

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

Reaping what you sow: Immigration, youth, and reactive ethnicity

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4mp9077h>

Journal

Applied Developmental Science, 12(2)

ISSN

1088-8691

Author

Rumbaut, RG

Publication Date

2008-09-12

DOI

10.1080/10888690801997341

Peer reviewed

Reaping What You Sew: Immigration, Youth, and Reactive Ethnicity

Rubén G. Rumbaut

Every day we are reminded of—indeed, we are surrounded by—the myriad ways in which the United States remains a “permanently unfinished” society, a global sponge remarkable in its continuing capacity to absorb millions of people of all classes and cultures from every continent on earth. There are today nearly 40 million foreign-born persons in the U.S.—of whom 12 million are estimated to be undocumented, most from Mexico and Central America—and another 30 million of foreign-parentage. This immigrant-stock population, the largest ever, is a youthful one—and today’s U.S.-born second generation, with a median age of 12, is poised to explode into adulthood in the coming 10 to 20 years. They are “coming of age” in an aging society undergoing profound social and economic transformations, all of which will have, inevitably, political ramifications. A great deal of how tomorrow’s social contract between natives and newcomers is worked out, and how the commitment to democratic values of equity and inclusion is met, will hinge on the mode of political incorporation and civic engagement of newcomer youth today (Tienda 2002; Tienda and Mitchell, 2006). The essays in this issue provide a glimpse of the possibilities.

Table 1 sketches a profile of basic characteristics of young adults 18 to 34 in the U.S., of whom there were 67 million in 2006. “Non-Hispanic whites” and “blacks” are overwhelmingly long-term natives (nearly 90%), whereas 95% of “Asian” and 80% of “Hispanic” nationalities are of foreign birth or parentage. The newcomers in turn are situated at the polar ends of the opportunity structure. Educational and related inequalities between whites and blacks seem narrow compared to the gulf that separates Asians (at the top of the educational hierarchy, with more than 60% having college or advanced degrees) from Hispanics (at the bottom, with 40% of young adult males having less than a high school diploma). The latter, however, are half as likely as young black men to be jobless, and much less likely to be incarcerated. In these widely varying contexts of social inequality, the way young newcomers come to define themselves is significant, revealing much about their social attachments (and detachments) as well as how and where they perceive themselves to “fit” in the society of which they are its newest members. Self-identities and ethnic loyalties can often influence long-term patterns of behavior and outlook as well as intergroup relations, with potential long-term political implications. And the decisive turning point for change in ethnic and national self-identities can be expected to take place in the second, not in the first generation.

Table 1
Characteristics of Young Adults in the United States, 18 to 34

Selected Characteristics		Non-Hispanic							
		White		Black		Asian		Hispanic	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Total young adults (18 to 34):	N	20,579,352	20,518,648	3,973,738	4,642,216	1,622,549	1,687,121	6,737,822	5,752,740
Generation:									
1st generation (foreign-born)	%	4.8	4.8	10.3	9.3	69.6	75.5	58.8	51.9
2nd gen. (US-born, foreign-born parent)	%	4.5	4.4	4.5	4.1	25.3	20.7	21.5	25.0
3rd+ gens. (US-born, US-born parents)	%	90.8	90.7	85.2	86.5	5.1	3.8	19.6	23.1
Education:									
Less than high school	%	12.2	9.4	18.5	16.6	8.1	7.4	40.8	35.3
College degree or higher (25 or older)	%	32.9	38.5	17.1	20.9	61.8	62.2	9.8	12.8
Labor force status:									
Working full-time	%	64.9	47.4	50.5	47.0	59.0	42.3	69.8	41.0
Not working	%	21.8	30.6	38.9	38.8	28.4	43.0	19.3	44.3
Incarceration (males only):	%	1.68	--	11.15	--	0.72	--	3.26	--

Source: Current Population Surveys, 2003-06. Note: Incarceration data are estimated from the 2000 census.

On March 25, 2006, in Los Angeles, perhaps a million people, wearing white t-shirts, marched peacefully in downtown Los Angeles to protest H.R. 4437, a bill passed by the U.S. House of Representatives which would have made felons of undocumented immigrants and criminalized those who would assist them. The bill was so brazen in its hard-line that Cardinal Roger Mahony, head of the Los Angeles archdiocese, published an Op-Ed in the *New York Times* on March 22 justifying his call for civil disobedience should H.R. 4437 become law. Several million others marched in cities across the country. It was one of the most extraordinary mobilizations in U.S. history—and the largest protest marches for any reason in most of those cities—surprising even the organizers. Just as surprising, perhaps most of the marchers were immigrants and their children—and for many, this was their first act of political protest.

Rewind to October 15, 1994, again in downtown Los Angeles: on that day more than 70,000 people marched to protest Proposition 187, a ballot measure which exacerbated ethnic tensions in California. It aimed to “Save Our State” by denying social and health services and access to public schools to undocumented immigrants and their children; and it required school districts to verify the legal status of students’ parents and report any persons suspected of being in the U.S. unlawfully so that they may be detained and deported. The protest march that day was the largest in memory, heavily covered on television and by the news media—spawning subsequent marches and student walkouts in local campuses. To the marchers, who included many second-generation youths from area high schools, Prop 187 was an affront to their parents, friends and neighbors. Parents too joined in some of the marches or encouraged their children’s participation, making the initiative an issue through which the budding teenage activists could bridge the generational divide and express themselves in solidarity with their parents.

One was a Southern California native and high school senior, Stephanie Bernal, half Latin and half Anglo (she self-identified as a “mixed chocolate swirl”), who reacted by joining with friends who were organizing her school’s anti-187 movement and by affirming the identity of her maternal ancestry: “When we get together to talk about it, we speak Spanish and just feel good about being Mexican.” Proposition 187 won in a landslide, getting 59% of the statewide vote, and 67% in San Diego and Orange Counties. But Stephanie’s Mexican ethnic self-identity was “thickened” in the process, as she came to define who she was and where she came from in opposition to who and what she was not. The divisive campaign had the unintended consequences of accentuating group differences, heightening group consciousness of those differences, hardening ethnic identity boundaries between “us” and “them,” and promoting ethnic group solidarity and political mobilization.

This process of forging a *reactive ethnicity* in the face of perceived threats, persecution, discrimination and exclusion is not uncommon. It is one mode of ethnic identity formation, highlighting the role of a hostile context of reception in accounting for the rise rather than the erosion of ethnicity (Aleinikoff and Rumbaut 1998; Portes and Rumbaut 2006; Rumbaut 2005). A few years earlier, second-generation Korean-Americans saw over 2,300 Korean-owned stores in Los Angeles’ Koreatown targeted by African Americans and burned during the rioting that followed a “not guilty” verdict in the 1992 trial of four white police officers charged with the brutal beating of a black motorist.

The event caused many young Koreans born or raised in the U.S. to become self-conscious about their common fate and distinctiveness as Koreans. They reacted by participating in multigenerational solidarity rallies and by moving to organize politically to protect the interests of the parent generation and the image of the group in the larger society. In this special issue, several of the essays focus precisely on the dialectics of reactive ethnicity and civic engagement—from Arab Americans in the 1990s (well before 9/11) to well-acclulturated second-generation Cuban Americans during the months-long crisis over a 6-year old boy named Elián González (see Santiago and Dorchner, 2000).

In contrast, conventional accounts of ethnic identity shifts among the descendants of white European immigrants, conceived as part of a larger, linear process of assimilation, have pointed to the “thinning” of their ethnic self-identities in the U.S. For their descendants, at least, one outcome of widespread acculturation, social mobility and intermarriage with the native population was that ethnic identity became an optional form of “symbolic ethnicity” (Alba 1990; Gans 1979; Waters 1990). This mode of ethnic identity formation, however, was never solely a function of social status and degree of acculturation to the majority group, but hinged also on the context of reception and the degree of discrimination experienced by the subordinate group: i.e., it was facilitated by an absence of prejudice and discrimination in the core society. Whether ethnicity will become similarly optional for the offspring of immigrants who are today variously classified as non-white, or whether they will be collectively channeled into enduring, engulfing, racially marked subordinate statuses and forge oppositional identities and reactive political mobilizations, remain open empirical questions.

As the papers in this issue demonstrate, youths see and compare themselves in relation to those around them, based on their social similarity or dissimilarity with the reference groups that most directly affect their experiences—especially with regard to such socially visible and categorized markers as gender, phenotype, accent, language, name and nationality. Their social identities, forged in terms of those contrasts with others, represent the way they self-consciously define the situation in which they find themselves and construct an ongoing account of who “we”—and “they”—are. Ethnic identification begins with the application of a label to oneself in a cognitive process of self-categorization, involving not only a claim to membership in a group or category, but also a contrast of one’s group or category with other groups or categories. Such self-definitions also carry affective meaning, implying a psychological bond with others that tends to serve psychologically protective functions. Ethnic self-awareness is heightened or blurred, respectively, depending on the degree of dissonance or consonance of the social contexts which are basic to identity formation.

For majority-group youths in an ethnically consonant context, ethnic self-identity tends to be taken for granted and is not salient; but contextual dissonance (let alone a “war on terror”) heightens the salience of ethnicity and of ethnic group boundaries. People whose ethnic, racial or other social markers place them in a minority status in their group or community are more likely to be self-conscious of those characteristics. Youths may cope with the psychological pressure produced by such dissonance (and with pejorative group stereotypes) by seeking to reduce conflict and to assimilate within the relevant social context—the modal response of the children of European immigrants in the American

experience. An alternative reaction may lead in an opposite direction to the rise and reaffirmation of ethnic solidarity and self-consciousness, as exemplified by Stephanie Bernal in the vignette sketched earlier. For Stephanie, the newfound sense of belonging she experienced in joining the movement against Proposition 187 helped dissolve the marginality and ambiguity of a “mixed chocolate swirl” identity.

A longitudinal study of more than 5,200 teenage children of immigrants from 77 nationalities in Southern California and South Florida in the 1990s (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001) found that despite their growing awareness of racial and ethnic inequalities, almost two-thirds of the youth affirmed a confident belief in the promise of equal opportunity through educational achievement; 61% further agreed in the baseline survey that “there is no better country to live in than the United States,” and that endorsement grew to 71% three years later—despite a growing anti-immigrant mood in the country and especially in California during that period. Tellingly, the groups *most* likely to endorse that view were the children of political exiles who found a favorable context of reception in the U.S.: the Cubans (before Elián) and the Vietnamese. The groups *least* likely to agree with that statement were those who had most felt the weight of racial discrimination: the children of immigrants from Haiti, Jamaica and the West Indies. In reacting to their contexts of reception and learning how they are viewed and treated within them, the youths form and inform their own attitudes toward the society that receives them—and their own identities as well. If there is a moral to this story of reception and belonging, it echoes an ancient admonition: that societies, too, reap what they sow.

References

- Alba, Richard D. 1990. *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Aleinikoff, T. Alexander, and Rubén G. Rumbaut. 1998. “Terms of Belonging: Are Models of Membership Self-Fulfilling Prophecies?” *Georgetown Immigration Law Journal*, 13, 1: 1-24.
- Gans, Herbert J. 1979. “Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2, 1: 1-20.
- Portes, Alejandro, and Rubén G. Rumbaut. 2001. *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*. Los Angeles, New York: University of California Press, Russell Sage Foundation.
- Portes, Alejandro, and Rubén G. Rumbaut. 2006. *Immigrant America: A Portrait*. 3rd edition. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Rumbaut, Rubén G. 2005. “Sites of Belonging: Acculturation, Discrimination, and Ethnic Identity among Children of Immigrants.” In T.S. Weiner, ed., *Discovering Successful Pathways in Children’s Development: Mixed Methods in the Study of Childhood and Family Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Santiago, Fabiola, and John Dorschner. 2000. “Outside Image Bewilders Exiles.” *The Miami Herald*, April 23.
- Tienda, Marta. 2002. “Demography and the Social Contract.” *Demography* 39, 4: 587-616.
- Tienda, Marta, and Faith Mitchell, eds. 2006. *Multiple Origins, Uncertain Destinies: Hispanics and the American Future*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Waters, Mary C. 1990. *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.