Living and Working in Ethno-Cultural and Multicultural Communities in Ottawa: South Asian Immigrant Women's Journeys

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Abstract. This paper examines the integration and identity construction processes of South Asian immigrant women in Ottawa. Interviews were conducted with seven immigrant women from South Asia who were working in Ottawa in order to understand their journeys in the Canadian context. The women came from different backgrounds and countries in the South Asian region. The findings revealed insights into their memories and ethnic identification, their workplace negotiations, and the importance of multicultural communities and a sense of belonging in Canada. Also, what was striking was their adaptability in the context of managing and balancing their lives in Canada to their new contexts while also retaining aspects of their earlier identities which were important to them.

Keywords: *Immigrant women, memories and identity, multiculturalism, workplace negotiation*

Introduction

The 2006 Census estimated that Canada's 3.2 million immigrant women came from over 220 countries. The largest proportion of these immigrant women, 9%, reported the United Kingdom as their place of birth, followed by the People's Republic of China (8%), India (7%) and the Philippines (5%).Of the total female immigrant population, 18% landed recently between 2001 to 2006, coming mainly from Asia. Among recent immigrant women, the largest share came from the People's Republic of China (15% or 84,700 individuals), followed by India (11% or 65,900 individuals) and the Philippines (8% or 43,700 individuals). (Chui, 2011).

South Asian immigration into Canada has had a long history and has been marked by and influenced by the racialized nature of Canadian immigration in the past, which is a common thread in immigration experiences of all visible minority immigrant groups. For example, after 1904 the entrance of Indian immigrants to Canada was restricted: "According to the Dominion Government, the aims of these restrictive measures were (i) to prevent hardship to the East Indians owing to the

severity of the Canadian climate, (ii) to fight racial friction, and (iii) to protect the Canadian working man and his higher standard of living" (Srivastava, 1983: 33). "South Asian women in Canada belong to the larger category of immigrant women of color-a term that is a social construction (Bannerji, 1993; Carty & Brand, 1993; Estable & Meyer, 1989; Leah, 1995; Ng, 1995; Ralston, 1988; Szekely 1990). Technically and legally, the term immigrant women refers to women who were born in other countries and acquired permanent resident status in Canada through the process of immigration" (George & Ramkissoon, 1998:103).

The definition of South Asia used here is taken from SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) which includes eight countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. It is a geopolitical and regional intergovernmental organization of South Asian nations and was formed in 1985. The main goal of this organization is to maintain and promote economic integration in the region. To this end a number of conferences and meetings have been held. In 2007 Afghanistan was included in SAARC.

Research Questions

In this study the following research questions are posed: How do South Asian immigrant women experience the identity negotiation processes in different contexts: personal and professional? How do they experience their integration journeys? How does multiculturalism have an impact on the integration process?

The study

Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with South Asian immigrant women in Ottawa using the long interview format (McCracken, 1988). To be representative of the different countries of South Asia an attempt was made to conduct the interviews with women from all the different countries represented in the definition of South Asian immigrant women. The interviews probed into their journey into Canada and also their early life before they came to Canada and attempted to uncover their life stories ~~and~~ through that an understanding of their identity construction processes as they immigrated into Canada. To participate in the study, the women needed to meet the following selection criteria: They had to be first generation South Asian immigrant women living in Ottawa who were at least 18

years of age and who were women who were working outside the home. The interviews were all conducted in English hence they had to be fluent in English and able to speak English and communicate in it. Participants were recruited through personal networks and word of mouth and snowball sampling. The interviews were held at a convenient location of the participants' choice and at a time chosen by them. The interviews were all audio recorded and transcribed. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Boyatkis, 1998). The transcripts of the interviews were analyzed for key themes that helped to uncover the insights into the lives and the identity formation and construction processes of the South Asian immigrant women. Of the seven women interviewed three were from India, one from Afghanistan, one from Bangladesh and two from Sri Lanka. They ranged in ages from 29 to 61 and had very different and varied occupations and professions.

Memories and Ethnic Identity

Memories of home, as well as issues concerning their ethnic identity and identification came through strongly in the participants' responses. As Sarup(1996, 40) states:

> "An important aspect to the construction and negotiation of identity is the past-present relation and its reconciliation. The past figures importantly in people's self representations because it is through recollections of the past that people represent themselves to themselves. We know that the past always marks the present, but often the past consists of a selectively appropriated set of memories and discourses".

Wanning (1998) in his study of post national Chineseness reiterates Sarup's (1994) thoughts who maintained that for people who are migrants, identity is about becoming, and the expression of loss and nostalgia is part of that.

Ethnic identity is usually defined as the sense of belonging and commitment that comes from being part of an ethnic group, and includes the feelings, behaviours and also thoughts based on ethnic group membership. Basically, the sense of self that an individual has in terms of membership in an ethnic group is ethnic identity (Liebkind, 1992, 2001; Phinney, 1990). Ethnic group membership is based on one's heritage or ancestry (Phinney, 1996).
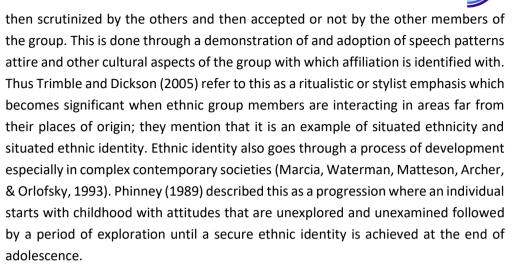
The sense of identification with a particular ethnic group (Tajfel, 1981) and a sense of belonging and commitment to the core values and beliefs are some of the

characteristics of ethnic identity (Phinney, 1990, 2000, 2003). Currently, the most widely used definition of the construct in psychology is the one developed by Phinney (1990, 2000, 2003). Phinney (1990), notes that there are "widely discrepant definitions and measures of ethnic identity, which makes generalizations and comparisons across studies difficult and ambiguous" (p.500). The definition as articulated by Phinney (1990, 2000, 2003) is used widely as she maintains that "ethnic identity is a dynamic, multidimensional construct that refers to one's identity, or sense of self as a member of an ethnic group" (2003, p. 63). In Phinney's articulation, ancestry is important as having a common race language culture religion or language or places of origin are important in ethnic identity. She added further, "Ethnic identity is not a fixed categorization, but rather is a fluid and dynamic understanding of self and ethnic background. Ethnic identity is constructed and modified as individuals become aware of their ethnicity, within the large (sociocultural) setting" (2003, p. 63). Phinney (1990, 2000) states that subjective identity then develops into a social identity based on ethnic group membership. There is some overlap and conflation between ethnic identity and racial cultural and even national identity. In Phinney's conceptualization (1992, 1996), ethnic identity is the sum of the norms attitudes behaviours beliefs and traits of a particular group. It is rooted in tradition and passed on from one generation to the next (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). Like Phinney (1996), other scholars (Umaña-Taylor, Yazedjian, and Bámaca-Gómez, 2004) have acknowledged that it is fluid and dynamic and multifaceted as a concept and is used to describe the connection and feelings with regards to an ethnic group (Bernal et al., 1991; Phinney, 1990; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In addition, the interpersonal processes that go along with ethnic identity are also important (Phinney, 1992; Sellers et al., 1997).

Trimble (2000) raises an interesting point with regards to ethnic identity, the issue of labeling. According to Trimble (2000) ethnic identity serves a function through naming or labeling people according to their ethnic identity which can be useful in terms of categorizations for demographic purposes such as a census. However beyond this, other aspects of ethnic identity are also important such as participation in religious and cultural activities attitudes towards one's own and other ethnic groups as well as music and food preferences and patterns of affiliation or friendship.

Trimble and Dickson (2005) argue that ethnic identity is contextual as it is based on social negotiations and declaration of ethnic identity to others, which is

then scrutinized by the others and then accepted or not by the other members of the group. This is done through a demonstration of and adoption of speech patterns attire and other cultural aspects of the group with which affiliation is identified with. Thus Trimble and Dickson (2005) refer to this as a ritualistic or stylist emphasis which becomes significant when ethnic group members are interacting in areas far from their places of origin; they mention that it is an example of situated ethnicity and situated ethnic identity. Ethnic identity also goes through a process of development especially in complex contemporary societies (Marcia, Waterman, Matteson, Archer, & Orlofsky, 1993). Phinney (1989) described this as a progression where an individual starts with childhood with attitudes that are unexplored and unexamined followed by a period of exploration until a secure ethnic identity is achieved at the end of adolescence.

Through the process of learning about their ethnic identity, youth can either find value in their ethnic group or experience feelings of resentment over how their ethnic group has been treated in the past, or even experience feelings of insecurity or confusion (Brown, 2000; Tajfel and Turner, 1986). The steps and phases of this process will depend on the socialization process and may not be identical for all youth, as not everyone reaches the stage of ethnic identity achievement. Ethnic identity often is composed of four aspects: ethnic awareness (an understanding about one's own and other ethnic groups; ethnic self-identification (Rumbaut, 1994), ethnic attitudes and shared values, and ethnic behaviours. Ethnic identity and immigrants' experiences and reception by the receiving society are interrelated as pointed out by Phinney et al (2001).

Participant Five, a 43 year old women from Sri Lanka had been in Canada for 12 years and had a bachelor's degree in Natural Sciences, and was working as a customer service services representative at a leading phone company. She narrated:

> "Oh, growing up, my neighbor was a Tamilian, as I said, and she had two kids. I really don't where… I wish I knew where they were now, but very nice. We all played together, …He had a nice bike, and we were all sharing the bike, because not everybody can afford bikes – nice ones, you know. He had this nice 10-speed bike. I remember we used to drive. We used to take turns".

The participants also talked about the importance of community in terms of their ethnic group and taking part and engaging in community participation. Participant Three, a 29-year-old woman from Afghanistan, who had been in Canada for seven years and had studied up to the high school level, and was an aesthetician

explained:

> "Yeah, I like to especially, you know, for my son, because I have a son and I really want him to be in the community, too, so I wanted to be in the community and participate in all the events and stuff and..., like, our New Year or any other celebrations that we have we get together so I all the time try to be there and especially take my son, that he knows a little bit about our land... our culture and language and religion and whatever like we do normally for in our country. I think it's very good for my son so I just mostly try to do it for my son, too".

This was echoed by other participants too, who emphasized the importance of knowing their culture and ethnic background especially for transmission to the next generation. Thus, Participant Six, a 38 year old women from India with a Bachelor's degree in Commerce, was a manager in a bank and had spent seven and a half years in Canada stated:

> "The only way is if you hadn't had the relationship, we wouldn't know our culture, so for my daughter, it's very important for her to know the culture, to speak the local language and be a part of it, understand the whole cultural aspect".

Workplace negotiations

The process of integration especially in the context of employment is fraught with challenges for immigrants in general and immigrant women as well. For immigrant women, one of the barriers to integration is lack of recognition of credentials as well as language barriers per se or discrimination and unfamiliarity with accents. (Jaya and Porter, 2011; Creese et al 2012). A lack of cultural capital and social capital often becomes a barrier for immigrants (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital can mean institutionalized cultural capital (credentials) and embodied cultural capital (not having the right accents, not having Canadian work experience). "For immigrants, failure to have their educational credentials recognized, alongside the absence of other forms of embodied cultural capital (like the ''right'' accents, work experience and cultural knowledge) are central to deskilling and downward occupational mobility in Canada" (Creese and Wiebe, 2012:60).

A feminist and equity perspective (Tastsoglou & Preston, 2005) takes into account the aspects commonly adopted in discussions of economic integration in conjunction with understanding the processes which may be different for immigrant women. Thus, education, while affecting immigrant women's participation in the

paid labour market, does not always increase participation as might be expected; immigrant women, even after entering the labour force, are more likely to be unemployed than immigrant men Occupational patterns show segmentation in the occupations of Canadian born women and immigrant women (Tastsoglou & Preston, 2005). Barriers to integration (Tastsoglou & Miedema, 2005) include systemic obstacles such as racism, sexism, language, and accent.

Immigrant women often have to overcome various barriers in their integration process in Canada. Some barriers include systemic racism and sexism as well as barriers to employment due to non-recognition of credentials, barriers due to lack of language proficiency, access to health care as well as isolation due to lack of social capital. These barriers have been documented by many scholars (Jaya and Porter, 2011; Neumann, 2011, Topen, 2011, Ku et al 2011). Others have confirmed that having social supports and networks have proved beneficial for immigrant women (Lamba and Krahn 2003), such as taking part in religious events and in activities through a church, which provides a sense of psychological comfort and support (Da, 2008). Salaff and Greve (2004) also discuss the role and importance of social support in their study of Chinese immigrant women.

Despite having high levels of education and excellent credentials, immigrant women face many obstacles and challenges to integration in the labour force and in being employed in jobs commensurate with their qualifications (Tastsoglou & Preston, 2005; Tastsoglou & Miedema, 2005). It appears that factors like systemic racism and sexism as well as accent (Creese and Wiebe, 2012) impede the progress of immigrant women in the economic settlement process. As Creese and Wiebe(2012)state in a gendered labour market employment discrimination against ''African-English''accents, a key form of embodied cultural capital, was experienced more profoundly by women, in turn significantly reducing women's employment prospects".(2012:66). This is echoed by Premji et., al (2014) who state that their study of immigrant women in Toronto "provide rich insights about how racialized immigrant women face triple intersecting layers of barriers and inequalities—based on gender, race and migration/immigration—as they attempt to find a good job, negotiate work-life balance, and take care of their family within the postmigration context in Canada" (2014:135).

Participant Six, the banker, referred to the language issue in terms of how customers would react:

"I think, with regarding to my customers, they've really accepted and acknowledged me as a person, and they were surprised, coming from India… "How come your language is so good?" And they'd be like, "Were you born and raised here," so I was like, "No." "But how come you speak such good English?" So there's a lot of myths amongst people that, "Okay, from Third World countries, oh, they're not educated," because they think the mother tongue is the first language, and then I had to educate a lot of them saying, "No, English is our first language in major schools in India, and then you kind of take your other language." With my colleagues… they've been very co-operative, understanding; and with my bosses, I think I've… knock on wood again, I've had really good bosses who have supported me and encouraged me, yeah".

The respondents also talked about their workplace negotiations and how they responded to difficult situations in the workplace. Participant Three, the aesthetician, explained:

"I just remember one time that I had a client; she was very, very difficult. I don't know if I can say fussy or anything like that, too, but she was very difficult and she even told me that she had a very bad day and she's very grumpy, and I said, "Oh, it's okay, don't worry," but she was very rude, and that day she really made me... I controlled myself too much, and after I went... I just left her in the room and I said, "Oh, I cannot handle her," and I cried. That was the only situation".

Another respondent, Participant One, who worked in a university setting had a particularly harrowing experience which she had earlier also identified as an experience as a racialized immigrant woman. Participant One, a woman from India who had migrated with her family as a child, was 61 years old and had lived in Canada for 50 years. She was an academic, had a Master's degree in and a background in Social Work. expressed her frustration at her workplace:

"Yeah, I mean, probably my last year was the... a reminder of how my life had started as very difficult there, and I thought in my last year they would sort of just leave me be and let me leave gracefully, but they didn't allow me to do that so there was just a... it was like the knives came out in the final year, and it was just a very, very traumatic year when they decided to cancel the courses that I was teaching without having consulted with me even though I had earlier negotiated with the director to teach those courses. And, you know, I had to fight with them every step of the say. I actually got student engaged in that struggle as well".

Multicultural communities and a sense of belonging and contentment

Being part of multicultural communities was cherished by all the participants. Pluralism and contact with other groups (Winter, 2007; Berry, 2013) was something that all participants seemed to enjoy and see as a positive part of their lives in Canada.

The Multiculturalism Policy of Canada as per the Act of 1988 states that the goal of the Act is to further the diversity of Canadian society through multiculturalism This would be done according to the intent of the Act by providing the freedom to all Canadians to preserve their unique heritages as well as giving them the right to participate equally in actively shaping Canadian society. The Act fosters the inclusion of all Canadians regardless of origins in terms of equality before the law but also valuing their diversity; as well as maintains that all the institutional systems will be respectful to Canadians of diverse backgrounds and as well appreciate**s** the diverse cultures in Canada. In addition the Act establishes that languages other than French and English may be enhanced while at the same time also balancing out the commitment to the official languages of Canada. While the spirit and letter of the Act provides a very wide scope of expression to different groups in society, it is also true that the uneasy and tenuous relationship between bilingualism and multiculturalism is not an easy balancing act to realize in terms of the actual lived experience and practice of multiculturalism.

While multiculturalism has been established in terms of the legislation and the development of government mechanisms and strategies to promote and take it further, at the same time it has been a debated and contested aspect of Canadian social reality. Arguments such as the divisive and fragmentary discourse of multiculturalism causing a deepening of the differences (Mirchandani and Tastsoglou, 2000) as well as the creation of ethnic enclaves and silos in society are reminders of the fractious nature of multiculturalism (Bissoondath,1994). Bisoondath (1994) argues that the fostering of multiculturalism has led to an increase in ethnic enclaves and a separation of newer ethnic immigrant groups form the mainstream thus creating a lack of unity. Neil Bissoondath stated that multiculturalism would be ". . .ensuring that ethnic groups will preserve their distinctiveness in a gentle and insidious form of cultural apartheid" and will "...lead an already divided country down the path to further social divisiveness" (1994, 82-83).The fear that Canadians are becoming strangers in their own country(Gwyn,

1995) and the perception that Canadians have no history, culture, and identity (Granatstein, 1998) due to the emphasis on embracing multicultural immigrant groups and their culture have all been voiced as the critiques of the multiculturalism approach in Canadian society and polity.

Participant One, the 61 year old academic, stated:

"Yeah. Our friendships have always been very eclectic, and I think, you know, friendships also... you know, they vary, right, so there's a different group of friends, you know, when we were younger and working in the immigrant service field more. There was a very multicultural community, and that's the one we would engage with more. And then as when we were parents and encouraging activities with our son, then it revolved around other parents, which is a whole other mix, but I've always had students who have been mostly from the racialized immigrant communities or those who..."
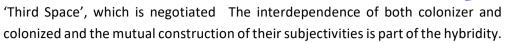
As well Participant Six,the banker, mentioned too:

"I have a mix of everyone. I have a lot of people from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Mexico, Spain, Canadians, too. Like, all my neighbours are Canadian, so, yeah, we have a very good relationship with our neighbours…..Yesterday we were talking about it at work, so at work we have a mix of cultures so we have Muslim people. …. We have very hard core French. We have Spanish. We have this. We have that. So it's funny… we were talking, and they told me, "How come you know about all religions and how come you're so distinct," and a lot of my customers, as well, they used to ask me…"

Despite challenges and difficulties, most participants had come to realize their new space and place in the Canadian context as something they belonged to and accepted. This is consistent with the discussion of hybridity as articulated by Bhabha (1994).

One of the early expressions of the psychology of colonialism was by Ashis Nandy (1980, 1983, 1987). Nandy's exposition emphasizes that domination extends beyond military and economic conquest and in fact involves colonization of the mind and psyche. Homi Bhabha studied the results of neo-colonialism on the individual in the modern and postmodern world. Bhabha (1994) focuses on the effect of the relationship between the colonized and colonizer on the individual psyche.

Hybridity is the creation of new transcultural forms due to the contact with colonization. Bhabha (1994) articulated hybridity through the enunciation of a

'Third Space', which is negotiated   The interdependence of both colonizer and colonized and the mutual construction of their subjectivities is part of the hybridity.

Bhabha (1994) goes beyond the binary oppositions juxtaposing West/non West, center/margin, center/periphery, in that these stark oppositions highlight dual and different sets of identities; he instead restates that as a more nuanced notion of hybridity, which is actually created due to the development of a Third Space, leads to a mixture of identities that is more fluid and complex.

Participant 7, aged 39, who was working as senior software engineer in a firm, and was from Sri Lanka stated this very well:

> "… I really like being Canadian. I'm not saying it's because it's a developed nation or anything. I don't really identify with it as well… but if I go to US, yeah, "I'm Canadian." Like, oh… but the thing is we visited Mexico once, and there were other Canadians. I didn't know they were Canadians. They asked me, "Where are you from?" They were white people. It felt kind of weird for me to say, "I'm Canadian" because, like, I'm brown and I'm saying I'm Canadian. The first thing that came out of my mouth was, "I'm originally from Sri Lanka, but I live in Ottawa, Canada." "Oh, you are from Canada." "Yeah." Later on, I think more… like, I wouldn't hesitate… in Canada, I wouldn't hesitate to say, "I'm Canadian." I have no issues. "I'm Sri Lankan Canadian."   But when you go somewhere else and somebody asks you, kind of weird to say first thing, I'm… I think I would be more comfortable saying, "I'm Sri Lankan Canadian," than saying "I'm Canadian.""
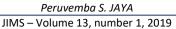
Participant Four, a 42 year old academic hailing from Bangladesh, who had a PhD and had been in Canada for 8 years, articulated:

> "Yeah, certainly, because it's been eight years, and I guess certainly I do feel that I belong here…. I do feel that I belong here. And also through work because much of my research work is also grounded in the Canadian context so I'm actively participating so I do have a sense of belonging in the sense that I have limited understanding, but I will understand more so to me that's also part of having a sense of belonging".

This is echoed by Participant Five, one of the women from Sri, Lanka, who said:

> **"**I'm really happy here. There's no two words.   I wouldn't do anything differently. Maybe just finish my Master's that I started, but I should have… but other than that… maybe that was the only thing I regret".

Discussion

The findings from the study revealed that the women while retaining a sense of nostalgia for their memories of their lives in their home countries nevertheless seemed to have a sense of belonging and settlement in their adopted country, Canada. Their integration journeys were also varied in that they all came from varied occupational and professional backgrounds with credentials in some cases that helped them and in others created barriers to the integration process. This is consistent with the literature on immigrant women's integration processes. They all found their own ways and carved their unique paths in dealing with negotiations in the workplace and moving forward in the integration journey.

In addition, most participants seemed to have found a lot of strength in the multicultural friendships and communities that they built around them in Canada, while at the same time retaining their sense of community with regards to their ethnic roots and groups.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study is based on seven interviews and is meant as a starting point for reflection into looking at South Asian immigrant women's experiences in Ottawa in different contexts. Given the diversity within the South Asian diaspora both in terms of country of origin (as there are eight countries within South Asia based on the SAARC definition outlined earlier) and the different socio economic occupational and immigration journeys of the women, clearly more research is needed in this area. Future research with in depth analyses based on data form particular countries and focused on particular countries within the South Asian diaspora would help shed light on the nuances in the lived realities of people from different country contexts.

Conclusion

This study while providing some insights into the experiences of South Asian women in the Ottawa region was limited in that it represented few voices. Future research on women from individual countries within the South Asian diaspora and also perhaps looking at women form different and varied occupational backgrounds would provide more specific and unique insights into the differences between different women's paths. Future research could reveal the challenges faced by

women who are not as skilled and have to encounter obstacles due to various systemic barriers and roadblocks. This research builds on existing work on South Asian immigrant women and provides insights specifically about the Ottawa community. The data rooted in the theoretical framework helps to situate the experiences of the women and to highlight the gendered nature of the identity construction and formation processes. Findings revealed differences in the paths to integration and an inclination and desire to integrate into the fabric of Canadian multicultural society while maintaining and celebrating their ethnic identities and diversity. Given the varied countries of origin of the diverse group of respondents, more in-depth research could shed light on experiences ranging from refugee or forced migration situations to immigrants who came by choice.

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