



# Navigating Americanized Identities: Bicultural Ethnicity, Race, and the Incorporation Experience

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## Abstract

This paper reports on the complex ways in which immigrant young adults make sense of their Americanized ethnic and racial identities. The analysis draws on a large set of in-depth interviews ( $N=233$ ) collected with immigrants between the ages of 18 and 29 across three regions in the US (California, New York, and Minnesota) in the early 2000s and is in dialogue with emerging new theories of immigrant incorporation which combine the insights of traditional assimilation and racialization frameworks. The identity narratives that emerge from these interviews demonstrate the overarching significance of racial and ethnic identification for young adults across various immigrant communities. The narratives also highlight some of the contextual factors involved in the construction of an ethnic identity in the US such as experiences with discrimination; or the presence of co-ethnic communities. The final substantive section explores how young American immigrants in the transition to adulthood attempt to cultivate hybrid, bicultural identities that balance their American-ness with the ongoing experience of living in a deeply racialized society. The paper concludes by discussing implications for the literature on identity formation and the transition to adulthood as well as on the immigrant incorporation experience.

**Keywords** Race · Ethnic identity · Immigration · Incorporation · Assimilation · Racism and racialization · Americanization

## Introduction

The development and construction of identity is a crucial component of any coming-of-age experience in the modern world. In a very general sense, this process involves both identifying, organizing, and embracing one's own distinctive individual qualities as well as sorting and selectively

claiming one's various social roles and relationships. A further component of the developmental process involves figuring out how the various individual and social dimensions of one's sense of self all fit together, how they cohere. Indeed, how individuals recognize, negotiate, and balance all of their various individual characteristics and group-based affiliations has increasingly been seen as a developmental hallmark of emerging or young adulthood (Arnett 2000, 2016; Schwartz et al. 2005, 2013). But how do racial and ethnic affiliations—such prominent if problematic aspects of American life—fit into all of this? What role does racial and ethnic identification play in the transition to adulthood in the contemporary United States?

This paper begins from the proposition that the structure and significance of collective identities for people of color in the United States is unique. In contrast with majority white Americans who appear, at least in general, to be far less self-consciously aware of issues of racial affiliation and ethnic identification (McDermott and Samson 2005; see also: Hartmann et al. 2009), many Americans of color and of immigrant origin understand themselves and their experiences in society through racial and ethnic lenses (Roth 2012; Lee and Bean 2004; Rudrappa 2004). It further posits

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that it is important to understand the ways in which these identities emerge and evolve across the life course (Baldwin-White et al. 2017). But while there has been a good deal of work on ethnic and racial identity formation among youth and adolescents from diverse social backgrounds, interest in ethnic and racial identification as a distinctive aspect of young adulthood has only begun to emerge (Syed and Juang 2014; Syed and Mitchell 2016; Umaña-Taylor et al. 2014; Yap et al. 2016).

This project contributes to this literature by focusing on the collective identity experiences and understandings of new, post-1965 immigrant young adults whom historians Barrett and Roediger (1997) might call “in-between peoples”—recent migrants, especially those from Asia and Latin America, who do not conveniently fall into traditional black and white racial dichotomies (see also Kasinitz 2004). It is based upon a large and diverse set of in-depth interviews collected in the early 2000s with first and second-generation immigrants mostly between the ages of 23 and 29 as part of larger study commissioned by the *MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy* (see Swartz et al. 2017; Waters et al. 2011). Extending from an earlier, more descriptive treatment (Baiocchi and Hartmann 2017), we use these interviews to construct a rich, insider’s view of “new” immigrant collective identification in the transition to adulthood.

Informed by social psychological research on collective identity formation, we further attempt to theorize both the contexts within which these narratives take shape and the question of why these immigrants place such emphasis on multiplicity, complexity, and biculturalism. Furthermore, our analysis is in dialogue with and intended to contribute to an emerging set of new ideas about and approaches to migrant incorporation in the contemporary world (cf. Ali and Hartmann 2015; Alarcon et al. 2016). Key to this new theoretical orientation is an ongoing debate about whether the immigrant experience in the US should be understood through a generalized *assimilation* framework (e.g., Alba and Nee 2003; see also Alba 2009), on the one hand, or one that focuses on the continued *racialization* of specific groups (e.g., Bonilla-Silva 2004, 2017), on the other. New theories of incorporation avoid the extremes of assimilationism and racialization and, instead, blend the insights of these alternative frames by exploring the forces of both inclusion and exclusion (or marginalization) at play in the incorporation experience (Cornell and Hartmann 2004; Kasinitz 2004). In other words, our analysis attempts to conceptualize the immigrant incorporation experience as a set of distinctive, if often uneven pathways for different migrant groups in varied social contexts (see also: Portes and Zhou 1993). It is an exercise and approach that we believe sheds light on the complicated construction and evolution of post-1965 American immigrant identities and their implications for

our understanding diverse experiences of the transition to adulthood in the United States.

The paper proceeds as follows. It begins with a brief literature review and discussion of how the interview data were collected and of the methods that were used to analyze the resulting transcripts. The first substantive section of the paper provides a general depiction of how ethnic and racial identities are understood and experienced by this diverse sample of immigrant young adults. Key findings here include the overall salience and significance of the ethnic and racial identity claims of these young adult respondents along with the complexities and tensions, both within individuals and across groups, that appeared in their responses. In the second section, we then argue that both the salience and complexity of identity claims among these diverse respondents are the result of powerful, contextual social forces that are also revealed in these transcripts: experiences with racism and discrimination, language use; and the presence (or absence) of co-ethnic communities in work, education, and family life (parenting).

In the third and final section, we look at one relatively common theme that runs across different narratives and across different social groups—namely, the unique way in which immigrant young adults attempt to cultivate a bicultural American identity by balancing their American-ness with and against their fluency in the language of their parents (i.e., bilingualism), familiarity with cultural practices, and (most importantly) perceived acceptance (or marginalization) by their respective ethnic communities and the broader culture. It is here that some of the racialized dimensions of contemporary American culture emerge most clearly formed. We conclude the paper by discussing the implications of our findings and analyses with respect to the sociological and psychological literatures on ethnic and racial identity (Cornell and Hartmann 2007; Phinney and Ong 2007), the immigrant incorporation experience (Ali and Hartmann 2015; Portes and Rumbaut 2014), and the transition to adulthood (Arnett 2000; Shanahan 2000; Settersten et al. 2005; Syed and Mitchell 2016).

### Collective Identification in the Transition to Adulthood

Psychologists have offered several generalized models of racial/ethnic identity development which depict various stages by which minority youth establish a secure and coherent notion of their ethnicity and racial self-concept (Marcia 2002; Phinney 1992; Phinney and Ong 2007).<sup>1</sup> Generally,

<sup>1</sup> With Umaña-Taylor et al. (2014), we agree that it is not only difficult but inappropriate and inaccurate to separate out race and ethnic dimensions of collective identification processes, at least in the American context; we thus use language that reflects this multifaceted attention throughout the paper (see also Cornell and Hartmann 2004).

these models suggest that racial and ethnic affiliations are often central concepts to the social identities of young people who are minorities (Lee Williams et al. 2012; Roberts et al. 1999), though they are often unexamined and diffused during early adolescence. As young people mature, however, and their cognitive abilities increase, most enter an exploration phase in which they reflect and critically reexamine their affiliation with these broad social categories. During this time young people may also seek out new knowledge and customs associated with race and ethnicity, as well as experiment with various ways to practice (or some may say perform) these social connections and identifications. Some models (i.e., Atkinson et al. 1993) suggest that during this time young minorities may also go through a confusing set of emotions and cognitions (e.g., dissonance and resistance) as they confront the realities of racial discrimination in their lives as well as in the dominant culture. But during the later stages of adolescence, or early adulthood, it is assumed that young people acquire the cognitive dexterity to navigate these tensions into a unified commitment to a coherent racial ethnic identity [or what developmental psychologists describe as an achieved ethnic identity (Phinney and Ong 2007; Syed and Juang 2014)].

Against this developmental backdrop, research has explored the determinants of racial/ethnic formation (Nguyen and Hale 2017; Roberts et al. 1999) and highlighted the importance of such achieved and cohered identities across a whole range of social outcomes and indicators—academic performance (Booth et al. 2017; Feliciano 2017), self-esteem and well-being (Hughes et al. 2015), mental health (Ai et al. 2014; Ida and Christie-Mizell 2012), and social incorporation or adjustment (Gummadam et al. 2015). Taken as a whole, this work has emphasized the assumed maturity and psychological benefit that come from passing the “exploration” phase of a diffused and unexamined ethnic identity, to the “commitment” phase of a solidified and coherent claim of belonging/identity.

The extent to which the significance and structure of ethnic and racial identities holds in the transition to adulthood and across the lifecourse (not to mention across different social groups and contexts) remains something of an open question. As alluded to previously, while there has been a good deal of work on ethnic and racial identity formation among youth and adolescents from diverse social backgrounds, interest in ethnic and racial identification as a distinctive aspect or dimension of young adulthood has only begun to emerge (Syed and Juang 2014; Syed and Mitchell 2016; Umaña-Taylor et al. 2014; Yap et al. 2016), and much of that work has been focused mainly on college-aged respondents, those who have just begun to enter the transition to adulthood. Here, we concur with Umaña-Taylor et al. (2014) who argue that “a life span approach to ERI must

include attention to how this process continues to unfold through young adulthood and into adulthood proper” (p. 28).

Much of the work has also tended to focus on and generalize from the experience of African Americans (Branscombe et al. 1999; Brown et al. 2002; Sellers et al. 1998, 2006), and has thus put less attention on the variations and complexities that emerge in other groups and communities (for important exceptions, see: Roth 2012; Rudrappa 2004; Rumbaut 1994; see also Weisskirch et al. 2016). This is an important point because an emerging theme among both psychologists and sociologists is the complexity of ethnic and racial identities in young adulthood for individuals of color (Umaña-Taylor et al. 2014; Ashmore et al. 2004; Roberts et al. 1999). Connected with this attention to diversity, complexity, and variation is an attention to context and the social conditions that shape and determine the collective identities of race and ethnicity, a key theme in the sociological literature on the topic (Cornell and Hartmann 2007; Smith 2007; Lee and Bean 2004).

## Data and Methods

Data for this analysis were drawn from a subsample of a larger set of qualitative interviews with young adults (the majority between 23 and 29 years old) commissioned by the MacArthur Foundation’s *Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood* (see Settersten et al. 2005; Osgood et al. 2007) in the first decade of the new century. The subsample of respondents that is the focus of the analysis presented here was drawn from three pre-existing longitudinal studies of adolescents and young adults that included significant numbers of first- and second-generation immigrant respondents: *The Immigrant Second Generation of Metropolitan New York Study* (Kasinitz et al. 2008), *Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study in San Diego* (Portes and Rumbaut 2014), and the *Youth Development Study* in St. Paul, Minnesota (Mortimer 2003).<sup>2</sup> The interviews analyzed for the current study

<sup>2</sup> Additional information about each of these longitudinal studies can be found at:

- Immigrant Second Generation of Metropolitan New York Study: <https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/DSDR/studies/30302/summary>;
- Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study in San Diego: <https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/RCMD/studies/20520/summary>
- Youth Development Study: <https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/studies/24881>.

It is worth noting that these three studies also included interviews with a range of native-born American respondents as well (white = 42; black = 12; other non-white = 12). These interviews were analyzed and included in an earlier, descriptive treatment (Baiocchi and Hartmann 2017), and as such provide comparative context for the immigrant narratives presented here.

**Table 1** Demographic composition of total sample and sites

	Total sample <i>N</i> =233	Minnesota <i>n</i> =10	New York <i>n</i> =92	San Diego <i>n</i> =131
Age				
18–20	2 (1%)	0	2	0
21–23	30 (13%)	0	21	9
24–26	146 (63%)	0	28	118
27–29	31 (13%)	5	22	4
30–32	24 (10%)	5	19	0
Gender				
Male	117 (50%)	5	52	60
Female	116 (50%)	5	40	71
Education				
HS grad or less	27 (12%)	2	11	14
Some college or vocational training	113 (48%)	6	34	73
Bachelor's degree or more	93 (40%)	2	47	44
Immigrant experience				
1st generation immigrant	121 (52%)	10	35	76
2nd generation immigrant	112 (48%)	0	57	55

include first and second-generation immigrant young adults ( $N=233$ ) representing varied racial, ethnic, social class, and educational backgrounds, and whose families had emigrated from Central and Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asian-Pacific region.

As Table 1 shows, the demographic composition of the total sample for the current analysis ( $N=233$ ) reveals a diverse, immigrant, cohort of young adults in their mid- to late twenties ( $M=25.6$ ,  $SD=2.5$ ), with an equal proportion of female to male respondents. Generally speaking, most respondents were interviewed during a time in their life course in which they were beginning to achieve many of the normative milestones of adulthood in the United States (Settersten et al. 2005). Many respondents had completed their formal education (only 13% were still students) and most were transitioning into career or long-term employment (74% were employed either full-time or part-time). Some had also begun to form their own families and navigate parenthood: 19% were married, 12% were cohabitating with a partner, and 28% had a least one child in the home. While respondents' socioeconomic status varied considerably across ethnic groups, most respondents described themselves as belonging to the “working class” (49%), or “working poor” (29%), while 19% described themselves as being “middle class” and 3% as “above middle class.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Additional analyses of demographic data obtained from the interviews (analyses not shown, due to space) indicate that the majority of respondents reported higher educational attainment levels than their parents, most of whom had completed their education prior to immigrating to the United States. For example, the highest education level attained by 53% of parents was a “high-school degree or less,” whereas 88% of respondents had at least attended some post-second-

With respect to educational attainment, approximately 40% of respondents had attained a college degree (bachelor's) at the time of the interview, while 48% indicated some type of vocational/associates degree or were still pursuing higher education more generally.<sup>4</sup>

As Tables 1 and 2 summarize, respondents identified as either first or second-generation immigrants to the United States. The vast majority of respondents who were foreign-born (52%) had nonetheless immigrated to the United States as young children and been socialized in the American context since an early age (i.e., the “1.5 generation”). More generally, the young adults in the sample represented a wide range of assimilative experiences (e.g., immigrated as refugees, undocumented resident status, formal visa programs) and different contexts of reception (e.g.,

Footnote 3 (continued)

ary education by the time of their interviews (attended some college, vocation training or attained a bachelor's degree).

<sup>4</sup> Data collected on respondents' socioeconomic status was not standardized across the three sites. Nonetheless, the qualitative interview schedule asked respondents to reflect on how they subjectively defined their own socioeconomic status. Research assistants later coded responses into one of four general categories: “poor or working poor,” “working class,” “middle class,” “higher than middle class.” Inter-coded reliability across the three assistants was generally high for these generalized categories (Cohen's  $\kappa=.835$ ,  $p<.005$ ). Respondents had also been asked to estimate their median household income. Consistent with the observation that 78% of respondent identified as working class or working poor, the median household income reported was \$35,000 per year ( $M=\$33,401$ ,  $SD=\$19,612$ ), though it should be noted that half of respondents were unwilling or uncertain on how to answer this question accurately.

**Table 2** Country of origin

	Total sample N=233	Minnesota n=10	New York n=92	San Diego n=131
Central America/Caribbean				
Dominican Republic	8 (3%)		8	
Jamaica	3 (1%)		3	
Mexico	39 (17%)		1	38
Puerto Rico	14 (6%)		14	
West Indies	7 (3%)		7	
South America				
Colombia	2 (1%)		2	
Ecuador	8 (3%)		6	2
Peru	3 (1%)		2	1
Central/East Asia				
China	44 (19%)		33	11
Hong Kong	5 (2%)		2	3
India	4 (2%)			4
Japan	1 (1%)			1
Russia	14 (6%)		14	
Southeast Asia				
Cambodia	4 (2%)			4
Laos	21 (9%)	10		11
Philippines	34 (14%)			34
Thailand	6 (3%)			6
Vietnam	16 (7%)			16

cultural practices in the community, presence of co-ethnic enclaves, educational and economic opportunities, racism and discrimination). As Table 2 highlights, respondents' families had emigrated from 18 countries across the Caribbean and Central America (30%), South America (5%), Central and East Asia (30%), as well as from South East Asian regions (35%).

Trained interviewers asked open-ended questions on topics related to the transition to adulthood including education, work, family of origin, relationships, politics, identity, leisure, and subjective aging. Sample questions focused on ethnicity included: What do you call yourself, that is, how do you identify? What does it mean to you to say you are [ETHNICITY, e.g., *Chinese American, Mexican American, Latino*]? Or that you are an American? How important is it for you to say you are [ETHNICITY]? Has your ethnic or American self-identity changed over time? Do you sometimes use different ethnic or racial labels in different situations? Why? Respondents spontaneously discussed ethnic and racial identity issues and experiences in other sections of the interview, which we incorporated into our analysis. Interviews took place in locations selected by interviewees and typically ranged from 2 to 4 hours. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and de-identified to maintain confidentiality; they were archived and then collaboratively coded using the software package Atlas.ti.

The analysis was informed by the various psychological studies of ethnic and racial identity development discussed above as well as with general sociological theories of identity that highlight the importance of social context (Serpe and Stryker 2011; Stets and Serpe 2013; Stryker and Serpe 1994; Tajfel and Turner 2004; see also Hartmann et al. 2017). However, our goal was not to develop a new theoretical conceptualization of these social psychological processes. Rather, we sought to contribute to a grounded, context-rich understanding of both the similarities and differences by which various ethnic and racial identities were constructed and conceptualized across various social situations. That is, our analysis was motivated by an interest to better understand the narrative structures, both shared and contrasting, across different racial and ethnic identities in the contemporary United States (i.e., how identities associated with being Asian American, Latino, Chicano may share similar narrative structures, etc.). And once again, our larger theoretical goal was to contribute to the new immigrant incorporation theoretical framework discussed above (Ali and Hartmann 2015; Kasinitz 2004; Portes and Zhou 1993).

More concretely, our analysis was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the common characteristics and narrative structures used by immigrant young adults to describe their social identities?
2. What common sources of tension and complexity are expressed by immigrant young adults across different social contexts, and what are the key forms of variation in these narratives?
3. What social contexts or conditions appear to be most important in shaping racial and ethnic identity claims?

We used an inductive or “data-driven approach” to identify the common themes used by respondents to describe their identities and experiences as immigrants with respect to these questions.

The research team used a multi-staged process of analysis involving (a) identifying specific sections of the transcripts in which respondents mentioned and discussed either their identity, ethnicity, or immigrant status; (b) inductively generating a list of 18 initial codes to describe the key narrative characteristics and structures within these sections of text; (c) organizing and refining codes by three general themes and seven sub-themes; and (d) applying the themes back to the data to ensure that our constructs were accurate as well as specific to the experiences of immigrant young adults. Throughout this iterative process—again, facilitated by the use of the Atlas.ti software package—the research team took a number of specific steps to ensure the *trustworthiness* of the qualitative analysis (Lincoln and Guba 2000; Morrow 2005).<sup>5</sup>

First, while our coding system was generated inductively, we also drew from the biographical field notes documented by interviewers to inform our interpretation of respondents’ social context and the various pressures and life circumstances that they faced. This effort to essentially *re-contextualize* the data (Morrow 2005) further enhanced the credibility of our findings, as did our use of respondents’ own words to frame and identify key themes. The research team also met regularly to assess the consistency and dependability of the themes—to ensure against idiosyncratic coding—through a collaborative, consensus-agreement approach (Patton 2005; Syed and Nelson 2015), which was carefully documented at different phases of data coding, and

synthesis. In addition, to ensure the dependability of the finalized themes the team employed a strategy similar to what grounded theorists describe as the *constant comparison method* (Charmaz 2001; Glaser 1992). This involved applying the thematic codes across different empirical examples, in order to assess the specificity of codes to capture similarities and differences throughout the sample. The result, we believe, is a fairly rich, content-oriented approach to understanding collective identities in line with the McLean et al. (2016) argument for “bringing content to the fore” in the study of emerging adulthood identities (see also Syed and Azmitia 2008).

## Findings

### Salient and Complex Identities

Our first set of findings, which are more descriptive than thematic, highlight the diverse and expansive ways in which respondents discussed their racial and/or ethnic identities throughout the entire interview schedule. When directly prompted to discuss how they identified in collective terms, most immigrant young adults not only claimed race and/or ethnicity as the primary lens through which to understand their identities, they often linked these narratives to extended discussions about assimilation, their perceived nationality, and daily experiences of racial discrimination. José, a young man who had lived most of his life in a barrio south of San Diego, had much to say about how race and his Americanized ethnicity were part of his identity. “I know I don’t look American,” he explained at one point, after vacillating between self-identifying as Chicano or Latino in the interview. “But I grew up here, and this is my home. I don’t even speak Spanish anymore, and so I’m more American than anything else.” Another respondent from San Diego similarly discussed that her social identity was rooted in her sense of ethnicity, but that topic of her identity was itself a complicated matter for her. “I’m starting to identify more as Vietnamese-American than before,” she described, “I used to just say ‘Vietnamese’ because ethnically, I’m Vietnamese, but culturally, I’m more American.”

In stark contrast to the rather restrictive ways by which most native-born white and black Americans in these samples described their race and/or ethnicity (with some “white Americans” even claiming not to have “any ethnicity at all”; see Baiocchi and Hartmann 2017), immigrant young adults often expressed their identities with complex narratives that touched on a range of topics. Indeed, these identities were rarely framed as a singular and isolated topic in the interviews, restricted to one set of questions or issue; instead, collective identification was a recurring reference point that respondents narrated to as they discussed issues important to them across the interview schedule. As for instance,

<sup>5</sup> Trustworthiness refers to what some qualitative researchers consider as the specialized set of criteria for qualitative research that parallel the more conventional—positivist—standards of research such as internal validity, reliability, and generalizability (Lincoln and Guba 2000; Morrow 2005). Though some have questioned the extent to which these criteria do in fact closely parallel the standards of positivistic research, or even whether they *should* (see overview of critiques by Morrow 2005), trustworthiness is often operationalized as issues of *credibility* (which parallel concern about internal validity), *dependability* (reliability), *transferability* (generalizability), and *conformability* (objectivity).

Anthony, a Filipino American living in Southern California, returned to the topic of his bicultural identity—of identifying both an American and Filipino—several times in the interview, even when discussing broad topics, like his views on recent political events in the US.

It's like the whole thing with Iraq currently, it just made me feel, you know, where do I stand on the issue because I feel in my heart that I'm an American because I'm an American citizen. I grew up with American culture. I went to American school. I prefer American things. I would say I'm more American but at the same time when I say I'm an American I get "like what kind of an American"? Like are you Filipino American, Asian American or something like that. I don't always know how I identify then.

Similar to other respondents, Anthony anchored many of his unresolved views on social issues, particularly controversial ones, back to "the ongoing question" of his racial and ethnic identity. More than just an issue of what to call himself, Anthony described his bicultural identity as an amalgamation of "two ethnicities" and of "two very different ways of looking at the world," within the context of a racialized society that regularly questions "what kind of American" he is. In examining a controversial issue, like the Iraq war, Anthony felt the need to revisit the perpetual question of which of his "two sides" he should identify with at that moment, but within the constraints of how others view him as an ethnic or racialized person.

Revisiting how one defines their ethnic identity, and framing it as a recurring issue to understand other life circumstances, was a theme that appeared throughout many of the interviews. Some of these unresolved issues explicitly implicated the experiences of being an immigrant and the various conflicts that young people (and their parents) faced as new Americans. For instance, Anthony felt that people viewed him as too *Americanized* because he only spoke English. But these sources of ambivalence and the connection to an ethnic identity were also linked to other broader "life issues"—for instance, when respondents described the challenges they faced navigating the transition to college, or in managing a work and homelife balance, and even in negotiating personal relationships. Kim—a Vietnamese American also living in Southern California—similarly discussed continually questioning how she identifies herself, and her two sides, as she grappled with the gender dynamics implicated in her relationships. Though Kim did not see herself as a "feminist," she was cognizant of the "patriarchal" norms both present within her family and in the broader US culture. As a result, Kim referenced her evolving understanding of what "it really means" to be a Vietnamese American woman—as someone who is "both traditional and American at the same time"—to frame how she navigates the gender politics and dynamics

as she moved into adulthood. Accordingly, Kim's ethnic identity, similar to her views on gender, "borrowed from two cultures" and reflected an ongoing effort to combine the "best from both worlds."

In a similar way, *what* many of these respondents called themselves—no matter how they identified specifically—was framed as ultimately less important than these "ongoing discussions" that the topic of one's emerging and evolving ethno-racial identity itself represented. Respondents often contested the use of prescriptive "labels" to describe themselves, as these terms were "too restrictive" and limited to convey the nuances of their bicultural-ness. Even among respondents who elaborated at length on the subtle semantics between self-identifying as a "Hmong in America" versus "Hmong American," or why they were "Chicana" but not "Latina," many nonetheless implied the importance was more in the "discussing of these differences" than the terms themselves. Moreover, some respondents could use various racial and ethnic labels interchangeably throughout the same interview. Lee, a college student from San Diego, saliently pointed out that one's identity is necessarily "fluid," because "it matters who is asking the question" and "in what context." Accordingly, Lee was "more or less Asian" around some people, but also "Chinese or even Cantonese" around others. It depends on "the setting and who I'm talking to."

### Contexts for Learning, Practicing, and Navigating Racial and Ethnic Identities

Lee was not the only respondent in our sample to explicitly talk about the importance of "context" and "settings" when discussing their identity. Indeed, as respondents elaborated on their various ethnic and racial affiliations, they often discussed the situations and social environments which shaped their sense of belonging growing up and continue to shape their identities as they transition to adulthood. Often these narratives implicated how different settings provide varying opportunities and constraints for ethnic and racial identity formations to take shape. At an immediate, micro level, respondents discussed how families, neighborhood, peer groups, schools, and workplaces could all be interactive settings for thinking about, experiencing, and practicing different aspects of their identities. A few respondents like Lee were also cognizant that they were embedded in broader macro contexts of the historical moment, and could talk about how stratification, racial hierarchies, and even forces of "globalization" affected their identities. While it is beyond the scope of this article to fully summarize the various ways respondents evoked the importance of context in their identity narratives, below we review a few key aspects that respondents discussed.

Most respondents were apt to first cite the importance of families in their development of identity. For many being a

member of their family and a member of their ethnic group were intimately tied. “I mean my family’s definitely Chinese,” replied one respondent after being asked about his identity.

My parents, you know... they’re not American parents. Like the way they interact with me. They speak Chinese to my grandparents. I mean, I eat that in the house. We don’t eat American food.

Other respondents similarly combined their discussions of identity with their description of their immigrant “family life” growing up, and the various socialization practices at home that contributed to their sense of ethnicity—often revolving around food and speaking the origin language. Particularly for respondents who felt strongly rooted in their ethnic identity, these everyday interactions with people whom they loved were important aspects of what distinguished them from “typical Americans.” Moreover, these respondents often emphasized the importance of maintaining ethnic ties through their connections to kin, remembering family history, and for those who had become parents, passing traditions onto their own children so that they “never forget who they are.”

Many respondents similarly noted that the language “spoken at home,” and with their families in general, was a key indicator of their “preserved” bicultural identity, particularly in a world of otherwise encroaching English. Quyen who lived in Southern California and strongly identified as “ethnically Vietnamese” cited her parents’ influence in helping her maintain a strong fluency in her mother tongue. “My parents really helped us with the Vietnamese language,” she described. “And I would think I’m more *ethnic* than the rest of (my friends) because I feel very connected to Vietnamese people in Vietnam.”

Raul, a young man also living in California, expressed a similar sentiment when he admitted that he was “glad that my parents really kept on us to speak Spanish in the house, and I want to do the same for my kids.” As was the case for others in his community, Raul’s identity as a Chicano was intricately wrapped up with his bilingualism. “It’s a big part of who I am, of who we are. It’s in the music that Chicanos listen to, it’s how Chicanos get along with others, it’s how Chicanos can feel comfortable with themselves.”

More generally, almost every first- and second-generation immigrant respondent in our sample brought up the issue of language when discussing their collective identity—whether to highlight their command of English, their bilingualism, or lack of familiarity with their mother tongue. Often these discussions highlighted the more social and communal dimensions of language, as opposed to language as a unique cultural practice. Indeed, many respondents emphasized the advantages of being bilingual with respect to accessing social networks embedded in school, churches, and work

situations. Quyen, who felt more “ethnic” and Vietnamese than her friends, discussed how she was able to connect and bond easily with strangers if they spoke the same language, particularly at an Asian market that she sometimes visited on the weekends. Similarly, Laura, a Mexican American in Southern California, discussed how she bonded with all the “Latinas” who “gossiped” at her work in Spanish. This cultural advantage was most clearly conveyed by Spanish speakers who often claimed the language was not only an important way of preserving one’s heritage, but also a relevant form of communication for various ethnic communities. In New York City several Spanish-speaking respondents even remarked that their fluent bilingualism was an important component of their multicultural, pan-ethnic identity as Latino or Hispanic. As one respondent explained, “speaking Spanish connects you to a lot of other groups here... we all speak the same language and have similar culture.” In contrast, in Southern California speaking Spanish was almost always associated with a Chicano or Mexican ethnic identity. While this reflects the broader representation of multiple Spanish-speaking nationalities present in New York, as compared to the large proportion of Mexican immigrants in California, it is nonetheless interesting how speaking Spanish could be framed in both exclusive and inclusive ways.

Language and bilingualism involving Spanish speakers operated differently in comparison with identity narratives among non-Spanish-speaking pan-ethnicities. Individuals who identified as Asian Americans, for example, were more prone to identify with the pan-ethnic label precisely because they were no longer fluent in their origin language. Kevin, an Asian American who had just graduated from college, discussed that he had gradually transitioned away from seeing himself as Chinese, precisely because he had difficulty speaking his origin language. “I just feel weird calling myself Chinese, since I don’t really speak the language anymore.” Some respondents who were not bilingual reflected on their identity more ambivalently, sometimes with obvious discomfort and sense of social shame. Carlos, who simply considers himself a “brown American” stated that the Spanish-speaking community in California distrusted Mexican-looking men like himself who could not converse in Spanish. “We were all pachucos; considered non-Mexican,” he described, citing a local urban idiom for overly Americanized, deviant, youth. “We were born in the U.S. and didn’t know Spanish and so were looked down by our families.” As many of these individuals explained, their physical appearances—more precisely, their skin color—already barred them from a “traditional American” identity. But Carlos also lacked the cultural capital of being able to speak Spanish which he viewed as limiting his ability to assert an ethnic identity, at least socially. To claim he was Mexican American or Chicano, he suggested, would be to



welcome a certain amount of skepticism and rebuke among “real Mexicans.”

Respondents also cited peer groups and schools as arenas in which they learned about their ethnic and racial identities, and the significance of race in the United States. For instance, when a young Laotian in San Diego was asked about the type of friends she had made at school, she emphasized the importance of “ethnicity” in her social networks. “There was mainly a lot of Laotians,” she described her friends at school. While “there were many blacks” as well, and “not many whites” in general at the school, she described, students from different racial groups did not really mix and were separate. Other respondents similarly described having school friends made up almost exclusively of the same race—sometimes due to the fact that they felt more comfortable being with people who looked and talked like them. In contrast, other respondents discussed feeling marginalized when there were few other co-ethnics at their school. As one Hmong respondent in Minnesota described, she had felt “limited to the number of friends” she was able to have while in school “because all the white kids stick, they stick with the white kids.”

Not surprisingly, respondents discussed how school was often the first place where they were “teased” or bullied for looking and/or sounding different and where they were first exposed to pejorative stereotypes about their race/ethnicity. A Chinese American man in New York recalls, “When I was younger, I was teased a lot. And it was hard because they see you differently.” Respondents said they were “ashamed” and “felt embarrassed” by their ethnic and racial difference and the assumptions others had of them.

Respondents also learned about stereotypes others held of them from teachers in schools. Raphael, a Mexican American young man in San Diego, recalled that a teacher told him “You don’t have to worry about doing well ’cause you’re Mexican, you’ll probably become a car mechanic or something.” In contrast to the low expectation that the teacher conveyed to Raphael, a Chinese American man from New York we called Steve conveyed the pressure and embarrassment he felt when he did not live up the “model minority” stereotype of Asian Americans “They think all Asians are smarter and everything,” he described. “I think it’s more of a disappointment for me, because as I go to school, if I don’t measure up to their expectations, it’s a disappointment... especially in math.”

Our interviewees also discussed how these cultural messages and racial stereotyping continued after they transitioned out of school and into work settings as adults. Some respondents, for example, discussed feeling like there was an unspoken “glass ceiling” at their work. As one respondent in New York discussed: “You look at a lot of companies, you know, you look at mid-range management, I’m sure you have a wide range of ethnicities. You have Black, Chinese,

Hispanic, but if you look at a lot of companies, you look at the top, it’s mostly white. There’s gonna be a lot of white people, WASPS.” Many others shared stories of experiencing discrimination themselves which affected their view of their status as a racial and ethnic minority in the workplace.

Beyond family, school, and work, respondents also discussed broader contexts which had also shaped their ethnic identity. Some respondents, for example, discussed how residing in an “ethnic” neighborhood, or more generally living near a significant number of co-ethnics, helped foster and normalize a sense of community. As described by some respondents, these neighborhoods help people like them “feel connected” with their co-ethnic friends and family members, as well as created a space to practice and engage with cultural traditions important to their sense of belonging. Alternatively, other respondents described living in areas with very few, if any, co-ethnics. A number of respondents in these situations cited feeling isolated and out of place to a supposed American norm present in their neighborhoods. Given the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment in later parts of the decade (cf. Massey and Sanchez 2010) and the emergence of restrictive and punitive immigration policies in the U.S. in recent years, it is worth noting that immigration policies and politics were not extensively discussed by respondents in this battery of interviews. (We will return to this point in the conclusion.)

### **A Something-Else American: Hybridity, Biculturalism, and the Importance of Being Different**

One of the most common, salient themes that emerged in respondents’ discussion of their bicultural identity revolved around their ubiquitous status of being both American but also a racial ethnic minority. As more than a few respondents described, they were “undoubtedly American,” but also clearly “something else.” Implicated in these narratives was a tacit acknowledgement by respondents that they had adopted many American customs and cultural values, having grown up primarily in the US. Nonetheless, most respondents still “felt ethnic” and identified with this constructed sense of difference to a perceived American norm, particularly with respect to their sense of culture, physical appearance, or both.

For example, Barkley, a 24-year-old young man living in New York City, had been born in the US but nonetheless still identified with the cultural traditions of Jamaica; he identified himself as a “black American” but with “the tendencies” of “somewhere else.” But while Barkley still traveled to Jamaica, and had lived there for a while as a youth, he also strongly identified with his life in the US. In sum, Barkley felt he had a unique, idiosyncratic American identity that was a blend of both places.

*My culture* and the American culture are sort of blended together, and that my traditions and my ideals are sort of, of the American, of the Jamaican way, but I do know whole lot about my country, as in Jamaica, I mean, America... So I have the experience of both. I've lived in both places, I know both places.

While not all respondents felt as connected to their country of origin as Barkley, and some even felt estranged to these places, most nonetheless expressed a similar feeling of a blended sense of belonging. And for Barkley, his blended identity was a combination of the culture in these “places,” which he felt comfortable navigating, but also his experiences of being racialized as a “Black man in America.” As he elaborated in the interview, most Americans see and treat him “first as a black person,” and even though being black in Jamaica and in the US “mean different things,” he had incorporated the “American labels” into his blended sense of self, going so far as to describe himself as “African American” at times. While Barkley did not identify with African American culture—and in particular emphasized that his Jamaican culture made him very different from most black people he knew—he nonetheless identified with a shared racialized experience of being mistrusted, feared, and looked down upon by many Americans. Still, Barkley emphasized that he was a different type of African American, and for this reason preferred to self-identify as a “black American.”

In this sense it is interesting that the theme of being a “something else American” was present even among respondents who were adamant that they would never be “accepted as a real American” by the US population at large. Even respondents, who felt their “skin color” ascribed them to a lower status within an assumed American racial hierarchy, could strongly identify as a “nonetheless American.” As for example Aisha, a U.S. born woman whose parents had immigrated from the West Indies, explained,

I'm probably not the segment of society that, you know, would benefit the *most* from being an American. But, you know, that doesn't make me any less an American. I was born here. I was raised here. I've spent all my life. This is the home I know. I don't know any other place. This is home. So whether or not, you know, the upper echelons of Americans decide to accept me or not, I'm still an American.

Aisha, like other respondents of darker complexion, felt she was seen in racial terms, and similar to Barkley believed that most people assumed she was African American. Unlike Barkley, however, Aisha had gravitated toward feeling more like an American after traveling with her parents to Barbados to visit her family. Like other respondents who had traveled back to their parents'

origin country—seeking at times a stronger connection to “the home country”—Aisha had felt disconnection and discomfort during the trip. She became keenly aware that she struggled with the Bajan dialect, but she also realized she was different and “really American” in how she viewed the world compared to her relatives, and people in the island in general. Years later, Aisha still struggled to define an identity for herself that captured her ambivalent affiliations and experiences with both Barbados and the United States.

For Aisha, as for many immigrant young adults, their bicultural identity often encapsulated the complexities and idiosyncrasies of their incorporation into American society; the particular way that they navigated and negotiated the social and cultural tensions emblematic of being American but also “something else.” Indeed, after emphasizing the distinctiveness of their Americanized ethnicities, most respondents continued to next discuss either the challenges or advantages associated with their Americanized identities. Here, respondents varied on a narrative that either emphasized their collective identities as net positive or negative in American society. On the positive end of the spectrum respondents framed their bicultural identity in terms of an empowering ethnic if not transcendental hybridity (as one respondent described it as having the “best of both worlds”). On the negative side, respondents discussed their Americanized identities in more racial terms, akin to a severe limitation which made them doubly ostracized in their communities (what another respondent described as “belonging to neither world” and feeling like a “a double minority”). Connected to these identity narratives respondents also discussed their assessment of America's multicultural society and their either optimistic or pessimistic views about the country's future.

Tomás, a self-identified Chicano living in San Diego, described his bicultural identity clearly in the former, more positive, multiculturalist frame. Reflecting on his identity as a type of dual conduit between two cultures, Tomás felt he had a unique, and advantageous, perspective on American life as a bicultural minority.

It made me feel two sides. In that it made me see home as one side...And being an immigrant you see that part. And then you see the (other) part when you go to school. The other opposing language, culture, and other cultures...it's unique because you have two sides to you...having two side you get wealthy of what you know, and you can grow more...I know of both (sides) and I can exchange ideas and grow more from that.

Tomás also described that each time he visited Mexico, he discovered something new about being Mexican, being American, and the “advantages” of being both. In particular Tomás felt the exposure to two intact cultures allowed him to develop “two sides” to his identity, and

with this comes the opportunity for “something altogether new.” For the substantial number of respondents who described themselves as “proudly ethnic,” their hybrid Americanized identities were often framed as a positive accumulation of different cultural components—a blending of the best of both worlds, as Kim had described above. Other respondents similarly talked about the dexterity created in having a “bicultural” or even “multicultural identity,” particularly in terms of navigating the “restrictive ideas” of both one’s origin culture and in US culture. By playing off the advantages of being “both traditional and American at the same time,” people like Kim claimed they were actively integrating two different cultures. Here, an American identity resembles an individualistic expression of the multicultural opportunities and different “cultural blends” being perpetuated in their broader community. As one respondent from Cuba aptly described, not only was his identity more Americanized by living in New York, he added a little “Latin flavor” to what “it means to be American.”

In stark contrast to these optimistic views about the consequences of their Americanized identities, other respondents asserted a much more pessimistic and largely racialized narrative regarding the current and future state of American affairs. For these individuals, the Americanization process was certainly occurring (both within themselves and in the broader community), but ultimately, its ramifications were far from clear or strictly beneficial. For these individuals, an Americanized ethnicity often represented a form of marginalization for ethnic minorities, and one that reflected the continuing legacies of racism in America.

Xang, who had lived most of his life in St. Paul, Minnesota, expressed considerable ambivalence about his status as an American person of color. As he described, he “can’t just step forward into the Hmong world” anymore, because much of what he knows and has learned about himself has come from his experiences growing up in Minnesota. “I can’t get rid of it,” Xang said, almost desperately, about the parts of his personality that have been Americanized. “I am just who I am.” Still, even with his clothes, his demeanor, and the way that he acts, Xang knows that most Americans will still never accept him as one of them. “I don’t look American, I’m not white like them,” he said somberly. “Other people see me as really just as Hmong, but everything about me is not.”

Unlike those who expressed a certain amount of empowerment and agency in being different from the typical American archetype, respondents like Xang held a more pessimistic vision of whether these differences would ever be valued in American society. As for example, Bao, who was born in Vietnam but had “grown up in the U.S.,” expressed a similar skepticism about ever being accepted as truly American. He felt he would be forever seen as non-white:

I don’t know. When I’m in America, I didn’t see people viewing me as an American. I see them viewing me as a color, and like a Vietnamese person or an Asian person, but not American.

For respondents like Xang and Bao, being “different” often implicated their understanding of an American bifurcated racial hierarchy in which they would forever be “second class citizens.” Otis, born in Barbados, discussed that after living in America for some time, he started realizing “the barriers against people of darker complexion.” It was not so much explicit racism like that he had sometimes observed as youth in New York—how police looked at him as like he was going to rob people—but more persuasive and subtle were the cultural scripts he had learned while living among Americans. “A white family would not want their daughter to marry a Black man unless he’s rich,” Otis said, “because they feel she’s going to be associated with him, categorized with him.” It was common knowledge, Otis emphasized to his interviewer, that Blacks suffer financially in the U.S., and so most Americans, even immigrants, knew to avoid being categorized alongside this marginalized group.

While not all respondents of color felt pessimistic about their trajectories in the US culture, race, and racism were nonetheless often implicated in the narratives about incorporation. Even respondents of color who felt optimistic about their Americanized status, nonetheless emphasized that they had to work hard to preserve a positive identity for themselves and their children; that they had cultivated a sense of ethnic pride to resist and buffer against the racism and discrimination that they faced. This often meant challenging, even directly confronting racialized stereotypes within their own sense of identity. Some respondents discussed the importance of cultivating pride in one’s collective identity for this purpose, or what one respondent described as “building an armor” against the racism of America.

A West Indian respondent summarized her attempt to create a protective identity of the culture from her parents and grandparents in her children. As she stated, “It’s important for them (my children) to understand their heritage,” as it gives them “a sense of having another political identity.” In particular, this political identity works against attempts by others to ascribe an American black identity onto them. As she concluded:

... because of attempts to give you an identity, like, “You are this because you’re black.” I think that having already a picture of Jamaica allows you to say, “No, I am not this, I’m that. This is what I am over here.” And that’s not to say that no one else does that. I think if you’ve got it, you’re going to make that part of your child’s armor, then you should.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Our findings reveal the diverse and complex ways that immigrant young adults assert and make sense of their Americanized identities and experiences. These narratives demonstrate the overarching salience and significance of race and ethnicity in the construction of collective identities for immigrant Americans in their transitions to adulthood. They highlight key contextual factors which shape these patterns of identification (experiences with discrimination, language use, and connection to co-ethnic communities) for both individuals and across different social groups. We have also explicated one relatively common theme that runs across different narratives and social groups: the unique way in which immigrant young adults attempt to cultivate hybrid, bicultural American identities in early adulthood—a collective identification strategy that balances among varied pressures to acculturate, experiences with discrimination and racism, and identification with one’s ethnic or national community of origin.

We believe these findings complement and extend developmental perspectives on ethnic and racial identity formation in early adulthood as well as emerging new theories of the immigrant incorporation experience. In terms of identity formation, they support the notion that early adulthood is a time of the life course when issues of collective identification are salient and engrossing topics for many minority and immigrant young Americans (Umaña-Taylor et al. 2014). As we documented above, discussions of identity were recurring and anchoring issues for how respondents processed and made sense of various life challenges and tensions. Consistent with the conception that early adulthood is a time of experimentation with different roles and examination of long-held beliefs (Swartz et al. 2017; Syed and Mitchell 2016; Schwartz et al. 2013; Waters et al. 2011), many respondents were keen to use multifaceted racial and ethnic identifications as lenses to explore different viewpoints and perspectives on their lives and the world around them.

Our interviews are also largely consistent with social psychological models that have attempted to conceptualize ethnic and racial identity formation as a general social phenomenon applicable to various groups and communities in the US context. However, it should also be understood that there are important sources of variation in these narratives, and each group has its own unique set of values, customs, and history. In spite of the large size and diversity of our sample, our ability to highlight the specific circumstances of each ethnic group in our analysis—not to mention variations within each group—was more limited than we would have liked. For example, while we quoted a number of Chicanos living in San Diego, our analysis

is an insufficient treatment of the nuances and particularities of this community considered at a more national level. We believe that subsequent studies should pay more attention to this diversity and variation in the immigrant identification and socialization experience. In addition, we know that it will be important for future research to assess if there are more systemic differences between second-generation immigrants and 1.5ers in the American context, as well as to explore the distinctive experiences and viewpoints of asylees or refugees (among others).

Given our findings about the general importance of social context in patterns of identification and meaning-making, it will be imperative for studies of immigrant identities and experiences in the later 2000s and onward to attend to the “anti-immigrant” policies and discourse (Massey and Sanchez 2010) that have emerged in the United States in the years since these interviews were conducted. We are thinking here, among other things, of the passage of DACA and the push-back against it; the rise of anti-immigrant attitudes; and the intensification of pressures to adopt more draconian immigration policies including the building of a wall on the southern border. In view of these changes, future analyses may benefit by comparing the more recent dynamics of immigrant identification and incorporation with those experienced by the most marginalized migrants of the previous decade. On this point, for example, Gonzales (2011) argues that because the Supreme Court has provided undocumented children some protection/rights for K-12 education (*Plyer vs. Doe*, 1983), these youth experience a unique “transition to illegality” in early adulthood that he describes as period of discovery, learning to be illegal and coping (see also: Menjívar 2006; Olivas 2005).

Variations and complexities notwithstanding, our analysis nonetheless points to some important commonalities in how experiences associated with ethnic and racial identities are narrated, constructed, and lived. As a general empirical finding, in fact, it is striking how such diverse young adults tend to similarly “talk” about the bicultural and racial tensions in their lives. We argue that such discussions reflect the uniquely American context in which even “being ethnic” is coded, and mutually understood, as synonymous with being a member of a non-dominant or non-white group (Rumbaut 1994). As a number of sociological studies have similarly highlighted (Massey and Sanchez 2010; Omi and Winant 1994), American racial institutions have long perpetuated a normative whiteness in the construction of the idealized American. And as a number of respondents explicitly cited, their skin color, as well as other physical features, ran counter to this assumed American norm. We suspect that it is this assumed white normativity that youth find themselves coded and objectified as Others, and from which many understand themselves and their social identity as a “different type of American.” This is not to say that specific

customs and heritage do not matter in the construction of collective identities, nor that all non-white communities experience discrimination similarly. Rather, it is to suggest that how these things matter, and how they are made sense of, seems to be mediated by the lens of the dominant culture, one which often has misgivings and ambivalence toward immigrant populations. And it is within this assumed monolithic cultural context, that variations in language and cultural practice become coded and signified as part of some other, distinctive culture.

Perhaps the racialization of collective identification among immigrants is not entirely surprising in a country that has been profoundly, if unfortunately, defined by a long history of racism [stretching from slavery and Jim Crow segregation to the struggles of the civil rights movement (cf. Roediger 2008)], while paradoxically celebrating itself as a “nation of immigrants” and touting its growing diversity and multiculturalism (Glazer 1997). Nonetheless, a great deal of sociological research continues to document the consequence of race as a stratifying force in contemporary American culture, and within this context, sociologists continue to document the diverse ways in which various minorities and new immigrants are incorporating to American society (Alarcon et al. 2016; Kasinitz et al. 2008; Portes and Rumbaut 2014).

On this point, we would underscore again how important categories of race and experiences with racism and discrimination are for multiple and varied immigrant groups in our study. Perhaps this is an obvious point for some. It is, for example, well-established in the literature involving Latino/migrants (Ai et al. 2014; Baldwin-White et al. 2017; Roth 2012). However, too often for both scholars and the general public it is easy to overlook its broader resonance and more general structuring power. And this finding about the central, structuring force of race and racism in shaping immigrant identities and experiences is one of the primary reasons why we have adopted—and see our paper contributing to—the new, more differentiated and grounded theories of the immigration incorporation experience.

At least until recently, the question for students of migration has been whether the immigrant experience in the US should be understood through a generalized *assimilation* framework (e.g., Alba and Nee 2003; see also Alba 2009) or one focused on the continued *racialization* of specific groups (e.g., Bonilla-Silva 2004, 2017). Newer thinking about immigrant incorporation (cf. Ali and Hartmann 2015; Cornell and Hartmann 2004; Kasinitz 2004) avoids these extremes. Instead, such approaches blend the insights of these alternative frames by exploring the forces of both ethnic inclusion and racial marginalization that are at play in the incorporation experience. Our study both reflects and reinforces the significance and usefulness of this theoretical orientation, demonstrating the interplay of ethnic and

racial categories as well the valuable insights of the analytic frames of both assimilationism and racialization. What is revealed, along the way, is that the immigrant incorporation experience is an ongoing, never-ending process marked by a set of distinctive, if often uneven pathways for different migrant groups in varied social contexts (see also Portes and Zhou 1993).

This new, more nuanced “immigrant incorporation” frame has implications not only for how we theorize the immigration experience, but also for the policies and programs that are adopted to assist and support newly arriving migrants. Although a full discussion of these more practical implications is well beyond our space constraints here, we want to underscore two key points: (1) that there is no single, one-size-fits-all model for policy and programs; and (2) that any policies or approaches that are adopted need to take the realities of racial discrimination and racism itself into account for many, if not all immigrant communities. In other words, immigration policies—especially those intended to provide assistance and support for immigrants in their relocation experience—must be context-specific. They must be tailored to the local conditions and unique identities of different migrant communities, and at the same time these policies must be attentive to the racialized culture and racist barriers that most migrants in the United States will encounter.

There is one final, more general conceptual point about the importance of meaning, subjectivity, and agency—even within a sociological frame attentive to context, variations, and constraints—that should be stressed by way of conclusion. While categorization and external labeling are important components of the identification and incorporation processes we have documented in this paper, our analysis also shows that it is not just the labels themselves that matter (as some sociologists would have it) but also the meanings attached to these labels by individuals. The meanings of particular identity categories varied widely by individuals and contexts, and labels sometimes had different significance at different parts of the interview. This variation is due largely to the importance of context; meanings and practices associated with specific ethnicities are heavily context-dependent. But these findings also raise some complications to how ethnicity and race are sometimes conceptualized in the literature, as almost external social categories and cultural scripts that respondents merely and almost automatically internalize. Many sociologists emphasize the malleability, and the mutually interactive nature of culture and social context; individuals are both influenced by, and an influence to, their context. While there is much sociological debate about how much agency individuals have to change their social contexts, our point here is to merely caution against reifying specific collective identities as static cultural constructs over time and place. They are constructed, processual, and

(at least potentially) ever-changing—if only because of the agency and subjectivity of human beings themselves. The challenge to studying such identities is that these social constructs are inherently subjective, malleable and being constantly renegotiated. It is therefore important to continually reexamine the meanings and significance that respondents attach to these labels—and importantly reexamine how we as researchers approach and make sense of these labels and categories ourselves.

Similarly, it is critical that scholarship seeking to better understand the lived experiences of immigrants not simply reify their status as non-normative and aberrant identities; it is clear that many ethnic and racialized American minorities already feel objectified in the broader culture as non-normative, ethnic others. As this literature on identities continues to grow and develop, researchers should be attentive of how they can capture and conceptualize these complexities and differences without reinforcing the very same cultural dynamics that objectifies these communities.

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