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Culture, Hybridity, and the Dialogical Self: Cases From the South Asian Diaspora

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This article outlines a dialogical approach to understanding how South Asian-American women living in diasporic locations negotiate their multiple and often conflicting cultural identities. We specifically use the concept of voice to articulate the different forms of dialogicality—polyphonization, expropriation, and ventriloquation—that are involved in the acculturation experiences of two 2nd-generation South Asian-American women. In particular, we argue that it is important to think of acculturation of the South Asian-American women as essentially a contested, dynamic, and dialogical process. We demonstrate that such a dialogical process involves a constant moving back and forth between various cultural voices that are connected to various sociocultural contexts and are shaped by issues of race, sexuality, and gender.

In her memoir, Meena Alexander, a poet of South Asian\(^1\) origin, reflects on her ethnicity as an Indian-American and how she is a woman “cracked by multiple migrations,” with many selves born out of broken geographies (Alexander, 1993, p. 3). Her narrative foregrounds the kinds of struggles with self and identity that many immigrants and their children face in the United States as they try to find a place in the contemporary U.S. society.

Questions about migration and the construction of identity are paramount today as the rate of immigrants in the U.S. rapidly increased in the 1990s to “nearly a million new immigrants per year” (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001, p. 55). These “new” immigrants present a dramatically different demographic portrait from the previous great wave of immigration at the turn of the last century. In 1890, over 90% of immigrants were European, whereas in 1990 only 25% were European with 25% being Asian and 43% being from Latin America (Rong & Preissle, 1998). This striking shift can be largely attributed to the changes in immigration law in the 1960s, when several racially motivated “Exclusion Acts” were eliminated to meet the demands of the U.S. Ia-

\(^1\)The term South Asian generally refers to people who reside in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Maldives, and Sri Lanka.
bor market (Mohanty, 1991). These new immigrants often find themselves struggling with asymmetrical cultural positions, racially charged contexts, and an oppressive political rhetoric. In addition, in contrast to their turn-of-the-century European counterparts, new immigrants have far better access to transatlantic travel and can take advantage of the accelerations in global communication technology.

Glick-Schiller, Basch, and Blanc (1995) argued that the earlier wave of mostly European immigration consisted of images of permanent displacement and a complete break from their homeland and a hard transition to a new language and life in the new world. The journey involved a movement away from one’s culture and customs and a step toward acquiring an ethnic identity, and then an eventual assimilation in the “melting pot” of the majority culture. The new “transnational” migrants invoke a different sort of picture than the old immigrants. Contemporary immigrants both create and transform social networks, circuits of capital and commodities, and cultural practices and rituals that exist in the country of their settlement and the home society. These immigrants travel back and forth between dual societies, inhabit multiple homes, roles, identities, and languages.

Glick-Schiller and others (1995) defined the new immigrants as “transnationals” who’s lived experiences and every day activities are shaped by multiple connections and linkages to several nations and cultures through travel, technology, and media (p. 48). The web of contradictory discourses related to home, tradition, community, nation, and loyalty experienced by the new immigrants and their children demand that we rethink our traditional notions of immigrant adaptation and acculturation.

In this article we explore how children of these new immigrant families negotiate their hybrid sense of self in such a context of cultural difference, racial politics, increasing globalization, and transnational communication (Bhatia, 2003). Traditionally, much of mainstream psychology has been occupied with developing universal, linear models and theories of immigrant identity, acculturation, and adaptation. For instance, cross-cultural psychologists have studied topics such as acculturation and acculturative stress (Berry, 1998), socialization and enculturation (Camilleri & Malewska-Peyre, 1997) and bicultural identity (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1998). This body of research, though commendable for bringing issues of immigrant identity to the table, has largely presented migration as a series of fixed phases and stages that do not account for the specific culturally distinct and politically entrenched experiences of new immigrants. In contrast to such universal and categorically static concepts, some scholars have challenged standard models of acculturation by proposing concepts such as segmented assimilation (Portes, 1994; Portes & Zhou, 1993) and assimilation without accommodation (Gibson, 1988). Both these terms refer to the ways in which the experiences of the new second-generation immigrants are shaped by racial encounters and discrimination, the culture of the inner city area, the presence of transnational communities, and the immigrant communities’ emphasis on the preservation of their home culture. For example, Portes (1997) pointed out that the experiences of the children of European immigrants in the early part of the century cannot be used as guide to study the experiences of the new, mostly non-European second-generation immigrants.

One way in which scholars across the humanities and the social sciences have begun to consider new ways of theorizing about the second-generation immigrants is by locating their experiences within transnational, diasporic cultures (Bhatia & Ram, 2001b; Glick-Schiller et al., 1995; Lavie & Swedenburg, 1996; Tölöyan, 1996). In his comprehensive explanation of the term, Tölöyan (1996) described diasporas as communities that actively maintain links with their culture.
of origin, including creating and maintaining their own religious institutions, language schools, community centers, newspapers, radio stations, and so on. Similarly, Glick-Schiller and others (1995) referred to new immigrants as being “transnational” diasporas as they “forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (p. 48). Diasporic communities distinctly attempt to maintain (real or imagined) connections and commitments to their homeland and recognize themselves and act as a collective community. In other words, people who simply live outside their ancestral homeland cannot automatically be considered diasporas (Töloyan, 1996). Examples of diasporic immigrants in North America are Asian-Indians, Armenian-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Chinese-Canadians, and Iranian-Canadians, and other such communities within Europe are Black-British, Franco-Magherbi, Surinamese-Dutch, and Turkish-Germans. Given the emergence of such transnational, diasporic communities, questions about acculturation become particularly crucial when applied to the children of these new immigrants or the “new second-generation” as Portes (1997) termed them.

In this article we consider how the self is experienced and expressed by second-generation women of the South Asian diaspora in the U.S. We take as our point of departure Hermans’ (2001) proposal that the notions of travel, diaspora, and immigration require that we come up with a dynamic, multivoiced and a dialogical notion of self. Hermans emphasized that universal notions of culture and self fail to explain the challenges accompanying the acculturation process within a world where cultures are mixing and moving and the local and the global are merging and creating new “contact zones” between different cultures. As a consequence, Hermans made a call to those scholars who study the relationship between culture and human development by asserting that the field of “developmental psychology is challenged by the increasing necessity to study a variety of developmental trajectories on the contact zones between cultures” (Hermans, 2001, p. 28). Our article is one answer to that call.

By drawing primarily on the work of Hermans and Kempen (1993, 1998), Wertsch (1991), and Valsiner (2000, 2002), we employ a dialogical approach to understand the formation of hybridized identities and hyphenated selves of the second-generation South Asian-American women. Adopting a dialogical approach that focuses on the multiplicity of subject positions allows us to highlight the multiple, alternating, and often paradoxical “voices” of the hybrid self. Given the conceptual, exploratory nature of our article, our goal is to present an argument, supported by select autobiographical accounts and cases, for why theories related to the dialogical self are particularly applicable in an era where immigration is of immense importance as a cultural and political phenomenon. First, we undertake a brief review of the concept of acculturation and culture in cross-cultural psychology. Second, we discuss the scholarship on dialogical self to set up the theoretical scaffolding of our article. Next we examine two autobiographical narratives by second-generation South Asian women living in America to demonstrate how their discourses about self exemplify various forms of dialogicality. Finally, we conclude with implications for understanding the construction of hybrid identities by using a dialogical perspective.

**CULTURE, SELF, AND ACCULTURATION IN CROSS-CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY**

Within the field of psychology in general and cross-cultural psychology in particular, there have been several models that explain acculturation-related issues. Cross-cultural psychology research-
ers, as we mentioned earlier, have studied topics such as acculturation and acculturative stress (Berry, 1998), socialization and enculturation (Camilleri & Malewska-Peyre, 1997), intergroup relations across cultures (Gudykunst & Bond, 1997), cross-cultural differences in work values (Hofstede, 1980), individualism and collectivism across cultures (Kagitçibasi, 1997), and bicultural identity (LaFromboise et al., 1998). We do not intend to undertake a comprehensive review of all the different concepts associated with the topic of acculturation within cross-cultural psychology literature. Rather, we will engage in a selective discussion of only those concepts that are directly relevant to the goals and purposes of the article previously outlined.

Prominent in acculturation research is the model of acculturation strategies proposed by Berry and his colleagues (e.g., Berry, 1980, 1985, 1990, 1997; Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987; Berry, Kim, Power, Young, & Bujaki, 1989; Berry & Sam, 1997). Their prolific output and the fact that several major introductory books on psychology (e.g., Halonen & Santrock, 1996; Tavris & Wade, 1997; Westen, 1997) cite them extensively indicate that their model of acculturation strategies is one of the most influential on the subject of acculturation in American psychology. Acculturation strategies refer to the plan or the method that individuals use in responding to stress-inducing new cultural contexts. A four-fold classification is proposed that includes “assimilation,” “integration,” “separation” and “marginalization.” Berry and Sam (1997) suggest that the assimilation strategy occurs when the individual decides not to maintain his or her cultural identity by seeking contact in his or her daily interaction with the dominant group. When the individuals from the nondominant group “place a value on holding on to their original culture” (Berry & Sam, 1997, p. 297) and seek no contact with the dominant group, then they are pursuing a separation strategy. When individuals express an interest in maintaining strong ties in their everyday life both with their ethnic group and with the dominant group, the integration strategy is defined. The fourth strategy is marginalization, in which individuals “lose cultural and psychological contact with both their traditional culture and the larger society” (Berry, 1998, p. 119).

The optimal acculturation strategy for immigrants is integration, which “appears to be a consistent predictor of more positive outcomes than the three alternatives” (Berry & Sam, 1997, p. 318). Integration implies both the preservation of, and contact with the home culture, or the “country of origin,” and an active involvement with the host culture, or the “country of settlement.” Central to the theory of the integration strategy is the assumption of universality. Berry and Sam (1997) state, “substantial variations in the life circumstances of the cultural groups that experience acculturation, the psychological processes that operate during acculturation are essentially the same for all the groups; that is, we adopt a universalist perspective on acculturation” (Berry & Sam, 1997, p. 296). In other words, immigrants’ acculturation strategies reveal the underlying psychological processes that unfold during their adaptation to new cultural contexts. Such a position has dominated acculturation research for almost three decades in psychology and has provided an important theoretical basis for research carried under the larger rubric of cross-cultural psychology (see Segall, Lonner, & Berry, 1998).

Classifying culture as an “antecedent” variable and the properties of the self as universal, natural, and pre-given, is a view that plays an important role in shaping acculturation research in cross-cultural psychology. Thus, for many cross-cultural researchers, culture and history are variables that enable the “display” of the pre-given properties of the acculturating self, but these very variables are not taken to be inextricably interwoven with the self. The historical and political aspects of immigration rarely enter the discussion, and when they do, they are classified as group variables. In contrast, in this article, we argue that the formation of immigrant identities is a
diagram of the process that is shaped by multiple, contradictory, asymmetrical, and often shifting cultural voices of race, gender, sexuality, and nationality.

**VOICES AND THE DIALOGICAL SELF**

In the last decade, many scholars and researchers in psychology and related disciplines explored the development of self as dialogical (Bhatia, 2002; Day & Tappan, 1996; Fogel, 1993; Gergen, 1994; Hermans, 1996; Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Josephs, 1998; Sampson, 1993; Valsiner, 1998, 2000; Wertsch, 1991). Inspired by Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s writings, concepts such as polyphony, heteroglossia, multivoicedness, and ventriloquation have been fruitfully employed to challenge the Cartesian, autonomic, bounded self to provide an alternative understanding of the self that emphasizes historical situatedness, cultural construction, and social interaction.

Interpreting Bakhtin, Wertsch (1991) noted that one way in which dialogicality comes into being is when one or many utterances of the “speaking subject” come into contact and “interanimates” the voice of the other. The utterance is an important element of dialogicality because of its focus on “addressivity,” a concept which requires at least two voices: the author and the addressee, the self and the other (Wertsch, 1991, p. 52). For Bakhtin (1986), the “other” as an addressee comes in many forms. One can “dialogically” engage with the addressee through face-to-face, verbal communication as a participant or as an interlocutor in an ongoing conversation. The addressee as the “other” can be a professional, specialist, foreigner, native, outsider, opponent, boss, employer, institution, or an “unconcretized” imagined other and so on (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 95). When the self and the other and the addressee and the addressee come into contact with each other’s voices, the self becomes multivoiced. When Bakhtin uses the term voice, he does not mean “auditory signals” but rather the “speaking personality” or the “speaking consciousness” (Wertsch, 1991, p. 12). In this regard, Wertsch (1991) noted that the real challenge of studying dialogicality is to spell out exactly how voices come into contact with each other and change each other’s meanings. Josephs (2002) provided us with a definition of voice that we find useful:

The obvious characteristic of a voice is its potential to speak, to tell a story. The story is not just any story, but a motivated story, which is rooted in emotions. A voice can talk to other voices, agree or disagree with other voices’ stories. A voice can also be ignored or silenced by other voices, but also by “real” others! A voice can take over the floor and become the monological figure on a ground of—temporarily—invisible, backgrounded other voices. But a voice can also support another previously suppressed voice to come to the fore. Last but not least, a voice can change qualitatively due to its interaction with another voice. (p. 162)

In their application of Bakhtin’s concept of voice, Hermans and Kempen (1993) conceived of the diagramical self in terms of a number of dynamic but relatively autonomous I positions or voices that are in dialogue with real, actual and imagined others. The I is not static but can move from one position to another with changes in time and circumstances.

From the perspective of the diagramical self, any given individual or I, depending on the sociocultural constraints, can take a stance or a position of ridicule, agreement, disagreement, understanding, opposition, and contradiction toward another I position. Wertsch (1991) reminds us
that to understand the development of the dialogical self, we need to ask the Bakhtinian question: “Who is doing the talking?” (p. 81). He argued that, depending on the sociocultural setting, some voices will be privileged over others because they will be considered more appropriate and effective. For Hermans and Kempen (1993), dialogical understanding does not mean that all the voices involved in communication with oneself or others are always in harmonious accord with each other. Rather, the dynamic movement between voices involves negotiation, disagreement, power, play, negation, conflict, domination, privileging, and hierarchy. In dialogical terms, one can think of the immigrant self as involving a back and forth movement between different voices (e.g., “Life here in the U.S. is impersonal,” “I have two cars and a house,” “Back home I never felt alienated,” “I face racism here,” “Back home there are too many political and economic problems,” “I can give my children a good life over here,” “I don’t belong here”). Hermans, Kempen, and van Loon (1992) called this polyphony of voices a movement between a “multiplicity of I positions” (p. 28).

A dialogical model of self allows us to illustrate how negotiating one’s migrant identity involves multiple negotiations with larger sets of cultural, political, and historical practices. Adopting a dialogical framework encourages us to examine the contradictions, complexities and the interminable shifts of immigrant identity construction (Bhatia, 2002; Bhatia & Ram, 2001a).

Valsiner (2000) noted that to understand the specific dialogical processes involved in the movement of the I positions of the self, we need to raise two important questions. First we need to ask, “how are the I positions changed?” and second, “what is the whole range of dialogical relations between the constructed voices” (p. 4). Valsiner answers his own questions by specifying the various forms of dialogicality involved in creating the “heterogeneity of the dialogical self—both in its current structure (synchronic heterogeneity) and over time (diachronic heterogeneity)” (p. 9). His explanation of the varied forms of dialogicality can be effectively used to detail how South Asian-American women living in diasporic locations constantly negotiate their multiple and often conflicting, dialogical voices, histories, and subject positions. Understanding the various forms of dialogicality experienced by women with hybrid and hyphenated identities challenges the linear, static, universal models of acculturation. By employing a dialogical approach, we can begin to formulate a model of acculturation that is culturally specific, dynamic and historically and politically situated. Given the limited scope of this article, we have chosen three forms of dialogicality—polyphonization, expropriation, and ventriloquation—to demonstrate how hybrid selves and hyphenated identities get constructed in the South Asian diaspora.

SOUTH ASIAN-AMERICAN WOMEN AND FORMS OF DIALOGICALITY

Scholars studying issues related to South Asian diasporic identity noted that women often become symbols of the community’s attempts to present itself as a spiritual, traditional, and homogeneous group with ancient cultural roots (Bhattacharjee, 1992; Dasgupta, 1998; Hegde, 1998; Mani, 1994). Dasgupta (1998) explained: “The main casualty of our communities’ efforts to reformulate homogenous ‘authenticity’ are women … South Asian women in America are given the task of perpetuating anachronistic customs and traditions” (p. 5). Examining the construction of South Asian-American women in the U.S. diaspora, Mani (1994) argued that they are struggling to “know” their place in the society. On the one hand, they have to face racial discrimination and prejudice as “brown” minority women from the larger American society, and on the other hand they have to deal with gendered oppression within their own communities. In other words, the accultur-
ation process and identity formation of many non-White, non-European, and non-Western, first and second-generation immigrants, especially women, in the U.S. society is a painful, difficult, and complex process. The following examples attempt to capture the dynamic nature of this process, keeping in mind cultural specificity, social situatedness, and the particular political contexts that are embedded in the hybrid identities of second-generation South Asian-American women.

Polyphonization: Kamasutra or Hyperintellectualism

The process of polyphonization refers to the phenomena where the selves oppose each other’s voices and sub-voices in an “increasingly complex—differentiated but loosely organized—structure of the of the dialogical self” (Valsiner, 2000, p. 8). Thus the voices, x1 “life is nice,” x2 “life is profitable,” and x3 “life is life” may continue to proliferate in opposition to voices y1 “life is dangerous,” y2 “life is depressing,” and y3 “life is not meaningful” (Valsiner, 2000, p. 7). Hermans and Kempen (1993) argued that the polyphonic self moves in “an imaginal space,” inhabiting different I positions simultaneously, with each position entering into dialogical relationships with one another, “agreeing or disagreeing with each other” (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. 47).

Sexuality is one major issue, among others, that complicates the issues of self and identity in the South Asian-American diaspora. Sayantini DasGupta and her first generation immigrant mother Shamita Das Dasgupta (1998), using their own personal experiences as a pivot, wrote that for many young, second-generation South Asian girls, coming of age in America has been a very painful process. Sayantini DasGupta recalled that growing up in an almost all White, Midwestern American suburb, she was one of the few “brown” girls. Growing up among an “ocean of blonde hair and blue eyes,” her feelings about her appearance, she notes, were “particularly low” (p. 121). Not being able to live up to the “unattainable” images of “Charlie’s Angels” and the golden-curl girls of “The Brady Bunch,” and facing “repeated and constant” racial slurs at school such as “nigger,” “injun,” and “hindoo,” combined with a lack of role models, she recalled a “perpetual feeling of self-loathing.” (DasGupta & Dasgupta, 1998, p. 121). For many non-Western, second-generation immigrants, being “othered” or “racialized” accentuates the pain of dislocation and displacement. These external positions and voices that are marked and assigned to the “brown” girl become internalized or appropriated.

However, as DasGupta and Dasgupta (1998) remind us, the White standard of beauty is not the only issue that affects their “sexual self concept.” Many of the South Asian-American women are also subject to the West’s fascination with the exotic and “mysterious” East and confess to being caught in the dual metaphor of the “other” as both “ugly” and “exotic.” DasGupta and Dasgupta (1998) explained:

Indeed, in White America’s categorization of racial others as sexually deviant, the Asian-Indian immigrant community is caught in a dual metaphor of both asexual and hypersexual … In this context, the “exotic” Indian-American woman is associated with the Kama Sutra, primal sexual energy, and other images of hypersexuality. Simultaneously, the alien, “ugly” Indian American-woman is associated with chastity, sexual repression, and hyperintellectualism. (p. 122)

In the previous quote, we see a polyphony of voices that simultaneously exist with each other. In addition, the preference for “fair skin” as an ideal beauty in the South Asian community adds an-
other layer of “voices” to the dialogical negotiations of the South Asian concept of self. A preference for “fair skin,” however, does not mean that South Asian parents are willing to allow their sons and daughters to marry White Americans or other out of group members. On the contrary, the intersections between race, culture, and sexuality take on a new dimension of polyphonic conflict in the context of marriage and dating.

There are heightened concerns and anxieties among many South Asian parents as their “community daughters” become ready for dating and prom rituals. These ideas of marriage and sexual- ity are imported from the homeland and many daughters and women of the community are expected to follow them. Out-of-group marriages are considered a taboo or looked down on because they signify cultural betrayal or “cultural dilution” (DasGupta & Dasgupta, 1998, p. 123). The parents condemn those daughters who make “independent” sexual choices because these choices are synonymous with being “Americanized.” So while the South Asian-American woman is imbued with the contradictory voices of being simultaneously “ugly” and “exotic” in relation to the larger mainstream White culture, she is also permeated with notions of beauty and chastity specified by her own community. DasGupta’s example highlights the point that the concept of voice along with its dialogical underpinnings allows us to challenge three assumptions about immigrant identity that are deeply entrenched in psychology in general and cross-cultural psychology in particular.

The first assumption relates to the notion of integration strategies. One of the assumptions inherent in the integration strategy proposed by traditional acculturation theorists is that immigrants can somehow “positively” assimilate the values and ideologies of both the dominant, mainstream group and their own ethnic group. Recall that the concept of “acculturation strategies” and “bicultural competence” assumes that each immigrant can possibly achieve a happy, balanced blend that entails “becoming effective in the new culture and remaining competent in his or her culture of origin” (LaFromboise et al., 1998, p. 148). Those immigrants who do not achieve this goal are considered to be experiencing higher acculturative stress (Berry, 1998) and are not as physically or psychologically healthy (LaFromboise et al., 1998).

DasGupta’s identity is constructed through a back and forth play between the different cultural voices of being ugly, exotic, intellectual, pure, and chaste. These voices represent her multiple, shifting and often conflicting cultural selves. The concept of voice allows us to focus on the idea that DasGupta’s identity emerges through a dialogical process that involves a constant moving back and forth between incompatible cultural positions. Rather than posit migrant identity as an allocation of different cultural components in a fortuitous, congenial amalgam, the concept of voice allows us to emphasize the constant contradiction, struggle and negotiation that immigrants experience between different cultural selves.

It is this process of negotiation and contestation between different voices that adds different levels of complexity to the study of identity in the diaspora. DasGupta’s identity is not fixed by some core, singular, essential, universal “trait,” an “attitude,” or a personality “attribute.” Her multiple and often contradictory voices illustrate the point that acculturation is a highly contested process rather than either a phenomenon of marginalisation or assimilation. Thus the concept of voice allow us to make the claim that DasGupta’s effort to rework the different voices of her culture, heritage, or ethnicity does not entail a movement toward assimilation or marginalisation or separation and integration in a new culture. Rather, there is an ongoing, simultaneous dialogical movement between the voices of feeling at once assimilated, integrated, separated, and marginalised. DasGupta’s struggles with various “cultural voices” challenge
the idea that one can be “biculturally efficient” by happily integrating the cultural voices on either side of the hyphen.

The second reason why the concept of voice is useful in analyzing the previously stated example is because it demonstrates that an asymmetrical relationship of power exists between different cultural components of the self. Being othered or racialized is part of many non-European and non-Western immigrants’ acculturation experiences, and these experiences are tightly knit with their evolving conceptions of a selfhood that is hyphenated, fractured, and in-between. An important question that is not tackled by cross-cultural definitions and “integration strategy” is how issues of conflict, power, and asymmetry affect many diasporic immigrants’ acculturation processes. For example, integration as discussed by Berry and Sam (1997) implicitly assumed that both the majority and minority cultures have equal status and power. Furthermore, it is not clear what the term integration exactly means. How does one know when one is integrated or not with the host culture? Who decides whether an immigrant is pursuing a strategy of marginalisation, integration or separation? Radhakrishnan (1996) suggested that the notion of multiple, hyphenated, and hybridized identities of the diaspora is a challenge to the idea that there can be some kind of a blissful marriage or integration of the cultures between the hyphen. Recognizing the complications involved in understanding the diasporic identity, Radhakrishnan raised a series of insightful questions:

When someone speaks as an Asian-American, who is exactly speaking? If we dwell in the hyphen who represents the hyphen: the Asian or the American, or can the hyphen speak for itself without creating an imbalance between the Asian and American components … True, both components have status, but which has the power and the potential to read and interpret the other on its terms? If the Asian is to be Americanized, will the American submit to Asianization? (Radhakrishnan, 1996, p. 211)

DasGupta’s identity is made up of different cultural voices, but the point that needs to be emphasized is that these voices share an asymmetrical relationship with each other. As a non-White, Indian she experiences otherness, marginality, and exclusion in the large, White, majority culture. On the other hand, as an Indian woman in relation to the South Asian diaspora, she feels that her community members expect her to dutifully carry forward the anachronistic Indian traditions, cultures, and customs. DasGupta’s reflections highlight the point that her diasporic voice is shaped by the asymmetrical relationships that exist within her family and the larger South Asian community and by those perceptions and views that the larger American society has toward the South Asian immigrant community. The concept of voice not only highlights the multiplicity and plurality of cultural selves within a single individual but also allows us to foreground the tensions, contradictions, and asymmetrical power relationships that exist between those voices.

Thus, thinking about race and nationality as part of the shifting voices of the migrant self forces us to abandon universal models of acculturation. Although integration and bicultural competency may be worthy goals to achieve, we contend that for most people living in contemporary diasporas, their negotiation with multiple cultural sites is fluid, dynamic, interminable, and often unstable. When we adhere to universal models of acculturation, we undervalue both the asymmetrical relations of power that exists within the diasporic communities and the inequities and injustices faced by certain immigrant groups from the dominant culture as a result of their nationality, race, or gender.
Recognizing and identifying the polyphonic construction of self helps us understand how, for South Asian-American women, acculturation cannot be considered as a static category that will either be achieved or not by second-generation immigrants. Instead, the polyphony of the dialogical self suggests acculturation may be a dynamic, plural, and infinite process that results in new cultural meanings and definitions, many of them contradictory and always resisting finitude.

Third, DasGupta’s remarks challenge the idea that all immigrants’ acculturation processes can be slotted in one of the four-fold classification of acculturation strategies (assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalisation) that have been developed by cross-cultural psychologists such as Berry and his colleagues. Her remarks suggest how her American voice and Indian voice contest each other in different ways under different sociocultural conditions. Josephs (2002) explains that even though a voice can contain a reference to a “social label,” it is also imbued with “personal meaning” (pp. 162–163). Thus, DasGupta’s Hindu/Indian, American, and Indian-American voices are developed through her ongoing experiences with her own community, the larger American culture, and through her own personal constructions of these experiences. Furthermore, these voices do not stand alone, separate from each other, but rather talk to each other, inform each other, suppress each other, animate each other, and so on. This polyphony of different voices constructs and shapes DasGupta’s acculturation experiences as fluid, dynamic, contextual, contingent, and not as fixed and singular as reflected in the universal and linear concepts of marginalisation, integration, and separation.

For example, DasGupta explained that, at times, her views about sexuality are considered too Americanized and Western by the Indian immigrant community or too traditional, passive, repressed, and asexual by the American community. In other words, DasGupta’s Hindu, Indian, American and Indian-American voices are not simply fixed labels, coping strategies, attitudes, traits, or some manifestations of her social roles, but rather, her fluid and conflicting voices are guided by the material of the larger sociocultural and political world. These voices interplay and feed off each other and as Josephs (2002) pointed out, these voices are “emotionally grounded and personally constructed” (p. 162). Dasgupta’s Indian-American voices are thus different from someone else’s Indian-American voices. Thus, the dynamic, fluid, and socially rooted yet personally constructed nature of voice makes it different from the concept of traits, roles, attitudes, and so forth. The dynamic nature of voices also implies that DasGupta’s voices can change over time as they interact with each other and with the events in her social world. In this regard, it would interesting to consider, for example, DasGupta’s talk about her acculturation process and her identity as a South Asian-American woman in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 events in New York.

Expropriation and Ventriloquation: “Zeal to be All-American” Versus Reclaiming Heritage

In contrast to polyphonization, expropriation refers to the process where a singular voice swallows all other voices and becomes “monologized” (Valsiner, 2000, p. 9). These forms of “dialogical monologization,” for example, can be witnessed when social institutions require total obedience and loyalty from individuals and demand people to act and think in ways that meet the “right” expectations of their social norms. Consider the following remarks by Surina Khan, a second-generation South Asian-American woman:
I am completely out of touch with my Pakistani life. As a kid, I remembered being constantly reminded that I was different by my accent, my brown skin colour, the smell of the food we ate, and my mother’s traditional clothing. And so, I consciously Americanized myself—I spent my early childhood perfecting my American accent; my adolescence affirming my U.S. identity to others; and my late teens rejecting my Pakistani heritage. (Khan, 1998, p. 62)

Khan, a Pakistani-American Muslim, basically demonstrates how all her life she consciously chose to Americanize herself. In trying to live up to the norms or standards of being an “all-American” girl, she began a process of erasing all parts of her Pakistani self: accent, customs, and traditions.

Khan’s case, however, is not as straightforward as it appears to be. All her life, she had a definite “zeal to be all-American,” (p. 64) but the all-dominating, expropriating American voice had developed in opposition to her Pakistani voice. In other words, being American for Khan meant not being Pakistani, and so we see here an example of self and other, addressor and addressee in dynamic play even when one voice seems to dominate. Apart from wanting to affiliate herself with all things American, Khan acknowledged that she is also a lesbian—a part of her that her mother and the Pakistani community do not want to affirm or accept. Thus, after “coming out” to her mother, Khan noted that her mother’s response was to urge her to visit Pakistan in the belief that such a trip to the “homeland” would “cure” her. She recalled that her mother pleaded and begged: “Just get away from it all. You need some time. Clear your head” (Khan, 1998, p. 64). Khan recounted how she insisted to her mother that she was “queer” and that she and her girlfriend Robin were moving to Washington, D.C. to live together. She narrates that her mother reacted by saying, “You and your lover better watch out! There is a large Pakistani community in D.C., and they will find out about you. They’ll break your legs, mutilate your face” (p. 64). Khan then reacted by cutting off all ties with the community, including her family, as Pakistan had now become synonymous with homophobia.

For Khan, her mother’s voice represents Pakistani values, attitudes, and beliefs. Being a lesbian for Khan meant erasing her Pakistani voice and she identified her lesbian voice with her “Americanness.” Thus, for her, being American required speaking like an American and taking on other American characteristics, but it meant also being raised with an American cultural belief that she has the fundamental right to be who she wants to be. Here we see how her American and lesbian voices get conflated with each other, and together these I positions expropriate the “Pakistani” self. Khan’s movement between her American, Pakistani, and lesbian voices points to the importance of conceptualizing culture as traveling, fluid, dynamic, mixing, and moving.

Khan’s reflections about her plural voices also challenge the notion of a monolithic and homogenous cultural and national identity. Her reflection raises important questions about how we
should theorize about the self and multiplicity of voices in the context of moving cultures, globalization, and the formation of diasporic communities. The concept of culture in cross-cultural psychology, in general, and the acculturation model, in particular, is circumscribed and defined by national boundaries. The term “culture” as generally defined in psychology and specifically “operationalized” in the acculturation models proposed by Berry and his colleagues both implicitly and explicitly posited one India or one China or one Japan and so on, “out there” in a fixed geographical and territorial space (Berry & Sam, 1997).

Hermans and Kempen (1998) stated that acculturation in cross-cultural psychology is seen as the process by which a particular individual moves from culture A to culture B in a fairly linear fashion. Typically this distinction between the home and host culture is taken to be at the national level. So acculturation is assumed to take place when say a person from Korea or Mexico immigrates to the U.S. and attempts to adapt to American culture and society. In other words, “culture” as understood in acculturation literature is usually conflated with “nation.” Such a model of acculturation cannot adequately explain Khan’s fluctuations between her different cultural identities and her attempts at identifying with American culture and being a lesbian while simultaneously retaining some connections to the Pakistani community in the U.S. and in Pakistan.

This slippage of nation with culture is quite pervasive in the cross-cultural psychology literature. For instance, Hofstede (1980) whose work is much cited in the cross-cultural psychology literature, cautioned the reader to be careful when discussing cultural difference solely at the national level and offered a series of categories that include gender, generation, ethnicity, and so forth. However, such categories are then put aside in favor of “collecting data” at the level of nations because, he argued, it makes “practical sense to focus on cultural factors separating or uniting nations” (pp. 12–13). Similarly, Gudykunst and Kim (1997), both of whom have been very influential in developing acculturation research, stated that usually boundaries between cultures coincide with boundaries between countries. Other prominent scholars like Segall, Lonner, and Berry (1998) referred to the preponderance of interest by cross-cultural psychologists in examining the notion of individualism-collectivism as a cultural characteristic across “national samples.”

From the formation of the modern nation state that is deeply intertwined with colonial and imperialist policies to the vast flows of migration from “Third World” postcolonial societies to the “First World,” the idea that culture can be circumscribed and defined by national boundaries is highly debatable. In contrast, psychology’s current conception of culture overlooks how the growing presence of diasporic communities, with their continuous back and forth negotiations with the cultures of their homeland and the host land, contradicts and contests homogenous and stable understandings of culture.

Khan’s fluctuations between her Pakistani and American voices point to the construction of identities through the intermingling, mixing, and moving of cultures. The concept of plural, cultural voices as being dialogically constructed within the self challenges the notion of a homogenous, monolithic, national or cultural identity. Her movement across various cultures is not circumscribed by geographic space and stands in stark contrast to the acculturation process that is generally defined in American psychology. Khan’s identification with American culture in her youth and her attempt to keep a distance from Pakistani culture is most likely to be described by cross-cultural psychologists as a move towards assimilation in the larger American culture.

It would be tempting to claim that Khan has been assimilated, rejecting the “culture of origin” and wholeheartedly adopting her new culture. However, sometime later in her narrative she reconnects with her mother and both “ventriloquate” through each other’s voices as Khan begins to
resurrect her Pakistani self. Thus, we argue that Khan’s shift in her sense of self should make us wary of relying on static models of acculturation, culture and national identity as they cannot account for how second-generation immigrants often display multiple cultural identifications or rotate and shift their identities through time.

The process of ventriloquation allows the voices “to speak through the other” (Valsiner, 2000, p. 9). Furthermore, in the ventriloquiation process, one voice infuses the other voice and uses it as a medium to express its own voice or its I position. For example, it is common to hear individuals saying “its not your voice but your mother’s voice that’s speaking.” Such a statement would be an example of ventriloquiation. However, this example points to an explicit and straightforward form of ventriloquiation. Other forms (indirect or inexplicit) of ventriloquiation “may range from interindividual enforcement of a voice in an asymmetric power relationship … to a person’s interpsychological use of a folk-saying in one’s own autodialogue” (Valsiner, 2000, p. 9).

Khan reconnects with her mother a year after their relationship was estranged. She told us that her mother was on the verge of settling a suit that was begun by her father, much before his death. Her mother is dissatisfied with her lawyer so she asked Khan for suggestions. Khan referred her to a lawyer friend, Maggie Cassel. The following exchange transpires between the mother and daughter as they get together to meet the lawyer:

“I presume this woman’s a lesbian,” my mother said in the car on the way to Maggie’s office. “Yes she is,” I replied, thinking, Oh no, here it comes again. But my mother took me totally by surprise: “Well, the men aren’t helping me, I might as well go to the dykes.” I didn’t think she even knew the word dyke. Now that was a moment … Her changing attitude about my lesbian identity was instilling a desire in me to reclaim my Pakistani identity. (Khan, 1998, p. 64, emphasis in original) What we see transpiring above is a subtle form of ventriloquiation. The mother does not completely endorse her daughter’s lesbian identity but indirectly acknowledges and accepts her sexuality by making a visit to her lawyer friend. Her statement, “the men aren’t helping me, I might as well go to the dykes” is an indirect ventriloquiation of her daughter’s voice. Khan, in turn, ventriloquates her mother’s voice when she expresses her desire to reclaim her Pakistani identity. This is indeed a significant occasion for both the mother and the daughter because it forms the basis for the qualitative transformation and development of their dialogical selves, and the relationship between them.

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF HYBRID IDENTITIES

Both DasGupta’s and Khan’s remarks highlight the point that their ongoing and simultaneous dialogical negotiations with their own Indian and Pakistani communities, respectively, and with the larger American society is clearly multi-voiced. Their battles with sexuality, race, and gender are filtered through their positions in their families, their communities, and the larger American society. Their acculturation processes exemplify the dynamic interplay between multiplicity of voices but also point to the political, cultural, and historical embeddedness of these voices. DasGupta’s and Khan’s acculturation struggles are linked to, and constituted by going back and forth between, the multiple homes, societies, identities, and languages.

The theoretical elements of the dialogical model of acculturation discussed in this article provides us with some preliminary ways to think about the issues involved in the acculturation processes of the new second-generation immigrants in the American society. Three general
implications for the study of the construction of diasporic and transnational identities can be drawn from this article. First, the processes of acculturation and “hybridization” for South Asian-American women such as Sayantini DasGupta and Surina Khan cannot be slotted or fitted in either the category of being fully assimilated or being separated from the “American culture.” Rather, the acculturation process and construction of hyphenated identities, as previously stated, involves a constant process of negotiation, intervention, and mediation that are connected to a larger set of political and historical practices that are in turn linked to and shaped by the voices of race, gender, nationality, religion, sexuality, and power. Assimilation or integration is not an option for many second-generation immigrants such as DasGupta and Khan because many members of their respective communities believe that Americans live in an immoral society and are too liberal with their children, narcissistic, highly sexual, and very materialistic. The identity negotiations undertaken by South Asian-American women involves several fronts: home, language, customs, food, and so on, and the voices of parents, peers, language, siblings, and homeland and American society are all represented in the dialogical self.

To suggest that the acculturation process, as much scholarship on acculturation in psychology demonstrates, merely involves “culture shedding” or “some behavioral shift” or the “unlearning of one’s previous repertoire” implies that one can float in and out of cultures, shedding one’s history and politics and replacing them with a new set of cultural and political behaviors whenever needed. Advocating the strategy of “integration” as the endpoint or examining acculturation in terms of universal categories overlooks the multiple, contested, and sometimes painful voices that are associated with “living in-between” cultures. The concept of acculturation as a multivoiced phenomenon allows us to think of acculturation as a dialogical process that is rooted in history, culture, and politics: a process that involves an ongoing, contested negotiation of voices from here and there, past and present, homeland and host land, self and other.

In contrast to the universal models of acculturation in cross-cultural psychology, the dialogical view of acculturation does not emphasize that the voices that are in conflict with each other need to be replaced by a set of voices that are integrated or harmonious with each other. Rather, a dialogical approach to acculturation emphasizes that asymmetrical power relations between conflicting voices and I positions are very much part of the diasporic self. Viewed from a dialogical perspective, acculturation and the construction of hybridity is not necessarily a series of phases where one goes from being less acculturated to more acculturated over time. Instead, drawing on theories of dialogicality, we suggest that there is a dynamic play among several competing voices, and we need to think of acculturation as a process and not as a product. It is not a process that is moving inexorably toward a finite end that can be captured by fixed categories, but a process that is spiral, revolving, and interminable with an emphasis on multiplicity, conflict, and contradiction.

Second, we argue that the concept of voice in the dialogical self does not refer to roles, traits, attitudes, and so forth. The purpose of using the cases from the South Asian-American diaspora was to illustrate the point that many second-generation children of transnational immigrant families are not going back and forth between roles or simply acquiring American or Indian “traits.” Rather, the concept of voice allows us to understand the plural, infinite, dynamic permutations of transnational identities that are created at the border between the social and the personal and self and society.

Third, the different forms of dialogicality sketched above show heterogeneity within a single community, both in its present “structure” and “over time” (Valsiner, 2000, p. 9). Universal models of acculturation erase the social situatedness and culturally constructed nature of hybrid identi-
ties and fail to recognize the diversity and variability involved as immigrants and their children struggle to come to terms with their multiple voices and worlds. Furthermore, any of these dialogical processes can transform and develop into any other form. The forms of dialogicality involved in polyphony can develop into the processes of expropriation and ventriloquation and vice versa. Therefore, any individual can demonstrate one or all the forms of dialogicality over time. Valsiner (2000) argued that some forms of negotiations with the different parts of the self are less demanding and lead us toward a more “stable” development, although other forms of negotiations are more paralyzing, severe, and show “instability.” The challenge for developmental psychologists is to map out how the varying intensity of dialogical negotiations involved in the construction of hybrid selves leads to different developmental possibilities or trajectories.

REFERENCES


