

Postcolonial Diasporas and Globalization: Implications for Culture, Identity, and the Practice of Psychology

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Abstract

We live in an age where transnational immigration, border crossings, and global media are proliferating at an increasing rate. Discussions about the self -- which are further intensified by issues of gender, class, race, and nationality -- challenge the grand narratives of the bounded Cartesian self. Acquiring knowledge about issues of self and identity becomes all the more critical in the face of sweeping demographic changes in the United States and Europe where encounters with diverse histories, languages, religions, and ethnicities have emerged as central to the daily lives in many urban, metropolitan cultural spaces (Bhatia, 2007, 2009). There are two central objectives of the paper. First, I analyze the transformations of identity that have emerged in the transnational diaspora communities. The second objective of the paper is to show how studying the *practices* of global cultural flows and transnational diasporas has important implications for reconstructing *knowledge* about: 1) the concept of culture, 2) identity and self; and 3) the larger discipline of psychology (Hall, 1991, Gilroy, 1993, Bhatia, 2009). In particular, I analyze two examples of how racial identity and concepts associated with modes of belonging are strategically reconstructed in the diasporic practices of Indian immigrants and some African-American communities in the U.S. I explain how these postcolonial practices involve appeals to constellation of transnational spaces, colonial histories, racial formation and ancestral geographies, and how these global cultural flows compel us to reconfigure the practice and knowledge of psychology.

Summary

Globalization has created complex interconnections across the world. People move across borders, capital travels across cities and nations, media exchanges are interlinked across the globe, cultures have acquired a mobility that brings about new “civilization of clashes” and struggles between people (Appadurai, 2006, p.16). Media images that are enshrined and heavily coded with local cultural meanings beam out to new places to find their home in the television sets across continents (Inda and Rosaldo, 2002). It is clear that the convoluted interplay between global and local practices have been present for centuries, but what is new is that the velocity, frequency, and intensity of this interchange has increased sharply in the last five decades (Dissanayake, 2006; Inda and Rosaldo, 2002). These interchanges and encounters have produced “remarkable transformations in the space of politics, economics, and culture, as newer forms of capital, originating largely in the west, began to imprint their local visibilities and inflect in unanticipated ways historically sedimented practices (Dissanayake, 2006, p. 25).” The global movements of

capital, labor, goods, people, and ideas have enabled the creation of transnational spaces and diasporic cultures.

The displacement of millions of migrant laborers, refugees and professionals from the postcolonial “Third World” to the “First World” and the formation of numerous migrant “ethnic enclaves” is now one of the most important defining features of the 20th century. Much of this displacement has occurred and continues to do so in relation to imperialist and colonial legacies, “for in some sense, the Third-Worldization and hybridization in the First World merely follow upon the prior flows of population, armies, goods, and capital that in the colonial era mainly moved outward” (Lavie & Swedenberg, 1996, p. 9). In these spaces, culture and its components such as home, language, and, self refers to multiple dwelling points that are both contested and contradictory.

There are two central objectives of the paper. First, I analyze the transformations of identity that have emerged in the transnational diaspora communities. I show how diasporic identities are important sites for the reconstruction of knowledge about culture, identity, and practices (Hall, 1991, Gilroy, 1993). The second objective of the paper is to show how studying the *practices* of global cultural flows and transnational diasporas has important implications for reconstructing *knowledge* about: 1) the concept of culture, 2) identity and self; and 3) the larger discipline of psychology (Bhatia, 2009). In particular, I analyze two examples of how racial identity and concepts associated with modes of belonging are strategically reconstructed in the diasporic practices of Indian immigrants and some African-American communities in the U.S. These practices are constructed by appealing to a constellation of transnational spaces, histories, and ancestral geographies.

By drawing on the work of Kamari Maxine Clark (2006), I show how some black Americans reconfigure their racial identity by linking their black subjectivity to Africa through ancestry, roots, and transatlantic global circulation of “slavery” and “nobility” narratives. These narratives are important to analyze because these “narratives signify a connection to Africa that produces notions of ancestry as being constituted through form one black ancestor to another. It describes black Americans as surviving incarnations of preslavery African societies, thereby enabling a self-identification of black Americans as not simply racialised but fundamentally embedded in genealogies of heritage” (Maxine Clark, 2006, p. 134). These transnational cultural flows will be examined through insights gleaned from the diaspora journeys that a group of African-Americans undertook to Nigeria in search of roots and ancestral heritage.

The second example in the paper demonstrates how the Indian diaspora’s articulation of race is constructed through model minority discourse and brown privilege (Bhatia, 2007; Bhatia 2009). In her memoir, Meena Alexander (1993), a poet of South-Asian origin, reflects on her ethnicity as an Indian-American and states that she is a woman “cracked by multiple migrations,” with many selves born out of broken geographies (p. 3). Her narrative foregrounds the struggles with self and identity that many middle-class professional immigrants face as they try to find a place in contemporary U.S. society. On one hand historical conceptions of class, race and ethnicity all intermingle in different ways to shape the Indian-American and South-Asian identity in the U.S. (Bahri, 1996). On the other hand, Indian-Americans have employed a particular set of agentive “immigrant acts,” as Lisa Lowe (1996) describes, to craft their own identities and build public discourses of how they want to be seen by the larger American public. I employ the concepts of “symbolic ethnicity” and “brown privilege” to show how the middle-class Indian diaspora

strategically uses history to promote a cultural rather a racial identity. The cultural psychology of racial distancing invoked by the Indians in the U.S. involves appeals to history, racial formations, and traditional practices and brings into fold the consequences of living with a racial identity in a society that is permeated with both aversive and symbolic racism (Sue, 2006). I draw on these two examples of diaspora practices to discuss the implications for rethinking culture, identity and the practice of psychology within global contexts.

1. Changing Semiotics of Culture

The shrinking of time and space has spurred on a complex connectivity between cultures, integration and fragmentation of communities; symmetrical and asymmetrical shifts in identity construction and new margins and centers of power are now in play. I will show how culture and cultural practices are not only decoupled from geographies, but are reterritorialized and relocated in new spaces. The delinking or “disembedding” of culture from the power of geography has implications of how psychology defines culture and cultural practices that are dislodged from local spaces. As children and families increasingly live in multiple imagined communities their notion of cultural locations bring the “here” and “there” into a singular social field. The various disjunctures between cultures has created both cultural mobility as wells as cultural closure. The politics of *traveling cultures* has to be studied carefully as globalization is linked with the intensification and speeding up of “time-space compression” in economic and social life (Harvey, 1989). Similarly, sociologist Roland Robertson (1992) notes that “globalization refers to both the compression of the world and the intensification of the consciousness of the world as a whole (p. 8). The question before us: Can the psychologist insert themselves in those places where culture is being re-inserted? Can the psychologist travel with uneven cultural flows? It is important to remember here that flows of people, media and images are not smooth, and consistent, rather they are marked by forces of reception, resistance, and re-invention.

The meeting of local and global is marked by what Arjun Appadurai (1996) calls “relations of disjuncture.” Divergent cultural practices that connect Mogadishu to Minnesota, and Mumbai to New York are one side of the global story. However, there are also deeply entrenched practices that are threatened by the movement of global modernity and provide a counterforce to cosmopolitan notions of culture and travel. A plural psychology must begin with theorizing about cultural practices that contribute to uneven power relations in this world and the various spots of disjuncture’s that spur the creation of various cultural identities. Appadurai elaborates, “It is indeed such disjunctures themselves precipitate various kinds of problems and friction in different local situations. Indeed, it is the disjunctures between the various vectors characterizing this world-in-motion that produce fundamental problems of livelihood, equity, suffering, justice, and governance.”

2. Critical Notions of Identity

To link globalization and formation of diasporas with culture and identity is to get insight about the broader conditions in which social life is being organized and

transformed. This sense-making activity of culture provides the material for shaping identity and one's consciousness about the world. As we etch out a psychology of globalization, it is imperative that we formulate critical definitions of culture and hybridity. Ella Shoat reminds us that if we engage in a mere celebration of syncretism, hybridity and mixing and not ask difficult questions of how race, class and neo-colonial power relations are refigured in the construction of hybridity, we "runs the risk of appearing to sanctify the fait accompli of colonial violence." (1992, p.109). As culture inserts itself in new contexts, we get new configurations of power and hegemony in identities that are being created at the local-global nexus. This section will examine how various elements of asymmetry are produced within these postcolonial and transnational identities and why they need to be studied carefully. Psychology needs to provide compelling explanations about how the subject of global flows mediates with new social processes to become hybrid cultural identities in everyday life.

3. Psychology on the Move

If global contexts and diaspora formations have to serve as a useful analytical tool for comprehending the construction of identity in the present transnational world, then we must reexamine the specific ways in which psychology needs to travel and move as cultural contexts are disembedded and reinserted in new contexts. I draw on Marcus' (2002, p. 4) concept of "anthropology on the move" to suggest that "psychology on the move" needs to rethink its "regulative ideas and framing presuppositions" of the conditions under which psychological knowledge is generated-- how we study knowledge, how we interpret knowledge, and how we apply this knowledge. I propose that we think of psychology as a "multi-sited" imaginary that connects complex social spaces and follows the permutations of culture as it ravel through dense transnational networks. As practioners of psychology we have to be reflexive of our own "spheres of dominant power" (Marcus, 2002, p. 9) and we also have to pay attention to the unfolding cultural practices at the peripheral circuits of globalization—especially hose circuits circumvent the west. There are circuits of cultural flows that "dispossesses" and "displaces" people and we have to think of novel ways of reconstructing the practice of psychology that speaks to the lives of marginalized and oppressed populations. This examination is critical because it has implications for how psychology can contribute to a deeper understanding of the ways in which individuals negotiate the anxiety, uncertainty, and possibilities that emerge as a result of the contact between local and global forces. The examination of global identities provides a very valuable site from which psychology has an opportunity to remake itself as a field that continues to be relevant in a world that is rapidly becoming global, asymmetrical, and diverse.