Himes, Mary: A Study of the Impact of Multicultural Events and Organizations on College Students

Research Proposal

I plan to research the impact of multicultural events and organizations on college students at SUNY Geneseo. The primary objective of my research is to see how college students relate to and/or are impacted by the cultures they are demonstrating through said organizations. Through interviews with a number of students from a multicultural organization, I expect to find that some students engage in said multicultural activities for the purpose of entertainment, some that engage for the purpose of becoming culturally aware, or even some for both purposes. Before starting my research, I hope to determine the best way to measure how beneficial something is to someone, and then I hope to find that multicultural events and programming are beneficial to students. I will interview students from the Bhangra Club at Geneseo; a dance club based on a traditional Indian Harvest Dance. I plan to use a number of methods from Heider (1976) to create my movie, and in said movie I will ask the below questions and more that I will design as the project continues:

- Why did you join Bhangra?
- Which culture does Bhangra study and or demonstrate?
- Did a prior interest in said culture have something to do with you joining Bhangra?
- Do you feel that participation in Bhangra has contributed to your understanding of the culture?
  - (if yes) how so?
  - (if no) how come?
- Do you feel more culturally aware as a result of joining Bhangra?
- Do you apply what you have learned through Bhangra to your life as a whole?
  - (if so) how?
  - (if not) do you feel that you can't do so?
- Do you feel that Bhangra has benefitted you as a person?
  - (if so) why and how?
  - (if not) how come?

Scholarly Background on (Topic/Title)

Studying the impact of multicultural organizations and programming on a college campus such as SUNY Geneseo involves understanding the benefits and importance of multiculturalism, as well as understanding the overall impact of out-of-class multicultural experiences. According to Watt, "a multicultural initiative is any type of program and/or a set of strategies that promote skill development to better manage difference on a personal, institutional, community, or society level" (Watt 2013: 7). After interviewing two students from the Bhangra team on the Geneseo campus, Kyle Fletcher and Varna Nair, and exploring the growing academic research on the impact and reality of multiculturalism on campus, it has become clear that multiculturalism as a whole is beneficial to an individual and to a college campus. The benefits of engaging in and expressing multiculturalism include "[preparing] students for working and living in an increasingly diverse world" (Bigatti 2012: 79), "understanding structural inequalities and how to produce social change toward equality and justice" (Einfeld 2008: 106), "[providing] college students with a holistic education that will prepare them to function as good citizens in society" (Watt 2013: 6), and an enhancement of an individual’s understanding of what goes on in the world according to interviewee Kyle Fletcher. Although "out-of-class experiences influence student learning and personal development" (Cheng 2006: 15), it is important to recognize the supplemental need for faculty, staff, and student affairs administrators to encourage participation in multicultural courses, organizations, events, and programming in order to assist students in becoming more culturally aware (Howard-Hamilton 2011: 11; Globetti 1993: 217-218).

The purpose behind interviewing Kyle Fletcher and Varna Nair was based on their involvement in multicultural organizations and programs. Both Kyle and Varna are part of the Bhangra dance group, Bhangra is "a type of Punjabi folk dance originally performed by men as a celebration of the harvest and it is usually associated with the Sikh religion" (Chacko 2013: 102). Bhangra is one of many multicultural organizations accessible to the student body of SUNY Geneseo; however, it struck my interest as a suitable organization to study considering that an aspect of the Indian culture is deliberately demonstrated; dance. Bhangra appeared on college campuses across the United States as an outlet for "South Asians who want to connect with their cultural heritage, but others are welcome too" (Bhangra Boom 2008: 68). Both Kyle and Varna expressed their admiration for the ways in which Bhangra as an organization has benefitted them; both of which mentioned that Bhangra helped them to open their eyes to other cultures and ideas other than their own. Aside from admiration for the group, Kyle and Varna discussed the overall positive attitude toward SUNY Geneseo’s attempts to encourage multiculturalism, emphasizing the idea that “the institution... also equips them and allows and creates the necessary socio-cultural space for them to achieve their full capacity” (Esterhuys 1999: 44). Directly acting out and demonstrating cultural traditions allows Kyle and Varna to tap into the Indian culture on a more intimate level and understand the history of the culture better than simply reading about or watching it; however, even as a spectator of a Bhangra practice, it was clear to me where the harvest traditions lie while watching the dancers use the different tools and move as though they were actually in the shoes of the traditional Indian harvest dancers.

Looking into the perceived benefits of practicing multiculturalism on campus in comparison to personal accounts of the impact of multiculturalism comes with a number of positive conclusions regarding the overall impact of multicultural organizations and programming. The idea that “participation in multicultural, co-curricular activity groups might encourage students to develop events that include the need to research global topics related to their group’ s purpose and campus mission” (Storey 2010: 106), seems accurate based on extensive work done by other scholars and the interviews I conducted with Kyle and Varna. Research shows that “student interaction with people from diverse racial or ethnic backgrounds is also associated with an increase in leadership abilities, civic participation, cultural knowledge and understanding, commitment to promoting racial understanding, greater openness to diverse perspectives, and a willingness to change one’s beliefs” (Pasque 2009: 81) and that participation in student organizations provide students with “opportunities to connect with peers who shared similar cultural backgrounds and experiences” (Museus 2008: 576-577), as evident through the origins of Bhangra dance groups on U.S. college campuses. Very well done.

References Cited

Bhangra Boom


Bigatti, Silvia M., Gina Sanchez Cibau, Stephanie Boys, Kathy Grove, Leslie Ashburn- Nardo, Khadija Khaja, and Jennifer Thorington Springer
I first saw a Bhangra performance a few months prior to the beginning of this course at GREAT Day during the Spring 2016 semester. Upon introduction to the ethnographic assignment, the first idea that popped into my head was to study a group on campus related to multiculturalism because it is incredibly interesting to me and also has a lot to do with my plans after college. I had decided to work with the Bhangra team because it involves a direct demonstration of a cultural tradition and because of the locality of the group. I had hoped to interview a minimum of two students from the organization, to interview the Assistant Dean of Students, Multicultural Programs and Services, Ms. Fatima Rodriguez Johnson, and finally have as many members of the Bhangra team fill out a survey regarding their personal experience with a multicultural organization in a numeric way. I unfortunately was unable to interview Ms. Fatima Rodriguez Johnson nor did I send out the survey; however, after much research I recognized that measuring the impact of multiculturalism on a numerical scale would provide me with little to no data regarding personal experience with multiculturalism. Despite the few roadblocks, I found that after completing the film and scholarly background on my topic of multiculturalism, it was made clear to me that multicultural experiences are essential to future success and global understanding.

Researching the impact of multiculturalism on college students and the Bhangra dance itself was the least cumbersome portion of the project. After we had watched a number of films in the class, I decided I would base the style of my film on Cannibal Tours because I wanted to feature a feeling of personability with my informants as well as non-biased footage of the Bhangra dance in practice. After deciding to incorporate the style of Cannibal Tours in my film, I knew that announcing that I would record portions of a practice to the team members would lead to inadvertent distortion (Heider 1976: 50), so I tried my best to leave the camera as out of the way as possible in both my personal interviews and in my practice recordings. After compiling the footage, I noticed that during both interviews Kyle and Varna hardly watched the camera and were incredibly engaged in the interview itself, something I also noticed while filming the Bhangra practice. Using discreet camera locations and limited movements while filming helped to create a more observational style film (Loizos 1997: 87). I found that the impact of multiculturalism on an individual could be incredibly biased; therefore, I found that observing from a distance while also mixing in some personal accounts was the best strategy in creating my film.