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Reconciling Two Cultures: The Experience of Immigrants and First Generation Americans from Non-Western Countries

Katerina G. Kruzykowski

America is a country founded by immigrants, those hoping to live a better life in a new land. Individuals living in the United States today represent every country around the world, from hundreds of different cultural backgrounds. Culture has an overwhelming impact on the daily lives of all Americans. Culture determines what birth name you receive, how your family interacts, which food is edible, what you are taught to believe in, how you are taught to dress, and the life opportunities that lay ahead. It is irrefutable that gender roles and traditions are defined by cultural norms. Culture is the foundation for expectations and values an individual holds dear. For immigrants and first generation Americans alike, when their cultural foundation is no longer present, expectations and values can change or be eliminated entirely.

The focus of my study is the experiences of immigrants and first generation Americans to see how they reconcile and make sense of a life lived in two spheres. It is, therefore, important to study a variety of cultural groups in order to have a broad spectrum of experience to draw upon. American culture places high demands on new immigrants to alter their traditional norms. Even first generation Americans, sons and daughters of immigrants, are born into a society unlike the one their parents grew up in. The dominant society does not necessarily agree with the traditional norms of their homeland, although in some cases norms do overlap. An individual's previous classification of reality no longer applies, and their worldview suddenly shifts.

For an individual in their twenties, it is a time of transition between childhood and adulthood; a time that yields cultural and parental expectations. Traditions and gender roles are key factors in telling an individual what they "should" or "should not" do. Having a sample group made up of my peers allowed insight into how this transition occurs while being caught in the midst of two cultures. Immigrants and first generation Americans are a unique group to study for this very reason. Having parents who did not grow up in American society, their situation is transitional on two fronts. They are making the adjustment into a new society, while also adjusting to a new value system.

Assimilation into a culture different from your own can be a difficult process. How and why people choose to come to America, what contact they maintain with their cultural ties, and what norms and traditions they uphold mold these individuals into a unique genre. One group can choose to resist the dominant culture, while another is seen as "Westernizing" if they deviate from cultural norms. Still yet others are caught in the middle, interchanging traditional norms with those in mainstream American society.

From the perspective of newcomers I addressed the validity of the melting pot theory. Has everyone really melted? I also explored how these individuals define American genders as well as their feelings towards American culture. Many interviewees expressed issues of isolation and discrimination. By analyzing the specific life experiences of the ten subjects in my sample, I will discuss how these subjects shed light on the monumental change of moving to a new country.

Literature Review

The phenomenon of immigrant assimilation permeates every aspect of that individual's daily life, and innumerable research has been done on this topic. Research has also been carried out on gender roles expectations and how they vary according to specific cultures. Every publication highlighted, addresses a different aspect of these two subjects. Each one is related to an element of my own research topic; the reconciliation of two cultures among immigrants and first generation Americans.

In "Becoming Canadian: Understanding How Hong Kong Immigrants Change Their Consumption," authors Wei-Na Lee and David Tse (1994) explored the relationship between immigrant assimilation and expenditure patterns. They surveyed both recent and long time Hong Kong immigrant families as well as Anglo-Canadians, and Hong Kong citizens for comparison groups. The purpose of the study was to see how consumption patterns changed over time for this particular ethnic group (71). Fundamental to the study were questions regarding an individual's assimilation, which the author claimed had a direct link to their material intake.

For Lee and Tse (1994) patterns of consumption paralleled whether or not the families were accepting of their new society. People are motivated to become accepted in society, and this has a direct link with how they participate in consumer culture. As Lee and Tse (1994) pointed out, "This motivation is especially strong for those who regard the new country as their permanent home. In addition, the individual's home country may not offer comparable opportunities or the attractive lifestyle of the new

country" (76). Interestingly, long-term immigrants were buying at a rate higher than the Anglo-Canadians themselves. As time progressed there was a rise in the new immigrants' consumption patterns as well (88).

It is true that some objects available for purchase in Canada were relative to the country itself, and would not have been a part of the Hong Kong market. For instance, Hong Kong differs from Canada in numerous ways; population, climate and personal space to just scratch the surface. Therefore, keeping a nice yard, owning a house or a private car was not applicable in a big city like Hong Kong, but in Canada, these are more common (88).

In their study, Lee and Tse (1994) also recognized the impact Hong Kong immigrants had on Canadian culture. Canadian markets began airing Chinese television stations, publishing Chinese magazines and newspapers, and opening Chinese supermarkets (77). Since the dominant culture accommodated the immigrants, in turn, the immigrants were more accepting of the dominant culture. This reciprocal relationship is important for immigrants to feel more at home and accepted into their new culture.

In "Adolescents and Their Parents: A Review of Intergenerational Family Relations for Immigrant and Non-Immigrant Families," Kyunghwa Kwak (2003) acknowledged the importance of studying immigrant adolescents and their parental expectations. She interviewed Asian immigrant and American born families in the United States to discover which group experienced more parent-child difficulties.

According to Kwak (2003), immigrant children and their parents tend to have greater discontent. She explains, "when a family immigrates to a new country for the purpose of long-term settlement, its members live in two cultures: their ethnic-heritage culture prior to migration, and the new culture of the society in which they currently reside" (117). It is difficult for immigrant adolescents to define themselves as an individual in a new society, while confronted with many different cultural norms. Immigrant parents also have a difficult time coaching their children through adolescence, since they are growing up in an unfamiliar culture.

The assimilation process into a new society depends on individual circumstances. Kwak (2003) continues, "After migration, the degree to which family members carry on cultural continuity in the new society can vary substantially" (119). Why people immigrate, how they are welcomed into a new community and how similar the two cultures are all equate to reasons why assimilation is different for everyone.

Kwak (2003) also acknowledges that while adolescents do grow up in a new culture, the rate of assimilation for them is much easier and faster than that of their parents. This difference in assimilation time also leads to disagreements over cultural norms, not forgetting the length of time the family spent in their country of origin (124).

Steven Cohen (1977) explores the melting pot theory specific to immigrant assimilation in the article "Socioeconomic Determinants of Intra-ethnic Marriage and Friendship." Specifically he focused on whether immigrants partake in friendships or closer, personal relationships with people from different ethnic or religious backgrounds. Cohen (1977) looked at two data sets to compile his findings: a survey from the National Opinion Research Center in 1965 to represent a national sample and a survey by the Bureau of Applied Social Research in 1972 to represent New York City neighborhoods (1001). Brilliantly, Cohen (1977) compared an inner city with the largest number of immigrants worldwide with national data. By comparing these two sets of data he ensured his findings would be valid and representative, just exploring one would have certainly skewed his findings.

Cohen (1977) concluded that the extent to which the ethnic or religious groups assimilated into American culture largely determined whether dating or friendships would occur with outsiders (1007). Ultimately, Cohen (1977) determined that by having friendships or close, personal relations with outsiders, it proves loose ties with an ethnic community and a confusion of cultural identity (1000). He did note a difference in that friendship required less of a commitment than marriage but that both proved a melting pot theory (1007).

Cohen (1977) correctly presumed that a melting pot was occurring in American society and that interethnic relations were a telling indicator that this was occurring. Immigrants were agreeing to accept outsiders into their lives as friends and partners, despite ethnic or religious differences. That blurred the lines between cultural groups, and Cohen (1977) determined therefore, that America was indeed a melting pot.

Each section of literature outlined above has given me useful information to adapt towards my own study. Kwak (2003) also touched on how young adulthood is a pivotal point for an individual where they cement their own person values. She also highlighted that "western individualistic countries" (116) have radically different value systems compared to more collective

societies. My sample consists of ten non-Western immigrants and first generation Americans, because I too agree that there is great disparity when the two cultures are compared. Additionally, Kwak (2003) pointed out that "with a close kinship network, an extended ethnic community in the larger society and a social support system" (120) the assimilation process goes smoother. In adopting questions for the in-depth interviews, I knew ethnic communities would be a good topic to touch on, since they provide a backbone of support for newcomers.

I adopted many of my interview questions from Lee and Tse (1994). They helped me realize a key difference in immigrant experiences-whether a family was forced to migrate as refugees or if they chose to migrate out of their own free will (71). This distinction made me realize that this is a vital question to ask.

There were three more questions in particular that Lee and Tse (1994) asked in their study that I adopted for my interviews; If the immigrants celebrate traditional holidays, spoke English in the home or if they planned on teaching their children traditional values (88). All of these questions of assimilation have a connection to how adaptable an individual will be towards a new culture's value system.

Cohen's (1977) study on the melting pot theory evolved into a focal point of my own study. Americans have thrown around this idea of a melting pot for decades; why not ask the newcomers themselves about it? I felt that presenting immigrants and first generation Americans with this question would give candid insight into whether these individuals feel they have melted or not.

Methodology

My research was carried out through in-depth interviewing of immigrants and first generation Americans from non-Western countries. The sample was limited to ten of my peers, five males and five females. The age range was limited to individuals in their twenties, since a larger age range would yield higher differences in experiences. Six of the interviewees were immigrants and four were first generation Americans, but I do not think this discrepancy negatively affected my results.

I felt it important to concentrate on non-Western countries because these individuals would have the most interesting experiences reconciling their culture with an American culture. I wanted each person to represent a different ethnic background to get a variety of different perspectives. My study represented individuals from The Dominican Republic, Mexico, Columbia, Ecuador, China, Poland, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Cambodia. This diversity proved to be a strong point of the study, as it allowed me a plethora of viewpoints to consider.

Fieldwork can capture and make sense of a large amount of information, thereby providing a bigger picture with deeper explanations. My original research proposal focused on gender role issues within the newcomer community. However, after the interview process I realized that gender roles were only a portion of the study, not the sole concentration. There were four key elements that immersed in my study: gender roles and cultural expectations, migration and assimilation, attitudes towards Americans and the west, and discrimination and the melting pot theory. The stories these individuals told revealed insight into the unique transition young adults face in becoming who they are as an American.

I used a tape recorder to record all ten of the in-depth interviews. Three interviews took place over the telephone due to time constraints, but the remaining seven were in-person. Analysis of the findings is of qualitative and inductive nature, allowing insight into the dilemmas faced by these individuals who seem to be torn between two cultures.

Due to time constraints and other practical considerations, this study uses a non-random sample. However, I honestly found it beneficial to interview people I befriended before the interview process. This in turn, focused my study to people living within New York and Connecticut. Since many of the interviewees knew me, they were exceedingly open and explanatory regarding more private matters. I might not have received such candid responses from a group of strangers. They were able to relate to me on a personal level and not just see me as a student collecting data. For me, this made the interview process care free and enjoyable, like I was simply carrying out a conversation with a friend. Since the sample group is relatively small, limited by age and consists of ten ethnic groups, it will not be representative of any one of their ethnic group as a whole, nor will it represent all immigrants or first generation American populations.

The following is a scale by which you can identify the ten interviewees:

Interviewee A	Female immigrant from Poland
Interviewee B	Female immigrant from Pakistan
Interviewee C	Female immigrant from Bangladesh
Interviewee D	Female immigrant from Ecuador
Interviewee E	First generation American female with parents from Mexico
Interviewee F	First generation American male with parents from Columbia
Interviewee G	First generation American male with parents from The Dominican Republic
Interviewee H	First generation American male with parents from Cambodia
Interviewee I	Male immigrant from India
Interviewee J	Male immigrant from China

I purposefully created my interview questions with three sections in mind. The beginning of the interview, specifically the first three questions, address the individual's assimilation process; the background information as to when, why and how they came to America. It also explores the connections the individual still maintains with their roots and assimilation pressures they may feel.

The second section, questions four, five and six, dealt with gender roles and cultural expectations. This was originally the main focus of my research study, but after conducting the interviews and compiling the data, it only proved to be one component of my findings. Many themes arose during the interview process and I felt equally important to integrate them into my study as well.

The final two questions were straightforward but very telling. By asking what traditions and value systems they would pass on to their children, I felt that would be very insightful as to what the individual values most. The question, do you believe America is a melting pot, took on an area of focus altogether. The answers were much more complicated than yes and no, and this question turned out to be one of my four concentrations. I ended by asking the demographics of the interviewee (sex, age, occupation, level of education achieved and place of residence) since I did not want the technicalities to hinder a one-sentence response from the onset of the interview.

In order to maneuver the ten interviews into a reasonable amount of data, that required me to analyze them many times over. I could have easily published a book with the influx of information I was given, so condensing it down was not an easy task. I was finally able to categorize the mass of information under four headings, although there is a considerable amount of overlap between them.

Findings

The four prominent themes of the study were gender roles and cultural expectations, migration and assimilation, attitudes towards Americans and the west, and the melting pot theory. All of which turned out to be issues the interviewees were grappling with while trying to reconcile two cultures; their own traditional culture with American ideology. The following discusses each in detail under their respective headings.

Gender Roles and Cultural Expectations

Originally the concentration of my study was to explore how gender role expectations shifted along with the move to America. Some respondents expressed that their traditional gender roles were clashing with American gender roles, while others felt the very opposite. Interviewee I expressed that he likes to “mix and match” the two, while also commenting that his traditions were “very clashy” with American gender roles. I received similar responses from three other respondents, two more from Asian backgrounds. Three males attested that gender roles are universal and that they experienced no such clash. Interviewee G stated, “I don’t really think that gender roles stray from country to country. The standards are the same, men bring home the bread and the women bake it.” Interviewee F agreed, “I feel in every culture a man is the one that takes care of the house, pays the bills. I see that in every culture. I really don’t see a difference between cultures. The man always supports.” However, Interviewee B seemed to predict this would happen, “Most modern, regular, average Americans don’t think that there are gender roles. I can cook so can the guy, I can work so can the guy, yes you can but what are you better at? Isn’t that what capitalism is about, trading what you are good at?” She cleverly uses capitalism to show that our intentions for equality are unfounded. It is important to note that a majority of immigrants felt a clash of cultural gender roles while a majority of first generation Americans could not make a distinction.

Each interviewee identified gender specified roles that their cultures prescribed. In terms of Mexican gender roles, men were termed “macho” and women’s roles were “ultra feminine and submissive” i.e., “taking care of her husband and raising the children and taking care of the house.” Interviewee C felt that Bangladeshi women were supposed to “take care of everything in the household first and then take care of herself.” There was a pretty large consensus that the “woman controls the house—that is her territory” and that the “mother is the manager of the house.” Clearly defined spheres immersed as women were found in the private sector most often.

However, gender roles are not so rigid in all households. Interviewee D who resides with her boyfriend stated, “We share everything, but he doesn’t do the laundry. He is a good cook, he taught me how to cook dishes. When my father was over, we call it *machona* when a person doesn’t know how to cook, and my father told me you’re not *machona* anymore—it means like being a man.” The very fact that her father would make such a comment shows that men do not, or should not have knowledge of cooking. The interviewee took it in stride and giggled as she relayed the story, but I found it very telling that the joke had such gendered undertones.

Four interviewees, three of which were females, felt no direct gender role pressures. But the remaining two females expressed pressures towards marriage, considering both were facing arranged marriages. Cultural expectations are high for girls to marry at a young age in some societies. Males’ expressed gendered pressures as well; to make money, have a career and take care of their elderly parents (the latter specified by three Asian males). Interestingly, male expectations seemed to be for future life events while those females who expressed concerns were having an immediate effect. Interviewee J noted that gender role expectations were a thing of the past, “Only my grandma’s generation applies for those ideal roles really. Hong Kong is kind of Westernized because of the British, so they don’t care about you as an ideal male, or not that much.” It is interesting to note that this perspective hits on the issue of both globalization and imperialism. The western, imperialist power seemed to bring an end to traditional roles in society. This consequence is one to keep in mind for the future.

All of the respondents felt gender or age specific expectations from their parents compared to their siblings. Interviewee B happily proclaimed, “I do clean in the house but the outside chores are for my brothers, thank God! I’m very feminine; I don’t want to be a sloppy guy.” Satisfaction as well as relief is felt by this female, who is clearly content with the division of labor.

Responsibilities as the oldest sibling seemed to transcend cultural barriers. Interviewee A, a female, admitted, “As the oldest, I think I almost took on more of a male role. I consider myself pretty strong physically, like able to carry things and push things or catch spiders, that kind of stuff.” It is humorous that the three examples she listed are considered strictly male roles. Being an exemplary role model to younger brothers and sisters was also voiced by two male respondents. Especially since their parents are living in an unfamiliar culture, the oldest child would be the first consulted about American issues or the one chosen to help translate.

There was also an overwhelming response that females were watched more closely by parents than brothers. From female and male interviewees alike, this opinion was supported on both fronts. Interviewee I admitted his parents “Are much more strict on my sister. I’m a guy so I can get away with more compared to a female.” Female immigrants especially agreed, “I’m a

girl so I can't go a lot of places." Interviewee C vented her restrictions, "not to stay out late, not to hang out with boys, not to wear revealing clothes, to take care of my siblings first and parents, to contribute to the family financially, respect the Bengali community whenever we are around them." It seems to me that in terms of rules, the females expressed a greater sense of pressure from their families, especially the two Muslim female immigrants.

Cultural expectations for sibling interaction do not always match the American model. As Interviewee J explained, "even though we are brothers, we won't hug each other, we won't say I love you to each other—but deep down we know we care about each other a lot. It is just a different culture, we don't get used to that physical touching thingy so much." Asian culture clearly has a different display of affection. I find it funny how he chose his words, "physical touching thingy" and how the tone seems to brush it off like an unnecessary contact.

Another topic that arose with siblings was how certain individuals were favored based on their gender. Two respondents felt that their mother and grandmother favored their brothers while two other respondents felt that their father favored their brothers. To have nearly half of the interviewees express a sense of son preference shocked me. I certainly did not expect such a response, although it is interesting to note that it was equally exclusive to Latino and Asian cultures.

Two female immigrants both arrived in America prior to the birth of their younger sibling. It was interesting to note that they both voiced how different their younger brother was because he was born in America. Interviewee C said, "He is definitely different being born in America. His relationship with my parents is different because he was born here. It is difficult for him to understand why it is important for him to do certain things, sometimes he questions it." Interviewee A seemed to agree exactly, "His own identity is completely different." It was fascinating that two immigrants shared this unique experience and articulated similar responses to this situation.

Cultural expectations are also translated down to career goals. All five male respondents claimed they could "do whatever" they wanted because they were a man: the possibilities were endless. One even pointed out the fluidity of jobs in America, in his point of view they are not very gender strict. For the females, three of the five felt their opportunities were equally open. Worthy of noting, the two respondents who felt their careers were limited were both Muslim females immigrants. For example, their parents had a hard time when the females expressed interests to be a nurse, a doctor, a lawyer, or a police officer. Interviewee B admitted, "You don't always have to be the cooking female, but again the fact that would not be accepted, is if you weren't willing to take care of family first. Don't reject family, family comes first. You could give up your job for family." This fascinating outcome proves that traditional values and expectations do influence the daily lives on young Americans, females especially.

Migration and Assimilation

Coming to America is an experience these ten individuals lived through themselves or heard second hand from their parents. Three immigrants had their father arrive first, and he later sent for the rest of the family. Amazingly, eight of the ten interviewees knew family living in America prior to their arrival. The lure of another family member already here stimulated the urge to migrate.

Commonalities ran throughout the respondents' answers about why their family chose to come to America. Most came for economic reasons, for jobs, and others for the education, to live a better life and have more opportunities. However, one interviewee's parents came as refugees from a war torn country. This had a definite impact on how his family picked up their lives here in America.

A few interview questions were aimed at the respondent's remaining contact with their traditional culture. I found that contact varied depending on the individual's situation. Interviewee J immigrated to America six years ago so he has yet to return. Financial barriers also get in the way of frequent trips because of the high prices of a long plane ticket. But a majority was able to make trips back to visit family members and even more kept in touch through the telephone and the Internet. Two interviewees expressed difficulty keeping in touch with family members who lived in rural areas since they don't have access to telephones nor the Internet. For first generation Americans; however, the contact seemed to wane. Three of the four first generation Americans I interviewed said they had no contact with relatives living outside of America. Only one of them was able to visit but he professed he will never go back.

Traditional activities that the respondents still practiced seemed to have a more uniformed response. Seven of the ten had

experienced closeness with an ethnic community, whether temporary or permanent. The remaining three who were never involved with a larger ethnic base were all first generation Americans.

Celebrating traditional holidays seemed to be an obstacle for the American born respondents. All four first generation Americans admitted that they celebrated no traditional holidays, while all six immigrants still joined in some form of commemoration. Two admitted it was tough to do, depending on the time of year and type of celebration. As they explained, it was difficult for them to enjoy the day while knowing everyone in their home country was feeling their same vibe of excitement. Communities are vital forms of survival for this very reason; it is a group of people who celebrate the same days you do and can make them special.

Eight of the ten respondents reported eating ethnic and traditional food, some on a daily basis. The two who claimed to eat "more American" food were both first generation American males. It was funny to see how the palate seemed to be different for the American born men. Seven of the ten respondents spoke their native language fluently, while three first generation Americans were not fluent speakers. Another case where it seems that traditions are filtered out by the time they reach the first American born.

Only four immigrants still actively wore some type of traditional dress. Interviewee B expressed herself eloquently when she defended her right to wear a veil:

I wish they would realize that a woman is something beautiful. You keep beautiful things in a sense covered. I don't put my diamonds in other people's faces because it's beautiful, it's gorgeous, and people will steal it. I keep my diamond only on my finger because it belongs to me. If a diamond can be so beautiful and so precious then I'm human and I'm a woman, I'm even more beautiful and even more precious.

Her point is flawless and her example is completely accurate. Wonderfully spoken, it is a true profession that traditional dress should not be shameful or embarrassing.

It was astounding that only one interviewee classified themselves as religious. The remaining nine disclosed they strayed away from their religion as they became older or left it completely. I was intrigued by this response, not only because I did not expect it, but because I wondered what this generation would pass down to their children.

Coincidentally, this same question appeared in the interview; what traditions and value systems will you pass on to your children? "Everything" and "teach them where they came from" were responses that I received four times each. Despite the fact that everyone was willing to pass down "everything," from interviewing the first generation Americans it does not seem like too much of their traditional culture has been sustained. Would this turn out to be a lost hope? I felt this was an important issue to address. It was remarkable to note that the three immigrants who felt pressure to join in an arranged marriage all agreed they would pass down this tradition to their children. Interviewee B outlined the following list of detailed rules for her children:

Don't even say 'ugh' to me, even if I am wrong. Take care of me, if you are a son take care of me all your life. Don't send me to an old folk's home, no, don't ever do that to your parents. And no boyfriend, no girlfriend honey, for us it's a waste of time. It's no use. I'm not going to let them try to date people so they can say wait we fit together, no. I would teach them all my religious customs. For a girl, don't go for feminine rights, it's nothing, just follow the religion and you will get everything within it. For my sons, mother is everything. Respect women, no hitting a woman, ever, don't ever touch a woman. Family is important, don't run after money. No oh, I'm eighteen I have my private life and my parents can't enter, no. I would chop their head off if they don't pray five times a day. They should do charity, keep their anger down. Respect the way you sit and eat, the way you are in front of adults, what you watch, everything.

There certainly does not seem like room for negotiation but this was the only in depth response I received. It was also the only respondent who felt a strong religious connection, which is what may give her such direction in life.

Dating was an issue for half of all respondents. Their parents either cautioned them about dating altogether, or stressed that dating must be within their own ethnic group. Interviewee I understands where his parents are coming from, "One thing I'm extremely proud of is that I'm 100% Indian. Mixing of blood, like it is not pure blood—my kids would be half and half." It was

interesting to hear such a perspective on interethnic marriage. Two Asian immigrants disclosed that their parents would disown them if they defied their parents' rules. One said, "If I were to run away with an American guy or something my parents would probably disown me." The other asked, "I know my parents and my family would be uncomfortable with it, they would probably disown me. Should I marry someone within my culture because it is safe?" I never realized dating was such a serious issue. Strict demands were being placed on these immigrants while the world around them was much more open. Five interviewees, both immigrants and first generation Americans asserted that they could date anyone. Interviewee D said she tried dating an American, "but it was different." Needless to say that relationship did not last.

The issue of virginity proved to be an expectation for all respondents but one, who claimed his parents' only request was, "Don't get anyone pregnant at a young age." Even though the sex after marriage norm was adaptable for all cultural groups, I got the feeling that the respondents recognized this was a façade. Interviewee A hinted that "I think they would lead you to believe that virginity is highly prized," but reality proves differently. Virginity may be valued, but only three respondents unveiled that they were.

Not surprisingly, divorce and homosexuality were not deemed acceptable to any culture. But there is a clear difference between what is accepted and what still goes on. Even though everyone agreed divorce is frowned upon, four respondents said it happens regardless. One of the interviewees is a homosexual and although he said homosexuality is not acceptable in his culture, "Regardless I'm never not welcomed in anybody's home." Divorce and homosexuality fell under the same domain, where neither was embraced but both are common practices nevertheless.

Attitudes towards Americans and the West

Being a second generation American myself, I found this section one of the most intriguing. Having people who I consider Americans define what in their mind an American is proved to be a life lesson. Even the definition of an American was questioned. Interviewee I declared:

You're Caucasian and I'm brown but I don't consider you American. I consider you as being where your ancestors were from. I think in American culture right now people are losing their roots and their ancestry. I cannot stand when people say I'm American—I'm like what does that mean? When you can't even follow American traditions or values then you can't truly call yourself an American. Can I call myself an American just because of citizenship? No, not at all.

By far, the most amusing reactions I received were when the respondents defined American males and American females. Interviewee J candidly categorized American males; "They like girls' asses and they stare at hot girls on the train. American people do think a man does work better than a woman. They are lazy, political and when it comes to money they deal with it very privately and secretly." Interviewee H laughed, "The man wears the pants, he says what happens and doesn't happen. American men try to take control of everything." Interviewee I thinks American men "are not comfortable with their sexuality. Men are very competitive with each other. They are like blood, guts, gore. Men here seem to have a notion that they need to prove something to other men. The whole alpha male thing is very true for men in this culture." Interviewee B alleged that money was very important for American females. Interviewee E thought, "The ideal American girl is a cheerleader, blonde and blue eyed, very thin and fit, perky, cute and sweet and all that crap." Interviewee D had one of the most interesting arguments:

I think a lot of girls are spoiled by their parents. I think it's really bad. It's just not fair. I grew up where I had to eat what my mother put on the table. I didn't have a choice, like I don't like it. I'm not going to eat it. Here I see that. Over there my mother never asked me, what do you want to eat? She made what she wanted to make and then she gives it to us. My step mom is white, American so she asks, what do you want me to make, what do you want to eat? It is different.

Thinking from that angle about food was something I never contemplated before. Certainly Americans view food differently from non-Western cultures but to parallel that with our own selfishness makes a valid argument. Interviewee C also pointed out that "Americans look at females as helpless individuals. They are constantly being told what to do, yet they have all their freedom." This must be a paradox for many immigrants who feel like America is the land of equality.

Women's rights hit a soft spot with two female immigrants in particular. Interviewee A finds women's rights issues to be a personal dilemma:

A lot of my friends are really active in pro rights marches and things like that which I find difficult for me to completely be on board about being raised as a Roman Catholic. Like issues of abortion and things like that are really very different for me so that's been kind of hard to come to terms with and it's been interesting to see their perspective on things.

Interviewee B concurred:

In the effort to try giving women the same status as men they have gone too far. I guess they just don't realize that you're equal, but equal in different ways. You are better in this, you are better in that. I personally think I'm glad I'm not American. I don't want to wake up at eight o'clock in the morning and do some labor, no that's your job. I've done my labor if I had babies, you do the rest. I'm not an object to be thrown around and go to work, getting divorced, getting abortions. I don't think it's right. If a guy can strip, why can't a girl—that's not equal rights. I feel they use women's rights as an excuse, to push it so far that they are not treated as the women they are supposed to be.

I was not too shocked that immigrant women did not feel enthusiastic about American women's issues. Personal beliefs and religion mutually mold views on women's rights.

Many of the respondents felt pressures to conform to American society. Interviewee C avowed, "I constantly feel pressure to think the way Americans do. Like in classrooms in high school, if I thought differently from my classmates I would be forced to think that I was weird. I would be rejected by the other students." Interviewee J shared his frustration:

I'm not really becoming more Americanized; I don't think you could say that. I still have my Chinese-ize in me. When I come here I'm just adopting American culture so I could survive in this environment. I didn't really change but I added more value into my life. Every single day I'm learning English and the American culture. It is really stressed out and makes your brain really tired. It is a lot of stress. It does make me become depress and angry so easy.

It is interesting to note that he thinks of adopting certain aspects of American culture as a survival tactic to make it here. That is an interesting take on how to reconcile challenges.

Three immigrants from Asia were all warned not to interact with American people. Interviewee B explained reasons why this is so, "Every class I enter every semester, I know I'm getting a look. It's just for them I'm too weird. They would find me weird. I can't even do the same activities as them so it's no use. I try to find people within my own community." Interviewee E believed that "An American girl wouldn't normally be friends with a Mexican girl." These are certainly not isolated cases where immigrants felt isolated, as I will delve more into discrimination later in the section.

Immigrants must conform not only to speak English, a totally foreign language, but to adopt a value of independence; crucial to the American ideology. To Interviewee H, a society that valued independence a "me" "complex was an unfamiliar one, "In Cambodia things or chores are more equally done. If a job needs to get done, everyone helps, whether you are a man or a woman or a child. There is no big split like I think America has, in Cambodia everyone helps each other." Collective societies put emphasis on teamwork and community. It is interesting how this perspective conflicts with Western societies.

For one first generation American male, finding commonalities with his ethnic subculture was his main predicament. Interviewee G shared that "If I ever felt any pressures to conform it was to a Dominican subculture rather than American society." It did not surprise me that this statement would come from a first generation American. Considering American born respondents appeared to be largely cut off from their traditional culture it would make sense they would feel isolated from the community as well. This would make it harder for them to identify themselves as a part of that group.

The phenomenon of globalization seemed to go hand in hand with the elimination of traditions. Six respondents touched on how practices are changing as a result of Westernization and that generations are different now than in the past. Interviewee G voiced an accurate theory, "every generation is more progressive." This is a cause of globalization. Interviewee A also pointed to this trend, "Things are changing a lot now that Poland is being exposed more and more to Western ideas and now that it's

part of the European Union and because of the Internet and everything it's changing social roles for everyone." It will be interesting to see in the coming future how globalization will have an effect on the world community in terms of traditional peoples and their belief systems. Non-western cultures are normally targeted for being different, for not fitting in. Hopefully this does not deter these people from staying true to their traditions.

Issues of Discrimination and the Melting Pot Theory

Half of the respondents felt some form of discrimination because of their ethnic background, and amazingly they all mentioned instances that occurred when they were children. "Go back to where you came from" or name-calling was typical of many of the situations. One Muslim immigrant told horrifying stories of bigotry; where people asked her about Osama Bin Laden and the Taliban. Ignorance takes hold of people and immigrant communities are very vulnerable to such abuse. Stereotypes stick out in people's minds and they use that as a basis for judgment. Interviewee F, an American born male with parents from Columbia, told how everyone would assume he was a drug dealer. Interviewee A spoke of the stereotype that Polish people are stupid, "Sometimes I felt like I would have to prove myself in that sense and just kind of show people in my school performance that it's just a stereotype that isn't true."

Spanish speakers and the Latino community face a lot of injustice in American society. Interviewee E can attest:

There was always an us versus them sort of thing, Mexicans verse the Americans. When I was a kid, I always wanted light colored eyes or light hair because where we grew up in Arkansas we were visibly different from everybody else. When I was in high school, a couple of times, I did do a blonde streak and I've also died my hair red, not to look so ethnic.

It is almost as if she wants to escape who she is, hideaway her ethnicity so that she can be accepted by the larger American populous.

It is especially hard for newcomers who are unable to speak English. Interviewee F explains that:

When I started school I knew no word of English. It was difficult for me to understand what the teachers were saying and for that I was isolated in school. They would isolate me and put me by myself. Like literally, they would put me in the corner by myself. All the other kids that spoke English were teasing and the assistant teacher always put me on the side. I didn't really interact with the kids at school.

This is a case of blatant institutionalized racism. Many people brush off childhood teasing, with the excuse that they are only kids. Two of the respondents brushed it off the same way, "They didn't know any better." But if we do not begin to teach our children tolerance, how will the human race be able to sustain itself?

The other half of respondents claimed they faced no such prejudice and were not made fun of because of their ethnicity. Interviewee A did point out an important factor; "I never really felt any pressures growing up. I guess it's just because I don't have an accent and I don't really look different, so it was never really much of an issue, other than my name." Interviewee G also mentioned that physical perception probably deterred people's discrimination, "I assume people think I'm Italian or something since I'm light skinned." Not speaking English fluently and looking physically different proved to be the toughest hurdles because they are easy to pick up on. Since physicality and speech was not an issue for these two respondents, it is important to note that neither of them ever felt discriminated against.

The final question of the interview asked, do you think America is a melting pot? One respondent had never heard the expression before and therefore did not give an answer. Only two respondents answered yes and were optimistic that the "American dream" was possible. Three respondents answered no. Interviewee J concluded:

There is a lot of discrimination happening. Different groups of people would tend to live together and go against other groups. Some white people in my school really feel that they are the only ones that own America and they really look down on other races. When you live in a country long enough, it blinds you from the truth.

Ending with such a strong closing statement I was taken aback. Not only did he hit perfectly on issues of discrimination but also he was able to discern the melting pot as a façade. Interviewee H picked up on this façade as well, "I wish America was

as good as it wants people to think it is, but live here and it is different.” There was nothing but honesty, spoken from the people fortunate enough to be able to see America from an outsider’s and an insider’s perspective.

Four respondents answered both yes and no to the melting pot question. While being able to see that cultures do blend together, they recognized that people are still not welcoming each other. Interviewee E spoke of how “Instead of saying we are American, we are Mexican American; there is always going to be something qualified to describe us.” The definition of what an American is does not always match up for everyone, which is why I believe there is no movement for this country to identify itself as one community. Interviewee B divulged, “If it’s a melting pot it’s only for if you have white skin and you’re European.” Indeed in the past America could be seen as a type of melting pot of sorts since primary immigration was coming from European nations. In the last few decades new waves of immigration from non-Western cultures are coming to this country in high numbers, more than European immigrants. The melting pot theory is proved to be false. A majority of the respondents have experienced the discrimination they feel is preventing the melting pot from even dissolving.

The depth of my findings went beyond what I imagined. Each interviewee shed light on a specific issue that makes their experience both unique and fascinating. As unique as each experience was, however, there was definite overlap in many of the responses. This proves that my interview questions hit on weighty issues; each pertinent to how the individual was reconciling their culture with American customs.

Conclusion

This research topic came to me during a trip I took to Cambodia. While I was living and working there I befriended many Cambodians who were my peers, both male and female. I was amazed at how different their daily lives played out according to their culture’s expectations. It was dramatically different when I compared it to the life my friends and I led back in America. It would have been too difficult to contact my peers overseas, but I knew many friends of mine who were immigrants here in America would be able to relay similar stories of cultural expectations.

I was also influenced by a quote from Gloria Anzaldua’s (1999) book *Borderlands*. In describing her personal experiences having to unite her Mexican culture with American culture she found it increasingly difficult and defended her traditions when no one else would. Anzaldua (1999) asserted, “They’d like to think I have melted in the pot. But I haven’t, we haven’t.” Since I personally don’t believe that America lives up to its declaration of being a melting pot, I felt that interviewing newcomers would be the best way to prove if my suspicions were true.

Cultural expectations put immense pressure on parents in determining when specific life events should occur. In “The Role of Gender in Immigrant Children’s Educational Adaptation,” Desiree Baolian Qin (2006) looked at why immigrant girls showed better school performance than immigrant boys. She hypothesized that one reason is due to “immigrant parents usually placing much stricter controls on their daughters than their sons.” This was verified in my study as well. A majority of interviewees said this was the case in their household and girls had more rules to follow because of it.

Erickson (1998) in her ethnography titled *Latina Adolescent Childbearing in East Los Angeles*, talked of American, middle-class norms for childbearing; “first finish high school and, increasingly, complete college (ages 18-25) in order to get a well-paying, rewarding job. Only then should they marry (ages 20-30) and have children (commencing 1-2 years after marriage).” Due in part to globalization, I found that norm expressed by many interviewees, American born and immigrants alike. Since all of the respondents are living in American society I feel they have adopted this timeline as well since it is the normal or correct way of life here in America.

At the same time, Lee and Tse (1994) emphasized that “when immigrants come into contact with another culture, they will likely find some behaviors common across both cultures and some that are unique and different.” Certainly this was the case for certain interviewees, depending on their situation and cultural background. Religious customs seemed to go either way, depending if the interviewee was Christian or not.

By compiling this research I have learned many valuable lessons. I discovered that gender role expectations did not vary across cultures as much as I expected they would. The roles that males and females occupy transcend cultural barriers; each is viewed as a type of inherent, natural role that the respective sex provides. This surprised me the most, as I felt that gendered expectations would be slightly different depending on cultural traditions. I learned how difficult it was for the female, Muslim respondents to cope with the huge cultural differences as well as major forms of racism. I came to realize how Americans and

American culture is perceived from a different viewpoint, in my opinion, a more objective one. This study also relayed how bigotry and intolerance is still a part of everyday life for these communities, despite the façade of a melting pot. Simultaneously this study reaffirmed that despite our ethnicity we all have many things in common. Parents seem to have strict rules for girls, virginity is cherished and dating always merits a conversation with mom and dad. Females are seen as keeper of the house and family life while men fulfill the public domain. Although these views are waning due to globalization, the effects are felt here in America as well as in other cultural groups.

Immigrants and first generation Americans have unique stories to tell, since they are merging together two cultural fronts. The first generation Americans had a dwindling connection to their traditional culture. In terms of identification with their ethnic group, gender role pressures, parental expectations, contact with family and country and knowledge of native tongue, they all seemed disconnected. Immigrants were the ones really doing the reconciling. Not everything they valued and deemed normative meshed together with the American way of life. Whether it was their gender role pressures, cultural and parental expectations, or experiences with stereotyping and intolerance the immigrant respondents faced numerous obstacles. This is why their attitude about Americans and western society was so aggressive and why they seemed to disregard the melting pot theory. The pressure they face on a daily basis to blend into this new American world must be one I cannot imagine. In a country built by immigrants, their stories prove to be a testament to the American way of life and should be forever documented in order to remember the struggles they have faced trying to make it as Americans in 2007.

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