



Interview with Tahseen Shams, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Sociology¹

University of Pennsylvania School of Arts & Sciences

Interviewed and transcribed by:
Jennifer Babitzke
Sociology- University of Kansas

¹ Tahseen Shams is a sociologist studying immigration, globalization, and identity. She is the author of one book, 14 peer-reviewed publications, and numerous invited book reviews, essays, and lectures at campuses across the world. More information about Dr. Shams' work can be found at <https://www.tahseenshams.org/>.

INTERVIEW WITH TAHSEEN SHAMS, PH.D.

In April 2023, The Sociology Graduate Student Association (SGSA) at the University of Kansas invited Dr. Shams to present her research for her book *Here, There, and Elsewhere: The Making of Immigrant Identities in a Globalized World*. This work illustrates how immigrants are “vectors of globalization” who are both subject to and an agent within the interconnectedness of societies. She argues that immigrants exist in a space that is neither the immigrants’ homeland nor hostland- a place Shams calls “elsewhere.” Dr. Shams’ book has received multiple awards including ASA’s 2021 Thomas and Znaniecki Award (International Migration Section), ASA’s 2021 Distinguished Book Award (Sociology of Religion Section), ASAs 2021 Asian American Book Award (Asian and American Section), and the Pacific Sociological Association’s 2021 Distinguished Scholarship Award. In this interview we discuss her book, how she came to research this topic, implications of this research for sociology, and general insight into her journey as both graduate student and early career scholar.

JB: Jennifer Babitzke

TS: Dr. Tahseen Shams

JB: In your award-winning book, you introduce the concept of “elsewhere.” What is elsewhere? How do you conceptualize it?

TS: Yes. So my book *Here, There and Elsewhere*, is about how global geopolitics is as important an element in America's identity formation as their homeland and hostland dynamics. In my book, I present a new analytical framework, multi-centered relational framework, which shows how places beyond the immigrants' homeland and hostland are also important for immigrants' identities. I conceptualize these places that are neither the immigrants' sending countries or receiving countries as “elsewhere”. But elsewhere does not mean everywhere, anywhere that's even remotely interesting to the immigrants doesn't mean that it's going to be an elsewhere. Where a place is located, the relationship between that place with the hostland country and homeland dynamics determines whether that place is an “elsewhere.” Does that place determine how immigrants self-identify or do they self-identify with that place? Does that inform their own sense of selves? Does that place beyond the homeland and hostland inform how other people identify the immigrant in light of elsewhere? So that's what my book is about, extending the homeland/hostland dyad to think about this third kind of space in immigrants' everyday lives.

JB: And that complicates our traditional notions of assimilation and acculturation because there's this other third, ephemeral place that influences how one identifies and how one is perceived.

TS: Yeah, so assimilation has its back turned to the border. It looks at what's happening inside the hostland, how homeland context shape immigrants' hostland identities over time, how immigrants become similar to the native population of the hostland. Transnationalism expands that focus to include the sending countries' dynamics, but it's still limited to that homeland/hostland dyad. Just because an immigrant is from one country and has come to another country doesn't mean that those are the only countries that are important to the immigrants, that no other dimension, other aspect of their identities are equally informative. Diaspora is another framework that we often use in international migration, even though there is a separate area called diaspora studies. But I show that diaspora also conceptually is tied to this dyadic framework where people are dispersed across different receiving countries but are connected to this one sending country or one homeland. My framework breaks through this dyadic framework to look at three centers, the homeland, hostland, and beyond.

JB: Toward the end of your presentation, you talked a little bit about generalizability to other ethnicities and cultures. Could you speak a bit about how you believe this might look with other immigrant groups such as Latin Americans or Latinos in America, French Caribbean immigrants in Canada or other immigrant groups?

TS: Sure. In my book, I did discuss historical cases that in migration scholarship we take for granted to show that there was an elsewhere effect that we just did not have the toolbox to see clearly. So for instance, I use the case of South Asian Muslim Americans to conceptualize elsewhere, but I also talk about how elsewhere, an elsewhere framework reveals a more complicated picture about Irish Americans, Catholics, Eastern and Southern Europeans, even the formation of Asian Americans. So you mentioned Latinos, how elsewhere can be relevant to that population. So one dimension that I talk about in the book is after 9-11, the entire U.S. immigration policy paradigm shifted from an economic cost-benefit paradigm to a security, national security paradigm. That did not affect Middle Easterners or Muslims nearly as much as it did immigrants from Latin American countries, especially Mexico. Because very, very few people fly into the United States. Most immigrants cross the border on foot or by driving. So this national security apparatus affected not Middle Easterners, but Latin Americans. So that's a kind of like an elsewhere effect. It was the exogenous shock that was rooted in Middle Eastern politics ended up affecting not Middle Eastern Americans, only, but more than that, the Latin American immigrants. Another example is the racialized context of the United States, where Latin Americans have suffered misdirected hate crimes after Islamist terrorist attacks. All brown people are lumped together as if they're the same. Latin Americans have often been mistaken as Middle Easterners. If you are non-white, if you look brown, you are a suspect. You are exposed to the national security threat, you know, that pervasive atmosphere of national security threat after moments of crisis resulting in Latin Americans suffering misdirected hate crimes after certain terrorist attacks in the United States.

JB: I'm kind of going back a little bit in your ideas of elsewhere, your conceptualization of that. I was struck by how elsewhere is constructed by the perception of others about immigrants. And so I started thinking about Patricia Hill Collins' idea of controlling images. Did that idea influence any of your framework? How does that play into this idea of elsewhere?

TS: I did not connect elsewhere with Patricia Hill Collins' work, even though, of course, as a sociologist of race, ethnicity, religion, nationalism, I am aware of this work. But the idea of being perceived by others in association to something that happened is just one part of elsewhere. It's just one part of the story. The other part, that's identification by others in relation to elsewhere that is obviously rooted in the stereotypical narratives, the controlling images of Muslims here in the United States. But that [controlling image] doesn't speak to how the Muslims think about themselves in relation to elsewhere. They too see themselves, perceive themselves in association with places that they're not from or have never visited. So that's the controlling image as part of the public presentation of self. That is just half of the story.

JB: Do you think elsewhere is a recent phenomenon made possible by communication and media, the 24-hour news cycle and higher political polarization, or has this concept always been a factor?

TS: I argue in my book that this is not a new phenomenon. For instance, let's look at how Catholics, Irish American immigrants were perceived back when social media was not a thing. They were seen as agents of the Pope, [people who] were taking directives from Rome, and they are going to subvert the Protestant ethic of the United States and make it into a Catholic haven. And they were discriminated and persecuted for it. There wasn't social media or advanced communication technologies there. Same thing with Southern and Eastern European immigrants during the Red Scare. They were suspected of, again, being agents of the Bolshevik Revolution because they were in the United States and the US had geopolitical tensions with the Soviet Union. Let's look at how Asian Americans as a pan-ethnic group was formed. Vincent Chin, who was a Chinese immigrant, was killed because he was misperceived as Japanese during a very heightened tension between the United States and Japan. They were economically competitive and there was a lot of tension and Vincent Chin, although he was Chinese, he was identified as Japanese and therefore he was brutally murdered. That paved the way for the Asian American Pan-ethnic Coalition². There wasn't a role of social media or the advanced telecommunication technologies that we're seeing here today. That does not mean that this unprecedented speed in which we get to learn about far away events almost immediately has no role; I think it spreads faster. We get to hear from a number of different places faster, a number of different places in general that we did not have the technology to hear from. For instance, anyone can go on social media and talk about their day, tell the world of the conditions of their lives. But that doesn't mean that the age-old hierarchy or the world systems that existed long before social media or advanced telecommunication technologies is not playing a role. Still now, what happens in the core countries matters a lot more than what

² Little, Becky. 2020. "How the 1982 Murder of Vincent Chin Ignited a Push for Asian American Rights." <https://www.history.com/articles/vincent-chin-murder-asian-american-rights>.

happens in the peripheral and semi-peripheral countries. We only care about what happens in the margins if we have a stake in that story. So I think telecommunications make it a faster process, but it does not change the elsewhere story that has long been present in the migration phenomenon. We just did not have the toolkit to tease it out and show that this is a geopolitical interplay and not just hostland dynamics of racialization or assimilation.

JB: KU, like many higher education institutions, has a robust international student population. How do you see university settings impacting immigrant identity?

TS: University campuses are often places where students are exposed beyond their parents' social network for the very first time. These are the places that are politicized. In high school, we may be exposed to different kinds of people, but we are usually circumscribed by the neighborhoods we live in. But it is truly in the college campus milieu that we first get a taste of this microcosm of the larger world. We see international students, we see activist groups, we see different kinds of classmates who care about different things, people who look different, people who speak different, people who dress differently. And we finally get to intermingle, and that's where, physically also, not just culturally or religiously, we are basically enmeshed together, so I think that it is different from the kind of interactions we would have outside of campus. What happens on campus is not really representative of the interactions that we would have off campus.

In my research, I have found that the interactions and exposures that my South Asian Muslim participants have had in their colleges have had a long-term effect in how they viewed the world and their position in it. They understood through their participation in activist organizations, with classmates, conversations, or debates, or organizational tensions on campus that this is what being a Muslim means. Or these are the places around the world where people like me are also persecuted or are discriminated against, and this is what the world looks like; this is where I fit in and this is my role here. Just because they have graduated from college doesn't mean that the friendships and the relationships that they have made on these campuses have ended. Many of our participants have continued maintaining those relationships. I think that college campuses definitely are places where students come to construct themselves in a new way, like in a more diversified way, in a more informed way with a more expanded worldview.

I think it is interesting to view what happens to international students when they go back to their sending country. After they're exposed to these conversations that maybe they don't have the privilege or the security to engage in their homeland because of some authoritarian regimes, they still take these ideas back with them. Similarly, when they come from one country to another to go to college, they are also giving students a different light of what their home country is like. And that reminds me of, for instance, an anecdote that everyone thinks that Pakistan is like a war-torn country, poor, nobody is safe there, but according to one of my participants who is Pakistani, a lot of his American white friends found from him that Pakistan is a very modern country. Like [when he shared] pictures of Islamabad and Karachi, they were awestruck that it's so advanced and the streets are clean and it could be like any very technologically developed country. That's the first time they've even learned what Pakistan looks like other than pictures of violence that they see on the news, or women wearing the hijab on

the news. So there is a lot of exchange, flows of information that informs both the international students, but through them, the other students also learn a lot. They go off with a more expanded, diversified worldview.

JB: Oh, that's really interesting. And bringing those ideas back to their home country when they return is also fascinating and acts like potential kernels of change for future generations.

TS: Sometimes they also find the toolkits to articulate what they feel needs to be changed in their home country. They learn to see their home country in a new light.

JB: Shifting gears a bit from the findings of your research to the process of conducting research, many grad students struggle finding their research topic and question, one that is significant and contributes to the field. But then there's also this long haul of doing the work of writing the dissertation. You've also worked on this topic all through grad school and now into your professional life. How do you maintain interest in your research topic?

TS: Interestingly enough, migration continues to be the fire that keeps me going. Like my interest in global geopolitics and migration, that hasn't waned over time, but I do have moments of burnout and boredom. And for instance, my second project on interracial, interethnic romance, I'm very bored by it. It's not something that I chose to do. When you are an assistant professor, it's expected of you that as soon as your first book is published, you need to have a second project [so] I was just playing around with this idea. And some of my colleagues who are very supportive loved it because it spoke to their research interests. And I thought, "Oh, okay, I'll give it a shot." Somehow, a small project now has 150 interviews, and now I have all this data that I'm just not sure if I have the interest that's going to sustain me through digging through, analyzing, writing about this entire data. But I think that with the way that I keep interest is I look at the data in the way that is interesting to me. If I'm interested in politics and contentious politics, geopolitics, I look for evidence of that to see, how can I frame this in a way that's interesting to me. And sometimes it also helps to just take a break because when you look at it a second time around, you're like, "Oh, that's actually pretty interesting." I think this balance of looking at a research project in a way that's interesting to you rather than what other people find interesting is something that is more helpful. Yeah, encouragement is very important, but [also find] something that's helpful for you to keep going when you're sitting in front of a screen late at night trying to figure out how you're going to continue writing the next paragraph when you're bored out of your mind. So look at it the way that is interesting to you. Frame it in a way that speaks to the literature that interests you, if possible, and take a break away by doing another project or trying to do a collaborative project. That way you keep your research agenda going, but you're taking a break away from something. But I think that with migration, there is, at least for me, there was something about migration in my personal life that resonated with me. So that keeps me going. If you're not interested in, for instance, gender, that will be very hard. There could be different projects to find in that topic, but if you're just bored of gender overall, it would be very difficult. I think just have an area that's just interesting to you and just engage in different projects if need be, rather than just stick to one project.

INTERVIEW WITH TAHSEEN SHAMS, PH.D.

JB: Yeah, I can see for some grad students, and I felt this a little bit in my own research with my advisor, that she's encouraging me in this one direction. And maybe I follow that direction a little bit and I'm like, "Gosh, this isn't resonating with me." So for grad students who have that experience, maybe trust what ignites your passion, follow what interests you.

TS: Yes, I've changed my project several times in my first year because I was interested in this idea. And then the end of my first year, somebody wrote that exact book, [my idea] got published! And I was so panicked at what do I do now? I don't have anything, right? Well, what am I going to do now? And there's that added stress that everyone keeps asking you, so what's your research about? What's your research project? What's your research project? And when you don't have a research project, you're like, oh my god, I shouldn't be here, you know, imposter syndrome, 100%. So, I've had a lot of floundering with different research projects. I ended up going back to that original research project because one of my advisors said, that doesn't matter, just do your own project [but] answer it in a different way. And it ended up being my book!

JB: An award-winning book, by the way! Several awards, in fact. So you're an early career scholar. You're within five years of graduation, and you have a very prolific CV. I think you've published 9 or 10 publications plus a book in this short period of time. What advice do you have for graduate students who want to prepare themselves for the job market and want to start or maintain a rigorous writing practice? What did you do?

TS: I wrote every day. I identified when is my A time and when is my B time? So I am a morning person, the earlier I wake up from sleep and get to my desk, the better I think and write. It's very easy to say. Sometimes our schedules are not within our control. Even if you want to work in our A-time early in the morning, we can't because baby wakes up or some family obligations, or we're taking care of our elderly parents or someone who is sick. I feel uncomfortable saying that, but whatever that one can do to give themselves a solid writing time, [is beneficial]. Because there are very few things in the job market that you can control; the only thing that you can do is publish as much as you can so that you have as much advantage as you can over the other candidates. It doesn't matter where you're graduating from, ultimately, if your research publications are impressive. I think, finishing your dissertation on time or whether you are writing a book or an article, I think the key thing is to give yourself time every day, even if just an hour, to write. Even if it's just 3 sentences, 4 sentences, or just edit what you've written the day before. Just make steady progress, even if it's very slow, just make steady progress every day. It's very easy to say, it also has a fragrance of privilege, but that is the only way that I think you can make progress, giving yourself the time to think and write.

JB: You mentioned A time and B time. What is the distinction of those different times?

TS: A time is when you think the clearest and writing comes more naturally. Your head is clear, you think more creatively, that's when you have the brighter ideas. B time is when you're tired; that's not the best time that you give yourself. That's probably like, yeah, I can answer emails, I can grade, but I probably can't write a chapter of my dissertation now because I'm tired or my

focus is just not on my work right now, I'm distracted, or I have some family obligations that I have to do. So yeah, I can work, write some emails, do some administrative stuff, but I can't put out a very creative piece of work or a paragraph. So that's the B time. And then the rest of the time, you basically try to do as much of non-work work, like some non-academic work, so that you can save some A time for yourself. So that's how I managed my schedule. I made sure to give myself some time every day to write. I turned off my cell phone or turned my phone on silent. I closed off my e-mail. I am not a big social media person, so that was never a big challenge for me. I tried to remove as many distractions as possible and write during my A time. During my B time, I did all my administrative stuff. And the rest of the time, I managed all my other obligations so that I saved my A time so I didn't have my non-academic work bleed into that time.

JB: Or feel the pressure to attend to other things because you already have the time and it's place for writing.

TS: Yes *and* have realistic expectations!

JB: Do you have any other comments or advice or anything in general for graduate students, early career academics, or people on the job market that you want to add before we finish the interview?

TS: Hmmm...I think that is the hardest question you've asked me. I think I would rephrase it a little differently, like what I would have done differently if I had another chance. I think I would have been more conscious of my mental health, and I would have been more attentive to work-life balance so that I had a better self-support mechanism for mental health. For instance, like I used to have my phone ding whenever I received an e-mail. What that meant was my phone was always going ding, ding, ding, ding, ding. So I was never off! A simple change like that to free up time, to be in the moment. I still suffer from being unable to be present and content with what I have. It's always like, what else do I have to do? What's next that I have to do? Like, I did this, but I didn't do that. I could do this better. I would start that practice for the long-term health of you know, my family life, my own mental health from grad school and not now as an early career scholar.

JB: I love that advice. Easy to say, sometimes hard to do, especially turning off the brain and just being present. Maybe meditation practices will help with that.

TS: Totally. Yoga helped so much when I was in my last year of graduate school.

JB: Well, I'll start my meditation practice and yoga. Thank you so much for spending this time with us.

Suggested Citation (ASA):

Shams, Tahseen. 2026. "Interview with Tahseen Shams, Ph.D." *Social Thought and Research* 38. <https://doi.org/10.17161/star.v38i.25814>