Title
"Redifining Victimhood: Vicissitudes of Empowerment" Domestic Violence in South Asian Immigrant Communities

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2204f4dt

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Publication Date
2017-04-01

Supplemental Material
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Introduction

Project Goal: I seek to further understand the experience of domestic violence (DV) survivorship in South Asian immigrant communities and the associated processes of post-traumatic recovery and rehabilitation.

Research Themes
- Empathy and gendered intersubjectivity
- Constructions of choice and agency
- Cultural memory in post-traumatic transnational identities

Informants
- 10 South Asian DV survivors
- Immigrants seeking asylum
- UK citizens
- Visa holders
- Pakistani or Indian origin
- Muslim or Hindu religious identity
- Ages: Mid 20s to Early 50s

Fieldsite
Manchester, UK: An Industrial City
- Industrialization heavily reliant on immigrant labor
- Overcrowding, social stratification
- Led to the formation of segregated communities and ethnic enclaves

Saheli Asian Women’s Project
- Hosila Outreach – provides opportunities and resources to women escaping from abuse
- Refuge Accommodation – hosts 6 families in transitional refuge living
- Women’s Support Groups – hosts social and activity-based groups to build confidence and career skills

Theoretical Frameworks

1. Situational Transnational Identities
- Transnational identity: “thoughts, feelings, dreams, and considerations of one place when one is physically in another place”
- DV survivors are functional in two culturally different environments (South Asia and England)
- DV survivors recognize and value the advantages of English community membership, and are proud to be able to use its resources for themselves and their children; they simultaneously remain proud of their South Asian identity and maintain a superiority over English culture behind closed doors

2. Resourcefulness
- DV survivors use their newfound transnational English and South Asian identity to demand higher standards and greater successes for themselves
- DV survivors are aware of their positions as categorical “victims” in society, and recognize that this identifying terminology comes with resources and opportunities otherwise unavailable to them such as:
  - Citizenship
  - Monetary Benefits (Rent-free housing, stipends)
  - Debt forgiveness
  - Child Care
- DV survivors work hard to take advantage of these resources, but reject the “victim” label attached to them: “Claiming ‘victimhood’ takes away my agency. I’m not defined by my past, but by my future. So I will work hard now, and be a survivor. I am not a victim.”

3. Community Building
- South Asian DV survivors face rejection and social isolation from the larger South Asian community
- In response, DV survivors have formed an insular community among themselves to support one another
- The peculiarity in this process of community building is evidenced in:
  - Power “plays”
  - Gossiping/Backstabbing
  - Racial Hierarchies
  - Social Control/Manipulations
- These behaviors are often displayed by women who seek power in relationships, perhaps in response to their abusive past

Survivor Experience: Redefining Victimhood

It's like being at the bottom of a well that's so deep you can't even see the light at the opening, and when you scream nobody can hear your voice...you're all alone.

1. Independent Living
2. Refuge Living
3. Attempt to Escape DV

Empathy and gendered intersubjectivity

Applications

Sustaining Independency in DV Survivorship
- Material Culture in Refuges
  - Helps maintain transnational identity
  - Allows DV survivors to be comfortable while in transitional living, so they can focus on building a sustainable future for themselves

“Victim” labeling as problematic terminology
- “Victimhood” implies: weakness, inability, instability, and deficiency
- “Victim” label focuses on the past, not the present or future, effectively stripping a woman of her agency

Future Directions
What are the intergenerational consequences of domestic violence and their effects on maternal ecology in South Asian immigrant communities?

Ethnographic Methods
- Fieldwork in Hindi/Urdu or English
- In-depth semi-structured interviews
- Spontaneous unstructured interviews
- Participant observation
- Worked closely with Saheli refugee care staff, social workers
- Moderated women’s support groups
- Volunteered within refugee community
- Shadowed outreach consultation visits

I represented Saheli at conferences and media opportunities.

I attended religious/holiday parties, festivals, and potlucks.

References and Acknowledgements

UCLA Lemelson Undergraduate Anthropological Honors Scholar Program
Dr. C. Jason Thioop, UCLA
Dr. Trilla Toyoda, UCLA
Dr. Aasmar Blom, UCLA
Dr. Norma Mendez-Denton, UCLA
Eva Melstrom, UCLA