

Duquesne University

Duquesne Scholarship Collection

Undergraduate Research and Scholarship Symposium

2022-04-20

Identity Formation and the Immigrant Experience

Renne Cabacungan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/urss>



Part of the [Migration Studies Commons](#), [Multicultural Psychology Commons](#), [Personality and Social Contexts Commons](#), [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#), and the [Social Psychology and Interaction Commons](#)

Identity Formation and the Immigrant Experience. (2022). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/urss/2022/proceedings/8>

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Research and Scholarship Symposium by an authorized administrator of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.

Identity Formation and the Immigrant Experience

Renne Cabacungan

Duquesne University, Psychology Department

Advisor: Dr. Elizabeth Fein

Abstract

Immigration history is an especially prominent aspect of an immigrant's identity. Immigration creates psychosocial changes which can impact how an individual is viewed by themselves and others. Immigrants develop a dual identity, drawing from both their new country and their country of origin. Navigating this binary lies at the heart of an immigrant's identity development. The purpose of this study was to investigate the personal processes one undergoes during immigration in forming one's new identity. Qualitative interviews were conducted with two participants of different nationalities. A life course theory approach structured the two interviews to create a comprehensive timeline of events and corresponding changes to how they viewed their identities. Both immigrants moved to America from their homelands. One participant was a female of Filipino origin, and the other participant was a male of Iranian origin. This paper will discuss common themes that emerged across the two interviews such as: culture shock, initial uneasiness, and adapting to new life through professions. Many differences also emerged in the areas of historical contexts and personal beliefs that created the participants' own unique and distinct experiences. The results of this study are especially important in a time where immigration remains a very controversial issue. At a time where immigrants are often dehumanized in media, the findings can be used to emphasize the difficulties experienced by immigrants in their attempts at navigating between two different worlds and allow their stories to be accurately represented.

Keywords: Immigration, Identity, Culture, Independent, Interdependent, Sense of Self, Assimilation

Identity Formation and the Immigrant Experience

While the United States has become increasingly diverse over recent years, minority stories remain underrepresented in mainstream media. Many such minority stories involve immigration narratives. There is a growing number of such experiences, as immigrants constituted 13.5% of the total United States population in 2020 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Immigration is a challenging process for individuals and families. The process of identity formation is particularly important in the psychosocial realm, as the process of defining one's identity in a foreign culture can either make the transition to the new country easier or more difficult. Phinney et al. (2001) propose that identification with homeland identities is influenced by both the original attitudes of the immigrants and the receiving viewpoints of the new culture. The central tension in identity formation emerges as a dichotomy between identification with homeland and pressure to assimilate to the new culture (Verkuyten et al., 2019). In America, this becomes a complex issue due to the increasing racial diversity in the country that is continually met with conservative pushback. This is uniquely challenging in America in that identification with homeland culture is done simultaneously amidst exposure to many diverse cultural communities.

Assimilation pressures originated primarily in terms of the predominantly white Anglo-Saxon culture, but this has been complicated by trends in immigration shifts since the 1950s (Sorrell et al., 2019). Perceived hostility or acceptance towards immigrant groups appears to be one of the most dominating factors in immigrant identity decisions, and retention of homeland ethnic identity is more likely to be fostered in pluralist societies (Phinney et al., 2001). On a smaller scale, conforming to the culture of the majority may provide a sense of security when first faced with the challenge of adjusting to foreign life. The choice whether to conform to the new culture or maintain the home culture does not necessarily exist as a binary choice. Multiple different identities intersect, and an individual may choose to identify with certain aspects of themselves at different moments. In a cross-cultural study of multiple different American minority populations, Sorrell et al. (2019) found that the degree of identification to the term "American" differed significantly, with some participants completely estranged from the label and others only identifying as American in certain situations. These results suggest there is a flux in degree in

which immigrants identify with the American label. This variation involves what aspects of culture the immigrant views as distinctly American, whether it be citizenship status, race, or other cultural values. Many sociohistorical factors influence which aspects of Americanness immigrants choose to identify with, and the complexity of this process warrants further investigation.

Though characteristics of the new culture may become internalized, cultures have different views on the degree to which the self is influenced by the sociocultural realm. Markus and Kitayama (1991) identify two culturally nuanced constructions of the self. Cultures that believe in an independent sense of self state that the self is self-determined and autonomous. This sense of self is identified more in Western cultures. Models of the interdependent sense of self (found in many non-Western cultures) believe the nature of the self is contingent upon the individual's social context and the attitudes of their society. The construal of the self which a person ascribes to can impact how a person identifies themselves within the new culture. This can be especially prominent when moving from cultures of one construal to the other. While an individual can choose certain beliefs to define the core of their being, these central values can be subject to attenuation depending on whether the self is viewed as independent or interdependent. Though it may be easy to think of the independent self as more stable due to its lack of reliance on other social dynamics, the wide variety of social changes an immigrant experiences can uproot what was previously considered an independent self, or perhaps even promote the self-efficacy espoused by an independent view of self.

The current research aims to emphasize two immigration narratives of nationalities uncommonly presented in traditional immigration narratives. One immigrant was of Middle Eastern origin, and the other was of East Asian origin. Since these cultures vary significantly from the dominant Western cultural framework, their insights are particularly valuable in the field of identity studies. The study aims to highlight the differences in how they perceive themselves, as well as how they are perceived by others, particularly in how they decide when to conform or express aspects of their home culture. These decisions are explored in relation to both material and immaterial aspects of cultural transmission.

Methods

Participants

Two participants were selected for in-depth qualitative interviews. The first participant (P1) was a female immigrant of Filipino origin. She immigrated to the United States upon completing nursing school in the Philippines. The second participant was a male of Iranian origin. He immigrated to the United States when he was fifteen years old.

Interview Protocol

Both interviews were recorded with the informed consent of the interviewees. Each interview lasted between thirty minutes to an hour. Interviews were structured around the Life Course Theory Approach developed by Elder et al. (2003). This approach emphasizes the importance of major life and historical events, particularly the changes they evoked in the individual. Participants were asked to sketch a timeline of their important life events. Interview questions were structured around deriving meaning behind these events in relation to their personal sense of identity, as well as exploring Markus and Kitayama's different construals of the self.

Analysis

Interviews were analyzed in a method adapted by Strauss (2005). The interviews were listened to thoroughly following each session. Topics related to identity formation such as cultural values and adapting to new surroundings were chosen for analysis. Recurring themes were noted, especially commonalities across the two experiences. Keywords and repeated phrases associated with these themes were written down each time they were said during the interview. Relevant quotations were written down and formed the basis for synthesizing the two narratives. Differences in the two narratives were also explored by the same method.

Results

Four broad similarities were identified across both interviewees' narratives. The first similar theme involved their motives for moving to America. P1's immigration decisions were made to escape poverty in the Philippines and seek financial prosperity in America. P2's family immigrated to escape

violence in Iran. For both participants, America was conceptually linked to a sense of safety, whether it be financial security or as a refuge from violence.

A second commonality revolved around an experience of initial uneasiness and culture shock upon arriving to America. An aspect of American culture became a source of apprehension. For P1, the language barrier served as the biggest barrier for her to overcome. Not only did it make communication difficult, but it also led to an internalization of her difference. She was primarily worried it would make her appear strange to others, as well as emphasize her foreignness. For P1, she originally wanted to suppress linguistic aspects of her Filipino culture in favor of American dialect. America was P2's first exposure to diverse low-income minority neighborhoods. He fled from Iran but ended up amidst racial violence in Los Angeles. As his first exposure to diversity, these experiences made him question the value of America's diverse cultural neighborhoods. He remained apprehensive towards the issue of diversity for the rest of his adolescent years.

Both participants came to overcome their initial bad experiences through their professions. P1's background as a nurse gave her a strong sense of pride in her accomplishments. Since her medical training occurred in the Philippines, her profession was identified with her home culture. As she gained recognition for her accomplishments, she no longer felt the strong urge to hide her foreignness, especially as she began to meet other nurses from the Filipino nursing diaspora. P2 overcame his apprehension towards diversity through literary studies. He came to realize the value of diversity through the merits of storytelling. Through his studies, he learned about how travelling and migration come to create intersecting identities in individuals, and he applied these lessons to his own experience.

The final similarity relates to a common experience across all immigrants. Both participants extensively described the dichotomy between identifying with America and their own ethnic identities. P1 describes a strong identification with both cultures, as she has come to proudly identify as a Filipino American. Her friends from church and her neighborhood enjoy listening to her stories from the Philippines and find her cooking to be quite tasty. Because her community has fostered acceptance of her ethnic identity, she does not view her Filipino identity in contention with her newfound home in America.

She remains grateful for the opportunity to provide for her family in America, thus weaving the two cultures into a unified identity. P2 primarily refers to himself as Persian. However, he admits that most of his Persian cultural identity is largely dormant. He finds no use for it, as he has not met other people in the area that identify with Iranian culture. He fears the anti-immigration sentiments that have pervaded the political climate, and simultaneously rejects the idea of nationalism. Thus, his identification remains primarily with his homeland, but this does not impact his daily decisions in expressing or hiding his culture. His Persian identification is not personally important to his life, but he is cognizant of its significant impact on other immigrants' experiences.

Two distinct differences emerged over the course of interview analysis. When asked to highlight a single event that was most important to how they view immigration, P1 related this question personally, while P2 answered more broadly. P1 cites the exportation of nurses from the Philippines to the United States as the most important event of her immigration history. This diaspora created a strong sense of community that bound her identity with a group of people of a shared experience. P2 interpreted this question differently, describing the importance of September 11, 2001's terrorist attacks as the most important event that defined immigration attitudes broadly. The zeitgeist of anti-immigrant paranoia that followed created the hostile political climate that continually makes the immigrant experience in America challenging.

To close, each participant was asked whether or not they believe identity is a personal choice. P1 answered yes, saying there are certain values at the core of a person which do not change. P2 answered no, saying a person will inevitably internalize the attitudes others hold towards them. Whether they are aware of it consciously, these attitudes subtly and overtly influence identity.

Discussion

The first two similarities show which facets of American culture the participants prioritized in terms of their own identification or disidentification with America. From a foreign perspective, the concept of the American dream inspired both of their immigration decisions, fostering a positive identification with this narrative of the culture. The negative aspects of their situation at home were

enough to push them away towards this promise of a better life. Both experienced disillusion upon arriving since their initial experiences did not align with the image of America they identified with. P1's negative experience regarding the language difference is a form of an assimilation pressure. While she was not worried about being perceived as Filipino specifically, she was more concerned about the notion of being identified as an "outsider." This corresponds with findings from Sorrel et al. (2019); immigrants view their status in the United States in relation to perceptions of outsiders. Since P1 was able to pass racially, her accent and limited ability to speak English served as the primary demarcation of her difference. P2's disillusionment resulted in the opposite of assimilation pressure. When faced with violence, the very thing he was fleeing from in his home country, P2 did not want to identify with his new culture. It is important to note the age at which P2 immigrated, as Phinney et al. (2001) state that ethnic identity is not fully realized until the end of adolescence. As P2 matured and found his profession, the attitude of outright rejection towards American identity changed into indifference.

P1's experience suggests that her two distinct cultural identities have formed a singular cohesive identity. As Verkuyten et al. (2019) write, "focusing on the combination of two separate group identifications may not always adequately capture the subjective meaning of dual identity" (p. 396). The dichotomy between Filipino and American is no longer a conscious distinction that P1 makes. Aspects from both cultures are positively reinforced, encouraging simultaneous identification. The two cultural labels enhance one another, as P1 is happy to bring Filipino culture to her chiefly American friends, while viewing America as the reason she is financially secure enough to continually support her family. Perhaps this integration comes with security in both aspects of the dual identity. However, individual differences in personality and world views can also influence the degree of simultaneous integration. P1's integrated identity is also indicative of an interdependent sense of self. Her gradual overcoming of her fear of being perceived as different was alleviated through meeting other Filipinos in her area and becoming well-established in her church community. P2, having experienced no such positive reinforcement for identifying with his Iranian culture does not experience it as integrated with his American identity. Though his personal attitudes against strong nationalist identification may also account for this lack of

positively integrated identity, the lack of a community to identify with can also account for this dormancy in expressing his Iranian culture.

The primary differences in their experiences show the different effects of independent versus interdependent constructs of the self. P1's sense of pride as a nurse works in both ways. Her sense of pride comes from her firm belief in her own accomplishments and ability to overcome adversity. However, this is also formed from the validation of others. P1's ultimate identification with the independent sense of self (as per the closing question) is attributed to religious reasons and devotion to God. Regardless, pride in her own accomplishments was something which perceived difference could not take away from her. Interestingly, this contrasts with Markus and Kitayama's (1991) expectation that non-Western cultures would be more likely to ascribe to an interdependent sense of self. P2's experiences and disdain with current anti-immigration attitudes led him to ascribe to an interdependent sense of self. While he personally identifies more as Iranian, the lack of reinforcement for expressing this part of his identity suggests an interdependent sense of self. Without a social attitude to foster expression, certain expressions of homeland cultures become obsolete. From a more pessimistic viewpoint, pressures to conform or hide identity out of fear of negative reactions can overpower forms of self-identification. The attitudes of the destination country profoundly influence the dichotomy between the two senses of self.

This study is particularly important in the modern political climate, as immigrants are often dehumanized. Global conflicts are creating increasing displacement and higher amounts of refugees. Highlighting the challenges immigrants face when adjusting to their new lives can help promote empathy and combat disinterest towards those perceived as different. As racial issues are being brought to the forefront of social justice movements, it is important to remember the minority experiences that lie outside of the black and white binary that is most prominently highlighted in news media. One limitation of the study is its small scale. Future studies should encompass a larger swathe of cultural identities, including Latino and Japanese Americans to name a few. Additionally, a wide variety of age groups should be sampled to accurately capture how similar experiences can have different impacts based on age and maturity.

References

- Elder, G. H., Johnson, M. K., & Crosnoe R. (2003). The emergence and development of life course theory. *Handbook of the Life Course*, 3-19. <https://doi.org/10.1007/b100507>
- Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological Review*, 98(2), 224–253. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.98.2.224>
- Phinney, J. S., Horenczyk, G., Liebkind, K., & Vedder, P. (2001). Ethnic identity, immigration, and well-being: An interactional perspective. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57, 493-510. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-4537.00225>
- Sorrell, K., Khalsa, S., Ecklund, E. H., & Emerson, M. O. (2019). Immigrant identities and the shaping of a racialized American self. *Socius*, 5, 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023119852788>
- Strauss, C. (2005). Analyzing discourse for cultural complexity. In N. Quinn (Ed.), *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods* (pp. 203-244). Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-05871-3_6
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2020). *Selected Social Characteristics in the United States 5-year estimates*. Retrieved March 31, 2022, from <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=immigrant%20population&tid=ACSDP5Y2020.DP02>
- Verkuyten, M., Wiley, S., Deaux, K. & Fleischmann, F. (2019), To be both (and more): Immigration and identity multiplicity. *Journal of Social Issues*, 75: 390-413. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12324>