



Society for Research in Child Development

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Immigrant Youths Explore Identity in High School

Children from immigrant families are assumed to give up their families' ethnic and cultural background in order to assimilate with American culture. But a new study shows that in fact, they find ways to combine their cultural heritage with their identification as members of American society, especially during the high school years. The types of labels they create and use could foreshadow the types of labels used by the larger society in the years to come.

The study, conducted by researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, Wake Forest University, and Willamette University, appears in the July/August 2008 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

"Given that immigrant families comprise the large majority of those with Asian and Latin American backgrounds and that these are the two fastest rising ethnic groups in the United States, the outcome of these explorations will have implications for the nature of ethnic categories and ethnic identity in the broader society," according to Andrew J. Fuligni, professor of psychiatry and psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles, and the study's lead author.

The researchers studied about 380 adolescents from Asian and Latin American immigrant families in Los Angeles over the course of four years of high school. The youths chose from a long list of ethnic labels that included terms referring to national origin (such as Mexican), pan-ethnic terms (such as Asian), and terms including the word "American" (such as American or Asian American). They study also assessed adolescents' degree of attachment to their ethnic background, the amount of exploration they'd done of their cultural heritage, and their proficiency in their families' native language.

Most teenagers who grow up in immigrant families choose a hyphenated label (such as Mexican-American) to describe themselves, according to the study. Moreover, significant numbers of these adolescents change their labels from year to year, suggesting that high school is a time for youths from immigrant families to explore their identities.

The study also found that first-generation teens (i.e., those who were born outside the United States) were more likely to choose a national origin label (such as Chinese) to describe themselves than were second-generation teens (i.e., those who were born in America to foreign-born parents). Furthermore, teens reported higher levels of ethnic attachment, exploration, and native language proficiency during the years in which they selected a national origin label to describe themselves than in other years.

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 79, Issue 4, *Stability and Change in Ethnic Labeling Among Adolescents From Asian and Latin American Immigrant Families* by Fuligni, AJ (University of California, Los Angeles), Kiang, L (Wake Forest University), Witkow, MR (Williamette University), and Baldelomar, O (University of California, Los Angeles). Copyright 2008 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.