Chojar, Faith: Multicultural Thanksgiving/Celebrating American Holidays Within Immigrant Families

RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Topic: The acculturation and assimilation of immigrant families into American traditions, specifically holidays.

For my ethnographic video I plan to explore how immigrant families assimilate and adjust to American culture with a specific interest on traditional American holidays. I have family who is half from India, who came to America approximately 40 years ago. They are willing to discuss with me the process which it took them to come here, what it was like being a family of Indian immigrants in a primarily white neighborhood in New York City, and what reasons caused them to begin more of an abandonment of the celebration of their native holidays and the adoption of American ones. I will also be speaking with the Italian side of the family and exploring the reaction warranted when coming into contact with people who were entirely foreign, struggling to adopt the American way of life. I would like to research studies on how different groups began to assimilate into American culture after immigration, the creation of ethnic enclaves, culture shock and American tradition. I will be asking questions such as:

- How did being in a country other than your own affect the way you raised your children?
- (specifically in my grandparents’ case) Why did you choose to raise your children Catholic instead of Sikh?
- What caused you to begin celebrating American holidays, namely Thanksgiving?
- What do these holidays mean to you?
- Why don’t you celebrate the holidays that your parents taught you to celebrate?
- Who did you talk to once you came to America?
- How difficult would you say the change was to make from being a traditional Indian family to being a traditional American family?

REFERENCES

DeWind, Josh, and Philip Kasinitz

Foner, Nancy

Middleton, DeWight R.

Alejandro, Portes

Song, Steve

The basic topic is good but you’ll have to hone it down... the questions are very broad right now and you just won’t have the time in 7 minutes or 800 words to address all of them. Explore the literature and see if you can focus the topic.

RESEARCH

VIDEO

Researching the celebration of American holidays by immigrant families proved it to be an act of acculturation and assimilation into a society in which the immigrant is unfamiliar. This was later confirmed by interview with first-generation immigrants, Mona and Besant Chojar. It is a method of coping and positive adaptive behavior, unlike that marked by culture shock, defined as individual maladaptive behavior to new environments (Middleton). After the initial introduction to the new environment, the individual begins to subsist positively. In this case, accepting traditional American holidays was a main method implemented. “If you have to live, you have to adopt the way,” stated Mrs. Chojar when asked if she had a difficult time relocating from her home country, India. This follows through in most all immigrant families/individuals. These traditions often become changed as time goes on and in the modifications that the family makes- such as eating Indian food on Christmas, but still having a meal of turkey, ham, potatoes and macaroni on Thanksgiving. “Obviously, immigrants do not exactly reproduce their old cultural patterns when they move to a new land; but these patterns continue to have a powerful influence in shaping family values and norms as well as actual patterns of behavior that develop in the new setting,” (Foner). Meaning begins to be added to the original meaning, which in this case, was not clearly known and was marked by stories being told of “Indians having nothing to eat” and “praying to and thanking God for keeping us alive.”

I am an American born child of mixed ethnicity, my father coming from India and my mother being Italian, born in NY, NY. The mix created was a particularly interesting one, with sarees being worn to half of the family functions by my Italian mom, and then having suits and dresses being worn by all to American functions. It appeared that my parents were adapting to American culture far faster than my grandparents were, and my brother and I were fully integrated. “… There are pronounced differences between the rate of acculturation of the parents and their children… children of Indian immigrant parents adapt to, embrace, and assume the behaviors, attitudes, and values of the dominant culture,” (Dutta).

The changes in tradition can be looked at as a patchwork quilt, being put together as time goes on. Rituals change and old traditions lose while new get tacked on for generations to come. It can be argued that all cultural forms are in a constant state of hybridization and imitation (Bhadha) and that the differences violate cultural boundaries, ultimately ending in mixed marriages where both cultures are adopted (Bhadha). Holidays in this sense have become intensely secularized. Though thanksgiving has little/no religious meaning, but has much meaning in the American tradition. It was also adopted by the Christian church, claiming we should be thanking God for all we have. It has become, by my Indian family, a holiday which holds its purposes in celebrating with those we don’t see most of the year and spending time together. The holiday itself has been secularized itself outside of my own household, “inevitably, secular pastimes began to encroach upon the obligations of church and hearth… theater companies began giving Thanksgiving Day matinees and social organizations started staging fancy Thanksgiving Day balls,”
(Gustaitis). Taken from interviews that were conducted with the New York Times, many immigrants stated to immediately adopt Thanksgiving as a holiday and called it relatable with the story of the Indian Americans helping out the pilgrims, the same way the families were helping them out once they came overseas (Severson).

The first Thanksgiving, as described by William Bradford, was a small celebration in preparation for the winter. Houses were dressed up to maintain warmth and everything was in abundance and storage (Wills). Wills (2003) argues that the Thanksgiving we celebrate now, as a country, was produced commercially and is solely for profit (Wills). With Black Friday and Cyber Monday following a holiday in which we are supposed to be grateful for all we have, these ideas of Thanksgiving being created for the masses by the corporations don’t seem too far from unbelievable. “Consumer culture has shaped every American domestic occasion, but not to the same degree,” (Pleck). Celebrations of Thanksgiving have not only lost their school-taught meanings/purposes in my family home, but are widespread across the country. As I mentioned in my video, “Immigrants . . . may construct their own versions of tradition as they re-conceptualize the past to make sense of current experience and speak to current dilemmas and traditions,” (Foner). This is much like what has happened with the holiday of Thanksgiving in general, having it become a cross of a family/commercial/religious/traditional holiday which is now a part of American history.

QUESTIONS
Mona and Besant:
When did you come to America?
Why did you leave India?
Where in India did you travel from?
When did you start celebrating Thanksgiving?
Why did you start celebrating it?
How difficult was it to move to a new country?
Why do we still celebrate Thanksgiving?
Do you know why thanksgiving is celebrated in America?
What does Thanksgiving mean to you?
Why did you raise your kids catholic?

To their kids:
Do you remember when you started celebrating Thanksgiving?
What did you do when you first started celebrating?
When did you learn about the meanings of Thanksgiving?
Why do you think your parents started celebrating?
What is the meaning of Thanksgiving?
What does it mean to you?
Why do we continue to celebrate?

REFERENCES
Anonymous
1997 Immigrants’ Holiday Rituals Changing. *USA Today Magazine*. 126(2631)

Bhattacharya, Gauri

DeWind, Josh, and Philip Kasinitz

Dutta, Debashis

Farver, J. A. M., Bhadha, B. R., & Narang, S. K.

Foner, Nancy

Gustasis, Joseph

Middleton, DeWight R.

Pleck, Elizabeth

Severson, Kim
2004 Turkey is Basic, but Immigrants Add Their Homeland Touches. *New York Times*.

Song, Steve
REFLECTION

Upon beginning this assignment, I set out to portray what life in a multicultural family who celebrated Indian and American holidays was like and how it was for a traditional Indian family to come to America. I sought to talk to the American-Italian side of my family to gain their opinion on coming into contact with a foreign culture and making it a part of their family. This topic proved to be too broad. It narrowed, focusing on the Indian side on Thanksgiving and talking to my participants- grandparents and aunt about where they traveled from, why, the transition to America and what started them on celebrating American holidays.

Stylistically, my video was quiet. Silence played a role in the beginning and ending sequences, with no outside sound aside from dialogue. The participants picked what they wanted to discuss and how, like my grandmother choosing to sit with her daughter if she needed help with articulating her English and my grandfather choice of talking on his own. This worked well in conveying the message of the video with little distraction. It also added dramatic effect in the last ~30 seconds with the final voice over, still photos, and silent video.

I followed the methods implied in conducting a life history. Doing so “. . . [focuses] on all the circumstances that have affected one’s life,” (Angrosino 2007). Though I did not show a full life history in my video, my grandfather spent nearly an hour telling the story of his life and reflecting upon where he’s come from. These individuals were those which I found who could be considered “representative” of the rest of their family who immigrated through the same processes at different times in their lives.

I used multiple resources dealing with culture shock, transition and acculturation into American society of foreigners. Majority of the research was explained in my paper, whereas in the video I added a slight bit of research to tie together what the participants were talking about- showing that many of the things they were saying were common, though possibly incorrect. In my video, research by Nancy Foner was shown.

Since I was filming my own family, maintaining objectivity was difficult. As the filmmaker, parts of myself were projected in the video (Sherman 1998). Being tasked with sifting through the material to see what was appropriate to use and what wasn’t, added an inherent bias to modifying a complete life history in picking and choosing what was “good.” Even with these biases in place my video and written work accurately showed the practices of a mixed family during the holidays, where the practices stemmed from, and what the holidays truly mean to them now.