Ethnic Classification among the Mexican American People

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Abstract: For Mexican Americans, the largest immigrant group throughout the fifty years with the longest continuing history of immigration, sociologists disagree about the extent of ethnic persistence. In this paper, we predict that strong persistence of ethnic identification into the third and fourth generations among Mexican Americans. We examine the extent to which respondents identify as Mexican or Mexican American and one behavioral indicator of ethnicity, Spanish proficiency, by generational status. We use a 35-year longitudinal and inter-generational data set of Mexican Americans (from the original survey conducted in Los Angeles and San Antonio as part of the *Mexican American People*). We find that identifying as Mexican American persists strongly into the fourth generation. This is coupled with high levels of being Spanish proficient, even in the fourth generation.

Introduction

The study of ethnicity has long been a topic of sociological inquiry. For the children and grandchildren of immigrants, sociologists have generally assumed that the salience of their ethnicity rapidly dissipates, if not completely disappears. Thus the sense of a collective "we-ness" is no longer an issue by the second or third generation, thereby diminishing the salience of the ethnicity for understanding social interactions. This assumption has been based on the experience of European immigrants in the early part of this century and their descendants today. For Mexican Americans, the largest immigrant group throughout the last fifty years, with the longest continuing history of immigration, sociologists disagree about the extent of ethnic persistence.

The trend towards loss of ethnic identification by the third generation, as predicted by assimilation theory, has been confirmed by most behavioral indicators for the "non-Hispanic white" (Alba, 1990; Lieberson and Waters, 1988). Some have argued that there is an ethnic revival in the third generation, as it seeks to claim what the second generation sought to forget in its attempt to secure the American dream (Greely 1971). However, this may be mere nostalgic fascination with one's past among persons who have secured comfortable positions in the new society. Actual ethnic behaviors, including association in ethnic social and cultural activities, actually declined for the descendants of European immigrants (Alba 1990). Gans (1979) calls this "symbolic ethnicity", i.e., "feeling ethnic" as opposed to "being ethnic" Some argue that by the third generation, ethnic identity for Mexican Americans is as weak as it is for descendants of immigrant groups (need reference).

Other researchers argue that for Mexican-Americans, ethnic identity has remained strong even into the third generation. Several explanations have been given as to why ethnic identity

persists among Mexican Americans. Researchers, such as Yinger (1985) argue that as the largest minority group in the Southwest, their regional concentration has isolated them from other groups, thus strengthening their sense of ethnicity. Also, the continuing influx of Mexican immigrants throughout this century has reinforced or revitalized attachment of even the U.S.-born to their native roots. Extensive migrant networks also channel Mexican immigrants into Mexican American neighborhoods and rely on U.S. born Mexican Americans as mediators with the host culture (Massey, et al. 1987). Mexican Americans are also phenotypically distinct from the dominant population, further stigmatizing them as a racial and ethnic minority. Finally, persistently low socio-economic status, occupational concentration, and residential segregation tends to reinforce their ethnic identification (Yancey, Erickson, and Juliani, 1976).

Another perspective argues that ethnic identity may be strong among Mexican Americans because they continue to be largely working class into the third generation. Whereas upwardly mobile ethnics may downplay their ethnicity in the interest of mixing freely with diverse groups, disadvantaged persons tend to be more socially isolated. The correspondence of residence, work and ethnicity causes ethnicity to be perceived as a principal determinant of life chances or the reason by which they understand their disadvantage (Yancey, et al 1976; Alba, 1990). Also, social and family networks bring together persons of similar ethnicity to create a social context that is both working class and ethnic simultaneously. We can test the class effects hypothesis easily but also we can examine whether persons who associate more frequently with coethnics and live in ethnic neighborhoods are more likely to give greater salience to their ethnicity and behave ethnically.

There is, however, little evidence to substantiate either the claim of persistence or acculturation. The extent to which either position is true and the conditions which influence such ethnic persistence or change will be addressed with this study. The analysis we propose will permit examining the validity of theories of immigrant incorporation and ethnicity for both the immigrant and U.S.-born population of Mexican origin and the children of both immigrants and U.S. natives. Also, this methodology will provide information not found in the classic studies of European immigrant groups since surveys were not conducted with these previous waves of immigrants leaving many key sociological issues unanswered.

The chief hypothesis to emerge from the theoretical discussion on Mexican Americans is that ethnic identity will persist strongly into the third generation, in both symbolic and behavioral ways. While we expect behavioral indicators to decline from the immigrant generation onward, we also expect strong expressions of ethnicity into the third generation among some sectors of the populations. The strength of this identity will be influenced by a number of key factors. We hypothesize that ethnic markers--such as surname, phenotype, limited or accented English, among others--are key to understanding ethnic expressions in later generations. More specifically, respondents who posses stronger ethnic markers at the first interview in the sixties--e.g., Spanish surname and Spanish speaking--will express stronger identity, and engage in more ethnic behavior, when reinterviewed in the nineties as will their adult children. Additionally we expect that (1) socio-economic origins and mobility and (2) the social context during childhood with respect to its class and ethnic composition will influence the symbolic and behavioral expressions of ethnicity.

Present Study

In this paper, we examine the persistence of ethnic identity into the third and fourth generation. We predict that there will be significant identification as Mexican American or Mexican even among the third and fourth generation. Additionally we examine one behavioral indicator of ethnicity—Spanish proficiency. We address the question of identifying as Mexican is reflected high levels of proficiency and whether Spanish proficiency persists into the third and fourth generation.

Data

We created a 35-year longitudinal and inter-generational data set from the original survey used in the *Mexican American People* (Grebler, Moore, and Guzman, 1970). We searched for the original respondents in this 1965-66 survey (referred to as the 1965 data) and re-interviewed them between 1997 and 2000 (referred to as the 2000 follow-up). We interviewed up to 2 of the adult children that had been born by the 1965 survey. I use the child survey that includes 768 respondents in this analysis of. We attached parental information from the original and follow-up surveys to the children's information.

Terminology. We call the respondents to the child survey, *children*, even though they were all adults (between 30 and 55 years old) at the time of the interview. We call the respondents from the original study, *respondent parent*. In the child survey, we collected information about the parent who was not part of the original study and call them *non-respondent parent*.

Variables

Ethnic Identity. Respondents were asked "People have different ways of thinking about their ethnic backgrounds or origins. What about you? How do you think of yourself? What do you consider your ethnic background to be?" Respondents were not provided response categories but rather responded in an open-ended manner. We included on the questionnaire, a list of possible responses. If respondents provided one of our pre-coded responses verbatim, interviewers marked that response. Any other response that did not exactly fit our pre-coded list was recorded verbatim. Respondents could provide more than one response. When they did so, we followed up with which background did they identified most.

We developed a measure of ethnic identity from these questions. When respondents provided only one response, we used that response. When respondents provided more than one response, we used the response they identified most with. In this paper, we provide first a detailed list of ethnic responses and then we group this long list into 5 major categories.

Generational Status. Respondents were asked about their place of birth. Secondly, child respondents were asked about the parent who was not our original respondent. Children were asked the non-respondent parent's place of birth and their parents' place of birth. From this information, we can classify the non-respondent parent as first, second, or third (includes later) generation. For information about the respondent parent, we use their responses to the original and follow-up surveys. We asked the respondent parent their place of birth, their parents' place of birth, and their four grandparents' place of birth. From this, we can classify the respondent

parent as first, second, third, or fourth generation. From both parents' information, we can classify the children as first, second, third, or fourth generation. When parents' generational status differed, we use the most recent generational status. For instance, the child of a first generation and second generation parent is second generation.

Spanish Proficiency. Respondents were asked how well they understood, spoke, read, and wrote Spanish. The response categories were: very well, well, somewhat well, not very well, and not at all. For this paper, we averaged the four indicators together and present the percentage whose overall Spanish Proficiency falls in the well or very well range.

Results

Detailed Ethnic Identity. Table 1 presents the detailed distribution of ethnic identity. We see that over a dozen ethnic labels are used by our respondents. These range from Mexican and Mexican American to Anglo and White. We see that Mexican American is the single most common label used—by 37 percent of the children. The second most used label is Hispanic with approximately a quarter of the respondents identifying in this manner. The third label most used label is Mexican, with 16 percent using this label. These 3 labels account for 80 percent of all responses.

Infrequent Ethnic Labels. The other ethnic labels were used much less frequently. Mexicano, referring to identifying as Mexican in Spanish, is used by only 2 respondents. Chicano, a label used extensively in academic and political circles, is used by 3 percent of the children. American Mexican, which refers to responses such American of Mexican descent or ancestry, was used by one percent. Hispanic and Latino are pan-ethnic labels that have come into recently, although Latino is used less often—two percent—than Hispanic. Spanish, Spanish American, and Latin American are also pan-ethnic labels but ones that are rarely used today (in contrast these labels were heavily used by respondents in the 1965 survey.) American, Anglo, and White would naturally be considered the most assimilated labels. Fewer than 100 respondents use these three labels combined. And of these, American is used more than the other two labels. The other category, which includes non-Mexican and non-Latino labels like Native American, is used by only six respondents.

Combined Ethnic Identify Labels. Since this distribution is so detailed and many of the categories are small and there are similarities among some categories, these are combined into 5 categories. These are listed on Table 2. First is Mexican American, which combines Mexican American, Chicano, American Mexican, and Mexican Mixed. Mexican includes Mexican and Mexicano. Pan ethnic includes Hispanic, Latino, Spanish, Spanish American, and Latin American. American/Anglo includes American, Anglo, and White. In Table 2, I present this combined distribution by generational status. We see that among the first generation, 60 percent identify as Mexican. But in the second through fourth generation, many fewer identify as Mexican and many more identify as Mexican American. In the second, third, and fourth generations, between 40 to 50 percent identify as Mexican American. Thus Mexican identity doesn't decline from generation 2 to generation 4. Mexican steadily declines between second to fourth generation. The second most prevalent identity categories are the pan ethnic labels (and we know from table 1 that this is primarily Hispanic). Identifying as American (or other related labels) increases from the first to the fourth generation but is overall at a low percentage.

Generation by Spanish Proficiency. Table 3 presents the distribution of those whose Spanish proficiency is high by generational status. Obviously most first generation children have very high Spanish proficiency. While Spanish proficiency declines in later generations, it is still high, for instance 30 percent of the fourth generation has high Spanish Proficiency.

Conclusions

Thus we observe significant persistence of ethnic identity and behavior into the third and fourth generation. These are preliminary data form our project. We will expand these analysis to include more measure. And we will predict ethnicity identify in a multivariate framework.

Table 1: Detailed Distribution on Ethnic Identification (Frequencies and Percentage)		
	Freq.	Percent
Mexican-American	285	37.1
Mexican	127	16.5
Mexicano	2	0.3
Chicano	23	3.0
American, Mexican	10	1.3
Mexican Mixed	7	0.9
Hispanic	203	26.4
Latino	16	2.1
Spanish/Spanish American	9	1.2
Latin American	2	0.3
American	61	7.9
Anglo	12	1.6
White	5	0.6
Other	6	0.8
Total	*768*	*100.00*

Table 2: Child's Ethnic Identification by Child's Generational Status (Column percentages)					
	Generational Status				
Ethnic Identity	1	2	3	4	Total
Mexican-American	19.5	47.6	41.9	41.2	42.3
Mexican	58.5	18.3	13.3	8.8	16.8
Pan Ethnic	17.1	26.6	32.1	35.3	29.9
American/Anglo	2.4	7.4	11.9	13.2	10.2
Other	2.4	0.0	0.9	1.5	0.8
Total	*100.0*	*100.0*	*100.0*	*100.0*	*100.0*
Sample Size	*41*	*229*	*430*	*68*	*768*

Table 3: Child's High Spanish Proficiency by Child's Generational Status (Column percentages)		
	Percent	*N*
Generation 1	78.0	*41*
Generation 2	43.7	*229*
Generation 3	22.3	*430*
Generation 4	30.8	*68*
Total	*100.0*	*768*