



Proceedings of the 12th Annual Conference
Latinos in the Heartland:
Positive Steps Toward a Pluralist Society
A multistate conference about integration of immigrants
www.cambio.missouri.edu/Library/

On Being a Mexican American: An Autoethnographic Analysis of Identity Construction

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Abstract

This article uses autoethnography to frame a larger conceptual/theoretical discussion of the identity categories based in the intersections of race/ethnicity, nationality, and immigration for the immigrant third generation and beyond, as they negotiate integration with mainstream United States culture and within their families. Drawing on a lifetime of experiences with identity management, the author interrogates dominant theoretical explanations of Mexican assimilation in an attempt to trouble the notion of immigrant generations as monolithic groupings. Particular emphasis is placed on the everyday experiences of Mexican immigrants and their descendants that contribute to Mexican American identity formation. More specifically, the author explores how Mexican Americans experience daily life at home, at work, and in public life, and how these experiences impact their sense of personal identity, their relationships with natives, their interactions with their families and community, and the identity work that goes into producing those categories and social worlds.

Keywords: Mexican assimilation, immigrant generations, bicultural identity

Introduction

As Mexicans immigrate to rural areas of the United States in record numbers, they bring with them their ethnic identities but struggle to maintain them as they live in predominately White contexts. Simultaneously, the influence of the Mexican immigrant population is beginning to reshape the social, political, and demographic landscape of the United States outside of the Southwestern borderlands (Saenz, Cready, & Morales, 2007; Zuniga & Hernandez-Leon, 2005; Kandel & Cromartie, 2004). However, over the last 20 years, little has been written about the experiences, group identities, assimilation, and social integration of immigrant Latino/as, particularly in the Midwest (Waters & Jimenez, 2005). Most ethnographic research on Mexicans in the United States has focused on the communities of the Southwestern Borderlands (Gomez, 2007; Massey & Sanchez, 2006; Macias, 2004). There is no question that studies of the Borderlands are relevant to Mexican American immigrant settlement, but the clear evidence that migration patterns have drastically changed over the past two decades requires scholarly focus on new destination areas as well (Durand, Massey, & Charvet, 2000).

For example, in 1910, 95% of Mexican Americans lived in the Southwest; in 1990 that percentage had decreased to 83%, and in 2000 it decreased to 75% (Saenz, Cready, & Morales, 2007; Guzman, 2001; U.S. Census Bureau, 1991), leaving 25% of Mexicans spread throughout other regions of the United States. The most recent estimates of Mexican Americans place the population at roughly 30,000,000 individuals (Tafoya, 2006). According to these figures, roughly 7,500,000 Mexican Americans are living in areas which previously had little to no Mexican immigration, such as the Midwest. The increased outward immigration and migration from the Southwest and the development of communities in rural areas are commonly attributed to the availability of jobs in construction, agriculture, and animal processing plants. Continuing with the trend of new immigrant gateways, 21% of Mexican immigrants have begun to settle in rural areas (Lichter,

Parisi, Grice, & Taquino, 2007; Arreola, 2004). Such migration of Mexican immigrants to rural areas in the Midwest has not occurred without opposition. Similar to the troubles of African Americans during the Great Migration, Mexicans and Mexican Americans across the Midwestern states have been subjected to segregation, isolation, and physical violence (Vasquez, 2010; Lichter et al., 2007). In rural areas where some immigrant Mexican communities are settling, this same opposition is occurring to this day.

Autoethnography

This article uses an autoethnographic approach to make larger conceptual and theoretical points about the struggle many Mexican Americans face as they attempt to construct and/or maintain an identity in the Midwestern United States. My use of autoethnography situates my biography as the context and data for analysis, highlighting my skin-color-based experiences, language proficiency, and assimilation into mainstream Midwestern culture. In conducting this autoethnographic analysis, I do not mean to generalize all Latino/as in the Midwest, or to imply that my personal experiences are common, to be expected, or desirable. Autoethnography can best be understood “as a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context” (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 9). Indeed, autoethnographies “turn the eye of the sociological imagination back on the ethnographer” and permit critical self-reflection of knowledge and the many forms in which it is produced (Clough, 2000, p. 179). As I will illustrate through my own personal experiences, constructing and maintaining an identity in the Midwest is a complicated and often highly contested struggle for Latino/as.

Identity and the Self

My first memories of moving to the Midwest as a teenager from southern Texas are based in a personal struggle to define myself. In my hometown of Brownsville, I was racially/ethnically part of the dominant group (Mexican).

In my new home in rural Missouri, I was very obviously different from most residents. My skin color suddenly became a variable in my interactions with others. My accent raised suggestions I enroll in ESL classes, and my enactments of Latino/a culture received punishment for violating the norms of my new social context. Indeed, who I thought I was appeared to not matter. Rather, how I was defined by members of the community came to dominate my sense of self.

Articulations of the self result in the development of groups, communities, and macro structures (Sewell, 1992; Bourdieu, 1984; Berger & Luckman, 1967). In turn, these socially constructed structures influence the creation of an identity by providing a system of shared meanings (for example, language) through which an individual can take the role of the other, reflect on the self as an object, and engage in social interactions (Blumer, 1989; Mead, 1967; Cooley, 1902). Social interactions serve as opportunities for us to receive feedback on how we are presenting our selves, to receive approval of an identity, and to confirm our own beliefs of who we think we are (Blumer, 1989; Goffman, 1959). Social interactions occur in a wide variety of contexts.

Relevant to the sociology of identity is the common characteristic that all social interactions occur between individuals who occupy specific positions or who possess certain statuses (Rose, 1998). A social interaction is not the converging of two individuals, but rather of specific dimensions of two individuals who possess membership to a certain group or status—their identity (Burke, 1980). How we come to define ourselves is an extremely social process. As personal as we may assume our conceptions of who we are, what we like, and what we do might be, all of these perceptions and ideals are constructed in relation to institutional and cultural discourses. That is to say, social actors rely on social interactions with others to learn about, and engage with, various categories of identity construction. In turn, our social interactions with others serve to confer our presentations of self.

Understanding Latino/a Identity

As the years passed and I became more assimilated into rural Missouri culture, an influx of Latino/a immigrants occurred in my community. Initially optimistic of this, I was shocked when I was excluded from the new Latino/a community. Meaner Latino/as policing the ethnic boundaries called me a coconut (brown on the outside, white on the inside) and chastised me for becoming like White community members. I thought to myself, how could this happen? A couple of years ago, I would have been doing the policing, but now I am on the outside looking in. Where do I belong?

An ethnic group can be defined as a collective of individuals within larger society who share a common ancestral origin, culture, and history (Cornell & Hartman, 1998). In this sense, Latino/a identity is not something that is inherited, but rather is something that is achieved through socialization and enactment of cultural cues (Jimenez, 2010; Brubaker et al., 2007). Undeniably, the salience of the Latino/a identity is dependent on the context and can manifest in “thick” or “thin” forms (Cornell & Hartman, 1998). The contexts which produce this variance have been the sites for rigorous study in recent years. As a result, there are many competing frameworks that Latino/a identity theorists suggest best apply to the population. Assimilation is defined as the decline of ethnic distinctions and social and cultural differences (Alba & Nee, 2003; Gordon, 1964). Converging groups and cultures intermingle to the point that a distinction between once diverse groups can no longer be made. Previously marked individuals and groups move to the unmarked category as they join the mainstream and become more similar. Irish, German, and Italian immigrants of the late 19th and early 20th century are examples of a successful assimilation process. Although initially met with great hostility, descendants of these immigrants are rather indistinguishable in appearance, culture, diet, language, and overall culture from the U.S. mainstream.

When assimilation is achieved, as in the case of the aforementioned immigrant populations, there is often nothing that connects third- or fourth-generation Americans to their ancestors or ancestral homelands. Frequently, this leads to a longing for a connection to the ancestral origin and a desire for distinction from the generalized mainstream (Waters, 1990). Scholars of symbolic ethnicity have emerged to explain this phenomenon (Waters, 1990; Gans, 1979). Symbolic ethnicity can be defined as a nostalgic connection to the culture of previous immigrant generations and a sense of pride in that culture and history without any real day to day adherence to cultural traditions or values (Waters, 1990; Gans, 1979). This theory of identity is based on the obvious notion that ethnicity is very much a social construction, which unlike race is not ascribed at birth and can be modified to fit the particular circumstances in an individual's life. Indeed, consciously choosing an ethnicity and practicing it symbolically is commonly a voluntary and positive process for White individuals and has little bearing on their life chances or outcomes.

As a result of assimilation to the unmarked category of American, the same White individual can assert an identity and claim Irish ethnicity on St. Patrick's Day, German ethnic identity for Oktoberfest, and excuse her temper as a manifestation of her Italian blood, all without any specific knowledge of history or culture. Symbolic ethnicity is an American phenomenon that contributes to a strong sense of individuality as well as a desire for distinction and communal solidarity (Waters, 1990; Gans, 1979). Unlike unmarked Whites who can navigate social life and contexts free of designations, African Americans, Asians, and Latino/as are ascribed into racial categories involuntarily and occupy a lower status in society in almost all contexts of their everyday lives regardless of their religion, culture, values, or beliefs. Therefore, while symbolic ethnicity is a valid concept for White, unmarked Americans, the logic cannot be applied to marked groups such as Latino/as.

Affiliative ethnic identity theory has emerged as an explanation of the desire for ethnic difference (Jimenez, 2010). Citing a shift towards accepting and

enabling diversity as a result of the 1950's and 1960's civil rights movement in the United States, affiliative ethnic identity theorists contend that an influx of diverse cultural awareness through mass media, politics, and education has supplied unmarked individuals with a toolkit by which to construct an identity regardless of a shared ancestral origin. An example of this affiliative ethnic identity are Native American enthusiasts who have no Native American ancestry but attend powwows, learn to play indigenous instruments, consume traditional Native American cuisine, and most commonly, develop a connection to Native American religious traditions and beliefs (Nagel, 1997).

Affiliative ethnic identity, thus, is a response to ethnic blandness (Wilkins, 2008). Jimenez (2010) defines ethnic identity, affiliative or otherwise, as both an internally held sense of self and an expressed aspect of identity. Affiliative ethnic identity is not based in a real ancestral connection to previous generations. Instead, individuals make claims and aspire to be accepted as honorary members of an ethnic identity category. This claim to honorary membership is achieved, not ascribed. That is to say, affiliative ethnic identity is the result of the consumption of knowledge, history, and culture of a particular ethnic identity category and the consumption and enactment of cultural cues and traditions until an individual views herself, and is viewed by others, as an affiliate within the ethnic identity category (Jimenez, 2010).

The "Work" of Negotiating an Ethnic Identity

In order to fit in with the new Latino/a community members, I had to make certain changes. I minimized my use of English in public, boasted about new music (Latino/a artists) purchases I had made, and followed Mexican American fashion trends. While this never afforded me inner circle status with the Latino/a community, it was enough to create and maintain lasting friendships.

A growing literature on the sociology of immi-

grant identity seeks to understand the trends in the construction of identity among Latino/a communities (Vasquez, 2010; Jimenez, 2009; Gutierrez, 1995). This has led to a series of explanations which differ in their justification of how and why Latino/a identify as they do. Latino/a identity can become symbolic when there is a large gap between immigrants, their descendants, and their point of origin (Jimenez, 2009; Waters, 1990; Gans, 1979), Latino/a identity can be a reaction to external pressures (Min, 2010; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), Latino/a identity may be revived during social movements (Nagel, 1997), and Latino/a identity can assume more of a panethnic perspective as diverse populations come together around a single phenomenon such as racialization (Espiritu, 1992). The common linkage of these theories of identity is the importance of a common point of ancestral origin in the construction of identity.

In my experience, being Mexican American is very complicated. If you take pride in Mexican heritage, you're un-American. If you take pride in being American, you're a sell-out. Therefore, being Mexican American required constant "identity work" for individuals living in the Midwest. The concept of "work" can be summarized as a series of negotiated roles, needs, and goals used to achieve social organization. As Anderson (1999) has illustrated, the "workload" of negotiating an identity is often experienced differently by individuals in various positions in the social hierarchy. Ultimately, social interactions serve as the basis for understanding surrounding social worlds. The ways that individuals view and present themselves is thus directly influenced and regulated by others, with whom they interact and co-construct realities.

This is to say that the process of defining who or what is a Mexican American is directly influenced by the interactional work within both worlds (Anglo and Mexican). Thus, an identity and its associated roles and responsibilities are not constructed by a sole individual. Individuals must "work" together to define how to appropriately respond or interact with others in a certain context. This does not always work out as Mexican Americans would like. The power of mainstream ideologies to categorize and marginalize

individuals is something that Mexican Americans are always contending with.

Conclusion

Mexican immigrants are often seen as one homogenous community with similar experiences, values, and orientations. In reality, the bricolage of different individuals and social capital is a complex mixture which requires individuals to work to achieve a comfortable sense of order in their lives. Conscious of the complex circumstances that contribute to the disorder of their lives, Mexican immigrants often must "work" to lend order to their social worlds and relationships.

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