

A survey of immigrant and native-born young people assessed their identity and strategies to maintain ethnic identity. Participants were asked to assess the “value” of ethnicity in a number of different activities. The results show that there is considerable similarity between the two groups although they employ different strategies to maintain their ethnic identity. The results support the model of “segmented integration” for young immigrants.

The New Ethnic Identity? Young People on the Prairies*

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Over the past half century, the demographic and social character of Canadian society has been changed through immigration, and projections indicate that it will continue to exert tremendous pressures on the ethnic makeup of Canadian society. This article will assess differences between immigrant and native-born youth living on the Prairies with regard to ethnic identity and their assessment of the value of ethnicity.

Immigration has always been an important component in the demography of Canada. Table 1 illustrates the overall immigrant contribution to Canada’s population growth over the last 150 years as well as projections for the future. The data show that the impact of immigration on Canada’s social, cultural and economic insti-

tutions has become increasingly important and will be more pronounced in the near future. Immigration has had an equally important impact on the Prairies over the last 25 years. While Ontario has historically been the choice destination for immigrants, the increase in immigration to the Prairies and the increased ethnic diversity of the Prairies population in the recent past has been remarkable. Lamba, Mulder and Wilkinson (2000) have pointed out that, over the last 50 years, immigrant settlement in the Prairie Provinces ranged from a high of 20,000 people per year in Alberta (1957) to a low of 1,582 people in Saskatchewan (1998). As noted by Mulder and Korenic (2005), the Prairie Provinces took in a high proportion of immigrants at the beginning of the 20th century but experienced major declines after that. However, over the last 25 years, this decline has reversed itself, and, as a result, the Prairie’s immigration intake has increased substantially. Statistics Canada (2008) shows that today nearly 13% of the total immigrant population in Canada resides in the Prairie Provinces. While all Prairie Provinces have experienced an increase in the number of immigrants, Alberta has been the preferred destination – nearly 75% of immigrants arriving in the Prairie Provinces in the last decade chose to reside in Alberta.

TABLE 1
Immigrant contribution to population growth of Canada, 1851–2036

Year	Contribution to population growth
1851–1861	23%
1891–1901	-24%
1941–1951	8%
1991–2001	59%
2036 ^a	92%

^a Projections are based on birth/death rates similar to rates in 2001, a fertility assumption of 1.7 births per woman and an immigration inflow of 230,000 people per year.

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Profile of immigrants living on the Prairies

The 19th- and early 20th-century ethnic diversity in the Prairies consisted of “old time” traditional

TABLE 2
Place of birth by Prairie province, 2006

	Manitoba	Saskatchewan	Alberta
Total foreign-born	151,230	48,160	527,030
United States	4.7%	11.3%	5.4%
Latin America ^a	11.7%	5.3%	5.9%
Caribbean and Bermuda	2.7%	1.5%	2.0%
Europe	41.4%	44.9%	35.6%
Africa	5.1%	7.4%	6.7%
Asia and Middle East	34.0%	28.8%	42.8%
Other	0.4%	0.8%	0.6%

^a Includes Central and South America.

Source: Statistics Canada, "Census Snapshot-Immigration in Canada: Portrait of the Foreign-Born Population," 2008a; Statistics Canada, *Report on the Demographic Situation in Canada*, 2008b; Milan and Martel, "Current Demographic Situation in Canada, 2005 and 2006," 2008; Dion and Coulombe, "Portrait of the Mobility of Canadians in 2006: Trajectories and Characteristics of Migrants," 2008.

European immigrants and their descendants, e.g., from Western Europe and the United States. However, more recent immigration has changed the social- and colour-scape of the Prairies, and as the 20th century came to a close, nearly 80% of immigrants that came to the Prairies were from Asia, Central/South America and Africa.

By the end of the 20th century, the five major cities in the Prairies found their residents to be more and more ethnically diverse. Today, over 8% of the population in Regina and Saskatoon are immigrants while in Winnipeg 17.4% are immigrants. The number of immigrants residing in Edmonton and Calgary is even higher (19.7% and 21.6%, respectively). Smaller Prairie communities, e.g., Brandon, Grand Prairie, Swift Current, also have significant immigrant populations (6 to 8%). These immigrant communities now include substantial visible minority members.

Who are these new immigrants residing on the Prairies and what are their socio-demographic attributes? The data show that most are economic-class immigrants (48% skilled/business workers) while 29% are family-class immigrants. The remainder are refugees (16%) and provincial nominees or other (7%). In the Prairie Provinces, the majority of immigrants are 45 years or older (54%) with an additional 33% between the ages of 25 and 44. With regards to sex, males and females are equally represented. Table 2 shows the origin of immigrants now living on the Prairies and that there are still large numbers of immigrants of various European origins. However, Table 2 also shows that the number of immigrants from Latin America, Africa and Asia now make up a substantial percentage of the Prairie population.

As noted above, visible minority groups settling in the Prairie Provinces have increased in size

and number. In 1980, less than one third of the immigrants residing on the Prairies were visible minorities. Twenty-five years later, nearly half of the immigrants were visible minorities and three out of four recent immigrants coming to the Prairies belonged to visible minority groups. Language patterns have also changed over time. Prior to 1961, just over 1% of the immigrants arriving in the Prairie Provinces did not speak one of the two official languages. However, by 2001, this had increased to nearly 8%. Finally, when we look at the educational achievements of immigrants living on the Prairies, we find that the most recent arrivals are the most educated. As Mulder and Korenic (2005) point out, for those who arrived between 1996 and 2001, 40% of the men and 32% of the women held post-secondary education degrees.

This profile reveals a changing demography of immigrants living on the Prairies and suggests that old strategies and policies for enhancing integration may no longer be appropriate. This article focuses on whether this is the case. Are young immigrants similar to their native-born counterparts or do gaps exist in terms of values, norms and identity? Do governments and NGOs need to develop new policies and programs to deal with immigrant communities in order to meet the changing needs and aspirations of recent immigrant communities?

Immigrant views of the world

Recent literature suggests that the meaning of ethnicity and national identity has undergone fundamental changes over the past quarter century (DaCosta 2007, Dhingra 2007). Nevertheless, differing theoretical and political camps have argued their cases. The first camp emerged

from a primordial view of ethnicity as fixed identities. Ethnic identities are seen as exclusive, and fixed, and a person can only have one (Novak 1971, Huntingdon 2004). This position argues that immigrants consider themselves “ethnic,” and maintenance of icons and remnants of ethnic affiliation are routinely made public and handled with reverence in an attempt to retain their ethnicity. As such, these individuals argue that there are major differences between immigrants and the native-born.

Other scholars have argued that people can have multiple identities, e.g., they can be both Canadian and Chinese (Portes and Rumbaut 2001, Rockquemore and Brunnsma 2002). Moreover, they can create new identities that merge with others, e.g., Chinese-Canadian, which is neither “Canadian” nor “Chinese” but rather a hybrid ethnic identity (Gans 1979, Gallant 2008). Young immigrants pick up the host language, adopt the latest fads and fashions and reflect a lifestyle that is indistinguishable from “mainstream” Canadian society, yet may still feel linked to their ethnicity. They argue that immigrants quickly learn that distinctive ethnic traits, e.g., languages and “cultural ways”, are a source of potential disadvantage for the individual to socially and/or economically integrate and thus will selectively abandon some of their “old” ethnic traits. This is not to suggest that there is a linear progression of assimilation.

These scholars go on to argue that there are major differences among immigrant groups with regards to how they integrate into their host society. Taking a more “segmented” approach, they claim that a variety of social factors determine the outcome of immigrant/ethnic integration. As such, some immigrant groups retain their ethnic identity and values, resist integration and maintain cultural distinctiveness for some time while, at the same time, other immigrant groups integrate into the host society soon after they arrive (Cohen 2007, Gregg 2006).

Our research comments on these perspectives. There is no doubt that continued immigration has led to a transformation of Canadian society and to the commensurate emergence of new complex ethnic communities and identities. Given these fundamental demographic and structural changes in Canadian society, have there been commensurate changes in the ethnic identity of young people living on the Prairies? What perceptions do these young people have of Canada? And how do they assess the “value” of ethnicity in today’s world?

Methodology

This article is drawn from a larger study involving a sample of university students from across the country (and Australia). The article focuses only on Canadian students between the ages of 18 and 24 who live in one of the Prairie Provinces. Students attending eight Prairie post-secondary educational institutions were contacted through a local faculty member to solicit participation in the study during the year. By focusing on just the Prairies and limiting the age cohort, we have included 474 students in the present analysis. Of these, 268 were Canadian-born while the remainder was foreign-born. The resulting sample represents students from different socio-economic backgrounds and ethnic groups, a variety of university disciplines (e.g., engineering, humanities, social sciences, science, education) and differing religious backgrounds. Each participant completed a self-administered questionnaire (both qualitative and quantitative); the actual time required to fill out the questionnaire ranged from 30 to 45 minutes.

Results

We begin our analysis by assessing how the participants responded to a general question: “How important are your ethnic ties?” The results show little difference between immigrant and native-born youth. Nearly two thirds of the respondents (both immigrant and native-born) felt they have maintained “very close” or “moderately close” ties with their parents’ ethnic ancestry. In addition, nearly three quarters of the young people felt that it was “very important” to maintain those ties. A similar percentage felt their parents’ cultural/ethnic background was important to them.

We then asked each individual how they “usually think of themselves” in terms of ethnicity. For example, Gallant (2008) found that in her study, fewer than half of the respondents mentioned a group connected with their parents’ country of origin. Table 3 identifies the distribution. This table shows that substantial differences exist between Canadian-born and foreign-born youth in terms of their self-identification. Nearly one quarter of immigrant youth saw themselves in terms of their “ethnic” identity and one third in terms of a hyphenated identity. For the Canadian-born, three quarters of them saw themselves as Canadian only (See Jedwab, 2008, for further discussion on this issue).

Immigration has had an important impact on the Prairies over the last 25 years. While Ontario has historically been the choice of destination for immigrants, the increase in immigration to the Prairies and the increased ethnic diversity of the Prairies population in the recent past has been remarkable.

TABLE 3
Self-identification of Canadian youth

	Canadian	Specific ethnic group	Hyphenated Canadian
Canadian-born	75%	12%	13%
Immigrant	45%	23%	32%

In summary, a surprising number of immigrant youth indicated that ethnic ancestry was an important dimension of their lives. On the other hand, Canadian-born youth were more likely to see themselves as “Canadian.” To explore this relationship further, we developed an index of ethnic identity comprising five questions about ethnic identity. Our results found a correlation of $-.35$ with nativity, depicting a modest relationship between the two – higher ethnic identity for foreign-born youth, lower ethnic identity for native-born youth.

Participants were then provided with a picture showing seven concentric circles and were told that the centre represented the core activities of their “ethnic group” within the city or area in which they lived. They were asked to identify how close to the centre they felt, with a score of 1 being the centre and representing the closest they could identify and a score of seven being distant. The overall mean was 4.1, with less than 10% in each of the first two circles. Comparing the two groups, immigrants scored 3.9 while native-born scored 4.2 (not statistically significant). A surprising number of participants (37%) identified with circles 6 and 7. These scores reveal that while there is some attachment to their respective ethnic group, the attachment these youth feel is not all encompassing. A detailed analysis, controlling for a variety of factors such as sex, ethnic group and parents’ social/economic status, remains to be done in order to more fully understand these results.

We followed up our evaluation of identity by asking these youth what behavioural activities they undertook to maintain their linkage to their ethnic ancestry, e.g., read non-English language newspapers/magazines, have friends of the same

ethnic ancestry, attend ethnic group functions. While 40% of the immigrant youth noted that they read non-English materials, less than 8% of native-born youth indicated that they did so. In addition, 60% of the immigrant youth listened to radio/TV programs in their ancestral language while less than 10% of native-born youth did this. Nearly half of the immigrant youth claimed to have three or more “close” friends who were of the same ethnic background while less than one quarter of native-born youth made such a claim. On the other hand, with regards to attending ethnic group functions, we found no statistical differences between the two groups. Overall, half of all these youth attend ethnic dances/parties or visit vacation sites/resorts where there are similar ethnic group members. The results reveal not only that different techniques are used by youth in an attempt to maintain their ethnic identity but also that there are great differences within the immigrant youth cohort.

We also developed an index of social integration. Our measure focused on the extent to which youth are involved or have an interest in Canadian issues. Table 4 identifies the responses of participants with regards to a variety of activities. The results show that there is little differentiation between native-born and immigrant youth on a range of issues. However, the pattern does reveal that immigrants consistently have slightly less interest in Canadian events or issues than do their native-born counterparts.

Finally, we asked each student for his or her perception of the “value” of ethnicity in Canada. Table 5 presents the results for their evaluations of both social and economic transactions. The results reveal similar “calculations” by both immigrant and native-born youth on a number of levels. Few youth see ethnicity as a disadvantage in living their lives in Canada. However, a substantial proportion of the participants felt that ethnicity was an important factor (an advantage) in determining the outcome of a variety of daily life transactions. We found that the data also reveal that “getting a job” is qualitatively different from other types of transactions, and both groups

TABLE 4
Interest in Canadian events and issues by Canadian youth

	Very much	Somewhat	A little	Not at all
Canadian politics				
Native-born	22%	31%	24%	23%
Immigrant	17%	33%	26%	24%
Canadian sports				
Native-born	34%	29%	20%	17%
Immigrant	29%	26%	24%	21%
Canadian authors				
Native-born	13%	31%	27%	19%
Immigrant	10%	27%	33%	30%
Canadian singers				
Native-born	15%	18%	37%	30%
Immigrant	13%	19%	38%	30%
Canadian food				
Native-born	25%	42%	27%	6%
Immigrant	24%	41%	25%	11%

TABLE 5
Distribution of students' perception of the value of ethnicity

	Advantage	Neutral	Disadvantage
Getting a job			
Native-born	33%	59%	8%
Immigrant	30%	60%	10%
Getting into university			
Native-born	19%	77%	4%
Immigrant	18%	78%	4%
Dating			
Native-born	23%	74%	3%
Immigrant	21%	75%	4%
Marriage			
Native-born	20%	77%	3%
Immigrant	20%	78%	2%
Buying a house			
Native-born	20%	76%	4%
Immigrant	20%	77%	3%
Buying a car			
Native-born	21%	77%	2%
Immigrant	20%	78%	2%
Making friends			
Native-born	22%	77%	1%
Immigrant	21%	76%	3%

recognize the importance of ethnicity (both positive and negative) in obtaining a job.

Conclusion

The argument that immigrant children tend to assimilate in a straight-line path is a framework that is rejected in the present research. Our results reveal that the “segmented” approach to understanding the identity of

immigrant youth is more appropriate. As Gallant (2008) and Khanlou (2008) point out, ethnicity is not necessarily an important dimension of the identity of young immigrants. Overall, our research shows that while ethnic identity is important, immigrant youth are not so different from their Canadian-born peers.

The results seem to support the concept of “integration” as outlined by previous scholars whereby immigrant youth have an interest in maintaining their ethnic culture but, at the same time, realize that they must carry out daily interactions with other ethnic group members. As Berry (2008: 51) states, “there is some degree of cultural integrity maintained while the person seeks at the same time, as a member of an ethnocultural group, to participate as an integral part of the larger social network.” Our findings support his conclusion that immigrant youth seem to seek a balance in their relationships and in their developed competencies in both their heritage cultures and in Canadian culture. Youth were clear in noting that the “value” of ethnicity has both negative and positive consequences. While a majority felt that with respect to many daily transactions ethnicity was “neutral,” they also recognized that in some situations ethnicity was either an advantage or a disadvantage.

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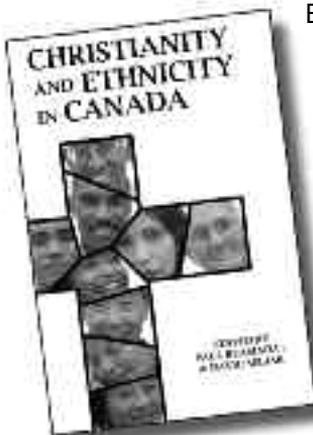
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