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Entering the public sphere: the citizenship practices of US immigrants*

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Abstract

This paper originally delivered as a keynote speech at the Turkish Migration Conference 2015 in Prague, Czech Republic on June 25, 2015. It focuses on civic engagement political participation and citizenship practices of Asian Indians in Dallas Fort Worth Metropolitan area drawing on qualitative field research material. Community participation is a process. Embedded in this observation is an understanding that as the individual branches out, he or she is becoming involved with associations with great civic and/or political presence, moving from one community of practice to another, and from a peripheral position to one of greater participation to invoke the ideas of Lave and Wenger. But equally, these activities illustrate how new immigrants construct their own sense of belonging as they engage with and interpret what it means to be an American and what kind of an American they want to be.

Keywords: Public sphere; integration; citizenship; immigrants in the US

Introduction

In an interview about one of her recent novels, *If Today be Sweet* (Harper Perennial 2008), Thrity Umrigar, a writer who was born in Mumbai but who came to the U.S. at the age of 21, reflects on her central character Tehmina Sethna. Tehmina's husband has died and she must decide if she is going to live permanently in the United States with her son Sorab, his white American wife Susan, and her grandson Cavas. Umrigar observes:

"In middle age, [Tehmina] is being asked to give up everything that she once knew and called her own—home, country, neighbors, friends. Her son has gone through a similar process many years earlier, but even he cannot help her. It is a journey she has to travel alone. But while faced with the larger choice of whether to stay in America, Tehmina is confronted with another more urgent choice: whether to live in America as a stranger or as a citizen. Citizenship implies connection, participation, joining in. Destiny beckons in the form of two young, troubled children next door. It is the plight of these two boys that forces Tehmina to choose. To decide whether she will forever straddle the fence and live in a no-man's land. Or whether she will jump into the fullness of her new life in America. Tehmina jumps. And in doing so, she fulfills the long-ago promise of her forebearers, to sweeten the life of the people in

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her new country with her presence. The irony is that she expands the fabric of community in suburban America by stubbornly holding on to her own Indianness."

In the character of Tehmina, author Umrigar captures the struggles with belonging that many immigrants in the United States and around the world confront, as well as the process by which they become participatory citizens. This issue is as important today as it was during previous waves of US immigration and perhaps more so in a world where global networks of transport and communication facilitate immediate contact with homeland cultures and homeland politics and where dual citizenship is becoming increasingly common.

For several years I have been exploring aspects of belonging and citizenship through research on various immigrant populations in the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area (which henceforth I will refer to as DFW), but most specifically with Asian Indians. My own desire, as an anthropologist, to better understand these phenomena stemmed from an interdisciplinary project with which I was involved beginning in 2001 that was funded by the National Science Foundation. That project was aimed at developing a rigorous baseline study of the processes of economic, social, and political incorporation of five immigrant populations in the DFW area. The political scientist on the team developed the "political incorporation" segment of the questionnaire that we used in interviews with 600 respondents across these five populations. He drew his questions from national surveys that routinely ask people about voting; about whether or not they put campaign signs in their front yards; about whether they had written to a politician; about whether they had donated money to a political party or hosted a function for a political candidate, etc. For several reasons, these questions left me both uncomfortable and dissatisfied. First as an immigrant and naturalized citizen myself, I knew I would have answered "no" to many of these questions but at the same time that they were not a good measure of my own interest in or engagement with politics and other dimensions of the civic sphere. Second, in my own participant observation at community functions within the Asian Indian community, as well as in contexts where I had been able to have more informal conversations with newcomers to the DFW area, I had begun to identify myriad other ways in which individuals were participating in the broader civic sphere - modes of behavior that, in my view, were absolutely fundamental to an understanding of processes of belonging, citizenship, and civic engagement. These individuals were "jumping" just like Tehmina had jumped.

Thus, in more recent research, carried out in a collaboration with Deborah Reed Danahay, an anthropologist at SUNY-Buffalo, and culminating in our book, *Civic Engagements* (2012) we have attempted to identify these other dimensions of participatory citizenship as well as the contexts within which immigrants learn and practice civic skills. To think about these contexts, we have found it helpful to adopt a "communities of practice" model, something that I will return to shortly. The project compares Asian Indians with

Vietnamese, after Mexicans and Salvadorans the next two largest immigrant populations in DFW, and populations about whom little has been written with regard to these issues of citizenship and civic engagement. The significance of raising these questions with regard to Asian immigrant populations in particular has become increasingly important - a Pew Center study (titled “The Rise of Asian Americans”) documented that by 2009 Asians had surpassed Hispanics as a new immigrant stream, leading many observers to note the potential impact of this generally well-educated population on the social and political life of the United States.

Anthropological approaches: from citizenship to civic engagement

It is useful to begin with a brief discussion of the concepts of citizenship with which we found it useful to “think” in framing our approach. Legal scholar Linda Bosniak (2000) outlines four categories of citizenship - as legal status, as rights, as political activity, and as identity and solidarity. **Legal citizenship**, Bosniak argues, refers to “formal or nominal membership in an organized political community (p. 456) while **citizenship as rights** makes rights “the defining feature of societal membership” (p. 463-4). **Citizenship as political activity** emphasizes active engagement in the life of the political community (p. 470), while **citizenship as identity and solidarity** underscores “the affective ties of identification and solidarity that we maintain with groups and other people in the world” (p. 479). Embedded in at least three, if not all four of these categories is an assumption of unitariness - that is one individual, one nation state. Like much of citizenship theory, these categories are “caught ... in the strait jacket of the nation-state” (Ip, Inglis and Wu 1997: 382). They do not capture citizenship across borders, something that has become increasingly important. Nor do they capture citizenship from a position of difference. In our research, we were attuned to both and in the latter case we found it useful to draw on the concept of cultural citizenship. As formulated by Renato Rosaldo and William V. Flores (1997: 57) in their research on Latinos in the United States, cultural citizenship is “the right to be different (in terms of race, ethnicity, or native language) with respect to the norms of the dominant national community, without compromising one’s right to belong, in the sense of participating in the nation-state’s democratic processes.” These authors point out that immigrants frequently draw on forms of cultural expression to claim recognition and political rights. Cultural citizenship gets us closer to civic engagement—that is participation in the public sphere that involves claims to recognition but also the ability to exercise the responsibilities of citizenship as these have been internalized by immigrant newcomers. So how, more precisely, do we talk about and examine civic engagement?

Deborah and I found it useful to define civic engagement as the “involvement in communal activities that have some purpose or benefit beyond a single individual or family’s self interest - either for a community organization, social group, or the general public”.

Civic (and we might add political) engagement are put into practice in the context in various spheres of associative life, such as voluntary organizations and religious institutions developed within immigrant communities. It is sometimes, if not often assumed that involvement in ethnic community organizations and activities mainly serve the purpose of strengthening ethnic identity and perhaps even marginalizing immigrants. In our work, we argue that to the contrary participation in these organizations and in other immigrant community activities in fact lead to the acquisition of civic skills and to broader civic engagement in American society.

It is in relation to these spheres of civic learning (and let me emphasize that we were in part looking at how civic skills are acquired by immigrant newcomers) that the communities of practice model becomes relevant. The emphasis in this analytical model, developed originally by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991), is on situated learning, a process akin to apprenticeship – learning by doing and by observing. Newcomers start from a position of peripherality and then move toward fuller participation. By adopting this framework for the study of immigrants and civic engagement, we posit that American civic life itself can be viewed as composed of various localized communities of practice, some composed of immigrants themselves, which may or may not be receptive to newcomers. Communities of practice may be located at various levels of sociality - ranging from informal forms of mutual aid, to organizations and associations, and to more formal political parties. Each individual participates in multiple, and sometimes overlapping or interconnected, communities of practice (Wenger 2006). Through their involvement in ethnically-based communities of practice, immigrants may affect and effect other forms of activity in the public sphere and hence become participatory citizens.

Before offering a few examples of our ethnography of various communities of practice, let me discuss briefly the Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) context.

DFW as a New Suburban Gateway

According to the 2010 US Census, there were just over 4.1 million foreign-born immigrants living in Texas. This group comprises 16.4 percent of the total Texas population, giving Texas a seventh-place ranking nationwide by percent of the state population that is foreign born. Of the foreign born population in Texas 73% were from Latin America and 19% were from Asia. While the top three countries of birth in 1990 were Mexico, Vietnam and El Salvador, in 2010 they were Mexico (with 60%), El Salvador (4.1%) and India (4.0%). The growth of the Indian population in the state is a reflection of nationwide trends to which the US national media has recently called our attention.

Starting in the 1970s, the DFW region has been an increasingly popular destination for immigrants. Its foreign-born population has grown from 1.4 percent of the total population in 1970 to 7.9% in 1990 to 17 percent in 2010. Seventy percent of these foreign born are from the Americas and 21 percent

are Asian. Following another national trend (Singer, Hardwick and Brettell, 2008), many of these immigrant newcomers are settling directly in the suburbs rather than in the inner city. Different populations demonstrate different residential patterns within a large metropolitan area like DFW.

The 2000 census counted close to 50,000 foreign-born Asian Indians in the Dallas-Arlington-Fort Worth CMSA in 2000 and just over 47,000 foreign born Vietnamese. By the 2010 census there were over 100,000 foreign born Asian Indians and just under 72,000 foreign born Vietnamese - clearly an indication of how important the first decade of the 21st century has been with regard to the growth of the foreign-born Asian population in the DFW area. These two immigrant communities are clearly quite different in their auspices of migration - the Vietnamese largely arriving as refugees while Asian Indians come as economic and education migrants. They demonstrate variations in median income and level of education (see Brettell and Reed-Danahay, 2012). Yet, despite these differences, they show some similarities in the processes by which they enter the public sphere and become civically engaged.

Communities of practice for civic engagement among Asian Indians in DFW

In the remaining time I want to discuss two different communities of practice for the civic engagement of Asian Indians in the DFW area making comparative reference to the Vietnamese as I go along. I begin with religious assemblies.

Religious Assemblies

In an essay on the role of religion in the adaptation of immigrants to America, Charles Hirschman (2004) reminds us that earlier immigrants to the United States found the psychological and social support within their religious institutions that were essential to adaptation, helping them to “become” American and develop a sense of membership and belonging. Scholarly interest in how religious institutions facilitate the process of immigrant incorporation, how they become training grounds for participatory democracy (Eck, 2001, 2007) and hence foster civic engagement has grown in the last decade. As one scholar has noted, well before immigrant newcomers “stand for election to the school board, they will stand for election in the governing body of their” church, mosque or temple” (Eck, 2001:336)

Deborah and I found precisely these dimensions of civic engagement within the framework of the religious assemblies we looked at within the Indian and Vietnamese communities in DFW. Here I briefly outline some of the similarities and differences.

1. For both groups, religious practices they brought with them have changed to accommodate a different lifestyle in the United States. Vietnamese Buddhist, like the Indian Hindu temples, have concentrated their activities on Sundays. This change shows an attempt to coordinate activities with

those of the wider society and is also a practical response to the school and work schedules of families in the United States.

2. Perhaps more importantly, across the diversity of religions represented, including Christian traditions, the lay population takes a much more active role in the governance of their respective sacred assemblies than is true in their respective home countries. This is critical to the process by which civic engagement is learned and practiced, as well as to the principles of democratic behavior.
3. Youth involvement through churches and temples is another common theme in our research, and we see that leadership skills are taught and youth are encouraged to engage with wider social spheres through community service and other cooperative activities
4. Civic activities within religious assemblies build on cultural concepts that are integral to religious belief and practice across a range of religious traditions. For both Indians and Vietnamese charitable work is connected to notions of social responsibility like *seva* (selfless service to the poor and suffering) within the Hindu tradition, or *trach nhiem* (which for the Vietnamese refers to a sense of responsibility) or *zakat* (one of the Pillars of Islam among Indian Muslims). But there are some differences.

One example is the approach to providing social services. While the Hindu Temple has strongly organized social service activities that reach beyond members of their congregations, this is not a significant activity for Vietnamese temples or churches. Social services among Vietnamese refugees were already well coordinated through refugee agencies and also through forms of mutual aid developed soon after the refugees started to arrive, long before the particular religious institutions were established as independent organizations within their communities. In addition, in contrast to the Indian case, any charitable work or other social assistance offered by the Vietnamese temples and churches is generally aimed at homeland causes (orphanages and hospitals) or at members of the religious group - evidence of transnational citizenship practice. An exception to this was during Hurricane Katrina, when these institutions, like their counterparts in the Indian community, mobilized resources to assist any victims of this natural disaster. The Vietnamese express a strong desire for helping themselves through assistance by family members and are sensitive about having had to take charity when they first arrived.

Thus, while we found conscious efforts to build bridges to and collaborate with local “mainstream” organizations among Hindus (and also Muslims where the Plano mosque became a polling place starting in 2004), this is seen less in the Vietnamese religious institutions, although the Catholic Church is itself very “mainstream” and some lay leaders in the church come into contact with those of other ethnic groups through their parish societies.

Some of the Indians who participated in our research were able to articulate quite clearly concepts of social citizenship and civic duty that are manifested in the kinds of activities with which they are involved in their respective religious

organizations. They could also articulate how “good works” facilitated a process of “assimilation” - a term used to suggest acceptance rather than abandoning cultural practices and religious distinction. Instead, core religious principles become the foundation for entering the larger American public sphere and exercising civic responsibility. Whereas the Indians interviewed spoke more about “giving back to the community”, using an idiom now familiar in US society more generally, many of the Vietnamese American parents interviewed did not use or recognize this idiom.

One explanation for this is that many first-generation Vietnamese refugees lack the skills in English and command of American vernacular speech that would make them familiar with such an idiom. When this concept was explained to those without good English skills, however, there was recognition of the importance of both service to others and helping those who have helped you. In most cases when the expression was explained, Vietnamese parents interviewed mentioned that they “gave back” through charity donations.

Nevertheless, the notion of “giving back” implies exchange and uses the metaphor of the gift (giving) as a way to talk about social responsibility. While this may seem to resonate with the idea of *seva*, Deborah found that the idea of *trach nhiem*, which guides Vietnamese forms of social responsibility, is more dependent upon the idea of a “good feeling” and a release from suffering that comes from helping others rather than from reciprocity. It may be that the first generation of Indians, especially Hindus who are influenced by the morality of *seva* (and who also have a better command of English), adjust more quickly to the rhetoric of “giving back” that is becoming so prevalent in American ways of talking about civic engagement than do Vietnamese Americans of the first generation. Among the Vietnamese, this is an idea that takes hold more among the younger generation. We see, therefore, that similar impulses to assume social responsibility are articulated differently among our two populations, and with slightly different implications for the role of religious institutions in fostering charitable activities.

Vietnamese churches and temples provide a resource for political mobilization that depends upon their shared sense of history and shared cultural traditions that transcend religion. Our research documented, for example, the commemoration of Vietnamese culture heroes at a Catholic Church, to which elected officials were invited, and a forum to protest the persecution of a Buddhist monk in Vietnam that attracted religious leaders from all the major Vietnamese American institutions. These activities illustrate the ways that formal politics is intertwined with religious expression in ways that may, however, be more indirect than direct.

Political mobilization through which people of different religious work together is less common among the Indians from within their religious organizations, although after 9/11 such mobilization has become a facet of mosque activity. In terms of homeland politics, what is politicized for the Vietnamese is framed by the communist/anti-communist divisions related to

Vietnam, a conflict that draws Catholic and Buddhist political refugees to work together. Among the Indians, by contrast, it is the homeland divisions related to centuries-old religious conflicts that are most polarizing. Indian immigrants therefore choose to either not bring the intensity of these religious divisions with them or to keep them as tightly controlled as possible. In DFW, Indians work through secular organizations for collaborative pan-Indian and trans-religious purposes. However, even within more secular pan-Indian associations efforts are often made not to engage in any activities or position statements that might indicate support for either Hindu or Muslim causes in India - that is, to choose between being Indian and being Hindu or Muslim or Christian.

When asked if he would link the kinds of activities with which he was involved through his religious assembly with a concept of citizenship, one research participant, a retired software professional who first moved to Dallas in 1978 stressed that it was a form of social citizenship, to be contrasted with political citizenship which involves “a power element.” Social citizenship, he suggested, is about helping others in need without the expectation of return. “And you don’t just help people of the same religion, you help anybody”. When pushed for further explanation on his ideas about citizenship, this respondent first noted that a good citizen should be law abiding but after that he thought a good citizen should be active in the community - by which he said he meant your neighborhood, where you are living. Clearly this research participant had constructed a concept of citizenship that was about social practice and about establishing a presence in the life of the community. In the end, however, he also added that a good citizen should vote and give support to those whose views are in concordance with your own.

Community Festivals

Although our research also deals with ethnic organizations, some of which involve Asians in DFW in transnational activities and political activities, I would like to use the remaining time to discuss a completely different sphere of civic engagement - the community festival. These are cultural spectacles but they have both civic and political subtexts. In particular I focus here on one community event that I analyzed in our book.

Each year, the India Association of North Texas sponsors two community-wide events, one in August (the Anand Bazaar) to commemorate Indian Independence Day (August 15th - when the British left India in 1947) and the other in January to commemorate Indian Republic Day (on January 26th, 1950 the Indian Constitution came in to effect). While these events are largely for the Indian community in the DFW area, bringing the dispersed population together in significant numbers, they can also be viewed as communities of practice where individuals acquire organizational skills, exercise leadership, and practice civic engagement. In addition, they offer opportunities, for those who attend, to learn about the broader political sphere as well as to remember their own history.

Although it has been hosted in various venues, since January 2002 India Nite has been scheduled in a large auditorium (just under 2400 seats) on the campus of a large private university in Dallas. The planning for India Nite, which is basically an evening of dance performances interrupted by ceremonial interludes, begins in the spring with a small group of IANT board members who meet sporadically to discuss it. As the event draws closer, groups of IANT leaders, members, and other volunteers meet more regularly to organize the evening, including signing the contract with the university, organizing the responsibilities of those working both front stage and back stage, securing business sponsorships, and deciding on which restaurants will serve food. Notices for the event are posted in centers of Indian activity throughout the city and on the Indian radio stations. The day of the event, the IANT sends out a message to all its members reminding them of India Nite.

The program begins at 4pm and lasts about three and a half hours. It is opened with the singing of the Star Spangled Banner (by second-generation Indians) and then of the Indian national anthem (by an older performer). In the auditorium two screens are set up where advertising slides for the businesses that have agreed to serve as sponsors are continuously projected. They are also listed on the back of the ticket and in the program. On the slides there were also social service messages such as one warning people about the dangers of drugs or another about how to become a foster parent. Finally, the slides also show pictures of various IANT events and programs or information on major charitable contributions made by the organization, often to various relief efforts in the aftermath of natural disasters. These slides offer occasions for promotion of the association and of local Indian-owned enterprises or mainstream enterprises that want to reach out to this generally well-to-do immigrant population.

The dance performances are introduced by young second-generation Indians serving as emcees who often issue a general ‘thank-you’ “for letting them serve the community” or “for the opportunity to give back to the community.” One year, an MC said that “service to our country is service to our lord of lords. Our prayers and homage go out to all our soldiers serving in Iraq.” The afternoon always begins with the youngest performers - children from ages four to eight or so - and progress throughout the afternoon and early evening to older children. While some of the dances are rooted in traditional folk dances from various regions of India, others are “in the classical style”, and still others offer a blend of traditional elements with more contemporary dance movements, and are often performed to Bollywood film songs that are very familiar to people in the audience. Some dances tell stories, occasionally with political or patriotic messages. One year, the dancers came in waving both Indian and American flags. The theme of the dance was “let us bow to the motherland” indicating that both countries are now the motherland.

Throughout the evening the dances are interrupted with more ceremonial events. Thus, each year the officers of IANT and the Board of Directors are

called on to the stage and introduced to the assembled audience together with the incoming President of IANT and the President-elect. "These are your community leaders" is the message that is transmitted. The outgoing President (whose spouse is always also introduced) gives a short speech about the accomplishments of IANT over the course of the year - the work with youth and senior citizens and the projects for which funds have been raised. Each year achievers in the community are also recognized with plaques and one year a college need-based scholarship, underwritten by United Central Bank, was presented to a college student of Indian descent. Another year, the winner of the talented youth award was a young Indian doctor, the graduate of a medical school in north Texas now living in California whose parents came to the stage to accept the award on her behalf. The volunteer of the year award that year went to an Indian who owns a photography studio who volunteers his time to record various community events; and the outstanding service award went to the owner of Taj Mahal Imports. In 2003, a check for \$12,000 was presented to Mrs. Alka Patel. Mrs. Patel's husband was shot shortly after 9/11 while he was working at his gas-station in Mesquite. The funds had been collected in the community and were going to help with the education of her two children.

Finally, each year there are guests of honor who are recognized. One year the District Director of the FBI, an Hispanic, was recognized. Another year the IANT recognized the president of the university that hosts India Nite and once the Indian Consul General from Houston was the honored guest. He emphasized that India has become a place where things are happening and that community events like India Nite "provide us with opportunities to take stalk of our achievements and shortcomings. We've had trials, tribulations, and tragedies," he went on, [but] "today we see tremendous optimism and high confidence levels. India is emerging as a major player on the world stage." At the end he was presented with a plaque indicating his "selfless devotion to Indians around the world and in the DFW area."

Sometimes the honored guests have been people whose presence suggests the developing political capital of Asian Indians in the US as well as locally. One year, for example, Frank Pallone, the founder of the India Caucus in the US Congress, was recognized. Pallone encouraged the audience to spread their heritage and maintain their level of community involvement. He referred to the high level of education of the Indian community in the US that made them somewhat unique. His message was to "take the next step", to get involved, to act politically, to speak to elected officials, to vote."

Congressman Pete Sessions was another prominent guest of honor. He talked about reinforcing the bonds with America and to help build the bridge to India so that the countries could cooperate in the war on terrorism. He noted the similarities between Indian and the US - "both countries are democracies, both countries are pluralistic, both countries believe in the rule of law." He concluded by complimenting the IANT on its contributions to the DFW

metropolitan and telling the Indians assembled “You are part of our country; you make us better. We share a common bond and vision of the future.”

India Nite, a community cultural celebration created anew in the U.S. context, is permeated with allusions to community service and political participation. The leaders of the organization stand before the audience as models of community service, as do second-generation emcees, and local Indian entrepreneurs who offer substantive sponsorship for the event. Throughout the evening various other individuals are recognized for their contributions to the local community or to humankind. And the guests who are invited to speak not only stress the rising importance of Indians in the economic and political arena, but by their very presence indicate the growing political and social capital of DFW area Indian immigrants. India Nite has become an occasion for DFW area Indians, led by their umbrella association, IANT, to claim political space in the mainstream. The India Association (IANT) serves as the link between the DFW area population and the broader political and civic arena. At India Nite (and within the India Association in general) there is an effort to emphasize unity across differences of region and faith both behind the scenes and prior to the event as well as in the front stage performance. In a post 9/11 world this display of unity has become particularly important because a portion of the Indian-American population is Muslim. Finally, in the context of the celebration of the day when India became a Republic with its own constitution and by extension a celebration of Indian culture, there are always many references to being an Indian in America or an American of Indian descent.

Events like India Nite, like other ethnic festivals, celebrations, and commemorations, are often easily dismissed as forms of nostalgic and symbolic ethnicity with no civic or political import. While on the one hand these activities are cultural spectacles in the sense of “organized events in which a group represents itself both to its own members and to non-members”; on the other hand, as communities of practice they provide social spaces for learning and putting into practice organizational and other civic skills. India Nite embodies the objectives of the India Association of North Texas - **“to provide a common platform to all members living in the North Texas area for pursuing their common goals and sharing their concerns while promoting joint efforts in the social, cultural, educational and charitable activities of the members.”** A venue within which Asian Indians can assert their right to be different is also a venue for claiming the right to belong and indeed for integrating some of the dimensions of what they have come to associate with American civic life.

Conclusion

Let me just say that our work shows that there are intriguing similarities in the processes by which the two populations we studied learn civic skills and engage the public sphere in the United States, but there are also significant

differences in civic participation related to the distinction between immigrants and refugees, to differences in human capital (education and language), and to the different ways in which these populations engage homeland politics.

Their command of English makes Indians more comfortable, by comparison with the Vietnamese, in their initial forays into the public sphere, particularly in the local context. Through their voluntary and religious organizations, Indians partner with what they consider to be “mainstream” organizations on particular projects and we see that they organize ethnic-based Lions Clubs that nevertheless interact with other local clubs as well as with the national and international dimensions of this global organization. Those with time and interest express little linguistic insecurity about participating in organizations like the PTA or on a local citizen’s council. For many in the first-generation among the Vietnamese, on the other hand, language barriers are paramount and often cited by research participants as an important issue. Very few Vietnamese refugees arrived with fluent English language skills, and for the first generation this can prohibit participation in civic spaces like schools, local government, or other institutions. It also affects employment opportunities. Language is, however, less of a problem for the growing 1.5 and second-generation who are increasingly assuming leadership roles.

In this regard, we have been particularly struck by the capacity of both Indian and Vietnamese immigrants to “talk the talk” of civic engagement—that is to learn the rhetoric of “team work”, “good neighborhood”, “giving back to the community”, and entering “the mainstream” and then to shape their actions accordingly. Gerard Delanty (2002: 603) has emphasized that an “important dimension of citizenship concerns the language...that people use to make sense of their society, interpret their place in it, and construct courses of action.” Our research substantiates this observation but we would suggest further that adopting the language or rhetoric of civic engagement also involves a process of claims-making. While Indian participants were more comfortable than Vietnamese participants with many of the phrases quoted above and used them more frequently, a reflection no doubt of their better English skills, high levels of education, and social class position, there certainly were contexts in which the Vietnamese used the rhetoric of civic engagement prevalent in the United States today.

At the outset I observed that citizenship is better defined not as an end state but as a process of continuous evolution and progression. One community leader perhaps best articulated the processual and situated learning dimensions of civic engagement and substantive citizenship that our project has been attempting to describe and analyze: He said:

[Community participation] is a process. First people get involved in their religious organizations. Then they get involved in the Indian community organizations. Then they move to the next level outside the community with chambers, school boards, mainstream organizations. One is a stepping-stone to the next. This is the path for the first generation.”

Embedded in this observation is an understanding that as the individual branches out, he or she is becoming involved with associations with great civic and/or political presence, moving from one community of practice to another, and from a peripheral position to one of greater participation to invoke the ideas of Lave and Wenger. But equally, these activities illustrate how new immigrants construct their own sense of belonging as they engage with and interpret what it means to be an American and what kind of an American they want to be.

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