

IN SEARCH OF AN IDENTITY: ETHNIC SELF-IDENTIFICATION
AMONG CHILDREN OF IMMIGRANTS

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ABSTRACT

In an increasingly ethnically diverse society such as the United States, it is important to understand the role that individuals' ethnic identities play in their lives. One of the main reasons for this is that previous research has found that ethnic identity has an important influence on key outcomes such as depression and self-esteem, academic expectations, and the ability to handle experiences of racism and discrimination (Arellano and Padilla 1996; Portes and MacLeod 1996; Umaña-Taylor 2004). However, not enough is known about the actual determinants of ethnic self-identification. In this paper, I use data from the 1992 and 1995 waves of the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study to examine different explanations for the ethnic identity choices available to immigrant children and children of immigrants. In particular, I focus on family context, cultural maintenance, and family relationships, as these factors have not been systematically studied in adaptation and ethnic identification research.

INTRODUCTION

Immigration to the United States continues at high levels, particularly from Asian and Latin American countries. As a result, the foreign-born population of the United States has increased to about 27 million in 1999 (Rumbaut 1999) from approximately 21.2 million in 1997 (Portes and Zhou 1993). This increase in contemporary immigration has given rise to a record number of children who, regardless of place of birth, are raised in immigrant families.

According to the 1997 Current Population Survey, there are almost 14.2 million first- and second-generation children living in the United States (Jensen 2001). This is the fastest growing and most diverse segment of the country's total population of children the 18 years of age, and account for approximately 20 percent of children living in America (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Rumbaut 1999).

Despite their record numbers, scholarly attention has, until recently, focused on adult immigrants to the neglect of their children. Given the fact that immigrant children and children of immigrants represent a crucial component of future U.S. society, understanding the impact of immigration on children and adolescents as well as their overall adaptation is very important. However, in the last couple of decades attention has finally shifted to immigrant children's adaptation in the United States (Harker 2001; Portes and Hao 2002; Portes and Rumbaut 2001, 1996; Rumbaut 1994; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001; Tseng and Fuligni 2000; Zhou 2001, 1997). This research has examined adaptation largely in terms of education and linguistic outcomes as well as the relationship between adaptation and the psychological well being of youth. Furthermore, some of this existing research has shown that a number of the more recent immigrants and their children do better by maintaining a strong social identity and culture and by resisting American influences. In fact, many authors now suggest that continuing to choose an

immigrant or ethnic identity can help ease economic and social incorporation into the United States (Portes and MacLeod 1996; Waters 1999; Zhou and Bankston 1998, 1994).

This line of research does not follow what has been considered to be a more traditional perspective on assimilation developed in the earlier part of the twentieth century. These theories, derived from the experiences of white European immigrants and their children, suggested that the longer the time spent in the United States and the more exposure to American culture, the more likely adolescents would be to adopt an “American identity” and, at the same time, reduce ties to the immigrant culture of their parents (Gordon 1964). This “straight-line” model assumed that ethnic groups would become more similar to mainstream America and more economically successful with each succeeding generation. However, the situation for recent immigrants and their children in the United States differs in many of the background assumptions of this theory and their experiences may not be the same.

This paper focuses on the formation of ethnic identities during adolescence; an issue that is particularly salient for adolescents whose parents are immigrants. Although adolescence is often a very difficult period, this is particularly so for children of immigrants. These adolescents face complex issues of adaptation, as they come to terms with the ethnic and racial identities of their parents as well as societal perceptions of their ethnicity and race (Waters 1996). As part of this experience, adolescents in immigrant families develop an identity as a member of a particular ethnic group within the larger society (Phinney 1989, 1990). According to Waters (1996, 1999), this often means developing an awareness as they learn to function in both the culture of their own group and the culture of the mainstream society.

Some of the existing literature on ethnic self-identification has examined the processes by which ethnicity is constructed (Nagel 1994; Waters 1990), however, it emphasis has often been

the “malleability of ethnicity and the fluidity of group boundaries” (Portes and MacLeod 1996, p. 523-524). Furthermore, this research neglects to fully examine all possible determinants of ethnic self-identities among children of immigrants. Since there seem to be advantages to retaining an immigrant identity as well as positive consequences for the future incorporation of children of immigrants into American society, we need to examine how these children choose the adoption of these symbolic labels.

As a result, I attempt to contribute to our empirical knowledge in the area of children’s immigrant adaptation by focusing on ethnic identity formation during adolescence. Specifically, this study examines the following questions: 1) What are the ethnic self-identity choices for adolescents growing up in immigrant families? 2) What are the most important determinants of these ethnic identities, in particular what is the role of family relationships and cultural maintenance? and 3) Do these patterns of ethnic self-identification change over time? In order to address these questions, I use data from the 1992 and 1995 waves of the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS), a survey of over 5,000 teenage children of immigrants in the San Diego and Miami metropolitan areas. I plan to focus on the experiences of those adolescents from Spanish-speaking and Asian immigrant groups as they are some of the largest in the country. Furthermore, their experiences enable us to examine a wide range of options including pan-ethnic identities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethnic Identity Development

In a society such as the United States, which is increasingly ethnically diverse, it is extremely important to understand the role that individuals’ ethnic identities play in their lives

(Umaña-Taylor 2004). One of the main reasons for this is that previous research has found that ethnic identity has an important influence on a number of key outcomes including psychological well-being, such as depression and self-esteem (Rumbaut 1994; Umaña-Taylor 2004; Umaña-Taylor, Diversi, and Fine 2002), academic expectations and achievement (Arellano and Padilla 1996; Portes and MacLeod 1996), as well as the ability to handle experiences of racism and discrimination (Chavira and Phinney 1991; Phinney and Chavira 1995; Portes and MacLeod 1996). Furthermore, a number of researchers had expected that as immigrants and their descendants assimilated to a new society, they would eventually lose their immigrant identity and distinctiveness (Glazer and Moynihan 1970; 1975; Gordon 1964; Maldonado 1975). However, this has not necessarily been the case for many contemporary immigrants and their children in the United States.

Before I can study ethnic identity, it is essential that I begin by introducing a clear definition of what is meant by the concept and how this relates to the notion of self-identity. The concept of identity is actually quite recent. It did not become an important area of research until 1950 with the publication of Erik H. Erikson's book *Childhood and Society*. As a result, most current research on identity is based on his work. Erikson's definition of identity refers to a psychological sense of inner self, a way of asking and answering the important question, "Who Am I"? According to Goodenow and Espin (1993), identity involves an individual's preferences and attachments to larger social groups as well as including other aspects that an individual values and feels to be important in his/her life.

In Erikson's (1968) view, the achievement of a healthy self-identity is a fundamental and central goal or task for adolescents. Adolescence is a critical period for the development of an identity; it is a time of passage to adulthood marked by major physical, emotional, and social

changes. Therefore, at no time during the lifespan is the urge to define oneself as great as it is during those years (Arnett 2000; Cote and Allahaar 1994; Erikson 1950, 1968; Marcia 1980; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001; Waterman 1985). During this time, adolescents “select and integrate childhood identifications, together with personal inclinations and the opportunities afforded by society, in order to construct a sense of who they are and what they will become” (Phinney and Rosenthal 1992).

Even though the achievement of a sense of identity is a key developmental issue for all adolescents, this process may be even more difficult for immigrant children and children of immigrants (Grinberg and Grinberg 1990; Rumbaut 1994; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 1995; Vigil 1998). Adolescents who grow up in immigrant families often face an added dimension to the identity formation process; in this case, they face complex issues of adaptation involving their old and new cultures (Berry 1997; Rumbaut 1994; Phinney, Romero, Nava, and Huang 2001). These adolescents live in two worlds that can be very different and often opposed to each other – the American and the ethnic (Kibria 2002). As a result, they are likely to experience intense acculturative stress and intergenerational conflict (Rumbaut 1994; Zhou 2001). For example, immigrant children and children of immigrants grow up and are socialized by parents or other family members who speak a native language and who bring with them a set of values and customs from their home country. Furthermore, these family members often maintain these values and customs while in the United States (McCoy 1992). However, their children take part in the American school system, where they become proficient in English and learn American customs and values. Because of this interaction with their own ethnic group and mainstream society, adolescents have to learn to integrate both of these worlds into their own individual ethnic identity (Phinney et al. 2001; Phinney and Rosenthal 1992; Rumbaut 1994).

Moreover, for those adolescents growing up in a society where the mainstream culture is *significantly* different in terms of values and beliefs from their culture of origin, integrating ethnic identity into a self-identity may present an even bigger challenge (Phinney and Rosenthal 1992). It is important that these adolescents achieve a healthy identity because it is this identity that will enable them to participate and thrive in different settings such as their home environment, the school system, employment, as well as in peer relationships (Súarez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001).

Ethnic identity is often conceptualized as that part of the person's self-knowledge, which is defined by their membership in an ethnic group and their particular emotional connection to that group (Phinney 1992; Tajfel 1981; Ontai-Grzebik and Raffaelli 2004). This refers to the thinking, perceptions, feelings, and behaviors that are part of membership in a specific ethnic group. In this case, one can argue that ethnic identity constitutes a basic and extremely important part of an individual's personality and as such, it is a powerful contributor to ethnic group formation, maintenance, and the development of social ties.

From this previous definition one can see that ethnic identity is a multidimensional construct that refers to a set of ideas about one's own ethnic group membership. According to most researchers, ethnic identity includes some or all of the following components: ethnic self-identification as a member of a particular group, feelings of belonging and commitment to the group, certain attitudes towards the group (both positive and negative), a sense of shared attitudes and values, and specific ethnic traditions and cultural practices (Bernal, Knight, Ocampo, Garza, and Cota 1992; Bernal and Knight 1993; Garcia 1982?, 1992; Giles, Llado, McKirnan and Taylor 1979; Phinney 1990; Rosenthal and Feldman 1992; Rosenthal and Hrynevich 1985; Rotheram and Phinney 1987).

Each of these components highlights a different dimension of the construct; some refer to the ethnic labels people use while others describe individuals' ethnic pride as well as their involvement in ethnic activities and traditions. Although every component is extremely important, this research focuses on ethnic self-identification, which can be described as the ethnic label that one chooses for oneself or the "the sense of oneself as a member of an ethnic group, possessing attributes common to that group" (Aboud 1987). Ethnic self-identification is important because it is a necessary precondition for every other component of the construct (Kinket and Verkuyten 1997; Phinney 1991, 1992), and as such, it needs to be understood and explained. Furthermore, current research has found that other aspects of ethnic identity are likely to disappear more quickly than identification. For example, among Chinese-Australian adolescents, there was a clear erosion of ethnic identity both in terms of behavior and knowledge but not necessarily in terms of identification (Rosenthal and Feldman 1992). Finally, understanding ethnic identity is also important because, as mentioned earlier, it affects the overall adjustment of minority group adolescents (Phinney 1989).

Immigration and Ethnic Identity

Individual ethnic identity formation and collective identity shifts have long been recognized as important features of the immigrant experience in the United States. They are a part of the larger process of immigrant assimilation into the host society, a process where newcomers and their descendants abandon their old identities and gradually merge into well established and more inclusive groups in their new home country (Glazer and Moynihan 1963; Gordon 1964; Greeley 1974; Herberg 1960).

This part of the assimilation process is known as *ethnicization* or *ethnogenesis*, and it can be described as a progression where a large number of immigrants from the same regional or national origin develop a sense of self-consciousness or awareness as a collectivity, and, as a result, they are able to create an ethnic group out of their shared American experience (Greeley 1974; Greeley and McCready 1975; Sarna 1978; Stein and Hill 1973; Bakalian 1993). For example, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many of the European immigrants that came to the United States were from places that were not yet countries. These immigrants only understood themselves in local and regional terms such as their village or province, but soon they began to see themselves in broader national terms such as Italians or Chinese (Kibria 2002). Over time, nationalities were created in America for newcomers whose original identities and loyalties extended not much further than their local villages. However, these self-definitions were not clear at the beginning. Instead, they developed during the process of settlement in the United States (Portes and MacLeod 1996). According to Greeley (1971), “the Norwegians and Sweden came to think of themselves as Norwegians and Swedes when they banded together to form communities of their fellows” (p.27).

A similar pattern of identity formation continues to be true for many of the contemporary immigrants who, as a response to the immigrant experience to the United States and the demands and pressures of their new environment, must decide how they will define themselves. According to Portes and MacLeod (1996), “this shift from local identities to broader national loyalties has its counterpart today in a still broader cultural project in which well-established national identities become subsumed under continent-wide labels.”

As immigrants adapt, they are faced with different ethnic identity choices and each one of these identities will influence their adaptation to the new society (Súarez-Orozco and Suárez-

Orozco 2001). For example, they may embrace total assimilation and complete identification with mainstream American culture, whereas other adolescents may choose to identify by their parents' national origin. In other cases, a new ethnic identity is forged; one that incorporates selected aspects of both the culture of origin and American culture. At the same time, immigrants may even face the option of panethnic identities. Although these categories seem to have little resonance with new immigrants as they enter the country, over time they become increasingly relevant, particularly for young adolescents as they begin to struggle developmentally with identity formation (Súarez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001).

Assimilation versus Segmented Assimilation Theory

Classical assimilation theory has been the dominant perspective when studying immigration issues, including ethnic identity. The main assumption of this theory is that the process through which different ethnic groups begin to share a common culture and gain access to opportunities is a natural one. According to this straight-line perspective, immigrants will eventually abandon old cultures and behaviors in favor of those of the host country. This process ultimately can lead to complete assimilation, where ethnic and racial minorities blend into the mainstream culture, shedding their immigrant distinctiveness and thus identifying with and blending into mainstream American society (Gordon 1964; Park 1928; Warner and Srole 1945).

Assimilation theory may be helpful for understanding the processes of ethnic self-identification. Gordon (1964) viewed “identificational assimilation” as one of the important subprocesses of assimilation. In this stage of assimilation, immigrants as well as their descendants cease to identify with their countries of origin and instead develop a sense of identity that is based exclusively on the host society. According to Gordon, this self-image as an

unhyphenated American is the end point of a long process that often begins with acculturation, followed by structural assimilation and intermarriage, and should be accompanied by an absence of prejudice and discrimination in the host society (1964). This process of identificational assimilation is considered to take place across generations and over time as individuals have a greater length and exposure to U.S. culture.

Despite findings of increased mobility among the previous white European immigrants, this classical theory of assimilation has been greatly criticized because of a failure to address the complexities of the assimilation process and the multiple pathways to assimilation (Portes 1985; Portes and Böröcz 1989). These criticisms are based on the perceived inability of the assimilation perspective to explain the adaptation of some of the most recently arrived non-European immigrants, especially those from Asian and Latin American countries. For example, these newer immigrants have experienced persistent ethnic differences across generations, a decline in the well-being of the second generation as compared to the first generation (a process often referred to as the second generation decline), as well as inconsistent outcomes across ethnic groups and individual members (Gans 1992; Zhou 1997).

More recent revisions of the assimilation model suggest that the adaptation and incorporation of today's immigrants is likely to be segmented and to take different paths. This will depend on the skills and experiences immigrants bring with them (such as education and English-language ability), as well as the contexts of reception and modes of incorporation that they face upon arrival (Alba and Nee 1997; Portes and Rumbaut 1996, 2001). This approach is often referred to as segmented assimilation (Portes and Zhou 1993). Segmented assimilation theory argues that the relatively uniform mainstream America to which previous immigrants adapted and integrated has all but disappeared. The assimilation process has become segmented

in such a way that the adaptation experienced by today's immigrants and their children may differ depending on the social and economic characteristics of the particular segment of the American population to which they assimilate (Portes and Zhou 1993). Thus, longer residence in the United States may be associated with mixed outcomes, rather than the automatic social and economic advancement predicted by the classic straight-line assimilation theory.

According to the segmented assimilation perspective, immigrants may follow three distinct forms of incorporation paths while attempting to adapt to a new society. One of these paths replicates the classical assimilation theory in which longer residence in the United States is associated with greater integration into the white middle-class. A second path refers to downward mobility and assimilation into poverty and the underclass, the direct opposite of the classical theory. Finally, a third path combines economic advancement within a strong ethnic community while preserving the values and unity of that immigrant community (Portes and Zhou 1993).

The application of segmented assimilation theory to ethnic self-identification suggests that ethnic identity formation is not a linear or one-directional process into the ethnicity of the dominant group. Instead, as described above, multiple ethnic identities may develop across different contexts and among various groups. According to Rumbaut (1994), these divergent models of incorporation will be accompanied by changes in the character and importance of ethnicity; thus, by divergent modes of ethnic identification. In this case, the segmented assimilation perspective recognizes that the segment of society in which today's immigrants are received varies from affluent middle-class neighborhoods to poor inner-city ghettos. This diversity in the receiving communities as well as other factors such as family structure, human and financial capital, cultural patterns, racial stratification and economic opportunities, will

determine how different segments of the immigrant population will adapt to life in the host country, including the ethnic identities that children will choose.

Predictors of Ethnic Self-Identification

We know that immigrant children and children of immigrants are, in reality, quite plural in their self-identities; they often choose from a wide range of labels including identifying themselves as American or hyphenated Americans to identifying by the parents' national origins (Portes and MacLeod 1996; Rumbaut 1994; Waters 1996, 1999). In this paper, I examine three different explanations for the different ethnic identity choices available to immigrant children and children of immigrants. First, I discuss how the assimilation model operates with regard to the ethnic self-identification of children. Proponents of this theory argue that over time, immigrants and their children would integrate into their new society; thus, experiencing a greater probability of identificational assimilation (i.e. identifying as American). Second, I discuss the role of segmented assimilation, which, as described earlier, argues that multiple identities may emerge among immigrant children and these are due to distinct modes of immigrant adaptation as well as the social contexts of reception. Finally, I discuss how aspects of the family context, family cultural maintenance, and family relationships should be incorporated to provide a fuller understanding of ethnic self-identification. The way children of immigrants think and often feel about themselves is critically affected by the parental modes of ethnic socialization and by the strength of the attachment that the child feels toward his or her parents and the parents' national origins. We know that ethnic identity is, among other things, a measure of the degree of the children's sense of identification with their parents (Rumbaut 1994); thus, what happens within

the family is extremely important. However, the parents' role has not been systematically studied in adaptation and ethnic identification research.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Data

I plan to use the 1992 and 1995 student waves of the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Survey (CILS) as well as the parental questionnaire. This survey conducted in San Diego, California and Dade (Miami) and Broward (Fort Lauderdale) counties in South Florida include a large number of children who were either U.S. born or had lived in the United States for at least five years and had at least one foreign-born parent (N=5,262 for first wave of survey). Respondents came from 77 different nationalities although the sample reflects the largest immigrant groups in each area. The total sample is evenly split by sex, grade in school, and generational status. I believe this dataset is well suited for this project because it reflects a wide range of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, migration histories, contexts of reception, as well as a variety of family structures, schools, and communities. Furthermore, the different surveys allow me to examine these issues from both the parent and child perspectives.

Variables

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable examined in this research is the adolescent's self-identification. In this case, their responses were classified into four mutually exclusive categories: non-hyphenated American, hyphenated American, non-hyphenated foreign nationality, and a panethnic identity (Hispanic or Asian American).

Independent Variables

Several independent variables are included in this study. For example, assimilation variables include fluency in English as well as preference for and use of English in social life. At the same time, U.S. nativity and citizenship of both the adolescents and their parents are also included. Some of the other variables include family size, family structure, and socioeconomic status. Furthermore, I include measures of parental ethnic identities, respondents' peer relationships, and experiences with discrimination in their lives. To examine the effect of family context, I include the following variables: a familism scale, an American preference scale, and a parent-child conflict scale.

Analysis

Maximum-likelihood logistic regressions will be used to predict the odds of selecting each of the four main types of ethnic self-identification. These variables will be regressed on individual characteristics, social context variables, measures of acculturation, as well as family relationships and cultural maintenance variables

It is important to note that I am currently in the design phase but very close to the analysis stage of this project. I hope to have much of the analysis completed within the next couple of months.