Duality of Cultures: Mexican American Cultural Identity in the United States

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Mexican American identity, like that of many other ethnic groups in the United States, is one that is very complex. There has been much discussion with regards to identity as well as discussion regarding assimilation of the children of Mexican American migrants. Much of this debate centers on the idea of assimilation in U.S. society and whether Mexican culture/heritage needs to be abandoned. With such a large Mexican American population in the United States it is important to understand the process of integration that first and second generation people of Mexican descent go through.

Through in depth interviews with 1st and 2nd generation Mexican American college students I address the following questions: (1) how are bicultural identities formed? and (2) are these identities beneficial? I argue that the experiences of being bilingual and bicultural in the United States allows for a dualism of identity that is both American and Mexican, that does not lead to a compromise of either culture.

With much debate on immigration policy, specifically immigration from Mexico, it is important to understand the ways in which people of Mexican descent become integrated into U.S. society and how their biculturalism affects their lives.

There are two major strains of thought regarding Mexican American identity in the United States: segmented assimilation theory and straight line theory. Segmented assimilation theory can be broken down into sub categories (Zhou 1997). The first of which is that people of Mexican descent in the U.S. gradually acculturate and become part of the white middle class and loss their Mexican identity, the second of these is that if a person does not assimilate into the white middle class they are subject to poverty. Lastly, there is the group of people who have rapid upward mobility, while still preserving their cultural identity as a Mexican person. In the classical assimilation view
the cultural traits of a minority, in this case Mexican American, are disadvantageous.

The second school of thought regards the “straight line” assimilation theory. As summarized by Brown and Bean (2006) this theory states that people become more like the people that are around them in characteristics, beliefs, norms, etc. This theory expects for people to become more like, in this case, the white middle class, with time. People who are more assimilated will then have less in common with people from their native culture, in the case of my study Mexican culture, and more in common with white middle class America.

In her book *Learning from Experience: Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles* Paula M.L. Moya (2002) writes of Richard Rodriguez’s book *Hunger of Memory* “His rags to riches scenario and his claim to have successfully assimilated into main-stream American culture (a process that, according to Rodriquez, entailed alienation from his Mexican parents and the concomitant loss of any connection to an ethnic past) are meant to indicate Rodriquez’s exemplary status as a self-made American man” (Moya 100). My question centers on his disconnection to his history and past. It would be a fair idea to say that Rodriquez believes that straight line assimilation is the only kind of assimilation available to Mexican Americans and that this in turn alienated him from his family.

The idea of Mexican heritage can mean different things for different people. Even though I feel this is a broad question I believe it will lead into different themes/ideas. The concept of Mexican heritage can take on different meanings. There is language, culture, religion, food, etc. All of these things play a part in Mexican heritage. Gordon (1964) argues that immigrant’s children are more attracted to American ideas and customs, yet
the strongest sense of socialization comes from their parents and family, which makes their native culture very important and an integral part of their lives. This double dose, so to speak, of cultures from an early age is what allows for a duality of cultures that is not in competition with one another. In Bernal’s (1993) study of Mexican American and Euro American school age children, one of the conclusions that he came to is that being bicultural allows for a greater empathy for other cultures and people.

Feliciano (2001) makes note of the benefits that people of dual cultures have. Grasping the English language as well as their native language promotes greater success in the United States. Furthermore, not only is being of a dual culture beneficial, but the opportunities that American born children take for granted, are more readily embraced by immigrants or children of immigrants who want to take advantage of the opportunities that are offered by the United States.

Moya goes on to write “Rodriguez closes his book [Hunger of Memory] by refusing a “minority identity altogether, suggesting that “minorities” are those people who are culturally disadvantaged. He presumes that as a highly educated person, he can no longer be considered a minority” (Moya 115). Why is this so? Does there need to be this kind of compromise in order to be a success in the United States? He seems to have a very clear indication that one negates the other. There is no middle ground that allows him to be connected to his family in Mexico, his parents, and ultimately the Mexican part of himself. Here we see that there are opposite ideas at work that cannot co-exist. Moya clearly indicates that she does not agree with Rodriguez’s identification.

In her article “Latina Languages and Identities” Ana Celia Zentella (2002) notes that “Anthropolitical linguistics assumes that the ways in which Latinas in the United
States speak English and Spanish cannot be divorced from socioeconomic and political realities. Of particular importance is the dominant language ideology that equates working-class Spanish-speaking Latinas with poverty and academic failure and defines their Spanish-English bilingual children as linguistically deficient and cognitively confused” (Zentella 322). This belief that English-Spanish speaker’s bilingualism would make their perceptions, memory, and reasoning less than standard is an issue that I would like to explore. Zentella says that being bilingual, and stemming from that biculturalism, is negative. To a certain extent the views of the anthropolitical linguist and Zentella are like those of Richard Rodriguez. In this theory, there are only two options. One of them is to assimilate completely or keep ties to language, “Spanglish”, and culture and be condemned to poverty.

Also, Albert M. Ochoa (1995) notes in “Language Policy and Social Implications for Addressing the Bicultural Immigrant Experience in the United States” that the dominant society makes it difficult for there to be open vertical mobility of immigrants, thus immigrants have to band together in order to have a chance of upward mobility. Yet the question is how a person that is bicultural can reach economic self-reliance to begin with. If they are bicultural then they have become a successful American who is both American and Mexican. Ochoa offers a somewhat more positive view of what Rodriguez and Zentella write. Ochoa makes note of the strong national ties that immigrants have in the United States. Not only will my interviewee have personal feelings about whether their Mexican heritage has helped or obstructed their success, but I am also curious to know whether or not they feel they have been victims of discrimination because of their bicultural identity. I feel that this would affect, most likely negatively, their self-image as
a person of Mexican descent.

To a certain extent a choice is made with regards to assimilation Marilyn Montenegro (1976) writes that, “White ethnic minorities can assimilate into American society. Historically, non-whites have not been allowed to assimilate. If the Mexican-American perceives himself as a member of a white ethnic minority, then he can foresee entrance into the dominant society for himself or his children” (Montenegro 5). To a large extent there are choices in how a person views him/herself ethnically, but this again leaves room for there to be a dualism of self-identification. Even though it is easier, to a certain extent, for Mexican Americans to assimilate it often leads to the loss of their Mexican culture. It is also interesting to note the African-American experience of assimilation in the United States. Montenegro notes that “Blacks do not face such doubts; they know they are not white. The dominant society has defined as Black anyone with a Black ancestor…The Anglo majority has been less specific in the case of the Mexican-American” (Montenegro 19). Not only is the Mexican community one of several U.S. minorities, but it is also one that seems to move with more fluidity. The idea of choosing what a person wants to be is very interesting. In Brown and Bean’s 2006 article it is made evident that the Mexican American experience in the United States is very distinct from that of European immigrants and African Americans. Yet, they are often compared to these two groups. Like the European immigrants in the United States some believe that it is only a matter of time before people of Mexican descent become assimilated into the host culture. On the other hand, their experience can be compared to that of the African American in that they are a disadvantaged minority whose upward mobility is delayed by racial discrimination.
As I noted earlier, with the action of being able to choose there is more a chance of loss of cultural identity in order to assimilate. Questions of the dualism of cultures are very relevant to Mexican Americans. I believe Portes and Rumbaut (2001) sum up the complexity of this issue well they note that “while assimilation may still represent the master concept in the study of today’s immigrants, the process is subject to too many contingencies and affected by too many variables to render the image of a relatively uniform and straightforward path credible” (45). Thus, there seems to be something lacking in the current thoughts regarding assimilation. The close proximity of Mexico to our south and the fluid movement of ideas, food, people between the United States and Mexico also make it easier to nurture and reinforce one’s Mexican identity. The opposition of assimilation and nurturing one’s Mexican identity seems to offer a balance. It is possible to assimilate and lose touch to one’s identity, but the proximity of Mexico allows for a direct connection to one’s culture. So what becomes the determining factor? What experiences, people, ideas, beliefs allow for a dualism of identity that is both American and Mexican?

Methodology

My research project is based on qualitative research. I feel that the best method for collecting data is through interviews. In order to have in depth interviews with college students I am limiting the number of interviews to 10. I will interview 2 males and 8 females. There will be 7 first generation interviewees and 3 second generation. I feel that interviewing students would be much more beneficial in that I would be able to probe
more deeply if I felt that a certain question would open to more conversation that was relevant to my topic.

As I have been responding to literature on the topic of identity the each question that I have come to ask seems to lead me in many different directions. In the next section of my research design I have formulated interview questions that I feel are flexible enough so that I may probe areas of interest in the responses I am given.

Interview Guide:

I. Name, Age, Gender
II. Make note of whether they are 1st or 2nd generation Mexican American (ask where they were born, as well as parents and grandparents)
III. Year and Majors
IV. What is your primary ethnic self-identification? What/if any other ethnic identifications do you have? Under what circumstances do you use each?
V. What do you believe Mexican culture is and how does it differ from U.S. culture? What connections do you feel to the dimensions of Mexican culture that you have identified?
VI. What makes you identify the most with your heritages?
VII. How well do you speak Spanish? How about reading and writing skills?
VIII. Who do you feel has helped you in better understanding/nurturing your identity as a person of Mexican descent?
IX. What kind of schools did you go to? Were you taught in English or Spanish? Both?
X. (If they report being bilingual) Has being bilingual made it easier or more difficult in school? In a social setting? In a work setting?
XI. Do you feel that being bilingual has helped you in school? Why? Are there times when you choose to speak one language rather that the other? What situations are these? What prompts you to choose a language?
XII. What factors do you believe have been crucial in your educational success?
XIII. Does language play a part in any of those factors?
XIV. Do you feel that you have had to compromise your beliefs in order to succeed? If so, how and when?
XV. Do you feel that you have had the same educational opportunities as people of other anestries?
XVI. Do you belong to any Mexican clubs at school? How about Latino clubs?
XVII. What ethnicity are most of your friends? (If there is a majority).
XVIII. Do you speak Spanish amongst your friends? Peers?
XIX. Do you feel that your success as a college student is in any way
affected by your Mexican heritage?

Through these interviews I hope to find the ways in which cultural traits, which are both American and Mexican coexist. I am also very interested in seeing how self-identification fits into how they view themselves.

Findings

The experiences of being bilingual and bicultural in the United States allows for a dualism of identity that is both American and Mexican, that does not lead to a compromise of either culture.

Self-Identification

Mexican-American

The way in which a person self-identifies is an integral into understanding how, and as what, they see themselves being in American society. The second question to each of my interviewees asked “As a person of Mexican descent in the United States what ethnic label/name do you identify with?”

Dan is a 21 year old male, first generation, third year college student. Dan identifies as “Mexican American, but I’m pretty Americanized, most of my customs I’ve lost, not lost, but not 100 percent.” This statement is similar to one that was made by Matt a 20 year old male, second generation, third year college student. Matt says that “[He] uses Mexican-American generally, when I’m feeling political I use Chicano, when I’m with non-Mexican Latinos I use Latino. With my family, we just say Mexican.”

Both Dan and Matt’s responses I would like to compare to Jamie’s. She is a 20 year old female, second year college student who is a second generation Mexican American. Her self-labeling is as a “Mexican-American, I don’t use Latina or Hispanic
because I feel that those are more Mexican. I’m Mexican American because I know I am Mexican, but I am more American.”

Of these three interviews what I found very interesting is that of the ten people that I interviewed, these three people were the ones that felt the least close to their Mexican heritage. All three of these people identified as Mexican American, which leads me to believe that this is the identification that is somewhat neutral. It is not as ethnically charged as a term like Latino.

*Chicana and Mexican*

Maria is 20 years old female, first generation Mexican American, and a third year at UCI. Maria responded “Hispanic, well, it’s the term that I feel has been the most widely used in identifying who I am, but since I’ve been in college, I’ve started to identify with the term Chicana because it seems more empowering to me.” I found her answer very interesting because in this quotation we see both the American and Mexican identity’s together. She uses Hispanic because it is what she has come to be most called by American society. It is easier to use this that explains the layers of identity that come with being both Mexican and American.

Brenda is a 21 year old first generation Mexican American who is a third year in college. Brenda identifies as “Mexican. I think it’s because my mom and dad would always answer Mexican when I helped them fill out papers. I know that I’m more than just Mexican, but because I called myself Mexican I’ve always identified with it.” What I found very interesting about her response is that her family ties, the very strong ties to her mother and father, is what influenced her self-identification. Another of my respondents Karen is a 20 year old female, first generation Mexican American. Karen identifies as
“Mexican…If someone asks me what ethnicity I am I normally tell them Latina, if they’re not happy with that answer, I tell them I’m Mexican.” Karen like Maria has learned to negotiate her self-identification. From what these responses show me, the different labels that one can apply to themselves correspond to the different situations. For example, Karen is Latina, but when she is not understood by people who are not familiar with the different terms of self-identification, she becomes Mexican.

These responses lead me to believe that the nature of the bicultural Mexican American identity is one that is negotiated everyday. The different labels including: Mexican, Mexican American, Hispanic, Latino/a, and Chicano/a are used interchangeably depending on where it fits. This reinforces the idea that being bicultural in the United States allows that dualism of identity that is Mexican and American.

**Role of Family**

In the interviews that I conducted it was overwhelmingly evident that family plays a huge role in the defining of one’s identity as a person of Mexican descent. The Mexican family unit is the source of support that leads to a dualism of identity. This might not be very apparent, but the research that I conducted shows this clearly.

*Connection to Mexican Heritage*

Maria feels most connected to her Mexican Heritage because of “[her] family [they] are the cornerstone of my Mexican identity. My mother and father and all of their family were born in Mexico and I still have family who lives there. My mother only speaks Spanish.” It is evident that the family plays the role of connection to the Mexican heritage and that this connection is transmitted most through the parental unit.
Karen sums up this idea very well “Mexican culture is more family oriented. What I mean by family oriented is that most Mexicans include aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, etc. in their families…I am very family oriented and close to my family.” While this is something that I expected to find in my interviews there was another aspect of family and togetherness that came up in a few of the interviews that I thought was very interesting.

Food seems to be a common theme that keeps people in constant contact to their Mexican heritage. Karen shared with me that “language is a very important part of my Mexican identification, but food has always been very important in my family. My grandma and mom always cook when my family gets together and it makes me feel very close to them.” When I asked Cindy about what she associated with Mexican culture the first on her list was food. Jennifer said that her connection to her family was strengthened by her mom and aunt. She “cooks with her aunt all the time. I love helping her make tortillas de harina [flour tortillas]. During the time that we spend together we talk about what’s going on with me and we just talk and I learn about my family.”

Food in this instance is a tangible way, a tangible interaction, in a family that allows for bonding. From my personal family life, I find that food is very important in all of our interactions. It is an aspect of Mexican culture that is very important to Mexican families in the United States. It allows for a connection to Mexico, to the authentic taste of Mexico.

Social Interaction

Friendship
From the interviews that I conducted friendships with people of Hispanic heritage, notice I said Hispanic and not only Mexican, tend to nurture biculturalism and bilingualism. Maria sometimes “speak[s] Spanish with my friends so other people won’t know what we’re saying, I don’t know, it’s just something extra that me and my close friends share.”  Johanna, a 21 year old female second year college student also shares that “sometimes [she] will say one or two sentences in Spanish because I can’t find the correct verbiage in English to express what I want to …This happens when I am with my friends and there are certain phrases that only seem right in Spanish.” The Spanish language brings a sense of togetherness. Not only can friends speak English to each other, but Spanish is a much more intimate way for them to communicate because not everyone can speak Spanish.

Work

Not only does being bilingual and bicultural allow for a greater sense of camaraderie among friends, but it is also a great advantage in the work place, especially in a state like California, which has such a large Spanish speaking population. Maria says that being bilingual “has helped me, I feel that being bilingual is such an asset no matter what language other language you speak.” Dan, who also works in a customer service setting notes that “at work actually it helps to have an accent; clients trust their own people...It’s just easier for them to understand me, but sometimes the Spanglish slips up.” Karen also sees this as a benefit, “at work it is very helpful because sometimes I have to talk to people who speak only Spanish, something that you often get because I live in an area where there is a high number of immigrants who have just recently arrived and that don’t know English, and I think that knowing how to talk with somebody, joke with them
in Spanish makes them comfortable.” Lastly, Johanna said that “being bilingual is always a plus…every where you go to look for a job they want Spanish speakers so it’s an advantage.” Being bilingual is a great advantage when one works in Southern California, but I think that this does not necessarily apply everywhere in the United States. Southern California is very densely populated with people who only speak Spanish, but since all of my interviewees live in southern California I expected for my findings to be as they were.

**Education**

Another very interesting finding that I had was that parent and family involvement actually increased the chances for a successful sense of biculturalism. The question that prompted these responses was “What factors do you believe have been crucial in your educational success?” Jennifer responded that “[her] mom is the most supportive person. She might not really understand my classes or why I need to take this class, or whatever, but she knows that my education is very important. She helps me with everything she can. Her support is amazing.” I found Johanna’s response to be very humorous and insightful; she says that it is the “Ole mighty chancla! [flip flop] Well kinda, the chancla represents my parent’s persistence. They always pushed me to do well.” Karla also has had the same experience, “My families support” was the concise response to the question regarding the factors that have been crucial to her success as a college student. In all of these instances the parent/family support is the most important factor in their success as healthy college student. The family might not provide help with school work, projects, and etc. but support is emotional, which in turn is tremendously helpful. Being of Mexican American heritage in the United States is allows for a dualism of identity that does not compromise any aspect of culture.
Discussion

There are two major strains of thought regarding Mexican American identity in the United States: segmented assimilation theory and straight line theory. Segmented assimilation theory can be broken down into sub categories (Zhou 1997). The first of which is that people of Mexican descent in the U.S. gradually acculturate and become part of the white middle class and loss their Mexican identity. As I have shown above this claim is unsubstantial. There are various aspects of Mexican heritage, including language, food, familial interaction that only lend to nurture their Mexican heritage, while lending to their success as a college student. The second of these is that if a person does not assimilate into the white middle class they are subject to poverty. This is also rejected by the fact that all of the people that I interviewed are college students. This does not necessarily mean that they will be wealthy in the future, but because it is only a very small fraction of Mexican American high school students that do attend a four year university, they are considered successful. Lastly, there is the group of people who have rapid upward mobility, while still preserving their cultural identity as a Mexican person. In the classical assimilation view the cultural traits of a minority, in this case Mexican American, are disadvantageous. The classical assimilation theory is also in opposition to my findings. The interviews I conducted have led me to believe that Mexican cultural traits have only enriched the Mexican American experience. All of these college students have the advantage of a strong family background, but also see their lives as college students in the United States to be important parts of their lives.

The second school of thought regards the “straight line” assimilation theory. As summarized by Brown and Bean (2006), this theory states that people become
more like the people that are around them in characteristics, beliefs, norms, etc. This theory expects for people to become more like, in this case, the white middle class, with time. People who are more assimilated will then have less in common with people from their native culture, in the case of my study Mexican culture, and more in common with white middle class America. This does not seem very likely in the instance of the interviews that I conducted. The fact that family and friends play such an important role in the lives of the students I interviewed, implies that these are the people they surround themselves with. Their culture is continually being reinforced.

The concept of Mexican heritage can take on different meanings. There is language, culture, religion, food, etc. All of these things play a part in Mexican heritage. Gordon (1964) argues that immigrant’s children are more attracted to American ideas and customs, yet the strongest sense of socialization comes from their parents and family, which makes their native culture very important and an integral part of their lives. Children want to fit in with their peers, but as they mature a connection to their family and history becomes more important. Four out of my ten respondents said that one of the factors that added to their connection to their Mexican heritage has been the Chicano/Latino courses that they have taken at their university. This double dose, so to speak, of cultures from an early age is what allows for a duality of cultures that is not in competition with one another. In Bernal’s (1993) study of Mexican American and Euro American school age children, one of the conclusions that he came to is that being bicultural allows for a greater empathy for other cultures and people. I was expecting an awareness that is more enhanced from my respondents because they are college students, but I was very impressed by the thoughtfulness of the responses to my questions.
Through my research and findings I have argued that a person of Mexican ancestry in the United States that is both bilingual and bicultural is valuable and allows for a dualism of identity that is both American and Mexican, in which neither of these cultures needs to be compromised.

In the interviews that I conducted it was evident that biculturalism and bilingualism aided in these people in their daily lives. It was overwhelmingly evident that family, friends of Mexican descent, the Spanish language, and cultural traits (like good and discipline) play a huge role in the defining of one’s identity as a person of Mexican descent, and that it has a positive effect. In the theories regarding assimilation there is a definite idea that in order to be American one would need to abandon their Mexican heritage, but my research proved otherwise. My research shows that this idea is false and that people who are of dual cultures are very aware of their dual identity and use it as an advantage in their lives. The connections with family and friends who spoke Spanish, had the same customs, ate the same kind of food, etc., all of these areas were beneficial in forming a positive view of themselves.

Even though my research helps shed some light on the compromises, or lack thereof, that people of dual identity face, it would be advantageous to do further research on people of later generations. It is possible that people of 1st and 2nd generation descent are closer to their culture because their immediate family was originally from Mexico. It would be interesting to see how later generations deal with their dual identity, or whether they believe they have a dual identity or not.
Works Cited


