Developing a questionnaire to examine immigrant identity in a cultural context

Jenny B. Mathews
Faculty Mentor: Fathali M. Moghaddam
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Introduction

The question of assimilation is one that has recently become more prominent in discussions of immigration in the United States. As a country founded by immigrants and whose foreign born population of 35.7 million comprises over 12% of the national population of 288.4 million, this is a question that requires close attention (U.S. Census Bureau). In the past, traditional assimilation theory has included a number of approaches. Taylor and Moghaddam (1994) use the following terms to describe two significant approaches: “minority-group assimilation” and “melting-pot assimilation”. Minority-group assimilation describes what would occur were minority immigrant groups to abandon their minority culture and ascribe completely to the majority culture. Melting-pot assimilation, on the other hand, describes a two-way process, in which minority groups and the majority group exchange aspects of each culture and ultimately create and share one combined culture. This type of assimilation theory is based partly on the concept of similarity-attraction, which says that we are able to best achieve interpersonal harmony with people who are similar to us. Nevertheless, much of the current debate regarding this topic questions whether either type of assimilation is actually occurring.

Current literature regarding minority-group assimilation shows that the process is not as simple or linear as it was once thought to be. Gans (2004) explains that while assimilation occurs in a number of different ways within various ethnic immigrant groups, each ethnic group has it’s own trajectory of assimilation. Depending on education, class, race and economic status, ethnic groups assimilate differently in different areas of society and show a different timeline of assimilation (Gans, 2004).
Additionally, younger descendents of immigrants have begun to reject the idea of assimilation in light of an effort to hold on to their ethnic heritage (Gans, 2004).

Literature on melting-pot assimilation, on the other hand, asserts that not only have pre-1965 European immigrant groups assimilated, but more recent immigrant groups such as Hispanics and Asians will follow the same path (Thernstrom, 2004). We can see this, Thernstrom (2004) explains, because while millions of people claim some sort of European ancestry, a very small percentage of those people reside in an ethnic enclave or speak a language besides English. Similarly, between 75%-82% of the same group married someone of mixed ancestry and only 17% had three or more friends of their same ethnic origin (Thernstrom, 2004). This shows that while these groups still hold on to some part of their ethnic heritage, they are also assimilating to U.S. culture and society. Current research has shown, Thernstrom (2004) explains, that the new immigrant groups are following a similar path.

While there is a vast amount of literature that explores the social processes of assimilation among immigrants, there is comparatively little research that deals with the accompanying identity processes. When we examine the literature on identity we find two relevant bodies of research: a larger experimental literature on social identity theory and a smaller literature on identity looked at through narrative. The identity literature is dominated by an experimental tradition that focused on inter-group relations (Tajfel, 1978). Through this research Tajfel hoped to develop a model for understanding inter-group relations based on the wider social contexts in which they occur. Through this nonreductionist approach Tajfel hoped to move away from the idea that group phenomena occur because of the personality traits of group members.
Early research that Tajfel conducted examined the function of group categorization in inter-group relations. This research eventually led to the development of the minimal group paradigm. In these experiments (e.g., Tajfel 1970), school age boys were randomly placed into groups, some were told that placement was meaningless and some were told that placement was based on their performance on a previously performed task (as cited in Taylor and Moghaddam, 1994, p.71). Subjects were then asked to allocate rewards to in-group or out-group members. These early experiments found that subjects were more likely to allocate rewards to in-group members than to out-group members, even when they knew that group membership was determined on the basis of a trivial criterion. Later work by J.C. Turner (1975, 1978a) expanded this type of experiment to examine the role of self-interest in this phenomenon (as cited in Taylor and Moghaddam, 1994, p.73). In these experiments some subjects also had the option of allocating rewards to themselves. These studies showed in-group favoritism when subjects could only reward the group and not themselves but that whenever possible subjects showed bias towards themselves. These experiments involving the minimal group paradigm have been used to demonstrate the influence that group membership has on inter-group bias and demonstrate the importance of a broad social approach.

Studies on the minimal group paradigm lead Tajfel and others to develop the concept of social identity theory, which looks at identity as the changeable product of social interaction (DeFina, 2003). The minimal group paradigm experiments have lead to the identification of four major concepts within social identity theory. These four concepts are social categorization, social identity, social comparison, and psychological group distinctiveness (Taylor and Moghaddam, 1994). Social categorization is based on
the idea that in order to process things in our environment we focus on similarities between those things and tend to ignore dissimilarities. This concept applies to the way in which we view the people with whom we come into contact. We also tend to categorize people based on similarities that they have and to focus on dissimilarities when distinguishing between categories or groups (Hogg, 2006). In a study in which subjects had to group people based on their race, Pettigrew et al. (1958) found that values and norms influence the way we group other people and that when we are part of one of the groups into which we are grouping others, our own status is affected by the outcome of the categorizations (Taylor and Moghaddam, 1994). These concepts show how our own identities are influenced by our tendency to group ourselves and other people based in similarities.

Social identity, as described by Tajfel (1972) is “the individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership (as cited in Hogg, 2006, p.113). Further, individuals are motivated to achieve positive social identity and accordingly to belong to positively evaluated groups. Social comparison describes the ways in which an individual determines his or her group’s social position and status (Taylor and Moghaddam, 1994). Since the individual’s status is directly linked to the status of the groups he or she belongs to, it is through social comparison that individuals come to understand what status they acquire as a member of a particular group. Finally, psychological group distinctiveness is the theory that individuals will strive to obtain for their group an identity that is both distinct from other groups and positive in comparison to those groups.
While the theories previously discussed have shed much light on the functions related to inter-group relations and discrimination, they have developed out of a body of research that is primarily experimental. These experiments typically last about an hour and use students as participants. These laboratory experiments use participants that, due to their education are not representative of the national immigrant population. Furthermore, much of this research has failed to examine identity as a long-term social process.

The body of research that has examined narrative in identity is much smaller. According to DeFina (2003) the narrative approach deals with the idea of identity as a process that is both shaped by and shapes narrative discourse. This theory is comprised of three parts: first, the way in which the specific narrative styles and content that a narrator chooses abide by the narrative traditions of their community, second, the way narrators use stories to represent and negotiate the social relationships of their respective communities, and third, the way that narrative can represent membership and participation in different communities through the representation of shared values and beliefs (DeFina, 2003). Not only does narrative discourse allow narrators to represent their membership in communities, it also acts as an agent that can maintain or modify those roles or membership by allowing narrators to create and test ideas about in-groups and out-groups and to negotiate similarities and differences (DeFina, 2003).

Additionally, narratives exist in both local and global contexts, either allowing the narrator to represent themselves based on the individual situation at hand, given the individuals present and their reactions to the narration, or allowing the narrator to negotiate their identity based in a broader context, such as ethnicity, gender or nationality.
(DeFina, 2003). These contexts of narrative draw on ideas from positioning theory, which postulates that individuals position themselves within a situation and that the narrative they then produced is based on that position (DeFina, 2003).

While the narrative approach has helped develop an understanding of the ways in which identity are negotiated through narration and positioning, more needs to be done towards developing an effective instrument that could be used in both qualitative and quantitative research. The present study is a modest step forward toward filling this important gap. Specifically I examine bicultural ethnic identity from an immigrant point of view. Geertz (1973) argues that essential to the understanding of culture is an interpretation that takes into consideration the context of that culture. It is not effective to interpret another culture from the perspective of our culture; therefore we must work to understand a culture from the perspective of its members (Geertz, 1973). Based on this theory of cultural context, my objective was to obtain an understanding of the immigrant point of view in order to develop a research instrument that would allow for a combined qualitative and quantitative approach in the study of immigrant ethnic identity.

Method

Participants

The participants for this study were 12 adults living in Washington, DC who fit one of the two following criteria: (a) they were born in another country and had since moved to the United States to live ($n=10$), or (b) they were born in the United States and their parents were born in another country ($n=2$). Participants were male ($n=7$) and female ($n=5$). The mean age of the participants was 25.75 (SD=7.66). Some of the
participants were students at Georgetown University ($n=7$). The other five participants were employees at a local restaurant. This second group was selected in an effort to obtain a more representative immigrant sample. The researcher also expected that comparing such a group to a group of college students would show differences and similarities between the populations, adding insight into the generalizeability of identity research that uses college students. A variety of ethnic heritages were represented: Bangladeshi ($n=1$), Eritrean ($n=1$), Guatemalan ($n=1$), Indian ($n=1$), Pakistani ($n=1$), Polish ($n=1$), Salvadorian ($n=3$), Singaporean ($n=1$), Trinidadian ($n=1$), and Turkish ($n=1$). Of those who were not born in the United States, participants had been living in the US for a mean 12.1 years ($SD=6.01$) and had arrived here when they were on average 15.7 years old ($SD=8.76$). During their time here participants had lived in a number of different areas of the country. One participant had lived in another country after leaving his or her country of origin and before moving to the United States. Because of the sensitive nature of the topic, participants were not asked about their legal status, although some chose to speak about this topic voluntarily.

**Procedure and Materials**

Data was collected through extensive interviews, conducted one-on-one with the researcher who is bilingual. Four of the participants spoke only Spanish. For these participants the questions were translated into Spanish and the interview was conducted in that language. Interviews included both verbal and written responses. Interviews were recorded and typically lasted 20-30 minutes. Participants were first asked general questions regarding age, place of birth, and place of residence. The researcher then asked participants to quantify four aspects of their identity using a 51-point likert-type scale.
ranging from not at all (0) to completely (50). Each of these questions was asked twice, the first time with reference to identification as American and the second with reference to identification as the ethnic heritage of their country of origin (referred to as X). The four questions asked in this manner were:

1. To what extent do you see yourself as American/X?
2. In an ideal world, to what extent would you feel American/X?
3. To what extent would you like your children to feel American/X?
4. To what extent do you think Americans see you as American/X?

Following each of these questions, participants were asked to explain their answers in words. At the end of the interview the researcher showed the participants the differences in their responses to questions 1, 2, and 4 and asked them to explain these differences. To control for the possibility that responses were influenced by previous responses, the questions were counter-balanced.

After seven interviews the questionnaire was adapted. Because the first seven participants tended to define their identity with their culture of origin based on their home life but many had difficulty recalling specific aspects of this environment, the adapted questionnaire included more specific questions about home life and social relations. Participants were asked to compare these aspects of their family life to their perception of similar aspects in a typical American family. Participants were also asked to compare their family, their role as a son/daughter, and their parents’ relationship to those of a typical American family based on three additional 51 point likert-type scales ranging from not at all similar (0) to completely similar (50). Following each rating participants explained the similarities and differences.
Results and Discussion

Interviews included two portions: a qualitative, narrative portion and a quantitative survey portion. Because of this I will first report the results for each portion separately, and then discuss the two combined.

Qualitative results

I was particularly interested in identifying ways in which immigrants describe themselves and how processes evolve as they assimilate. Through the interviews I was able to identify three common themes that subjects named as part of assimilation and their identity. While I collected extensive material from each of these interviews I will only present material that is relevant to the themes I have identified. These themes and examples as they appeared in the interviews are as follows:

Cultural heritage

Participants consistently named aspects of their cultural heritage as part of both their American identity and their ethnic identity. Of these aspects the most frequently named were language, religion, food, family, and social relationships. For many of the participants who were college students, these aspects of their cultural heritage expressed themselves more strongly when they were at home with their family than when they were at school, living with other students. Language, food, religion, and familial relationships were all aspects of their non-American identity that participants identified as appearing within their homes. Participants consistently equated proficiency in the language of their country of origin as something that made them identify more strongly with that culture. Similarly, participants identified the ability to speak English without an accent as something that made them identify as more American. Participants who practiced the
religion of their country of origin named religious practices as something that made them identify more with that culture. Participants also said that the relationships they had with their parents were different than those of a typical American family, often citing differences in respect and affection as things that made their family different. Along the same line, one female participant felt that social relationships she had with males here would be seen as too informal in her country of origin.

Examples of specific instances in which cultural heritage arose within the interviews follow:

1. “I mean the fact that I don’t speak fluent Italian makes me not feel Italian.”
2. “My religion, I would say mainly, because I’m Catholic, but the Catholic Church in Poland is much more conservative than it is here, so some of the things that I do, like I go to mass very consistently and you know, I grew up with my parents always talking about religion all the time, and I feel like although you know a lot of people in America are also very Catholic the church in Poland is much more strict about it, and I think that’s what’s always going to stick with me.”
3. “And, we’re not very affectionate, and that’s the other thing that I noticed, it was really weird when I came here ‘cause my roommate would always, whenever she talked to her parents on the phone she would always say ‘ok I love you, bye’ we never do that, we’ve never said that, ever. It would just be weird to say it, I think. That’s why my home isn’t very American.”

*Cultural cognitive styles*

Participants named cultural cognitive style as something that made them identify as American and as something that made them identify with their non-American culture. Two specific types of cognitive styles that were referred to frequently dealt with the role of women in society and education. All of the female participants referred to their perceived independence in comparison to the independence of women in their country of
origin as something that made them identify as American. Along with this was a
difference in their view of women’s roles in society in comparison with their mother’s
view of the same issue. Most participants also referred to views and practices surrounding
education as things that made them feel more or less American. Many referred to
discipline as something that differentiated the education and work styles of their country
from those of American society.

Examples of specific instances in which cultural cognitive styles arose within the
interviews follow:

4. “My mom especially is very Indian in her way of thinking, like culture, religion,
like all that stuff and even food, I guess I see myself as Indian in a lot of aspects
but at the same time the way I think is very American, like if I would go back to
India I think my thought process is very different in terms of like political views
or like you know views for feminism and women’s roles in the house or you
know just in the world would be very different than someone who grew up in
India.”

5. “There’s this one sort of defining characteristic of Singaporean culture, the word
for it is kiasu…and it literally means fear of losing, and it’s like I don’t think
there’s like a western equivalent it’s kind of like, umm, competitiveness, but like
just scared of being lower compared to someone else and in me it’s not as strong
as it would be if I grew up in Singapore, but I am very kind of competitive and I
do push myself as hard as I can to be kind of better relative to everyone else and
I’d say that part of me is very Singaporean.”

_Context and experience_

Participants consistently referred to experiences they had in relation to context as
part of their identity. Participants who had lived in the United States from a young age
explained that when they returned to their country of origin they felt more American than
when they were here. Similarly, participants also mentioned that when they come to what
they called a very American environment after having been in an environment that is strongly influenced by the culture of their country of origin, they identify more with their country of origin. The influence of context appeared to occur both in long term and short-term experiences, as participants identified these experiences in situations ranging from short phone calls to stays lasting a number of months. Participants also identified experience in a culture as increasing the amount that they identified with that culture. Interestingly, place of birth and place of citizenship also very much influenced participants’ identification with a culture. Many participants cited the simple fact that they were not born in the United States as something that would prevent them from ever feeling fully American while others identified American citizenship as what made them feel truly American.

Examples of specific instances in which experience and context arose within the interviews follow:

6. “When I go back to Trinidad, people, like when I pay for a plane ticket or something like that in Trinidad, I’ll talk to the Caribbean airlines, she’s like oh I’m Trinidian, are you Trinidian? And I’ll say yeah I am and she’s like you’re not Trinidian because I don’t have like that instant accent already, so she just like, completely disassociates me that way and I’m just like, I guess I’m American you know, so, ‘cause since I’ve been here for so long I feel like I’ve lost that contact.”

7. “When I go home, I feel like I’m [more] American than I am Polish because of the influence of my roommates and my friends and like, being at Georgetown and you know I tend to not really interact with other Polish people ‘cause there’s I mean there is a Polish community here but it’s just not as big and I haven’t really found myself to be part of it but then when I come back here after being at home I realize that I’ve picked up all these things
from home that are very culture dependent like for example the things that I eat or like habits I have.”

8. “A lot of my [South Asian] identity is in the context of weddings because that’s the only time I ever go back and so everything is kind of in the context of family.”

An aspect of the narrative approach that is important to discuss is the difference between experiencing and explaining. For example, in quote 3, the speaker describes an experience she has had. We know that she finds other families to be very affectionate and that she thinks her family, in comparison, is not affectionate. However, the act of describing this experience to us does not show everything that is going on within this relationship. The process of narrative is very subjective and it is interesting to note that from these quotes and these descriptions we can only really conclude exactly what is being said within the context that it is being said. That is to say, we must keep in mind all of the other contextual factors that relate to the description of this one aspect of this person’s life.

Table: Mean scores on various ratings of American and “other” identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>M (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To what extent do you see yourself as American?</td>
<td>35.45 (15.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent do you see yourself as X?</td>
<td>26.59 (15.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In an ideal world, to what extent would you feel American?</td>
<td>37.54 (12.70)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Quantitative results from one participant were left out of this analysis because the participant could not answer all of the questions. Sample size ($n=11$) was too small to obtain any significant results from the likert-type scale responses. It is also important to note that standard deviations of the mean score on each of these questions showed a great deal of variance. However, mean scores did show that subjects identified more strongly as American than they did as persons from their country of origin. Mean scores also showed that while subjects reported that they would on average like to feel slightly more American than they did the difference was much greater between how much they actually saw themselves as a person from their country of origin and how much they would like to identify with their country of origin. Subjects also reported that they would like to identify more with their country of origin than as American.

Subjects reported that they would like their children to be more American than of their country of origin. Subjects also reported that they thought Americans would perceive them as less American than as a person from their country of origin.
An important part of the research that should be discussed involves the two different groups of participants. The first group was composed of university students while the second was made up of workers from a local restaurant. While members of the second group had been living in the United States just as long as the first group \( \text{group 1} (M=11.6), (SD=5.32) \) vs. \( \text{group 2} (M=12.6), (SD=7.23) \), none of the members of the second group spoke fluent English and all reported interacting mostly with people of the same cultural and linguistic background. These are both circumstances that could greatly contribute to either their identification as American or with their country of origin.

Interestingly, participants from the second group reported identifying as more American \( [(M=45), (SD=5.77)] \) than members of the first group \( [(M=30), (SD=16.07)] \). When compared with the results of the interviews, this difference could be accounted for by the fact that most of the participants in the second group identified citizenship as their main reason for feeling American, compared with the first group in which participants reported not feeling completely American despite being American citizens. The second group focused on the fact that they were here and were therefore American. They explained that they felt a tie to their home country because they were from there but would not want to go back. The first group, on the other hand, showed a dialogue between each of the two identities that they felt they had and was able to explain how each identity changed in different situations.

**Limitations**

It is important to note that the first group of participants dialogued about their identity with ease, exhibiting experience talking and thinking about identity. The second
group, on the other hand, had more trouble understanding and answering questions about identity. This difficulty could be attributed to the fact that they are not used to articulating aspects of their identity. Another reason for the difficulty of expression could be attributed to a language barrier. Four of these participants only spoke Spanish and because of that the interview was conducted in Spanish. While the experimenter was fluent in Spanish, she is not a native speaker, which could have contributed to this problem. The fifth participant spoke Eritrean and very little English. These participants also showed discomfort regarding the interview as a whole. This discomfort could be attributed to an unease that many immigrants with little knowledge of the U.S. legal system feel towards discussion close to the issue of citizenship and legal status. Discomfort could also be attributed to unfamiliarity with these types of questions.

The difficulties of using a college population as a sample highlighted in this study also have implications for further research. Because the college population is not representative of other immigrant populations it should therefore not be used as the sole subject in the study of immigrant identity processes. Instead, a different method should be developed that is sensitive to the linguistic, educational, and experiential differences of such immigrant populations.

Concluding Comments

The topic of identity processes of immigrants is one that is lacking in research. Most research that exists on identity is limited because of its focus on laboratory experiments that do not allow for the study of processes. In order to be able to study identity processes a tool must first be developed. The current research lays the
groundwork for what themes such a tool would incorporate and supports the idea that these themes would include: (1) cultural heritage, (2) cultural cognitive styles, and (3) context and experience. From these themes questions should be developed that would allow for a more standardized combined qualitative and quantitative questionnaire. A mixed methods approach is ideal because it gives us the benefits of both qualitative and quantitative methods. In such an approach each method covers the weaknesses of the other and the two complement each other. We are able to see not only what is happening but also can ask why and in what ways, thus taking us one step further to understanding the processes behind immigrant identity.
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