Beyond “Culture Clash” Understandings of Immigrant Experiences

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This article addresses the ways in which the experiences of immigrant youth and families in U.S. schools and society have been conceptualized primarily as conflicts between immigrant cultures and dominant U.S. culture. Exemplified by the discourse of culture clash or of immigrants being torn between two worlds, this prevalent understanding structures the experiences, cultures, and identities of immigrants as unchanging and fixed in time. This article illustrates the ways that culture and identity are constructed within the double movement of discourse and representation. It offers examples of how dominant representations create simplistic understandings of the identities of immigrant youth, as well as the ways youth are constructing new identities.

As a researcher interested in the experiences of immigrant families in the United States, I try to pay attention to news stories about immigrants. More often than not, these stories highlight the clash of cultures, or the ways that immigrant youth are torn or caught between two worlds with ubiquitous headlines such as “Generation 1.5: Young immigrants in two worlds” (Feagans, 2006), “Taking on two worlds” (Do, 2002), and “Mother’s Fray: Culture clash puts special strain on immigrant moms and daughters” (Wax, 1998). One dimension of this focus on cultural conflict emphasizes the differences between immigrant cultures (East) and U.S. culture (West). In the practices of the popular press, we see dualisms of traditional/modern or rural/urban in explanations of immigrant culture and U.S. culture. For example, in a series highlighting the ways that Hmong girls have been Shamed into Silence by Hmong culture, Louwagie and Browning (2005a, 2005b) pointed out that “culture clash can stymie help” (2005b, p. 11A) for Hmong girls who have been raped by Hmong gang members. In their explication of
the culture clash, the journalists highlighted the contrast, “Adapting any non-Western culture to the United States is a formidable task. For the Hmong community, which hails from isolated mountain villages in Laos and refugee camps in Thailand, settling in urban areas such as St. Paul has meant a bigger change” (Louwagie & Browning, 2005b, p. 11A). Here, the identity and culture—beliefs, behaviors, and values—of immigrants such as the Hmong are characterized as traditional, patriarchal, and rural, in contrast to a highly modern and civilized U.S. society.

Another dimension of the culture clash discourse emphasizes the differences between the first-generation (parents) and second-generation (youth). This dichotomy results in a preoccupation with intergenerational conflict where arguments that immigrant youth and adults have over clothes or dating restrictions are construed to be clashes between the traditional values of immigrant parents versus modern values of youth who are influenced by contemporary U.S. practices. Again, the Shamed into Silence series is illustrative: “The problem comes in mixing Hmong traditions with American culture, many agree. While Hmong refugees are struggling to survive in a culture foreign to them, their children are adapting more quickly and disobeying what they see as their parents’ antiquated rules” (Louwagie & Browning, 2005b, p. 11A). Implicitly and explicitly, the values and practices of Hmong immigrants are depicted as backward or stuck in time.

In education, the cultural difference model for explaining immigrant student achievement problematically positions educational outcomes as a product of the cultural practices of immigrants. At one extreme, explanations of low achievement point to bad cultural practices for the under-achievement of immigrant students (S. J. Lee, 1997; Ngo, 2002). Hmong students’ decisions to drop out of school to marry, for instance, are viewed as choices that are tied to traditional values—rather than as a response to oppressive social structures (Ngo, 2002). At the other extreme, cultural values based on Buddhist and Confucian beliefs are used to account for educational progress and attainment. Vietnamese students’ high success is attributed to a strong work ethic and family support (Zhou & Bankston, 2001). As a result of this either—or framework, immigrant students are viewed as gangsters and delinquents or as academic superstars and model minorities. Immigrant families are viewed as supportive and functional or as unsupportive and dysfunctional.

Even though I want to recognize the importance of the cultural difference research in drawing attention to the struggles of immigrants, I also want to point out the insidious effects of a singular focus on cultural conflict. The cultural difference model for understanding immigrant experiences sets up binary oppositions between tradition and modernity, East and West, and First World and Third World, among others. This oppositional framework is problematic for at least two reasons. First, the emphasis on traditional cultural values reifies the notion of culture, positioning it as something that is fixed or a given, rather than as a social process that finds meaning within social relationships and practices. Second, binary oppositions inscribe judgment and a pecking order (i.e., good/bad, ours/theirs) into cultural practices and values. Moreover, as Lowe (1996) convincingly argued, “the reduction of the cultural politics of racialized ethnic groups, like Asian Americans, to first-generation/second-generation struggles displaces social differences into a privatized familial opposition” (p. 63). The challenges faced by immigrant youth and adults are relegated to the private sphere of the home. This focus on intergenerational conflict problematically absolves institutions of education, labor, and government of responsibility, and deflects attention from exclusionary historical practices as well as discrimination immigrants continue to face (Jaret, 1999; Olneck, 2003).

In order to account for the complexity of immigrant students’ and families’ experiences, and the ever-changing nature of culture and identity, we need to move beyond discrete understandings of culture and identity as good/bad, traditional/modern, us/them. In this article, I suggest that we move toward seeing the changes or the in-between (Bhabha, 1994) of culture and identity. To do so, I illustrate the ways that culture and
identity are constructed within discourse and representation. In the following section, I explicate an understanding of identity that accounts for its dynamic, contested, and messy nature that moves beyond the fixity of binary categories. I then offer examples from my work with Lao American immigrant students to illustrate how this plays out in students’ lives.

Understanding Culture and Identity as Dynamic

The work of cultural studies theorists such as Hall (1989, 1990) and Bhabha (1994) provides a foundation for understanding culture and identity that takes into account the continuous process of change and negotiation. These theorists reject the definition of cultural identity based on an understanding of a singular, shared culture of a collective one true self shared by people of a common history and ancestry (Hall, 1990). Drawing on this work, I understand identity as constructed through discourse and representation involving the play of power (Hall, 1996). Rather than whole, seamless, or naturally-occurring, culture and identity are the result of differentiation in social relations precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity. (Hall, 1996, p. 4)

Because identity is constructed through the “play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion,” (Hall, 1996, p. 4) identity is a positioning—political and negotiated.

I understand discourse to mean the spoken and written language and images used in popular and academic arenas. Discourse is more than simply a collection of statements or images, but is a set of historically grounded (yet evolving) statements and images that function to create a certain reality (Gee, 1996). For example, the dominant discourse about Asian Americans highlights their status as a model minority. This image of success emphasizes the role of hard work, family support, and cultural values in the high educational attainment of Asian Americans (S. J. Lee, 1996). This dominant discourse of the Asian American model minority positions Asian Americans as the poster-child of American meritocracy, as it simultaneously blames other groups (e.g., African Americans, Latino Americans) for their underachievement (Osajima, 1987).

An important assumption of this understanding of discourse is that some discourses have been so ingrained through repetition that they seem to be natural and have become dominant. The repetition and naturalization of dominant discourses have masked their social and continuous construction. These dominant discourses conceal the existence of competing discourses. From the above example, the dominant discourse of Asian American success masks discourses that account for the struggles of Southeast Asians such as the Lao and Hmong (Ngo, 2006). Because identity is reflective of power and takes place within discursive relations, characterizations of immigrants as traditional, patriarchal, and resistant to assimilationist demands are neither neutral nor harmless. They reflect political positions, values, and social practices (Hall, 1990; Kumashiro, 2002).

From this understanding of identity and discourse, identity construction involves a double movement, where we are identified by a history of discourses—ideas and images of who we are—and identify ourselves by responding to the representations that have already identified us (Hall, 1996). The ways we respond may repeat, resist, or contradict how we have been identified. As we draw on discourses to make meaning for ourselves, others also use discourses that are available to understand or identify us. For instance, as a person of Vietnamese heritage who has lived in the United States for most of my life,
I might identify myself as an Asian American. However, others may identify me as Chinese because my physical appearance matches with what they know about people of Chinese descent. This double movement creates an identity that is “fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions” (Hall, 1996, p. 4). This understanding of identity as shaped through discourse and representation allows for sites to continuously open for reexpression (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1990). Bhabha called the space that opens up for negotiation and change the third space, ambivalent space, or in-between. He maintained that “we should remember that it is the ‘inter’—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 38).

By looking in the in-between, we may see how immigrant students work with or rework discourses that have already identified them. Next I draw on data from an ethnographic study with Lao American students at an urban public high school, to illustrate the double movement of identity and the in-between of Lao immigrant students’ identity.

The Double Movement of Identity

Dominant Discourses at Work: Lumping Lao Students as “Chinese”

One way to think about dominant discourses is to think about the stereotypes or myths that exist and are circulated about different immigrant groups. For immigrants in general, these dominant discourses or stereotypes include the perception that immigrants are a burden on the U.S. economy or take jobs from so-called real Americans. For Asian immigrants in particular, some stereotypes include the perception that Asian immigrants are all computer geniuses, good at math, passive and quiet, or martial arts experts. An important characteristic of stereotypes or dominant discourses is that they lump individuals into one-dimensional, generalizing categories that ignore the complexity of their lives and experiences.

This was the case in my research with Lao immigrant students at Dynamic High School. Dynamic was an urban public high school that enrolled approximately 1,482 students from across the city. The majority of the students were either African American (43%), Asian American (mostly Hmong American) (38%), and White (16%). According to the school brochure, its richness in cultural and ethnic diversity was notable in the 41 languages and dialects spoken by students and staff. Of the large number of Asian American students, the majority were Hmong. Even though the non-Asian students and teachers at Dynamic knew that most of the Asian American students were Hmong, many still referred to all Asian students as Chinese.

The lack of understanding and acknowledgment of the differences within Asian ethnic groups at Dynamic High reflects the dominant ways in which Asian immigrants are represented and understood within the popular imagination, as a homogenous group who are all the same (S. J. Lee, 1996). Problematically, this obscures the diversity of Asian groups and the variation in immigration experiences, educational attainment, and economic status (Ngo, 2006). Although Asian Americans are comprised of numerous groups, including those of Cambodian, Chinese, East Indian, Filipino, Guamanian, Hawaiian, Hmong, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Laotian, Samoan, Taiwanese, and Vietnamese heritages (Pang, 1990), dominant discourses mask this enormous variety. Individuals of Asian descent are all lumped into simplistic categories such as Chinese or Japanese.

For example, at Dynamic High, despite the fact that school records revealed that although none of the students were Chinese, all Asian students were labeled as Chinese. Consider what Chintana, one of my Lao student participants, said when I asked her if students and staff knew the difference between Hmong and Lao students:

Chintana: A lot of people like call Asian people like just Chinese or something. I hear it all the
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The work of identity construction is fraught with tensions and disagreements that are belied by notions of identity construction and negotiation that allude to a trouble-free process (West, 2002). At the same time that others use discourses to identify us, we also draw on discourses to make meaning for ourselves. In the in-between (Bhabha, 1994) of culture and identity, expectations from others of who we are or should be may collide and conflict with how we want to identify ourselves. Although discourses of the experiences of immigrant families frame the choices and struggles of culture and identity within East/West or immigrant/nonimmigrant binaries, my work with Lao students revealed the salience of “different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions” (Hall, 1996, p. 4).

I found that the tensions that arose in students’ identity work came from expectations by non-Lao students, as well as family members and Lao peers. For example, in Mindy’s case, her association with the Hmong students at the school was problematic to her identity as Lao. As she shared: “I think my friends are getting mad at me ’cause I’m hanging out with too many Hmong people…. I think that they think I’m becoming one of them.” Friends as well as family accused her of wanting to be Hmong. According to Mindy, her parents asked “Why you trying to be like Hmong people, dying your hair and stuff like that?” Her parents particularly worried that she would “turn out bad”:

Mindy: It’s like they think if I hang out with Hmong people I’m going to be bad, right? But

In these remarks, Ms. Anderson reiterated the identification of all Asian students as Chinese. Her reference to how non-Asian students perceived Jackie Chan as the national hero for the Asian American students also alludes to the role of popular culture in defining Asian identity and heritage. Informed by popular representation, this understanding exemplifies two stereotypes about individuals of Asian heritage: all Asians look the same and all Asians know martial arts or kung fu (R. Lee, 1999). Such understandings about Asian American students and families do little to capture the change and complexities of their lives in the United States.

Conflicting Discourses: Redefining Identity in the In-Between

In the double movement of identity, our identities are not exclusively determined by dominant discourses of other people. Because culture and identity are shaped within social relationships (Hall, 1996), the work of identity construction is fraught with tensions and disagreements that are belied by notions of identity construction and negotiation that allude to a trouble-free process (West, 2002). At the same time that others use discourses to identify us, we also draw on discourses to make meaning for ourselves. In the in-between (Bhabha, 1994) of culture and identity, expectations from others of who we are or should be may collide and conflict with how we want to identify ourselves. Although discourses of the experiences of immigrant families frame the choices and struggles of culture and identity within East/West or immigrant/nonimmigrant binaries, my work with Lao students revealed the salience of “different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions” (Hall, 1996, p. 4).

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Mindy: It’s like they think if I hang out with Hmong people I’m going to be bad, right? But
to me, I hang out with different kind of people, you know and I don’t turn out bad. I know what’s right and what’s wrong sometime.

Researcher: What are your parents afraid of? Like when you say they’re afraid you’re going to turn out bad—what are they afraid of?

Mindy: Like becoming a slut, like kind of forgetting your own race kind of.

Researcher: What does that mean?

Mindy: Like I would talk American, English at home a lot. They be like “Don’t talk American, you’re going to forget your own race, you’re going to be American” and stuff like that.

In Mindy’s experience, her identity work was problematic for her parents and Lao friends in at least two ways. First, speaking English or “American” was an activity that would lead to her forgetting her identity as a Lao person. Second, having Hmong American friends meant that she was choosing a Hmong identity over her Lao identity. This emphasis on her Lao identity is remarkable because she is half Lao and half Vietnamese.

In addition, the presence of multiple discourses at play in Mindy’s experiences with her parents is especially notable. From Mindy’s account, her parents associated being Hmong with conceptions of Americanization that included putting red or blonde streaks in her long black hair and “turn[ing] out bad.” Turning out bad included “forgetting your own race” and being sexually promiscuous or “becoming a slut.” This understanding of Hmong culture and identity is also noteworthy because in some ways it echoes popular discourses of Hmong immigrants that emphasize the role of Hmong traditional practices in contributing to the high rate of pregnancy and marriage among Hmong teenage girls (S. J. Lee, 1997; Ngo, 2002). In other ways, it contradicts the dominant discourse that frames Hmong culture and identity as rooted in tradition. From the perspective of Mindy’s Lao parents, what it means to be Hmong links Hmong culture and identity to the harmful influences of Americanization and practices of Western society rather than notions of tradition.

Conclusion

In the social construction of identity, a Lao student may consider herself Asian American, her parents may consider her Lao, and non-Lao students may consider her as Chinese or Asian. The double movement of identity opens up a space of change and negotiation. Here, the identity that individuals such as Lao American students may want to claim is not recognized or misrecognized by others because it disrupts ingrained discourses of who they should be. In Mindy’s case, who she thinks she is and the way she wants to represent herself are at odds with perceptions and expectations of friends and family. The culture and identity of immigrant students and families thus cannot be conceptualized simply as something that is static, passed from one generation to the next. Notions of immigrant experiences must move beyond an either–or paradigm (i.e., either one is traditional or modern), toward an understanding of the in-between (Bhabha, 1994). In the in-between of culture and identity, students such as Mindy are changing what it means to look and behave as a Lao American. Accordingly, perceptions about immigrants must move beyond a culture clash understanding in order to account for the work of immigrants to redefine and reexpress what it means to be parents and youth in U.S. schools and society.

As educators, community members, and policymakers, this means attending to the dominant discourses that we invoke to understand immigrant families. Paying attention to these discourses will allow us to question the assumptions and representations underlying them. For example, we might ask ourselves:

1. What are the binary discourses that we use to understand the educational experiences of immigrant students and families?
2. What are alternative discourses or explanations for understanding the experiences and actions of immigrant students and parents?

3. How might we look at the in-between to account for changes as it relates to issues such as gender roles, family authority, identity, and economic survival?

For educators interested in moving beyond a culture clash understanding of immigrant experiences and toward a notion of in-between, there are a few practical recommendations to keep in mind. First, it is important to learn about and address the dominant representations or stereotypes of immigrants in general and specific immigrant groups in particular. For example, class lessons might examine the various stereotypes of immigrants, such as the ever-present myth that immigrants are a burden on the U.S. economy. Second, because identity and representation have political underpinnings, it is important to learn and teach about the motivations and contexts for the representations. For instance, stereotypes of Asian Americans as the yellow peril and model minority have historical roots in U.S. labor and civil rights movements respectively (R. Lee, 1999). Finally, because culture and identity are in a continuous process of change, it is important to address how this is occurring in the everyday practices, interests, and experiences of immigrant youth and families. Class lessons that delve into the outside school interests of students might reveal, for example, that immigrant adolescents are identifying as hip-hop spoken-word artists.

Additionally, it is important to remember that all discourses are political. All discourses position individuals within specific power relations, and prompt us to attend to certain issues but ignore others. Understanding immigrants as traditional positions immigrant youth and families as backward, failing to assimilate, and thwarting assistance (Louwagie & Browning, 2005a, 2005b). This has implications for how we view immigrant students and families, and the types of services and assistance we provide as educators. Consequently, we need to ask: What kinds of educational initiatives are possible when we position Muslim immigrants as patriarchal and sexist? What kinds of initiatives are possible when we position Vietnamese parents as deeply committed to their children’s education? These questions are critical for recognizing the political and educational implications of what we choose to emphasize as educators and researchers—because different discourses make possible different ways of teaching individual students and organizing schools.

Notes


2. See Ngo (2003) for more information about the study and methods.


4. All names of people and places are pseudonyms.

5. A resource that examines this stereotype is Soe’s film (1986), All Orientals Look the Same.

6. Additionally, the U.S. Bureau of the Census included smaller Asian American groups within the category of “All Other Asians” in the 1980 Census: Bangladeshi, Bhutanese, Bornean, Burmese, Celebesian, Cerman, Indochinese, Iwo-Jiman, Javanese, Malayian, Maldivian, Nepali, Okinawan, Sikkimese, Singaporean, and Sri Lankan (Pang, 1990).

7. For resources, see Web sites such as http://immigrationforum.org/ and http://www.mnadvocates.org.

References


