IDENTITY AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AMONG YOUNG SECOND GENERATION IMMIGRANTS

ABSTRACT

Not all second generation immigrants identify with the ethnocultural group of their parents' country of origin. Those who do may have either an ethnic (essentialist) or cultural (more open, acquirable) conception of belonging to these groups. Some second generation immigrants identify as strongly with Quebec or Canada as they do with their parents' ethnocultural group of origin. Many other second generation immigrants also have a sense of belonging to the host society, although it may be less strong. Almost all vote in federal and provincial elections.

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Young second generation immigrants are people born in Canada to immigrant parents. Therefore, they have generally grown up and been educated in a Canadian environment. However, some parents have kept alive aspects of the culture of their country of origin, such as language, values, cuisine and music, and may therefore have transmitted them to their children. Consequently, these children of immigrants may have developed an allegiance to the culture of another country or part of the world, sometimes without ever having set foot there.

This article explores choice of identity and civic participation by young second generation immigrants in Quebec.[1] I will look at how these youth define themselves and how they define their identity groups. I will also consider their sense of belonging to the majority society, while the exercise of their right to vote is here viewed as an indicator of civic participation.

Identity choices

Not all young people who technically belong to the "second generation immigrant" demographic group consider their ethnicity an important dimension of their identity – far from it, in fact. When asked to spontaneously name the membership group or groups that define their identity (that is, the groups that are the most significant and characteristic of who they are), slightly fewer than half of the respondents (12 out of 28) mentioned a group connected with their parents' country of origin.

These findings may appear surprising and, to a degree, contradict the literature on the subject. Part of the explanation may lie in the way subjects are recruited for most studies of second generation immigrants, which often are systematically biased in favour of young people who continue to attach importance to their parents' ethnic origins. My selection method was based primarily on a source independent of self-definition, cultural behaviour or community participation.[2] This suggests that young people who are *de facto* members of the "second generation immigrant" demographic group do not necessarily regard themselves in those terms.

Some respondents even adopted a discourse that rejects all forms of group membership, either to signal that they are like everyone else or, on the contrary, to indicate that they are unique, different. Nevertheless, many of these respondents named membership groups (even ethnocultural groups) that they consider identity-defining. In fact, only two second generation immigrant respondents named no identity group, confining themselves to a discourse that rejects allegiances. A number of respondents, however, named more than one identity group: about one-third named one group, another third named two, and yet another third named three or more. Indeed, one respondent named five membership groups he considered significant and characteristic of who he is.

Regardless of whether their discourse rejected allegiances, whether they named one identity group or several, the young second generation immigrants named fairly diverse identity groups.

Aside from ethnic and geopolitical groups, which I cover at greater length below, the identity groups mentioned relate to the following: *place* ("Montrealer," mentioned by two respondents); *sex* ("man," "male"); *occupation* ("parent," mentioned by two respondents, "mother," "student,"

mentioned by three respondents, "musician," mentioned by three respondents, or "in the arts"); *personality traits* ("likes sports," mentioned by two respondents, "into hardcore punk," "interested in fashion, beautician"); *ideology* ("separatist," "socially aware,"), *social class* ("educated," "upper middle-class"); *age group* ("young," "my age group," "older"); a *circle of friends with a name*, or a *majority ethnocultural, religious or language group* ("Christian," "Catholic," "Francophone").

This diversity is similar to what was found in the control group.

Observation 1: *Ethnicity is not necessarily an important dimension of the identity of young second generation immigrants. They name various types of groups when asked to spontaneously choose their most significant group memberships.*

Forms of minority ethnocultural group membership

Twelve respondents chose a minority ethnocultural or religious group related to their parents' origins, either as their sole identity group or, more often, in combination with other groups.

Aside from one ethnoreligious group ("Jews"), the ethnocultural groups chosen by the young second generation immigrants fall into three categories: first, the parents' *country* of origin (whether they are, for example, "Portuguese," "Senegalese" or "Egyptian"); second, on a smaller scale, the region or *subcategory* within that country (notably religious groups, such as "Indian Hindu" or "Egyptian Christian"); third, on a larger scale, a broader or *pan-ethnic* geographic or ethnic grouping, such as "Latinos" or "Africans." Regardless of level, almost all of these groups are defined simply by cultural practices and values, sometimes with an added, not necessarily explicit, reference to heredity or to physical characteristics perceived as typical.

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Some respondents declared a hybrid identity, combining ethnocultural majority and minority allegiances ("mixed Afro-American/New Quebecker," "Montrealer of Egyptian origin" or "Filipino-Canadian"). Their conception of identity generally differs from that of respondents who choose a more unified minority ethnocultural identity.[3] In some cases, it is more a label symbolizing a relatively vague ethnicity, from which the respondent derives only certain values. In other cases, respondents feel that they have additional culture and enriched knowledge generated by the overlap between two distinct cultural universes. Finally, when hybridity contains a racial component, the sense of shared group membership is based on a similar experience of exclusion from the majority community.

All of these definitions of identity-defining membership in ethnocultural minorities may be essentialist to different degrees. Individuals who embrace an *essentialist* definition of their ethnocultural identity group believe that it is impossible to change one's identity. For them, membership in these groups stems from unchanging characteristics that they were born with and that cannot be acquired: blood, physical features (hair colour, eye colour, skin colour) or genealogy. Of the 12 youths in my sample who chose to include a minority ethnocultural group in their identity groups, five had an essentialist definition of this group ("Portuguese," named by two respondents, "Jewish," "mixed Afro-American/New Quebecker," "Egyptian"). They therefore regard these groups as more ethnic than cultural.

But membership in a minority ethnocultural group is not necessarily essentialist in the eyes of all who feel it. For five other respondents, membership in their group is something that can be acquired, a construct ("Montrealer of Egyptian origin," "Indian Hindu," "African," "Senegalese," "Canadian-Filipino"). These allegiances are constructed through a way of life, values, cultural practices (such as cuisine or music) or through participation in the group's community activities. Therefore, they may understand these groups as cultural as opposed to ethnic constructs.

Between these two conceptions, there are young second generation immigrants who display a relative essentialism in defining their minority ethnocultural identity group, often in terms that are broad ("Latino") or imprecise ("my ethnic group"). They see ethnocultural membership not as a matter of blood, but rather as a product of childhood socialization: "being in the environment," "living in this environment," "if they were adopted, yes – there's a family factor. It depends on your family, the way you were raised."

In short, it might be said that the respondents were evenly divided between essentialist and non-essentialist positions. This is not specific to minority ethnocultural groups; the three degrees of essentialism apply to the other types of identity groups cited by the second generation immigrants and also appear among the other respondents in the study.

The sample is too small for us to clearly identify the factors that lead young second generation immigrants to consider their parents' ethnocultural origins to be a core component of their own identity. Nevertheless, it is interesting that second generation immigrants who have never visited the country of origin of one or both immigrant parents are less likely than the others to identify with it. Going back may therefore strengthen or nourish their sense of identity; conversely, it may be a consequence of their attachment to the country, which induced them to visit.

Whether one or both parents were born outside the country seems to have some impact. Respondents with two immigrant parents from the same region were evenly divided between those for whom ethnicity is identity-defining are those for whom it is not. Respondents with only one immigrant parent were significantly less likely to consider their minority ethnic background as one of their identity groups (only three of the 12 respondents with a single immigrant parent).

In short, the second generation immigrant respondents who identify with their immigrant parent's or parents' ethnocultural group of origin may do so at three levels (country, a subcategory within the country or at a pan-ethnic level) and with three degrees of essentialism.

Observation 2: *When membership in a minority ethnocultural group is a component of young second generation immigrants' sense of identity, it may take different forms.*

Sense of belonging to Quebec and Canada

Minority ethnocultural allegiances do not prevent young second generation immigrants from identifying with the society that welcomed their parents and in which they themselves grew up. Some respondents included Quebec (three respondents), Canada (two respondents) or both (one respondent) among their identity groups. As in the larger sample, Quebec was defined by some as an ethno - cultural group (mother tongue, culture, even heredity or physical features) and by others as a civic membership group, like Canada (territory, knowledge of the common language or of a common language, citizenship).

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While few second generation immigrants in my sample chose to include Canada or Quebec among their identity groups, this does not mean that they do not have a strong sense of belonging to Canada or Quebec. Of the 28 second generation immigrants in the sample, 19 reported an allegiance to their Canadian citizenship and 11 to their Canadian nationality – a proportion comparable to that found among the 41 Aboriginal people who made up the remainder of the sample. Smaller numbers of second generation immigrants declared an allegiance to what they consider their Quebec "citizenship" (three respondents) or their Quebec nationality (up to seven respondents) – higher proportions than among the Aboriginal respondents in the study but lower than in the small control group.

In addition to their declared sense of belonging to Quebec and Canada, almost all of the second generation immigrants participate in these two civic communities. In all, 24 of the respondents vote both provincially and federally, and a 25th respondent votes at the federal level only. Only three of 28 second generation immigrants we interviewed do not vote at all.

Observation 3: *Though few of the respondents consider it vital, belonging to and participation in Canada and Quebec are very much present.*

Conclusion

The brief comments above clearly indicate the possible diversity of feelings of belonging and identity among young second generation immigrants in Quebec. While many identify with their parents' culture of origin – at least in part – not all do. In addition, those who do identify define this allegiance in different ways, which may be essentialist or not and which may operate at different levels. Some combine it with allegiance to Canada or Quebec to form a hybrid identity, but none of the young people we interviewed seemed to consider this problematic.

Even a strong identification with their parents' ethnocultural origins does not prevent second generation immigrants from identifying with the society that welcomed their parents and in which they grew up (whether they regard it as Canada or, more specifically, Quebec). While very few respondents chose it as an identity group, many of them have a sense of belonging to Canada or Quebec and almost all participate in civic life.

We must therefore beware of over-generalizing about the identities of second generation immigrants, for as the research findings summarized herein demonstrate, these are varied and complex.

Notes

[1] A total of 28 youths aged 18 to 25 were interviewed in Québec and (primarily) in Montréal in 1999. The interviews lasted from 1.5 to 2 hours. Half the respondents were women and half were men; four were Anglophone and the other 24 were Francophone. Their parents came from different parts of the world. The full study also included 57 other youths: 41 Aboriginal people from different First Nations in Quebec, five immigrants and a small control group of 11 other youth.

[2] Most studies of members of ethnic minorities recruit subjects through ethnic associations or invitations that target people who self-identify as second generation immigrants. My respondents were selected from a list of names of individuals with at least one parent born outside Canada, taken from the Quebec birth registry. For more information on the methodology and for detailed results and discussion, see Nicole Gallant, 2002, Appartenances, identités et préférences à propos des droits différenciés dans le discours de jeunes membres de minorités ethnoculturelles au Québec, doctoral dissertation, department of political science, Université Laval, January 2002, 656 pages.

[3] However, a single term may conceal a hybrid second generation immigrant interpretation or, at least, an identification with the minority community within the host country.