Relational Theory in a South Asian Context: An Example of the Dynamics of Identity Development

Lisa Desai, Psy.D.

About the Author
Lisa Desai, Psy.D., completed her doctoral training at the School of Professional Psychology at Wright State University. She then came to the Boston area to pursue a two-year post doctoral fellowship in child and adolescent psychology at Mclean Hospital. Dr. Desai is currently a staff psychologist at the Stone Center Counseling Services at Wellesley College. She is also on staff at the South Asian clinic at Cambridge Hospital and maintains a private practice in Wellesley, Massachusetts, where she works primarily with children and women.

Abstract
Indian culture has been referred to as one which is inherently inter-relational. The purpose of this presentation is to examine the ways in which salient aspects of South Asian culture, including family-centeredness, religion, regional affiliation, language, and caste/class, impact identity development in people of Indian descent. While the focus, in terms of examples and a case study, will be on Indian women who attend college in the U.S., the issues and questions raised during the course of this presentation pertain to both men and women who are raised within the Indian culture. Using the frame of Relational/Cultural Theory, the question becomes: How does culture combine with developmental and psychodynamic theory in shaping relational images?

When talking about identity in India, we face the duality of an individualized self versus a communal self. Indeed, like other Asian cultures, the communal aspect of Indian living has long been acknowledged (Kakar, 1978; Ho, 1993; Sinha, 1997). For Indians who have immigrated to the U.S. or elsewhere, the degree to which they digress from traditional beliefs and customs varies. Some families maintain strict beliefs, while others are more tolerant and even encourage the incorporation of Western ideals. Still, several researchers have observed that, by and large, Indian families who have migrated to the U.S. and other parts of the world have typically held onto many aspects of their traditional values and lifestyles. The destination of migration, of course, determines the type of influence the “host” culture will have. Sowell (1996) has talked about the dispersion of Indians to all parts of the world which naturally creates various compilations of Asian and Western identities. Alvarez (1995) notes that, for many people, immigration is bittersweet in that it represents loss of the culture of origin and all its familiarity, but also offers hope for freedom and opportunities in the new world.

Many theorists distinguish between Western and South Asian cultures in one basic way: while the U.S. values and encourages independence and personal accomplishment, India has historically advocated communal values and individual accomplishment insofar as it improves the well being and/or status of one’s family or community. David Ho (1979) defines collective identity in the following way:

Collectivism affirms that preservation and enhancement of the well-being of the group is the supreme guiding principle . . . members of the group are expected to subjugate their own inclinations to group requirements, perhaps even to make personal sacrifices . . . with each member being related to other members in a network of
Another religion in India.

Vastly different experiences of a person practicing the Hindu perspective of Hinduism, while acknowledging the interlocking responsibility and obligations.

Hsu (1985) has commented that the relational worlds in a Western person’s life are less filled with kin and family relationships, and so the need to search for friendships and the need for self-reliance become paramount. He notes that for Asian cultures, such as the Chinese, few relationships are formed outside of kinship so that relational needs are automatically and permanently met.

As with many ethnic groups, Indian youth in the United States may find they live in two worlds: Western society which forms their external environment and their traditional Indian home which forms their interior environment. From this perspective, one may say that the need to work toward becoming relational in the Western world is in contrast to the task of the South Asian. The work may be in finding ways to tolerate, and perhaps introduce shifts in, family relationships so that reciprocal demands become less intense. This must be done in a way which respects and preserves cultural ties. Indeed, when Susan Jones (1997) studied identity in a culturally diverse sample of college women, she found the women “shared a sense that their identities consisted of multiple layers. Identity was experienced as evolving in an ongoing negotiation between the outside and inside worlds” (p. 380).

Much has been written about psychology and the common themes among various Asian cultures. Although focusing specifically on Indian culture, some of the notions apply to other Asian cultures, just as other features of Indian culture are similar to Western experiences. Furthermore, in reviewing the literature, and my own experiences clinically and personally, it is obvious that the diversity within India precludes any type of generalization about cultural influences. For example, when comparing the dramatically different economic strata of Indians, one may see more commonalities between the affluent in both India and the United States (Tharoor, 1997). In another example, Tharoor has stated that the only commonality between a Christian, Kerala speaking South Indian and a Hindi speaking North Indian, is that both come from India. This presentation emphasizes the diversity in India. I will talk about culture and identity mainly from the perspective of Hinduism, while acknowledging the vastly different experiences of a person practicing another religion in India.

Aspects of Culture Which Contribute to Identity

Views of the Self

The nature of self in India may be thought of as encompassing a highly personalized aspect and a communal aspect because of the impact of both religion and family. In the classic book, Clan, Caste, and Club, Hsu (1963) draws a distinction between the American, Chinese, and Hindu Indian psychological worlds, describing the Indian world view as one that is “supernatural oriented,” whereas the Western stance is “individual oriented,” and the Chinese life view is “situation oriented.” His premise is that mutuality in relationships, tailored to meet situational requirements and social appropriateness, exists more in Chinese culture. In contrast, he observes that Indian culture is embedded in a religious orientation where relationships with gods form the strongest relationships. According to Hsu, while family is central to Indian culture, there remains an individual orientation towards the religious. In a more recent article entitled “Is the Indian Self Predominantly Interdependent?” Misra and Giri (1995) reported that, in their study of Indian graduate students, “the majority of the students were characterized with either low independent/low interdependent or high independent/high interdependent self construal.” Some theorists have attributed the Indian’s ability to integrate individualistic and collectivistic traits to India’s period under British colonial rule (Patel et al., 1996; Roland, 1988). Clinically, Roland repeatedly noted in his work with Indian patients that there emerged a viable “private self” which was purposely preserved as distinct from one’s “family self” and may be more connected to one’s “spiritual self” (Roland, 1988).

Indian Family Structure and Dynamics

While there is evidence for an aspect of the Indian self which is individually oriented in the spiritual context, there is no doubt that South Asian culture places a powerful and lifelong emphasis on family and collective identity. Roland (1988) and Kakar (1978) posit that intense relational bonds between children and parents begin early in life. Both describe significant differences in the nature and duration of the early mother-child bond relative to Western child-rearing. According to Kakar, a highly gratifying, relatively long-term (until about age five) initial maternal bond is fostered in children. This is in contrast to Western child-rearing where independence and exploration are encouraged in the child, beginning...