

Culture as a Dynamic Construct

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Canada has one of the largest immigrant societies in the world. Canada prides itself on being a cultural mosaic and not a cultural melting pot. Qualitative ethnographic insight and observations I have made as an immigrant to Canada are discussed as they relate to Psychological Theory. The following questions are asked: What is the dynamic balance between acculturation, assimilation and stagnation? What represents a successful transition into Canadian culture for an immigrant?

INTRODUCTION

I recently immigrated to Canada from South Africa. In doing so I became my own research participant and my life became my research project. Qualitative researchers strive to become immersed in the communities they study. By virtue of my immigration, I rather fell into being immersed in a community of immigrants. The following are ethnographic insights I have drawn from my experiences and the experiences of other members of my community of immigrants to Canada. The researcher has become the subject also. I have reflected on these findings and used a Grounded Theoretical Approach to incorporate these insights into well established Psychological Theoretical knowledge.

Canada has received a wave of South African doctors as immigrants. I immigrated to Canada as the spouse of one of these doctors. South African doctors coming to Canada are in a privileged position. As an Anglo- African with a Western background and English as my native language, I did not experience many of the problems experienced by other immigrants; such as understanding the language, finding employment, living in poverty or discrimination (Santrock, MacKenzie-Rivers, Leung & Melcomson, 2005; Somerville & Wasworth, 2009). My experience of Canadians is that they are a very friendly and welcoming people. My adaptation as a Canadian immigrant and that of those people from whose experiences I draw for this paper, is a kind of a "control case" to highlight the process of immigration, without the extraneous variables mentioned above.

DEALING WITH LOSS

One thing that immigrants will often not share is their emotional attachment to their country of birth. The country immigrants have left behind may or may not be functioning as effectively as Canada but people almost always have a strong attachment to their country of birth. The process of immigration therefore represents a significant loss to many immigrants. The circumstances under which people decide to move to Canada may also influence this process.

Elizabeth Kübler Ross's *Stages of Death and Dying* (1969) can shed light on the process of loss (E.J. Van Rooy personal communication, 2009). Kübler Ross (1969) describes these stages as sequential but later research has shown that they may appear in any order (Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999 cited in Myers, 2010). The following are my recollections of my own feelings and typical statements made by immigrants, which highlight the stages in the experience of loss.

Immigrant Statements Relating to Loss

Denial

"One day we will move home"

Anger

"Why can't things in my country be as good as they are in Canada?"

Bargaining

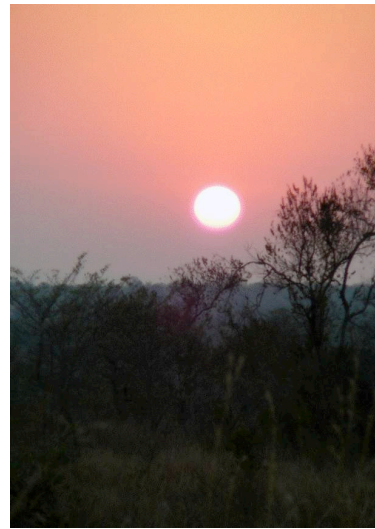
"We will just stay in Canada for a short while then we can go back"

Depression

"....and then I just cry again."

Acceptance

"I can live in Canada and be happy"



*Sunrise over the African Savannah -
Kruger National Park*

The successful resolution of these stages is characterised by the immigrant making new attachments and finding new things of value in Canada. However, it is all too common for immigrations to become "stuck" in depression.

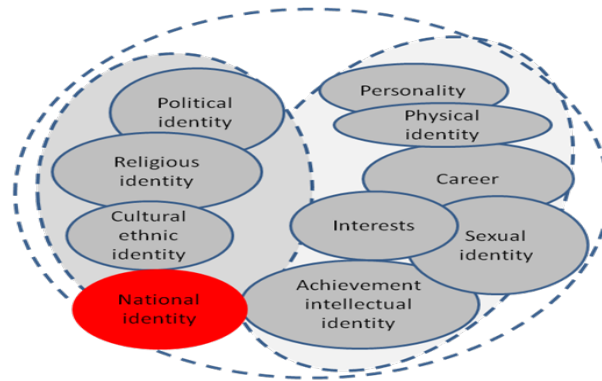
A NEW SENSE OF IDENTITY

Erick Erickson, (1968) a renowned Psychoanalyst proposed various life stages of development. Each stage is characterised by a "crisis" or challenge, which must be successfully resolved before further development can take place. The stage which is most significant for identity development is adolescence. Erickson (1968) describes this stage as identity vs. identity confusion.

A sense of identity is described by Santrock, et al., (2005) as encompassing many things including; personality, physical identity, career, interests, sexual identity, achievement or intellectual identity, political identity, religious identity, cultural and ethnic identity. In addition to the identity factors described by Santrock et al., (2005) I propose that one's National Identity,

that is whether or not one is a Canadian or of some other nationality, is also a fundamental cornerstone of overall identity. National Identity appears to be set during adolescence along with many other aspects of identity.

Figure 1: Identity Development



(Sanrock, MacKenzie-Rivers, Leung, Malsomson, 2005)
 *National Identity (de Bruin 2009)

Immigration poses a challenge to the identity of an adult immigrant. The identity previously established during adolescence is now challenged in the face of immigration. Immigrants may wonder if they are now Canadian or if they are of their original nationality. Immigrants may experience a conflict between letting go of their old identity or holding onto their old identity and simultaneously embracing a new Canadian identity. All the immigrants, I have met, respond to this challenge by engaging in behaviours which reaffirm their original national identity. Among South Africans, these reaffirming behaviours include the following:

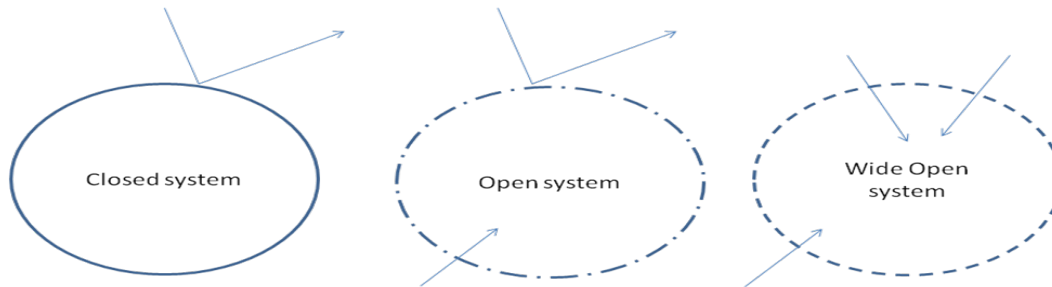
- Dropping Zulu words into conversations
- Decorating their homes with African décor, (which in my case includes animal prints and an unnatural number of elephants). African décor is something which South Africans in South Africa seldom seem to embrace.
- Listening to only Afrikaans music
- Translating Harry Potter books into Afrikaans
- Eating South African foods
- Starting a South African blog
- Flying “home” for the summer
- Reading South African online newspapers
- Checking the currency exchange
- Watching rugby and cricket

VON BERTALANFFY’S GENERAL SYSTEMS THEORY

Further insights into the process of acculturation can be drawn from the General Systems Theory developed by Von Bertalanffy’s (1950; 1974 cited in Meyer, Moore & Viljoen, 1997.) Von Bertalanffy describes human behaviour as functioning in systems. Systems may either be closed,

in that they are isolated from their environment, or open, in that they permit an inter-exchange between internal elements of the system and the environment. The General Systems theory can shed light on three different strategies which new Canadian immigrants use to address the challenges that immigration poses to their identities.

Figure 2: Von Bertalanffy's General Systems Theory



RAISING CHILDREN IN A DIFFERENT CULTURE

Immigrants are faced with the conundrum of raising children in a culture different from their own. Children are also faced with the challenge of parents imposing cultural values which may appear out of place and different from those of their peer group. For example, a teenager may feel wildly frustrated by her mother's expectation, formed in South Africa, that her daughter not date until she reaches university. (Unbeknownst to the mother, the adolescent dating scene in South Africa has changed substantially as a result of globalisation.)

This clash between parents' and children's expectations may result in a disconnection between them. Similar findings were reported in a Grounded Theory study of Portuguese Immigrants to Canada (Morrison & James, 2009)

The precarious balance between instilling traditional values in children and adapting to a Canadian culture seems to be navigated best by parents with authoritative flexible parenting styles and who have good communications skills. Permissive parenting, although a tempting option for many confused parents, and authoritarian parenting - - rigidly imposing irrelevant value systems - - have their own perils.

Children have the task of integrating and functioning within their own peer group. This process appears to be dependent on the age at which the child moves to Canada. Adolescents moving to Canada after their early teens may experience the same adaptation process as adults moving to Canada. Children living in Canada during their late childhood and early adolescence are strongly influenced by their peer groups. The huge impact of the adolescent's peer group on their development is often neglected in Psychology. The large impact of a peer group is demonstrated when 1st generation Canadians adopt the accents of their peers and not their parents. It would appear that if the majority of a child's peers are Canadian around the end of middle childhood and the beginning of adolescence, the child adopts the national identity of being Canadian, regardless of whether they were born in South African or Canada.

I am routinely amazed by the difference in identity between myself and a friend of mine. My friend and I are the same age, have the same cultural background, have similar parents and speak the same language. We were even born in areas close to each other in South Africa. Her

parents immigrated to Canada when she was six and I came to Canada as an adult. I am vexed by my mixed identities, and by feeling home sick and chronically concerned about the welfare of South Africa. My first generation Canadian friend suffers almost none of these concerns – having developed a Canadian identity in childhood and adolescence.

Another friend of mine immigrated to South Africa from Hong Kong in her late childhood. She lived in South Africa during her adolescence and early adulthood and has now moved back to Hong Kong. During this short, yet critical time in South Africa, she developed a South African identity even though she has spent the majority of her life in Hong Kong. She states that she now feels “100% South African Chinese”.

I suspect that growing up with a peer group consisting only of immigrant children may result in a subgroup identity. Children may feel that they are 2nd generation immigrants rather than 1st generation “Canadians.” They may also have a stronger attachment to their parents’ country of birth than those who do not grow up with a largely immigrant peer group. Further research would provide more insight into this.

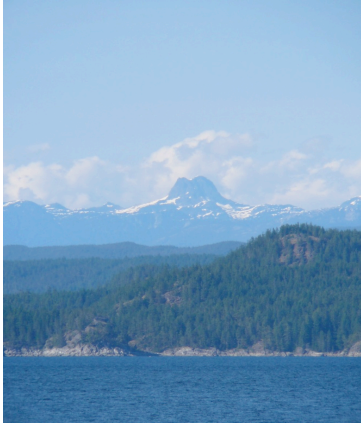
CANADIAN CULTURE OR CONSUMERISM

In the struggle of immigrant children to develop “Canadian - ness” there is another imposing discourse which may hijack the process. As immigrant adolescents experience the disconnect between their cultural identities and that of their parents and work on assimilating an identity which is congruent with their peer group, they may be left vulnerable to the perpetual bombardment of consumer culture.

James (2007) describes consumer culture as a value system which has developed through mass media geared towards increasing purchasing behaviour. People subscribing to this culture are eager to consume, believe that their value as people is determined by their possessions and are unusually focused on fame, attractiveness and youth; and are wasteful, and conventional. They also accept inequality as a natural order of things, as possessions determine people’s value. Thus, in order to be valued, some people must necessarily have more than others.

Consumer culture is in stark contradiction with Canadian values, which I experience as being focused on equality and social justice. I fear that some first generation immigrants, who have grown up in Canada from an early age, may rebel against their parents’ culture, skip right over Canadian culture, and adopt consumerism in their quest for a cultural identity. For example, a daughter may no longer respect her mother if her mother’s profession, although noble, does not pay well. One immigrant child asked me if I would consider having a second wedding celebration as my first wedding celebration was not held at a commercial resort. Although all children are vulnerable to consumer culture, immigrant children may be even more so. A Canadian Council on Social Development study on Immigrant Youth (2000) found that recent immigrant youth experience Canadian culture as highly consumerist. This appears to be influenced by the age at which children immigrate and whether or not they assimilate this culture. This may prove to be an interesting direction for further research.

CONCLUSION

*The View from Vancouver Island*

In conclusion, even under the best of circumstances, immigration is not easy. As a person's national identity appears to be a deeply rooted psychological process, immigrants may feel many conflicting feelings about their immigration. However, the process of immigration can be successfully navigated by people who are open to their new culture, while accepting their own heritage. Parents who have authoritative flexible parenting styles with good communication skills may also meet these challenges more successfully. The insights discussed in this paper are from my own subjective experiences which provide a fertile harvest for theory generation. These insights and anecdotes provide a good starting point for further research.

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About the Author

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