

Ethnic identity among children of american immigrants sociology essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Each and every one of us on his way from childhood through adolescence to adulthood has to go through some major physical, emotional and social changes. Ideally step-by-step and through elaborate self-exploration we learn to understand ourselves better and accept ourselves just the way we are. comes to better understanding and accepting himself. as an individual as well as a member of a group. Identity is a very complex aspect of the personality development and has several dimensions, one of which is ethnic identity. Ethnic identity can be defined as a sense of belonging to an ethnic group. Many psychologists like Phinney, Nesdale and Mak note that “ ethnic identity reflects not only membership in an ethnic group, but also attitudes and feelings including ethnic pride, the importance of one’s ethnicity relative to other parts of the self, and involvement in one’s ethnic heritage” (qtd. Marks et al. 501). For children of immigrants, the formation process of ethnic identity can be complicated by experiences of intense racial and cultural conflict (Rumbaut 752). Studies of American immigrant families conducted by Phinney et al. suggest that while these young people were raised by parents who are likely to retain the language, values, and customs from their country of origin, they are “ educated in the American school system, which emphasizes English proficiency and American customs” (136). Hence, the exploration of the ethnic identity among these children is highly affected by their family ethnic practices as well as peer contacts from different ethnic groups. “ The immigrant context provides family and community social environments that heighten” the importance of ethnic identity among children of immigrants (Marks et al. 502).

There is a complex psychological mechanism that underlies the formation of ethnic identity. Children growing up tend to compare themselves to different social groups looking for similarities or differences in such traits as race, nationality, religion, class, language and accent (Rumbaut 760). The more differences they find between them and other ethnic groups the higher level of their self-awareness. Moreover, Cross proposed a framework for ethnic identity development in which “ individuals remain largely unaware of their racial identities until they encounter racism, which triggers active identity exploration” (Marks et al. 502). The young adolescents try to cope with the psychological pressure and seek to reduce the social conflict by assimilating (literally, becoming similar) within the certain social group. Whereas, “ an alternative reaction may lead... to the rise and reaffirmation of ethnic solidarity and pride” (Rumbaut 767). Hence, there are multiply ways of ethnic identity resolution among second-generation immigrants.

Psychologists, who devoted years of study to the problem of ethnic identification among American immigrants have agreed on the three major types of ethnic identity among their children:

This classification is based on the three main reaction to the dilemma of remaining within the sphere of nationality and the culture of the country of origin or breaking out of it altogether into the culture of the host country, described by Child: the “ in-group” reaction of those who retain their ethnicity; the “ marginal’ reaction of those who combine the traits of both worlds; and the “ rebel’, who fully assimilate into American culture (qtd. Rumbaut 787). For some children, mostly of white European immigrants, the

acculturation process is so successful, that it puts them at risk of estranging from their family.

Talking about family role in the ethnic identity formation, parents' attitudes regarding cultural maintenance are one of the most significant influences on the process of adaptation among their children. The results of research with European American immigrants conducted by Alba in 1990 showed that parents who believed that ethnicity is important were more likely to pass these attitudes to their children and promote ethnic identity in them (qtd. Phinney et al. 138). The economic and social status of parents also has a great impact on their children ethnic identity. According to Rumbaut, immigrant parents who are higher-status professionals are more likely to influence their children's selection of a national origin identity. " In such upper middle-class immigrant families the child may have more reason to associate social honor with and to feel pride in the national identity of the parents" (790). Parents' involvement in their child social life, help with a school work, support to their interest contribute to his sense of ethnic pride. In comparison, children who reported feeling embarrassed by their parents are much more likely to identify themselves as Americans. A good example is a response of a Philippino immigrant girl to the Olsen's survey: " Our parents don't come [to school functions] because they don't know any English. I don't even tell them when they are supposed to come. They dress so different and I don't want our parents to come because the others will laugh at them and tease us. We are ashamed" (qtd. Rumbaunt 753). Overall positive parent-child relationship allow a child to incorporate the culture of his origin to his identity and experience positive well-being, while the

conflictual parent-child relationships are associated with difficulties in adaptation process and lower self-esteem among children.

Another highly influential factor in the ethnic identity formation process is language proficiency. Those children who choose to speak English over the language of their ethnic group are much more likely to identify themselves as Americans, and less likely to self-define by national origin. “ Conversely, youths who do not prefer English and who report greater fluency in their parents’ native languages are most apt to identify by national origin”

(Rumbaut 790). The knowledge of mother tongue may help to maintain the ethnic participation, which reinforces ethnic identity (Phinney et al. 138). So to speak, native language can be a tool of indirect parents’ influence on ethnic identity promotion among their children. Whereas, language spoken outside of family circle is equally important in self-defying process.

Proficiency in English helps an immigrant child to assimilate into American society through the peer interaction, school achievements and exposure to American culture through media.

Another influential factor in the self-defying process which is also closely related to the two mentioned above is peer interaction. Although, findings on this matter are somewhat controversial. The amount of time spent with peers from the same ethnic group evidently has a positive effect on the ethnic identity. However the studies of Bakalian on Armenian families in America showed that even when the second generation immigrants broaden their social circle and limit friendship contacts inside their ethnic circle they still retain their already formed ethnic identity (Phinney et al. 139). So the

peer interaction is only as important as it provides the means for exploration
<https://assignbuster.com/ethnic-identity-among-children-of-american-immigrants-sociology-essay/>

and expression of the ethnic identity. It also can indirectly reinforce it if the native language is used.

The role of discrimination in the process of ethnic identity formation among immigrant children also shouldn't be underestimated. Quite predictably the Rumbaut's research results showed that the respondents who have experienced discrimination in the United States are not likely to self-define as Americans. Even just the expectation of discrimination or rejection based on the race or ethnicity negatively affects the process of assimilation among immigrant children. " Respondents who expect that people will discriminate against them no matter the level of education they may achieve are ... more likely to maintain a national-origin identity" (Rumbaut 787). On the other hand in the same survey the refugee groups who have been receiving public assistance from the government highly agreed with the statement that " There is no better country to live in than the United States." Correlatively they scored highest on the American preferences scale.

Finally, obtaining the United States citizenship status can shift the already formed pattern of ethnic identity (for those children who weren't born in the US, but who arrive with their parents). It was proven that the citizenship is superior to nativity. It is perceived by an immigrant as a sign of complete acceptance by American society and promotes the preference towards self-defying as American (Rumbaut 789).

Obviously, psychological well-being of immigrant children is highly wired to the process of assimilation and adaptation to the new culture. These children have to go through experience of " living in two worlds and not fully

belonging to either” (Greenman and Xie 114). The feeling of alienation to either culture is unavoidable. As we tend to attribute certain values to the groups we belong to the sense of belonging and acceptance by this group are crucial to our self-esteem and self-acceptance. Therefore a healthy sense of ethnic identity is extremely important to the social development and well-being among the children of immigrants. Indeed, these children have tough decisions to make from which language to speak to customs of which culture to follow. While the already hard process of self-exploration can be even more complicated for the children thrown new culture it can also boost their self-awareness giving them better understanding of who they are, what their roots are and where they belong in the future.