

Cultural Identity among Iraqi Immigrants: Four Voices and Different Opinions

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The present study portrays the cultural identity within the developing culture of Iraqi immigrants in the United States and the United Kingdom, aside from their native culture, and how they develop their life within the foreign societies. It is an endeavour to individually convey the voices and opinions of four Iraqi immigrants who immigrated to the United States and the United Kingdom when they were at the ages of five years, thirty-one years, twenty-six, and twenty-seven years in order to explain the problems of their cultural identity and belonging. For them, what does it mean to be Iraqi in the UK/USA and live between two cultures that pull in opposite directions? How is their identity constructed and where do they belong? Are they Iraqis, Americans/ British or in-between? The current study aims to address such issues utilizing Homi K. Bhabha, Hall, Brubaker and Cooper, and others. The study employed a semi-structured interview which yielded findings that the immigrants underwent the consequences of the two-culture impact and this is clearly reflective of their mixed identity.

Key words: *Identity, immigrants, hybridity, culture- in between, third space.*

Introduction

The historical events of Iraqi immigration to the United States and the United Kingdom date back to the 1970s when Iraqis emigrated from Iraq to the USA/UK after a period of dilemma with the Iraqi authorities and after the war between Iraq and Iran which continued about eight years (Berruti et al, 2002; Myhill, 2006). In addition to that, in 1991, thousands of Iraqi people immigrated after the Arab gulf war when Iraq occupied Kuwait. At that time many parts of Iraq revolted against the regime and felt plight with the ruling authority. Most of these citizens were displaced to neighbouring countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, then some moved to the



western countries such as USA, UK, Netherlands, Norway, Germany, Sweden, Finland and others.

These countries are considered as relatively new in terms of the studies on the construction of Iraqi identities with a Western background (Eliassi, 2013:1-2). Other common reasons which lead people to immigrate are education, marriage business, fear, and so on. The current empirical qualitative study is limited to the USA/UK context. In fact, all of the interviewees are from the first generation, yet one of them was very young when she emigrated to the UK. She was only five years old at that time. Hence, she could be considered as being from the second generation. The current study, being a pilot, aims to achieve the following: (a) To check the validity of the interview items for further relevant studies (b) To examine the impact of the American/ British culture on Iraqi identity. (c) To explore whether the interviewees have established an “in- between” cultural identity or constructed identities that mixture of both cultures (the American/British and Iraqi). In order to achieve the above mentioned aims, interviews were conducted with four Iraqi immigrants, two living in the United Kingdom and two in the United states.

Literature Review

Brubaker and Cooper conclude that identity was introduced as a science and social analysis in the USA in the 1960s (200:2). Also, it was expected to be a social science and was considered as a familiar term as early as in the 1950s (Gleason, 1983). As well as the word identity, this has been grown by itself in the newspaper and academic lexicon and was used in political and practical social analysis. At the end of the 1960s, the word identity was developed together with the emerging black power activities from the American perspective. After that, the word identity developed into various fields such as racism, sexuality, gender, class, ethnicities, religion, immigrants, culture, and nationalism, therefore many theorists have been obligated to address the question of identity. (Brubaker and Cooper, 200).

The current study will shed light on the immigrant issues. Since the study focuses on the identity issue, it is important to highlight some significant definitions of identity. According to Jackson “Identity is that which confers a sense of personhood. It also refers to self- definition” (Jackson, 1999:9). Erickson asserts that identity is “being as oneself as well as being different” (Erickson, 2002, 60). Self-identification sometimes is subjected to argumentative in which people viewing themselves according to their encounter culture. Researchers and theorists reach an agreement that “identities are constructed and negotiated through interaction” (Prins, J et al. 2013:18). It is important to mention that self and identity are related to each other’s because “self-influences society through actions and society influences the self through having “shared language and meaning that enable the person to take the role of other” (Sets and Burke 2003:128). The result is the self-effects of society, therefore, we have to realize the self

to know the society. Nevertheless, (Hall,1997:42) claims that the logic of identity which was used in the past is either psychological or philosophical, therefore, he proposes that identity as “the ground of action” the former concerns that the notion is continuous, self-sustaining, explaining, developmental, and the selfhood inner dialect. Hence, Hall’s interests in psychological logic. The earlier shares the inside of self to its outside when we portraying the connection between the people and their society, as well as the reality of what the individuals saying about themselves. The current study is adopted a psychological viewpoint of identity, belonging, how the interviewees express themselves in a new foreign culture that stands for both or in-between the Iraqi and the American /British society throughout their position and knowledge. The hybridity concept is promoted from literary theory and cultural to illustrate the colonial hostility throughout the development of culture and identity (Bhabha,1996). The term of hybridity in the current study denotes to the mixture of two cultures as well as it utilizes to be as a postcolonial era in the 20th century in cultural and political perspective. According to Bakhtin hybridity is:

“it is a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of utterance, between two different linguistics consciousness’s separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor” (Bakhtin,1981:358).

The current study going to organize the term when explaining cultures in-between and how the Iraqi immigrants who are living in the United States/ United Kingdom utilize the terms “in-between” and “both” in sharing their identity. As stated by Eliot, contemporary migration has implanted to a mixture of social, political determination, economic, and religious. The immigrants’ people have brought with them only a single part from their native culture and the host culture. What has been evolved on the modern soil is different from parental culture. Furthermore, in such condition sympathy-culture and the clash-culture come into the surface (Eliot:1949). The former state is written by Eliot along time and it still relevant to the current condition. Besides that, there is a bridge between culture standing as both different and alike. It contains part of the two culture and connecting between them (Bhabha, 1996).

The concept of Hybridity is also expressed by Hoogvelt as: “celebrated and privileged as a kind of superior cultural intelligence owing to the advantage of in- between, the straddling of two cultures and the consequent ability to negotiate the difference” (Hoogvelt,1997:158). Contrasting to that Bhabha argues that “the agencies of hybridity locate their voice in a dialect that does not seek supremacy and sovereignty”. They shape part of their culture from which they come out to set up vision of community, as well as “version of historic memory, that give narrative form to the minority positions they occupy; the outside of the inside: the part of the whole” (Bhabha, 1996:58). One more statement of Bhabha’s about hybridity is that it is a kind

of in-between universe and the “cutting edge of translation and negotiation” which gives the essential denotation of culture. It is a third space that will help to realize and “emerge as the others of ourselves” (Bhabha,2004:56). In the current study, the hybridity culture is discussed in narrative terms of societies about the issues of identity in foreign countries, which may illustrate a hybrid identity of encounter cultures in the USA/UK.

Methodology

The current study is qualitative-based approach investigating as it is investigating the participants’ attitudes. The study sampled randomly selected four Iraqi immigrants with different ages. The study employed semi-structured interview performed via face-to-face and social media.

Results and Discussion

Viewing identity: Iraqi, American / British or Combining Both

Interviewee 1 UK is an Iraqi-British woman. When she was five years’ old she has emmigrated to the United Kingdom with her family due to the war in 1991. She has lived in the UK about twenty-five years there. She is married to Mr. Salam. They have two kids. I interviewed her while she was visiting her family in Iraq. The meaning of self-identification for the interviewee goes by ethnicity. When I interrogated her about her favorite identity she illuminates that she enjoys in both cultures the Iraqi and the British. She justifies that because she is a holder of both citizenships and she has an experience for both cultures. She considers herself as an Iraqi as well as a British.

“Well, I recognized I have both cultures in my mind, that is because I am interested in both, the middle Eastern Iraqi culture and the western British one. I am interested in the Iraqi culture because it is my origin culture and the British one because I lived there”
(Interviewee 1UK).

According to the abovementioned indication of the interviewee, it seems that she stuck to the British and she learned a lot of British traditions and culture from a different perspective. The reason behind that is her integration with society and she has to learn such traditions to be familiarized with the society. Over the course of time, she adopted the tradition of the surrounding people. However, it seems that she likes her original habits and traditions. She has feelings of Iraqi identity because this was at the core of her childhood. The interviewee asserts that her identity is being erased because she has mixed with a new culture. She indicates that her life in Iraq was her childhood “Organic community” (Hall, 1997:46) and the

youth. She was not aware of the issue identity during those ages however she considers that at the age of 25-35, people can be aware of such issues.

Actually, each interviewer has identified himself/herself in a contrasting way. For example, interviewee ₂ UK, emigrated to the UK when he was at the age of thirty-one in 2013 with his family. It is obvious that he reached adulthood when he became an outsider of his country that is why we can consider him from the first generation. He identifies himself as following:

“I can describe myself as both Iraqi and British but, sometimes, I feel as more Iraqi but, I have never felt 100% as a British. I usually feel as in-between but sometimes I identify myself as more Iraqi. It depends on the situations and positions that make this sense” (Interviewee ₂UK).

According to the previous state the interviewee shows that he stands in-between, yet, he still strongly attached to his background of Iraqi ethnicity. Therefore, speaking on self-identification and understanding is built on “multifaceted sense of belonging” (Eliassi, 2013:52) that create an actual collective and individual belonging. He mentions the reason that makes him feels in-between because, he has holed of two countries citizenship, Iraqi and British. The British is where he lives and works with his wife and children and the Iraqi where the rest of his brothers, sisters, and parents live.

Interviewee ₁USA is thirty years old when she emigrated to the USA. She is an Iraqi-American. She lives with her family during the 2009. she married to Mohammed. She has got two kids their name is Lara and Adam. I interviewed her while she visited her parents in Iraq. She states that:

“At the beginning of my arrival to the USA I viewed my identity as Iraqi because I was born there and learn the Iraqi culture and tradition. During the course of the time, I felt that my mind has changed. I start to like the American tradition and culture. I usually celebrate with the American friends as well as with the Iraqi” (Interviewee ₁USA).

It is obvious that the interviewee has integrated with the American society during the course of time. She is successfully integrated with the surrounding society. In that time, she had improved step by step and now she has a mix- cultures (Iraqi-American). The main reason was that her integration with the society and she is being accepted the tradition of the host country. She indicates that her life in Iraq were her childhood “Organic community” (Hall, 1997). Therefore,

Manal has a sense of belonging. Although Manal integrated with the new society but she yearns to her proper country.

Interviewee 2USA is also an American Iraqi man. He is thirty –two years old

Consequently, it was found that each interviewee attempts to view his/her belonging and identity depending on his/ her understanding in the host country in a distinct way and how he/she positions his/her self-understanding in the United States/the United Kingdom society. Considered together this indicates that they are immersed in the respective American/ British culture and society.

The British/American Impact on Iraqi Cultural Encounter on Interviewees' Identity

According to Interviewee 1 UK, the impact of the British culture on her identity could be related to Eliot's states

“I have been affected by the British culture encounter very much because, I have lived in both cultures, therefore, I have to leave part of each culture my original culture and the British in order to be familiarized with the British society. I cannot follow up the Iraqi culture 100% in the UK because I cannot continue my life in the host society. On the other side, I cannot follow the British culture and identity. In this case, I will get lost and forget myself. So, I cannot become familiarized to my family who all are Iraqi. Therefore, the best solution to take over both cultures” (Interviewee 1UK).

The interviewee points out that she places herself in-between. The reason behind that because she thinks that the British culture is her genuine environment. As it mentioned previously, Rana grew up in the United Kingdom and she doesn't have that much experience of her mother country. Following up Eliassi and Alini indication homeland for younger people is imaginary, created depending on their wishes and desires. (Eliassi, 2014). The last statements denote to what has Rana claimed in that the UK is her origin country meanwhile she lives there, whereas the Iraqi is her imaginary country only. She assumed that the Iraqi culture is not bad because she has two different cultures and the Iraqis have only one culture. She continues that she has different way of thinking than the Iraqis.

“It is very exciting to learn about British culture and understand it. As a human being, we must know the way do they think to get knowledge from it. In fact, the British culture cannot change my Iraqi

Identity but, it is interesting to be accustomed to them. Adding to that for younger people the British culture is more attractive than others. The identity of those people who were born or grew up in the UK and integrated is constructed from both cultures and my case is different. I know many Iraqi people from old age who have lived for a long time here it is difficult for them to integrate with the society even though they didn't learn the English language. They have never at all considered themselves as a British because it is difficult for them to be integrated" (Interviewee 2UK).

The aforementioned is distinguished with what have Brubaker and Cooper stated that: "identity is self-understanding rather than self-interest" (Brubaker & cooper, 2000:6). Even though, the interviewee realizes his own identity he interceded to the British culture. In addition, his extensive knowledge in life, the experience of relocation and dislocation and living in many different countries made him adjust in new cultures. He believes that the integration a kind of knowledge human being must gain in his life. To him, British culture is knowledge and self-interest. The interviewee underlines that the British integration has never changed his actual identity because his case is contrasted with those people who were born or brought up in the UK. As the interviewee states that there are many Iraqis do not like to be integrated with British society because they are from the oldest generation. People like those have rejected to be identified with the majority of British society. The reason behind that is "either to continue to exist or to achieve higher self-worth" (Eliassi, 2013: 50) or they have never learned the keys of British society.

"I like the friendliness of people how things get done easily and continently, and the quality servers provided to the community" (Interviewee 1USA).

In fact, the interviewee effected with American society. The reason that made her very interested in the American is her integration with the American people who she considers them very kind people. It seems that it is kind of a psychological aspect. She claims when she immigrates to the USA, part of her personality nature has changed because she did not have much experience about the United States. She has become patient because everything gets done easily and life in Iraq is totally different. Therefore, Manal has two cultures mixture during the course of time. The relocation in the American culture and the travelling from the native country shaped such mix- cultures and create the third space. Therefore, the interviewee tried to adopt the American identity clinging to her original root:

"This is an open question. I may need an hour to explain that. Besides, I do not believe that there is "western country" the

reason is that there are many western countries, religious, culture. Even though they have common things but they cannot consider as western culture. One of an important effect of my living in the USA is my mind has opened and tolerant of other people's beliefs and value. Now, the way that I think is totally different. Right now I am open minded than other Iraqis who live in Iraq" (interviewee 2USA).

As a matter of fact, the interviewee claims that he positions himself in-between mentions the reality that he lives in the USA and being accepted the tradition of the host country. Although he believes that he learned good things from the American which made him open-minded and different from others. In addition, adopting the American culture does not mean he lost his original one.

Conclusion

In terms of being pilot study, it has been revealed that the interview has elicited related results on the issue of identity which indicates that the instrument is valid and workable to the larger scale studies. In terms of content, the current paper explained what has happened to four Iraqi immigrants who are living in western countries (the United States/ the United Kingdom) individually and how they constructed their identity culturally when they encounter another cultural background such as when living as an American / British resident. The present study shows how the Iraqi immigrants view and understand themselves in relation to the surrounding environment and society. In one way or another, the participants tried to accept the tradition of the host countries as well as maintain their Iraqi identity.



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