Deepika Sharma, Brady Wagoner

Coconut Culture and Jekyl-and-Hyde : a Study of Self Dynamics among Second Generation British-Asians

MUZEUM HISTORII POLSKI

DEEPIKA SHARMA, BRADY WAGONER
Graduates of Cambridge University, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The self is composed of I-positions that become intelligible only within a given cultural framework, which can be thought of as the ground upon which figures appear. Thus, we arrive at a two level self-system, where I-positions (level 1) are organized by cultural frameworks (level 2) that subsume multiple positions within a generalized position (like Mead's "generalized other"). These levels correspond to what has been called polyphony and cognitive polyphasia, respectively. The former refers to particular voices through which we think/speak whereas the latter is about entire patterns of group thinking. To illustrate the relationship between polyphony and polyphasia we interviewed second generation British-Asians, who simultaneously belong to two very different cultural groups. The subject, who we focus on in our analysis, uses multiple voices to answer the question if she would tell her mother about her smoking, but she also navigates between two distinct frameworks in the process, the Asian and the British. Self-dialogue can thus be understood not only at the level of particular I-positions, but also at a more general level of confrontation between these two frameworks.

Key words: cognitive polyphasia, cultural frameworks, social structure, positioning, self dynamics

1. INTRODUCTION

Hermans (2002) likens the dialogical self to a society of mind. This is not only a fitting metaphor to emphasize the heterogeneity and conflicts found in the self, but it also reminds us that our selves develop out of social exchange in a preexisting social order and its systems of meanings. This becomes particularly clear with immigrants, who must move between two radically different social groups. The positions that emerge from each group make sense only against the cultural background of the group. For example, to understand a particular voice within a subject, we must have knowledge of the cultural background in which that role is enacted.

The situation is further complicated for immigrants in that they often have to work within two cultural frameworks simultaneously. Their selves are constructed at

the intersection. For this reason immigrants are frequently dubbed "coconut" or "Jekyll and Hyde" and accused of "disloyalty", "acting white", "selling out", and "betrayal" (Verkuyten & de Wolf, 2002, p. 373). Adhering to one group has implications for the other, which raises issues of loyalty and difference with respect to the majority as well as one's minority community. These conflicts are inter-personal, existing in the social structure, but also manifest themselves intra-personally, in the immigrant's self dynamics.

Though the self is composed of a multitude of voices, that of immigrants can be organized into two broad conflicting cultural frameworks. In this paper we will develop this insight. Our contribution will be three-fold: (1) We will situate I-positions against a cultural background. (2) This will be done by exploring the conceptual differences and interrelations between individual voices (polyphony) and general group frameworks of thinking (polyphasia). (3) We will illustrate how this can help us understand the subjects' self-dialogues on issues relevant to both frameworks.

2. POLYPHONY AND POLYPHASIA

In his book *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), Bakhtin introduces the concept of voice, the "speaking consciousness". A voice always exists in a social milieu, it cannot exist in and of itself, that is in isolation from other voices. One person says something which is addressed to another. The voice that is addressed can be another person present then and there, or someone (or a group of people) who is temporally spatially, and socially distant, i.e. "an indefinite, unconcretised other." (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 95). Since any utterance entails the idea of addressivity, all utterances are dialogical or polyphonic, in that they always occur in the intermediate space between, at least, two speaking consciousnesses.

Each voice takes on a position from which meaning is constructed, a position that adopts a certain stance in addressing, questioning and answering other voices. Hermans and Kempen (1993) argue that when the Bakhtinian notions of voice and polyphony are superimposed on the Jamesian I-me differentiation, the "I" can move from one spatial position to another according to temporal and situational changes. The "I" fluctuates between variegated and even polarized positions, infusing each position with a voice, thereby enabling dialogical relations between positions. These different voices engage in an exchange of their respective "Mes", thereby constituting a complex, narratively structured self.

I-positions are particular in that they have to do with concrete others and concrete ways in which the I is characterized. However, the self is also organized through more general systems of meaning. Different voices are subsumed under unifying principles of a group, whether that be my family, church community or nation. Similarly, individuals might belong simultaneously to two groups with radically different principles. This is perhaps best expressed by the concept "cognitive polyphasia".

In his classic book *La Psychanalyse*, Moscovici (2004/1976) introduced the term "cognitive polyphasia" to understand the radically different ways in which psychoanalysis was represented by the French media. The liberal, Catholic and

Communist press all developed very different representations of this strange new phenomenon. For example, the Catholic press tended to emphasize the possible therapeutic benefits, down-playing its "theory of man" and sexuality; while the Communist press were quick to associate psychoanalysis with their enemy, bourgeois American individualism. Cognitive polyphasia is premised on the dispersal, inference and circulation of knowledge between changing social milieus and the demands made by particular social contexts on the individual. It suggests that societies and its citizens can maintain inconsistent forms of thought and belief simultaneously.

Individuals are always part of larger collective patterns of thought, which we will here call "representational frameworks". In one of the most notable studies on this phenomenon, Wagner et al. (1999) found evidence of precisely such coexistence in their study on social representations of madness in north India. Their results revealed that traditional representations of madness (involving ghost possession) played as much a role in respondents' overall belief systems as did modern psychiatric science. The question of which of the two predominated was one of social context rather than the representation itself. In the private, family domain, the more traditional representation was accessed, while the public context elicited the high-tech, psychiatry representation.

In addition, Wagner (1998) holds that cognitive polyphasia can explicate how people cope with the fragmentation of their temporal and spatial worlds. A traditional society, he observes, segments its people in terms of distinct roles, clearly delineating each group member's domain of time and space within that social milieu. Hence, the demands made on each member in a traditional society are singular and well-defined. A modern society, however, involves the coexistence of both traditional and advanced sectors, and so effectuates a splintering that "cuts right across each man and woman and across each member of a social standing" (Wagner, 1998, p. 321). Hence, each individual simultaneously pertains to different temporal and spatial domains, thereby requiring simultaneous competence in incongruent fields.

This explanation rings especially true in the context of the world we inhabit today. With the kaleidoscopic forces of globalization, knowledge expansion and disciplinary division all interacting at once, we have entire cultures in a tesseral condition, with members seeking ways to make sense of the complex roles that are demanded of them. Individuals are becoming "polyglots": absorbing and amalgamating multiple fields, distinguishing them and then contextually re-defining them to address the increasingly complex problems that challenge them (Moscovici, 2004/1976). As individuals cater to these mental demands, their incongruent opinions come to coexist rather than conflict with each other since each is situated at different nodes of their constructed social world. In specific social circumstances, only the particular representations in the relevant nodes are activated. Cognitive polyphasia clarifies that these modes are not sequestered, functioning in and of themselves: they connect and interact with each other. In this sense, the notion sheds light on our grasp of the current human condition.

We should be careful to distinguish between cognitive polyphasia and polyphony. Different voices do not necessarily correspond to different representations, i.e. frameworks of understanding the world. In India my perspective on madness will

not likely differ dramatically between the I-positions of university student and employee-in-a-pharmacy. However, when we compare these I-positions to those positions emanating from the traditional Indian family context we can clearly say we are dealing with two different representations (Wagner et al. 1998). In short, there can be multiple voices within the same representational framework, and several perspectives on same representation, e.g. madness-as-spirit-possession. The following section identifies two distinct representational frameworks, which we will later use to identify and understand different voices and the dialogical tensions produced between them.

3. REPRESENTATIONAL FRAMEWORKS OF SECOND GENERATION BRITISH-ASIANS

Second-generation British-Asians are exposed to two distinct cultural worlds. On the one hand, they participate in Asian family activities and ways of thinking. For example, they use their native language and conform to unspoken codes of conduct: no obscenities, no smoking or drinking in the presence of parents etc. On the other hand, once outside the home, they find themselves in a world of contrasting values and expectations. For instance, in the presence of their friends, they slip into the argot of the peer group and are perhaps even encouraged to behave independently of family ideologies.

Each of these groups constructs representational frameworks based on certain underlying principles. The ones that constitute the Asian representational framework are imbibed in early childhood: respect for and obedience to parents, adherence to social proscriptions and traditions, and need for family approval. Here, collectivism is an ideal: individual needs are often sacrificed for those of the group defined by "shoulds" and "should-nots". In contrast, the British representational framework is composed of starkly contrary principles. It resonates with individualism, a relative indifference to social norms, absence of inhibition. There exist no familial or social duties that are obligatory as in the Asian framework.

Each of the above frameworks, in turn, provides a foundation from which specific representations are derived. Take the example of marriage. Within the British representational framework, marriage is essentially about romantic love. It activates the idea of independently finding one's partner, falling in love and wedding bells. In the Asian context, marriage triggers entirely different nuclei of meanings: family opinion and approval, norms and rituals. In either case, the networks evoked are rooted in different universes of values. The British context constitutes individualism, independence, and self-determinism while the Asian context is composed of collectivism, dependence and fatalism.

Both representational frameworks have a place in the lives of second generation British-Asians. At home they work within one, while outside they dwell in another. Our interest lies in what happens at the intersection between these two worlds. How do they negotiate the meaning of some activity that spans the two worlds, that has implications for both, such as marriage or drugs? Further, how are different I-positions utilized in relation to these frameworks?

4. RESEARCH METHODS

Purposive sampling was used in this study. Unmarried second generation British-Asians were selected with the expectation that they would manifest cognitive polyphasia in the public and private domains. Interviewees were young adults (male and female) living in Cambridge or London. Second generation British-Asians are defined, for the purpose of this study, as people whose parents had migrated and settled in the UK. This group was selected for understanding cognitive polyphasia because it presumably faces two divergent value systems simultaneously: Asian at home and British outside. The first generation parents are likely to emphasize Asian standards upon their children, while Western ideals permeate their sensibilities once they step outside their homes. Also, it was hypothesized that married respondents would have a fairly well-established self-identity and were less likely to manifest divergent behaviours to the same extent as their unmarried counterparts. Adolescents, being in the Eriksonian "Identity-versus-role confusion" stage of psycho-social development, were hypothesized to have greater ambiguity in their behaviour. Young adults aged 18-24 years thus seemed like a feasible in-between.

Open-ended in-depth interviews were used so as to allow a detailed exploration of attitudes, opinions and world-view and to generate personalised below-the-surface discourse. The interview began with covering information on the respondent's background, to provide a context to situate the interviewee's personal circumstances and experiences, thereby informing not only factual details but also the coloured lens through which the interviewee perceives these events.

A vignette was used as a projective technique to unpack the content of the representational frameworks for divergent forms of thought and feeling. This technique allowed respondents to spontaneously draw from their general observations in a fairly distanced manner. In contrast, dilemmas were used to systematically elicit the constructive process by which respondents arrive at their own understanding of their multifarious views. For instance: "Imagine you want to get married to a non-Asian. What according to you would be the consequences, the reactions of your family? What would you do in this situation?". When faced with a dilemma such as this, interviewees had to engage with it in a personal way, considering "what if" that specific dilemma occurred in their lives.

5. SELF-DIALOGUING WITHIN AND BETWEEN
REPRESENTATIONAL FRAMEWORKS

One of the first goals of the interviews was to establish which areas of life were highest in discrepancy, between public and private domains, both in terms of behavior and cultural values. The only areas to be high on both dimensions were drugs (including smoking and drinking) and relationships (including issues of pre-marital sex and marriage). In the following we will analyze a self-dialogue concerning smoking to observe the dialogical dynamics going on between the two representational frameworks.

Smoking and drinking were taboo in the traditional Indian social structure. While modern-day India has since shifted from these strictures, the same social representations continue to permeate among first generation immigrants. A negative valence is attached to these issues, even in homes where either parent drinks. This valence may range from mere disapproval to a complete forbiddance of such behaviour among children. This contrasts directly with norms of public life in the UK, where pubs are central to social interaction, with alcohol and nicotine being neither unconventional nor contentious. The second generation thus faces antipodal cultures with respect to these issues.

Consequently, respondents almost always end up hiding such behaviour from their parents, even when parents themselves may engage in alcohol and nicotine-related habits. Interestingly, even when parents "catch a whiff" of these "bad habits", this knowledge is typically left ambiguous by both parties to prevent overt conflict. It is within this situation that the following excerpt comes. The subject is a 21-year-old female who has been smoking for five years and hiding it from her mother. A single example is used to illustrate this point but the general patterns of self-dialogue were found in all participants. Working with a single case allows us to fully analyze what, when and why various I-positions are brought into play.

Mod: "Why [would you not tell your mother that you smoke]?"

Resp: "Out of respect…basically. Drinking is ok but smoking she doesn't like it and I wouldn't want anything like that…yeah…so I wouldn't tell her. Coz my mum drinks as well so its ok (laughs)."

Mod: "Hmmm?"

Resp: "I felt sad [when she cried after discovering that I smoke]. No-one likes to see their mum cry … But then you deal with it and the fact is I still smoke… (giggles). [But I don't tell her] Out of respect, basically. I don't want to start all over again… and she'll be like (voice changes, becomes all lecturing, serious) oh well you know you shouldn't smoke, you should focus on your career… this that and the other… I know I have to quit one day… if you have kids… that are healthy, you know you have to quit smoking… yeah and my boyfriend even knows that I smoke as well and he doesn't like it as well but he'll never tell me quit quit quit… So I have my own time, I'll quit when I want to... I don't want to go through the whole process of being told oh you've got to this that and the other… out of respect, basically…"

Her narration reflects her struggle between not causing pain to her mother (Asian Framework) and indulging in the pleasure that a cigarette gives her (British Framework). To this end she utilizes several voices drawn from each framework. She speaks through the voice of Asian Daughter, the British Youngster, the British Observer and the Asian Mother.

Consider again the first part of the extract, as given below:

Mod: "Why [would you not tell your mother that you smoke]?"

Resp: "Out of respect…basically. Drinking is ok but smoking she doesn't like it and I wouldn't want anything like that…yeah…so I wouldn't tell her. Coz my mum drinks as well so it's ok (laughs)."

Here, the respondent uses the moral dimension to define herself. Rather than giving excuses for not telling her mother she uses the principles of the Asian representational framework to claim a higher moral ground, i.e. "out of respect, basically". The Asian value of respect for parents is "ventriloquated" (see: Valsiner, 2002) through the voice of an Asian Daughter. The narrator then shifts to the British Youngster position to affirm that "Drinking is ok". From here she returns to the Asian Daughter position, in expressing her obligation not to hurt her mother. In the final line she moves back into the British framework but this time to focus on her mother's behaviour. In condoning her mother's alcohol consumption, she re-defines the moral code in accordance with the British social milieu. Here, instead of re-positioning her mother as immoral for consuming alcohol, she alters the moral code itself.

Interestingly, in this positional transition, she simultaneously retains her own morality (or absence of immorality) while doing the same for her mother – she is respecting her mother by not telling her and it is acceptable for her mother – which comes from the narrator's experiences in Britain where such an alternative vision is not only tolerated but actively practiced. In this alternate moral code, the boundaries that define morality are widened and rationalized in the private domain: alcohol is acceptable but cigarette smoking can kill and so is not.

The next few lines of the extract reveal a shift of focus:

Mod: "Hmmm?"

Resp: "I felt sad [when she cried after discovering that I smoke]. No-one likes to see their mum cry… But then you deal with it and the fact is I still smoke… (giggles)."

Here, we see the narrator vacillate between the Asian and British Frameworks again, but with a new development. First, in verbalizing her own sadness, the respondent's Asian Daughter voice is revealing her submerged guilt, not just at having catalyzed her mother's sadness but at having betrayed her trust. And in her very next claim, "no-one likes to see their mums cry", she is attempting to justify this guilt and re-enter the moral domain. Simultaneously, this sentence softens the boundary between her Asian self and her British self, for she is recognizing the similarity in all mother-daughter relationships: she is in effect entering the liminal zone and becoming the British Observer, for she next states "but then you deal with it" – a statement to affirm her self-reliance. Here, she has almost instantaneously translocated and distanced herself from the situation: this is evident from the reversal of the pronoun "I" to "you" as well as the tone of dispassion that infuses it. From here, once again, we discern the self switching to the British I-position, giggling at the persistence of her ("immoral") habit.

The next few lines involve similar fluctuations between the three voices of the Asian Daughter, the British Youngster and the British Observer, along with the entry of a new voice: that of the narrator's own mother. This is distinct from simply ventriloquising her through the Asian voice. Here, she actively parodies her mother's voice:

Resp: "[But I don't tell her] Out of respect, basically. I don't want to start all over again… - and she'll be like (voice changes, becomes lecturing, serious).

Oh well you know you shouldn't smoke, you should focus on your career… this that and the other… I know I have to quit one day… if you have kids… that are healthy, you know you have to quit smoking… yeah and my boyfriend even knows that I smoke as well and he doesn't like it as well but he'll never tell me quit quit quit… So I have my own time, I'll quit when I want to... I don't want to go through the whole process of being told oh you've got to this that and the other… out of respect, basically…"

In the lines "oh well you know you shouldn't smoke, you should focus on your career…" and "oh you've got to do this that and the other", the respondent employs the technique termed "reported speech" (Bakhtin, 1981), whereby she introduces the dialogic other with whom she is engaged. She inter-animates her utterance with the speaking consciousness of her mother who sermonizes and directs her, and subverts her own subjectivity. The interviewee clearly demarcates her own speech with that of her mother's by taking on the latter's accent. This is a classic example of "a parody: a form of dialogic orientation where one voice transmits what another has said but with a change in accent" (Wertsch, 1991, p. 55). Through this parody, the respondent is actually activating her mother's voice within her. Simultaneously, she is also re-positioning her mother as an irritant, lecturing about right and wrong. Through such a re-positioning, she is, in effect, exerting control over her mother's voice. Further, this speaking consciousness is simultaneously the voice of the mother herself, as the worried parent trying to come to terms with what she perceives as inappropriate or even "wrong" behaviour on the part of her daughter.

The mother's concern regarding her daughter, needless to say, is universal. The mother's words index the collective voice of parenthood. However, in this particular excerpt, the Asian element is unmistakable in the linkage between career and smoking. The mention of these two relatively unrelated phenomena, in parallel, is cultural-specific: "smoking" is often generalized to other "similar bad habits" (alcohol, drugs, clubbing, sex) and the two are typically seen as correlated in Asian parental monologue. This Asian linkage was found in all interviews. For example, one male student was told by his parents "don't think about girls now. Focus on studies and your career. Girls can wait." Any of these "bad habits" get immediately conceptualized as obstacles or distractions in one's movement toward socially sanctioned goals, such as prestigious job, money, etc.

This Asian representation of smoking is contrasted in the next line with the British representation, in which smoking is conceptualized primarily as a health risk. She switches to a generalized position (as in Mead's "generalized Other" which embodies the attitude of a social institution rather than the position of a particular role) of health conscious British Observer, and adopts the more generic language "you" instead of "I". This position is then eclipsed by that of the British Youngster, in this case, the I-position of girlfriend responding to her boyfriend's voice, which is implicit. The boyfriend does not like her smoking (probably for health reasons) but within the British representational framework personal autonomy is more highly valued, and thus he is unwilling to tell her what she should do. The affirmation of autonomy is then reaffirmed by her, at a more general level, outside of the

particular relationship with her boyfriend. She says, "So I have my own time. I'll quit when I want to". Again the same point is made but adapted to the context of her particular relationship with her mother: "I don't want to go through the process of being told". We know this voice is addressed to her mother because she follows this sentence with a second parody of her mother.

Her speech comes full circle; she ends with the same voice and expression she began with – the Asian Daughter saying, "out of respect, basically". Why go through this long, back and forth, self-communication when she ends at the same place she began? Our answer: because the issue of smoking lies at the intersection of the Asian and British frameworks, she must give voice to I-positions from both, arguing all points of view. To open this issue is to animate all voices of relevance. We see her making use of I-positions emanating from particular social roles (both her own and others), but also generalized positions, such as smoking-as-a-health-hazard.

This kind of chain of utterances is what Valsiner (2000) calls a "cyclical hierarchy". The subject reflects on her context, her smoking behaviour, and psychologically distances herself from this context through the various voices each responding to and mediating the influence of the former. The consequent exchange of voices and representations builds a hierarchy of semiotic mediations, which eventually returns to the original context, unchanged: she continues to smoke and hide it from her mother. Nonetheless, such self-communication does lead to a development in the subject's awareness of herself, though her attitude toward smoking might not have changed in the process. The presence of different voices, the content of their speech and the consequent interactions help her realise the various facets of her self, as well as the fact that she herself is situated in neither of those positions but in a complex of positions, including those of significant others. This awareness provides a sense of acceptance and balance of the diverse representational frameworks in her self.

Her original solution to the problem is already itself a compromise between the two frameworks. She maintains her autonomy by smoking, while respecting her mother by keeping her habit out of the home in both speech and deed. The self-communication is rather an attempt to justify and affirm the status quo from all relevant positions. In this sense, no innovation (a mark of genuine dialogue) occurs, yet there is development of self-awareness and self-acceptance through psychological distancing.

6. CONCLUSION: DIALOGUING THE FRAMEWORKS

The interplay between voices – polyphony – and that between different forms of thought – cognitive polyphasia – are evident in the subject's self-dialogue. Through the positions of daughter, mother, youngster and observer, the subject essentially gives two reasons for not telling her mother she smokes: the Asian principle of respect for parents and the British value of autonomy. She begins by stating that she does not tell her mother "out of respect" and then moves on to saying that she continues to smoke despite the knowledge that her mother would not approve as a declaration of independence. In essence, she is using Asian and British cultural frameworks to work out the reason for her behaviour. What's more, she feels the

obligation to give two explanations, and thus affirm both representational systems she belongs to. Neither is privileged. Hiding undesirable behaviour from parents is not unique to this sample. What is distinctive in second generation British Asians is the use of incompatible frameworks for justifying one's actions.

These very different "Asian" and "British" worlds can be easily distinguished by the respondent as she smoothly moves between them. Yet she is not squarely located in either. Owing to her consciousness of her experiences with, and the differences between, the two worlds, she populates her speech with voices from both. Asian and British actors are selected to interact in her ensuing response, becoming the voices that position her in particular ways. We see an exchange between the various participating voices, as well as one between these two worlds through these very voices. However, this "exchange" should not be confused with a genuine dialogue in which all participants are transformed in unexpected ways; instead, she spins all voices to a solution already arrived at.

This paper outlined a two-level self-system. At the first level, the particular I-positions interact with each other, exchanging specific ideas or opinions. This is also a more general exchange at the second level between the cultural frameworks to which these I-positions belong: here, the interaction is between the larger meaning systems that constitute the frameworks. The two-level self-system can be helpfully explained in Rubin's face-vase image. An object is fore-grounded only by creating a background through which it stands out. In our study we saw how different voices (objects) became meaningful against the background of a whole representational framework.

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