Chapter 34

Story Objects:
An Interactive Installation to Excavate Immigrant History and Identity through Evocative Everyday Objects

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ABSTRACT

Most modern globalized societies are characterized by large immigrant communities. While previously the assimilation of immigrants was often connected to “unlearning” the original cultural background, today’s acculturation processes are marked by digital media, which support identity-forming by empowering communication. On the other hand, digital media often strengthen difficulties in inter-generational communication. The authors explore the use of digital interactive media to foster inter-generational communication and the transfer of cultural and historic knowledge. Story Objects is an installation that presents aspects of immigrant history alongside an individual family history leveraging food traditions and memories as a starting point to stimulate the viewers on multiple levels to engage in communication about the larger topic of immigrant identity.

INTRODUCTION

A rapidly increasing part of the population of the United States is consisting of immigrants from all parts of the world. Since the nineteenth century the United States have been the prime destination among immigrants and an important topic of American sociological research was to examine and understand the changes of the society brought about by immigration. Between 1880 and 1920 about 24 million immigrants mostly from Europe came to the United States forming a rather
coherent group of cultural backgrounds that these immigrants came from (Waters & Jiménes, 2005). The composition of the immigrant community of the beginning of the twenty-first century is more heterogeneous and varied. The large majority of current immigrants come from Latin America and Asia and their backgrounds are vastly different. While a high percentage of Latin American immigrants are low-skill laborers, the range among the Asian immigrants reaches from highly educated scientists, engineers and healthcare professionals on one end to uneducated peasants on the other end (Zhou & Xiong, 2005). Despite this heterogeneity the group of Asian immigrants has generally not been considered as having difficulties to assimilate to the dominant culture. The level of achievement of the 1.5 (immigrants who were born abroad and arrived in the United States as children) and second-generation immigrants (U.S. Born children of immigrant parents) of Asian descent has been strong. As Zou and Xiong report based on numbers from the 2000 U.S. census, Asian Americans aged 25 to 34 are more likely to hold a college degree than whites and equally their earnings ratio was higher compared to white families; at the same time the poverty ratio is higher.

Historically there has been a great pressure on the immigrant population to assimilate to the majority culture and the generational shifts are marked by assimilatory changes. The most important markers of these shifts are the language usage patterns in respect to the dominant and minority languages (Alba, Logan, Lutz & Stults, 2002). Immigrants who speak their host society’s dominant language have better socioeconomic opportunities than those who do not. Proficiency in the dominant language is a key factor for upwards assimilation, as it is directly correlated with access and better results in education and employment. At the same time language proficiency must also be understood as social capital providing respect and reducing vulnerability and linguistic isolation (Nawyn, et al., 2012). As the second generation of immigrants from the past decades forms, patterns of assimilation and intergenerational shifts become apparent. Asian second generation immigrants have an exceptional success rate in education and in particular in the attainment of advanced degrees (25 percent of Asian men had advanced degrees such as professional, masters or doctoral degrees, compared to 8 percent of whites, 3 percent of blacks and 2 percent of Hispanics) and a similar tendency is recognizable in terms of the employment situation (Rumbaut, 2008). Along with these successes in education and employment goes a high rate of language assimilation (for example, while in the 1.5 generation Chinese immigrants only 11.5 percent claim to speak English “very well”, this number grows in the second generation to 42.8, which is besides the Cambodian and Laotian group the highest increase among all immigrants. Rumbaut, 2008). The flipside of this fast adoption of English is a quick decline in the proficiency of the minority language. More than half of the foreign born members of the 1.5 generation prefer speaking English at home and three quarters of the second generation speak English at home. Among the 1.5 generation only 47 percent could speak the non-English language well and only 34 percent could read it well. Among the 2.5 generation members these abilities went down to 16 and 13 percent, and the third generation had become largely monolingual English-speaking. Compared to Spanish-speakers Asian origin groups are more likely to loose their bilingual skills by the second generation (Rumbaut, 2008).

The loss of language skills is only one salient indicator of the assimilation process and in conjunction with this loss several other aspects of preserving a relationship to the culture of the parent generation are at stake, which influence inter-generational communication and the identity forming of the 1.5 and higher generation. As Rothe, Pumariega and Sabagh state, “the process of immigration and acculturation often involves the separation and loss of attachment associated with the person’s culture of origin and a transformation and re-editing of identity” (Rothe, Pumariega

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