

The Evolution of Ethnic Identity From Adolescence to Middle Adulthood: The Case of the Immigrant Second Generation

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Abstract

Through an analysis of qualitative interview and survey data, this study examines ethnic identity development from mid-adolescence to middle adulthood among a representative sample of immigrants' children from Mexico, the Philippines, and other countries, who were followed for more than 20 years. Findings reveal that ethnic self-identity labels are more stable in adulthood than adolescence or the transition to adulthood, but the importance of ethnic identity diminishes, especially among those born abroad. Most prefer ethnic identity labels referencing their origin country, reflecting family ties and cultural attachments. However, some, mostly foreign-born, shift to ethnic self-identity labels exclusively related to their American experience, including panethnic labels in response to U.S. racialization. Only a few actively resist such labeling and claim nonhyphenated American identities. Overall, the findings reveal how diverse ethnic identity development patterns over the life course are shaped both by ancestral attachments and the imposition of existing U.S. racial structures.

Keywords

immigrants, ethnic identity, second generation, middle adulthood, life course

Do children of immigrants maintain strong identities rooted in their origin countries as they age or do they begin to identify only in American terms? Research shows that ethnic identities shift considerably from adolescence to *early* adulthood among immigrants' children (Feliciano, 2009; Rumbaut, 2005). Yet we know little about how ethnic self-identity development unfolds into *middle* adulthood, especially among a diverse population whose parents have migrated largely from Asia and Latin America since the 1960s. Researchers increasingly recognize the value of mixed-methods approaches for exploring the complexities of ethnic self-identification and the subjective meanings behind ethnic labels (Marks, Patton, & Coll, 2011). By combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, and analyzing longitudinal data across more than two decades, this study enhances understandings of ethnic self-identification, an important indicator of how contemporary immigrant groups integrate into U.S. society.

We focus on immigrants' children born in the late 1970s, who were coming of age in San Diego during a time of *relative* inclusion. Unlike today, when a high proportion of immigrants' children grow up in mixed legal status families, the overwhelming majority of our respondents who were not U.S.-born became naturalized U.S. citizens (as did many of their parents, some of whom legalized through the Immigration Reform and

Control Act¹). Moreover, they grew up in an increasingly diverse context. From 1980 to 2017, California's Asian population grew from 5% to 15%, and the Latino population grew from 19% to 39% (Public Policy Institute of California (Bohn et al., 2018)). Nationally, the U.S. Census began allowing identification as more than one race in 2000, reflecting an emerging consensus that individuals should be free to flexibly self-identify (Csizmadia, Brunsma, & Conney, 2012). Yet the political context has not been uniformly inclusive. Proposition 187 in 1994, while deemed unconstitutional and never implemented, would have denied health care, public education, and social services to undocumented immigrants in California and was passed during a core developmental period for our respondents, from early to late adolescence (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Moreover, a "Latino threat narrative" fueled by fears about

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Mexican immigrants has long been evident in U.S. public discourse (Chavez, 2008).

These historical and social contexts are relevant for identity development (Elder, 1998). In response to prejudicial social climates, children of Latin American immigrants may reject an American identity (Massey & Sánchez, 2010). On the other hand, our respondents come from diverse ethnic backgrounds, and the vast majority spent most their lives in a multicultural California context where anti-immigrant views do not dominate. An accepting political and social climate enables agency in self-definitions, which may lead to wide variations in ethnic self-identification even within ethnic groups.

Ethnic Identities Among Children of Immigrants

Ethnic identities invoke subjective feelings of group belonging, revealing boundaries between insiders and outsiders, and thus provide insight into how immigrant groups will integrate into U.S. society in the long term (National Academies of Sciences, 2015). Conventional accounts of ethnic identity among descendants of European immigrants pointed to the “thinning” of their ethnic self-identities; ethnic identity for this population has become an optional, leisure-time form of “symbolic” ethnicity (Alba, 1990; Gans, 1979; Waters, 1990). However, such an outcome is possible only when accompanied by the absence of prejudice and discrimination (Gordon, 1964; Waters, 1990). In a context of perceived discrimination and exclusion, ethnic identity may not erode, but rather rise, in the form of reactive ethnicity (Rumbaut, 2008). Moreover, a segmented assimilation framework suggests not one linear path of ethnic identity development, but multiple patterns of ethnic self-identification (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Rumbaut, 1994).

Although scholars agree that ethnic identity involves feelings of belonging in a group, no universally accepted definition of ethnic identity, nor shared understanding of its multiple dimensions exists (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Phinney & Ong, 2007). We focus on self-labeling, a widely used dimension of ethnic identity (Fuligni, Witkow, & Garcia, 2005). Rumbaut (1994) distinguishes between four types of ethnic self-identity labels among U.S. children of immigrants: (1) national-origin (e.g., Mexican, Vietnamese), (2) hyphenated (e.g., Mexican-American, Filipino-American), (3) American (e.g., “plain” or “unhyphenated” American identity), and (4) racial or panethnic (e.g., Black, Latino, Hispanic, Asian). The first two types of identities indicate close connections to national origins, while the last two exclusively relate to the “American present” (Rumbaut, 1994, p. 763). However, research shows that ethnic minorities often use multiple labels in different situations, and panethnic identities often overlap with national-origin identities (Dowling, 2014; Kasinitz, Moltenkopf, Waters, & Holdaway, 2008).

Previous studies find considerable change in ethnic identity among immigrants’ children from early adolescence through early adulthood (Feliciano, 2009; Smith, 2014), but researchers have not yet examined how ethnic identities shift from early to

middle adulthood. While ethnic identity is assumed to stabilize by early adulthood (Erikson, 1968; Phinney, 1993), changes may occur. We consider changes in self-labels, as well as in ethnic identity importance as individuals transition further into adulthood.

Variation in Ethnic Identities Among Children of Immigrants

Because children of immigrants are diverse, we expect considerable variation in ethnic self-identities across a number of dimensions. One key point of difference is immigrant generation. We distinguish between the 1.5 generation, who migrated as children, the 2nd generation, who were born in the United States with two immigrant parents, and the 2.5 generation, who were born in the United States with one immigrant and one U.S.-born parent. Studies of ethnic identity labels using earlier waves of the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS) showed clear generational differences in ethnic identity labels among adolescents and young adults that were generally consistent with conventional assimilation frameworks (although with exceptions): The most recent arrivals (1.5 generation) were most likely to identify in national-origin terms, while the 2.5 generation were most likely to adopt panethnic terms (Feliciano, 2009; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Tovar & Feliciano, 2009). However, it is unclear whether such patterns extend into middle adulthood.

Because family socialization is often gendered, with immigrant parents controlling daughters more than sons, girls may be more exposed to ethnic culture and socialized to maintain cultural traditions (Lopez, 2003). As a result, studies suggest that adolescent girls identify more closely than boys with their parents’ origin country (Qin, 2009; Zhou & Bankston, 2001). Others suggest that girls are more likely to identify biculturally (Rumbaut, 1994; Waters, 2001). Yet other studies find no gender differences in ethnic identity (Fuligni, Kiang, Witkow, & Baldelomar, 2008). Previous research has not only yielded inconsistent results, it has not yet examined gender differences in middle adulthood.

Ethnic self-identity development may also vary by national origin. More than others, children of Mexican immigrants may exhibit “reactive ethnicity,” adopting Mexican identities in reaction to hostile anti-immigrant contexts (Rumbaut, 2005, 2008; Tovar & Feliciano, 2009). Children of East Asian immigrants may adopt Americanized identities to combat “forever foreign” stereotypes (Tuan, 1999), although Filipinos may be less likely to adopt Asian identities because of their unique colonial history and racialization experiences (Ocampo, 2016). Research also suggests that ethnic self-identification among mixed adolescents fluctuates more than others (Harris & Sim, 2002); however, identity development may also just take longer to solidify for those from mixed backgrounds.

Adolescent experiences likely shape later ethnic identity. Because ethnic identity often develops through family socialization (Knight, Bernal, Cota, Garza, & Ocampo, 1993), individuals from close-knit families may maintain

identities rooted in their ancestral backgrounds. Relatedly, previous research suggests that ethnic languages provide a link to parents' culture for immigrants' children (Phinney, Romero, Nava, & Huang, 2001). Studies also show that adolescents not proficient in their parents' native language more often adopt Americanized (panethnic) identities (Fuligni et al., 2008; Rumbaut, 1994). However, we do not know whether such patterns extend into middle adulthood.

Previous studies show that panethnic self-labeling is associated with lower family socioeconomic background (Portes & MacLeod, 1996; Rumbaut, 1994; Waters, 2001). Portes and MacLeod (1996, p. 536) interpret panethnicity as an externally imposed classification, arguing that socioeconomically advantaged people "are more capable of resisting . . . outside labels." Similarly, Rumbaut (1994) argues that children of high-status immigrant parents feel pride in their background and thus assert identities rooted in the homeland. These findings complicate Gans's (1979, p. 432) argument that "ethnicity is largely a working class lifestyle." More consistent with Gans's perspective, Agius Vallejo's (2012) research suggests that Mexican-Americans from low-income backgrounds tend to retain stronger Mexican/Mexican-American identities than their middle-class counterparts do. Yet limited research has examined the associations between class background and ethnic identities in middle adulthood among immigrants' children from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

Through our longitudinal approach, we can assess whether higher education correlates with declining ethnic identity, as suggested by Gordon's (1964) theory that integration into mainstream institutions facilitates identificational assimilation, or whether, as segmented assimilation theory suggests, maintaining ethnic attachments facilitates educational success (Portes & Zhou, 1993). Studies examining how education in early adulthood relates to ethnic identity show that college-educated minorities maintain origin-country identities more often than less educated peers, in part because the salience of ethnic differences intensifies in predominantly White contexts (Feliciano, 2009; Tovar & Feliciano, 2009). Agius Vallejo (2012) finds a similar pattern among upwardly mobile Mexican-Americans nearing middle adulthood, yet not among those from middle-class families. Thus, it is not yet clear how educational attainment relates to ethnic self-identity among adult children of immigrants from diverse class and ethnic origins.

Prior research shows close links between religion and transnational ties and ethnic identities (Levitt, 2007). Maintaining close contacts with relatives abroad facilitates identification with the home country (Levitt, 2007). Religion, like language, is a cultural aspect often tied to ethnic identity (Chong, 1998). Studies of multiple religious groups (e.g., Catholic and Buddhist) suggest that ethnic churches and religious rituals within families help preserve ethnic culture among the second generation (Chong, 1998; Min, 2010). It follows that fewer nonreligious adults may express ethnic identities rooted in their parents' home country than others.

Finally, individuals may adapt self-identities to conform to how others see them. For example, Nagel (1994) argues that panethnic identities, such as Asian, stem from outsiders' homogenization of diverse groups. However, some immigrants' children resist such labeling, maintaining distinct ethnic identities despite racialization (Roth, 2012; Waters, 2001). Among adolescents from Asian immigrant families, Kiang and Luu (2013) find only modest concordance between ascribed ethnic labels and ethnic self-identities. Whether ethnoracial classification by others relates to ethnic self-identity development over time is an open question.

Research Questions

We examine change in ethnic identity from mid adolescence through middle adulthood among immigrants' children, addressing three broad questions and several subquestions:

1. How do *ethnic self-identity labels* change from mid adolescence to middle adulthood?
 - When in the life course are ethnic self-labels most and least stable?
 - Does the degree of change vary by immigrant generation?
 - Which labels become more or less common with age?
 - How do labels vary across the life course by immigrant generation?
2. How (and why) does the *importance* (or salience) of ethnic self-identity change from mid adolescence to middle adulthood?
 - Does the importance of ethnic identity vary by immigrant generation?
 - Which ethnic self-identities are most salient for children of immigrants in middle adulthood?
3. (How) do various characteristics relate to ethnic self-identity labels among immigrants' children in middle adulthood?
 - Do ethnic labels vary by demographic characteristics, including immigrant generation, gender, and national origin?
 - Do labels vary by family and personal characteristics in adolescence, including family socioeconomic background, family cohesion, and language?
 - Do labels vary by religion, transnational ties, and educational attainment?
 - Do labels vary by the racial/ethnic ascriptions of others?

Method

Data Collection and Sample

We analyze survey and qualitative data drawn from a sample of original respondents from the CILS, a study of foreign-born and U.S.-born children with at least one immigrant parent attending eighth or ninth grades in San Diego in 1991–1992.² The study used a school-based sampling frame³ to accurately

capture the population of immigrants' children in San Diego before they could legally drop out of school. Because the data are limited to a sample drawn in Southern California in fall 1991, the findings cannot be generalized beyond this. However, San Diego was and remains a principal site of contemporary immigrant settlement.

Respondents were surveyed four times (T1, T2, T3, and T4). The first survey was carried out in 1992 (14.2 years old on average), the second in 1995 (17.2 years old), and the third in 2001–2003 (mid-20s). That third phase of data collection obtained surveys from 1,480 respondents (in 2001–2002) from whom a representative subsample of 134 was drawn, with whom in-depth, open-ended qualitative interviews were conducted about a year later. More than 12 years later (2014–2016), this subsample of 134 was tracked, and a full fourth wave of surveys and in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 112 respondents (84% of the 134⁴), who averaged 37.2 years old. They were located not only in California but all over the country, as well as Mexico. Appendix Table A1 provides a sample description.

The flexible interview format at T4 allowed us to delve deeply into the most important aspects of each person's experiences, while also collecting standard survey responses comparable to earlier survey responses. We combined data collected through closed-ended responses with existing CILS longitudinal data, analyzing it using descriptive statistics. We analyzed the interview data in Dedoose, version 8.0.42, a software program for analyzing qualitative and mixed-methods data, using the constant-comparison method, in which we coded responses into conceptually similar categories and compared within and across groups by key attributes to discern patterns (Boeije, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Ethnic Identity Measures

Ethnic identity measures at T1, T2, T3, and T4 are based on the same question: "How do you identify? That is, what do you call yourself (e.g., Asian, Hispanic, American, Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano, Latino, Filipino, Filipino-American, Vietnamese, Vietnamese-American, Lao, Lao-American, Cambodian, and Cambodian-American)?" In the surveys at T1, T2, and T3, respondents wrote in a response. In the T2 and T3 questionnaires, the open-ended question was followed by, "How important is this identity to you?" Respondents could select from "not important," "somewhat important," or "very important." In the in-depth interviews at T3 and T4, those same initial questions were asked, but these were followed by deeper questions, such as "do you always use this term?" and "What does being [ethnic identity label] mean to you?"

In comparisons across waves, we compared four mutually exclusive categories: (1) origin country identification (whether solely or as hyphenated-American, e.g., Filipino or Filipino-American),⁵ (2) panethnic identification (primarily or only, e.g., Latino, Hispanic, Asian), (3) identification *only* as "American," and (4) mixed/other identities (e.g., Mexican-Filipino, Black-Filipino, "human being").⁶ Placing respondents

into categories was sometimes complicated. As in previous studies (Fuligni et al., 2008), many used national or hyphenated terms *and* panethnic terms at T3 and T4 (e.g., Hispanic and Mexican). To facilitate comparisons with T1 and T2 data in which only one response was given, we coded the most preferred label (national/hyphenated *or* panethnic) if this was articulated. If not, we used the more specific identity label (e.g., Mexican). Focusing on the more specific identity prioritized a connection to the origin country, as distinct from those who *only* used panethnic terms, signaling an identity rooted solely in the U.S. experience (Rumbaut, 1994). Most respondents who used multiple terms indicated they preferred the more specific label.

For analyses focused on the covariates associated with identity labels in middle adulthood only, we separated those who mentioned national origins *and* panethnic identities. Thus, we distinguish between using (1) national origin terms (alone or hyphenated) and *not* panethnic, (2) national/hyphenated *and* panethnic terms, (3) *only* panethnic terms, (4) solely American, and (5) mixed/other identity labels.

Results

Stability and Change in Ethnic Identity

Many respondents expressed remarkable stability in identity labels across more than 22 years. The most common open-ended response was to state the *same exact* ethnic identity across all four time periods, even separating out national and hyphenated responses (25%). Of those demonstrating such stability, over half used national labels and only one used a panethnic label. If we consider national and hyphenated labels interchangeable, as many respondents did, 51% identified similarly from adolescence to middle adulthood. Only one respondent chose a different label at each time point.

Based on the categories of national/hyphenated, panethnic, unhyphenated American, and mixed/other, Figure 1 shows that about 31% of all respondents with complete data across time ($n = 106^7$) changed ethnic identity labels in adolescence (T1–T2) or the transition to adulthood (T2–T3), but only 17% changed from early to middle adulthood (T3–T4), suggesting ethnic identity labels usually solidify by adulthood.

However, patterns vary widely by immigrant generation. Ethnic self-identity labels are most stable among the U.S.-born with two immigrant parents and least stable among the 2.5 generation, with the foreign-born in between. For example, while only 18% of the 2nd generation expressed a different ethnic self-label in early adulthood than late adolescence, 31% of the 1.5 generation and 64% of the 2.5 generation did so. Since the 2.5 generation overwhelmingly have mixed ethnoracial backgrounds, this supports previous findings of more flexible ethnic identities among mixed-race adolescents (Harris & Sim, 2002). However, most 2.5 generation individuals, like the 1.5 and 2nd generation, do not change ethnic identity labels from early to middle adulthood, suggesting similar crystallizations of identity in adulthood that may take longer for mixed-background individuals.

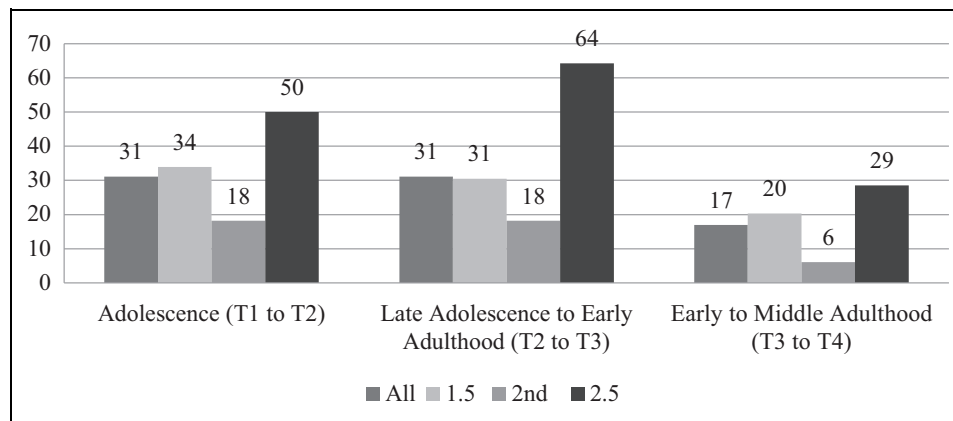


Figure 1. Percentage who change ethnic self-identity label by life-course stage and generation ($n = 106$). *Source.* Authors' calculations based on the CILS Longitudinal In-depth Sample, 1991–2016. CILS = Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study.

Table 1. Ethnic Self-Identity Label Change Across the Life Course, by Generation.

	Early Adolescence (T1)	Late Adolescence (T2)	Early Adulthood (T3)	Middle Adulthood (T4)
All ($n = 106$)				
National/hyphenated	77.4	68.9	76.4	71.7
Panethnic	12.3	17.0	7.6	13.2
American, unhyphenated	4.7	0.9	2.8	3.8
Mixed/other	5.7	13.2	13.2	11.3
	100%	100%	100%	100%
1.5 Generation ($n = 59$)				
National/hyphenated	83.1	71.2	86.4	74.6
Panethnic	15.3	22.0	6.8	17.0
American, unhyphenated	1.7	0.0	1.7	6.8
Mixed/other	0.0	6.8	5.1	1.7
	100%	100%	100%	100%
2nd Generation ($n = 33$)				
National/hyphenated	75.8	75.8	81.8	84.9
Panethnic	12.1	9.1	9.1	9.1
American, unhyphenated	3.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Mixed/other	9.1	15.2	9.1	6.1
	100%	100%	100%	100%
2.5 Generation ($n = 14$)				
National/hyphenated	57.1	42.9	21.4	28.6
Panethnic	0.0	14.3	7.1	7.1
American, unhyphenated	21.4	7.1	14.3	0.0
Mixed/other	21.4	35.7	57.1	64.3
	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source. Authors' calculations based on the CILS Longitudinal In-depth Sample, 1991–2016.

Note. CILS = Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study.

Generational Differences Across the Life Course

Table 1 shows differences in identity labels across the life course by immigrant generation. The 1.5 and 2nd generation similarly use national and hyphenated labels most commonly at all time points, in contrast to the 2.5 generation. However, the use of these labels fluctuates among the 1.5 generation, more of whom use panethnic labels in late adolescence (T2, 22%) and middle adulthood (T4, 17%), as compared with the 2nd generation, only 9% of whom identify panethnically at T2, T3, or T4. While no 2nd generation respondents identify

in plain American terms beyond early adolescence (T1), the use of plain American labels increases among the 1.5 generation from T3 to T4 (from 1.7% to 6.8%).

Qualitative interviews suggest that transitioning away from labels rooted in their origin countries toward Americanized identities (panethnic or plain American) reflects increased cultural and political incorporation into U.S. society for the 1.5 generation. For example, Kham, who migrated at age 14 and identified as Lao in adolescence and young adulthood, but as Asian at age 36, explains, "... the longer we live here ... we

look at ourselves as being American now...Everybody in our...household became U.S. citizens.” Kim Cuc, who migrated at age 3, similarly shifts to an Americanized label, but as simply American. At age 26, Kim Cuc reflected on her adolescence, “I used to just say “Vietnamese...I didn’t really identify with American culture at all...But now, it’s like I kinda adapted and integrated myself into the society.” At age 37, Kim Cuc prefers to identify solely as American:

I wouldn’t identify myself as Vietnamese...Physically from a phenotype perspective, I don’t look typical American...most people when they think of Americans they think of just White. But living in San Diego, you see a multicultural group of people....

Although few respondents share Kim Cuc’s American identity as their preferred self-label, many similarly asserted that they were (also) Americans.

Among the 2.5 generation, the use of national/hyphenated labels declined substantially from early and late adolescence to early and middle adulthood, while the use of mixed labels increased, especially from late adolescence (36%) to early adulthood (57%). Qualitative interviews suggest that 2.5 generation respondents choosing national/hyphenated labels as adolescents identified strongly with their immigrant mothers. However, over time, they began to state a mixed identity in response to outsiders’ questions and perceptions. Mike, for example, identified as American-Chinese in adolescence. However, at age 36, Mike identifies as “Irish-Chinese...as a courtesy to others.” Similarly, by middle adulthood, no 2.5 generation respondents used a “plain” American label. Abigail states in early adulthood that “I could be considered American Asian I guess, but I just consider myself an American.” However, by middle adulthood, she embraced her mixed ancestry as Thai, French, and German: “I’ll [often] get somebody who walks up and asks me... ‘What are you?’... And I love talking about it...It’s kinda fun. Not everybody you meet is that combination.” Adopting complex identities reflects the 2.5 generation’s experience that, given their appearance, others question plain American or national/hyphenated identities, a theme we return to below.

Ethnic Identity Salience

Ethnic identity tends to become less important as immigrants’ children age, a pattern most pronounced among the 1.5 generation, as shown in Figure 2. While the percentage describing their ethnic identity as very important declined from early to middle adulthood across all generations, only among the 1.5 generation did the percentage stating that ethnic identity was *not* important increase: By middle adulthood, 34% declared ethnic identity was not important, compared with 6% of the 2nd generation and 14% of the 2.5 generation.

The more pronounced decline in ethnic identity salience among the 1.5 generation may partly stem from citizenship changes. Most became U.S. citizens by middle adulthood, contributing to a shift in personal allegiance (recall Kham, above).

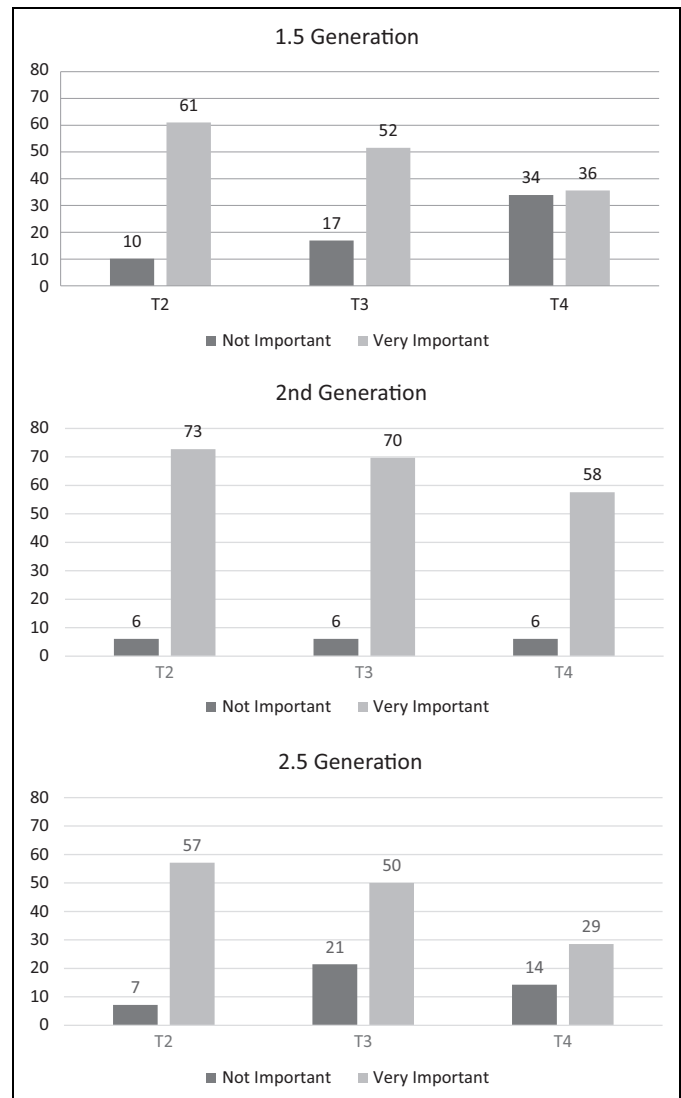


Figure 2. Importance of ethnic identity over time ($n = 106$; percentages). Source. Authors’ calculations based on the CILS Longitudinal In-depth Sample, 1991–2016. CILS = Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study.

The overall decline may also signal shifts in priorities as respondents transition into new roles. According to 37-year-old Brian, “...now that we’re all established professionals and...we’re married with kids,...I’m never gonna say it’s inconsequential or insignificant. But...[being Chinese-American] doesn’t define us anymore.”

Table 2 shows the importance of different self-identity labels in middle adulthood. Here, and in subsequent analyses, we distinguish respondents who identify with their origin country *and* a panethnic group from those who *only* use national/hyphenated terms or *only* panethnic terms. Among those who identified solely in national/hyphenated terms, 53% stated this identity was very important, compared with 13% of those who identified solely in panethnic terms and 21% who identified in mixed/other terms. Combined with Portes and Rumbaut’s

Table 2. Ethnic Self-Identity Label by Importance in Middle Adulthood (T4; Percentages).

	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important	%	N
National or hyphenated	53	35	13	100	55
National or hyphenated and panethnic	42	38	21	100	24
Panethnic	13	27	60	100	15
American, unhyphenated	50	25	25	100	4
Mixed/other	21	57	21	100	14
	41%	37%	23%		112

Note. Pearson's χ^2 significance tests show the association significant at $p < .05$.

(2001) previous finding that panethnic identities were least salient among immigrants' children in adolescence, these results suggest that panethnic identities remain less salient throughout the life course.

Correlates of Ethnic Self-Identity Labels in Middle Adulthood

Table 3 shows differences in ethnic self-identity labels in middle adulthood by various characteristics and experiences. We report tests of significance overall and by category on the table but do not rely heavily on p values in our interpretation of findings because p values can be unreliable, particularly for small samples (Lambdin, 2012). Instead, we highlight theoretically relevant differences that are large in magnitude and consistent with our qualitative evidence. Thus, our discussion below focuses not only on findings that reach statistical significance but also on suggestive differences that are large in magnitude (15% or greater difference) if these are relevant to existing theories and prior research discussed earlier.

Starting with demographics, separating those who solely express national/hyphenated terms from those also using panethnic labels reinforces the finding that more 1.5 (49%) and 2nd-generation respondents (58%) identify in national/ hyphenated terms than the 2.5 generation (27%). Most of the 2.5 generation's parents are from different ethnic groups, and thus, they tend to identify as mixed/other (60%). Gender differences are mostly small, but all respondents who preferred "plain" American labels were women. In contrast, national-origin differences were pronounced. Seventy-five percent of Filipino and Indian-origin respondents identified solely in national/hyphenated terms, much higher than others. Consistent with prior research (Ocampo, 2016), few Filipinos used panethnic terms and some explicitly rejected Asian panethnicity. Second-generation Elaine, for example, states, "I don't really... identify with other Asian cultures." In contrast, Chinese, Mexicans, Vietnamese, and other Southeast Asians used panethnic terms more often, whether in conjunction with national/hyphenated labels or as the sole label. Most respondents of mixed parental origins (81% of whom are 2.5 generation) identified as mixed/other (69%).

The patterns of difference by adolescent characteristics are suggestive: While 59% of those from high SES backgrounds identify with their national heritage, only 44% of those from the lowest SES backgrounds do so. Conversely, 24% of those from the lowest SES backgrounds prefer panethnic terms, compared with only 3.5% of those from the highest SES backgrounds. These findings support research suggesting that higher status individuals more often reject panethnic labels (Portes & MacLeod, 1996; Rumbaut, 1994), contrary to the view that ethnic maintenance is more pronounced among lower SES individuals (Gans, 1979).

Consistent with the notion that origin country identities reflect attachment to family heritages, almost 66% of respondents from highly cohesive families identified solely in national/hyphenated terms, compared with only 43% of those from less cohesive families. Conversely, only 3% from highly cohesive families identified panethnically as adults, compared with 18% of others.

While language *preference* in adolescence does not relate strongly to ethnic self-identity labels in middle adulthood, most (65%) with strong T1 foreign language *skills* identified solely in national/hyphenated terms in middle adulthood. Unsurprisingly, a much larger percentage (32%) of respondents who spoke mostly English as opposed to mostly non-English with parents (6%) identified as Mixed/Other, reflecting that most of those identifying as Mixed have one U.S.-born parent and grew up in English-dominant households. Significantly, more respondents who primarily spoke a language other than English with parents as adolescents identified solely in national/hyphenated terms at T4 (55%) than those who spoke English (32%). This supports the perspective that language and ethnic identity are closely intertwined (Phinney et al., 2001), which was reinforced in interviews. For example, like many respondents identifying in national-origin terms, Jimmy mentions language when asked what being Lao meant to him, "Just the way I was raised, what language I speak."

Many characteristics in middle adulthood relate to ethnic identity labels in expected ways. Individuals with religious identities (ranging from 49% for other Christians to 75% for other religions) more often express national/hyphenated identities than those who are spiritual but not religiously affiliated (8%), consistent with the theory that the maintenance of both religion and identities rooted in the homeland is intertwined (Chong, 1998). However, half of the respondents with no religion also identify solely in national/hyphenated terms. More respondents maintaining transnational ties identify solely in national/hyphenated terms (53%) and fewer identify panethnically (9%) than others (35%, 30%), consistent with panethnicity reflecting an orientation to the U.S. present and away from origin countries. In line with the segmented assimilation perspective that socioeconomic success relates to retaining ethnic identities (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Rumbaut, 1994), 68% of postgraduate-educated respondents identify solely in national/hyphenated terms and none panethnically. For respondents earning graduate degrees, the experience of leaving ethnic communities may heighten ethnic boundaries and

Table 3. Ethnic Self-Identity Labels in Middle Adulthood, by Select Covariates (Percentages).

	National or Hyphenated	National or Hyphenated and Panethnic	Panethnic	American	Mixed or Other	%	N
Overall	49.1	21.4	13.4	3.6	12.5	100	
N	55	24	15	4	14		112
Demographics							
Generation***	ns	ns	ns	ns	***		n
1.5	49.2	24.6	16.4	6.6	3.3	100	61
2	58.3	22.2	11.1	0.0	8.3	100	36
2.5	26.7	6.7	6.7	0.0	60.0	100	15
Gender ^{ns}	ns	ns	ns	^	ns		n
Female	49.2	21.3	11.5	6.6	11.5	100	61
Male	49.0	21.6	15.7	0.0	13.7	100	51
Origin country***	**	ns	ns	ns	***		n
Mexican	50.0	25.0	21.4	0.0	3.6	100	28
Filipino	75.0	15.0	5.0	5.0	0.0	100	20
Vietnamese	28.6	28.6	28.6	14.3	0.0	100	14
Other Southeast Asian	54.3	18.8	18.8	0.0	6.3	100	16
Chinese	60.0	40.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100	10
Indian	75.0	25.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100	4
Other Latin American	50.0	25.0	0.0	0.0	25.0	100	4
Mixed	12.5	6.3	6.3	6.3	68.8	100	16
Measured in adolescence (T1 and T2)							
Family socioeconomic background ^{ns}	ns	ns	*	ns	ns		n
Lowest SES tertile	43.9	14.6	24.4	2.4	14.6	100	41
Middle SES tertile	47.6	26.2	9.5	2.4	14.3	100	42
Highest SES tertile	58.6	24.1	3.5	6.9	6.9	100	29
Family cohesion ^{ns}	*	ns	*	ns	ns		n
Not high	43.2	21.6	17.6	4.1	13.5	100	74
High	65.6	21.9	3.1	3.1	6.3	100	32
Language preference ^{ns}	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns		n
Prefers foreign language or both	55.6	19.4	19.4	0.0	5.6	100	36
Prefers English	46.1	22.4	10.5	5.3	15.8	100	76
Foreign language ability ^{ns}	*	ns	ns	ns	ns		n
Does not speak and understand very well	43.2	23.5	13.6	4.9	14.8	100	81
Speaks and understands very well	64.5	16.1	12.9	0.0	6.5	100	31
Language spoken with parents***	*	ns	ns	ns	***		n
Mostly English or both	32.1	17.9	10.7	7.1	32.1	100	28
Mostly or only non-English	54.8	22.6	14.3	2.4	6.0	100	84
Measured in middle adulthood							
Religion ^{ns}	^	ns	ns	ns	ns		n
Catholic	59.5	18.9	8.1	2.7	10.8	100	37
Other Christian	48.5	18.2	15.2	3.0	15.2	100	33
Buddhist	50.0	16.7	25.0	0.0	8.3	100	12
Other religion	75.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	25.0	100	4
Spiritual, no organized religion	8.3	50.0	25.0	8.3	8.3	100	12
None, atheist	50.0	21.4	7.1	7.1	14.3	100	14
Maintain ties in home country? [^]	ns	ns	**	ns	ns		n
Not at all	34.8	26.1	30.4	0.0	8.7	100	23
Yes	52.8	20.2	9.0	4.5	13.5	100	89
Educational attainment*	ns	ns	**	ns	ns		n
High school only	0.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0	100	2
Some college	47.5	15.0	15.0	2.5	20.0	100	40
AA degree	54.6	18.2	18.2	0.0	9.1	100	11
BA/BS degree	40.5	27.0	13.5	8.1	10.8	100	37
Graduate or professional degree	68.2	27.3	0.0	0.0	4.6	100	22
What race do others see you as?*	ns	ns	ns	ns	***		n
White	28.6	14.3	28.6	0.0	28.6	100	7
Asian	46.9	28.1	15.6	6.2	3.1	100	32
Filipino or Pacific Islander	75.0	12.5	6.3	6.3	0.0	100	16
Hispanic	50.0	27.3	9.1	4.6	9.1	100	22
Black or Part-Black	16.7	16.7	0.0	0.0	66.7	100	6
Ambiguous	48.0	20.0	12.0	0.0	20.0	100	25

Source: Authors' calculations based on the CILS Longitudinal In-depth Sample, 1991–2016.

Note. Pearson's χ^2 significance tests, overall (left column) and by category: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, ^ $p < .10$, and ^{ns} $p > .10$. CILS = Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study.

last further into the life course as they move further into professional careers dominated by Whites (Agius Vallejo, 2012; Feliciano, 2009).

In addition, highly educated respondents may identify more strongly with their origin countries because the “immigrant bargain”—that their parents’ sacrifices will be vindicated through their own success—motivates them (Agius Vallejo, 2012; Louie, 2012). For example, JP notes:

I think for me being so motivated by my parents and their sacrifices, and to see the struggle that they went through... Especially, seeing how their lifestyle was growing up in... the Philippines... never did I wanna give up [on my education].

Highly educated Mexican-origin respondents were especially motivated by the immigrant narrative and proudly expressed Mexican/Mexican-American identities. For example, Isabella, a master’s degree-holding school teacher, states, “...I think that my parents did a very good job with us... encouraging us to study, to go to school... I’m proud to say that I’m Mexican...” Leo, who also holds a master’s degree, similarly articulates his ethnic identity expression as a tribute to his immigrant parents, while also seeing it as a response to stereotyping:

For me it’s very important to label me Mexican-American because I wanna show people... two sides. I wanna show my parents that, hey, I made it. And I’m proud of being Mexican. And..., I wanna show... conservatives people—hey... I’m an immigrant that came to this country and I succeeded and I don’t take advantage of the system.

Leo exhibits reactive ethnicity: His identity developed in response to conflictual experiences in the United States and not only home country attachments (Rumbaut, 2008).

Finally, we find that respondents’ phenotypes relate to ethnic self-labels in complex ways. Many respondents’ identities diverge from outsiders’ classifications. For example, none of the seven respondents perceived by others as White (and thus nonethnic/immigrant), identifies only as American. Likewise, none of the six respondents viewed as Black/part-Black by others identifies primarily as Black. Instead, these respondents often identify using mixed terms (e.g., Afro-Latina, Black-Filipino, 67%). Yet racial classification by others influences self-identity labels. For example, Trung adopts an Asian identity to correspond to others’ classifications: “When you look at me, I’m not really... the—physical embodiment of... an American. ‘cause I’m Asian. But... I still consider myself an American since I lived here all my life and... this is where I call home...”

Respondents viewed by others as Black uniformly noted how others’ perceptions shaped their ethnic labels. For example, Pat, who expresses a Black-Filipina identity, explains, “...if it was up to me, actually, I’d just say, I’m American [but] I know what they’re asking... I don’t want to be rude about it.” Similarly, Maria and Spencer,

both of African-American/Filipino immigrant parentage, shifted from identifying as Filipino-American in adolescence (reflecting close relationships to their Filipino mothers), to stable identities as mixed Black-Filipino by early adulthood. Spencer even asserts that his Black identity is now more important “‘cause [of]... my skin color.” These shifts in identity labels over time are responses to outsiders’ racial classifications.

Discussion/Conclusion

Moving beyond existing research focused on ethnic identity in adolescence or early adulthood, this long-term longitudinal study of immigrants’ children aging from their teenage years into middle adulthood makes several contributions. First, we lend support for the supposition that ethnic identity shifts most during adolescence and transitions to adulthood but stabilizes further into adulthood (Erikson, 1968; Phinney, 1993). This study additionally reveals that the importance of ethnic identity often declines as adults develop new identities as parents, workers, and spouses.

Second, we find multiple paths and outcomes of ethnic self-identity development among immigrants’ children and variation by immigrant generation, consistent with segmented assimilation (Rumbaut, 1994). However, while the vast majority of foreign-born respondents identify in national/hyphenated terms throughout the life course, by middle adulthood, they are more likely to shift to panethnic identities than their U.S.-born peers. In contrast to linear assimilation accounts predicting the U.S.-born would most frequently adopt Americanized self-identity labels (e.g., Gordon, 1964), we find that foreign-born respondents more often use both “plain” American and panethnic identity labels by middle adulthood. The interviews reveal that these 1.5-generation adults recognize their increasing political and cultural incorporation into American life, a shift perhaps not as salient for the 2nd or 2.5 generation. However, just as the foreign-born more frequently discard identities rooted in origin countries with age, they also tend toward viewing ethnic identity as unimportant more than U.S.-born peers do, patterns of difference that hold even within national-origin groups.

Third, this study illuminates how ethnic identity development derives from both ancestral attachments and external classifications imposed by U.S. society. Those who assert identities referencing their origin countries tend to come from close-knit families and maintain native languages and ties to the home country. Panethnic identities, on the other hand, are more common among those with less education who have less cohesive families and few transnational ties. Panethnically identified adults tend to accept U.S. racial classifications rather than express personally salient identities. In contrast, the few children of immigrants in middle adulthood who identify as “plain” American resist the forces of U.S. racialization, unlike American-identified adolescent children of immigrants (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). These adults assert that, at least in Southern California, American is *not* synonymous with

White. Nevertheless, it is more common for adult children of immigrants to feel constrained by a U.S. racial structure that limits their ethnic identity choices (Dowling, 2014; Song, 2003). We see this among those who identify as Asian because they view this as an Americanized label reflecting their racial classification and among those who adopt mixed identity labels in adulthood after recognizing that others question how someone can identify as American but appear non-White, or identify in origin-country terms but appear Black. Thus, these ethnic self-identities differ from the “symbolic ethnicity” exhibited by descendants of European immigrants (Waters, 1990) because they are often a response to racialization rather than costless expressions of individual preference.

Limitations of this study suggest future research directions. First, our study was restricted to a particular historical and social context—children of immigrants born in the late 1970s and coming of age in San Diego in the 1990s, who we followed into their late 30s. In more homogeneous and exclusionary contexts, immigrants’ children may have less agency to choose self-identity labels. Second, our sample is limited to ethnic groups prevalent in San Diego in the 1990s, including Mexicans, Filipinos, Vietnamese, and other Asian subgroups. Ethnic identity development may differ for others, such as those with Caribbean or African origins and future research should explore ethnic identity development for other groups in different regional and historical contexts. Third, our sample is relatively small, making comparisons across ethnic groups and between covariates, and the conclusions drawn about such differences, tentative. While a larger sample would allow for more complex statistical analyses and greater confidence in the conclusions drawn, our analysis also shows the importance of drawing on qualitative data to illuminate the complex meanings behind ethnic identity choices and changes over the life course. Overall, this study reveals the interplay of agency and structure in ethnic identity choices among children of immigrants over the life course, suggesting that within inclusive contexts, ethnic identity choices are shaped both by the depth of homeland and cultural attachments, and by the existing U.S. racial structure.

Appendix

Table A1. Sample Characteristics.

	N	%
Generation		
“1.5” (foreign-born, came to United States under age 13)	61	54.5
“2.0” (U.S.-born, both parents foreign-born)	36	32.1
“2.5” (U.S.-born, one parent foreign-born, one parent U.S.-born)	15	13.4
Gender		
Female	61	54.5
Male	51	45.5

(continued)

Table A1. (continued)

	N	%
National origin		
Mexican	28	25.0
Filipino	20	17.9
Vietnamese	14	12.5
Other Southeast Asian	16	14.3
Chinese	10	8.9
Indian	4	3.6
Other Latin American	4	3.6
Mixed	16	14.3
Family socioeconomic background (T1)		
Lowest SES tertile	41	36.6
Middle SES tertile	42	37.5
Highest SES tertile	29	25.9
Family cohesion (T2, <i>n</i> = 106)		
High	32	30.2
Not high	74	69.8
Language preference (T1)		
English	76	67.9
Other language or English and other equally	36	32.1
Foreign language ability: speaking and understanding (T1)		
Less than very well	81	72.3
Very well	31	27.7
Language with parents (T1)		
Mostly/only English or both equally	28	25.0
Mostly or only non-English	84	75.0
Religion (T4)		
Other Christian	33	29.5
Catholic	37	33.0
Buddhist	12	10.7
Other religion	4	3.6
Spiritual, not religious	12	10.7
None, atheist	14	12.5
Educational attainment (T4)		
High school or less	2	1.8
Some college, no degree	40	35.7
AA degree	11	9.8
BA/BS degree or 3+ years college	37	33.0
Graduate or professional degree	22	19.6
Transnational ties (T4)		
No ties	23	20.5
Keep in touch directly or indirectly	89	79.5

Source: Authors’ calculations based on the CILS Longitudinal In-depth Sample, 1991–2016.

Note. CILS = Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study.

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Author Contribution

Cynthia Feliciano contributed to conception, design, acquisition, analysis, and interpretation; drafted the manuscript; critically revised the manuscript; gave final approval; and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of work ensuring integrity and accuracy. Rubén G. Rumbaut contributed to conception, design, acquisition, analysis, and interpretation; critically revised the manuscript; gave final approval; and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of work ensuring integrity and accuracy.

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Notes

1. The 1965–1990 period was arguably the most inclusive era in U.S. immigration history. The 1965 Act repealed the “national origins quotas” law that had restricted immigration since the 1920s and blocked Asian and African migration. After the Vietnam War ended and the 1980 Refugee Act was passed, more refugees were resettled in the United States in the 1980s than in any other decade. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 legalized 2.7 million undocumented immigrants. And the 1990 Act tripled the number of visas to highly skilled immigrants. Nearly all respondents and their parents were legal permanent residents, if not citizens, by 2014.
2. The larger Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study included a Southern Florida sample not used here.
3. See Portes and Rumbaut (2001) for further information about the original sample.
4. Comparisons between the 112 interviewed at T4 and the full T1 sample showed no sample attrition bias on *any* characteristic (age, gender, grade point average, family socioeconomic status, etc.) *except* national origin, which was by design. The T3 in-depth interviews intentionally included a larger Chinese sample to facilitate ethnic comparisons.
5. Although Rumbaut (1994) distinguishes between “national” and “hyphenated” terms, our interviews revealed, like previous research (Kiang & Johnson, 2013), that respondents often used these terms interchangeably, sometimes depending upon the audience, a finding we elaborate on in other work (Feliciano & Rumbaut 2018). In addition, our analyses showed no significant differences between the covariates considered in Table 3 and those who identified in primarily national or hyphenated terms.
6. The two T4 respondents who used a panethnic-hyphenated term (Asian American) were coded as panethnic, consistent with Rumbaut (1994).
7. Six respondents not interviewed at T2 were dropped from analyses over time, although included in all subsequent analyses. We found no evidence of selection bias when testing whether these 6 differed significantly from the other 106. For example, the six were distributed across four national-origin groups and evenly distributed across family SES backgrounds.

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