

**Transnational Identity and Behavior: An Ethnographic Comparison of First
and Second Generation Latino Immigrants**

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Abstract:

We present findings from ethnographic work conducted during 2002 and 2003 on the formation of transnational identities among first and second generation immigrants in three different urban sites in the northeastern United States: Philadelphia, New York City, and the New Jersey urban corridor connecting these two poles. The sample was compiled using chain referral methods and was recruited to represent four broad categories of immigrants: Mexicans, Central Americans, Caribbeans, and South Americans. The final sample included 160 persons. We found that at this point in their trajectory of incorporation, respondents identified themselves more as Latinos than Americans. The solidification a pan-national Latino identity in the second generation does not necessarily imply ghettoization, however, but defines an ideological space from which the second generation encounters American society and its diverse peoples: whites, blacks, Asians, and others. Two facets of the second generation, however, do not bode well for their successful incorporation into the structure of U.S. society and its economy: the common lack of documentation, and the lack of a strong sense of social solidarity, either with others in their situation or with the people in their home communities

Keywords:

Immigrants, transnational, identity, assimilation

This article presents findings from a research project on the formation and content of transnational identities among first and second generation Latino youths. Ethnographic work was conducted during 2002 and 2003 in three different urban sites in the northeastern United States: Philadelphia, New York City (Manhattan, Queens, and the Bronx), and New Jersey urban corridor between these two poles (including, Camden, Newark, Princeton, New Brunswick, Kearney and Trenton). We defined youths as people between the ages of 13 and 33. First generation migrants were those born abroad or who had entered the U.S. after age 13, whereas the second generation included those born in the U.S. or arriving before age 13,

Our principal goal in conducting the study was to understand the extent and nature of transnational identity and the factors that condition it. We thus gathered information on basic traits such as age, gender, residential location, and national origins. We also gathered extensive narrative data through open-ended interviews on topics such as migration, social networks, documentation, language use, interpersonal relations with friends and relatives abroad, values and aspirations, and perceptions of inequality and discrimination. We also gathered basic life histories for each respondent.

The sample was compiled using chain referral methods and was recruited to represent four broad categories of immigrants: Mexicans, Central Americans, Caribbean's, and South Americans. The final sample of 160 persons included 55 interviews conducted in Philadelphia, 47 in New York, and 58 in New Jersey. It included 111 first generation and 49 second generation immigrants. Among all respondents, 67 were female and 93 were male; 55 were Mexican, 22 were Central Americans, 29 were Caribbean, and 44 were South American.

“Ethnic origins” and Transnational Identity

Latin Americans are extremely heterogeneous with respect to racial and ethnic origins, comprising diverse mixtures of pre-Columbian, African, European, and Asian peoples. In order to consider the influence race and ethnicity on identity we created a two-fold classification

scheme. First, we ourselves developed a five-point index of skin color ranging from light to dark. After applying this scale during interviews, however, we found that most subjects fell in the medium category, which led us classify respondents also according to the origins of ancestors. For example, we initially identified one of our respondents as a medium-complected mestizo based on his appearance, which blended European and indigenous features. Upon completing the interview, however, we discovered that the subject had Chinese ancestry on his father's side and Japanese ancestry on his mother's side (in addition to having European and indigenous roots).

Our data suggest that many first and second-generation immigrants experience discrimination and exclusion in the United States regardless of skin color. Sometimes, the discrimination stems from use of the Spanish language (and what this symbolically represents). At other times it stems from aspects of personal appearance. Since Latin America is a hybrid society it is often is often a subjective exercise to identify the "racial" strands that make up any one individual. Whereas in the United States, racial categorization has usually been in terms of black versus white (with indigenous people falling largely outside the paradigm), in Latin America the concept of multiple "racial" mixtures has always existed. This has made it possible to incorporate other ethnic groups into the original indigenous-European-African mixture that began in the 16th century. Each wave of immigrants has brought its own set of "racial" characteristics to the traditional Latin American mestizaje, which began with the conquest but which, in fact, followed a longer period of "ethnic" mixing among Moors, Jews, and Christians on the Iberian peninsula. We find, therefore, that Latino identity is not related just to skin color, which is the way that American society has traditionally drawn racial lines.

Latino Identity

Through extensive interviews and ethnographic fieldwork we found that Latinos have an important overarching identity that is identifiable apart from identities pertaining to specific countries of origin. This transnational Latino identity has a variety of roots. One is the historical formation of most Latin American nations. A majority of leaders in the 19th century claimed independence from Spain for the "Latin-American Continent," not just a particular region. Latin American immigrants also feel connected by a commonality of push factors in their home countries: a lack of employment, low wages, violence, insecurity, and inequality, summed up

by the refrain “Si no hubiese la necesidad de salir no se haría” (If I didn’t have to, I wouldn’t have left.). Use of Spanish also plays an important unifying role, especially when it is reinforced through participation language-specific social networks. Respondents spoke about feeling able to communicate in an “emotional way” with other Latinos in contrast with the “Nordic” way they talk to white Americans, an alienation heightened by their poverty and economic insecurity. Feelings of “Latinidad” are thus bound up with commonalities of experience, language, culture, social interaction, and emotional sensibilities.

The Second Generation

In the second generation, we encounter a continuation and strengthening of the transnational Latino identity, and Latinidad is employed conceptually as a key distinction between themselves and the rest of American society. At this point in their trajectory of incorporation, they identify more as Latinos than Americans. The solidification a pan-national Latino identity in the second generation does not necessarily imply ghettoization. Rather it identifies the ideological space from which the second generation encounters American society and its diverse peoples: whites, blacks, Asians, and others.

Two facets of the second generation, however, do not bode well for their successful incorporation into the structure of U.S. society and its economy. The first is the overwhelming importance of documentation as a factor conditioning the possibilities for their lives. A large share of the second generation have grown up in the United States without legal documentation and for this reason they see bleak prospects for mobility. Without legal papers, they cannot aspire to high levels of education and occupational achievement. Even if they manage to get a good public primary and secondary education, they will be unable to enroll in good colleges and unable to apply for loans or other financial aid. So even if they are very good students, speak two languages fluently, and have a high school degree they see themselves as stuck in the American class system without any real chance to achieve a meaningful career. For them, economic mobility and social assimilation in the mainstream seem impossible dreams.

Second, whereas we found that first generation Latino immigrants very frequently used the term “solidarity” in describing their strategies for survival and advancement in the United States, we rarely heard members of the second generation use this word. Indeed, we often had to explain to them what it meant. In contrast to their parents, who feel a sense of common purpose

and derive a sense of strength and satisfaction from collective efforts, the second generation view themselves as having to survive individually, and have no expectation that collective efforts based on Latino solidarity will help them improve their lives. The emergence of a large population of undocumented migrants who have grown up in the United States, combined with a lack of faith in collective strategies of political, social, and economic advancement, do not yield bright prospects for future assimilation.