Immigrant Identities and the Shaping of a Racialized American Self

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Abstract

Immigration scholars largely focus on adaptation processes of immigrant groups, while race scholars focus on structural barriers nonwhite immigrants face. By comparing nonwhite immigrants with native-born Americans, we can better understand how racial logics affect the identification of racial minorities in the United States. Drawing on 153 interviews with Indian, Caribbean, Chinese, Filipino, and Mexican immigrants, and comparing their narratives to those of black native-born respondents, the authors find similar understandings of American identity across immigrant groups as well as barriers to recognition as American shared by immigrants and native-born blacks. Immigrant narratives continue to reify the United States as a white nation, thus leading to their exclusion by default.

Keywords

immigration, race, ethnicity, identity, racialization

The subject of belonging within American society is as important today as it was during debates about the belonging of newly freed slaves or Irish and Italian immigrants living in New York at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Shklar 1991). This debate has received great attention in recent years, taking center stage in the course of the 2018 midterm elections and in the current national conversation as we consider whether to allow certain groups of immigrants to enter the country at all, under what circumstances, and what our decisions about entry say about American ideals (Ahmed, Rogers, and Ernst 2018; Fox News Digital Team, Myers, and City Service News 2018; Fuller 2018; Smith 2018). And these debates are still occurring alongside conversations about the extent to which native-born blacks are accepted into American society (Distefano 2018; Taylor 2018).

In light of such public debates, we examine immigrants’ and native-born blacks’ narratives about their national identity. These self-accounts are central to the way Americans explain to themselves and others how, and the extent to which, they can be seen as “American.” Such accounts about American identity are closely tied, but certainly not equivalent to, citizenship. Citizenship is commonly understood to encompass multiple elements, including civil rights, political rights, and social rights as well as aspects of identity construction (Marshall 1950). More recently, research on citizenship has specifically highlighted the interactional component of citizenship (Colomy and Brown 1996), in which individuals claim and are afforded particular identities and rights. As such, it expands understandings of citizenship beyond macro level policies to include micro level interactions. How the interactional component of citizenship plays out has implications for the social rights that are afforded and the way

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individuals choose to portray their identity. Lack of access to social rights, as a component of citizenship, has the potential to shape individuals’ national identity. Thus, we analyze qualitative interview data from five immigrant groups: Mexican, Chinese, Filipino, Caribbean, and Indian. In addition, we include native-born blacks, comparing the narratives of American identity of a nonwhite, native-born group with those of immigrants.1

We ask three questions: (1) To what extent do immigrants of various ethnic groups identify themselves as Americans or according to their countries of origin? (2) When immigrants do not identify as American, what are their reasons? and (3) How do immigrants’ narratives of their identity compare with those of native-born blacks? In this article, we examine identity in terms of self-perception, but we recognize that self-perceptions are often constrained and/or fostered by broader structural realities and the perceptions of others. Indeed, our findings reveal that immigrants understand their place in America in terms of how they think others perceive them, and narratives of native-born blacks reflect the same concerns. Results have implications for the civic identity adaptation of new immigrants in the context of existing and potentially changing racial categories (Lee and Bean 2004).

**Perspectives on Assimilation**

The question of inclusion has dominated debates about American identity and is a central concern in research on immigration and assimilation. Early immigration literature understood assimilation as adoption of and acceptance into white Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture, positing that immigrant groups would adopt the characteristics of the dominant group, namely, Protestant whites (Gans 1979; Gordon 1964; Warner and Strole 1945). Since the 1950s, however, immigrant streams have shifted dramatically, with more recent waves of immigrants coming from Asia, Latin America, and Africa (Alba and Nee 2003; Fong 2001; Glazer 1985; Hirschman 1983; Portes and Zhou 1993). With these shifts, immigration researchers have reconsidered early theoretical and empirical assumptions about the immigrant experience, as well as what it means for immigrants to become American (Alba and Nee 2003; Jimenez 2010; Rumbaut 1997; Waters 1999).

Some scholars argue that the process of joining the mainstream is multigenerational (Alba and Nee 2003; Menjivar 2006). Indeed, the most pressing question within the assimilation literature remains whether it is possible for immigrants to assimilate and whether American society can include immigrants regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, and nation of origin (Alba 1990; Gordon 1964; Lee and Bean 2004; for a review, see Feagin and Feagin 1999). In reconsidering assimilation, scholars have questioned what adopting an American identity entails, even questioning the term assimilation altogether. Some point to the negative effects of assimilation, arguing that for nonwhite immigrants, assimilation entails downward or restricted social mobility, as articulated by proponents of the theory of segmented assimilation (Hall, Portes, and Lynch 2011; Portes and Rumbaut 2006; Portes 2007; Rumbaut 1997). Others highlight positive effects of assimilation. For example, some argue that the adoption of hyphenated identities alongside American ideals of civic nationalism creates access to the American dream (Ecklund 2006; Mostofi 2003:700). A common argument in the immigration literature is that different immigrant groups have distinct modes of incorporation (Portes and Rumbaut 2006), although this claim is disputed (see Waldinger and Catron 2016). One key division in this literature concerns the extent to which race shapes the process of becoming American.

**The Role of Race**

One key critique of the immigrant adaptation literature centers on the connection between immigrant and racial identities (Feagin and Feagin 1999; Gallagher 2003; Geschwender 1978; Golash-Boza 2006; Hirschman 1983; Portes and Zhou 1993; Zhou 2015; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008). Many scholars of race question the underlying assumptions of the assimilationist literature (e.g., Gallagher 2003; Geschwender 1978; Portes and Rumbaut 2006; Portes and Zhou 1993; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008), examining the ways immigrants define themselves and how others define them, rather than measuring the degree to which immigrants have assimilated. These scholars argue that race is a central barrier to assimilation, contending that European groups, such as the Irish and Italians, were able to assimilate when they became viewed as white (Omi and Winant 1999; Portes, Fernandez-Kelly, and Haller 2005; Portes and Zhou 1993). Proponents of segmented assimilation assert that divergent paths of assimilation are due to racism (i.e., Portes et al. 2005), but immigrants’ perspectives on how they are viewed by the mainstream are rarely articulated. The debate continues over whether early European immigrants faced a different degree of discrimination than those currently immigrating to the United States from Latin America, Africa, and Asia (Alba and Foner 2014; Alba and Nee 2003; Fox and Guglielmo 2012; Glazer 1985; Kolbe 2015). Furthermore, the success of many of these immigrant groups builds on past successes of native-born blacks in opposing racism, for example, relying on organizations created in the civil rights movement (Kasinitz 2008).

Scholars also debate the extent to which discrimination has an impact on the experience of immigrants (Alba and
Nee 2003; Lampe 1992; Portes and Zhou 1993; Waldinger 1996). For example, Lampe (1992:110–11) argued that when immigrant groups face discrimination from the host society, the salience of their own ethnic and racial identity increases. Scholars agree that discrimination matters, but the extent to which it does and for whom is debated. Alba and Nee (2003) argued that civil rights legislation has made discrimination less of a barrier to assimilation. Yet Portes and Zhou (1993) asserted that it is still a major concern for immigrants, where immigrants with darker skin experience more discrimination. Similarly, Lee and Bean (2004) argued that Latinxs and Asians have a higher chance of integrating into American society because of their lighter skin color, while blacks continue to struggle because of racial discrimination. Still others argue that light-skinned people of color, such as some of those who are Latinx, continue to experience discrimination and are not fully integrated into American society (Golash-Boza 2006; Haller et al. 2011; Telles and Ortiz 2008). For example, Golash-Boza (2006) contended that Latinxs who experience discrimination are less likely to identify as American, instead adopting a hyphenated identity that reflects the degree of otherness they feel. However, others argue that some second-generation immigrants identify as American regardless of experiences of discrimination and the ways others may perceive them (i.e., Waters 1999). Experiences of discrimination may heighten the importance of a hyphenated or ethnic identity, but many second-generation immigrants also place a strong emphasis on their own identity as American.

Race scholars have also engaged this debate by exploring the ways race has become structurally embedded in American society (Omi and Winant 1999). For immigrants coming into the United States, joining U.S. society means being incorporated into, and potentially reshaping, the content and form of race and racial hierarchies in the United States. Omi and Winant (1999) argued that no one is without a racial identity and that this identity is not static or inherent. Instead, they wrote,

We use the term racial formation to refer to the process by which social, economic and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings. Crucial to this formulation is the treatment of race as a central axis of social relations, which cannot be subsumed under or reduced to some broader category or conception. (p. 19)

Thus, to understand the immigrant experience requires understanding the way processes that “determine the content and importance of racial categories” for them, particularly as immigration scholars turn to issues related to integration or assimilation. Given the centrality of race in the United States, when immigrants interact with U.S. society, they are inevitably interacting with particular notions and structures of race and race relations and participating in a process of racial formation. Although race plays a key role in creating a hierarchy (Bonilla-Silva 1999), researchers suggest that there is no single, straightforward axis along which racial groups are organized but rather groups are differently positioned in relation to whites and that position is contextual (Kim 1999). This approach becomes particularly important when considering new immigrants.

Some scholars of assimilation recognize the power of such structures in shaping the immigrant experience and in hindering or promoting integration (Alba and Foner 2014; Bashi and McDaniel 1997; Kolbe 2015). Distinguishing race from ethnicity, examining the salience of race for determining life chances, and studying how integration entails participation in the construction of U.S. racial hierarchy have been important correctives to the literature on immigrant assimilation (Bashi and McDaniel 1997). Upon migrating to the United States, the system of racial classification facilitates the adoption of pan-ethnic identity (Itzigsohn and Dore-Cabral 2000). Once arrived, immigrants negotiate their place in the racial hierarchy by drawing on multiple identities, such as religion and class (Ajrouch and Kusow 2007; Guenther, Pendaz, and Makene 2011). Being part of both a marginalized religion as well as a racial group may have implications for how different immigrant groups adapt (Ajrouch and Kusow 2007), as the way people identify is tied to context, shaped by surrounding groups (Fernandez-Kelly and Konczal 2005; Nagel 1994). Immigrants’ perceptions of discrimination may strengthen their racial and ethnic identities and can even become a barrier to adopting a national identity (Skrobanek 2009). This phenomenon can span generations, with even the third and fourth generations being regarded as “foreign” in certain contexts (Tuan 1998). Thus, it is important to understand how the multigenerational process of assimilation is embedded within the racialized social system in the United States.

Addressing Gaps in the Literature

Most of the literature on immigrant identities focuses on the particularities of certain ethnic groups (Guenther et al. 2011; Lampe 1992; Menjivar 2006; Waters 1999), and little research has taken a broader view of the way immigrants define themselves across ethnic groups. Furthermore, few scholars have studied how recent immigrants describe themselves as American in comparison with black Americans, who are still categorized as a racialized “other.”

Here, we bring the race literature and immigration literature into conversation with one another, examining how immigrants understand themselves as racialized members of American society. As our respondents construct an understanding of their national identity, they draw on the ways others react to them as they go about their lives. A key part of this process, particularly as concerns the role of race, is appearance. Proponents of symbolic interactionist theory examining identity construction highlight the importance of...
appearance in shaping interactions and thus constructions of identity (Stone 1962; Stryker 1968). Although we do not have visual data, our narrative findings reveal that many immigrants perceive their physical appearance as a barrier to developing an identity as American. We find that a large number of immigrant respondents do not identify as American. Although it is not inherently surprising that immigrant and even second-generation respondents may not think of themselves as American, our immigrant respondents’ narratives reveal the underlying reasons for their belief that others do not recognize them as such. Our respondents find it difficult to separate their national identity from their experience of exclusion and inclusion within American society on the basis of race. Even when our respondents identify as American, they still feel that others do not recognize them as American because of their appearance. Many describe conditional identities, identifying as American simply because they are citizens or live within the geographic borders of the United States; they do not “feel” American in other ways. These findings expand literature on immigration, revealing the racialized ways immigrants understand their place within American society and contributing to our understanding of immigrant adaptation. They also reveal the exclusionary processes embedded in interactional citizenship, as many respondents, including some black Americans in our sample, reject an American identity, even when they are officially citizens of the United States, due to exclusionary interactions they have with other Americans.

Methods

We draw on data collected through the Religion, Immigration, and Civic Engagement (R.I.C.E.) study, a research project examining ways that immigrants from several different immigrant groups, as well as native-born blacks, perceive their civic and political roles. In this article we focus solely on the responses participants gave to questions about identity. The R.I.C.E. study amplified data from the Portraits of American Life Study (PALS). The PALS applied multistage sampling methodology to conduct interviews in 62 randomly selected five-digit ZIP codes in different parts of the United States, oversampling Asians, African Americans, and Latinx. The R.I.C.E. study then stratified the PALS sample ($n = 2,610$) to randomly select 100 native-born Americans and then further stratified the sample by ethnic group to select 150 first-generation immigrants in addition to 100 second-generation immigrants. We define first-generation immigrants as those who were born outside the United States but immigrated to the United States and second-generation immigrants as the children of first-generation immigrants. Native-born Americans have neither parents nor grandparents born outside of the United States. The study achieved a 59 percent response rate, with a total of 208 interviews.

The sample analyzed for this article includes 19 Asian Indians, 27 native-born blacks, 39 Chinese, 19 Caribbeans, 16 Filipinos, and 33 Mexicans, for a total of 153 respondents. Although we have a relatively small number of respondents from each group, their narratives provide insight into our understandings of what it means to be American and how this meaning is shaped by race. We follow Small (2010) in arguing that qualitative data cannot be evaluated by the standards of quantitative methodology, instead viewing our respondents as individual cases. Our sample did not include immigrants from European countries, because they now account for a very small percentage of immigrants to the United States. Initially we did not include native-born black respondents in our analysis, but as we began to see that racial, ethnic, and national identities were tightly linked for immigrant respondents, we included native-born blacks because they share a common nonwhite status with many immigrants. Overall 94 respondents were 1st-generation immigrants to the United States, 14 were 1.5th-generation immigrants, 18 were 2nd-generation immigrants, and 27 were native-born black respondents. Our sample intentionally includes a large number of 1st-generation immigrants; because of their recent migration (and recent exposure to a non-U.S. social context) they are more self-conscious about boundaries around American identity and provide an ideal case to examine experiences of racialization among immigrants.

Overall, individual interviews varied from 20 minutes to 2 hours, averaging close to 1 hour. Interviews were conducted in five languages, Spanish, Mandarin, Tagalog, Hindi, and English, and then translated and transcribed into English. For this article, we focused on responses to the following questions:

- What does it take to “fit in” to American society?
- What ethnic/racial group best describes you?
- Could you tell me a little about the role being [ethnic group] plays in your life?
- Do you view yourself as an American? Why or why not?
- In what kinds of situations are you more American and in what kinds of situations more [ethnic group]?
- Do you think that others view you as an American? Why or why not?

Analyzing these semistructured interviews allowed us to focus on the narrative descriptions immigrants use to identify themselves, and we know that narratives often reveal how people navigate their social psychological contexts (Davies and Harre 1990). However, narratives may not be entirely accurate, as perception, even incorrect perception, shapes the ways people think and act (Thomas and Thomas 2006).

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2This categorization is conventional for scholars in the United States (Alba and Nee 2003).
1928). The language individuals use provides insight into the ways they understand the world around them and their place within it (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Indeed, narrative becomes especially important when examining immigrant groups’ sense of belonging. Closed-ended surveys can provide some indication of how immigrants participate in society and indicate some aspects of how they identify themselves, but they cannot indicate the nuances of how immigrants understand their sense of belonging. By analyzing the narratives of our respondents, we better understand how they are incorporated into the United States and the barriers they perceive to belonging.

We began analysis by coding respondents into two different categories: those who did not identify as American at all and those who identified as American in some way. We then looked for themes regarding respondents’ relationship to the term American. These themes often spanned the two categories. For example, we found that both respondents who self-identified as American and those who did not discussed their identity in terms of the way others saw them. Furthermore, because our questions focused on ethnic identities before inquiring about identification as American, we expected to find neater distinctions between ethnic, national, and racial identities. Instead, respondents often confounded these categories, with racial identity playing a large role in the way people identified ethnically or nationally. Because sources of identification overlapped, these thematic groups do not fall into simple count categories. Instead, we chose examples that illuminate thematic elements that continually emerged. In addition, when we asked about ethnic or racial identities, most respondents self-identified as “Mexican” or “Jamaican” rather than “Hispanic” or “Afro-Caribbean,” for example. Thus, national origin often stood in for race or ethnicity, likely reflecting the degree to which they have adopted American culture and resistance to being incorporated into U.S. racial categories. We do not attempt to untangle these categories, instead studying how immigrants identify themselves, even as those identities are layered and at times confounded. In addition, we expected to identify trends within ethnic groups or citizenship status groups but quickly found that these categories did not determine patterns of self-identification.

Results

Notions of identity often did not fall into neat categories. Instead, respondents would shift back and forth from one way of naming themselves to another, even contradicting themselves at times. At one point in the interview they might say that they considered themselves only Mexican, and later in the interview, they would say that they considered themselves American under certain circumstances. Some saw being Mexican (or Filipino, Chinese, Caribbean, or Indian) and American as mutually exclusive, whereas others saw them as entirely compatible identities.

At the same time, we found that respondents fell broadly into two groups: those who did not identify as American under any circumstance and those who did in certain situations. We also analyzed the ways respondents related to the term American: why, in the case of the first group, they never called themselves American and why, in the case of the second group, they did or did not invoke the term American to describe themselves in certain situations. Overall, across both groups, we found that many respondents did not use the term American as a primary way of identifying themselves, even if they considered themselves American in some way. Respondents across both groups understood their inclusion within American society as contingent upon the perceptions of other Americans. Respondents saw themselves through the eyes of other Americans, as nonwhite and, therefore, not American.

Identity Narratives Excluding the Term American

A significant group of respondents did not consider themselves American. Instead, they consistently reiterated their membership in a particular ethnic or national group, and that ethnic or national group was most often a specific group such as Mexican or Filipino rather than a pan-ethnic group such as Latinx or Asian. When we asked respondents what ethnic or racial group best describes them, they nearly always named themselves according to their countries of origin or a parent’s national identity. Thus, respondents used nationalities interchangeably with ethnic or racial categories, ignoring or rejecting categories in the U.S. racial classification system. This finding is important not only to how they understand what it means to be Jamaican or Indian but also to how they understand what it means to be American, as they also linked American national identity with racial or ethnic categories.

Although many Indians had strong notions of what it means to be Indian, none of the Indian respondents said they never consider themselves American. For example, one Asian Indian respondent (AI_6), first-generation, age 46, and a permanent resident in the United States, did not identify as American until she was directly asked if she ever saw herself as American, and she went on to describe the way she feels about her American identity:

Respondent: Everything is by the Constitution, so we pretty much have this chance to be Americans. But I, myself, I think I’m mixed.

Interviewer: Why do you say that? Why do you feel mixed?

Respondent: Because I am not completely American. I don’t do things Americans do—some other things—like eat rice and spice [laughs]. Or go to church too often. . . . And I have Indian parents.

Implicit in this response is a perception of American and Indian identity as exclusive. Although no Indian respondents
fully rejected the term *American* as a way of describing themselves, some said they were not perceived as American because of their skin color.

Respondents whose identity narratives fully excluded the term *American* did, however, include Filipino, Chinese, Caribbean, and Mexican respondents, both U.S. and non-U.S. citizens. We expected non-U.S. citizens to see citizenship as a barrier to claiming American identity, but many respondents who *are* citizens do not call themselves American. For example, a 47-year-old first-generation Chinese respondent (CH_5) said, "Although I’m a U.S. citizen, I still feel that I’m Chinese." For this respondent, U.S. citizenship status is a separate matter entirely from the question of identity. Although his citizenship status is factual, the way that he feels on an emotional level is Chinese. Another U.S. citizen, a 31-year-old first-generation Filipino (FL_3), said “I always consider myself Filipino,” when asked if she considered herself an American. When the interviewer asked a follow-up question, the respondent said,

**Respondent:** Yeah, I mean technically I am an American citizen. But deep inside me I am Filipino.

**Interviewer:** So if someone asks you “What are you” what would you say?

**Respondent:** I’m Filipino . . .

**Interviewer:** Do you view yourself as American?

**Respondent:** No. Because I’m not.

Once again, the respondent sees her American citizenship as a technicality but her identity as a Filipino is unchanging; she continually reiterates that she was born in the Philippines and how she views herself “deep inside.” In other words, her American identity is a one-dimensional identity, while being Filipino is an identity that functions on multiple dimensions.

Indeed, other respondents explicitly stated that they did not identify as American because their ancestry, origin, and racial identity outweighed any sense of American identity. One first-generation Mexican respondent (MX_18) who was a U.S. citizen and 78 years old said that she tells those of Mexican heritage who were born in the United States, “you say that you are American because you were born here. . . But you are of Mexican ancestry, because your parents are Mexican.” When the interviewer then asked the respondent if she ever sees herself as an American, the respondent said no. For her, her Mexican ancestry outweighs any tie to American identity. Another respondent (CH_4), a non-U.S. citizen, but nevertheless a legal resident, Chinese and first-generation, age 20, said,

Whether it’s what I look like . . . or my blood system, the blood in me is Chinese. So, I don’t think I would be American unless one day I marry an American and have a mixed child. As for right now, I am Chinese.

Interestingly, this respondent suggests that ties by blood or marriage to an American would change his own identity and bring him closer to an American identity, aligning with early scholarship on assimilation (Gordon 1964). Interestingly, however, the Mexican respondent quoted above felt that even second-generation immigrants who are born in America cannot authentically call themselves American and that heritage was not a negotiable factor in determining identity. Similarly, the Chinese respondent described her blood as Chinese, making the question of being American or Chinese into a question of ethnic bloodlines. In this way, these respondents’ narratives reveal that they are confounding race with nationality.

Although citizenship status did not have much bearing on identity for some respondents, others explicitly discussed their citizenship status. Some acknowledged that although citizenship status should be enough to identify as American, they perceived other barriers to acceptance within American society. For example, another Chinese respondent (CH_1), a 63-year-old first-generation U.S. citizen, said, “I will forever think of myself Chinese,” and when the interviewer asked him if he considered himself an American, he said emphatically, “Still Chinese. Americans, they don’t even recognize you . . . to say ‘I am an American.’ Can you do that?” This respondent’s identification as an American was contingent upon “real Americans” recognizing him as American, demonstrating how interactions shape immigrants’ understandings of identity and how they can become barriers to immigrants fully adopting an American identity.

### Multiple Identities

Among those who did consider themselves American, some respondents did so only in certain situations, whereas others did so all the time. Yet even among those who always called themselves American, there were different senses of what being American meant. For example, whereas one respondent defined being American as a legal citizenship status, another respondent might define it as participation in American economic life or eating certain foods.

We found that many respondents from each ethnic group saw themselves as American simply because of their citizenship status or because they lived within the borders of the United States. In most cases, they did not reject the term *American*, because they had a sense of citizenship or geographic identity. For example, a 59-year-old first-generation Chinese respondent (CH_22) identified himself throughout the interview as Chinese. Yet when asked if he saw himself as an American, he said, “I am an American citizen. I am a Chinese American.” The respondent did not identify as American until prompted, and even then, this identity was linked solely to his citizenship status. Similarly, when asked...
if he views himself as an American, an Indian respondent (AI_17), 27 years old and a non-U.S. citizen, said, “Yeah, I’m in America,” and when the interviewer asked why he viewed himself as American, he repeated, “I’m living in America.” This respondent’s American identity is based purely on his geographic location. These respondents attach external conditions to their American identity rather than describe it as a fundamental part of their self-conception.

Finally, some native-born black respondents express similar sentiments. For example, one native-born black respondent (BLK_7), 40 years old, said that she views herself as an American “only because [she] was born in [America].” Another native-born black respondent (BLK_21), 39 years old, qualified her American identity in terms of citizenship, saying,

I think of myself as an African American 99.9 percent of the time. The only time that I would say [I’m an] American is if I’m filling out an application and they ask my legalization, am I a U.S. citizen?

Here, the respondent’s ethnic, or racial, identity is closer to the way she understands herself than her national identity. In these cases, respondents across ethnic groups and citizen groups relegate American to a legal or geographic status, while their ethnic identities are more totalizing.

A smaller number of respondents tied American identity to performing certain tasks, including working, paying taxes, and participating in the economy, whereas identification with an ethnic group corresponded with family, community, and even spirituality. These respondents often associated ethnic identity with relationships, while associating American identity with practices. In many cases, these respondents exhibited hybrid identities, saying they felt American when they were around other Americans and they felt more Jamaican with other Jamaicans, for example. One 41-year-old second-generation Filipino man (FL_6), who is a U.S. citizen, said “I consider myself American I guess when I’m with people in general, and a Filipino when I’m with Filipinos and people that I grew up with.” This respondent’s sense of identity changes depending on the people surrounding him. Other respondents described different contexts when they feel more American or more identified with their ethnic group. For example, a 39-year-old first-generation Indian male respondent (AI_11), who is a resident in the United States, said,

I think when I’m at work, when I pay my taxes, when I’m part of the commercial consumption of the United States as a consumer, when I have to be with either the government or the service sector. Pretty much day to day life; you’re more American then . . . I think being Indian. . . . That’s the time out to be with your family or with your community.

These respondents clearly distinguish their ethnic and American identities, discussing family and intimate friends in relation to ethnic identity, while working, buying and selling, and accomplishing certain tasks related to American identity.

Finally, a few respondents felt tied to both identities all the time. For example, a Mexican respondent (MX_23), age 86 and not a U.S. citizen, identified herself as Mexican American and described feeling “moved by ‘God Bless America’ . . . [and] the Mexican national anthem.” This respondent feels both sides of her identity at a visceral and emotional level.

**Being an American Means Being White**

Whether or not respondents called themselves American, many claimed that others did not, often because of their skin color. Scholars show that immigrant identities are shaped by both the ways those outside of immigrant groups view immigrants and by immigrants’ individual senses of self (Dhingra 2003; Jenkins 1994; Lampe 1992). Many of the respondents’ notions about American identity were inextricably linked to their perception of how others viewed them.

We found that the link between being white and being American was strong in some respondents’ minds. Respondents who did not explicitly discuss whiteness often said that they do not think others view them as American because they do not look American. Although not all respondents defined what it means to look American, the implication was clear: the color of their skin and their physical features excluded them from recognition as American. For example, a first-generation 34-year-old Indian respondent (AI_19) thought others saw her as Indian rather than American, because of “Maybe my appearance . . . because that’s the first thing they—look at me, the outward appearance.” Similarly, a Chinese respondent (CH_10) who said that she must embrace both Chinese and American identity and culture, still said that she did not think others saw her as American. She remarked, “if [others saw me] in person, they would not think of me as an American. . . . It’s the way that you look itself [that] wouldn’t make Americans think of you as American when they first see you.” These respondents sense that their physical appearance bars them from recognition as Americans, even if they do not explicitly equate whiteness with being American.

Other respondents explicitly mentioned skin color. An Indian respondent (AI_14), age 36 and a first-generation immigrant who is not a U.S. citizen, felt that others do not view him as an American because he is “different in . . . color.” Similarly, a male Filipino respondent (FL_8), age 43, first-generation, and a U.S. citizen, said, “No, I don’t think [others view me as American], because the way they look at you. . . . They see you—your skin is brown . . . nothing changes even if you are a citizen.” A Chinese respondent (CH_20), a U.S. citizen who is 21 and second-generation, said that although he thinks of himself as American “every day,” he does not think others think of him as American, “because of skin color. If you’re not white, then you’re something else, you’re not American.” Although each of these respondents identify as American in some way, they do not
think others perceive them as American because of the color of their skin, and at times this perception changes the way they identify themselves.

Other respondents do not consider themselves American at all, because they believe others do not recognize them as American. For example, a 39-year-old U.S. citizen (NB_1) said,

People don’t understand. You know, they say—they see black eyes—black hair, brown eyes, whatever, well—automatically—well, I’m not white. They automatically picture Americans as being white, whether you’re black or brown [chuckle]. So, if I say I’m American, they wouldn’t understand that.

In this case, the respondent’s identity is not only connected to the way she sees herself in terms of race, but also to the way she perceives that others see her in terms of race. Similarly, a 31-year-old first-generation Filipino respondent (FL_3), who is a U.S. citizen and who also does not ever view herself as an American, said, when asked if others view her as an American, “No. . . . Just the way that I look, nobody would ever think that I’m an American. Just my features.” When the interviewer pressed her further, asking, “What are the features that you think are considered American?” the respondent replied, “White.” This respondent knows that she does not fit into the visual mold that defines American identity, and this affects how she perceives her own place within American society.

Furthermore, despite their longer history in the United States, some black respondents spoke about their sense of exclusion. For example, one native-born black respondent (BLK_4), age 50, said, “Being an American and being a black American are two different things. So I’m always a black American, [with the] outcasts.” This clearly indicates that the respondent does not view the term American as inclusive. Another native-born black respondent (BLK_20), age 32, said that he does not think others view him as an American, because “It just seems like the only time another race accepts you is when there’s a tragedy, and they want everyone to come together.” He equates recognition as American with acceptance, as we see that for blacks as well as many immigrants, adopting an American identity implies more than just gaining citizenship status. Across immigrant groups and even within the black native-born group, respondents asserted that others do not view them as Americans, because they do not look how they expect Americans to look.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Although some respondents embrace an American identity, most do not see it as totalizing or have a well-developed sense of what it means to be an American. Rather, they primarily identify with their ethnic group or nation of origin. They have a better sense of what it means to be Chinese or Mexican, for example, than American. In many ways, this is not surprising for new immigrants. Interestingly, in most cases, they cannot separate their experience of being a racial or ethnic minority, an experience defined in large part by being nonwhite, from their sense of what it means to be American. In this way, our results suggest that our respondents perceive that they do not have all the social rights of citizenship (Marshall 1950) and that exclusion experienced in interaction (Colomy and Brown 1996) shapes their identification. Many of our respondents view American identity in racial terms, and the connection between nationality and race and ethnicity can be a barrier to immigrants identifying as American. When our respondents do identify as American, many associate that identification with their geographic residence or their citizenship status. In other words, their American identity is often highly contingent upon location, citizenship, or acceptance by other Americans, while ethnic and racial identities are perceived as more fixed and deeply felt.

Surprisingly, we did not find major differences between national or ethnic groups or between generation groups, in terms of whether they define themselves as American or their understanding of what it means to be an American. The main difference between groups was that no Asian respondents entirely rejected an American identity; however, they still described American identities that are specific and highly contextual. Although many scholars posit that Latinx and Asian immigrants will assimilate more easily into American society, because they are lighter skinned than blacks (Lee and Bean 2004), we found that Asians, Latinx, and blacks perceived themselves as outsiders within American society. Although there are many important differences between each immigrant group, our research reveals that immigrants of various ethnicities may face similar barriers to acceptance in American society. According to our respondents, these barriers are experienced in interactions linked to appearance. This finding aligns with symbolic interactionist theories highlighting the importance of appearance in shaping national identity (Stone 1961; Stryker 1968). As it is phenotype shaping these interactions, it is our respondents’ perception that this is something that immigrants themselves are not able to easily alter.

Our findings do not bode well, especially in our current context, for a new America envisioned by pundits and scholars alike, in which immigrants redefine what it means to be American and reduce the stigma of being a person of color. The immigrants we interviewed, despite being from all around the world, (1) do not see themselves as American at their core, (2) say that others do not view them as American because they are not white, and (3) view the United States as a nation for whites. This latter view has profound implications. As Emerson (2006) showed, the United States as a political entity has always been both black and white, with unique cultures and a blended black/white/other national culture. Yet the narrative of the United States, as reflected in our respondents’ perspectives, is that the United States is a white
nation, of, for, and by those of European descent. The newest immigrants to this nation continue to be excluded by it. They are nearly unanimous in stating that they cannot be viewed by others as Americans because they are not white.

Collectively, the narratives these respondents recount are narratives of being different in America. Our findings offer support for Lampe’s (1992) argument that perceptions of outsiders shape the way immigrants identify. Many respondents viewed their status within the United States as utterly dependent upon their race or ethnicity and white Americans’ reception of such racial and ethnic groups. These findings reveal that inclusion is still a major issue for immigrants. Rather than examining what immigrants can do to assimilate, we must also examine the ways that American society continues to exclude immigrants on the basis of race or ethnicity. As Shklar (1991) argues, the history of American identity and citizenship has been inextricably linked with questions of inclusion and exclusion. Rather than a linear process of liberalization and increasing civil rights for all, this history has included cycles of renegotiating belonging. Our findings support research that documents racialized assimilation, whereby experiences of discrimination in the United States leads immigrants to be less likely to adopt an American identity, instead adopting a pan ethnic or hyphenated identity (Golash-Boza 2006). We have confirmed and expanded what is foundational to much of the immigration literature, that the surrounding society shapes the degree to which immigrants identify as American.

The racialized notions of American identity that the respondents in this study expressed reflect the sense that although they have come to the United States to gain full access to American society, they believe that their race and ethnicity, factors they do not have the ability to change, bar full access. Groups that have lobbied for citizenship within the United States have done so out of a desire for acknowledgment as full members of the society, not out of a commitment to civic involvement for its own sake (Shklar 1991). Indeed, rather than developing notions of what it means to be an American solely through participation, economically, politically, or socially, the development of these notions is contingent upon recognition within American society through interactions with other Americans, a recognition many of these respondents feel they have not gained.

This relationship between recognition and identification is not new within the literature on identity. Scholars acknowledge that individuals develop their identity within relational contexts (Dhingra 2003; Jenkins 1994; Lampe 1992) and our respondents cannot separate their sense of American identity from their sense of whether others view them as American. As Jenkins (1994) argued, much of the identity literature focuses on ways that groups or individuals define themselves without acknowledging how outside forces shape those definitions. Thus, although these findings contribute to our understanding of how immigrants define themselves, they also reveal the importance of examining the role that dominant discourses of categorization play in shaping immigrant identities within American society and comparing such discourses with those of native-born black Americans. We agree with race scholars who argue that research should not only examine how immigrants move through the social structures, but also how immigrants find themselves constrained and limited within these structures, perhaps by dominant discourses of identity (Bonilla-Silva 1999; Omi and Winant 1999). In this article, we do so by shifting the focus to immigrant identities.

Future research should expand our investigation of the barriers immigrants perceive to inclusion within American society. For example, scholars should continue to investigate immigrant narratives about inequality and discrimination, as our findings reveal that economically successful immigrants to the United States still perceive themselves as treated differently from whites. Future research might also include interviews with immigrants in European countries, as well as white immigrants within both the United States and Europe, to investigate whether racial categorization as white shapes the identities of immigrants living in Europe. Finally, scholars should continue to examine the perceptions white native-born Americans have about other races and ethnicities, including perceptions of immigrant groups, to better understand the opposite end of these perceptions of exclusion. These lines of inquiry will prove important for scholarship as well as public policy. This research may reveal how policymakers can continue to address inequality and structural barriers within American society.

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