BRIDGING THE GENERATION GAP

Exploring the Differences between Immigrant Parents and their Canadian-Born Children

ABSTRACT

In the following paper, I discuss the importance of recognizing generation as a key differentiating factor in visible minority experiences of integration in Canadian society. The bulk of both academic and non-academic research has focused on the immigrant experience and the difficulties of acculturation, particularly for immigrants who have been racialized (seen as racially different from the dominant white population or even immigrants of European extraction). For second-generation minorities (the children of immigrants, those who were born and/or arrived in Canada before adolescence), the problems of fitting in are quite different. They do not have the same concerns of acculturation, yet despite their often mainstream appearance and behaviour, they still have to struggle with racism and exclusion, particularly in childhood and adolescence. This article argues that the experience of *growing up* different is what distinguishes first and second-generation experiences with belonging. Therefore, a great deal more attention needs to be paid to how the concept of generation radically affects visible minority negotiations with Canadian society.

> People who aren't of color…don't understand the duality of my life…why I have to lie to my parents about where I'm going…sometimes I'd cry myself to sleep at night because…my boyfriend wouldn't understand the pressures that I go through as a Korean daughter…growing up, my God, I can remember days…when the frustration was just so much that I didn't want to go home…when school was done, I'd hang out…by myself, not socializing with anybody. It can be really detrimental because you don't feel you belong anywhere.[1]

There is often a tendency in both academic and non-academic contexts, to assume that being a visible minority automatically implies that one is an immigrant. Scholars, researchers and mainstream media attempt to address questions around racism, belonging and being Canadian with the underlying assumption that the communities and individuals about whom they are speaking are purely immigrant; that is, they have spent a significant chunk of their formative years in another country and have moved to Canada as adults. In such a scenario, the issues revolve around acculturation and the sometimes bumpy road to acquiring citizenship: language and job training; cultural alienation, and both systemic and everyday discrimination on the basis of differences in dress, accent, skin colour, and other cultural markers. While the harsh realities of immigrant life should not be underestimated, it is also problematic to assume that all visible minorities experience specifically immigrant problems. Such an assumption perpetuates the idea that visible minority communities will always be immigrants and, therefore, outsiders to the Canadian nation, regardless of how many years they have spent in Canada. Furthermore, what is consistently overlooked in this scenario is the presence of non-immigrants who are at the same time visible minorities. Their experiences of alienation, racism and belonging are vastly different from those of their immigrant parents, but are no less significant in terms of how we continue to construct our ideas of who is and is not a "real" Canadian.[2]

In the following paper, I argue that the issue of generation must be taken up in a more sustained manner by both scholars and non-academics alike. Research on race and racism in Canada needs to be more attentive to the experiences of second generation visible minority children, youth and adults. It is also of vital importance for educators and government initiatives to recognize that generation is a distinguishing factor in people's experiences of belonging and exclusion. Using the available literature in this area in conjunction with my own fieldwork,[3] I will focus on three main points: 1) generation as a crucial factor in the kinds of problems encountered by visible minorities 2) the unpacking of generation and its relationship to development and identity and 3) the problems faced by second generation subjects, i.e. dealing with racism during formative years of identity construction, and negotiating the demands of mainstream peer culture that are often in direct opposition to the cultural norms of family and community.

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Generation as a Key Concept

A great deal of research on visible minorities in Canada continues to reference a purely immigrant context. Both scho-larly and non-scholarly work uses language that implicitly constructs the typical visible minority individual as someone who has recently emigrated from another country. The problems that such individuals and groups encounter are then addressed as problems of acculturation: language and job training; 'Canadianizing' their educational credentials; learning the cultural norms of Canadian society; and dealing with both everyday and systemic racism because of their perceived differences from the white mainstream population. There is no discounting the realities of immigration and the struggles of communities to make homes in a strange and often hostile society. However, it is problematic to assume that visible minorities are always immigrants. This assumption only serves to reify the dominant perception of racialized, ethnicized communities as eternal immigrants. In this scenario, if you are a visible minority, you will be always a permanent outsider to the Canadian nation. For example, certain groups have been in Canada for over three or four generations and are still referred to as immigrant communities.[4]

Furthermore, it is not a suitable framework for understanding identity that is raced and ethnicized without being immigrant. If we continue to assume that racism in Canadian society is always related to the problem of "newcomers," then we are effectively ignoring the presence and experiences of many people who were born and have grown up in Canada and yet continue to struggle with issues of racism and exclusion. In place of language difficulties, foreign credentials and cultural alienation, second generation subjects have to struggle with a discourse of national belonging that is flexible enough to exclude them even when they talk, act and live 'like everyone else.' How are these two experiences distinct? This is a crucial element of race and identity, but it has not been a major part of the research on specific visible minority communities. A great deal of the Canadian research has, until recently, overlooked generation and specifically youth. Most of this research has been primarily concerned with understanding the adult immigrant experience or, occasionally, the non-adult in the context of family. This research has not explored the question of youth and the specificities of this subject position in terms of the multiple spaces that youth occupy (school, peer groups, family, community etc.). However, this is slowly changing, as Canadian researchers are now offering compelling accounts of the key differences between immigrants and their children and point to the importance of theorizing these differences (see, for example, Rajiva, 1996; Aujla, 2000; Handa, 2003; Rajiva, 2004).

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Growing Up Different: the Challenges of Becoming Someone and Belonging Somewhere

Age and generation structure belonging are significant in very different ways for immigrants and their second-generation children in countries such as Britain, the U.S. and Canada. The obvious explanation is that the former arrive in a context of difference, whereas the latter grow up in a context of difference. But on the face of it, this should mean that second generation ethnics find belonging a much easier task. According to American scholars, Min and Kim, this group is less likely to face the same systemic barriers that their immigrant parents faced (Min and Kim, 2000: 754). Changing historical contexts coupled with a stronger comfort level *vis-à-vis* the dominant culture mean that young minorities have an easier time succeeding on the job market and integrating socially into mainstream western culture (754). Yet Min and Kim also point out that in spite of the fact that immigrant professionals have more disadvantages in the labour market, and more unpleasant job experiences than their western-born counterparts (754), the latter have higher levels of insecurity and self-doubt (750-755). Their identities are seemingly more fragile and more open to confusion. Below are two first-hand accounts of growing up as minorities in Canada that point to the difficulties that second generation subjects encounter, difficulties that are consi-derably different from those faced by their immigrant parents, and yet are in some ways more existentially painful:

> I know people who were born here and somehow we always feel we are strangers because we're visible minorities, so at first sight, people will always see you as coming from somewhere else. In many cases you still have to prove yourself.[5]

> During my adolescent years, it hindered my development as an individual because everyone kept hounding me about the fact that I was different, that I looked different (not that I sounded different) and it led to feelings of inferiority; difference became something negative. It happened all the time when I was younger and as I was growing up.[6]

As theses two excerpts illustrate, generation is one of the key factors that affects *identity* in the case of minority children and youth. What becomes apparent in these and other similar accounts is that unlike immigrants who have previous identities to draw upon (outside their subsequent experiences of immigrant non-belonging within a western nation), second generation subjects who develop in contexts of outsi-derness have never been anything other than visible minorities. They do not have the same desire to belong that many second generation children experience. For this group, growing up different at a time in their lives when belonging is so important has been the biggest challenge. A sense of belonging with one's peers is crucial in childhood and adolescence; it is what allows subjects to build a positive sense of identity. If, during such developmentally significant periods of identity work, subjects consistently encounter exclusion, the question arises as to how this affects their overall sense of self (Rajiva, 2004). Researchers in this area are still not attentive enough to the developmental implications of second generation experiences with becoming different.

Inter-generational Conflicts

One major concern is that second-generation subjects have to negotiate a specific set of struggles around belonging

that arise from the difficulties of being "in-between" two cultural identities and experiences. This means that they are neither part of their parents' past cultural landscapes, nor are they completely part of the 'Canadian' mainstream. One of the main problems encountered within immigrant families is this tension between maintaining 'homeland' values and cultural practices and the realities of raising children who are part of mainstream Canadian peer culture. Although some immigrants opt to place their children in special, cultural (or religious) schools, for most immigrants this is not a viable option. The end result is that second-generation children grow up being exposed to the norms of Canadian society. This becomes a serious problem, particularly at adolescence, this since many immigrant communities have beliefs that are radically opposed to certain Canadian adolescent practices. Western adolescence has certain assumptions underlying it, as a period of discovery, identity building and rebellion against the family and sometimes school structures. In many communities, certain practices that Canadian society takes somewhat for granted – i.e. dating, drinking, drugs, parties, pre-marital sex, dances, certain types of clothes – are frowned upon and sometimes actively prohibited:

> My main memories of adolescence…Studying or fighting with my parents about socializing (Were your parents strict?) yes very strict. Very strict. Absolutely. Um so um, I had the earliest curfew of all my friends, I had to, they had to know exactly where I was at all moments outside the house, no not outside the house, but outside of school hours…it was sort of a constant battle to try to um, sort of break away from that. Mostly unsuccessful, and um (What about things like dating?) dating was um, no, absolutely not. I mean that was absolutely not a, it wasn't even something you talked about, at home...All my friends were mainly, like every day friends, girls, and dating was like, it wasn't even an issue, it was like no. (so just understood) understood, absolutely understood.[7]

As the above account indicates, this is particularly salient for girls, who have to struggle with what feminist scholars describe as the gendered nature of national identity (see, for example, Valverde, 1992; Stasiulis and Yuval Davis, 1995; Khan, 1998). According to Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1989), women in most countries are consistently expected to be "bearers of culture": that is, reproduce the traditions, cultural symbols and norms of that particular group. This is particularly the case with communities living in the shadow of a dominant national identity that excludes them on the basis of perceived racial difference. Girls are expected to maintain cultural practices that are sometimes no longer relevant in the homeland countries, and are certainly not widely accepted in Canadian society. This includes concerns with dress and behaviour;[8] peer socializing (at night, at parties and school dances); growing independence at adolescence (which is often not part of immigrant communities' understandings of adolescence); and perhaps most importantly, interacting with members of the opposite sex, and having romantic relationships with boys who are not part of the community. Although cases such as the recent Atwal murder are rare and extreme, these tragedies are a poignant reminder of the intergenerational difficulties that communities face: for many immigrants, the behaviour of their daughters is tied directly to the community's sense of identity, dignity and difference from white Canadian society.[9]

Racism and Belonging

While the focus in the literature is often on the intergenerational tensions between immigrant parents and Canadian-born children, part of this tension is also related to the latter's experience of racism and discrimination in larger society. As previously mentioned, adult immigrants' identities are generally shaped by the homeland contexts in which they grew up. Second-generation subjects growing up in countries such as Canada have to wrestle with being seen as 'racially' different in a national context, where Canadianness is automatically conflated with Whiteness. Their respective struggles with belonging in Canadian society are perhaps what constitute the most important difference between the two generations. Despite shared experiences of racism and exclusion, the responses of the two groups differ significantly, mainly because first-generation minorities have less at stake in terms of belonging to Canadian society.

Authors such as Okano (1993), Rezai-Rashti (1994), Aujla (2000) and others have discussed the shame and embarrassment that minority children feel growing up, about their immigrant families and cultural backgrounds. According to some scholars, while immigrants often experience more overt racism than their Canadian-born and/or raised children, they also have a stronger source of self-esteem to draw upon (see, for example, Bagley, 1987; Ou and McAdoo, 1993). In contrast, second-generation subjects, from a very young age, are aware that they are 'different.' They are, thus, in greater danger of developing a negative self-identity because they realize that no matter how much they try to belong, they will always be perceived to a lesser or greater extent, as foreigners or, following Aujla (2000), 'strangers in their own land':

> I said earlier that in a way I think I will be always be a stranger to this society until the day people meet me and don't feel like they have to ask me where I'm from anymore. The day I won't have to prove myself constantly.[10]

> Just in terms of like feeling ashamed and I guess what you were saying, like about trying to blend in and not be seen as Indian, I remember when like sometimes at school, people would make comments about Indians, not to me, but about Indians, in front of me, and when I heard those things, it used to make me feel so awful inside. So awful. And like that incident with my mom when she was dressed in a Sari, like I was so, I don't know, I just didn't want to be associated with it. It's that whole thing that you talk about, being seen as different.[11]

The above accounts illustrate the profound effects of racism on second-generation identities and on the negative ways in which subjects often end up relating to their families and communities. These stories also point to a fundamental difference between immigrant and second-generation struggles to belong: immigrants may actually have a much harder time economically and socially in terms of fitting in and building a life, but second generation subjects may be more affected at the level of positive identity and self-esteem because, unlike

their parents, they have no previous memories of belonging upon which to draw.

Conclusion

The above discussion highlighted the importance of generation as a key concept in the study of visible minority communities. My main argument was that, for the most part, both the academic and non-academic literature has tended to focus on specifically immigrant issues: language and job training; learning new cultural norms; dealing with alienation and family upheavals; and handling racism and discrimination in Canadian society. There is no gainsaying the importance of this work in terms of offering us a deeper understanding of the immigrant experience. Nevertheless, in much of this literature, there is still an implicit sense that visible minorities are always immigrants, facing specifically immigrant problems. Until recently, most of the literature on race in Canada has neglected the experiences of non-immigrant minorities from ethnicized backgrounds: in other words, the second-generation children of immigrants, those who were born and/or raised in Canada, and have had their main experiences of socialization in Canadian society.

For the second generation, belonging is not an issue of language or job training, foreign credentials, unfamiliarity with Canadian cultural norms, or a longing for a past 'homeland.' Instead, they face the difficult task of growing up different: trying to belong to a national identity that continues to see them as not Canadian; dealing with experiences of systemic and overt racism that are based solely on perceived racial difference rather than on cultural strangeness; and finally, struggling to balance the often competing demands of peer culture with the cultural expectations of immigrant families and communities. These problems are widespread across different ethnicized communities; however, we are only now slowly beginning to explore the specificities of experience in the Chinese, Korean, Somali, South Asian and other communities. Scholars such as Bagley, McAdoo, Handa and others have drawn our attention to the noticeable differences between immigrants and their children in terms of integration in Canadian society, but a great deal still remains to be known about the experiences and identities of second-generation children and in particular, the strategies they use to negotiate belonging in their extremely complex spaces of existence.

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Notes

1 Respondent N, in Mythili Rajiva. *Identity and Politics: Second Generation Ethnic Women in Canada*. Master's Thesis, 1996, 122.

2 Throughout the paper, I will refer to Canadian as distinct from ethnicized and racialized communities in order to drive home the point that there is still a dominant understanding of Canadian as white and western.

3 For further details concerning methodology, please see Mythili Rajiva. *Identity and Politics: Second Generation Ethnic Women in Canada*. Master's Thesis. Also see Mythili Rajiva. 2004. *Racing Through Adolescence:* Becoming *and* Belonging i*n the Narratives of Second Generation South Asian Girls*. Doctoral Dissertation, 1996.

4 For example, South Asians have been in parts of Canada since the early 1900s, and yet they are commonly assumed to be a "new community" in both the literature as well as mainstream perceptions. See, for example, Kamala Elizabeth Nayar. *The Sikh Diaspora in Vancouver: Three Generations amid Tradition, Modernity and Multiculturalism*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004.

5 Respondent E, in Mythili Rajiva. *Identity and Politics: Second Generation Ethnic Women in Canada*. Master's Thesis, 1996, 122.

6 Respondent N, in Mythili Rajiva. *Identity and Politics: Second Generation Ethnic Women in Canada*. Master's Thesis, 1996.

7 Anita, 34, interview participant in Mythili Rajiva. *Racing Through Adolescence:* Becoming *and* Belonging *in the Narratives of Second Generation South Asian Girls*. Doctoral Dissertation, 2004.

8 The specifics of this depend largely on the particular community. For example, certain communities are less concerned with dress, and more with behaviour and the maintenance of certain cultural norms.

9 In 2003, 17 year old Amandeep Atwal, a Sikh girl in British Columbia, was killed by her father, after he discovered that she had a white boyfriend and she was planning to move in with him.

10 Respondent O, in Mythili Rajiva. *Identity and Politics: Second Generation Ethnic Women in Canada*. Master's Thesis, 1996, 122.

11 Rose, 33, interview participant in Mythili Rajiva. *Racing Through Adolescence:* Becoming *and* Belonging *in the Narratives of Second Generation South Asian Girls*. Doctoral Dissertation, 2004, 384 .