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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1k34d421>

Journal

Identities, 27(2)

ISSN

1070-289X

Author

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Publication Date

2020-03-03

DOI

10.1080/1070289x.2019.1587904

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Second-generation Central Americans and the formation of an ethnoracial identity in Los Angeles

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ABSTRACT

Whether Latinos in the United States are an ethnic or racial group is extensively debated. Some propose Latinos are an ethnic group on their way to becoming white, others contend Latinos are a racialised group, and an alternate perspective posits Latinos are an ethnoracial group. This study intervenes in this debate by examining the identities of second- and 1.5-generation Central Americans in Los Angeles, California. Drawing on 27 in-depth interviews, I show Central Americans have an *identity repertoire*, which includes national origin, panethnic, racial, and minority identities. I also capture the *situations* and *reference groups* that influence the deployment of ethnic and racial identities. These results suggest Central Americans develop an ethnoracial identity. I argue Central Americans' ethnoracial identity emerges from agency – subjective understandings of themselves and resisting invisibility in Mexican Los Angeles – and from structure – a racialised society, institutionally-created panethnic categories, and racially-based experiences.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 21 September 2017; Accepted 10 February 2019

KEYWORDS Ethnoracial identity; second-generation; incorporation; Latinos; Central Americans; Los Angeles

Introduction

Whether Latinos in the United States are an ethnic or racial group is an extensively debated topic in academic and public spheres. One side posits Latinos are an ethnic group; thus, they are expected to follow the path of Southern and Eastern Europeans who lost their ethnic attachments and eventually joined the white mainstream (Patterson 2001; Yancey 2003; Alba and Nee 2003; Lee and Bean 2004, 2007). Another perspective emphasizes Latinos are a racialised group. These scholars argue the racialisation of Latinos is a product of structural and social forces that have attributed racial meanings to Latinos and sorted them into lower levels of the social hierarchy (Telles and Ortiz 2008; Golash-Boza and Darity 2008; Cobas, Duany, and Feagin 2009;

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Chavez 2013; Lacayo 2016). A third strand advances Latinos are an ethnoracial group – a conceptualization that accounts for the role of ancestry, history, and culture in Latinos’ lives as well as their racialised experiences in the U.S. (Alcoff 2009; Itzigsohn 2009; Flores-González 2017).

The arrival of over 20 million immigrants from Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean during the post-1965 period has stimulated this debate. With a population of 59 million, Latinos are the largest minority group in the U.S. and they are projected to reach a quarter of the U.S. population by 2065 (ACS 2017). The children of immigrants constitute an important segment of the Latino population. In 2012, second-generation Latinos accounted for nearly a third of all Latinos; certainly, the children of immigrants will have lasting impacts on U.S. society (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; PRC 2013). While Mexican immigrants have dominated immigration flows from Latin America, Central American immigrants and their children are also a notable component of the post-1965 migration wave. Central Americans arrived in earnest at the turn of the twentieth century. A significant share of 1980s arrivals fled brutal civil wars and political repression, while 1990s arrivals escaped destruction caused by natural disasters and economic instability in Central American nations. Today, Central Americans constitute the third largest Latino group in the U.S. (5.6 million) and the children of Central American immigrants have reached adulthood (ACS 2017).

The magnitude of the post-1965 immigration wave and new migrant origins and characteristics has revived questions about immigrant identities, the types of group affiliations immigrants will develop, and how self-conceptions may shift over time. The answers to these questions are important because they give us insight into how newcomers and their U.S.-born children are fitting into society and the state of the U.S. racial structure (Rumbaut 1994; Itzigsohn 2009). Much of contemporary identity scholarship has focused on identifying preferred identity labels and the implications of these for the assimilation process. In the case of Latinos, there is no consensus on whether ethnic, panethnic, or racial identities are the most salient and what these suggest about their position in the U.S. racial landscape. Further, despite the important presence of Central Americans in the U.S., literature on second-generation Central Americans is lacking.

This study contributes to second-generation and Latino scholarship by focusing on an underexplored segment of the post-1965 immigration wave. Specifically, this study investigates: What are second-generation¹ Central Americans’ ethnic and racial identities? When do ethnic and racial forms of belonging become salient? How do Central Americans’ identities inform the debate on Latinos’ ethnic and racial position in the U.S.? Drawing on 27 in-depth interviews conducted in Los Angeles, California, I find U.S.-born and -raised Central Americans have an *identity repertoire* that includes national origin, panethnic, racial, and minority identities. These identities capture Central Americans’ ethnic distinctiveness and struggle for visibility in Mexican

Los Angeles, their sense of belonging to a panethnic group, their racialised experiences, and similarities and sense of solidarity with other U.S. racial minorities. This study also captures the *situations* and *reference groups* that make ethnic and racial identities salient. These results suggest ethnic and racial belonging are not in opposition to each other; rather, ethnic and racial belonging are both salient for members of the contemporary second-generation and Latino subgroups. Thus, this study's findings support the conceptualization of Latinos as an ethnoracial group.

Literature

Latinos' ethnic or racial position in the United States

Debates have emerged about Latinos' group status because ethnic and racial group formations in the U.S. have different implications. Ethnicity is rooted in perceptions of a shared ancestry, culture, and history. While ethnic groups are communities that provide a sense of belonging, membership in these groups is flexible and can be invoked voluntarily. Furthermore, ethnicity does not imply inherent differences in worth (Waters 1990; Cornell and Hartmann 2007). Some scholars posit Latinos are best characterized as an ethnic group. As such, Latinos are expected to follow the assimilative path of Southern and Eastern Europeans for whom ethnicity waned over time and who eventually became white. Supporters emphasize the dynamic nature of whiteness in the U.S. They argue that just as whiteness expanded to incorporate the once racialized Irish, Italians, and Jews, the boundaries of whiteness will adjust once again to include Latinos. And as occurred with European ethnics, Latinos' ethnic identities will become largely symbolic and optional (Patterson 2001; Yancey 2003; Alba and Nee 2003; Lee and Bean 2004, 2007).

In fact, proponents argue a loosening of boundaries is underway. They contend declining white social distance and racial prejudice towards Latinos is evidenced by white/Latino intermarriage rates and residential integration (Yancey 2003; Lee and Bean 2004). They also point to the significant share of Latinos that self-identified as white during the 2000 census, which suggests Latinos have begun to see themselves as part of the white majority (Patterson 2001; Yancey 2003). Similarities in Latinos' and whites' social and racial attitudes, particularly adherence to a meritocratic ideology and a reluctance to engage with race-related issues, provide further support (Yancey 2003). Proponents contend these trends suggest Latinos have begun to shed their ethnic attachments and are on their way to joining the white mainstream.

Another side contends Latinos are a racialised group. Racialisation describes the process by which groups or individuals 'are sorted into the social hierarchy based on the meanings that members of society give to presumed physical or

cultural characteristics' (Telles and Ortiz 2008, 131). Proponents argue Latinos' historic incorporation into the U.S. through conquest (Mexicans in the Southwest) and colonization (Puerto Ricans) marked them as other and inferior and was followed by their social marginalization, discriminatory treatment, and incomplete inclusion into the nation (Grosfoguel 2003; Telles and Ortiz 2008; Cobas, Duany, and Feagin 2009; Dowling 2014). Contemporary Latino racialisation is reflected in the construction of Mexicans and Central Americans as cheap and disposable labour, criminals, and deportable 'illegal aliens' (DeGenova 2002).

White attitudes and media representations also capture ongoing racialisation. Lacayo (2016) found whites perceive Latinos as culturally deficient, lacking motivation, deviant, and inassimilable – characteristics they perceive as permanent and that are projected onto all Latinos despite national origin or generation status. While Chavez (2013) contends negative media representations of Latinos bolster and reproduce the Latino threat narrative – a perception that Latinos are invading the U.S. and that, unlike European immigrants, Latinos are incapable of becoming American.

This perspective also points to the racialisation of the Latino/Hispanic labels – a process that involves both subjective and ascriptive dimensions. On one hand, it occurs when individuals use these ethnic labels to express their racial identity (Rumbaut 2009). On the other hand, it also occurs when group outsiders ascribe individuals a Latino/Hispanic identity on the basis of physical and cultural characteristics (Golash-Boza and Darity 2008). These identity and labelling practices show the institutionally-created Hispanic ethnic category (Mora 2014) has acquired racial meanings on-the-ground (Rodríguez 2009).

A third stand proposes Latinos' position in the U.S. is best represented as an ethnoracial group. Alcott (2009) highlights that while academics emphasize conceptual differences between ethnicity and race in practice, it is difficult to neatly map these categories onto groups, particularly Latinos. She contends Latinos are best characterized as an ethnorace, defined as:

groups who have both ethnic and racialized characteristics, who are historical people with customs and conventions developed out of collective agency, but who are also identified and identifiable by bodily morphology that allows for both group affinity as well as group exclusion and denigration (122).

According to Alcott, this conceptualization is more fitting because it accounts for Latinos' diverse ethnicities; the significance of ancestry, history, and culture in their lives; and the various forms of racialization they experience.

A growing body of work supports the ethnorace perspective. Itzigsohn (2009) shows second-generation Dominicans in Providence develop an ethnoracial identity, which he argues stems from incorporating into a racially stratified society that limits identity choices for non-white immigrants. Specifically, respondents see themselves as Dominican (their anchoring cultural identity) and as belonging to a broader Latino panethnic group. However, Dominicans

also deploy the Hispanic/Latino labels as their racial identity to create an intermediate position for themselves as non-white and non-black. An understanding of American as culturally and racially white and thus inaccessible reinforces Dominicans' ethnoracial identity.

Flores-González (2017) also finds Latino millennials in Chicago express themselves as a separate ethnoracial group. Chicago Latinos do not decouple race and ethnicity illustrated by their use of ethnic terms (i.e. national origin or Hispanic/Latino) to express *both* their ethnic and racial identities. Additionally, Latino millennials articulate a Latino prototype – a definition of Latino based on physical characteristics including skin, hair, and eye colour – which makes respondents identifiable as Latino and allows them to identify other Latinos. For white passing Latinos, ancestral characteristics outweigh phenotype as they are racially reclassified as Hispanic/Latino by non-Latinos on the basis of their Latin American ancestry. Taken together, the identity experiences of second-generation Dominicans in Providence and of U.S.-born Latinos in Chicago show the increasing relevance of the ethnorace perspective.

Central Americans in the United States

Central Americans' major influx into the U.S. occurred at the turn of the twentieth century. Much of 1980s migration was stimulated by political instability and civil wars in Central American nations, while natural disasters and economic instability further propelled flows during the 1990s (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001; Abrego 2014). Cold war rivalries and U.S. geopolitical interests affected the legal reception extended to Central Americans. For example, Salvadoran and Guatemalan immigrants that fled oppressive right-wing, U.S.-supported regimes were denied refugee status, while Nicaraguans that fled a leftist guerrilla government opposed by the U.S. encountered a more favourable reception (Coutin 2007). Overall, U.S. immigration law produced a Central American community with varied legal statuses, including legal permanent residents, those temporarily protected, and a sizeable undocumented population (Menjívar 2006; Abrego 2014).

The U.S. Central American population exceeds five million and collectively it is the third largest Latino group (ACS 2017). The arrival and demographic significance of this population has led to a growing body of literature primarily focusing on the experiences of the immigrant generation. This work examines the emergence of Central American communities in different U.S. regions (Hagan 1994; Mahler 1995; Repak 1995; Menjívar 2000; Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001); the effects of immigration law on migrants' lives, their socioeconomic position, family relations, and social networks (Rodriguez and Hagan 2004; Menjívar 2000, 2006; Abrego 2014); the strategic adoption of a Mexican identity to facilitate the migratory journey and access to Mexican migrant networks (Castañeda, Manz, and Davenport 2002); and

Central Americans' civic engagement, particularly, their claims for legalization, labour organizing, and participation in Central American peace negotiations (Waldinger et al. 1996; Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001; Coutin 2003, 2007; Zimmerman 2015).

While scholarship has explored various dimensions of the immigrant experience, the experiences of U.S.-raised Central Americans remains a nascent topic. Among this work, Rumbaut's (1994) early analysis of the identities of adolescent Central Americans found four prominent identifiers: American, hyphenated American, panethnic, and national origin. He contends the hyphenated and American identities are assimilative identifications that signal a shift towards Americanization. Alternatively, the panethnic identifier is a dissimilative identity as it reflects identifying with a minority group in the U.S., while a national origin identity remains rooted in an immigrant experience. Chinchilla and Hamilton's (2013) exploratory study of ten Central Americans in California captures multiple ethnic identities are salient. College-educated Central Americans think of themselves in terms of national origin, as members of a diaspora, and as belonging to a panethnic group; yet, they express an ambivalent relationship to an American identity despite growing up in the U.S.

While the work above has given us insight into identity patterns, we lack a clear understanding of how second-generation Central Americans see themselves, the experiences that shape their identities, and the meanings they attribute to their identities. This study intervenes in the literatures discussed by investigating: What are second-generation Central Americans' ethnic and racial identities? When do ethnic and racial forms of belonging become salient? How do Central Americans' identities inform the debate on Latinos' ethnic and racial position in the U.S.?

Methodology

This study relies on 27 in-depth interviews conducted in Los Angeles, California. The Los Angeles metropolitan area has the largest concentration of Central Americans in the U.S. (845,000). Salvadorans and Guatemalans (441,000 and 272,000, respectively) comprise the largest share of this group followed by Hondurans (54,000) and Nicaraguans (46,000). Despite well-known Central American settlements throughout Los Angeles, Central Americans share the city with a much larger Mexican population (4.6 million). The Los Angeles metro area is also home to other important groups, including non-Hispanic Blacks (846,000), non-Hispanic Asians (2 million), and non-Hispanic whites (4 million) (ACS 2017).

Interview respondents are of Salvadoran (15 respondents), Guatemalan (7), and Nicaraguan (5) descent. The majority are second-generation (18), meaning they are U.S.-born and were raised in the greater Los Angeles area. And a third are from the 1.5-generation (9) – they were born in Central America and arrived in Los

Angeles as children aged three to nine. Members of the 1.5-generation are included in the interview sample because they spent formative years and underwent important stages of identity development in the U.S.² Furthermore, their educational and institutional experiences are largely U.S.-based. And like their U.S.-born counterparts, their lives in the U.S. are their central point of reference (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). This is particularly significant for the Central American 1.5-generation for whom return visits to their countries of origin were complicated by their parents' lack of or ambiguous legal statuses as well as civil and political unrest in Central American countries during the 1980s and 1990s (Menjívar 2006; Abrego 2014). Respondents were identified through snowball sampling. I used my networks to recruit an initial set of informants and I continued to recruit additional participants through respondent-driven referrals. This referral-based system allowed me to reach respondents who were raised in distinct Los Angeles communities and were exposed to different ethnic, racial, and class groups. Respondents include high school (12) and college graduates (15) and a comparable proportion of females (14) and males (13). Study participants were between 22 and 32 years old at the time of the interview.

In-person interviews were conducted from July 2011 to November 2011. Interviews lasted 45 to 90 minutes and they were digitally recorded and transcribed. Interview questions were open-ended and explored major topics of interest, including family background, cultural practices, ethnic and racial identification, notions of inclusion and exclusion, intergroup relations, and academic and work experiences. Interview analysis was guided by a deductive and inductive approach. This method relied on conceptually derived codes, such as 'ethnic identity', 'panethnicity', 'racial identity', and 'American identity', that were applied by systematically reading through interviews. The inductive stage involved deriving coding themes from respondents' narratives. I paid close attention to how respondents talked about themselves, the various forms of belonging they expressed, and the connections they articulated with other ethnic/racial groups. I also examined the moments in which respondents used particular identity labels and when identity shifts occurred. Interviews were read and re-read using the deductive/inductive coding scheme to ensure the analysis reflected prevalent narratives. While these findings are not representative of all second-generation Central Americans and Latinos, by drawing on qualitative methods, this study captures individuals' multiple identities, the meanings attributed to labels, and the situations that make particular identities salient.

Findings

This study finds second-generation Central Americans in Los Angeles have an *identity repertoire* that includes national origin, panethnic, racial, and minority identities. These identities capture their ethnic distinctiveness, sense of

belonging to a panethnic group, racialized identities and experiences, and similarities with other racial minorities. It also uncovers the *situations* and *reference groups* that make particular identities salient.

National origin identity³: resisting Mexicanization

All 27 respondents identified with their national origin and as Latino. While some expressed a preference for one label over the other, there are moments in which a national origin identity acquires greater salience. For example, respondents often described feeling invisible in Los Angeles because the much larger Mexican origin group obscured their nationalities. Sergio, a 23-year-old media strategist, described growing up in Los Angeles: 'Latino was really code for Mexican... So that invisibility... I really hated it. [Growing up] I was like, "but no, no, we [Salvadorans] are here too!"' Cinthia, a 24-year-old law student, further explained contextual dynamics and how these affect Central Americans' identity negotiations:

Mexican identity is hegemonic. That's the way Latino identity, at least on the west coast, is characterized... It's tough for Salvadoran people we are still very new... so we're trying to craft our identity and it's hard to assert your identity when people tell you [that] you're something you're not... It's always this constant battle... It's like, 'Mexican does not equal Latino!' [Latino] should incorporate all different ethnicities and groups within it.

Cinthia's narrative draws attention to the regional meaning of identity labels. The magnitude of the Mexican population, their historic presence in the region, and the prevalence of Mexican culture in public spaces have led to associating particular markers (including mestizo phenotypes, brown skin colour, and Spanish language and surnames) with Mexican descent in Los Angeles. Moreover, Salvadorans arrived more recently and they are a much smaller group relative to Mexicans, as a result, Central American nationalities are often erased from the Latino group and identity.

The regional definition of Latino as Mexican that Cinthia describes results in a process of Mexicanization – instances during which group outsiders lump Central Americans into the Mexican origin group on the basis of physical or cultural features. For the vast majority of respondents, this recurring experience produced feelings of invisibility and frustration; and it was during moments of Mexicanization that respondents' national origin identity became especially salient. Freddy, a 29-year-old law enforcement agent, exemplifies respondents' typical reaction:

Oh, before they even finish the sentence I tell them, 'I'm not Mexican, I am *Nicaraguense* [Nicaraguan]' ... There's other people that live here in Southern California that are not Mexican from Central America,' and most people wouldn't even know where it was, and what would bother me... is they'd

say, 'well Nicaraguan isn't that the same thing [as Mexican]?' So that's when I'm like, 'No! It's actually completely different.'

Pamela, a 29-year-old in hospitality management, expressed a comparable reaction: 'I say... "First of all, I am not Mexican, I am Hispanic, my background is Guatemalan. There are other countries where Hispanics come from, it's not just Mexico, like El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and South America. We're all different".' Freddy and Pamela immediately deploy their national origin identity to resist an imposed Mexican identity. Freddy's narrative demonstrates a lacking awareness of Central Americans' ethnic distinctiveness and of Central America's geographic location, while Pamela's illustrates how Central Americans seek to redefine the local meaning of Latino beyond Mexican descent by emphasizing the cultural and regional differences that characterize Latinos. Consistent with these experiences, the vast majority of study participants assert their national origin identity in relation to Mexicans to resist their invisibility and to give their countries of origin, and Central America more broadly, greater recognition in Los Angeles.

Latino panethnic identity: constructing panethnic group membership

All study participants also expressed a Latino panethnic identity. Respondents' panethnic narratives primarily emphasized origins in Latin America, a common culture, and shared Spanish language. And some drew panethnic similarities on the basis of life and educational experiences. Panethnic belonging became particularly salient in peer interactions and social relationships with other Latinos through which similarities were identified and reinforced. Luis, a 27-year-old school district staff, shared:

In high school [I hung out with Hispanics] because you can just relate to them more, you have more things to talk about, and you can speak to them in Spanish... family values are pretty much the same, you grew up the same... You have a different connection [with Hispanics] than you would with any other race.

As the majority of respondents articulated, Luis emphasizes Spanish language is an important unifying cultural feature between Latinos. He also perceives shared values and understandings create a sense of familiarity, facilitate the development of social connections and navigating private spaces. Sussie, a 26-year-old insurance sales representative, highlighted the significance of a communal orientation:

As Latinos, we have a better sense of togetherness... of unity... of family, than some other... races. It can be the way [we're brought] up. You always know that if something happens, all the Latinos come together... That's something I definitely appreciate, that I'm part of something that is different from saying I am just American.

Sussie draws attention to being raised in a way that emphasizes family and cohesiveness. According to her, these values are not only consistent across Latino subgroups but they also set Latinos apart from other groups. For Sussie, a sense of community and greater emotive content are key features that distinguish Latino panethnicity from other group memberships and identities.

Others described Latino panethnicity emerging from similar life experiences. Martin, a 28-year-old banker, reported:

Ultimately, we [Mexicans and Central Americans] all end up going through the same types of hardships... I think they do equate in that sense... I mean academic struggles, economic struggles, social struggles. I think we end up going through the same thing and other people perceive us... and judge us on the same scale.

This perspective was echoed by Anthony, a 28-year-old IT technician:

Private school was definitely an eye-opener for sure... A lot of the kids there were pretty well off, and they were Caucasian... All the Hispanics would hang out [together] during lunch... and the whites [separately]... Everybody just made [their own] comfort zone... I think everybody [Hispanics] were in the same boat...we all shared that same feeling – our parents are struggling but they want us to have a good education.

For Martin, the ethnic boundaries that distinguish Mexicans from Central Americans become blurred when comparing socioeconomic and educational challenges. Just as noteworthy is his perception that on a social level Latinos, regardless of nationality, are subjected to similar views and treatment. For Anthony, attending a private high school exposed him to socioeconomic disparities between white and Latino students. These social and economic divides were visible in the financial sacrifices Latino parents endured to cover the costs of private schooling, and he added, in the extracurricular activities that were inaccessible to Latino students. These narratives demonstrate Latino panethnicity is reinforced by the nexus of class and ethnicity in Los Angeles, which fosters a sense of commonality between Central Americans and other Latinos.

While many college graduates reported being aware of cultural commonalities between Latinos, their college experience influenced a politicized panethnic identity. Specifically, they developed an awareness of the systemic economic, social, and educational barriers that cut across Latino groups. Raquel, a 29-year-old teacher, shared:

I get to UCLA and I [realize] other groups are going through the same thing in LA?!... This is what you're doing to improve the lives of all of us who speak Spanish? [referring to student organizations] So everything just [shifted], my college experience became a catalyst for [understanding an] overarching struggle and experience, this fight for social liberation that we [Latinos] are going through. Through college I was constantly changing but being *Salvadoreña* was an amazing foundation... It was making it [Salvadoran identity] bigger, better, enriching it.

Raquel elaborates that higher education also exposed her to an encompassing Latino student experience characterized by being a first-generation college student, financial hardships, and having an immigrant background. Consistent with other research, Raquel's student involvement, course curricula, and personal experiences in the university made panethnic group membership salient (Reyes 2018). Yet, adopting a panethnic identity did not supplant a national origin identity; rather, it enhanced her sense of self by adding to her identity repertoire. Similarly, other college graduates articulated a politicized panethnicity in college motivated their activism and influenced their professional trajectory.

Latino racial identity: making sense of skin colour, whiteness, and racialised experiences

Although Hispanic/Latino is not an official racial group in the U.S., most respondents (21 out of 27) racially identified as Hispanic or Latino. The remaining six respondents reported their national origin or Central American as their race. Respondents defined their racial status in relation to whites by drawing on their understandings of whiteness, while racially-based experiences in social institutions make belonging to a racialised Latino group significant.

Consistent with historic racial classification practices in the U.S., most respondents understood race as being defined by physical characteristics (Rodríguez 2009). Carlos, a 24-year-old in hospitality, points to the role of phenotype for defining his racial identity:

Evidently, I'm not light in complexion, that right off the bat sets you apart here. I feel I have to claim being Latino and Guatemalan because even though I'm here and I could claim this is my home, not many people see it like that.

Physical features are vital to constructing Carlos' racial identity. He recognizes skin colour is a salient marker of racial group membership in the U.S.; thus, he must assert an identity that makes sense given his darker skin pigment. In defining his identity, he immediately draws on what he is not – light-skinned – which means he cannot be white, so he must be racially Latino. Carlos also identifies a relationship between skin colour, perceptions of foreignness, and being accepted as an American; that is, Latinos' contested claims to an American identity in contrast to whites' normative and unquestioned belonging to the nation (Chavez 2013).

A Latino racial identity also becomes salient for Central Americans when they reconcile institutional categories with on-the-ground understandings of race. Respondents reported difficulty answering race-related questions on the census or applications due to a lacking Hispanic/Latino option. Sussie conveyed her thought process during these moments, she asks herself, 'Is

race Hispanic?’ – noting the lack of a Hispanic racial category – followed by, ‘[Is] Hispanic not white?’ – alluding to the label ‘non-Hispanic white’ often found on forms. Although she is light-skinned, Sussie reconciles this situation by determining, ‘Well, I’m obviously not white, so I am Hispanic’, suggesting that other characteristics in addition to skin colour define white racial status. In fact, respondents defined whiteness as high socio-economic status, occupying positions of authority, and having resources that facilitate success – a definition that is informed by whites’ structural position in Los Angeles.

Study participants also reported instances in which being perceived as Latino defined an experience. Martin relayed:

I never experienced racism until I got to college because I grew up here [in South Central] and everyone is the same. But it wasn’t until college where I felt the colour of my skin mattered. It was something very hard to embrace... I felt that from faculty first and then students. I was blown away by it.

According to Martin, growing up in a working-class Black/Latino community insulated him from discriminatory practices. However, he realized the significance of his group membership once he entered a predominantly white institution. While in college, he was often confronted with presumptions of lower capacity and undeservingness. Despite ‘defeating the odds’ by gaining admittance into a prestigious University of California campus, the ‘colour of his skin’ became a salient feature that defined him in the eyes of others.

Central Americans’ experiences in the labour market also show the significance of a racialised Latino group. Marissa, 32-years-old, explains that during job searches:

I feel that I have to be at a certain level because of my ethnicity. It goes back to that perception that people might have of Hispanics, so I feel I have to meet a certain standard... If I’m going to interview for a different job, I feel I have to excel and show them what Hispanic people can become.

Marissa has been in the labour market for over 15 years in a variety of occupations – from food service, retail sales, banking, to the California National Guard. Through her experience in the labour market, she has learned employers use her ethnicity as an indicator of lower capacity, skills, and work ethic; thus, she must meet a higher standard relative to other job seekers to challenge the unfavourable stereotypes employers have of Latinos. Although she refers to Hispanic as an ethnicity, her experience is most consistent with being treated as a member of a racialised group – a group that has been sorted into the labour market hierarchy based on perceptions of their capacity and worth.

Giovanna, 31-years-old, reported differential treatment at her place of work for being Latina:

I'm the physician newcomer to the department but as soon as a tall white guy comes in I'm treated as a nurse whereas this guy, who is probably just a technician, is called the doctor and I'm called the nurse. So, everyday I have to remind patients and I have to remind nurses, 'No, I am the doctor here.'

Giovanna's experience as a doctor highlights that racial perceptions of Latinos also affect the professional lives of college-educated Central Americans. Assumptions based on phenotype and racial expectations lead others to sort her into a lower position in the occupational hierarchy. She recognizes that her gender, petite frame, and ethnic background inform the assumptions made by other hospital staff and patients. Nevertheless, Giovanna noted that constantly challenging racialised perceptions in her profession led to frustration and 'after a while, it takes a toll'.

Minority consciousness: recognizing similarities, constructing solidarity

Some respondents also expressed a minority group consciousness when comparing their experiences and social position to that of other minority groups. Experiencing differential treatment led some respondents to identify similarities between Latinos and Blacks. Javier, a 26-year-old PhD student, shared interning in Washington, D.C. exposed him to how race operates in the labour market. He recalled employers overlooked his candidacy for openings and instead selected less qualified white applicants. He observed workplace discrimination also affected Blacks:

I just noticed there is this racial segregation in the workplace in D.C. that made me sick. [Blacks] had an education but they were getting office jobs, and they're from D.C., Maryland, Virginia... they should have an advantage. It wasn't until then that I realized Blacks are very discriminated against, more than Latinos... I see it here [in Los Angeles] now that I got that lens in D.C.

Javier did not interact with Blacks much while growing up in a Latino/Asian community of Los Angeles. However, in D.C. he lived in a predominantly Black neighbourhood and also interacted with Blacks in various job settings. He observed Blacks were channelled into lower level occupations, such as office assistants, despite being college-educated, while whites were often in coordinator and director positions. This sorting gave him a new racial lens that not only brought into focus comparable labour market experiences for college-educated Latinos and Blacks but also has given him a new perspective into how race operates in Los Angeles.

Similarly, Anthony reported he could relate most to Blacks because:

We can share the same pain. I guess it sucks to say racist, but I've worked in a lot of offices and I've seen a lot of my people [Latinos] and Black people not move up because of the colour of their skin. And they [management] may not

say it directly, but we know... that's really what it is. I feel we share the same pains, so yeah, I don't see any difference between us.

Anthony also describes understanding the implicit ways in which race obstructs Blacks' and Latinos' occupational mobility. His remark, 'it sucks to say racist', illustrates the hesitation with which many high school graduates discussed race-related issues. Certainly, acknowledging the depths of racism is incompatible with their belief that the U.S. is a meritocratic society where the American dream is accessible to those who work hard. Despite an initial hesitation to articulate race, Anthony conveys a meaningful connection with Blacks stemming from discriminatory treatment.

Others reported a connection to Blacks on the basis of similar family circumstances. Alexa, a 24-year-old banker, shared:

I get along with every race, I just feel... a lot more with Black people and Hispanic people... Maybe the fact that a lot of my friends that are Hispanic or Black, they're all [from] broken homes. I know it sounds bad but it's true. We've gone through similar situations, and a lot of them only have their mom, or they only have their dad, and they have a lot of family, and the American [white] people that I know, they're just a little more put together.

Alexa elaborates going through 'similar situations' means growing up in non-traditional parenting structures and in households where parents spend significant time away working long hours or multiple jobs. Large and cohesive extended families are another feature she feels connects Blacks and Latinos. Conversely, she perceives whites as having more stable family units and greater financial security. Thus, deviations from what is understood as the 'traditional American family' as well as experiences growing up make Alexa feel uniquely connected to Blacks and Latinos.

Experiences in college led some to develop a 'student of colour' or 'people of colour' consciousness. The university becomes an important site for the crystallization of this identity – the experience of entering and navigating a predominantly white space, being a first-generation college student, academic activism, and course curricula contribute to fostering a student or people of colour sense of self. Below, Cinthia describes developing a student of colour consciousness while in college:

Before, I would think of Latinos as an isolated group. We do our own thing, we have our own issues... Going to college [made] me realize Latinos are important [because]... we're the group that is able to connect with all the other groups, with the Southeast Asians, with the other Asians, with Blacks. We're that glue.

In college, Cinthia developed an awareness of the various experiences Latinos represent. She explained Latinos and Central Americans can relate to Asian groups along an immigrant/refugee narrative, and they can relate to Blacks in terms of socioeconomic status, racial experiences, and their

lower position in the social hierarchy. According to her, this unique in-between position allows Latinos to be a mediating group among minorities. Other respondents conveyed the college experience led to a recognition of comparable issues affecting Latino and minority communities in Los Angeles, including lower school quality, truncated educational trajectories, poverty, and discrimination. These experiences demonstrate higher education institutions are a site in which being a racial minority acquires salience for Central Americans, and where identities based on the perception of a collective minority experience are constructed.

Discussion and conclusion

Scholars have advanced different perspectives on Latinos' ethnic/racial position in the U.S. One side contends Latinos are an ethnic group on their way to becoming white (Patterson 2001; Yancey 2003; Alba and Nee 2003; Lee and Bean 2004, 2007). These scholars emphasize declining social distance between Latinos and whites as well as similar outlooks on race provide evidence for this position. Proponents also contend recent shifts in Latinos' self-identification show ethnic identities are waning. This study finds second-generation Central Americans in Los Angeles continue to think of themselves in terms of ethnicity. Respondents conveyed ethnicity is an important part of their lives, yet contextual dynamics also accentuate ethnic group belonging. Specifically, U.S.-born/raised Central Americans' national origin identities become particularly salient during instances of Mexicanization – these are moments in which non-group members ascribe a Mexican identity onto Central Americans on the basis of physical and cultural markers that have acquired a Mexican meaning in Los Angeles. Rather than becoming absorbed into a much larger and regionally dominant group, respondents actively assert their national origin identity to give their cultures, histories, and migrations greater visibility.

While the Hispanic panethnic category is an institutional construct, panethnic group belonging is also meaningful for Central Americans. A Latino panethnic identity is forged with other Latin Americans primarily along cultural affinities (Itzigsohn and Dore-Cabral 2000); for others, developing an awareness of similar structural conditions across Latino groups reinforces panethnic group belonging (Padilla 1985; Reyes 2018). Thus, Central Americans' experiences illustrate how institutionally-created categories become significant forms of group membership and are reproduced. Central Americans' identity repertoire also demonstrates national origin identities and panethnicity coexist, which reflects a key feature of panethnicity – a tension between smaller group boundaries based on unique ethnicities and larger group formation and sense of solidarity across ethnic lines (Okamoto and Mora 2014). And, as Central Americans illustrate, the adoption of panethnicity does not suggest a waning of an ethnic identity (Alba and Nee 2003).

An opposing side argues Latinos' histories in the U.S. and their contemporary experiences show a process of group racialisation. This perspective emphasizes institutional experiences characterized by marginalization as well as the 'othering' of Latinos as different and inferior. Attributing racial meanings to panethnic identifiers and deploying these as racial identities demonstrate the Latino/Hispanic labels have also become racialised (Grosfoguel 2003; Telles and Ortiz 2008; Golash-Boza and Darity 2008; Cobas, Duany, and Feagin 2009). I find the vast majority of Central Americans did not see themselves, and they understood others did not see them, as white. The majority of respondents reported racially identifying as Latino/Hispanic; a racial identity that is constructed by reconciling their physical characteristics in relation to those of whites and by negotiating on-the-ground understandings of whiteness that centre status and authority. A racialised Latino identity also becomes significant as a result of experiences in social institutions through which Central Americans learn physical and cultural markers are used by others to make determinations about their 'inferior' aptitudes, skills, and intellectual capacity. Thus, Central Americans' racial identities and racialised experiences are indicative of their non-white status.

Respondents also expressed a minority group consciousness. This consciousness captures respondents see themselves as members of a racial minority in the U.S. and a sense of solidarity with Blacks and Asians. Most respondents with this outlook constructed similarities with Blacks on the basis of similar family circumstances, experiences with discrimination, and Latinos' lower position in the racial hierarchy. Mainly college-educated respondents articulated similarities with Asian groups, specifically along educational experiences and immigration histories. Moreover, college graduates also discussed coming to see themselves as 'people of colour' as a result of experiences in higher education. The development of a minority consciousness is significant because it reflects Central Americans have come to see their structural position in the U.S. is closer to that of other racial minority groups and farther from that of whites.

Given second-generation Central Americans' identity repertoire, I argue their identity formation experiences align with the ethnorace perspective (Alcoff 2009; Itzigsohn 2009; Flores-González 2017). I contend Central Americans' ethnoracial identity emerges from agency – subjective understandings of themselves and efforts to resist invisibility in Mexican Los Angeles – and from structure – a racialised society, institutionally-created panethnic categories, and racially-based experiences. Central Americans' identity repertoire reflects the significance of their immigrant backgrounds as well as their socialization in and orientation towards the U.S. The formation of their racial and minority identities is particularly significant. Because the United States is founded upon a racial system that privileged whiteness and relegated non-whites to an inferior position, race and processes of racialisation continue to play an important role in

how individuals are perceived and treated. Both high school- and college-educated Central Americans develop a clearer awareness of the role of race in society and in their lives when they enter important social institutions where they are forced to reconcile meritocratic ideals with their racial realities.

Overall, this study makes important empirical and conceptual contributions. It focuses on the experiences of second-generation Central Americans – an important yet underexplored segment of the post-1965 immigration wave. This study's qualitative approach captures Central Americans' multiple identities as well as the experiences that make ethnic and racial identities salient. In doing so, it demonstrates ethnic and racialised belonging are not in opposition to each other; rather, ethnic, panethnic, racial, and minority identities can exist simultaneously. These findings have important implications for race and ethnicity theorizing, particularly because whether ethnic or racialised identities are adopted is critical to the conversation on incorporation and the racial position of Latinos in the U.S. This study illuminates it is necessary to conceptually account for individuals' multiple forms of belonging and the meanings attributed to identities. I contend accounting for the complexity of individuals' sense of self will allow us to better theorize emergent group formations and the contemporary U.S. racial structure.

Notes

1. This study is about people of Central American origin who were born in or grew up for most of their lives in the United States. While the study sample includes second- and 1.5-generation respondents, I refer to this group collectively as the second-generation because findings indicate no difference in the process of identity formation for these two groups and to avoid a cumbersome narrative.
2. See Portes and Rumbaut (2001, 2006) and Kasinitz et al. (2008) for other analyses that combine the 1.5- and second-generation.
3. A national origin identity means identifying with the country of origin, such as identifying as Guatemalan, Nicaraguan, or Salvadoran.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Vilma Ortiz, Celia Lacayo, Leisy Abrego, José Itzigsohn, Rubén Hernández-León, The Research Group, and this journal's reviewers for helpful comments on previous versions of this paper. I am grateful to study participants for sharing their experiences.

Disclosure statement: I have no conflicts of interest regarding the content or data in this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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