The Importance of Families and Communities in Understanding Ethnicity and Maintaining Ethnic Identity

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Introduction

Social science provides us with a variety of theories that attempt to explain the dynamics of race and ethnicity. Many of these theories are concerned with the basic question of ethnic difference: its origins, persistence, and decline. In the contemporary literature on immigration to the United States and on how immigrants adjust to that relocation, assimilation and the persistence of ethnic identity have often been considered polar opposites.[1] Researchers, however, are beginning to find that both processes often occur simultaneously, as when immigrants become acculturated into American society but also maintain or even construct distinct ethnic identities, often "symbolically."[2] Even though a generation of immigrants may give up their ethnic identities, adopt the host language, and intermarry, their children or grandchildren may chOose to renew ancestral ethnicities, and in so doing, may even contribute to the re-ethnicization of their parents as adults. Ethnicity (and ethnic identity), therefore, is both a conservative force as well as an agent of change.[3] The articles in this special issue of *Ethnic Studies Review* explore the dynamics of ethnicity in the United States and contextualize the experience of various groups within families and communities.

Since "Ethnicity: Family and Community" is such a broad topic, this special issue can only capture a portion of the very interesting ongoing research in the area. While the articles included are diverse, they center around the general themes of understanding problems associated with ethnicity and ethnic identity. Social issues related to ethnicity include internal migration patterns and providing public assistance to immigrants. How can communities cope with the needs of diverse immigrant groups? Is assimilation into the dominant host society always

the best solution for these groups? Another difficulty associated with families and ethnicity is when families want their ethnic or racial culture to be taken into consideration even when they and their children are in settings outside of the home. Two articles in this issue focus on dilemmas of transmitting ethnic culture and identity when children are of a different race or ethnicity than their caregivers (including within the home). Finally, the issue concludes with articles concerning the maintenance and transmission of ethnic identity. In the case of Vietnamese Americans, the focus of concern is on the too rapid "Americanization" of the second generation. For Lithuanian Americans, however, the concerns are somewhat different. Instead, the task facing Lithuanian Americans (and other white ethnic groups) is how to retain ethnic identification after several generations of acculturation, assimilation, and intermarriage in the United States.

Understanding Ethnicity

Jenkins reminds us that although internal processes of group identification take place, the role of external categorization (which includes power and authority relations) is also important in that it establishes what identities are acceptable to various groups.[4] It is this external categorization which affects recent immigrant groups with few resources, as is the case among the Hmong in the United States. Additionally, whites have different "ethnic options" compared to "colored" minorities in the United States.[5] This is a particularly sensitive issue among parents of multi-cultural/racial children and for parents raising children of another race than their own who feel that their choices are unfairly constrained. An important element of ethnicity is its intersection with social class. For instance, purely symbolic ethnic connections are more prominent among middle-class Hispanics and whites, while lower-class Hispanics tend to view ethnicity as part of their disadvantaged minority status.[6] We see this played out among parents concerned with their children's child care--do they emphasize their class expectations when searching for daycare or does finding a culturally sensitive daycare take precedence?

The article, "Hmong on the Move: Understanding Secondary Migration" by Jac D. Bulk focuses on the geographic movement of Hmong refugees in the United States. They tend to settle in three states: California, Wisconsin, and Minnesota both for employment opportunities and to meet their familial obligations. While they are accused of being "welfare nomads," Bulk convincingly argues that this is an erroneous assumption. Although Hmong refugees tend to congregate in regions with high rates of unemployment and welfare dependency, they do so in order to be with family and clan members. For them, it is more important to maintain their traditional identity as a community than to maximize

their own individual self interests. In effect, these conditions result in Hmong having a migrant rather than a minority orientation toward their position in United States society.

The articles by Verschelden and Uttal also focus on the problems of maintaining traditions and ethnic identity. The article "'Shared Ethnicity' in Transracial Adoption" by Cia Verschelden explores the complexities and controversies over transracial adoption. In particular, she addresses issues faced by white parents who adopt black infants. Such an adoption questions the nature of ethnicity. Is it an inherited trait or learned? Verschelden argues that the learned aspect of ethnicity is the most important one. However, given a society which treats blacks and whites differently due to racial characteristics, white parents of black children are faced with the task of trying to teach their children necessary coping skills. She contends, however, that through the process of "sharing ethnicity" that both parents and their children can cope with social reality.

Like Verschelden, Lynet Uttal focuses on the issues associated with maintaining ethnic/racial identity. In her article "Racial Safety and Cultural Maintenance: The Childcare Concerns of Employed Mothers of Color," however, she explores the lack of continuity between the needs of the parents and paid caregivers. She argues that is it important to have childcare which acknowledges the importance of race, culture, and class. In particular, she argues that mothers of color take into account racial safety and cultural maintenance when they make their childcare decisions. While Bulk, Verschelden, and Uttal all focus on problems associated with ethnicity in communities and families, the final articles place more emphasis on the maintenance of ethnic identity.

Ethnic Identity

Both when ethnicity fails to be transmitted to subsequent generations and when it is resurgent, it becomes clear that it cannot be explained simply as the passing down of ethnic traditions and culture from one generation to the next. Instead, ethnic groups and individuals actively construct an ethnic identity through the creation of ethnic symbols, boundaries, communities, and culture that change depending on both group and individual circumstances. One can adopt a multitude of ethnic identities, for example--regional, national, civic, and social. The choices available are often connected to cultural symbols. As individuals and groups, we select what cultural representations we wish to emphasize and act upon.[7]

Joseph Stimpfl and Ngoc H. Bui's contribution to the special issue, "I'd Rather Play the Saxophone: Conflicts in Identity between Vietnamese Students and Their Parents" takes a look at identity maintenance among Vietnamese Americans. Ethnic identity formation of the

children of Vietnamese immigrants is affected by their educational attainment as well as their integration into American culture. At the same time, their very assimilation negatively affects their relationships with their parents. Often parental expectations contrast sharply with the desires of the youths themselves. In particular, the acculturated children fail to place the family as a central location in their lives. They tend to place their own interests before the needs of their family.

While Stimpfl and Bui focus on recent immigrants, Mary Kelly's article, "Ethnic Conversions: Family, Community, Women, and Kinwork" focuses on the role that families and community play in transmitting and maintaining ethnic identity among Lithuanian Americans across several generations.[8] What is particularly interesting about her article is the fact that the ethnic identity sometimes is created through community and familial ties rather than through actual ethnic heritage. This is one strategy by which increasingly assimilated ethnic groups with high intermarriage rates can retain ethnic identity and culture.

In addition to the articles, this special issue, "Ethnicity: Family and Community," includes a selected bibliography of current readings on the intersections between ethnicity, family and community compiled by the guest editor and Thomas Sanchez. Readers interested in the articles included in the special issue can further explore these areas on their own. The bibliography is organized into three sections: Anthologies and Edited Volumes, Books, and Journal Articles and Book Chapters. Each section is ordered alphabetically by author. The bibliography includes a sampling of publications in the areas of Sociology, Psychology, Social Work, Dance, Folklore, Education, Gerontology, Ethnic Studies, Social History, Communication, and Women's Studies.

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Notes

[1] David L. Salvaterra, "Becoming American: Assimilation, pluralism, and ethnic identity," in *Immigrant America: European Ethnicity in the United States*, ed. Timothy Walch (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), 29-54.

[2] Anny P. Bakalian, *Armenian-Americans* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1993.); Herbert Gans, "Comment: Ethnic invention and

acculturation, a bumpy-line approach," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 12, 1 (1992): 42-52.

3 Ronald Reminick, *Theory of Ethnicity: Anthropologists' Perspective* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983).

4 Richard Jenkins 1994, "Rethinking Ethnicity: identity, categorization and power," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 17, 2 (April): 197-223.

5 F. James Davis, *Who is Black? One Nation's Definition* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991); "Ethnic and Racial Identities of Second Generation Blacks in New York City," *International Migration Review* 28: 795-820.

6 Candace Nelson and Marta Tienda, "The Structuring of Hispanic Identity," *Ethnic & Racial Studies* 8 (1985): 49-74.

7 Ann Swidler, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," *American Sociological Review* 51 (1986): 273-286.

8 This article was sent out for an external blind review by *Ethnic Studies Review* senior editor, Miguel A. Carranza.