, particularly Asian Indian youth living abroad, have a way to understand racial crossings as it is “imbricated with understandings of gender, sexuality, class and nationalism” (p. 235). Maira believes that Asian Indian youth, participate in the remix youth culture, featuring a mixing of “Indian film (Bollywood) and folk music with dance music” and “sample hip-hop as part of the larger dissemination and commodification of urban black and Latino youth across the nation and around the globe” (p. 236).

Further, researchers (Clark, Hall, Jefferson, & Roberts, 1976; Rose, 1994a, 1994b; Thornton & Gelder, 1997) have defined hip-hop as a school-style subculture that embodies a critique of the condition of urban youth who mainly face unemployment and marginalization in a post-industrial economy. They opine that this medium is used by youth as a way to express their collective identity, to define themselves as a group rather than a collection of individuals. Their closeness and camaraderie is manifested through sub-cultural items such as music, dance, and food. It appears that Suman, with her close affiliations, with African American students on campus, often uses this remix culture to negotiate not just questions of her own ethnic identity, but also her relationship with Blackness and racial ideologies linked to her experiences at school, home, work, and/or peer relationships. It was as if Suman was defining her culture against her parental home while deviating from the normative ideals of adult communities (Thornton & Gelder). For her, the distinctive style of her headscarf expressed her sense of collectivity and oneness with the African American youth she associated with, and the close relationships she maintained with them (Clarke et al.).

Conclusion

In this article, I use narrative inquiry to begin to describe an Asian Indian student's identity formation, relationship with her adoptive parents and siblings, her thoughts about other Asian Indian students, in general, and those with whom she had interacted while at school or university. Her story gave me a unique opportunity to peek into a young woman's sub-culture and identity formation as she tried to define who she was, what resonated with her being, and what she wanted to become. It was as if she was living in two worlds; “belonging nowhere and belonging everywhere!” Through narrative analysis I was able to examine society through the lens of my participant's narrative of her life, her making sense of her being. My approach to narrative analysis was biographical since it attended to the person in relation to the society and took into account

the influences of her social position and family. It seemed that Suman's revelation provided an example of how human lives can be portrayed as storied texts, within a social context (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992). She spoke and I interpreted her brief story in terms of a cultural context, personal growth, and social connections. Through her interview, I have only scratched the surface to see what identity formation and sub-culture can mean for Suman.

Reading about narrative research and writing this article using Suman's interview has reiterated my strong belief that narrative research is an important form of social science research, especially when placed within the larger framework of sociocultural theory. However, the challenge for researchers like me is to understand how human actions are related to the social context in which they occur and how they grow. As we make our way through life, we as social beings have continuous and dialogic interactions both with our surrounding world and with ourselves. All of these are woven together into an intricate web, where they might strike one as being entangled in their complexity and a never ending maze. One way of structuring these experiences is to organize them into smaller meaningful units. And one such meaningful unit could be a story, or a narrative (Moen, 2006). Narrative analysis has provided me such a way to methodologically order and sequence Suman's life story through her interview. My point of departure is that the narrative approach is a frame of reference, a way of reflecting during the entire inquiry process, a research method, and a mode for representing the research study. Hence, the narrative approach is both the phenomenon and the method (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000).

A narrative study such as this leaves researchers to ask more about their participant within their current context. If I were to conduct another interview with Suman after six years, I would be interested to know about her life upon completing school, her opinion of marriage, whether or not she has married, her current relationship with her parents and siblings, and what she thinks now of Asian Indian men and women.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Demographics

1. Where were you born?
2. When were you born?
3. How long did you live in India before coming to the United States with your parents (for first generation student and Suman)?
4. Sex - Male / Female

Family Characteristics

1. How many siblings do you have?
2. What is your mother's educational level?
3. What is your father's educational level?
4. What are your parents' occupations?
5. Father _____ Mother _____

Personal

1. What is your present level of education?
 - a) Freshmen b) Sophomore c) Junior d) Senior
 - e) Graduate f) other (please specify) _____

2. What is your marital status at present?
a) Married b) Unmarried c) Separated d) Divorced
e) Widowed f) other (please specify) _____
3. What is your current living arrangement? Are you living with your parents/relatives or are you on your own here?
4. What language do you speak at home with your parents and sibling/s?
5. Does your family observe/ participate in any of the traditional Indian festivals here?
6. How often do you go to India to visit your relatives? Is it for an occasion or on a family visit?

Social Life

1. What are the ethnic backgrounds of your friends at school as well as outside?
2. Are you comfortable talking and interacting with students of different ethnic backgrounds other than yours at school? If no, explain why not.
3. How comfortable are you talking and interacting with other Asian Indian students in your school?
4. Do you interact more with the first generation Asian Indian students or with the second generation? Why/not? What is your general opinion about them? Their inter-relations?
5. Did you ever experience a feeling of being treated differently from the rest here?
6. Do you talk about your school life with parents? If yes, what do you discuss with them?

Author Note

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