

How Does Storytelling in Immigrant and Multigenerational Households Shape Children's Cultural and Religious Belonging?

Anya Poddar

Student, Northern Highlands Regional High School

Abstract

By using autoethnography, this study examines how storytelling in immigrant and multigenerational households shapes children's cultural and religious belonging. Storytelling can include memories, mythology and history. It is central to human and societal development. Existing literature highlights that living in-between cultures can be a source of struggle. This can amplify for immigrant children who are missing a direct connection with their heritage. The findings underline the significance of everyday stories, rituals, and traditions in informing a new family member of their heritage and cultural values. Therefore, allowing them to develop a new identity and sense of belonging. In this process, the author explains how storytelling favours the development of a multicultural self, strengthens emotional and family bonds, and fosters cultural awareness across multiple domains.

Keywords: Storytelling; Cultural belonging; Religious belonging; Immigrant children; Multigenerational household

Introduction

The Significance of Stories

“Story is really about identity; it's about identity maintenance; it's about who I am” (Davis, 2006). Stories define individuals and aid them in constructing their identity. The origins of stories can include mythology, religion, history, folkloristic aspects, and memories. They have the power to make sense of our experiences and give them meaning, guiding us into our roles in society and allowing us to reflect on our values. It is through them that individuals grasp and develop a sense of identity, understand, and find meaning in their lives (Fivush, 2008). Storytelling is particularly beneficial during formative years and contributes to a great extent of our well-being (Fivush, 2011; Merrill et al., 2019, Fivush & Merrill, 2016).

Studies have indicated that storytelling creates a healing experience, promotes self-expression, mutual learning, and emotion management skills (Liehr & Smith, 2014, as cited in Medne, 2022). According to Medne (2022), the idea of self-determination, allowing people to self-express and form better relationships with other individuals, is what gives meaning to life. This explains why storytelling is linked to personal

and communal well-being. A story has the ability to create shared understanding between individuals. Therefore, it can create emotional links (Liaquat et al., 2022).

The construction of a sense of belonging and community can be challenging when individuals cannot directly access the ground of a common culture, such as in the case of immigrant children. By ‘immigrant children’ this paper refers to both second-generation immigrants, that means individuals born in the host country where their parent(s) migrated to, and children that have immigrated themselves at early ages. Research has explored the challenges of immigrants’ acculturation — intended as both maintenance of heritage practices and adoption of novel ones (Panicacci, 2021). Yet, less attention has been dedicated to the experience of immigrant children and their multigenerational households.

Immigrant children are the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population, and they have been rapidly increasing since 1990 (Tienda & Haskins, 2011). Their identity contributes to the ever-changing diverse nature of The United States, and their challenges differ from those compared to what their parents had experienced. As second-generation immigrants or early age immigrants, they lack hands-on or deeper connection with their heritage culture. Furthermore, they grow up immersed in a society which their parents never experienced as children themselves (Zhou, 2003).

Immigrant children can learn the host language and culture at a quicker pace compared to their older family members. The generational gap can further lead to an absence of a family common culture (Liaquat et al., 2023). In this process, storytelling can act as a bridge between the two cultural worlds that immigrant children face, allowing them to adapt to their current society while still holding on to their roots. Listening to stories of experiences, history, culture, and religion helps children build connections with their heritage. They can understand it and integrate it into their own developing story. Stories can offer them opportunities to become part of a community, and build a sense of belonging to something that would otherwise be inaccessible. For instance, this can be achieved through descriptions of smells, flavors, images, and stories of significant events which were part of their developmental years (Lyon, 1999, as cited in Waal & Born, 2021).

Through the original lens of autoethnography, this paper explores how storytelling plays a critical role in shaping immigrant children’s cultural and religious belonging. By offering a unique perspective and lived-experience of the author, this research contributes towards understanding the complexity of immigrant families, and the challenges of navigating multiple cultural dimensions at early ages. The study advocates for the importance of storytelling in our multicultural society.

Literature Review

The significance of storytelling

Storytelling is the activity of sharing a story orally or physically acting out by using actions and props. The activity of reminiscing has been an integral part of human communication, and contributes to an overall well-being of individuals and their families (Bohanek et al., 2009). Studies have pinpointed that 40% of all human communication includes storytelling (Fivush & Kellas, 2025). Therefore, storytelling

is critical for children's development as it can provide a foundation for development of identity, the building of life events, creating meaning of their lives, and forming emotional bonds (Fivush & Kellas, 2025; Merrill et al., 2019; Liaqat et al., 2023).

Research has explored how storytelling can shape a child's sense of belonging in their heritage, and many studies propose fresh theories regarding how this process operates from early stages of development (Fivush & Kellas, 2025; Liaqat et al., 2023; Liaqat et al., 2022; Merrill et al., 2019.). The categories of storytelling include: traditional, translational, interactional, and retrospective (Fivush & Kellas, 2025). This paper specifically focuses on traditional storytelling. It refers to the oral transmission of stories through speech and performance relying solely on the storyteller's memory. This can include historical and cultural context that has been passed through generations. Traditional storytelling is broad and this paper will focus on intergenerational narratives, specifically. Intergenerational narratives refers to narratives that are told by older generations and passed on to younger generations. These stories are crucial as they allow the younger generations to own a memory, without having experienced it (Bohanek et al., 2006; Merrill et al., 2019). Fivush and Kellas (2025) considered intergenerational family storytelling as important to individuality: "cultural and family stories seep into the ways in which individuals fashion their own personal narratives" (p. 105). This is because stories are particularly important during the development stage of adolescence, as they can play a role in allowing individuals to discover their sense of self. Having a sense of ownership can allow individuals to understand who they are and where they come from. Research has highlighted that narrating stories from an elder's perspective has shown better outcomes in adolescents in terms of developing self-esteem, having academic and social competence, gaining a higher sense of meaning and purpose, and displaying fewer behavioural issues (Fivush, 2011; Merrill et al., 2019). This process can also include sharing family history, and this can in turn, help build a more defined sense of identity in youth (Fivush, 2008; Merrill et al., 2019; Fivush et al., 2011).

Immigrant families in the United States

As of 2025, there are approximately fifty two million immigrants living in the United States of America (Pew Research Center, 2025). Prior to the 1965 migration trend, immigrants arriving in the United States were primarily of European origin. Migration from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbeans have shifted many elements of American society (Paat & Pellebon, 2012). Furthermore, the increasing size of the immigrant population is transforming the diversity of the United States. As immigrant children are coming of age, they are becoming the newest Americans (Rumbaut, 2005).

Scholars have stressed that The United States has been distinguished as a country of immigrants, bringing in dynamic cultures (Waters & Pineau, 2015; Paat & Pellebon, 2012; Rumbaut, 2005). In saying that, Paat and Pellebon (2012) recognised the controversy behind immigration. This is due to the heterogeneous immigration population today in contrast to the earlier predominant European origins. Waters and Pineau (2015) and Panicacci (2021) emphasise how, by integrating and carrying with them new and ever-changing cultures, immigrants contribute to the host society's culture and drive social change.

A family can be recognised by relationships that are formed through common experiences, and belonging. It represents a community with shared emotions, values, beliefs, and traditions. It is the first and most

complicated community an infant is introduced to (Fivush & Kellas, 2025). Children are born into a world filled with the stories their family encapsulates. This can include their parents, siblings, grandparents, and relatives. The collection of stories informs their origins, histories, and their self-development. It can act as a foundation to children's belonging and understanding of who they are, where they came from, and what all of that means to them (Merrill et al., 2019; Fiese et al., 1993, as cited in Fivush & Kellas, 2025; Stone, 2017, as cited in Fivush & Kellas, 2025). Stories are passed down through generations and each retelling creates other shared meanings and bonds. In their nature, the stories can be ever-changing slightly and alter with new narratives. However, as stories are carried across decades, repeating the same process, they still preserve deep-rooted messages, teachings, and values (Fivush & Kellas, 2025).

As stories need a common language and culture, immigration into another country can present further challenges. It requires an extensive and intentional effort to hold on to cultural preservation. Intergenerational immigrant families who migrate together, by incorporating different generations, can engage in a greater amount of language, storytelling, and culture exchange (Liaqat et al., 2023). The process of socializing in a heritage culture combined with a new one, ultimately affects children's ethnic identity formation in what Paat and Pellebon (2012) state "serves as a frame of reference for self-definition and social network affiliation" (p. 128). Therefore, immigrant children navigate the waters of multiple cultures, languages, norms, and values. This becomes a salient aspect in the development of their own sense of belonging (Paat & Pellebon, 2012). This type of cultural identity formation is peculiar because most of it occurs without having immersive exposure with the heritage language and culture first-hand (Liaqat et al., 2023). For that reason, storytelling acts as a link into their heritage and provides immigrant children a bond to their other cultures.

The Importance of Storytelling in Developing a Sense of Cultural Belonging

Biculturalism and multiculturalism can be viewed as an umbrella term. They are not a uniform experience and have various individualized definitions. According to Grosjean (2015), criterias to be considered bicultural can include that "one should be able to identify fully with both cultures to be termed bicultural" (p. 575). Cultural identity is a complex and fluid construct (Panicacci, 2021). It relates to many aspects of an individual, such as the behaviors, feelings, and values. Literature has pinpointed how having a sense of belonging to a cultural group is critical in identity formation and knowing social dynamics (Paat & Pellebon, 2012; Phinney & Ong, 2007).

Regardless of settlement that is being accomplished, children born to immigrants are often labelled as immigrants (Batalova, 2024, as cited in Lerias et al., 2024; McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024, as cited in Lerias et al., 2024). In due course, their experience typically evolves into creating a bicultural identity. This means that "firstly, they take part...in the life of two or more cultures. Secondly, they adapt, at least in part, their attitudes, behaviours, values, languages... to these cultures. Thirdly, they combine and blend aspects of the cultures involved" (Grosjean, 2015, p. 575). New immigrants seek to accomplish this goal: maintaining connection with their heritage country and understanding their new culture. This is why acculturation in a new society can present peculiar challenges for immigrant children. Being multilingual is a remarkable component in shaping identity through stories in multilingual families. The use of shared language provides children the opportunity to socialize and build emotional connections with relatives and

older generations, especially in multigenerational households. Limited fluency in the heritage language, can cause a struggle in finding a common ground to emotionally connect with other family members, such as grandparents (Liaqat et al., 2022).

Benet-Martínez and Haritatos (2005) explored bicultural identity integration among Chinese American young participants, unpacking the extent to which an individual facing two different cultural dimensions perceives these as ‘compatible’ or ‘oppositional’. This is because carrying different identities is complex and challenging: “Biculturalism can be associated with feelings of pride, uniqueness, and a rich sense of community and history, while also bringing to mind identity confusion, dual expectations, and value clashes” (p. 1017). Many bicultural individuals tend to lean towards one or the other culture, and sometimes choose to identify with neither. Some participants in Benet-Martínez and Haritatos’ study stated that coming from two contrasting heritages made them feel the need to choose one or the other. Many participants highlighted the challenges of being bicultural: “you are both cultures and at the same time, you are neither” (p. 1016).

Rumbaut (2005) qualitatively explored the process of how immigrant children make sense of who they are as individuals. This study evidences the struggle that these children can experience: “they do not see that I straddle two cultures, nor that I feel displaced in the only country I know. I identify with Americans, but Americans do not identify with me. I’ve never known what it’s like to belong to a community” (Rumbaut, 2005, p. 111). Rumbaut (2005) concluded that ethnic identities are “complex products of people’s ongoing efforts to interpret, understand and respond to the social, structural, cultural, and historical situations in which they find themselves, within their sets of resources and vulnerabilities” (p. 159). Furthermore, as pointed out by Lerias et al. (2024) we should consider that “acculturative stressors are specifically tailored to the context of immigration that include immigrant group and settlement country factors, bicultural adaptation, as well as the sensitivity to stress and critical stage of development that youth find themselves in” (p. 487). This makes the process of acculturation and identity development in children even more subjective and unique.

The literature reviewed above indicates that having to manage more than one language and culture, without direct contact with one of these dimensions, can lead to feelings of alienation and confusion. In this context, storytelling can serve an essential function. As stories create meaning, they also create a shared community (Fivush & Kellas, 2025). Younger generations, through these meanings and beliefs, are able to access a cultural dimension that they could not experience first-hand. By incorporating this new dimension in their sense of self, they will ultimately contribute to a culture-making process together with older generations.

Storytelling and Religious Belonging

Religion is a salient aspect of culture especially in certain societies. It can shape individuals’ interpretation of the world, social interactions, and lifestyle. For some immigrants, religion can aid in preserving their heritage culture, to the extent it provides a community and a sense of identity, to keep traditions alive. Religion is strongly intertwined with the concept of culture in terms of building individual and family identity. Smith (1978) described how uprooting, migrating, resettling, and community-building can be

seen as a “theologizing experience” (p.1181). This experience refers to the idea of immigrants actively utilising their faith to rebuild a community, get through challenges, create new meanings, and reshape a sense of belonging. This means that individuals carry their religious beliefs, identities, and values with them as they migrate between regions (Trinka, 2019).

Migrating into another country is often motivated by the hope for a better quality of life (Hendriks & Bartram, 2018). However, settling into another geographic location presents numerous challenges, such as navigating the unknown, separation from loved ones, lower socioeconomic positions, sense of alienation, and homesickness (Hendricks & Bartram, 2018). Given the challenges involved in migration, having a strong sense of religious belonging could help migrants make the transition more manageable, or quickly recreate a new sense of community in the host society. In support, research has indicated how individuals’ religious faith intensifies after immigration and how they can more consciously engage in religious communities (Trinka, 2019). According to Trinka, migrating changes the nature of faith: individuals foster new practices and expand their resources while adapting previous rituals. Religious communities build a safe space for individuals to share experiences, mythologies, and daily religious practices. Thus, migrating could increase prominence of religious beliefs and practices (Ebaugh & Chafetz 2000; Mayer, 2007, as cited in Bugg, 2014). As generations integrate further, the nature of religion in individuals can modify.

Storytelling is frequently practiced in religion to make abstract and complicated ideas into understandable concepts. For example, mythology is one of the oldest forms of storytelling, expressing human narratives and values. The deep psychological mechanisms related with myths encourage the development of social and communal knowledge for children, as well as self-knowledge (Cajete, 2017). Mythologies are cultural narratives that influence the way individuals and societies live.

Religious texts and meanings are often passed through stories. According to a finding by Alasmari (2023), the use of religious expressions in conversations, stories, and phrases can actively shape and negotiate family identity, and individuals’ perspectives on social relations and structures. The study primarily incorporated an exploration of auto-ethnographic accounts. The results illustrated how the usage of religious expressions, such as everyday phrases and religious language, used by families in daily conversations, like at the dinner table, could socialize immigrant children into heritage cultural norms (Alasmari, 2023).

Research question

The literature reviewed above shows that storytelling plays a fundamental role in shaping the development of immigrant children by helping them develop a sense of cultural and religious belonging. On another level, research has highlighted the struggles of immigrant children to find a balance in their multiple identities and develop ties with their own heritage. By adopting an auto-ethnographic approach, the present paper aims to answer the following research question: How does storytelling in immigrant and multigenerational households shape children’s cultural and religious belonging?

Methodology

Method

This paper adopts an autoethnographic approach to explore the relationship between storytelling and belonging in immigrant children – taking inspiration from Belford and Lahiri-Roy (2018). The approach uses personal experiences and stories to explore complex sociocultural processes and can be considered as a combination of an exploration of a cultural meaning and autobiography (Koning & Moore, 2020). Through the shared experiences and memories of the author, this paper can effectively communicate the relation of stories and belonging during formative years.

While there are many pieces of literature illustrating the central role of storytelling in families and communities, when it comes to fostering belonging, personal accounts can add a lived dimension to this work. The data for this study is extracted from personal memories, family stories, and conversations. In addition, they describe and analyse the memories that real personal experiences can offer, and an in-depth understanding of the topics being explored. This methodology, which is intrinsically a form of storytelling itself, aims to elicit an intellectual and emotional connection between the author and the readers. This is perfectly suiting the purpose of showcasing the power of storytelling (Bochner & Ellis, 2016).

Reflexivity

This research emerges from my own journey – growing up between an immigrant household as well as a multigenerational one. As a second-generation Indian and ciswoman, I showcase the development of immigrant children faced with changing culture and religious identity through the form of books, mythology, conversations, memories, and pictures. The lens adopted in this paper is informed by my background – having been born into an Indian culture and Hindu religion. My credibility on this topic arises from my personal experience of building an identity across two countries and navigating two varied cultures. Positionality is essential to this literature as the goal is to link personal narratives with wider themes of culture, religion, childhood development, and the importance of having a sense of belonging. The reflexivity frames my history and the themes researched, shaping my personal biases and interpretations of topics. I recognize that my story is one in million and cannot be the basis for a collective conclusion. However, my lived experiences provide one lens to a general truth of the lives of many.

Findings

Storytelling Bridging Gaps and Constructing Identity

Sainik Farms in New Delhi was a house filled with noise: the kitchen was loud with rattling dishes, the dogs barking, aunts laughing, and siblings quarreling. Living in a multigenerational home meant that an abundance of memories, stories, and values filled each day. Every minute spent in India was complemented with laughs of escapades of parents, grandparents, and cousins. In the moment, the stories merely meant giggling and happy memories at the dinner table.

I am the second youngest of seven cousins and a daughter to ten others. I was oblivious as to why I always called my cousins ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters.’ Family, like for any other individual, was the first community

that I was born into. Growing up, I was consistently told tales of memories. Was it family nostalgia or an identity building plan? Through these narratives, I learned early in life about my complex family tree: gathering knowledge about everyone's personal identity and forming emotional connections like branches. The stories functioned as a foundation of trust, language, values, and understatement of my culture. Grandparents often share reminiscence storytelling that foster a connection to heritage and family for the children in their home. My *dadi*, (my grandmother), told me about the festival of *Janmashtami*. *Janmashtami* is a hindu festival celebrating the birth of *Krishna*, a hindu god. She described the chaos of the kitchen assembling a feast, people overflowing, and doors remaining open to welcome everybody. Hand-in-hand with *dadu* (my grandfather), they would invite the less fortunate in their home to eat, drink, and share religious offerings on this auspicious day. A simple tale gave me a connection with my *dadu*, someone whom I have never met. My *dadu* lives within me because of the stories I've heard. I can imagine him laughing at my embarrassing moments and cheering me on when I'm discouraged, because somewhere inside my heart I feel like I completely know him and he knows me through these stories.

That day formed a bridge for me between the generational gap of me and her, and the gap between the living and dead of me and my grandfather. That day, I learned the significance of a shared meaning. I have learned about my ancestors; grandpa, great-grandpa, grandma on my moms side; through memories. Knowing about each of my relatives and holding them close to my heart makes me who I am. I realized the values of my family, to welcome and accept different people. Over time, a collection of these stories made numerous bonds in my life and tied an invisible string between me and the people in my life. India was a place to me shaped by community, traditions, and culture. Slowly, I too became a part of the line passing down a generation of memories. Everyday, I immersed myself more through meal time talks, morning prayer, and family rituals. Every detail embedded me more into who I am in my family and identity. Knowing the language and rituals gave me a better place on that table and in my family.

Navigating Dual Identities

Growing up as an Indian in the United States, everyday was filled with complexity and thought. There was a world outside my small apartment, 12-A in Hackensack. The world of perfected American accents, scents of florals, and lemonade stands on the streets. Yet somehow, in my apartment, that world flipped upside down and disappeared. 12-A had the aroma of jasmine, chai on the stove, and the American accent had been replaced for Hindi.

I often thought about whether I needed to pick one over the other. For some, I was too Indian. While for others, I was not Indian enough. To society back in Delhi, I was often seen as just an American. I have never fit into one identity and both versions of myself were always incomplete. The pressure behind this complexity consistently laid layers on me. I realized that switching between the two identities became its own language that I was absolutely natural in. When I had started bringing my friends into my home, I noticed my nature; mannerisms, behavior, accent, tone, and even body language; adapt in an instant between talking to my friends versus my parents in my own home at the same time. I felt a need to integrate in the new context, by embracing an American identity.

My life was an active game of tug-of-war. It was a stretch between identities and also expectations. There were certain expectations made by my family, embedded in my Indian roots. Even in Hackensack, New Jersey, speaking English in my household was disallowed, having the ability to speak in Hindi was an expectation set. Speaking in our language allowed me to have better connections and relationships with an Indian community and my family. Knowing the language enlightened me on preserving traditions that I wouldn't be able to understand otherwise. However, there were other expectations made by my new society, deep-rooted in American culture. Starting from elementary school itself, it was embedded within me the expectations of growing up and out of the nest, constantly being told to make something of myself. One side appreciated community, respect, and tradition. The other side valued freedom, individuality, and personal growth.

Indian tradition encourages interdependence, to maintain relationships and prioritize family over individual wishes. In a multigenerational home, more than just parents, extended family was a tight knit community. Life events and decisions were passed through the entire family. Values were integrated early on, teaching children the importance of taking care of their elders once they grow. My parents would always joke around with the idea that I would place them in elderly home. The United States is socially more accepting of living facilities while Indian values prefer multi-generational homes or taking care of your parents in other ways.

American culture has a strong belief system in personal growth. This country is a society shaped by individual rights, personal goals, and independence. Most children, in the U.S, have tunnel vision on their personal life and achievements. From a young age, they are raised to make decisions by themselves and be ready to be out the nest. Being an only child in an Indian household, I never understood that vision. Until late middle school, I wanted my parents to move with me wherever I went to University. In fact, I didn't even enjoy going to sleepovers growing up in the fear of being away from my parents.

I always had a desire to adapt to American culture, but also balance both my values. As I grew into myself, I found my own becoming. I realized I didn't need to choose, but create my own meaning. At the age of sixteen years old, I got my first job and with it, my first pay check. Taking the initiative to earn my own money and work highlighted the American values I picked up on the way. This was a personal decision I made. Typically, American parents want their kids to get jobs in their late teenage years but I never felt that pressure. I wanted to foster independence and learn to be self-reliable. I chose to become an aftercare teacher at a Montessori school, something I greatly enjoyed. My first pay check was spent taking my parents out for dinner, and happily so. I wanted them to have reassurance that I was still connected to the roots they instilled in me. It's an Indian ritual, and one in my family, to give your parents your first earning. Instead of focusing on personal achievement, I chose to focus on giving gratitude to the people who got me there. I noticed a beautiful contrast in this situation. In India, during dinner time, the table and the amount of people were larger. This meant more stories and culture being passed down with the food. However, this intimate moment at a restaurant in New Jersey with my parents still fulfilled the delicacy of meal time conversations and culture.

Truthfully, oftentimes, movies and songs have long been a symbol of my contrasting identities. They symbolized the language, culture, values, and meanings behind their origins. Watching a Hindi movie in

my bed in high school makes me feel connected, once again, to my Indian culture. Films and songs are windows into cultures. For example, the film *Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani* is an Indian film about long-lasting friendships and love. They illustrate the same values and expressions of Indian culture, prioritizing relationships. On the other hand, American movies showcase the values of “The American Dream.” The movie *Minari*, an American film despite being based in Korean linguistically, depicts a small family’s pursuit of a better life and their struggle in reaching there. Watching more movies and listening to more songs helped me better transform into a person that realized she never had to pick just one culture. I was lucky in having the capability to understand both perspectives.

I realized that having two identities isn’t about picking one over the other. In fact, every part of my identity is an extra layer added to who I am. My intercultural identity has become something I am proud of, not ashamed of anymore. Extra layers, I found, was extra knowledge. I knew things about opposite sides of the world. I was proud when I saw people learning about other cultures in school but I knew I was part of it. World History class in ninth grade had an “India Unit,” I was thrilled to be able to raise my hand and provide further information every lesson. Students near me had so many questions and my identity gave me the opportunity to answer every single one.

What defines me as a person is the history of each culture, the stories that I carry from each home, and the lessons that I have taken from them.

Cultural Belonging, Finding a Balance

Preserving the past while focusing on the present is a complicated thought, one representing the balancing act of Western and South Asian culture. My family held great pride in preserving the past: maintaining relationships, passing down generational memories, and keeping deep-rooted rituals. My dad would continue on traditions in the United States that his parents had once shown him. Every birthday of a family member that had passed away, me and my dad would go to the temple and distribute fruit. It was an important tradition and held deep-rooted meaning. Western culture focuses on individuality: building a future, achieving goals, and becoming independent. Class jobs and chores were an important aspect in forming this individuality in developing children. I never had chores at home and so it was something I learned from my link to the western world, primarily during school. I always thought I had to keep the two separated; as a child, culture meant hiding one part of me while overemphasizing the other. At one point, who I am all depended on where I was and who I was with.

In the United States, the culture surrounding the American Dream is a continuous chatter. The ambition to chase this purpose is an inspiration for Americans and immigrants. Storytelling is not only crucial in child development, but also cultural development. As the term, the American Dream, was created by a narrative of experiences and stories differentiating America to the world. This concept soon became a necessity to belong in the cultural identity of the American nation. Immigrants migrated to the U.S to find their individual belonging in this culture and to live up to the expectations illustrated. The “American Dream” had been coined by immigrants themselves in this nation. Saying the Pledge of Allegiance every morning in school and sitting in history class continued building the stepping stones of knowledge for me to this dream.

My parents are first-generation immigrants, choosing to resettle in this nation for better opportunities, work, and a brighter future. They too took part in the belief that hard work and independence can grant a person individual success in the United States. My parents would tell me about their first days and nights spent in this country. In 2001 with three thousand dollars in their pockets, they chose this place. Their home was a small cramped studio apartment shared with two of my aunts and uncles. Every night was spent sleeping in sleeping bags and every morning was spent commuting and working at a telephone store in New York City. Before any history class, this envisionment enlightened me on American culture. My parent's story was almost my first building block of this belonging. Their hard work and perseverance gave me my first full understanding of an "American Dream." They came into this country knowing nothing themselves but being an immigrant continued into this culture by existing in the community.

Cultural belonging in New Delhi, on the other hand, was a belonging in relations. Four generations spread in my home. Having three older generations being with me, I understood the preservation of relationships and traditions. Ironically, my apartment in the US had seemed smaller to me. Not in size but in feeling, it lacked culture, buzz, chaos, and generations of memories and love.

In my family, tradition was greater than a process. Tradition was a lineage that was practiced and embedded with every generation. Whether it was the respect for elders, religious customs, or beliefs held. For example, *Diwali* is an important Indian festival representing the victory of light over darkness. In my house, the festival is celebrated by placing *diyas* in every room of the house. *Diyas* are a small and shallow oil lamp, the light in them brings hope and prosperity. It was a tradition of worship and ritual. Other times, tradition and culture peeks through softer actions. For example, touching the feet of elders to get blessings or tying a black thread on you to protect from evil eyes. The practice of touching the feet of elders signifies the reinforcement of family bonds and is a gesture of respect and humility. Tying a black thread is seen as a way to absorb or ward off negativity and bad luck. Every soft or loud tradition was a cultural moment I experienced, standing for its own significance: the discipline in worship, the respect for others, and the values of goodness. Despite being a child, I understood that each gesture was important and weighted with meaning. I saw the significance of these rituals in my elders and the little to great difference they made in our everyday lives.

As I grew older, the cultural belonging I had found in each society had slowly intertwined. Society in the United States had many important rituals as well and some of them had been left inexperienced by me. Thanksgiving is a huge holiday for the people in the United States. The traditions include huge family meals, volunteering, and giving thanks to loved ones. I never related to this feeling even as I heard all my friends speak about it. Maybe it was because huge family gatherings and giving thanks was more of a cultural norm to me than a holiday.

I could prepare for the future and the past, and know where and who I came from. I found a balance in both my cultures, realizing that I am not whole without both. I have developed into the person I am applying the culture of ambition and the culture of tradition too. Culture represents where I came from, which can never be only my heritage or this new society — it is always both.

Religious Growth Through Values

Each night before going to sleep, I saw my dad remember to pray and thank god for his family. It didn't matter if we were in the United States, in India, or anywhere else in the world. Soon, I joined him. At first, when I was younger, it started off to merely be like my father. My father, in my eyes, was a simple, traditional, and family man. I looked up to that aspect of him. To the world he was a father and to me he was my *papa*. It was routine before our goodnights and kisses. I slowly understood that there was so much more meaning behind it. Some nights, my dad would tell me religious stories. For example, he would explain to me the story of *Mahabharat*. It is one of India's greatest tales, translated to "the great tale of the Bharata dynasty." *Mahabharat* tells the mythological story of a war between two sets of cousins fighting for the throne and justice, alongside the Indian god, *Krishna*. *Krishna*, in this story, taught the values of dharma and morality. Every story I heard gave me a greater belief in faith. Praying every night was a practice of faith he stayed disciplined in. No matter how many years passed immigrating to another country, where Christian beliefs were dominant, he found his comfort in the belief he always carried. This practice of faith shined light on our values as a family beyond religion. They preserved our principles of gratitude, love, and humbleness. This small ritual taught me the values of our family, and also helped me grow religiously. I realized that I didn't need to be in India surrounded by temples to pray. There were differences in not having big religious ceremonies or family surrounding you, but faith had just become faith. I found a comfort and safe belonging by carrying this part of me in my home away from home.

Hinduism is a religion characterized by a diversity of values, beliefs, and traditions. A fundamental concept that sits at the foundation of this religion is the idea of *Karma* and *Dharma*. *Karma* tells us that our actions have consequences, good or bad; *Dharma* refers to individuals living their lives upholding their duties, individualized, social, religious, etc (Saxena et al., 2023). I often heard these words in my house, but they were never outlined for me. I understood the true meaning behind these fundamentals through stories and memories, like the *Mahabharat*. Other stories included *Ramayana*. *Ramayana* is a collection of myths following the life of lord *Rama*, an avatar of an Indian god. This story, as well, showed me the ideas of righteousness and morality.

My parents would always tell me to "do what is good even if it's a little inconvenient." These lessons showed up in our regular days and nights. I have grown up to be a person that feeds stray animals and helps out the homeless because of this. Last year, in India, I drove around with bags of dog foods, treats, and toys to do what is good even though it was a little inconvenient. My mom would often tell me stories of India in the U.S. She described the days she'd go around in her car, distributing blankets and biscuits to the thousands of people on the streets of Delhi. I didn't learn *Karma* through books and texts. It was a quiet lesson taught through painting stories and watching the people I looked up to. These stories developed me into the person I am today and I have continued to apply the values I have learned.

Dharma, fulfilling one's duties, is applicable to relationships as well. To be a good daughter, sister, granddaughter, and friend. That is a value I continuously strive to become better at. The desire to act in that way comes from the spoken memories I have heard about my family and our principles. Growing up, a story that was frequently repeated was how my *Bade Papa*, dad's oldest brother, took care of the family after my *Dadu's* death and built a business and home on nothing. He had prioritized his family over

himself, sacrificing not finishing his schooling. When times got hard after *Dadu's* death, my family had never given up and stuck together to be where they are today. Today, I understand how this showed me my family values of perseverance, hard-work, responsibility, and the importance of family sticking together. When I see him, I realize he continuously shows up to complete his duties towards his family. To be a good son, brother, dad, and to me – uncle.

Every piece of a memory or valuable tale gives me not only a place in my family, but constructs my personal identity. I learned from my mom the value of *Karma* and doing good for others in this world. I learned from my uncle the value of *Dharma* and perseverance. Applying these values today keeps me rooted in my religion and carries the warmth in another home and country.

Traditions, tales, and values gave me my belonging and helped construct my identity into who I am today. There were challenges along the way of navigating dual identities and understanding religion but a rich bag of culture came with it. Everything that has formed my personal identity is things that I will continue to share, spread, and pass down to all other meaningful individuals I will meet.

Discussion

The findings illustrate that the idea of belonging to an immigrant child is something that constantly develops through everyday occurrences, stories, and experiences. On one hand, facing different cultures can bring confusion and clashes, leading to feelings of displacement in the beginning (Rumbaut, 2005). However, finding a balance in culture(s) and identity(s) can create uniqueness and rich senses of communities and history (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005).

Family narratives of shared history provide a framework for each individual to understand and integrate shared events into their own autobiographies (Bohanek, Marin, Fivush, & Duke, 2006; Fivush, 2008; Merrill, Booker, & Fivush, 2019). This is illustrated by my connection to my *dadu*, being created by a shared history. Encouraging this development in immigrant children leads to the preservation of the family heritage, values, identity, and culture. Being an immigrant child, I contributed something new to the United States society and the people that surrounded me. Despite perseverance, I readapted and revitalised my values and heritage to share with my host society.

The older generations gave me tools to access the past of my family. For example, my grandmother sharing stories of my *dadu*. As the younger generation, on the other hand, I can give back and provide tools to connect the older generations with the new host society. Like helping my parents interpret American societies and values of individuality. Liaqat, Axtell, and Munteanu (2022) highlight the importance of generational gaps in families through storytelling.

In this autoethnography, multigenerational households have shown to hold an abundance of stories that effectively give new life an identity and place in their family culture. New life is the addition of every new family, community, and societal member. Fivush and Kellas (2025) recognize the central role of families in this process, being the first community an individual is born into. The findings in this paper and existing research show how storytelling is a tool in aiding the development of children to connect not just with

their families, but also with their societies, heritage, and new communities. In my experience, I realized growing up that I didn't need to pick between my identities. This was all thanks to my stories and experiences that gave me the link to my heritage and host society. On one hand, deciding to be independent in the US, I got a job in my teenage years. On the other hand, I stayed connected to my roots and values of *Dharma*, being an aftercare teacher and fulfilling my duties to small children.

My story adds to existing research by providing a lens of an individual having found a way to value both cultures.

Research has often studied immigrant children as people that have not been a part of their heritage, making it difficult to find a belonging there. The author's experience carries memorable stories and understanding from both cultures, showing how these can intertwine and blend together into forming a new multicultural identity, reflecting Grosjean's (2015) idea of having complementary identities. The literature extensively supported the idea of blending and existing peacefully in two cultures, where you can switch and co-exist (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Grosjean, 2015; Panicacci, 2021).

The author's experiences reflect the findings in literature, with personal experiences of finding belonging through family narratives. The results illustrated stories weaved into everyday life instills identity into developing children, creating belonging without definitions or terms. The author integrated into her life both cultures through dinner time conversations, mythologies, and simple phrases and expressions, recalling Alasmari (2023). The findings reinforce the idea of storytelling being experienced culturally and religiously across generations.

Conclusion

This study explored how storytelling in immigrant and multigenerational households shape children's cultural and religious belonging through existing literature and autoethnographic storytelling. Additional aspects concerned immigrant children's dual identities and acculturation, as well as their struggles adapting to each cultural context. The studies of immigrant children is an extensive territory for researchers. Despite having a variety of cultures and ethnicities in the world, every individual has a different, unique experience shaped by specific stories and meanings. The literature revealed that stories are the principle to constructing identity. Stories create shared understanding and community, something particularly crucial in immigration contexts. Storytelling is a bridge between cultural words for second-generation immigrants, linking individual identity with their heritage and current society. Embracing a new culture does not mean erasing existing cultural affiliations, second-generation immigrants are able to assimilate while holding on to their heritage through stories: conversations, memories, expressions, phrases, and narratives. This study illustrated a lived reality outside of definitions and concepts, where the author realizes that stories bridge gaps — cultural and generational, fostering a multicultural, multifaceted identity.

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