

Cultural Identity Among Immigrants in America

AP Seminar

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Introduction

In today's socio-cultural climate, anyone can call America home. This has been made possible by globalization and modern immigration. No other country in the world has more immigrants than the U.S. In fact, over 40 million people living here were born elsewhere (Budiman, 2020). However, for many new citizens, the pressure to assimilate and conform to classic American culture is substantial. According to Gallup, one of the nation's most trusted analytical sources, 72% of Americans feel that immigrants have a responsibility to learn English (Jones, 2013). This demonstrates the social expectation to adopt new languages, customs, and characteristics. Nonetheless, more than 15% percent of American adults do not speak English at home (Ingraham, 2018). This exhibits a resistance to societal pressures. The linguistic diversity of this country suggests that naturalization does not require integration. In contrast, Ran Abramitsky and his associates at Stanford University found that migrants who arrived in the 1900s-1910s were less likely to give their children names that reflected their foreign origin (Abramitsky, 2017). This conflicting research begs the question, have immigrants become acculturated in the U.S.? Absolutely not. In today's modern society, immigrants have been successful in preserving their identity and resisting cultural conformity by developing ethnic enclaves in the metropolises of America.

Ethnic Enclaves in LA and New York

Despite the relentless urge to conform to classic American culture, immigrants have retained their roots first and foremost through the development of ethnic enclaves. When first moving to the U.S. new citizens will often turn to familiarity for comfort, rather than immediate assimilation. In the bustling city of Los Angeles, California, a collection of distinct cultures have

been divided up geographically. The diversity of the metropolis prompted this development, which has since become extremely successful and well-known. Koreatown, west of Downtown Los Angeles, has the largest focus of Korean culture in the city. Koreatown has received substantial investments from Korean companies in the past decades and has a large accumulation of Korean small businesses. Koreans constitute one-third of the entire area's residential population (Allen & Turner, 2013). This demonstrates the ability of these immigrants to confine their ethnic group to a specific area and foster their culture while in America. Even more well-known is Chinatown, a sprawling community with rich heritage. Residents of Chinatown not only have access to the similar goods and services available in their origin country, but can also make a living off of their traditions and customs. James P. Allen and Eugene Turner recently examined this area in an article for the American Association of Geographers. They found that tourists support this community by purchasing from the large shopping centers as well as smaller street vendors. The authors make it clear that L.A. is unmatched in its diversity. They analyze a multitude of locations with various regional influences. In a survey conducted through the University of California Los Angeles, it was found that 83% of Chinatown residents born in the U.S. speak a language other than language **and** 78% speak English "very well" (Mai & Chen, 2013). Additionally, this survey discovered that 91% of the population over the age of 18 is immigrant. This neighborhood is a prime example of the ability immigrants have to protect their heritage and feel accepted in their ethnicity, rather than succumbing to conformity and acculturation. Los Angeles is also home to Little Tokyo, and smaller neighborhoods with heavy Mexican influence. Each diverse group is able to maintain their identities while creating a better life for their families in America. Despite the common assumption that immigrants live in groups due to financial restrictions, recent research done in New York and L.A. suggests otherwise. In

fact, a study done for the American Sociological Association proved that immigrants do not pick specific neighborhoods for economic reasons, but rather to be closer to their own people (Logan et al., 2002). They form initial friendships and bonds with their communities and stay there even as their wealth accumulates. This perpetuates a feeling of community and alleviates the pressure to become “white-washed”. The authors, John R. Logan and Richard D. Alba are both well-respected in this field. Logan is an accomplished author and has been a professor at Brown University since 2004. While Richard A. Alba has his own assortment of works and is currently associated with the CUNY. The American Sociological Review is a very prestigious journal and the authors are very experienced in this field. While L.A. is considered one of the most prominent cities in the country, New York had the highest immigration rates in the country during the mid-19th and early 20th century. Although New York’s Chinatown was born in the 1870s, it grew exponentially to over 4,000 by the 1930s and continues to prosper (*ChinaTown and Little Italy Historic District New York, New York*, 2020). The actual territory expanded from 7 blocks to 55 within that same time frame. The success of Chinatown in both Los Angeles and New York exhibits the strength of immigrant culture. Alongside this sprawling community lies Little Italy, which is home to authentic restaurants, traditional festivals, and lots of Italians. This area too, brings in impressive revenue. Today, these neighborhoods continue to grow and flourish, becoming more popular to tourists each year.

Eastern Enclaves

In Eastern cities, immigrant communities continue to implement their heritage into American society. In Philadelphia, the Puerto Rican community has carried out the “Latinization” of urban neighborhoods both through unique vernacular and ethno-architectural changes (Volchock,

2019). Liz Volchock, an urban planner and social preservationist makes a strong point in her analysis of this process: not only do these areas sound like Puerto Rico, but they look like it too. This group has had no trouble settling into their neighborhood. Latin American immigrants have also preserved their culture in Charlotte, North Carolina through music. The Latin population of Charlotte has preserved their identity through the growth of the Latinidad genre (Casillas, 2016). Dolores Inés Cassillas, the Director of the Chicano Studies Institute at UCSB, analyzes Samuel K. Byrd's book *The Sounds of Latinidad* and reflects on his perspective. The professor also adds that the creation of this genre can be attributed to demographic shifts that prompted intercultural fusion within the Latin community. In their communities, the sounds of Spain, Portugal, and Mexico are praised. The continuation of Latin musical expression exhibits a commitment to true identity in Charlotte. This is just another example of cultural preservation. Similar to Charlotte, Spanish identity is protected in Miami through Little Havana. West of Downtown Miami lies a neighborhood almost entirely populated by Cubans. In this enclave, all aspects of a traditional Caribbean are common. The food, music, religion, and language draw in tourists and comfort migrants (Biondi, 1991). Afro-Caribbean products bring in substantial revenue for the locals. Evidently, Latin American immigrants have had no trouble staying true to their homelands. Farther north, in Cincinnati, researchers concluded that Muslim immigrants have been able to adapt to American life by supporting and establishing Muslim markets (Ezme, 2016). Ezme, an associate of the University of Cincinnati, asserts that because the majority of participants said that ethnic markets have a large impact on where they choose to live, they have been able to preserve their native identities. Researchers found that these international markets determine where they live and how they eat. They are able to maintain their traditional diets and follow religious guidelines through the use of these stores. The study was conducted through an

extensive survey, and the data clearly supports the author's conclusion. In addition, Ezme's study also found that almost all of the families knew at least one other family within their neighborhood that had migrated from their same country. This too, shows a feeling of community within urban enclaves. In the North End of Boston, Italian immigrants have created a close-knit neighborhood, full of their original country's customs. Researchers Jon Smajda and Joseph Gerteis wrote in their article for the *Sociological Forum* that the North End is clearly defined by ethnicity and depends greatly on tourists economically (Smajda & Gerteis, 2012). Smajda and Gerteis spent an extended time studying the area and its characteristics in order to create a comprehensive report on the Irish population. Joseph Gerteis is affiliated with the University of Minnesota and has published multiple books. He is most certainly qualified to give his insight on this issue. They assert that residents there strive to include all Italians in their little society, perpetuating a feeling of family within a foreign country. In fact, the authors noted that the white residents of Boston actually want to participate in the Irish traditions and festivals, supporting the enclave. Once again, a specific ethnicity has created a boundary between assimilation and celebration of culture. The ability of migrants to make America home while giving their families a better life is overwhelmingly inspirational and rare.

Psychological Impact of Distinct Ethnic Concentration

Society has long held onto the fallacy that naturalization should coincide with assimilation, however, it's been found that even adolescents are able to stand firm in their beliefs and resist social pressures (Do et al., 2020). This psychological research, conducted through the University of North Carolina, has proven human ability to oppose societal standards and influences. It suggests that those going through the citizenship process are psychologically able to stand up for what they believe in. The research clearly states that, even as children, it's human nature to resist

opposing attitudes rather than conforming. These enclaves are a clear representation of immigrants' nonconformity and individuality. Revathy Kumar, a professor at the university of Toledo, has a Ph.D. in Education and Psychology. Along with a group of her associates, Kumar studied the impact of living in an ethnic enclave on immigrant Arabs adolescents. Their exploration revealed that young immigrant Arabs had an increased feeling of belonging when immersed in an ethnic enclave (Kumar et al., 2015). Once again, psychological research has proven the ability of migrants to reject acculturation. These areas are fostering a strong sense of community. Michele Gelfand, esteemed psychologist and professor at Stanford University, as well her colleagues claim that ritualistic synchrony has a variety of impacts on group behavior. According to their findings, synchrony greatly benefits communities, as it creates a feeling of strength within the group (Gelfand et al., 2020). The unity found within these enclaves are surely promoting the same prosocial behaviors that the researchers examined. The feeling of protection that these enclaves provide for residents allows them to express their true culture. From a psychological perspective, these enclaves are preventing cultural assimilation among immigrants.

Conclusion

Moving to a big city in a foreign country is undoubtedly one of the most daunting processes a person can go through. Upon arrival in America, migrants are met with an expectation to leave their culture behind and conform to new societal standards. However, in 21st century society, immigrants are resisting acculturation by gathering in enclaves within the largest American cities. However, it's important to note that there are challenges to opposing assimilation. It's been proven that although African American immigrants prefer to have their children taken care of by family members, they chose to send them to daycare centers instead (Obeng, 2007). Many

parents hope their children can grow up with a deep understanding of their African culture, but cannot find the time or resources to make these arrangements. Despite these possible limitations, experts say that ethnic enclaves undeniably provide social capital to those far away from home (Espinoza-Kulick, 2021). Language barriers and racial biases may seem formidable, but they're actually not. The preservation of ethnic immigrant culture in America's metropolises is abundant and overwhelmingly evident. Walking along the busy streets of an unfamiliar city, one might just smell, hear, or see a scrap of their homeland. At least in these little bubbles, it's clear that American immigrants know who they are.

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