



## *The New Immigration and Ethnic Identity*

### About the Brief

This policy brief is based on Christoph M. Schimmele and Zheng Wu (2015) *The New Migration and Ethnicity Identity*, a research synthesis prepared for the Population Change and Lifecourse Cluster, and published as PCLC Discussion Paper 3 (1):1.

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### Target Audience

- ◆ Researchers
- ◆ Policy Makers
- ◆ Students

### Summary

This knowledge synthesis provides an up-to-date assessment of how the acculturation experiences of the children of immigrants influences their social identities. While other factors affect identity development, this synthesis focuses on the interface between identity and intergroup relations. Most post-1965 immigrants encounter economic circumstances and a “color” barrier that complicate the acculturation process. How these structural forces affect the pathway towards becoming a Canadian or an American is a far-reaching issue. For groups that are able to achieve economic parity with Whites and encounter little racism, their “ethnicity” could recede across generations. Hence, recent immigrants could eventually adopt unhyphenated identities based on a sense of belonging to the host community. In multicultural countries, however, such identificational assimilation is unnecessary for successful incorporation. The children of recent immigrants could instead opt for bicultural identities. The troubling possibility are situations where barriers to immigrant incorporation motivate a reactive ethnic solidarity. In these cases, ethnic identity could reflect social divisions and perhaps even ethnic conflict within society.

### Key Findings

- ◆ First generation immigrants tend to prefer national-origin identities (e.g., Chinese), while their children tend to adopt hyphenated (e.g., Chinese-Canadian) identities. This suggests the acculturation of immigrants is an intergenerational process.
- ◆ Bicultural identities (e.g., Chinese-Canadian) are common among the second generation. There are two explanations for this pattern of self-identification. First, Canada’s multicultural environment encourages the simultaneous retention of cultural distinctiveness and a sense belonging to the host nation. Second, some racial minorities are hesitant to “drop the hyphen” because of subtle perceptions of being less “Canadian” than their White counterparts.
- ◆ For both first and second generation immigrants, a national-origin label remains important. Few second generation immigrants are adopting a purely national identification (e.g., Canadian), which suggests that the process of acculturation is on-going.
- ◆ The experience of racism or discrimination discourages a sense of belonging to the host nation. This experience can also lead to “politicized” identities as immigrants react to exclusion through in-group solidarity and a rejection of the mainstream.



## Background

Prior research questions whether the model of acculturation that European immigrants followed is pertinent for those of the new immigration (Alba and Nee 1997). The “new immigration” refers to the influx of immigrants from non-European countries (visible or racial minorities) that followed the repeal of racist immigration policies in Canada and the US in the 1960s (Massey 1995). Most previous studies on the adaptation of immigrants focus on indicators such as English/French language use, socioeconomic mobility, and spatial assimilation (Wu, Schimmele, and Hou 2012). These are no doubt pertinent factors, but patterns of social affiliation are another aspect of the adaptation of immigrants. Social identities are a reflection of intergroup relations and associate with the process of acculturation. Ethnic identity and identificational assimilation (e.g., identifying as “Canadian”) are intercorrelated as these outcomes relate to the incorporation of immigrants into the mainstream and their personal commitment to the host community/nation.

This empirical overview focuses on the role of intergroup relations and the context of immigration in the production of social identities. First, do external factors such as discrimination and racism trigger the development of “reactive” in-group identities among racial minorities? Second, do strong in-group identities correlate with feelings of alienation or a weak sense of belonging to the host nation? Third, is there a relationship between ethnic identity and behavioral participation in Canadian/American culture? The process of acculturation can be smooth or turbulent; this depends on the characteristics of immigrants, life-stage at immigration, and the social context of re-settlement (Wu et al. 2010). The theory of segmented assimilation provides a framework for interpreting these differences (Zhou 1997). This theory posits three possible modes of acculturation. First, the classic straight-line mode of acculturation, which leads to the adoption of “Canadian” or “American” identities across generations. Second, an obstructed mode of acculturation, which leads to assimilation into an underclass and the development of oppositional racial identities. Third, a mode of adaptation that depends on in-group solidarity (e.g., ethnic enclaves), leading to strong in-group social identities or bicultural identities if the experience of discrimination is low.

## Main Findings

**Ethnicity and ethnic identity should be interpreted as products of intergroup relations.** Too often ethnicity is considered to be a cultural phenomenon. Ethnicity should not be reduced to culture for two reasons. First, the assumption that a common culture is the basis for ethnicity ignores the cultural variation that exists within ethnic groups (Chandra 2006). This is particularly the case for national (e.g., Chinese) and pan-ethnic groups (e.g., Asian), which are quite heterogeneous with regard to cultural norms and behaviors. In addition, people that share the same “ethnicity” have different levels of affiliation with their ethnic group, ranging from none to a lot. This includes variation on indicators of culture such as language use, traditions, values, and behavioral norms. Second, ethnicity has little meaning in homogeneous societies; it is a social phenomenon that is exclusive to heterogeneous societies. The classic statement from Barth (1969) is that ethnicity represents the boundaries between groups not the “cultural stuff” inside groups. In this perspective, intergroup contact (power relations) is the primary determinant of ethnic identities. For racial minorities, ethnic identity is an ascribed label that connotes their social distance from Whites.

**Ethnic identities are not incompatible with national identities.** A major concern in the literature is whether cultural maintenance discourages a sense of belonging with the host nation. This corresponds to the question of whether ethnicity among recent immigrants from non-European countries will fade across generations as occurred for European-origin immigrants. Patterns of self-identification suggest that attachment to the host nation increases across generations. First generation immigrants, regardless of length of residence, tend to prefer a nation-origin label. This largely reflects their foreign-born nativity and socialization. In the 1.5 and second generations, there is an increase in identificational assimilation. For these generations, however, an ethnic affiliation remains important. Being domestic-born has stronger effects on the odds of claiming an unhyphenated or hyphenated label than does length of residence (Rumbaut 1994). A key feature of the new immigration is the potential to retain ethnic identities



alongside national identities. The modal path of acculturation in the second generation is the development of bicultural identities. Having a Canadian identity may indeed involve a multicultural ethos that fosters cultural distinctiveness.

**The acculturation process is on-going.** Since 99 percent of racial minorities are first or second generation immigrants, the process of acculturation is incomplete, since ethnicity is not expected to fade out before the third generation. At this point, unhyphenated identities remain rare among the second generation. The literature suggests that race is a major factor in the acculturation process. Dropping the hyphen is, perhaps, no longer necessary or desirable. The reasons the children of European immigrants lost their ethnicity are themselves unclear. For recent immigrants, personal preferences and a greater tolerance for cultural distinctiveness in host communities implies that hyphenated identities could persist past the third generation. In addition, internalized perceptions of difference constrain racial minorities from dropping the hyphen and adopting straight “Canadian” or “American” identities. The relationship between a sense of belonging to an ethnic group and adopting an ethnic label is not clear-cut. For example, some minorities adopt an ethnic label despite little emotional identification with the ethnic group (Hiller and Chow 2005). That is, despite feeling more “Canadian” or “American” than ethnic, racial minorities are adopting hyphenated identities because of racial discourses that make them feel less Canadian or American than Whites.

**Segmented assimilation is occurring.** The relationship between acculturation and the social identities of immigrants is complex, and there are several possible outcomes. The modal outcome is integration. This is a positive indication that numerous immigrants are able to maintain an ethnic identity and incorporate into the host nation. But not all immigrants are willing or able to integrate. The reasons are unclear, but a national-origin identification (e.g., Chinese) is not uncommon in the sec-

ond generation. In models of acculturation, this represents a separated outcome. It cannot be assumed that a strong ethnic identity in conjunction with a weak national identity (e.g., Canadian) necessarily reflects alienation from the host nation. There are other forms of social affiliation that connect immigrants to the host community besides identificational assimilation. It could be that labels such as “Canadian” are simply too amorphous to resonate for some immigrants. That said, it is also possible that some second generation immigrants adopt a nation-origin label because of being made to feel less Canadian than Whites. There is evidence that some people adopt racialized labels because of their incorporation into an underclass.

**Racism influences social identities.** Historically, ethnicity has functioned as a basis for social stratification in Canada and the US. This has two major implications for the social identities of immigrants. First, the dominant group places immigrants into ethno-racial categories, which constrains their choices of self-identification. Most US Blacks cannot and do not claim to be “White,” even though most have some White ancestry. This is because society perceives them as “Black” regardless of their personal identity. This color line is not as stark for Asians and Hispanics, but perceptions of difference from Whites still “color” their patterns of identification. For example, treatment as second-class citizens vis-à-vis Whites complicates their national identities. This can discourage the use of unhyphenated labels and promote a preference for pan-ethnic identities. Second, the experience of racism can foster the development of in-group identities. Similarly, it can lead to a rejection of a national label such as “American” or “Canadian” and alienation from the mainstream. These represent politicized identities that emerge in context of social exclusion and socioeconomic deprivation. Thus ethnic balkanization is a corollary of unreceptive host communities. In contrast, for immigrants with prospects for socioeconomic mobility and few encounters with discrimination, integration is the expected outcome.



## Conclusion

**S**ocial identities are a reflection of the incorporation of immigrants into the mainstream and their personal commitment to the host community. Strong ethnic identities are not incompatible with attachment to Canada. Most second generation immigrants are opting for bicultural identities. Ethnic identity remains important for both first and second generation immigrants, which demonstrates that the acculturation process for recent waves of immigrants is incomplete. When welcomed, immigrants tend to assimilate or integrate with few problems. But immigrants feel marginalized and tend to adopt non-Canadian identities when prejudice and discrimination is rife.

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