IMMIGRATION AS A DYNAMIC EXPERIENCE: PERSONAL NARRATIVES AND CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY THERAPISTS

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ABSTRACT: This is a reflective account of the experiences of the authors who immigrated to the United States from India at different developmental, historical, political, and social stages. Although their culture-of-origin was the same, the meaning and experience of immigration was different for each author. The narratives show a natural continuum of experiences based on their developmental stage during immigration, reasons for immigration, and the historical context of both India and the US at the time of immigration. A common theme is the ambivalence experienced by them in their process of creating a physical and psychological home in a different culture.

KEY WORDS: immigration; personal narratives; Asian Indian; women.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a reflective account on the meaning of immigration and the dynamic nature of immigration as experienced by three Indian women. Each of the authors emigrated from India to the United States of America at different developmental stages in their lives, and during different historical, political, social, and economic periods of time in both India and the USA. The authors’
narratives are the stories of only three women but reflect the overall, dynamic nature of the immigration process as viewed within the frameworks of politics, history, gender, individual and family development, and social context.

According to Juthani (1992), Indians began immigrating to the USA in increasing numbers beginning in the mid-1960s mainly due to the new immigration policy of 1965 (Sandhu, 1997). The rate of immigration has steadily increased over the years leading to Indians being the fourth largest Asian immigrant population in the United States (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1991). Immigration is conceptualized as a stressful process and several authors have outlined various stages of adjustment patterns of immigrants as they cope with cultural changes (Akthar, 1999; Ibrahim, Ohnishi, & Sandhu, 1997; Sue & Sue, 1987; Sue, Mak, & Sue, 1998). These stages concentrated on the adaptation process that occurs within an individual. The cultural transformation that occurs in immigrants is heavily influenced by contextual factors (Juthani, 1992; Sandhu, 1997). Because these contextual factors are frequently unique to individuals and their families at the time of immigration, it is important that the experience and impact of immigration not be generalized across all immigrants even when they claim the same country-of-origin. An “ecocultural” approach needs to be used to study the phenomenon of immigration that focuses on the cultural and ecological conditions of both the country-of-origin and country-of-immigration (Sandhu, 1997).

The following narratives are written in a chronological order starting with the author who was the first to immigrate to the USA. All three authors have commented on the historical, political, social, and cultural milieu in the USA and in India during the time of their immigration. They have also commented about their own personal process involved in leaving their countries-of-origin and adapting to the USA. The authors have narrated their immigration stories in first person and will be identified by their first names. No one story provides the complete picture; but taken as a continuum of experiences through these three narratives, immigration in all its complexity and dynamic nature can be better understood and appreciated.

PERSONAL NARRATIVES

Narrator 1—Poul森

My process of immigration began at a very young age in the early 1960s when my father went to England to pursue his doctoral studies.
Both my mother and father left for England when I was 3 years-old. My sisters and I were left in the care of our paternal grandparents and extended family until my parents were ready for us to join them in England. My sisters and I joined our parents in England when I was 5 years-old. At the time when my father immigrated, India was a very new, post-colonial democracy that still maintained strong ties to England. It was not unusual for families to send their adult children to England for studies and for professional development. In fact, England was the preferred destination for many middle- and upper-class Indians to pursue educational and professional advancements. My father left India at a time when he felt stymied by the bureaucracies and the barriers that kept him from attaining his goals for himself and his family. At this time in history, India’s relationship with the USA was not significant and Indians were only beginning to consider the US as an option for immigration.

Our immigration to England proceeded relatively smoothly. Though not welcomed with open arms, India and Indians were familiar to the British because of their long colonial-era ties to the subcontinent. After my father completed his PhD, he found that he was unable to obtain an academic position in Britain. Therefore, we proceeded to move to Singapore where my father taught at the university level for 3 years. Again, our immigration to this country presented few problems—I was still quite young and Singapore and its people were no strangers to Indians or to British colonial rule. After our years in Singapore and a brief stint in India in my pre-adolescent years, we moved on to Zambia in Central Africa. By that time, most of my father’s younger siblings had immigrated to the USA and were putting pressure on him to consider moving there also. The political and social climate at this time in Zambia was quite difficult and my sisters and I had reached an age where my parents had to consider our future college education and opportunities. Although my father and mother were not as keen on immigrating to the US, they felt that for our future they needed to consider this option.

My family and I finally migrated to the US in 1979; we arrived at the height of the Iranian hostage crisis. My family is from the Sikh religious background and my father, paternal grandfather, and uncles were frequently the subject of hostile reactions because of their turbans and beards. I felt I had arrived in a hostile and unfamiliar environment: White Americans did not seem able to distinguish between Iranians, Indians, Mexicans, or anyone with brown skin and dark hair. One of my earliest memories in the United States is of driving along the highways with my father and being given “the
finger” or being “mooned” as other drivers went by. It was an uneasy and uncomfortable time for us all. At this time in history, Americans seemed very unfamiliar with other cultures and people from other countries, and especially with Indians. Concepts such as “globalization” and “outsourcing” were still decades away. Politically, the US seemed to be wary of Indians because India had remained relatively “non-aligned” between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the United States. The Cold War tensions were at their highest at that time.

In addition to the seemingly hostile environment that I encountered in the USA after our immigration, I also struggled with the different cultural and social values in this country. Having been educated up to this point in schools that tended to follow the British system of education—all-girls schools, wearing uniforms, very formal and structured education—the American system seemed like total anarchy! I was a teenager in an unfamiliar and very different environment than what I had been used to and struggling to deal with the general developmental challenges of adolescence while at the same time coping with the unsettling feeling of being a “stranger in a strange land.”

After our immigration to the USA much of our social support was limited to other Indian families in the community. The thought of having an American friend in high school was completely out of the realm of my experience and dating was out of the question. Coming from a culture that still believed in and practiced arranged marriage, there was no room for negotiation on this issue. Ultimately, I struggled in an environment where I felt out of place and I struggled against my parents and what they represented in terms of cultural values and traditions. During a troubled and difficult adolescence and early adulthood in my new “country-of-immigration,” I rebelled and dropped out of college and moved out of my parents’ home at age 18. Much to my parents’ initial disapproval and disappointment, I eventually married a Caucasian American and had children at a young age.

When I reflect on my experience of immigration, I see it as very much a process, one that is dynamic and has continued throughout my lifetime. It is a process that continues even now. After more than 20 years in the US and in an interracial marriage, my sense of “immigrating” continues. Adjusting to the complexities of life here post-September 11, 2001 and the aftermath of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars continues to pose challenges, as does the realization that these events have triggered the same fear and uncertainty that I experienced when I first moved to the US during the Iranian hostage
crisis. The flip side of my negative experiences due to political world events and their impact on life in the US is that my experience of immigration has opened up a world of learning and development that I would not have had the privilege of experiencing if my parents had chosen to remain in India. I benefit from being in an interracial relationship with all its challenges and joys while raising biracial children with a sense of culture, history, and identity. Yet I continue to struggle to come to terms with being essentially an "involuntary" immigrant and with my fluctuating sense of "outsider" and "insider" in this country. These will continue to be my challenges as I continue my dynamic process of immigration.

Narrator 2—Karuppaswamy

I was 34 years-old when I came to the USA. I am the oldest daughter in a family of five. We lived in Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu, in South India. Like many families who lived in this metropolitan city, my parents had originally come from more rural backgrounds, characterized by traditional value systems and stereotypical gender roles. In their families of origin, the extended family was intricately intertwined with the nuclear families. However, the city life had already loosened the extended family ties, which challenged the traditional gender roles in my family. Unlike most of my cousins, both males and females in my immediate family were equally well educated. Nobody questioned that we had to go to college. It was simply assumed that we would. I had received my post-master’s degree in psychology and worked as an addiction counselor for about 10 years. I had been running my own private practice as a counseling psychologist and working in a women’s university as a lecturer (similar to the assistant professor’s position in the USA). After coming out of a brief marriage at the age of 25, I was desultorily trying to complete my doctoral degree. Life seemed set on its course.

A childhood attack of infantile polio had left my lower limbs paralyzed and I moved around using caliper shoes, crutch, or a wheelchair. Considering this challenge, my educational and career achievements seemed noteworthy for some people. In my eyes however, life seemed to have come to an impasse, safely nested within the folds of my family-of-origin. I depended heavily on family, friends, and hired help for day-to-day chores as cooking, cleaning, shopping, going to the bank, and being chauffeured around. It was a privileged life in a way, always loved and supported. Nevertheless, it was a fish bowl
existence seeing life through the passing windows of a speeding automobile.

It was then that my siblings asked me to try to apply for my PhD in the USA. Since 1992 my two sisters and brother had moved to this country to pursue higher education. Their main reason for encouraging me to come here was the availability of facilities for people with disabilities here. I was terrified yet excited. To leave everything I know behind, and start in an alien land on my own? Could I survive this radical change in my life? I was no young girl on the threshold of her life, filled with dewy-eyed dreams about the future, with a personal sense of idealism and invulnerability that characterize the young. I already had a life in India, and a career I loved, and lived with family and friends who would always be there for me. Yet...I wanted something more...something different from life. So I left home on August 15, 1996, the day that India had gained her independence from the British Raj in 1947.

By the 1970s the movement of Indians going to England had waned and more people were going to the United States for higher education and careers. These immigrants were often highly qualified professionals in the fields of medicine, engineering, and computers. When we consider the gender of these immigrants, most of them were men who came alone or with their families. Mature women for the most part would come as dependent wives or mothers. But things were changing in India also in terms of women’s education and career aspirations. More and more young women were traveling to the United States along with their male cohorts to pursue higher education. However, while it is a more common practice in the United States for adults to return to school to further their qualification or make a career change, it is a very rare thing for Indians to do. So this was a new step for me to take. I had no role models to follow or cohorts for company. However, one of my sisters lived on the same campus and was in the last semester of completing her degree. Honestly, neither my family nor I would have considered me coming to the United States if it were not for the fact that I had family close by to buffer the initial transitional stresses.

I landed in Chicago and was driven to the small university campus in the middle of a cornfield! Initially I was stumped. Where were the neon lights, the towering skyscrapers, and the hustle and bustle of cities like New York that I had seen in television shows and Hollywood movies? I had enrolled for a masters program in this Mid-western commuter university. There were only 18 to 20 Indians who attended this small school of about 6,000 students. For the most part the
students were older women already employed, returning to school, juggling family, work, and school. Most of my classmates and professors were white. I felt rather alone in a strange land. Even other international students seem alien to me. Initially the lack of an Indian community on campus posed a challenge for me. Later this became a blessing in disguise. The fact that my school was small, with small class sizes, and rather “laid back” in its pace of classes gave me an opportunity to interact closely with my peers and professors.

The 3 years I spent in this university were a turning point in my life. I learned to live on my own, to cook and clean. I commuted all over the campus with a motorized scooter, thus becoming more mobile, gaining a tremendous sense of physical freedom for the first time in my life. I learned how to negotiate the harsh winter storms of the Midwest while figuring out the intricacies of how a computer worked. I discovered that within my rather private introverted person was a more social autonomous self who did not hesitate to talk to strangers and discover a kindred spirit there. I learned that I could create a “family” even with people whose language, culture, and life style were totally foreign to mine. I learned to look back on my own culture, my religion, myself, and my family, gaining fresh perspective on all of them. I began to appreciate the ancient wisdom and rich cultural heritage that my country had bestowed on me. I learned to talk confidently about my spiritual beliefs while respectfully challenging some Christian fundamentalists’ attempt to “save” my soul. At the same time I began to question certain traditions and social constraints that people, particularly women, in India faced. Unbeknown to myself I was becoming an articulate spokesperson for my country in our small campus. So for the most part I felt at home in this country becoming part of its diverse tapestry. Then Sept 11, 2001 happened.

America became deeply traumatized and less sure of its invincibility and image in the world arena. Americans became suspicious of internationals, seeing insurgents in anyone who looked different. In a moment, my complacency of having a sense of belonging, safety, and community were obliterated. I was deeply aware that this was not my country and that I was a sojourner here who could be scrutinized. I was deeply aware that the sociopolitical changes in this country personally affected me. When the Iraq war began and India along with many other countries disagreed with the USA’s decision I was proud. In a time when even Americans who criticized the war were seen as unpatriotic, I felt I had no voice to express my feelings. Now I evaluate afresh my comfort level in living in this country permanently. Does this mean that I am ready to go back to India? I sense my dilemma
then. Slowly I realize that both India and the USA have become integral part of who I am. There is a part of me that deeply loves my India and is proud to be her daughter. I feel a sense of wholeness when I touch my homeland. But when I am in India there is a part of me that longs to be here in the USA. I yearn for the personal sense of freedom, confidence, and opportunity that the USA has given me. Together, both countries have nurtured me to become someone more than who I was before I left India. So what is home for me? Am I an immigrant? No. I still see myself as an “international” and I am not yet ready say anything more right now.

**Narrator 3—Natrajan**

I came to the United States in 1998, when I was 23 years-old. I had completed my masters in social work in India and had chosen to come to the United States to pursue my higher education in family studies. During this period, coming to the United States for higher education was a relatively common practice. My two older brothers had both been to the United States for higher education and had stayed in the country for 9 years each before coming back to India. So, if I desired to pursue higher education, the United States was the preferred destination and I was almost expected to come here.

I grew up in the Southern part of India and my family belongs to the very privileged Brahmin caste. I also come from a well-to-do family where education is a high priority for both men and women. Although at that time, my family was concerned about my marriage, it was not unusual for families to find a suitable Indian groom for their daughters in the United States. The US by then had a huge Indian immigrant population and there was a sizable population of men from my community pursuing higher education or working in the United States. I also had several extended family members settled in the United States. These served as reassurances for my family that I would be all right in this country.

The process of my moving to the United States was quite streamlined. By that time, there was almost a “cookbook” recipe available about how to apply to universities, how to network and communicate with American professors, and how to successfully obtain a student visa to gain entry into the USA. I was also not alone during this process of moving to the United States. I had a group of women friends who were also applying to various universities in the United States for higher education and some of whom immigrated with me, although to other universities.
India during this period was going through the process of “globalization” and renewed “westernization.” The Indian society was introduced to American food through McDonalds and Pizza Hut. Western clothes were very common and with the advent of cable television, we were able to watch American “soap operas” on a regular basis. So, the American accents and American slang were becoming familiar. Internet cafes were being opened at every street corner and access to global communication and information was becoming affordable to many middle-class families. The Silicon Valley at this time was doing extremely well and the United States was welcoming professional immigrants from India with open arms.

Once I was accepted into the university, I got in touch with the already existing Indian Students Association. In a couple of weeks, I had an apartment leased and even had roommates while I was still in India! As one of my roommates was from the same city as I was, I even had the opportunity to talk to her and discuss the kind of household things that we needed to take to the United States. Thus I came to the USA having a pre-existing Indian community. My university boasted one of the largest populations of Indian students in the country. There were several Indian grocery stores and restaurants within our small university town. My primary mode of communication with my family was through e-mail. This ensured faster and cheaper communication than writing letters or calling long-distance. The Internet also helped me to be in touch with changes and developments happening back home in India.

However, the department that I entered hardly had any Indian students or faculty. My colleague, Shruti was the only one who had Indian origins but in my eyes even she was “different” as she had been in the United States for most of her life. This was different from the experiences of my other Indian friends who were in fields such as engineering or science. Some of their classes consisted of only Indians or Asians. As a result, most of my Indian friends socialized only within the Indian community in the university. However, in my situation I was forced to socialize with Americans and also with people from other nationalities. This gave me an opportunity to make friends with “others,” but my meaningful friendships were saved up for fellow Indians.

At this time, I still considered myself a temporary immigrant. I was on the “F1” student visa and my privileges in the United States were also limited. In fact, I did not like the term “immigrant” and I would prefer to address myself as an “international student.” Both my brothers had returned back to India after their higher education and I
was planning on doing the same. Both my master’s level and doctoral level projects were based in India. I networked in India as a professional, and built contacts that would advance my career there. My relationship with the United States was contractual. I believed that we had a give and take relationship: The USA was sharing with me its existing technology and “know how” in return for my labor in advancing their technology and “know how.” It was a fair deal. I still considered my home to be India. The events of September 11, 2001 only strengthened this feeling.

However in the recent past things have become more unclear about what is meant by “home” for me. My prospective partner, also an Indian, came to the United States as a working professional, unlike me who came here as a student. While I still struggle with my immigration identity in this country, he is more willing to call himself an immigrant. Furthermore, as an adult I have built very strong friendships and mentoring relationships in the United States. I find myself more willing to be identified as a “potential immigrant” and consider the possibility of a more long-term stay in the United States. I am willing to consider the possibility of living in the United States but having projects ongoing in India as a trainer. I have been establishing relationships with fellow Indians in my field who are attempting to do the same. My visa status is still that of a “non-resident alien” and I might soon progress to becoming a “resident alien.” Right now in my process of immigration, I am willing to change the status of my residency. However, I definitely want to be identified as someone from outside this country with very strong roots in India.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The immigration processes narrated here show the impact of the “ecocultural” milieu of India and United States that existed during the time of the authors’ immigration and the influence of the stages of their individual development. In comparing the narratives, a continuum in the authors immigration experiences can be seen in the following themes: (1) The voluntary nature and the level of control that each author had over her decision to immigrate to the United States, (2) the composition of her primary social network in the USA during the initial stages of her immigration, (3) the depth of emotional investment to her country-of-immigration, and (4) the extent of her continued day-to-day relationship with her country-of-origin.
Even though the narrators differed along a continuum on the above themes, a common thread among them was the ambivalence they experienced in their process of creating a physical and psychological home in a different culture. It seemed like they all questioned the meaning that they ascribed to the concept of “home.” They also questioned their sense of belonging in their country-of-origin and whether they would fit in with the culture that they have left behind. At the same time they questioned their sense of belonging and safety in their country-of-immigration and seemed to realize how historical world events can change these feelings in an instant. They also seemed to realize that their process of immigration was life long and there were no absolute answers to any of their questions.

Such a continuum experienced by immigrants has a lot of implications for mental health professionals. It is not only important to focus on the stages of the immigrant’s acculturation and assimilation but to also gather information about where on the continuum they fall in their immigration experience. From each authors’ experience, the opportunity to tell their immigration stories and to make connections between their experience and the historical, political, cultural and social milieu of their country-of-origin and country-of-immigration was a very healing journey. Therapists need to create an environment where clients can have the opportunity to narrate their stories and make these connections. Genograms, especially cultural genograms (Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995) could be an effective way of providing a space for the clients to discuss these issues. The following questions could be used along with the cultural genogram: (1) Do you consider yourself as an immigrant? (2) Who decided that you will come to this country? (3) Did you have any choice in the matter? (4) How old were you when you immigrated? (5) What was going on in your family when you immigrated? (6) How did your immediate family and extended family react to your immigration? (7) Were there other people of your age/gender/status who were immigrating at the same time? (8) What was going on in your country when you decided to immigrate (political & social)? (9) What was going on in your country-of-immigration when you decided to immigrate (political & social)? (10) What was the relationship between the two countries during that time? (11) Did you feel welcome in your country-of-immigration? (12) How did these factors affect your immigration experience? (13) What metaphor will you use to describe your immigration experience? (14) Who formed your main support system when you first immigrated? (15) Is there someone who has had similar experiences as you? (16) How is your experience different from others? (17) Who in your support systems
understands your experiences best? (18) How would you define your relationship with your country-of-immigration? What metaphor would you use to define it? (19) How would you define your relationship with your country-of-origin? What metaphor would you use to define it? (20) What country do you consider to be your “home”?

These questions may shed light on the etiology of the clients’ presenting problems. They may help clients make connections between their immigration experiences with their developmental stage during the time of immigration and the effects of the social, political and cultural context of their country-of-origin and country-of-immigration. Finally, this could greatly inform our clients’ healing process.

REFERENCES


