ON THE EDGES OF THE MOSAIC

Navigating Ethnocultural Identity among Second Generation Greek and Jewish Youth in Halifax*

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This research project focuses on Jewish and Greek-origin youth in Halifax. Our interest has been in mapping out, through data gathered from qualitative interviews, how second generation youth of Greek and Jewish origins living in Halifax articulate their day-to-day experiences. The realities of immigration in Atlantic Canada are quite different from that of rest of the country and present unique challenges for identity maintenance due to the low numbers of immigrants and low densities of immigrant concentration. As a result, we expected to find an increased pressure on young people from non-majority groups in Atlantic Canada, compared with what would be found in larger Canadian metropolitan centres, to look like everyone else, to speak English only and to organize their leisure time around activities outside their ethnocultural/religious community.

Methodology

Fifteen Greek youth, seven women and eight men, 18 to 24 years old, and eight Jewish youth, three women and five men, 17 to 24 years old, participated in this project. The majority were born in Atlantic Canada and/or had lived most of their lives there. In the spring of 2004, qualitative interviews were conducted with two student research assistants, one of Greek and one of Jewish background. Analysis was conducted with the assistance of the qualitative software program *Nu*dist*. Our aim was not to be able to make generalizations about ethnic youth beyond those involved in this project; rather, we were interested in looking at ethnic youth who live outside major metropolitan centres in order to add something new to the existing literature.

Ethnic youth outside urban centres: Importance of a dual identity

The recognition of the importance of hyphenated identities among diasporic populations is widespread among scholars of culture and identity. The hyphen is, on the one hand, often seen to mark the limits of assimilation into a dominant culture and, on the other hand, the limits of remaining entirely ensconced within difference. In Canada, few immigrants settle outside the major urban centres in Ontario, British Columbia and Quebec. This likely puts unique pressure (and higher levels of "acculturative stress") on young people in Halifax to both maintain their distinct cultures and to assimilate into the dominant culture. To date, research on Jewish and Greek youth has privileged those living in urban centres. Our project intends to fill in these gaps.

Findings

Self-identification

Among the Greek youth interviewed, the most commonly used identifier was "Greek Canadian," followed by "Canadian of Greek origin," followed by "Canadian Greek."

As defined by the participants, being of Greek origin means following traditions and having certain priorities, being part of a rich culture and being part of a unique community. It is to feel a sense of belonging, to participate in maintaining a culture and, according to Penelope (G11), "It means to be proud of where you came from and it means you are different from everyone else."

Most of the Jewish respondents defined themselves as Jewish. What this actually meant to the participants is complex; however, as Daniel (J1), for example, suggested, at this point in his life he sees himself more as "a Canadian Jew than a Jewish Canadian." Somewhat similarly, Ryan (J5) pointed out that outside of the country he might identify as Canadian, while within Canada he would identify as Jewish. Most participants identified Jewishness as a sense of belonging, of pride and a way of life, not as a religious practice.

Both Greek and Jewish participants mentioned similar ways in which they learned to be Greek or Jewish. The Greek participants mentioned four primary ways of learning what it means to be Greek: 1) by watching others (e.g., their parents, their peers, their priest) 2) by attending Greek school and listening to Greek music 3) by traveling to Greece and 4) by interacting with other cultures. The Jewish participants mentioned three main components to the way in which they had learned about being Jewish: 1) watching others 2) growing up outside of the Jewish centres 3) watching family elders.

In terms of their religious self-identification, the majority of the Greek participants responded that they were religious and practicing in various degrees. Many of them mentioned, however, that in the eyes of others in the community they may not be "practicing enough," but in their opinion they were practicing the right amount. Furthermore, in the eyes of at least one female participant (Kat, G15), religion is more important culturally and the church acts as a common meeting place for friends. Most of the Jewish participants described themselves as Conservative, although as Jenna (J8) offered, this may have something to do with the few options available in Halifax: Few of the Jewish youth participating described themselves as religious.

Participation in community: The public sphere

The various community activities that the Greek participants described taking part in were very similar. Participants were well aware that identifying as being Greek (even a hyphenated Greek) and as a member of the Greek community acts in many ways as a form of insurance protecting them from loneliness, economic downturns and, simply, life's vagaries. A minority of individuals interviewed had problems with the small size of the community. Despite some concerns expressed over a generational gap, the majority of participants agree that they have a decent relationship with the community's more senior members. Likewise, all the Jewish respondents described participating in the Halifax Jewish community to some degree.

Relationships and eventual marriage were central community concerns in the eyes of both groups of young people. Relationships between young Greek-Canadian youth were found to be closely monitored by the Greek community with the conse - quence of being extra careful when forming such relationships (or they simply avoided them). The view among the Jewish participants was slightly more complex: they dealt more specifically with the issue of religious conversion as well as intermarriage. Jenna (J8) described the struggles her mother went through prior to her conversion. The trauma of acceptance (or the lack thereof) experienced by the new convert was, however, seen as potentially more desirable than the experience of internal conflict that might arise in inter-faith families.

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Family life and friendships: The private sphere

In general, the Greek participants felt that they had good relationships with their families. Many participated in family activities on a regular basis. Relationships with siblings are also described in highly positive terms. A participant (Aphrodite, G10) described the closeness of her family as indicative of that of the community more generally: "My family is really close, everyone, even my third cousins, where some people just don't even really talk to their first cousins."

Most of the Jewish participants also suggested that they had positive, open family relations and suggested that this was the case for most or many of the Jewish families they knew. Where there were conflicts, the participants were reluctant to place any responsibility on their religious or cultural affiliation, seeing the conflicts as personal or individual. Some Jewish participants felt that their fathers were distant or busy, and some noted tensions with the religiosity of their mothers. The participants also noted close relationships with their siblings.

Among Greek youth, conflict was often the result of differing opinions, worldviews and experiences. Kat (G15) openly and accurately identifies the conflict and its origins: "Because I grew up in Canada, and they grew up in Greece, because Canada is a lot different than what it was when they first came, my friends are all Canadian, and I've grown up and been taught that the sky is the limit, my parents don't think so liberally as much as I do." Similarly, among the Jewish participants, the main area of conflict raised had to do with life course and life decisions and parental concern over the choices their children made and the paths they were following. These conflicts were seen as difficult but usually resolvable – again, the participants were hesitant to ascribe any connection between these things and their Jewish identities.

The majority of the Greek participants agreed that, even though they had many Greek friends, most of their friends were not Greek. The main reason for this was because of where they were raised and the number of Greeks around them. Many participants also responded that even if all their friends were not Greek, they would still make an effort to maintain friendships with their Greek friends. The participants who answered that most of their friends were of Greek heritage claimed that it was easier to relate to other Greeks because they had similar upbringings, problems and parents. Similarly, most of the Jewish participants acknowledged that most of their friends were not Jewish; the reasons they gave for this were varied, relating primarily to their sense of connection to the community, as well as it its size and location.

Gender roles in the public/private continuum

According to many of our respondents, a typical Greek male is expected to be serious, respectful, educated, married and a good provider for his family. A typical Greek female,

by contrast, is expected to be proper, cook and clean, be educated, be married by her mid-twenties and have (Greek) children as soon as possible.

Although the Jewish cohort did not report different gender roles and expectations, as had their Greek counterparts, many youth in both groups discussed the expectations they felt surrounding dating and relationships between youth in the community. One male Greek (Lukas, G9) respondent suggests: "'Cause people talk far too much, because it's not like two friends in high school who can go out, hang out, whatever, and just have a good time, 'cause once two Greeks do it, they're expected that it's got to go farther." Most of the Jewish participants felt the primary pressure exerted upon them was to marry someone Jewish. But the difficulty of meeting this expectation in Halifax was noted. Not only did family and community exert pressure on Jewish youth to marry other Jews, many of the participants also emphasized marriage in their own sense of Jewish expectations. Only one participant said that she did not expect to marry a Jewish person.

Cultural differences

In the perceptions of the Greek-Canadian youth of Halifax in this study, young men in Canadian culture can and do live in their parents' house much longer than young men in Greece. The latter are pushed to mature much earlier. By contrast, young Greek-Canadian women's experience of the age of maturity, as culturally defined, is the opposite of young men's and across cultures. According to Aphrodite (G10): "Greek youth living in Greece, girls I just remember being 15 and feeling like an adult, and going to Greece and feeling like a child."

For most of the Jewish participants, "everything" was different. Significantly, they felt that in Israel – where Jewishness is central to national identity – you could be a "real" Jew without being religious (affiliated), which they felt was not as true in Canada. A major difference the participants articulated was the mandatory military service that is part of life for all but the most ultra-religious of Israeli Jews. Eric (J3) noted: "Well, the most particular, the age 17, I'm ready to go to university and they're ready to go to the army."

In terms of settling in Halifax, some Greek participants found it limiting in terms of employment opportunities. Another disadvantage of living in a smaller city with a small Greek community is a greater difficulty in keeping one's culture alive. In addition, living in a city where everyone knows everyone else presents yet another disadvantage for some participants: "the negatives are the gossip, and all, being so involved in your life and you don't even know these people, you know what I mean" (Penelope, G11). On the positive side, another Greek-origin male participant (Achilles, G5), speaking for about half of the participants in this study, expressed a fierce commitment to Halifax. The majority of the Greek participants stated that living in Halifax means that you get the best of both worlds.

Only a few of the Jewish participants answered the questions related to settling in Halifax, which likely reflects the ambivalence about this question among both young people and their families. Those with positive feelings about settling in Halifax also mentioned its size and the fact that they saw it as a nice place to raise a family. Most noted that one had to "work at" being Jewish in a small community like Halifax; they noted positive and negative aspects of this, such as the closeness of the community and proximity to other groups versus the relative lack of knowledge of Jewishness in others in the region.

Some conclusions: Differences and similarities

Our findings from Halifax suggest not a decline in ethnic identity but different articulations for the second generation of Greek and Jewish Canadian-born youth compared with the ethnic identity of the immigrant parents' generation and, thus, different "performances" of such identities.

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We found several similarities between the Greek and Jewish youth interviewed in this study. For example, both groups exhibited a shared sense of pride in the uniqueness of their communities, especially in light of their small numbers. How our respondents navigate their hyphenated identities is central to a larger question about how they, as Canadian-born ethnic minority youth, have grown up within the omnipresent and state-sanctioned discourses of multiculturalism, yet in a region of Canada where immigrants and ethnic communities are numerically "lost" in a majority White Canadian culture.

The ambivalent experiences of our participants reflect the particular problematic of minority cultures in the Canadian peripheral regions where minority numbers are very low and where multiculturalism as policy, practice and critical discourse are often strongly opposed. The space for diversity within these communities is also minimized because of their small size. For Jewish youth, for example, most of the activities within the community are organized through the city's two synagogues. Young people who are secular, or who do not find fit easily into Orthodox or Conservative categories of religious observance, may feel isolated in Halifax. Similar experiences are shared by the Greek youth for whom the options of being a secular Greek-Canadian in Halifax are very limited.

Both groups shared similar experiences of learning about identity and culture and similar feelings of Otherness, including the experience of racism and how this emphasized the need to maintain community and traditions. As the national discourse of multiculturalism is so foundational to Canadian self-identity, those living outside the urban spaces where visible social and cultural differences are central

to everyday life may experience a double sense of marginalization. Because of this isolation, both groups expressed a similar sense of the importance of community participation in order to ensure the survival of their communities. Sometimes this could be linked to a desire to leave the region and find a space within a larger diasporic community; at other times it was articulated in terms of a relative rejection of identity in favour of assimilation; and in still other instances, it manifested itself in terms of a desire to stay and fight for the maintenance of the regional community.

All the participants described similar experiences of close-knit families and connection to peers from the same ethnic group. Although most of the young people involved had diverse groups of friends, they all marked the importance or significance of having or having had close friendships with other young people with similar cultural, and thus minority, backgrounds to their own. They also described similar experience of difference between themselves and youth in Greece and Israel.

There were differences between the groups. One major difference exists in their experience of religiosity. Although there was some similarity in terms of the experience of being seen as less observant than might be expected in a larger centre or by the parental generation, the Greek youth identified themselves as being more religious than the Jewish youth.

Although we have not used gender from the beginning as an analytical category in this study, gender differences emerged very strongly in the analysis of the Greek youth data. Gender differences were less marked in the Jewish cohort. Further probing of the respondents might reveal the gender dynamics at work within Jewish families, and this is an area that is certainly worth further study. Discussions of marriage and expectations around marriage were central to discussions of identity in both groups. The expectation that one marry someone with a similar cultural background loomed large for most of the respondents.

Epilogue

Our analysis is preliminary in nature. However, we are very excited by the richness of the data we have explored. What is most clearly pointed to by our work is the need for more, as well as larger, studies that look at the experience of minority young people outside of the major urban centres of Canada and the United States. The complexity with which the young people in our study expressed their experience of pride and marginality needs to be given further expression in order for us to be able to draw a much fuller picture of the experience of social difference and Canadian identities in Canada as a whole, not just in Toronto, Vancouver and Montréal.

Notes

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[1] Authors' names are listed in alphabetical order.

Foreign Credential Recognition



Guest Editor: Lesleyanne Hawthorne (University of Melboune)

This issue of *Canadian Issues / Thèmes canadiens* (spring 2007) provides insightful information and viewpoints on the growing debate regarding foreign credential recognition. The 35 articles published in this issue give an informed overview of the challenges involved in the recognition of foreign credentials and suggest a wide range of approaches to dealing with these challenges.

Topics covered by the authors include criteria set by regulatory organizations, the "legitimacy" of the credential recognition process, the prevalence of prejudices and professional protectionism, strategies adopted in Canada and abroad for credential recognition, ways to facilitate professional assessments of immigrants, retraining and transition programs, and the economic, social and cultural contributions of immigrants to Canada.

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