

Baumann, G. (1996) *Contesting Culture: discourses of identity in multi-ethnic London*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press pp.1–2, 4–6 (extracts)

Having myself migrated to Britain at the age of twenty-one, I had been puzzled for a long time by the way in which immigrants were portrayed in the British media, in political rhetoric, and,

not least, in the academic literature . . . in Britain (this) ethnic reductionism seemed to reign supreme, and the greater number even of academic community studies I read seemed to echo it. Whatever any 'Asian' informant was reported to have said or done was interpreted with stunning regularity as a consequence of their 'Asianness', their 'ethnic identity', or the 'culture' of their 'community'. All agency seemed to be absent, and culture an imprisoning cocoon or a determining force. Even their children, born, raised, and educated in Britain, appeared in print as 'second-generation immigrants' or 'second-generation Asians', and, unlike the children of white migrants like me, were thought to be precariously suspended 'between two cultures'.

DECONSTRUCTION:

Culture determinism- what British- Asians say is linked to the 'Asian Culture'

No agency= it doesn't what the individual does.

Children born in the UK= suspended between two cultures

This latter commonplace in particular I failed to understand. I could not work out why they should be suspended between, rather than be seen to reach across, two cultures. More importantly, which two cultures were involved? Was there a homogeneous British culture on the one hand, perhaps regardless of class or of region, and on the other hand some other culture, perhaps one which was shared with their parents? If so, how were these parental cultures defined: was it on the basis of regional origin or religion, caste or language, migratory path or nationality? Each of these could define a community, a culture, and an ethnic identity in the same breath, it seemed...

DECONSTRUCTION-

Reach across two cultures, not in between

They do not consider 'culture' as multilayered.

...The answers to my confusion could, I thought, be found only by fieldwork: I rented a house in the centre of Southall, where I lived for the next six years, and from there involved myself in the life of the suburb.

My agenda, as in all fieldwork, was open: live locally, socialize locally, find local things to do, and let yourself in for whatever comes. At the same time, keep a daily research diary, write fieldwork notes, and, not least, keep a personal diary in order not to confuse private concerns with the documentation of other people's doings and sayings.

Fieldwork: six-year research project in Southall-
Participant observation- (Baumann)
Non-participant observation

. . . Adult Southallians were no less relativist than their children in discussing culture and community. Even assuming that community was a matter of birthplace, as the dominant discourse so often does, some Southallians could, among friends, squeeze a laugh out of the absurdities of ethnic classification. 'See me friend Jas here', said Phil, an Englishman, and pointed to his drinking-mate at the Railway Tavern bar, 'he's an Asian, but he's born in Africa, so I'd say he's an African. And me, I was born in Burma, so I'm the Asian here, aren't I. And Winston here, you think he's a West Indian: he's the only one of us born in this town, so he's the Englishman born and bred!' Attributions of culture and community can clearly not be reduced to one factor alone. Rather, all but the most single-minded of adult Southallians, it turned out, regarded themselves as members of several communities at once, each with its own culture.

Deconstruction:
Culture as multi-layered, not just 'national culture'.

Making one's life meant ranging across them. I did find a few people who said: 'I am a Muslim and nothing else', 'I am a Christian and have no other community', or 'I a man African from the Caribbean, but as African as the people born in Africa' Nevertheless, the vast majority of all adult Southallians saw themselves as members of several communities, each with its own culture.

Deconstruction: some people have an essentialist view of 'culture'
Not in Southall.

The same person could speak and act as a member of the Muslim community in one context, in another take sides against other Muslims as a member of the Pakistani community, and in a third count himself part of the Punjabi community that excluded other Muslims but included Hindus, Sikhs, and even Christians. In this way, they echoed the awareness of shifting identities that young Southallians had alerted me

to. Matters got more confusing, however, as fieldwork progressed. Some Hindu parents would claim that 'all Sikhs are Hindus'; some Sikh parents would dissociate themselves from the Sikh community and describe their culture as 'British-Asian, basically, whatever the religion you're from'; and Muslim friends would argue with pride that the local mosque was in itself a multi-cultural community. Clearly, all these utterances could be discounted as if they were mere figures of speech. But when an ethnographer collects more of them by the week, should one not ask what makes these usages any less important, authentic, or truthful than the usages that equate culture with community; community with ethnic identity; and ethnic identity with the 'cause' of a person's doings or sayings?

Deconstruction: ethnographers analyse the concept of 'culture' and how its levels influence life.

G. Baumann

... The dominant discourse relies on equating community, culture, and ethnic identity, and its protagonists can easily reduce anybody's behaviour to a symptom of this equation. So long as its human objects can be logged under some ethnic identity other than, say, British, German, or American, it can even claim to speak 'for' them, 'represent' them, explain them to others. The ways in which Southallians spoke about each other and about themselves added up to a very different message: culture and community could be equated in some context, but were not the same in others. What the word 'identity' might mean in any one context, was a question of context.

DECONSTRUCTION: according to the dominant discourse, community = culture = ethnic identity

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Reach across two cultures, not in between

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Fieldwork: six-year research project in Southall-

Participant observation- (Baumann)

Non-participant observation (outsider) NO

Culture as multi-layered, not just 'national culture'

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ethnographers analyse the concept of 'culture' and how its levels influence life

according to the dominant discourse, community= culture = ethnic identity



TaskB0.1.5

Baumann and Hannerz make similar points concerning how individuals do not see themselves in unidimensional terms:

Baumann writes that people see themselves ‘as members of several communities, each with its own culture’, and that ‘making one’s life meant ranging across them’,

Hannerz writes that ‘many people ‘share different parts of their personal cultural repertoires with different collections of people’.

- Do you agree with Baumann and Hannerz?
- If so, what ‘communities’ do you feel you are a member of, and how does your own life mean ‘ranging across’ these communities?



TaskB0.1.6

Baumann refers to ‘ethnic reductionism’ in the British media, political rhetoric and academic literature which consists of equating community, culture and ethnic identity.

- Can you think of examples in the media, political rhetoric, and academic literature where such ‘ethnic reductionism’ is apparent?