

The Effects of Politics on the Ethnic Identity of Immigrants of Color

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Submitted to the Board of Study in Sociology

School of Natural and Social Sciences

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College

State University of New York

May 20

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Abstract: Although numerous studies suggest that ethnic identity affects politics, little data has been collected on the potential impacts of politics on ethnic identity. However, ethnic identity is constructed by social interactions. Therefore, politics characterized by racism and xenophobia will likely strengthen the ethnic identities of immigrants of color by necessitating increased co-ethnic solidarity in order to navigate around the increased marginalization they face. The impacts of politics may be particularly strong in the contemporary United States because the current public discourse around immigration is characterized by moral panic, exaggerated and biased reports of social issues. Overall, moral panic contributes to a climate of xenophobia by informing public discourse and government policies. Hostile public discourse and strict enforcement of severe immigration policies may increase experiences of perceived discrimination. High levels of perceived discrimination may foster the need for co-ethnic solidarity as a way to negotiate the obstacles discrimination causes. Perceived discrimination may also complicate one's ability to identify as American. This study explores the impact of politics on the ethnic identity of immigrants of color through interviews. Participants were asked about their thoughts on the contemporary American Political climate and its impacts on their relationship with their ethnic identity.

Introduction

Much research supports that ethnic identity affects politics, but there is little to no research into how politics shape ethnic identity. However, there are multiple factors which suggest that politics can affect the construction of ethnic identity. For example, social interactions influence the construction of ethnic identity (Nagel, 1994). Therefore, ethnic identity is constructed largely by the social environment it exists within. The effect of politics on the ethnic identity of immigrants of color may be particularly significant in the United States because American politics has frequently been a venue for blatant xenophobia. Inflated reports of

social strain and crime caused by immigrants have been used as a political tool (Massey and Pren, 2012). The prevalence of xenophobia in politics has shaped American law. As a result, immigrants, especially immigrants of color, are heavily penalized by discriminatory laws (Eversman and Bird, 2017; Massey and Pren, 2012 ; Welch, 2003)

The potential effects of politics on ethnic identity are particularly poignant now, as immigration has become a prominent topic of debate in both the media and in private. Public discourse continues to be shaped by a moral panic over fear of migrating criminals and strain on social systems (Chavez, 2013; Eversman and Bird, 2017; Massey and Pren, 2012). In response, the current administration of the United States government has become particularly preoccupied with immigration policies. Furthermore, many politicians, as well as private citizens, demonstrate a desire to remove policies which help immigrants, such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Additionally, many call for restrictions on immigration, such as a wall on the Mexican border, and travel bans. Since ethnic identity is constructed by social interactions, politics characterized by racism and xenophobia will likely strengthen the ethnic identities of immigrants of color by necessitating increased co-ethnic solidarity in order to navigate around the increased marginalization they face.

The purpose of this study is to understand how politics influence ethnic identity. The impacts of politics on ethnic identity may be best understood by examining the construction of ethnic identity, the link between politics, ethnic identity, and discrimination, as well as how discrimination fosters group solidarity. I will examine the connections between ethnic identity, politics, and discrimination by reviewing existing literature on these topics and conducting in-depth interviews.

Construction of Ethnic Identity

According to Nagel's (1994) theory on the construction of ethnic identity, ethnicity is constructed not only by the individual, but also by social interactions. These social interactions may be between two members of the same ethnicity, but interactions with outsiders can also shape ethnic identities (Nagel, 1994). Therefore, ethnic identity does not exist in a vacuum, so it can be affected by the political environment. Many studies establish a link between politics and ethnic identity (Perez, 2015; Sears, et al, 2003). These studies focus on ethnic identity's effect on politics. However, since social interactions can shape ethnic identity, politics may have an impact on the construction of ethnic identity. This could prove particularly true in cases where the political environment can be characterized by xenophobia, since multiple studies establish a link between experiences of discrimination and strengthening of ethnic identity.(Marsiglia, et al 2017; Hipolito, 2016; Perez, 2015; Sears et al., 2003). Furthermore, discrimination may foster increased group solidarity as a way to navigate the obstacles of discrimination, and political mobilization, which may further shape ethnic identities by fostering an environment that focuses on group solidarity and commonalities.

Immigration is an experience which can greatly affect the construction of one's ethnic identity. In a study of the ethnic and racial identity of Dominican immigrants in the United States, Itzigsohn and Dore-Cabral argue that immigrants can choose among different identities which determine what communities they belong to and the resources they have access to, as well as shaping their understanding and control of their social reality(2000). The ability to choose among different identities allows for a different construction of ethnic identity from what may be typical in their country of origin. Still, construction of ethnic identity is shaped by and for the

parameters of American society. In some ways, a construction of ethnic identity adapted to American society may help immigrants of color navigate American society. However, at the same time the identities available to them are restricted by dominant ideas on race and ethnicity (Itzigsohn and Dore-Cabral, 2000). Since they must adjust the construction of their identities to fit into American ideas, the ethnic identity of immigrants of color may be particularly vulnerable to the political environment.

While both first and second generation immigrants may have similar identities, they have distinct experiences. The identities of the second generation may vary from that of their foreign born parents-largely due to acculturation. In *Legacies*, a book which comprehensively examines second generation immigrants in the United States, Portes and Rumbaut (2001) argue that the second generation is a key turning point in the development of national and ethnic identities. The researchers posit that it is the children of immigrants who adapt their identities to American ideas and may chose to adopt or reject panethnic labels. The development of their identities is complex and unique from that of their parents because they exist in two different cultural worlds. Most juggle conflicting attachments and allegiencies, and must define themselves in relation to multiple reference groups and varying classifications they are placed in by both their ethnic community and outsiders. Of course, Portes and Rumbaut's argument implies that first generation immigrants don't feel this pressure at all, which seems unrealistic. First generation immigrants are exposed to and operate in American society just as their second generation children do. Though, first generation immigrants may not feel this pressure nearly as strongly, since they are generally less acculturated. However, their American born children may feel a much stronger sense of conflict since they are typically more acculturated.

Since children of immigrants are typically more acculturated than their parents, it is possible that many have a weaker connection to their ethnic identity. For example, in order to cope with the pressure wrought by being different, the typical response of the children of European immigrants is to reduce conflict by assimilating (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). While the descendants of European immigrants have been able to assimilate into American culture to the degree which their ethnic identity becomes optional, it is unclear whether such a high level of assimilation will ever be accessible to descendants of immigrants of color (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). An alternative response is to fall back on ethnic solidarity and self consciousness (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). Relying on ethnic solidarity may be a more appealing option for children of immigrants due to the marginalization they face. Children of immigrants of color may be more aware of their identity, as people whose ethnic or racial identity marginalizes them are more likely to be self conscious of these aspects (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). It may be harder for children of immigrants of color to assume an "ethnicity optional" identity because the marginalization they face may make it harder to distance themselves from their ethnicity. Therefore, they may struggle to integrate into broader, more mainstream identities such as "American".

Discrimination and Ethnic Identity

Experiencing discrimination has direct effects on ethnic identity. Research has found that levels of perceived discrimination increased the strength of ethnic identity (Marsiglia, et al, 2017; Hipolito, 2016). Additionally, discrimination could make one more aware of their ethnic identity. In a series of surveys about ethnic identity in a class of UCLA students across four years, Black, Latino, and Asian respondents thought about their ethnicity more than Whites

(Sears et al., 2003). The Black, Latino and Asian respondents higher awareness of their ethnicity in comparison to Whites may be a reaction to the ethnic and racial discrimination they experience. Discrimination impacts one's ability to identify with the majority group. For example, perceiving one's own ethnic group as the targets of ethnic discrimination kept college students in one survey from fully identifying as American(Sears et al., 2003). In a qualitative study of the construction of ethnic and racial identity in second generation West Indians in New York, Butterfield writes that all the respondents felt that the label "American" did not truly apply to them because, as one respondent said " for our whole lives, America has told us that America is everything that Black people are not"(2004). The respondent's analyzation of America points to the role of marginalization in the formation of identity. The respondents perceive "American" as a white exclusive label, or, at least one not meant for black people, implying that they feel a sense of alienation from American identity based on their race.

The level of acculturation is also a factor in forming ethnic identity. In a study of: acculturation, perceived discrimination, and ethnic-racial identity among Latino youths, levels of acculturation had an inverse relationship with ethnic identity, except in those who reported higher levels of perceived discrimination (Marsiglia et al, 2017). The study establishes an inverse relationship between acculturation and ethnic identity, but also suggests that perceived discrimination is capable of disrupting this relationship. In other words, acculturation decreases the salience of ethnic identity, but perceiving high levels of discrimination towards one's ethnic group could negate the effect of acculturation on the salience of one's ethnic identity.

While discrimination pushes many immigrants and children of immigrants closer to their ethnic identity, some may choose to distance themselves from their ethnic identity, especially in

more acculturated individuals. Butterfield found that second generation immigrants typically did not distance themselves from African Americans(2004). However, when interacting with people who are not West Indian, some participants distanced themselves from their West Indian identity to avoid the stereotypes associated with it. Therefore, while discrimination may strengthen ethnic identity, it may also cause one to distance themselves from it.

Status can also be used in distancing. Butterfield reports that middle class respondents distanced themselves using socioeconomic status (2004). The use of socioeconomic status as a method of distancing suggests that the ability to distance oneself is matter of privilege. Thus, distancing may be more common in those who are more acculturated, white passing or of higher class status. Therefore, while some may react to discrimination by ethnic distancing, it is not accessible to everyone. Additionally, while ethnic distancing may complicate feelings towards one's ethnic identity, it may not necessarily reflect one's feelings towards their ethnic identity. Furthermore, since ethnic distancing is not easily accessible to everyone, many may still experience a strengthened sense of ethnic identity.

Multiple studies suggest that politics and ethnic identity are connected. For example, Sears et al. (2003) found that ethnic identity and political attitudes were deeply tied. Perez's (2015) study of ethnic identity, xenophobia, and politics in Latina undergraduates expands on this connection by establishing perceived discrimination as an additional factor in the relationship between ethnic identity and politics. In the respondents with higher levels of Latino identity, exposure to xenophobic rhetoric decreases political trust and strengthens ethnocentrism. In other words, those who are already strongly connected to Latino identity become less confident in the political system and more focused on their ethnic group and culture when

exposed to xenophobic rhetoric. Latinos exposed to xenophobic rhetoric with high levels of ethnic identity also showed higher levels of pro-group politics. Perez's findings further support the idea that discrimination can strengthen ethnic identity because the study demonstrates a reaction against xenophobic rhetoric wherein those affected by xenophobic rhetoric emphasize the connection with their ethnic identity and coethnics.

Acculturation also plays a role in politics. More acculturated Latinos in Perez's study were generally less trusting of government as their acculturation level increased (2015). Perhaps more acculturated Latinos have spent more time in the United States, thereby increasing their odds of experiencing discrimination and making them more familiar with the realities of structural inequality in the United States. Overall, Perez's findings support a connection between exposure to xenophobia and decreased political trust. Perez's findings further establish the link between xenophobia and the relationship between politics and ethnic identity. Perez (2015) found there was no link between Latino identity, political trust, ethnocentrism, or pro-group politics in the results of the respondents who were not exposed to Xenophobic rhetoric. However, Perez's findings may be exaggerated due to the tendency for panethnic identities, such as Latino, to be used politically. Despite this, Perez's findings are still applicable to the current study, since xenophobic rhetoric may foster the politicization of ethnic identities.

Because immigrants of color are often marginalized, many may lean towards pan-ethnic identities. Itzigsohn and Dore-Cabral define panethnicity as "...the expansion of ethnic group boundaries to include different national or ethnic groups that share a common language, a common culture of a common regional origin into an encompassing identity" (2000). In other words, panethnicity is the creation of a shared ethnic identity that goes beyond traditional labels

using already existing commonalities to include multiple ethnicities. The decision to use pan-ethnic labels may be a political reaction to discrimination.

Nagel (1994) asserts that Panethnic identities are preferable in situations where numbers and solidarity are most advantageous, such as politics. The solidarity that pan-ethnic labels bring explains their frequent use in politics. Their often political nature is furthered because Pan-ethnic identities are often used as official ethnic categories recognized by states, such as the ones that appear on official documents (Nagel, 1994). Since they are officially recognized terms, panethnic labels are often used in implementing policies. The policies they influence, such as immigration policies, and ethnically-linked resources policies, shape ethnic identities, boundaries, and cultures (Nagel, 1994). These policies shape the lived experiences of the people they apply to. For example, political policies designed to house, employ, regulate, or otherwise assist immigrant populations influences the composition, location and class of immigrants and, thus, their descendents (Nagel, 1994). These policies can be used to help vulnerable populations, such as immigrants of color and their descendants, but discriminatory policies targeted at specific populations can be implemented just as easily. The nature of targeted policies is influenced by public discourse, as the politicians and other elected officials who create and enforce policies may find it in their best interest to cater to public opinion. If public discourse justifies the discrimination of immigrants of color and their descendants, discriminatory policies easily become commonplace.

Xenophobia & Moral Panic

The dominant population is often hostile towards immigrants. Some fear that immigrants are taking jobs and public assistance programs from citizens, and both individuals and media stir

up fear with exaggerated reports of immigrant crime (Orozco, 1998). Exaggerated reports and fears around crime and social strain caused by immigrants are a type of moral panic. In an article examining how moral panic manifests in the United States, Eversman and Bird argue that moral panics function by using exaggerated reports to fuel public discourse to construct an "enemy" linked to a particular behavior or phenomenon and a victim (2017). However, moral panic discourse seldom reflects society's dynamics accurately. Rather, moral panic relies on exaggerated portrayals of the behaviors and groups in question (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994). Moral panic reinforces stigmas and structural inequalities by playing off of them. For example, the constructed enemy is usually a social group that is already marginalized, such as racial minorities, and the constructed "victim" is usually a group which holds more political power than the "enemy" (Eversman and Bird, 2017). Moral panic often justifies discriminatory government policies through its manipulation of public discourse.

Immigration laws in the United States have historically been shaped by xenophobic and racist moral panics. Eversman and Bird (2017) write that moral panic can be used to understand how exaggerated reports about social problems and deviance can inform public opinion and policy. Therefore, public discourse characterized by immigration centered moral panic may foster xenophobic policies. The ultimate goal of moral panic driven discourse is to construct the enemy as immoral, dangerous and warranting control (Eversman and Bird, 2017). Constructing the perceived enemy as warranting control has concrete repercussions.

In American politics, research has found immigration based moral panic justifies strict, discriminatory policies, such as retroactive prosecution and the limitation or elimination of judicial review of deportation decisions, and indefinite detention (Eversman and Bird, 2017;

Massey and Pren, 2012 ; Welch, 2003). Furthermore, in their analysis of immigration laws and their effects, Massey and Pren(2012) posit that the manipulation of public attitudes towards stricter immigration policies is more for political gain than for garnering support for sensible immigration policies. However, these policies do little to provide a solution, as the social problems associated with immigration are obscured by the very moral panic which justifies these harsh policies.

Essentially, moral panics are a powerful form of social control. Moral panics are often used as a form of social control to distract from social issues (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994). Not only do they serve as a convenient scapegoating tactic to distract from social issues, but they can also be used to shape political attitudes overall. Massey argues that the issue of immigration has been manipulated to make American public opinion more conservative (Massey and Pren, 2012). Immigration can also be used as a distraction from other social issues. In an analysis of the enforcement of immigration policies, Welch argues that immigration policies and attitudes historically loosen when the economy is better and more jobs are available and become much stricter during periods of austerity (2003). The fluctuation of immigration policies and attitudes reinforces the role of moral panic in immigration policies and attitudes, since Welch's analysis demonstrates a direct relationship between economic austerity and stricter immigration policies and attitudes. Furthermore, Welch posits that in more prosperous times, undocumented immigrants often go unnoticed by the general public (2003). When contrasted with the lack of public interest in undocumented immigrants during prosperous times, the increase in stricter attitudes and policies during times of economic austerity suggests that these attitudes may be provoked to distract from economic hardships. These attitudes are perpetuated by news media.

News media heavily affects perspectives on immigration. Major news sites cover the topic with increasing frequency. The content and tone of these reports play a significant role in public discourse about immigration. News media's portrayal of immigration and immigrants is not always accurate and unbiased. The motivation of news companies who capitalize off of sensationalized reports is clear. Exaggerated reports on the influx of immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants, and immigrant crime capture the audience's attention. Massey and Pren(2012) write "the media discovered that the trope of a broader siege made for dramatic copy and good visuals and happily played handmaiden to aspiring politicians and bureaucrats". The trope of an immigrant "siege" has often been projected onto Latin American immigration to the United States

In American public discourse, Latin Americans have often been characterized as an alleged threat: the "Latino threat narrative", as Chavez calls it, perceives Latinos as unwilling and unable to assimilate to American society(2013). Overall, the Latino threat narrative can be summed up as a series of bigoted, alarmist assumptions about Latinos, both immigrants and their descendents, that find legitimacy through media, politicians, academics and even government agencies. The sheer saturation of the Latino threat narrative, combined with the legitimacy granted to it by institutions, politicians, and academics is enough to make it credible despite how little basis in fact it may have. The legitimization of the Latino threat narrative directly impacts the treatment of Latino immigrants. Rather than be sympathetic to institutional biases, the general public pushes the blame on to immigrants, which makes many reluctant to give immigrants rights and protections, as they perceive allowing immigrants access to these rights and privileges as rewarding criminality (Chavez, 2013). The presence of the Latino threat

narrative in public discourse has harmed Latin American immigrants and their descendants by pushing them further to the margins. The reluctance of the general public to give immigrants access to resources makes it harder for immigrants to access social and health services.

Additionally, the association of immigrants with criminality leads to immigrants bearing the brunt of the enforcement of immigration laws.

Ironically, while immigrants, documented or undocumented, are often racially profiled, and heavily penalized, the employers which provide falsified documentation often go unpursued (Eversman and Bird, 2017). Focusing the enforcement of immigration law almost exclusively on immigrants themselves rather than the institutions which exasperate the violation of immigration laws is remarkably unfair and does very little to stop the influx and employment of undocumented workers, despite lawmakers insistence that it will. The attitudes and the policies they both spawn and justify have serious destructive consequences. For example, making undocumented workers bare the brunt of these policies only serves to further isolate an already marginalized group from society and ultimately makes immigrants even easier to exploit. Furthermore, with increasing enforcement, undocumented immigrants face higher risks and, therefore, may be less likely to receive or even look for assistance in the first place.

Discrimination inevitably provokes a response in those who are marginalized by it. In order to cope with the obstacles caused by discrimination, immigrants of color may rely on those around them. In their study of Latino immigrants, predominantly low income Mexican immigrants, Ayon and Nady (2013), found their participants often relied on their social networks, consisting of family, neighbors, and friends, for help when facing difficulties. Additionally, these social networks consisted predominantly of other Latino immigrants. Since

their participants all had very similar demographics, it is unclear how widely applicable Ayon and Nady's study is. However, the findings suggest that at least one group of immigrants of color rely mainly on each other for help. These findings support the argument that people facing oppression will create group solidarity to help cope with the obstacles they face. Additionally, policies which enforce discrimination often lead to the mobilization of ethnic groups towards activism (Nagel, 1994). The mobilizations utilize a collective identity, culture and shared purpose to create solidarity. For example, the panethnic identity of Latino stresses cultural commonalities across Latin American cultures in order to foster a common identity and group solidarity (Nagel, 1994). The creation of a collective identity and the use of culture to create solidarity can also have an impact on ethnic identity; they may strengthen ethnic ties and shape the way culture and ethnic identity is constructed in the first place.

Itzigsohn, J., & Dore-Cabral suggest that panethnic identification may be a signal of acculturation, as even as ethnic ties fade, racialized identities stick around (2000). Therefore, panethnic identities may be more common in second generation immigrants. In general, the researchers predict a shift towards panethnic labels as acculturation increases (Itzigsohn, J., & Dore-Cabral 2000). However, panethnic labels are seldom without conflict.

Though panethnic labels help navigate the American system of racial classification, access to political power or privilege may lead members to shed ties to other ethnic groups in less privileged positions. Additionally, many respondents to Itzigsohn and Dore-Cabral's survey reported thinking that other Latino ethnicities discriminated against Dominicans (2000). In particular, some respondents reported that Puerto Ricans saw Dominicans as competitors for resources (Itzigsohn, J., & Dore-Cabral 2000). While racialization may push Dominicans to

adopt the panethnic identity of Latino or Hispanic, competition for resources among the ethnic identities within Latino/Hispanic and the desire for upward mobility complicate the existence of panethnic labels.

Methods

Since identity is a complex and subjective topic, research on ethnic identity, such as this study, is better suited to qualitative methods. Because ethnic identity is constructed by the individual it is greatly affected by lived experiences. Furthermore, the meaning of ethnic identity, and how current events affect one's ethnic identity may be interpreted differently from person to person. Therefore, the effects of the politics on the ethnic identity of immigrants of color are best examined in detail. Interviews allow participants to discuss ethnic identity with nuance that might be missed in survey. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to examine how the current American political climate has impacted the ethnic identity of immigrants of color. Participants answered questions about their personal experiences with ethnic identity, as well as thoughts on policies and public attitudes that negatively impact immigrants. The interviews were around an hour long. The study consisted of five participants: two men and three women. Participants were not compensated. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling.

All of the participants were second generation Latino identifying college students between the ages of 18 to 25. The college aged demographic is important to study because the lived experiences of college students are different than that of the middle aged working class, and underage populations typically studied in immigration literature. Furthermore, the college aged participants experienced the advent of social media during their formative years, so social media may influence the construction of their ethnic identity or help create co-ethnic solidarity,

which likely sets them apart from older co-ethnics. Furthermore, while they experienced this technology for the first time at a young age, they did not experience it as small children, which also sets them apart from younger co-ethnics who may not remember a time when such technology was not available. The participants' parents came from one or more of the following countries: Peru, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Mexico, and Ecuador. Two of the participants had Puerto Rican ancestry, but no other participants shared an ethnic background. The majority of the participants' parents both came from the same country, with the exception of one participant who had one parent from Cuba and one from Puerto Rico. The use of snowball sampling may limit the applicability of the current study, as many of the participants may be from the same or overlapping social circles. Therefore, many of the participants may have similar perspectives by default. Furthermore, the study's findings may not be representative of the population because of its small sample size.

Ethnic and National Identity

Overall, the participants identified with the panethnic labels of Latino or Hispanic, as well as more specific national origin based labels. All of the participants identified as both American and as their parent's country of origin. Interestingly, the majority of the participants compartmentalized the two identities rather than using hyphenated identities. The separation of the participants' two identities supports Portes and Rumbaut argument that second generation immigrants form complex and unique identities because they inhabit two different cultural worlds (2001). Furthermore, many participants did not mention their American identity until specifically being asked whether they identified as American. This suggests that the participants may feel a deeper connection to their ethnic identity over their national identity as an American.

Additionally, the construction of American identity was distinct from the formation of the respondents particular ethnic identity.

Whereas the particular ethnic identities of the participants were typically heavily linked with culture and ancestry, American identity was linked almost exclusively with nativity and place of residence. This division is most plainly demonstrated by Aaron's discussion of his identity as an American and an Ecuadorian and his comparison of his identity with that of his Ecuadorian born relatives, in particular his Grandmother:

I can say I'm Ecuadorian cause the blood runs through me. It's in my veins. It's not like I'm from there, I've lived there, I've lived the life. My grandma, on the other hand, she was born in Ecuador, she was raised in Ecuador, she did everything in Ecuador. She's from Ecuador... She's lived in America for 40 plus years. She still wants to go home AKA Ecuador. My identity is I'm Ecuadorian, but I was born here; I consider this home. She's Ecuadorian but she does not consider this home. I feel like their identity is more tied to the land, and my identity is tied to my blood, or my ancestry. They have ties to the land. I don't really.

Here, Aaron used blood as a metaphor for ancestry. By speaking about the Ecuadorian "blood that runs through me" as the reason for his Ecuadorian identity, he indicated ancestry as a cornerstone of his Ecuadorian identity. However, by contrasting the relationships he and his Grandmother have with America he established the role of birth place in the construction of identity.

Other respondents also linked American identity with place of birth. For example, when asked if she identified as American, Rosa, an American born Puerto Rican woman responded:

I do identify as American because it's where I live. I've never lived anywhere else but here. This is where I'm comfortable and this is where I consider home. This is where I'm from

Rosa's American identity was tied to the fact that the United States is her place of birth and residence. On the other hand, her exposure to Puerto Rican culture was important in strengthening her relationship with her Puerto Rican identity:

When I'm in my house, things are different due to the fact that my mom is constantly speaking a mixture of Spanish and English. She knows both languages well, but she's trying to push our traditions into it, which at times I'm very fortunate to have. If it wasn't for that I wouldn't know my ethnicity or anything about my culture. At the same time, she's trying to Americanize it, which makes it more difficult to distinguish things.

Her mother's efforts to expose her to Puerto Rican culture were vital in forming her ethnic identity, as were the distinct differences between Puerto Rican culture and American culture.

The respondents considered themselves American because they resided and were born in the United States. However, it was clear that many did not feel that they matched typical perceptions of how an American looks and behaves. Similarly to the second generation West Indians in Butterfield's (2004) study, many of the respondents felt that they did not fit into American identity based on their race and ethnicity.

Aaron discussed how his appearance affected his relationship with his identity. Despite being born in America, people assumed that he was not American because he did not look a certain way:

I feel like its a lot harder for me to call myself an American. I feel like its a lot easier for me to called myself an Ecuadorian because let's be honest, you look at me, and for like the general person, you're gonna assume that I'm from another country cause I don't look quote on quote "American", like the image of an American is. I felt more comfortable calling myself an Ecuadorian than an American cause of what I look like.

Aaron was alienated from American identity because he did not fit into common perceptions of how an American looks because people typically view Americans as White. Despite the ethnoracial diversity of the country, he and many others like him are often not perceived as truly American because they do not fit the image of a "typical American". Furthermore, the assumption that he is not American because he did not look like he was 'from here' implies that immigrants of color cannot become truly American- a reflection of American society's exclusion of immigrants of color. Aaron was not the only one to mention being othered based on appearance.

Experiencing alienation from American identity was more common among darker skinned individuals. The relationship between dark skin and feelings of alienation from American identity reflects how others' perceptions of an individual can influence the individual's construction of ethnic identity. Because it is more obvious that those with darker skin are not White, it is easier for others to mark them as different, and, therefore, an outsider. Thus, they may experience the projection of ethnic and racial stereotypes onto their person more directly. Conversely, lighter skinned individuals reported feeling alienated or distancing themselves from their ethnic identity.

Distancing

Two of the participants spoke about distancing themselves from their ethnicity. Both of their interviews reflected a connection between ethnic distancing, other people's perceptions of their ethnicity, and lighter skin tone. Both respondents reported receiving questions about the veracity of their ethnic identities based on their skin color. Elena, a Mexican American, described her experience:

There were times where I'd just be like I'm not Mexican or I don't know where I'm from, just to like protect myself. There were even times where people in class at the time in middle school? High school ? Middle school. Where they would bring up topics like immigration and I'd be like oh no I don't know. I just had to kinda like fake it like I didn't know about anything that was happening. I couldn't really admit to who I was at the time. You're a teen you're figuring out who you are. It's like, I know who I am, but at the time I couldn't really say anything just trying to protect my family to the point where its like certain traditions I'd celebrate with my family I couldn't really talk about, and it really did affect me.

Elena also mentioned that she used to avoid certain styles of clothing to avoid "looking ethnic" in response to the stigma her Mexican identity received. Like the participants in Butterfield's (2004) study, Elena wanted to avoid the stigma associated with her ethnic identity by distancing herself from it. Elena was able to distance herself because she suffered from anemia, which made her skin appear lighter. However, once she recovered and her skin returned to its natural color, she realized that it would not be so easy to distance herself:

"Once I started like-now that I'm not anemic, now that I know what my skin tone is and everything I began realizing like oh wow I'm brown. People like are gonna see me different, and I started to be more conscious of like there were times where I wouldn't be aware of that, but then, oh yeah, I don't really blend in with everyone else. What do I say? I can't say that I don't know where I'm from, I'm old enough to know, I'm supposed to know where I am from."

Her situation is distinct because her lighter skin was caused by an illness. When she recovered from anemia, her skin returned to its natural color. Seeing her skin at its darker natural color, she realized that she was not able to truly escape stigma. Therefore, she felt that she was obligated to embrace her Mexican heritage. Her realization supports that ethnic distancing is not as accessible for those with darker skin. She was not the only participant to note the connection between light skin and distancing

While fairer skin may help one avoid being stigmatized, it is not strictly beneficial; it can complicate one's relationship with ethnicity and race. Another participant, Valerie, described how being fair skinned has affected her ethnic identity. People often doubted her Puerto Rican heritage because they did not think she "looked the part". Similarly to the participants who described feeling alienated from American identity, others' assumptions based on her appearance ostracized her from a part of her ethnic identity:

"It got to the point where as I got older I just stopped identifying. Even though I don't usually say that I'm Puerto Rican I still follow aspects of that culture. I still respect all aspects of my culture, Cuban, Spaniard, and Puerto Rican, but I don't necessarily say that I am because I want to stop having to defend myself and what I am. If I say Cuban or Spaniard, it's like "okay that makes sense". I don't get any kind of conflict, and that's what I tend to do now. I know I shouldn't, and I should be proud, but at the same time, do I really have to constantly defend myself. "

Valerie's adaption of her ethnic identity based on others' reactions reflects Nagel's theory that social interactions influence the construction of ethnic identity (1994). In this case, the conflict between common perceptions of Puerto Ricans and her actual personage made it easier for her to omit her Puerto Rican identity rather than disclose it. Despite being culturally connected to her Puerto Rican heritage, she focused on identities which others found more fitting.

Xenophobia, the Media & Politics

Overall, the participants perceived America as hostile towards immigrants. The participants all viewed popular perceptions of immigrants negatively. Furthermore, the participants all discussed xenophobic stereotypes they had encountered. They encountered some of these stereotypes in interpersonal interaction in their everyday life. However, the scope of xenophobic stereotyping goes beyond the participants' personal lives. They connected the

stereotyping they faced personally with the xenophobic stereotypes they witnessed in the media and politics.

The participants generally felt that immigrants were stereotyped by the American public. The stereotypes they described reflected many of the same themes examined in the existing body of literature on xenophobia. The participants often discussed immigrants being stereotyped as dangerous and burdensome to the American people. Elena described common American perceptions of immigrants concisely:

I think most Americans view immigrants as dangerous, taking up space, or unnecessary, like they shouldn't be here. I feel like they just view immigrants as just Mexicans but there's other immigrants too, from like other places.

Elena discussed how immigrants are framed as not only an unnecessary burden, but also a danger to society, which mirrors Orozcos (1998) examination of xenophobic stereotypes. The stereotypes the participants discussed also reflected Chavez's (2013) *Latino Threat Narrative*. Tom, a child of Peruvian immigrants, discussed an experience he had in North Dakota while protesting:

When I was there, I had to go back and forth to get supplies. When I was going to Walmart just to get supplies a lot of people weren't used to my skin color. Also, I was speaking to my friend who was also Spanish speaking. People around me were saying like "hey, he's probably an illegal immigrant". I'm just trying to get things for low prices like you are. Also, like being a part of a protest and being pinpointed like these Native Americans, not just Native Americans, also Hispanics, and skin color that's tan, they're gonna be the ones causing trouble, they're not important.

Tom recounts people assuming that he is 'illegal' and notes that Latinos are viewed as troublemakers, a sentiment that echoes the assumptions of criminality projected onto Latino immigrants and their descendants described in Chavez's (2013) *Latino Threat Narrative*.

Xenophobic and racist stereotypes, including the Latino threat narrative, are perpetuated through the news media and politics.

Chavez (2013) asserts that the media is instrumental in the persistence of the Latino threat narrative. Furthermore, research has shown that both media and politics have played an instrumental role in creating and sustaining immigration based moral panic (Massey and Pren, 2012). The role of xenophobic and racist rhetoric in the media and politics is a recurrent theme in the interviews conducted for the current study. Additionally, many participants felt that the pervasiveness of xenophobic and racist rhetoric in politics and the media directly impacted peoples thoughts and, potentially, actions.

Overall, the participants noticed a lack of positive representation of Latinos in the media. While the media might highlight a few prominent Latino celebrities, Latinos as a whole are often portrayed as criminals. Valerie discussed how the media portrays Latinos:

They only think since these people are deemed acceptable to white society and white based media, that they're the only ones to talk about. I think it skews us because if they're not talking about that set group of celebrities they're only talking about us from a criminal point of view.

The participants perceived media portrayal of Latinos as a polarizing dichotomy. On one hand, a small handful of Latinos are considered acceptable by White people, and praised for being exceptional. On the other hand, other Latinos are largely ignored or framed as criminals. Though celebrities may be able to do some good with their platform and provide positive representation, occasional positive representation does not neutralize the negative effects of moral panic based xenophobic media portrayal.

News media is instrumental to the purveyance of moral panics. News media often plays into fears about a siege or flood of immigrants (Massey and Pren, 2012; Chavez 2013). Tom's discussion of media portrayal of Latinos reflected the prevalence of immigration based moral panic in the media:

In a way, I would say because the mainstream media always has a way of spinning off immigrants. Because it comes to right wing and left wing media if it gets a lot of coverage. We live in a political landscape now where the president, Donald Trump, is really pinpointing that immigrants are flooding into the country. It's really making us look bad but in reality we're just trying to make a lifestyle of our our own and get our citizenship and we really need a safe path to citizenship.

Tom's observation that news media portrays immigrants as "flooding" into the country is also a common theme in research about immigration based moral panic (Massey and Pren, 2012; Chavez, 2013).

Moral panics can be used to manipulate politics (Massey and Pren, 2012). The interviews also outlined the role of politics in the exacerbation of xenophobic attitudes through policies and rhetoric. Rosa described the influence of politicians on xenophobia:

...people who are from higher up positions, like senators, they have more of a pull on what can happen. They can easily be like "oh these immigrants are causing issues" or "it's not us it's them". Stuff like that. They like to push things that aren't true. If you're in an area where people are constantly doing that to immigrants of course it's going to be more difficult for us. It hasn't been as recent except for in the Presidential election with Trump. That's when people started viewing immigrants worse, but they're not trying to hurt us, only in words but in actions not as much

The participants marked the 2016 presidential election as a key moment. They identified Trump's campaign and presidency as enabling xenophobic attitudes. Valerie noted Trump's capitalization on stereotypes regarding Latinos:

I feel like with Trump he has a tendency to put us all in one giant box, when that's not really the case. Especially, I don't like how he refers to Mexicans. It's just flat out disgusting. I remember how he'd call them rapists. My cousins are half-Mexican. They're not like that. I feel like he's just quick to use stereotypes. I just find it to be very frustrating. He doesn't really take into consideration the fact that all of our cultures are different.

The attitudes demonstrated by politicians, especially one with as large of a platform as the president, do not exist in a vacuum. The attitudes of politicians affect both policies, and public attitudes. The participants associated Trump with an increase in xenophobic and racist attitudes across the board. Not only that, but they also felt that racist xenophobes were emboldened by the 2016 election and the president himself. Aaron described the relationship between the election and bigoted attitudes:

Yeah I definitely think that it [the 2016 Presidential Election] did. I feel like it gave people more of like, I guess you could say, courage, to be vocal about their thoughts on immigrants, and from there that confidence shifted everyone's point of view. They were more outright in a way, like, racist. That's how I kinda realized things were turning out to be.

Aaron noticed an increase in people expressing bigoted beliefs towards immigrant. Elena shared a similar perspective:

I definitely feel like having um, I guess our president speak on it and be like "oh yeah everyone we're not for it". And I think ever since our president began talking about it things just got worse, like the deportations and everything. I know it happened with Obama, but it did have programs of like okay here's some resources that can help. He did have policies if you don't use the resources we have to follow protocol and everything. But, now it's just like "no, we don't want any of them. Ship them back". A lot of it has to do with politics, like his supporters

The participants felt that Trump's presidency marked a shift in both the political atmosphere and public attitude, at least in the realm of immigration. Chavez (2013) argues that bigoted and alarmist assumptions can be legitimized through media and politicians. Therefore, one

explanation for the increase in perceived discrimination is those who were already bigoted were emboldened by the 2016 election.

Social Support and Solidarity

Unlike the findings of Itzigsohn, J., & Dore-Cabral (2000), the participants did not view other Latinos as competition for resources. Instead, the participants saw other Latinos as resources and fellow community members. Social support played an integral part in the way that participants coped with discrimination. Similarly to the participants in Ayon and Nady (2013), the participants in the current study relied on support from family, friends, and the communities they belonged to and reciprocated the support. Furthermore, family and co-ethnic communities were particularly significant in the development and connection to ethnic identity.

Rosa felt that it was easier to be an immigrant in New York because of its diversity.

Additionally, she identified the significance of being in proximity to other Puerto Ricans:

If I lived in Montana, where there's barely any Puerto Ricans, that's where I'm gonna feel like the outsider. Because there's not many of my kind, so I don't know who to go to, who to gravitate to. If I go to the people who are considered stereotypical Americans they might not see me as that, but I can't find my own people. Considering I live in New York, where there are a lot of people who are the same race as me, who have the same issues and problems I have, it makes things easier for everyone else because it doesn't seem as overwhelming.

For Rosa, being near other Puerto Ricans was important because they experience the same issues she has. The commonalities between the issues she and other Puerto Ricans faced provided a sense of solidarity that helped her cope. In particular, she described the role of community in dealing with negative representation:

We all know the media won't portray us in the correct way. There gonna constantly show us as either part of a crime, either the person doing the crime or the person the crime is done [to], but nothing positive. We know the only way we're gonna get positive reinforcement is by talking to each other. I guess that's why we're all so close. We have

constant communities that have just our people. We gravitate towards those people not because its tradition, but because we all have the same kind of viewpoint, and we have the same experiences, so we're all gonna go to where we feel its best because if we're gonna be with our culture, we're gonna be with our culture. We're not gonna look for our culture in different ways.

Being in co-ethnic communities provides not only solidarity, but also fosters positive experiences of one's culture and people. While physical proximity to co-ethnics is extremely helpful in fostering positive feelings about one's ethnic identity, the rise of the internet means that physical proximity is not a necessity.

Social media can also provide support. Elena described how social media helped her embrace her Mexican identity:

A lot of it came from social media, just having a bunch of activists and artists that I've started listening too, they're Mexican. They talk a lot about their culture in their music like "it's beautiful being this way. Open up". And even like, there's this new movie called Roma, and like, seeing someone that looks like, almost like me and like my family, the actors. It makes me feel good. Maybe it's not that bad. If a person with a high profile can do it, like me, then maybe I can. You know, there's a lot of representation online now to support you. Having that support, and like a community, I guess it makes it feel easier to stand out.

The social media content published by Mexican artists and activists provided Elena with a sense of empowerment and ethnic pride, ultimately bringing her closer to her ethnic identity. Using social media for social support is a relatively new phenomenon. Furthermore, the use of social media may be unique to young adults and teens, which could explain why the participants in Ayon and Nady (2013) did not discuss the use of social media.

While a general sense of solidarity and support from co-ethnics is helpful, people tend to rely on their family and friends in particular. Two of the participants described how family

members helped them develop a sense of ethnic pride despite stigma. Elena spoke about how her parents helped her embrace her Mexican heritage:

My parents would sit me down and it's just like, they would always say to me like why do you only hang out with a little bunch, why don't you have other friends, that look like you that celebrate the same things as you. They were kind of wanting me to have more, be more of like a family atmosphere, have more friends, They wanted me- I guess they wanted me to show more of who I was, so they kinda just guided me in the right direction. They always introduced me to new people. They would take me to different places where we could celebrate. We celebrate the day of the dead. So [we] would go to a community center where they celebrated the day of the dead, we all did. There was a bunch of activities you could do, we were given talks, listening to speakers. Do more of that, I guess it made everything better.

Elena's parents encouraged her to develop co-ethnic friendships and actively participate in cultural activities, which ultimately helped her feel proud of her identity despite her previous desire to distance herself from it. Similarly, Aaron discussed how his father influenced him:

As I got older, gradually spending more time with my biological dad and his pride in his culture rubbed off on me. I was like "shit, why can't I be like that, just be so proud, not so ashamed of who I am". He definitely influenced me a lot.

For both these participants, family helped combat feelings of shame towards their ethnic identity.

Interpersonal connections can also help cope with discrimination. Elena heavily relied on her family and friends to cope with xenophobic and racist attitudes:

Well, a lot of it is I go back and talk to my parents about it. Cause it's always being talked about on the news, so there's always something that we always have to talk about. It's always like try not to listen to what people say you know who you are, don't let that affect you. I mean, it hurts when you see, not necessarily Mexicans, but other people being mistreated. It hurts just as much because we're all on the same boat. But definitely, talking about it with my family and my friends makes it less painful.

Furthermore, the respondents felt that the recent increase they saw in xenophobic rhetoric in media and politics necessitated solidarity. In particular, Valerie described the 2016 election as a turning point:

I remember the election as whole, even though it was bad, I remember people coming together more. Either to be racist or to fight it. When he started talking badly about Latinos and Latinas and Latnix, all of them, it made us stronger. It made us more verbal. I think the younger generations are gonna be like "we're gonna fight back. We're not gonna sit back and take it"...Even though the election was a bad thing it's going to yield positive things in terms of activism, and people trying to come together and create some sense of community through bad times. People tend to come together during the worst types of situations.

The increase in solidarity Valerie witnessed supports Nagel's argument that marginalized groups often rely on group solidarity to cope with the obstacles they face (1994). The participants were not just passive witnesses to this solidarity. Since the election, Aaron felt an increasing amount of concern for those of his ethnicity:

In a way I feel more concerned about their well being cause like y'know you gotta look out for one another sometimes. In this world, specifically, with the confidence of specific individuals has increased in how they act. Yeah, I definitely feel a lot more worried about them, whether they're family friends, or just individuals that I see.

Overall, the interviews made it clear that the participants relied on co-ethnics, usually family and friends, for support. Furthermore, the participants felt an increase in solidarity, which was necessitated by the current political climate.

Conclusion

The formation of ethnic and national based identity is complex. While ethnic identity is self-constructed, it is effected by factors outside of the individual. Despite being more acculturated since they are second generation, many participants felt that they did not fit into mainstream ideas of what it means to be American. Conversely, the participants retained a strong

connection to their ethnic identity. The participants' strong connection to their ethnic identity may be in part because they did not feel accepted into mainstream American identity. Despite being born in the United States, they are not viewed as American. Mainstream media has actively perpetuated xenophobic moral panics. Overall, the 2016 election marked an increase in perceived discrimination.

The findings of this study implicate that current political events led to an increase in perceived discrimination and fostered co-ethnic solidarity. Furthermore, much research establishes a direct relationship between increased perceived discrimination and an increased connection to one's ethnic identity (Hipolito, 2016; Marsiglia et al., 2017). Therefore, politics affects ethnic identity through the way it impacts perceived discrimination and co-ethnic solidarity.

Limitations

The sample size of this study was small. Additionally, all of the participants were within a small age range and attended the same college. Many of them came from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. The small sample size and relative homogeneity of the sample limit the applicability of this study. Additionally, doing follow up interviews a year after the initial interview could have improved the study by providing information on how politics affect ethnic identity over time.

Suggestions for Further Research

Further research is needed to truly measure the effects of politics on the ethnic identity of Latinos. A study with a larger sample size is needed. Furthermore, additional studies examining how the effects of politics vary based on region, age, and generation would be useful. It would be

interesting to see how first generation immigrants react to the political environment, and how their identity is affected in comparison to the second generation. Also, a similar study should be done over multiple years to see how the effects of politics on ethnic identity change over time, especially in a continuously shifting political climate.

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