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“I am Desi”: (Re)Claiming Racialized Narratives of Being Asian in White America

Prithak Chowdhury

Traditional models of racial development do not consider the experiences of international students from non-European countries, especially Asia. The racialization of international students in the United States is a complex process of socialization that exposes them to the underlying dynamics of privilege and oppression in American society. In this scholarly personal narrative on selfhood and identity, I deconstruct what it means to be a racialized international student of color in the United States. Following a trajectory of self-conflict and self-awareness, which slowly yet profoundly stripped away the myriad layers of my socialization, I reconstruct a multi-layered understanding of my racialized identity using Accapadi's (2012) polycultural model of Asian American identity consciousness. This re-conceptualization of my own self comes with an appreciation of the complexity of who I am and who are my people are. I trace this personal narrative to highlight the role of cultural consciousness defining my epistemology as a scholar-practitioner.

Student development theory explores the individual facets of students' identity formation with regards to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and ability (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quayle, 2016). However, there is very little to no scholarship on the intersectional experiences of identity that contribute to a more holistic understanding of the individual. Traditional racial identity theories do not consider the complexity of intersecting gender, sexuality, and class dimensions that inform and influence the racialized experiences of students of color. This problem amplifies in regards to the development of international students from non-White and non-European countries. The experiences of international students coming from Asia, Africa, South America, and Latin America differ from their White-

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European counterparts due to the racialization they experience in the United States (Glass, 2011; Glass & Westmont, 2014; Glass, Gomez, & Urzua, 2014). These students often negotiate a distinct cultural and ethnic identity in addition to their identity as international students. In this article, I examine the racialization of international students from Asia, specifically South Asia, through an analysis of my personal narrative as first an international student from India, and now an aspiring scholar-practitioner in student affairs.

Theoretical Framework

Most early theories on student development are grounded in psychosocial considerations of identity formation (Patton et al., 2016). While these theories help frame the complexity of identity development in college students, they are specifically modeled after and studied using White men from elite institutions. The early theories do not pay attention to the formation of student's individual identities. In response to this shortcoming of early student development theories, social identity theories began to address the development of social identities. Within the umbrella of social identity development, racial and ethnic identity development scholarship emerged to understand how students came to make meaning of themselves through the lens of race (Patton et al., 2016).

Racial Identity Development

Racial identity development theory examines race as a social construct (Patton et al., 2016) which influences and shapes how we view ourselves and others. Inherent in this model is a separation of racial identities, based on power and privilege, as either dominant or subordinated. White European identities are considered as dominant while Asian, Latinx, Black, Native American, mixed, and multiracial identities are considered subordinated.

Most racial identity development models use Sue and Sue (2003) as a foundation of stage based development. Sue and Sue's (2003) racial and cultural identity development model (RCID) outlines a trajectory of increased complexity from an individual's *conformity* to dominant White culture to *synergistic articulation and awareness* of their racial identity with other aspects of identity. While this model helps to frame an understanding of racial identity and introduces concepts of dominance and hegemony within the identity formation process, it does not consider the unique development of different racial identities. It presupposes racial development through the binary of people of color (POC) and White identities. Additionally, this model also starts from a place of conformity to Whiteness and assumes Whiteness as the norm for POC until they articulate a self-understanding of their identity. Finally, it does not address the racialization of individuals who are not from the United States, have been in the U.S. for a relatively short time, or

have just immigrated to the U.S. To gain a better understanding of racial identity development as it pertains specifically to Asians and Asian Americans, it is necessary to examine the specific experiences of Asian students in America.

Asian American Identity Development

Most racial identity development models offer an entry point for the exploration of Asian and Asian American identity, but they do not specifically address Asian or Asian American experiences (Accapadi, 2012; Kim, 2012). Since traditional racial identity development models do not consider ethnicity as a significant influence in the development of a racial consciousness, they do a disservice to the Asian community for whom ethnicity is intrinsically intertwined with experiences of race. To fully understand the experience of Asian America, we need to consider both the impact of race and racism as well as appreciate the influence of ethnic memberships.

In this regard, Jean Kim's (2012) model offers five progressive stages of Asian American identity development (AAID). Kim (2012) integrates ethnic identity into her analysis and addresses how Asian Americans come to understand their identity by moving beyond ethnic affiliations to resolve racial conflicts in a predominantly White society. In the first stage, *ethnic awareness*, individuals experience their identity through their culture, families, and social communities. In this stage, individuals discover and strongly identify with their ethnicity. During the second stage, *White identification*, individuals feel alienated in White culture and feel the impact of difference. This causes them to reject their identity, strive for acceptance, and therefore internalize Whiteness to fit into and become a part of White culture.

The third stage, *awakening to social and political consciousness*, marks a shift in consciousness for Asian Americans who become more aware of their racialized selves. They move away from blaming themselves for being treated differently and acknowledge that their negative experiences are a result of racism. In this stage, individuals also stop viewing White culture as superior or "normal". In the fourth stage, *redirection to an Asian American consciousness*, this shift in paradigm becomes more complex as individuals yearn to learn more about their identity as Asian Americans and develop pride in their racial identity. This stage is also marked with an understanding of the socio-historical legacy of racism and the way Asian Americans have been marginalized in the United States. The final stage, *incorporation*, usually involves a strong sense of confidence in one's identity as an Asian American. This stage marks an ability to integrate an individual's racial identity with other social identities.

Kim's (2012) Asian American identity development model successfully integrates ethnic and racial identities while providing a critical framework to delineate

influences of power and privilege in racial identity formation. However, like most other stage models, this model offers a linear progression of consciousness (Accapadi, 2012) which does not leave room for the complexity of intersectional identities. Stage models do not allow for multiple points of entry and assume that all development begins from the same place. For example, Kim's (2012) model does not consider individuals who may have come from households where ethnic awareness is not prominent. Additionally, with regards to international students, this model does not consider the immigrant experience or the multi-ethnic experience of individuals who were not raised in America. To understand the experiences of students who navigate racialization while also facing acculturation in U.S. society, a different model that addresses the holistic selves of students is required.

Polycultural Model for Asian American Identity Consciousness

Mamta Accapadi's (2012) Asian American identity consciousness model uses critical race theory (CRT) and polyculturalism to outline a complex identity formation process that honors and centers the experiences of Asian or Asian American individuals. Accapadi uses the term APIDA (Asian, Pacific Islander, Desi American) as a more inclusive alternative to the blanket term "Asian," to de-center the dominance of East-Asian narratives that marginalize other Asian groups. She uses CRT to center the voices of the APIDA community and examine their experience through the lens of systemic oppression, and uses polyculturalism to identify anti-racism rather than diversity as a core value. Accapadi notes that polyculturalism is distinct from multiculturalism as it "requires us to understand the ways in which our cultural histories intersect, and sustain an emancipatory, anti-racist educational effort" (2012, p.71). This is significant in creating a liberation-based paradigm for Asian and Asian American students as they reimagine their cultural selves.

The Asian American identity consciousness model offers a multiple point of entry which recognizes that racial identity development is not linear or hierarchical, but fluid and continuous. This is specifically relevant in understanding the international student experience since most international students of color "stumble upon" their racial identity while renegotiating their ethnic and national identities. Accapadi (2012) proposes six different points of entry for the model: (1) *ethnic attachment* wherein an individual's relationship to their ethnicity helps inform and influence their racial identity formation. (2) *Self as other* describes physical and other phenotypic characteristics as a point of entry to race consciousness. The idea of who looks "too Asian" or does not look "Asian enough" is a significant experience for individuals navigating a sense of self as they grapple with their Asian American identity (Accapadi, 2012 p.74). (3) *Familial influence* points to the powerful role played by family in shaping a sense of self and informing how we view our identities. (4) *Immigration history* refers to the connection of Asian or Asian American individuals with their, or their family's, history of coming to the United States. (5) *External*

influences and perceptions indicate the external factors that influence racial identity development. (6) *Other social identities* point to our intersectional existence where our identities are all interdependent and inform one another.

The multiple points of entry into the identity consciousness model allows for a fluid and complex understanding of racial identity development. Especially with regards to international students, who experience race differently than students who have lived in America for a relatively longer period, a multiple point of entry allows for an intersectional understanding of how they navigate socialization into a new culture and system of power and oppression.

Being Indian: Understanding my bi-ethnic identity

My personal journey of unpacking and redefining my identity as “Asian” occurred when I reflected on the conflicting pieces of my bi-ethnic identity. For me, college was a transformative space. It was the laboratory of self-experimentation where I discovered the fascinating intricacy of my character, personality, and life. It was a transitional period, one where I started moving from something familiar to something more complex. However, in addition to the transitions that were initiated, factors such as traveling to a different continent, living in a different culture, and trying to fit in at the same time further complicated my understanding. I found myself in an experience that called for extraordinary scrutiny and introspection. With the rarity of that experience, coupled with the individual burdens of my life story, I woke up in a flux of my own identities. For the first time, I was compelled to ask myself that endearing, but often ignored question: Who am I? That is where I stood six years ago, when I entered the United States of America. I found dissonance in understanding, unpacking, and integrating my bi-ethnic Indian/Desi identity with my politicized and racialized Asian self in the United States.

India, my birthplace, is home to an enormous diversity of cultures, religions, languages, and ethnicities. As Indians, these little snippets of our identity matter so much that most of us choose to identify with our individual culture, ethnicity, or religion before even acknowledging our unity as citizens of one nation. To be of a specific ethnicity or culture is what defines someone in India. But what happens when you do not know where you belong? Are you lost in the tide of an ethnocentric culture that may value your last name more than your first? Or do you redefine what it means to be from a particular group by carving your own identity with the scalpel of your individuality? For the longest time, I struggled with these questions.

I come from a bi-ethnic family: My Baba (Father) is from a liberal, modern Bengali family, while my Maa (mother) hails from a socio-conservative noble tribal family in Tripura, a small and often forgotten state of North East India. My parents are one

of the few anomalies representing bi-ethnic marriages in the state. Their decision to love gave me a life so amazingly distinctive that I emerged with identities I never would have imagined. I grew up in the cradle of two very distinct cultures, both of which tolerated each other in their existence, but refused to reconcile in any manner possible. I “look” Bengali Indian but I eat, behave and live like a Tripuri tribal. For this reason, I always fail to authentically pass as Bengali. My culture just does not fit the Bengali mold, but I do not fit into the tribal frame either. I do not have the South East Asian features that distinguish tribal folks from other ethnicities, I do not speak any of the tribal languages, and my last name is not a tribal one. I come from both worlds but belong in neither. In this stage of identity diffusion, I experienced a struggle with developing my core sense of self, which was compounded by confusion and insecurity. For me, that confusion and insecurity was reflected in my uncertain relationship with extended family, cousins, grandparents, and to an extent, my own parents. I felt that it was my parents’ fault for the ambiguity with which I had to navigate the world.

Growing up bi-ethnic in India, I constantly navigated what it meant to be authentically me. Additionally, having received an education in Catholic schools and college all my life, I was exposed to a very Christian sense of morality and knowing despite my Hindu upbringing. In this context, my success depended on me becoming more and more “westernized.” In the absence of an ethnic identity I could comfortably call my own, and in the face of educational values taught and given primacy at school, I learned to adopt western ways of doing and being to become something other than my ambiguous self. Speaking clear and fluent English, learning western literature, and talking about western history made me seem intelligent, educated, and smart in that colonial framework. This “success” lent me the opportunity to come to the United States. While I was aware of my difference as a person of color, my struggle was to find inclusion in White culture and society. Frustration abounded; despite succeeding in every which way and despite adopting White ways of being and doing, I still was not considered “one of them.” These thoughts were exacerbated when I tried to come to terms with my newfound “brown” identity in a predominantly White institution in America. I was relearning many new messages of what it meant to be me, yet I had no way to voice those feelings of doubts, contexts, and anxieties.

I never realized then that White ways of knowing, being, and doing were fundamentally contradictory to who I was, and even though I wanted to be “one of them,” I never could. It was not until I realized how my concept of inclusion overlooked the broader aspect of the very system oppressing and devaluing my existence. I needed to assimilate and integrate just to be a nominal part of this system. This insidious and hegemonic nature of Whiteness is still something that I unpack as I learn, unlearn, and re-learn values from a more critical lens. The perception of deficit this system of Whiteness created in me is something that I

will actively have to deconstruct to fully realize my authentic self, my culture, and the value they possess.

Becoming Asian: An issue of nomenclature

I realized I was Asian when I came to the United States. I remember the first time I had to check off the “Asian” box in The Common Application; more than anything else, I was confused. Neither I, nor my family, or anyone I knew for that matter ever called themselves “Asian.” I felt distinctly uncomfortable doing so. In the U.S., I became “Asian.” I was not just “brown” but I was also “Asian” and so had to fit a certain mold of what Asian meant. The college professionals in my school introduced me to the Asian American Society, the Chinese American students who ran that club, and even took me to the “Asian” market. Even though being Asian was a new experience and meant something totally different to me, I was expected to feel included because I was “Asian.” I was trying to understand my bi-ethnic self even as I navigated this new identity of being Asian in America. My struggles with these conflicting pieces of who I am heightened in graduate school when I felt the pressure to conform, know, and identify in certain ways. As a student of color, I was expected to believe in certain things and agree to certain approaches; if I did not, it was because my Asian identity inherently channeled internalized Whiteness. I was fearful of what others saw me as and what I could be. I wasn’t brown enough or Asian enough for my peers, both White and POCs, to fully accept the multilayered self I brought to the classroom.

The blanket term “Asian” often invokes the specific image of an East Asian individual, and therefore by extension becomes a reference to East Asian culture. This conflict in who is Asian and who is not “Asian enough” percolates into our experiences as professionals and students. Specifically, international students who never identified as Asian find themselves rendered invisible through the imposition of expectations on what it means to be Asian in America. Accapadi (2012) notes that it is important to consider the implications of the nomenclature we use to define our students, and the tight boxes of stereotypical expectations we may unknowingly place them in. For international students, navigating an Asian American identity comes with the double-edged issue of race and nationality. Not only can the term Asian be confusing, and even exclusionary, for international students just getting acquainted with racial identity in the U.S., the term “American” places an added emphasis on the necessity of citizenship for their experiences as Asian to be valid. The complexity of this issue is rarely addressed by scholars in higher education since most scholars primarily focus on the experiences of Asian American students without considering the nuance of nationality or immigration. My identity as Asian was shaped by my understanding of what it meant to be an international student from Asia in America.

Integrating Asian and Desi

I did not realize the impact my identity crisis had had on me as a person. But today, while still in the process of finding out who I am, I accept being a bi-ethnic individual, even as I embrace my Desi identity. I accept being an anomaly. I accept the history of the parts of my identities. I learned of the hatred and xenophobia that has guided interactions between Bengalis and tribals for the longest time. I learned of how, subconsciously, the two groups are led to “tolerate” each other but not be in harmonious coexistence. I learned of my families and how their social and cultural past dictates their lives, and in turn how that has shaped my life. For while I am still trying to rethink and define what I mean when I say I am a “student from India,” I think I at least started to scratch the surface, and in doing so, found peace. In learning about my past and the past of my cultures, I took a step towards learning more about me. I came to understand and acknowledge that “Asian” is a political identity that becomes true in the face of Whiteness and White supremacy. “Asian” is the product of my racialization in the United States and I own it as the political aspect of who I am in this country. It helps me build community, understand my struggle in the context of others and puts perspective to my experience. There is power and reality to that term and I bear it as an essential part of me.

However, I am not just Asian. I refuse to be *just* Asian. Asian is who I became and was forced to be. “Asian” does not honor the depth, breadth, and excruciating complexity of my identity as a child of mixed caste and mixed ethnicity. It does not acknowledge the myriad stories I carry within me as a student from India. Thus, I have come to embrace and use the term *Desi* as an identifier of who I am. In terms of Accapadi’s (2012) model of identity consciousness, my *ethnic attachment*, *familial influence*, *other social identities*, and *immigration history* all played intersecting roles in helping me slowly emerge through multiple, and complex, points of entry to a stage of identity achievement where I choose my own path in life. Where I am now is the stage where who I am is a construction of my own beliefs and choices and an integration of the many realities in which I operate. In this situation, I came to that space where I choose to rely on my own notion of who I am and how I want to be named instead of depending on others to label me. Integrating my Desi and Asian identities as identities that I hold and navigate has been significant in helping me conceptualize who I am as a practitioner. However, this does not mean the process of self-discovery and understanding has stopped. There are still many pieces to my identity that I continue to unpack and understand.

Conclusion

In this context of unraveling who I am, I recognize identity consciousness as a tool and method of self-actualization and transformation. I am an Indian, cisgender,

educated, male, international student with complex degrees of privilege and oppression. Understanding those parameters of dominance, subordination, and oppression is quintessential to realizing “who am I and how do I show up to this work?” Answering that question has been significant in framing my approach to identity-conscious practice. I realized that to be socially just and reflective of a critical and transformative paradigm that rejects unequal dynamics of power, I must enter it with a willingness to be a part of the process; to strive for a heightened sense of awareness that includes both self and society. I hope to be able to engage in deeper learning on how to navigate these realities on an institutional level.

As a profession, higher education must reimagine how it engages its international student population, especially with regards to their socialization into American cultural dynamics. The racial development of international students from Asia is critical in understanding the Asian and Asian American experience in our colleges and to help provide better resources for our students who identify as such. More importantly, this work needs to happen through the lens of a liberation-focused paradigm that can redefine how we make meaning of our work as scholars and practitioners. In this regard, a holistic approach to development that honors the complexity of our students is essential.

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