Conflicts of American immigrants: assimilate or retain ethnic identity.

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Immigrants to the US face numerous challenges as they struggle to assimilate into American society while trying to retain their cultural and ethnic identity. These immigrants have been the victims of many racially based riots, police brutality and looting of their businesses by locals. The dominant society also has many biases that make it difficult for immigrants to be accepted into the economic, political and social structure. However, technological innovations such as telephone and e-mail have eased the process of retaining their ethnic identity as they adjust to the mainstream.

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The United States of America is a country of immigrants. From the early settlers to the present entrants, ethnic and cultural diversity is abundant. When this country was still young, the settling population was homogeneous: white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant background. In time, other Northern Europeans sought entry, and eventually, Southern and Eastern Europeans, Asians, Central and South Americans poured in by the thousands. The American "mosaic" was slowly developing, and in the process, differences became apparent. Such differences involved varied religions, races, and ethnic heritage. Catholics, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and non-English speaking immigrants grew quickly in numbers. Assimilation was becoming all the more difficult to attain. The Table (page 15) shows how the composition of immigrant population changed from the early 1800's to the late twentieth century. For example, in 1820 there were 7,690 Europeans and 6 Asians entering the country, whereas between 1971-1994, there were 2,193,839 from Europe and 5,641,168 from Asia. Was the American context prepared for such heterogeneity?

Although the composition of the American population became so heterogeneous, the structural arena of the United States did not adjust accordingly. The cultural and ethnic diversity of the new immigrants was not readily welcomed within the political, economic and societal context. Fortunately, "quotas" were abolished to a point, in time, other Northern Europeans sought entry, and eventually, Southern and Eastern Europeans, Asians, Central and South Americans poured in by the thousands. The American "mosaic" was slowly developing, and in the process, differences became apparent. Such differences involved varied religions, races, and ethnic heritage. Catholics, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and non-English speaking immigrants grew quickly in numbers. Assimilation was becoming all the more difficult to attain. The Table (page 15) shows how the composition of immigrant population changed from the early 1800's to the late twentieth century. For example, in 1820 there were 7,690 Europeans and 6 Asians entering the country, whereas between 1971-1994, there were 2,193,839 from Europe and 5,641,168 from Asia. Was the American context prepared for such heterogeneity?

But, the newer immigrants, those that have been arriving since 1965, struggle to assimilate. The American society has also struggled to make the [TABULAR DATA OMITTED] necessary structural alterations to accommodate such diversity. Russian, Japanese, Chinese, Asian Indians, Filipinos, Cambodians, Hispanics, and Laotians, to name a few, constitute the new immigrants as defined for purposes of this article. Their distinct physical features and diverse customs, languages, and norms, make it even harder for them to "achieve a cultural solidarity sufficient at least to sustain a national existence" (Gordon, 1964:63). Trying to adapt to the dominant society, predominantly white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, is difficult when one's skin color or facial features differ from "the norm." The inherent and acquired biases of the dominant society discourage acceptance and limit entrance into the larger group's economic, social and political structure.

This article examines the melting pot theory and cultural pluralism, placing these concepts within a historical context of the immigration process in the United States, to show that the new immigrants have faced different issues while attempting to retain their ethnic identity compared to the immigrants that arrived on American soil prior to 1965 who tampered with assimilation. The underlying American values of individualism and competition are foreign to such people who highlight collectivism and familial cohesion. Due to their diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds, the new immigrants constantly struggle with assimilating at the expense of retaining their ethnic identity.

THE MELTING POT THEORY

The melting pot theory, which developed in the eighteenth century, expected that all immigrants assimilate into the American mainstream while fighting together for one country. This implication was based on the existence of Anglo-conformity that emphasized homogeneity, both religiously and ethnically. In the late 1700's, the population in the United States was "predominantly white, English, and 99 percent Protestant" (Ramakrishnan and Balgopal, 1995:13). One could easily fit into the structure of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) since already of the same racial, ethnic, and religious group.

On the other hand, "melting" into the dominant society did not come easy for those immigrants that were of color or who had some physical feature that distinguished them from the WASP. Despite the fact that the African slaves made up one-fifth of the total population at that time, "his predominantly slave status, together with racial and cultural prejudice, barred him from serious consideration as an assimilable element of the society" (Gordon, 1964:246). In addition, during the last part of the
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In 1924, Horace Kallen first described the term cultural pluralism: "democracy is an essential prerequisite to culture, that culture can be and sometimes is a fine flowering of democracy, and that the history of the relation of the two in the United States exhibits this fact" (p. 11). Kallen also postulated that one automatically and without voluntary will, belongs to an ethnic group. Whereas, a person volunteers to belong or not to belong to a state, a social club, or even to a political party. People can change their attire, find a new spouse, or move to another country, but they cannot necessarily change or "move out of" their ethnic foundation.

Cultural pluralism is a concept that is often heard in discussions about the Americanization of immigrants. Despite twentieth century technological advances and economic upheavals, the United States of America still encounters conflicting attitudes and thoughts regarding the integration and acceptance of immigrant populations as unique and important groups within the larger dominant group. Cultural pluralism emphasizes the "... mutual respect between the various groups in a society for one another's cultures, a respect that allows minorities to express their own culture without suffering prejudice or hostility" (Schaefer, 1990:47). In addition, cultural pluralism "involves the mutual exchange of cultural content" and assumes that "ethnic groups have the right to preserve their cultural heritages and also to contribute to American civic life" (Epps, 1974:177).

Wehr (1988) suggests that the Hispanic population in the United States wants to "assimilate and to remain separate, to be part of the mainstream and to retain their own identity. Not a national identity with a geographic enclave . . . but identity conferred by a larger culture of history, myth, geography, religion, education, language, and affairs of state" (p.1). This may be true of many other immigrant groups that maintain minority status in the United States. For example, the new immigrants from Asian countries want to follow their religions such as Hinduism, Islam, or Buddhism, that differ from the Judeo-Christian traditions. That differ from the Judeo-Christian traditions. The notion is to have the "freedom of religion" while adapting to their surroundings and being accepted by the dominant group in doing so.

ISSUES INHIBITING OR EMPOWERING THE IMMIGRANT

One way to limit access of diversified and non-white groups into the United States was to enact immigration policies. The Naturalization Law of 1790 ensured citizenship for whites only. It took 162 years before the Walter-McCarran Act of 1952 permitted non-white immigrants to become naturalized citizens (Takaki, 1987). In 1882, the government passed the Chinese Exclusion

nineteenth century, it became questionable if the southern and eastern European immigrants could be successfully assimilated; lower (than northern European immigrants) socioeconomic status and lack of education placed them at a disadvantage.

ASSIMILATION

During the early part of the twentieth century, immigrants from all over the world were expected to assimilate "as quickly as possible" into the American mainstream. In fact, the quicker one "melted" into the "pot" of American culture the easier it was to be accepted by the white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. For example, an ethnic group was encouraged to forget its language, religious practices, dietary and eating habits, customs, values, and norms. It was not viewed as possible for a group of immigrants from the same racial or ethnic background to assimilate into the dominant society while holding onto their ways of living, thriving, and surviving. In order to assimilate, one had to be willing, and able, to conform while letting go of one's cultural and ethnic foundation.

The melting pot theory did not always work as expected. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, Japanese men were "hauled away" by the FBI, "there was a curfew on persons of Japanese ancestry," and all Japanese, U.S. citizens or not, were to be evacuated (Kitano, 1993:42-43) and sent to internment camps. "The first feeling of being a prisoner occurred almost immediately. After assembling and answering a roll call . . . we were bussed to the train depot . . . and were herded into some old-fashioned railroad cars with armed guards" (Kitano, 1993). Such treatment was not anticipated by these people who served their country like any other U.S. citizen. Their attempts to "melt" into the American mainstream by protecting the country on the frontline or by adapting in some way was just not enough. Their courage to adapt to a lifestyle vastly different from their own was not respected. The right to live a life in "freedom and liberty for all" did not apply to them.

Chan (1991) emphasizes that within the internment camps, "Japanese language schools and the practice of Shintoism were forbidden, while Euro-American teachers and WRA [War Relocation Authority] staff ... assiduously promoted Americanization" (p.128). More recently, the film My America . . . Or Honk If You Love Buddha (1996) eloquently portrays the Chinese, Japanese, and Korean faces as those of an enemy. On the other hand, cultural pluralism emphasizes acceptance of such newer entrants and describes ways by which all persons can retain their identity while adapting to the American mainstream.

CULTURAL PLURALISM

In 1882, the government passed the Chinese Exclusion
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Act and in 1924 the Japanese Exclusion Act, which, respectively, prohibited the entry of Chinese laborers for ten years and did not allow Japanese to become naturalized citizens. The National Quota laws of 1924 were also enacted placing limits on, for example, the number of southern and eastern Europeans entering the country.

In the early part of the twentieth century, U.S. immigration officials denied entry to over 3,000 Asian Indians, mostly based on reasons that these people would be "public charges" if allowed to enter. At the same time, Chinese men were not permitted to sponsor their spouses into the country. This not only limited entry into the United States of the Chinese, but also greatly reduced their options of having a family and "setting roots." For these people, an opportunity to stand out as a unique and worthwhile group was not even permitted.

Immigrants, as a group, have had difficulty maintaining their cultural and ethnic identity. In fact, certain clusters of immigrant populations that have not been homogeneous, have had the hardest time keeping their distinctiveness. For example, Glazer and Moynihan (1970) discussed the Germans as a group lacking "homogeneity." They identified that the Germans were either Catholic or Protestant, but differed vastly on educational levels, socioeconomic status, and job skills. This intragroup diversity might have led to their dissolution as a distinct group within New York City.

One would think then that groups of immigrants with strong homogeneity due to skin color, religion, ethnic customs, and values would have had no problem standing out as unique and distinguishable groups within the American dominant society. Actually, structure of the dominant society did not allow for such a separation. One either automatically assimilated or was immediately ostracized. Travel and visits to other countries may obviate that it is very difficult to "let go" of one's customs, traditions, and lifestyles without some degree of despair and discomfort.

Sanders (1975) asked, over 20 years ago, if there is a possibility that "society’s attitudes toward ethnic and cultural groups leading to an emphasis on the positives and the special contributions that such groups could make" could occur (p.97). Actually, many problems still exist. Take into account violence towards immigrant individuals and groups; for example, the attack on Mr. Louima, a Haitian immigrant, by the police, indicates such discrepancies. Louima was so severely brutalized within police headquarters that he had to be hospitalized for a "pierced rectum" and a "lacerated bladder" (Goozner, 1997:1, 10). Or take as an example, community occurrences where Iranians are victims of vandalism due to political upheavals in their country of origin. David and Lin (1997) poignantly capture the bigotry and violence against Asian Americans as becoming a national problem: "The incidents of hate crimes include the cruel ethno-violent murders of Vincent Chin, Jim Loo, Nauroze Mody, Hung Truong, the recent massacre of Southeast Asian school children in Sacramento, California, assaults on Asian American homes and places of worship, racially motivated boycott against Asian-owned businesses, racial harassment of Asian Americans on college campuses, etc." (p.12). Sanders’ (1975) comments about past issues of cultural and ethnic groups demanding "that their life-styles be given a place in society," continue to this day (p.97).

On the other hand, the advancement of technology has facilitated the process of an immigrant’s retaining her/his ethnic identity while adapting to the mainstream. Lower long-distance telephone rates and electronic mail have made it easier to "stay-in-touch" and "up-to-date" with families and friends abroad. Such accommodating factors may reduce the stress encountered by immigrants and strengthen them as individuals as they attempt to retain their cultural and ethnic identity within a dominant society.

CONCLUSION

From Anglo-conformity, to the melting pot, and into the era of cultural pluralism, the way of the American immigrant has changed. From having the ability to assimilate to finding barricades, intentional or not, when attempting to adjust to the American mainstream, the American immigrant’s technological environment has changed. The early white, English-speaking Protestant immigrants conformed to the American society quickly. More recently, immigrants encounter different challenges as they try to adjust while maintaining their cultural identity. The new immigrants continue to arrive in the United States with hopes of achieving opportunities not available in their country of origin. At the same time though, the United States, rich in cultural and ethnic diversity, overflows with racially based riots, police brutality towards immigrants, looting of immigrant businesses by local citizens, and welfare reforms that specifically limit not only illegal immigrants, but legal residents as well.

Either way, the American mosaic continues to expand. Whether its diversity offers opportunities for cultural expansion or acceptance of ethnic differences and similarities, each group is an important "piece." If the mosaic is to expand, all members of the American society need to allow for such participation. The Chinese immigrant will be accepted entirely as a member of the larger contributing society. The Hispanic will be invited to attend decisionmaking conferences, and the Cambodian will be sought for advice, if necessary. The non-white
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citizens will hold more upper-management positions. Homogeneity will give way to heterogeneity, and the United States of America will stand true to its constitutional promise of "... freedom and liberty for all!"

Note: References available upon request.