FEATURE ARTICLE

Immigration and the Journey: Two Narratives on How Immigration Shapes Identity

Carla D. Hunter, Ph.D.
Mikhail Lyubansky, Ph.D.
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Carla D. Hunter

Mikhail Lyubansky

The current national debate on immigration reminds us of a story Alex Haley tells in the epilogue to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. In the story, Haley is standing with Malcolm at the airport when a group of children dressed in their traditional clothing get off a plane from Europe. "Pretty little children," observes Malcolm X, "Soon they're going to learn their first English word: Nigger."

Forty years later, Malcolm X's observation still speaks to the ubiquity of the U.S. racial hierarchy and the internalization of the hierarchy is part of the acculturation process for all immigrant groups. Immigrants are confronted with institutional racism and the corresponding racial hierarchy from the moment they first set foot on U.S. soil. In this contemporary racial Zeitgeist, many White immigrants, like their non-immigrant White counterparts, deny both the existence of institutional racism and their own personal racial biases. In their defense, they cite their staunch color-blindness (or support of affirmative action), their diverse social circle (usually consisting of members of different immigrant groups), their own minority-group status and victimization, and their unfailing good intentions. They don't want to be racist, they say, and so, in their own eyes, they're not. And yet, despite these good intentions, White immigrants are not insulated from learning racism, just as immigrants of color are not immune from experiencing it (see Roediger's 1999; 2005 for a sociological treatise on this phenomenon). "Nigger" may not be the first word immigrants learn today, but, in our opinion, negotiating the U.S. racial hierarchy remains one of the primary and most salient experiences for most immigrants, Black and White.

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In keeping with the tenets of a multicultural ideology, we use this space to offer two personal perspectives on immigrants' racial socialization – the first by a White European immigrant, the second by an immigrant of African descent.

Mikhail's Narrative

After a few years in the United States (my family emigrated from the former Soviet Union when I was 6 years old), my parents were able to accumulate the resources to move from Chicago, where I was starting to fall in with a "bad" (read "non-White") peer group, to Skokie, a near suburb that at the time consisted mainly of Jews, other Whites, and a handful of Asian immigrants. Despite my own Jewishness, the move proved difficult for me, as my accent, clothes, and lack of familiarity with U.S. cultural norms made me conspicuously different from my U.S.-born counterparts and, therefore, an easy target for bullying. I coped with the marginalization as best I could and gravitated toward others in similar circumstances – the Asian immigrants.

At that time (in the 1980s), there was little in the school curriculum about the history of racial oppression (slavery was glossed over, the civil rights movement was not covered at all). Likewise, there was no discussion of contemporary racial inequities or the influence of group membership on personal identity and attitudes. Left to my own devices, I interpreted the racial reality I was experiencing (e.g., Blacks were less likely to be in honors classes and more likely to be shown on the news as being involved in criminal activity) as the product of some deficit in the underachieving group (Ryan, 1976). That my friends (consisting mostly of Asian immigrants) were all high academic achievers only reinforced this mindset: If immigrants could succeed, everyone else should be able to. By my junior year of high school, I was so well socialized into the racial mainstream and its "just world" and "colorblind" ideologies that I did not even notice racial injustice, much less challenge it. For example, when an American Indian in the community pointed out that our high school name (Indians, at that time) was disrespectful I enthusiastically volunteered to write an editorial for the school paper defending the school's Indian symbol and all of the associated imagery. In

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retrospect, the school's use of the "Indian" symbol was blatantly offensive (e.g., each week the school's top football performer was honored with the "Savage of the Week" award). Thus, in a relatively short time, I had internalized the U.S. racial hierarchy and all its privileges. As a White person, even as one who had personally experienced marginalization, I not only had the privilege to attribute group inequities to personal/group deficits, but to be unaware of even the most blatant forms of racism and to ignore the voices of people of color when they labeled and criticized it.

Unfortunately, my early racial socialization was not unique. As part of a project on the Russian-Jewish Diaspora (Ben-Rafael et al., in press), I interviewed prominent individuals (e.g., editor-in-chief of one of Chicago's Russian-language newspapers, Rabbi of a Russian-speaking congregation) about a variety of different aspects relating to the Russian-speaking Jewish community, including race relations and group prejudice. All of the respondents reacted with discomfort and avoidance to this part of the interview, and even as an "insider," it was difficult to engage them in a conversation that focused on anything other than their own group's victimization. This avoidance is itself diagnostic (why avoid a topic unless it is associated with guilt, shame, or some other negative experience?). Yet, even from the few brief comments, it was evident that, like me, our cultural informants had also internalized the racial hierarchy and saw themselves as culturally superior to African Americans and other people of color.

Over time I have been able to re-educate myself about the realities of race and unlearn at least some of the prejudices I had unwittingly picked up. While this part of my personal journey is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth noting that my racial resocialization mostly took place in the context of relationships with people of color, other White immigrants, and U.S. born individuals who were further along in their journeys.

Carla's Narrative

Race relations in the United States are such that they leave some persons of color feeling invisible, others feeling extremely visible, and the majority believing that racism and discrimination are not factors that significantly affect all aspects of American life. I am a Black woman who is a first generation immigrant from the British Caribbean, also referred to as the West Indies. My family, proud of being both Black and immigrant, socialized me to hold on to my immigrant identity and to believe in the American Dream -- that everyone has equal opportunity to succeed in the United States. However, becoming Americanized with regards to race, (e.g., talking back to authority figures, not succeeding at scholarly pursuits, using race as an excuse for not succeeding)

was looked down upon and actively discouraged. Thus, I was raised in the precarious position of being a person of color who was taught to see race, but behave as though it should not be a factor that significantly affects my life. My family members communicated this by simply not talking about race as an obstacle in their lives, even though I learned that it was a significant factor in their not being promoted at their places of employment Racism has been a painful topic for my family, one that is better avoided than discussed. Even today, when I raise the topic of race, I am jokingly called a racist.

One review of the volumes of findings produced by the racial identity literature clearly demonstrates that racial identity and ethnic identity are life-long developmental processes (e.g., French, Seidman, Allen, & Aber, 2006; Hall & Carter, 2006; Helms & Cook, 1999). The emergence of my racial consciousness fits with the findings produced by this literature. But, the experience of being an immigrant to the United States, of being a tropical fish placed into a coldwater pond, is unique and leads me to believe that only through examining the intersection of race, racial identity, and cultural values can we come to understand how Black immigrants from societies with less racial diversity make sense of U.S. race relations. My early experiences with my family's adversities and our family narrative of success despite the odds have created two very pronounced suspicions. The first is that talking about race, for some Black immigrants, may lead to feelings of invisibility (Waters, 1999). This invisibility, which is associated with racialization, makes it challenging for Black immigrants to hold on to their ethnic identities. Denying race is a reaction to this invisibility. The second is the nagging feeling of being misunderstood, of being assumed to feel negatively about my racial group because I socialized with people of diverse races or because I did not mistrust whites to the same extent as Black Americans (please see Phelps, Taylor, & Gerard, (2001) for an empirical investigation). Given these suspicions, I personally have felt that current models of racial identity do not capture the cultural component and may, therefore, be inadequate conceptualizations of Black immigrants' emerging racial consciousness.

Black immigrants' cultural values are so ingrained that race and racism are difficult to discuss and sometimes even say. I would like to conclude my narrative by sharing a snippet of a conversation that I recently had with another family member. My family member states, "I wanted to let you know I filed a lawsuit against my previous employer for "age, gender, and oh what's the other thing again" momentary silence "race," I say? "Yes that's it gender, age, and racial discrimination." Is this person expressing a pre-encounter attitude? Most likely he isn't, as filing a lawsuit does not fit with holding pre-encounter attitudes. I believe, the pain of racism is

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so ingrained and covered over by cultural values (e.g., self-reliance) that one must uncover the culture in order to get to that pain.

Implications for Counseling Psychology

One of the strengths of the counseling psychology perspective is its focus on multiculturalism. Many immigrant families who make a home in this country do so at a time when overt racism has lessened, but institutional racism, in its many forms, has not. Immigrants and their

families will have salient memories of the current immigration debates, of being stopped and searched, or the experience of losing a family member to deportation. As professionals interested in furthering a multicultural perspective, it behooves us to consider the intersection of race and immigration. Sue (2003) provides a very readable text from which one may begin the personal journey. In addition, we advocate the use of personal narratives or racial autobiographies to uncover socialization messages with regards to racism, overt and covert (Carter, 2003). Finally, we recognize that overcoming our racism, to borrow Dr. Derald Wing Sue's title, is very personal work. However, we believe that it should not only take place in a personal context. Some of our most meaningful growth experiences have occurred through honest dialogue with others. Counseling provides one such opportunity, but we encourage our readers to find other opportunities to engage with others, both with relative strangers and in the context of intimate relationships.

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FOOTNOTES:

[1]Ironically, I now find myself at the University of Illinois, where the use of the Chief as a school symbol continues to be a source of considerable controversy. Despite the lack of obvious offensive imagery and the University's claim that the practice honors the American Indian population of Illinois, I now side with those who find the "Chief" objectionable and would see him "retired."

[2]The process of imposing a racial character or context on a group member, which may lead to ignoring ethnic and individual differences.