




EXPLORING THE STORIES OF ASIAN-CANADIAN WOMEN ON WHAT IT MEANS TO BE BICULTURAL

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Individuals who identify with two cultures, or bicultural individuals, often face unique challenges as they attempt to negotiate the demands of their ethnic and dominant cultures. While much of the current research focuses on conceptualizing and measuring bicultural identity, studies investigating the lived experiences of being bicultural are scarce. This study explores the stories of four second-generation Asian-Canadian women about their bicultural experiences and what being bicultural means to them. Drawing from narrative inquiry, four interviews were conducted to collect stories from participants. The findings of this study indicate that there are multiple definitions of being bicultural and they elucidate some of the challenges faced by second-generation Asian-Canadian women associated with their multifaceted identity. The results provide a better understanding of how the second-generation Asian-Canadian women in this study defined and interacted with their bicultural identity.

Keywords: biculturality, culture, ethnies, identity, second-generation



Les personnes biculturelles, c'est-à-dire les personnes qui s'identifient à deux cultures, doivent souvent composer avec des défis particuliers lorsqu'elles tentent de concilier les caractéristiques de leur culture ethnique et celles de la culture dominante à laquelle elles sont exposées. Bien que la plupart des recherches actuelles portent sur la conceptualisation et l'évaluation de l'identité biculturelle, peu d'études s'intéressent aux expériences relatives au fait d'être une personne biculturelle. Ce projet de recherche présente l'expérience de quatre femmes canadiennes d'origine asiatique de deuxième génération par rapport à leur biculturalité et, ensuite, la signification qu'elles donnent au fait d'être une personne biculturelle. Quatre entretiens ont été menés pour recueillir les propos des participantes. Les résultats de cette étude montrent que plusieurs définitions de la biculturalité sont possibles. Ces définitions mettent en lumière certains défis avec lesquels les femmes canadiennes d'origine asiatique de deuxième génération doivent composer par rapport à leur identité biculturelle. Les données obtenues dans le cadre de cette recherche permettent de mieux comprendre la façon dont se définissent les femmes canadiennes d'origine asiatique de deuxième génération qui s'attribuent une identité biculturelle et la façon dont elles vivent leur biculturalité.

Mots-clés : biculturalité, culture, deuxième génération, ethnies, identité

It is estimated that the number of second-generation¹ visible minorities in Canada will double by 2031 (Statistics Canada, 2011). According to Statistics Canada (2011), the two largest ethnic groups were South Asian and Chinese, comprising 46% of all visible minorities. Despite the projected growth of second-generation Asian-Canadians, there is limited knowledge about their experiences as bicultural individuals. Few studies have explored what it is like to negotiate between two different cultures,² sometimes at odds with one another (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013). Having a bicultural identity and being a visible minority can pose challenges in the acculturation process (Giguère, Lalonde, & Lou, 2010; Ong, Burrow, Fuller-Rowell, Ja, & Sue, 2013). As Canada becomes more diverse, the experiences of bicultural individuals raise significant concerns for multicultural counselling practices. Pedersen (1991) recommended that multicultural counselling take into consideration “demographic,” “status,” and “ethnographic variables” (p. 7) within the therapeutic relationship. Furthermore, the Standards of Practice (2015) for the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association (CCPA) oblige counsellors to understand the “ways in which ethnicity, language, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and so forth, can affect attitudes, values and behaviour” (p. 8). Yet, little is known about how the combined challenges associated with bicultural identity, gender, and visible minority status

¹*Second-generation* refers to those who are born to first-generation immigrants. Second-generation Asian-Canadians are typically born in Canada and have foreign-born parents of Asian descent (Giguère, Lalonde, & Lou, 2010; Sundar, 2008). This study included participants who self-identified as second-generation immigrants.

²The author acknowledges that the term *culture* reflects multiple definitions that can be embedded in objectivity and subjectivity (Das, 1995). The formal study of cultural people have historically problematized individuals rather than the broader sociopolitical context (Adams, Edkins, Lacka, Pickett, & Cheryan, 2008). Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, culture only refers to the subjective experiences manifested in the adaptation to one’s “physical and social environment” (Das, 1995, p. 46).

influence the lives of Asian-Canadians. Studies on biculturalism have largely focused on measuring identity and have mostly taken place in the U.S (Novin, Banerjee, & Rieffe, 2012; Stroink & Lalonde, 2009). This study posed the research question: What does it mean to be bicultural to second-generation Asian-Canadian women? The purpose of this investigation was to provide a rich description of bicultural Asian-Canadian women's experiences to help inform multicultural counselling practices.

Bicultural Identity and Acculturation

There is an important distinction between the terms *bicultural* and *biculturalism*. A *bicultural* person is generally defined as an individual who is "exposed to and internalizes more than one culture" (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013, p. 122), for instance, an immigrant, a biracial individual, or a visible minority. Biculturalism describes one of many processes of acculturation. There are several ways an individual can acculturate *or* adapt to their two (or more) cultures. Cultural frame switching is one method. Using this method, individuals alternate between two cultural systems (Benet-Martinez, Lee, & Leu, 2006). Berry's (2001) model of acculturation identifies a framework within which bicultural individuals can orient their identities by one of four methods: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization (Chia & Costigan, 2006; Farver, Bhadha, & Narang, 2002; Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013). *The integration* method, also known as biculturalism, is one in which the "behaviors, values, and identities pertaining to each of their two cultures" are integrated in the individual (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013, p. 123). If individuals use an *assimilation* method, they identify with only the dominant culture. If individuals use a *separation* method, they continue to identify only with their ethnic culture.

Marginalization is the least desirable method where both dominant and ethnic cultures are rejected by the individual.

Biculturalism as an orientation is often described as the most desirable form of acculturation (Chae & Foley, 2010; Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013), leading to “fewer psychological problems” (Farver et al., 2002, p. 12). Nguyen and Benet-Martínez’s (2013) meta-analysis research supports the relationship between biculturalism and positive psychological adjustment. The authors claim that their findings “invalidate” previous assertions that bicultural individuals experience “marginality and maladjustment” (p. 122-123). However, bicultural individuals often experience a wide range of cultural conflicts, as will become evident in the following section. Therefore, the two terms must be used with caution since it cannot be assumed that all bicultural individuals are oriented towards biculturalism and are therefore “well-adjusted”. To avoid assumptions about levels of acculturation and psychological adjustment, this study relied on the term bicultural, which describes an individual who identifies with two cultures.


Bicultural Identity Conflict and Well-Being

Bicultural identity conflict refers to a “broad range of conflicts” (Stroink & Lalonde, 2009, p. 45) that may result from having two cultural identities. These tensions can arise from the contradictory “values, behaviors, and expectations of heritage and mainstream cultures” (Stroink & Lalonde, 2009, p. 46). Interpersonal tensions can include intergenerational conflict and racial discrimination. Chung (2001) concluded that Asian-American college students experience intergenerational conflict in the realms of “family interactions, educational and career concerns, and dating and marriage issues” (p. 382). It was also demonstrated that gender differences may exist in matters of dating

and marriage where “female students report[ed] higher conflict scores than male[s]” (Chung, 2001, p. 381). Farver, Bhadha, and Narang (2002) found that South Asian-American women were less likely to integrate their two identities compared to their male counterparts, in part, because Asian cultures tend to grant men “greater independence” (p. 23). Therefore, women experience bicultural conflict differently than do men.

In addition to familial conflicts, visible minorities must confront racial stereotypes. The model minority and perpetual foreigners, for instance, are common stereotypes associated with Asian-Americans (Suzuki, Ahluwalia, & Alimchandani, 2012). Ong et al. (2013) found that 78% of Asian-Americans experienced racial microaggressions, or “subtle forms of racial” discrimination (p. 189), within a two-week period. By invalidating experiences of “marginality and maladjustment,” stereotypes about Asian-Americans are perpetuated by the literature.

Conflict at the intrapersonal level occurs “within the individual... as the experience of ‘feeling torn’ between two cultures” (Giguère et al., 2010, p. 19). Since Western cultures tend to stress individualism while Asian cultures emphasize collectivism, Asian bicultural individuals may experience internal conflict (Kim, Sarason, & Sarason, 2006). This incongruence can “threaten... their sense of self” resulting in “psychological distress” (Kim et al., 2006, p. 27). Through internalized racism, racial stereotypes can be adopted into an individual’s self-concepts (Pyke, 2010). This can result in physiological health consequences, such as high cortisol levels (Tull, Sheu, Butler, & Cornelious, 2005).



Thus, having two cultural identities can lead to cultural conflicts, which have potential negative psychological and physical consequences. Culture and race, combined with gender norms, have considerable impact on the experiences of many Asian-Canadian women. The research suggests women have more disadvantages in terms of bicultural conflicts. This study explored second-generation Asian-Canadian women's stories to better understand how they (a) define being bicultural, and (b) experience their bicultural identity.

Theoretical Framework

Since this study sought out narratives about lived experiences, I employed a social constructivist lens, which acknowledges the existence of “multiple realities” (Creswell, 2013, p. 36). Therefore, this study did not aim to measure bicultural identity or propose a single definition of biculturalism; rather, the purpose was to elucidate the unique experiences of bicultural Asian-Canadian women.

Methodology

For this study, I used a qualitative narrative inquiry approach. The goal was to collect stories about individuals' lived experiences and beliefs (Creswell, 2013; Hoshmand, 2005). Stories about identity and culture were collected from participants to describe the subjective experience of being bicultural.

Participants

Using the pragmatic approach, participants³ were selected by enlisting volunteers who were readily available (Creswell, 2013). Four second-generation Asian-Canadian⁴ women were recruited from the researcher's online social network. They ranged from ages 21 to 28 and were of Chinese, Filipino, and South Asian backgrounds. Because not everyone fits neatly into the demographic definitions, the inclusion of participants was based on self-identification.

TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHIC DATA OF PARTICIPANTS

Name	Kimberley	Taylor	Jessica	Na'ilah
Ethnicity/cultural background	Chinese-Canadian-American	Filipino-Chinese-Canadian	Chinese-Canadian	Pakistani-Canadian
Age	25	23	21	28
Place of Birth	Canada	Canada	Canada	Pakistan ⁵

Data analysis

A paradigmatic approach was used to extract common themes described in the participants' stories (Creswell, 2013; Polkinghorne, 1995). Multiple readings of the transcript were conducted to allow the themes to emerge from the narratives (Creswell, 2013). In the first reading, significant passages were

³Pseudonyms were used in this study to protect the identity of the participants.

⁴It is important to note Asian groups are heterogeneous, consisting of many different subgroups and bearing important differences in values, beliefs, and norms. Asian-Canadian refers to those who identify as Southeast Asian, South Asian, East Asian, and Pacific Islanders along with Canadian (Miller, 2007).

⁵ While Na'ilah was born in Pakistan and moved to Canada at the age of 11, she self-identifies as a second-generation rather than first-generation immigrant.

highlighted and analyzed for emerging themes. In the second reading, silenced stories, powerful voices, and outliers were considered (Creswell, 2013).

Procedures

This study received approval from the Research Ethics Board at the University of Ottawa. After explaining the purpose of the study, obtaining informed consent, and gathering demographic information, semi-structured interviews were conducted over video calling platforms. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour, was recorded using a third-party application, and was then transcribed verbatim.

Results

Two primary themes emerged from the data: *being bicultural* and the *outsider*. Sub-themes also emerged under each major theme as shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2: IDENTIFIED THEMES AND SUBTHEMES

Themes	Subthemes
Being Bicultural	The definition The experience: visibility or invisibility
The Outsider	Conflicts with ethnic culture Conflicts with mainstream culture

Being Bicultural

Definitions of *being bicultural* vary. Two participants described being bicultural as “identifying with two different cultures” while another defined it as “living in two cultures.” Kimberley’s definition as “valuing two cultures,”

however, was markedly different. She described a valuing of each culture, in contrast to cultural integration.


The processes of selecting aspects from Asian cultures were common among participants. Taylor, for example, integrated “bits and pieces of both [mainstream and ethnic] identities”. However, participants also made parts of their ethnic culture invisible to various degrees. Taylor would avoid certain identities depending on the situation due to the “bad stereotypes” associated with being Chinese or Filipino. For instance, she would introduce herself as Chinese-Canadian and deliberately leave out her Filipino identity if she deemed it beneficial. While Taylor chose which aspects to hide, Na’ilah adopted a worldview that omitted her ethnic culture entirely:

...when I operate in the world, I would adopt like a White lens... I would see myself looking outwards as a White person... I would look at White people as in they’re just White—they’re normal.

This cultural frame switching (Benet-Martinez et al., 2006) can result in hiding or even silencing certain aspects of one’s ethnic culture. It is important to note that none of the participants reported concealing their Canadian identity, suggesting the implicit need to conform to mainstream culture. This process conveys the complex nature of what it means to *be* bicultural.

The Outsider

This theme focuses on the recurring experiences of being an outsider. For some, being the outsider was inherent in being bicultural. Though Na’ilah strongly identified with the dominant culture, she still felt like the ‘other.’ Na’ilah explained that being bicultural meant:



You're kind of in the middle... If I'm surrounded by Pakistanis, I feel like I'm not Pakistani enough, I'm too Canadian. And when I'm in Canada, I feel like I'm too much of the other... Like you always feel like you're a little bit of an outsider.

Jessica also described being bicultural as living “between two places,” not fitting “into either place,” and “always [being] seen as the other.”

While not every participant expressed feeling like the outsider, all participants shared stories of tension involving their bicultural identity. Most participants described their home life as the primary connection to their ethnic culture. Taylor's parents disallowed her from traveling with her significant other:

[That] specific item of boyfriend-girlfriend related stuff and about things looking bad, [my parents are] still very strict on that...I wish sometimes they would understand that it's different in North America.

The participants' stories exemplify the interpersonal conflicts that can arise when cultural values do not align. This may contribute to feelings of alienation from their families among bicultural individuals.

Alienation from mainstream society was well-illustrated by Kimberley and Jessica who shared stories about lunchtime in elementary school. I found Jessica's story particularly poignant:

I would always bring rice in like a box, and then other students had sandwiches. And I'd be eating cold rice because they didn't have a microwave [laugh]... It was really sad... I really want[ed] to hide my

food too... I didn't want other people to smell it, so I'd keep the lid on [laugh]. So, I would take the lid off, and then eat, the lid on, and then eat.

Jessica and Kimberley also discussed the underrepresentation of Asian people in the media. Jessica talked about how she felt discouraged about pursuing acting "because [she] wouldn't fit those roles." Likewise, Kimberley, who had previous acting experience, described the roles available to her as "very limited." Thus, the media is yet another context in which participants felt invisible. From childhood to adulthood, participants were reminded of their differences, adding to the sense that they are and always will be outsiders. This sense of being outsiders exists even though Asian people have a long history in Canada, particularly with Chinese history dating back to before confederation.

Implications

The way terms are defined by individuals, institutions, and professionals can vary substantially. By framing being bicultural as valuing two cultures, as Kimberley uniquely did, bicultural individuals may not experience conflicts the same way as those who align with the literature's definition. Definitions and findings asserted by the research can have powerful influence over what being bicultural means. It is important for counsellors to provide the opportunity for clients to explore their own meanings rather than imposing definitions. Counsellors who rely on academic conceptualizations of biculturalism may risk "not getting the full picture" (Na'ilah). With a surface understanding, counsellors may neglect the social context in which frame switching occurs.

Consistent with previous findings (Chung, 2001; Stroink & Lalonde, 2009), the results indicate that Asian-Canadians experience bicultural conflicts

regardless of how one defines *being bicultural*. The findings also confirm that bicultural individuals confront racial discrimination along with bicultural tensions (Kim, Sarason, & Sarason, 2006). For the women in this study, bicultural conflicts occurred at various stages of their lives, in public and private spaces, and in varying degrees. Counsellors should consider how these tensions and sociopolitical frameworks affect bicultural individuals. The clash between cultures reinforced the sense of being an outsider that, to some, is inseparable from being bicultural. Practitioners should sensitively explore the outsider rhetoric and be mindful of inadvertently recreating the sense of other in therapy.

The narratives in this study offer insight into the experiences of Asian-Canadian women. The CCPA's *Standard of Practice* (2015) emphasizes the importance of incorporating multicultural competencies into counsellor education programs. Representation of bicultural experiences is crucial within the counselling curriculum. This study can be used in educational settings to expand students' understanding of multicultural counselling.

Conclusion

By illuminating the stories of Asian-Canadian women, this study enriches our understanding of underrepresented voices and informs multicultural counselling practice. The transferability of the findings is limited due to the small and specific sample size, making it difficult to generalize results to other bicultural, ethnic, and generational groups. Participants were from my personal social network, which influenced the interpretation of the data. As a second-generation Asian-Canadian woman myself, I brought to this study my own presumptions about bicultural experiences. Future research can explore the experiences of bicultural individuals from various cultural backgrounds

using a larger and more objective sample. Researchers may also consider the impacts of parental levels of acculturation and process of citizenship.

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