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11-2011

### Hyphenated Identities as a Challenge to Nation-State School Practice?

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Hamann, Edmund T. and England, William, "Hyphenated Identities as a Challenge to Nation-State School Practice?" (2011). *Faculty Publications: Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education*. 109. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/teachlearnfacpub/109>

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## Conclusion – Hyphenated Identities as a Challenge to Nation-State School Practice?

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Prof. Jansen mentions in the foreword to this book that the editor, Saloshna Vandeyar, merits praise for her recognition of and response to the existing dearth of scholarship concerning transnational students and students with hyphenated identities, and how nation-states and education systems (as manifestations of the state) respond to these students. Yet the success of this volume is not just that it adds a number of new case studies to a previously little examined topic. Rather with case studies from South Africa, the Netherlands, Mexico, Sweden, the U.S., Brazil, Israel, Germany, and Singapore that share the goal of illuminating the complexities of immigrant identities in relation to (or in tension with) school systems worldwide, this volume has the chance to do much more than just make a small body of research a little bigger. In particular, it affords a chance to juxtapose how transnational students negotiate school and identity with how school systems in turn view such students, and then it allows an examination of two different strategies – situational ethnicity versus the assertion of

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Published in Saloshna Vandeyar (Ed.), *Hyphenated Selves: Immigrant Identities within Education Contexts* (Amsterdam & Pretoria: Rozenburg Publishers & UNISA Press, 2011), pp. 205-213.

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a hyphenated identity — as a glimpse into the cosmology of transnational students as they come into adulthood. Do they view the world as having stratified ethnic hierarchies that need to be adapted to, or do they recognize such stratification systems and defiantly still insist “I am who I am”?

In his work on qualitative research methodologies, Patton (1990) has noted that “maximum variation” sampling reduces the hazard of generalizing from even a small sample if the constituent examples in that sample are intentionally substantially different from each other. Although there are only ten chapters in this book (not a large “n” in the traditional sense), the wide diversity of geographies and experiences represented by these chapters makes generalization (at least on themes in common across this difference) a bit safer than if the sample were more homogeneous. Maximum variation sampling is a purposeful way to seek representativeness of a larger population by detecting similarities within a range of extreme examples. In this way, when newcomer students’ experiences and identity formation in Sweden is sufficiently similar to those in South Africa, and these populations of students face similar challenges to those experienced by newcomer students in the United States and Brazil, we can see that perhaps there is some predictive power in the experiences of the students in the preceding pages that is not relegated to their specific contexts. This volume does not include examples from the U.K., Kenya, Canada (or 180 other nations), but we feel comfortable assuring readers that the chapters in this book are relevant to those places too.

### **School Systems and Situational Ethnicity versus Hyphenated Identities**

As Gitlin and colleagues (2003) memorably phrased it regarding American schools and international newcomers, newcomers are often concurrently “welcome” and “unwelcome.” That is, they are concurrently asked to shed or at least ignore much of who they have been from a socio-cultural/national standpoint so that they can fit in to the new system, but they are still marked as different (i.e., old identities are not fully erased). Offering an historical perspective, Lomawaima and McCarty (2006) trace a similar dynamic in the century-plus of

education offered by the Euro-American school system to the indigenous, or “American Indian.” From almost the beginning of the extension of schooling into “Indian country,” American Indians were punished at school for maintaining “dangerous” differences (like indigenous languages), but concurrently encouraged to maintain a few “safe” differences (like producing crafts), which among many other things sustained an assertion that such students were different from the national norm or ideal depicted through routine school praxis.

Both Gitlin and colleague’s (2003) work and Lomawaima and McCarty’s (2006) remind us of the powerful roles of school and of the dominant cultural milieu that shapes the microenvironments of schools that students must negotiate. Several of the chapters here echo this perspective – for example, Lundgren’s (this volume) reminder that, although Swedish schools officially embrace diversity, it is only of the “safe” variety, like exogenous food and clothes, while non-Swedish values are not afforded the same embrace. London (this volume) points out the power of select labels used by school systems to shape the educational experiences of those so labeled. Even as their pieces convey recommendations for changes in teacher education practice, both Carter’s (this volume) and Canen’s (this volume) chapters describe a status quo that further substantiates the link between common educational practice and the assertion of mainstream or dominant viewpoints (rather than a more inclusive panoply).

Still, neither Gitlin and colleagues (2003), Lomawaima and McCarty (2006), nor the contributors to this volume would want their documentation of the power of schools to shape the terrain that students must navigate to suggest that students are without agency in such navigation. In addition to asking: “How is it that multiple, plural, and/or hyphenated identities are available to some students?” and “What do they mean or entail?”, several of the chapters here also consider: “Per what logic( s) do students assert one or more of those identities and to what consequence?”

Usually, one available identity to newcomer students is a heritage identity (from another nation state in this volume’s examples, but a subordinated indigenous identity like Lomawaima and McCarty [2006] focus on would also fit this construct) and the other is the identity of the student’s new nation-state, i.e., the nation state where he/she now lives (although Hamann and Zuniga [this volume] remind

us that some transnational students — e.g., a student born in Mexico who moves to the U.S. and then returns to Mexico — have lived a more complicated geographic trajectory than just heritage country and new one). Usually the identity of the new nation-state is higher status (at least at school) and the historic or heritage identity is lower status, although both Vandeyar (this volume) and Lam Choy Fong and Yeoh (this volume) point to complications to this dynamic that we will address later. In saying that both are available, we do not mean to imply that they are equally available or that assuming a particular identity will automatically be concurred with by others. Peers and others can reject students' bids to assert certain identities.

While the idea that two people will similarly navigate the challenges presented by an educational system of a particular adopted nation is clearly overly simplistic — Hamann and Zúñiga's finding (this volume) that some transnational students in Mexico identified as “Mexican,” others as “Mexican American,” and even a few simply as “American” highlights this point — the idea that ranges of reactions to assimilative pressures exist among immigrant students, and that patterns exist within those ranges, is not so far-fetched. In fact, we suggest as a strong current within these assembled articles, that transnationally mobile students seem to react to both formal and informal assimilative pressures quite frequently along either of two lines: (1) the use of a situational ethnicity (Becker, 1990); versus (2) the assertion of a hyphenated identity. Using the word “versus” here seems *apropos* because, as we develop the argument that students from various international settings tend to break along these lines, the tension between these two strategies will also become evident. To be certain, other important potentialities exist regarding student reactions to school-originating pressures to assimilate, but, because of the patterns of immigrant student behavior in response to institutions of education illuminated in this book, we wish to define a theoretical framework that accentuates these two responses specifically.

### *Situational Ethnicity*

In a fascinating study of Portuguese immigrant high school students in the Northeastern U.S., Becker (1990) referred to students' situational assertion of Portuguese identity at home and American identity

at school as “situational ethnicity.” These students had learned that an immigrant identity, or at least a Portuguese identity, was a low-status identity at their school; so they worked purposefully to hide accents, to dress in mainstream styles, and otherwise try to obscure their newcomer status. In research on Sikh heritage youth in Britain, Hall (1995) notes a similar selective use of ethnic labels by youth.

To understand both of these examples, perhaps it makes sense to clarify how Becker (1990:49) understands ethnicity, an understanding that also largely matches our own. She notes:

I see ethnicity as a set of resources and strategies which can be maneuvered or manipulated at will .... I also recognize the individual's ability to change identities to avoid cognitive dissonance or to move between different social fields and assume roles in each without producing stress or disorientation. This ability presupposes a repertoire of ethnic behavior used by people to manage seemingly conflicting demands.

We would add to her description, however, that individuals can also choose to change identities (or at least to attempt such a change) to avoid the hazards, real or perceived, that come with not doing so. Making such situational identity shifts involves a kind of *realpolitik* orientation — in brief, “because I cannot change the inequality of statuses available to me, I will seek to be identified with the one that is least disadvantageous.” The use of situational identity is an adaptation to the hierarchical political ecology of identities rather than a contestation of them.

At several points in this book, students of varying ethnicities/nationalities exhibit a similar strategy for dealing with the formal and informal inequities of an education system that among other expectations requires immigrant students to assimilate into the dominant group. Vandeyar, for example, describes “psycho-social passing,” which refers to a student's attempts to deemphasize his/her differences with a particular group, and to foreground the similarities. She discovered that, just like the Portuguese students in Becker's (1990) study, some South African newcomer students marked a desire to seem similar to the students who ridiculed them because of their ethnic or national differences. It is not hard for us to see how an

immigrant student's desire to "pass" might inadvertently end up reifying, and possibly even emboldening, the inequities imposed by the dominant systems in the first place.

The desire of a transnational student to "pass" as a member of the dominant group, rather than present themselves as opponents to an unjust system, may be further exacerbated by what Rajagopalan describes in Germany as "xenophobic" and "racist" narratives about immigrants that enable "society to view even diverse and culturally vibrant immigrant enclaves as ghettos, and to institutionalize discriminatory and marginalizing practices based on simultaneous fear of "ghetto" communities and a belief that students from those communities are ill equipped for high achievement" [pg. 191]. If there are real perils to maintaining affiliation with a particular group that is stigmatized, then it is not hard to see why some would try to reduce this peril.

Like Becker (1990) before us, we call the reaction of transnational students to adapt to their adopted country's formal and informal assimulative expectations via psycho-social passing *situational ethnicity*. This kind of reaction to an inequitable educational (or cultural) setting does not inhere immutability; it does not preclude the eventual formation of a hyphenated identity, nor does it necessarily imply capitulation to the dominant group. It may suggest an internalization of an unequal social order, but it may also reflect savvy pragmatism. Nonetheless, what may be individually pragmatic leaves intact and uncontested the unequal social order (that subordinates one of their identities), and that social order may continue to be deleterious for the student attempting to use situational ethnicity.

### *Hyphenated Identities*

Hyphenated identities refer to identity labels that are not reduced to a single referent and they exist and are used for very different political purposes. Historically, indigenous American students have been called "American Indian" students rather than just "American" in part to differentiate them from what "American," on its own, is intended to convey (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). Yet considering the labels used by the state is not the end of the story. Dutch society views second and third generation "immigrant youth" as culturally, linguistically,

and politically “Dutch,” yet fully a third of these youth assert hyphenated rather than singularly Dutch identities (Weiner, this volume). Acknowledging that marking of difference is sometimes intended to direct resources to those in the marked category (London, this volume), from the American and Dutch examples we can conclude that hyphenated identities do not only exist as a means for the state to mark difference, but they can exist as a way for “immigrant youth” to mark difference as well. Thus, hyphenated identities can be thought of as both emanating from the state (from the top-down, so to speak), as well as from the individual (bottom-up), as a means for an individual to agentively project a more complicated identity than just “Turk” or “Kurd” or “German” would singularly imply.

Anthropology has long distinguished the *emic* from *etic*, drawing attention to the difference between internal classificatory schema and external schema. Per this distinction, it is different for an individual to say, “I am Mexican American” (with or without the hyphen), than for the state to say “You are Mexican American.” As we consider hyphenated identities, we need to draw attention to what person/entity is making/asserting such an identification. Unlike situational ethnicities, which are always asserted by an individual (although subject to the approval, partial approval, or rejection of the peer set), hyphenated identities can be asserted or imposed/ascribed. So for the juxtaposition between situational ethnicity and hyphenated identity proposed earlier, we need to set aside temporarily the second pattern of hyphenated identity use (that is, its use in the classificatory schema of the state).

Self-asserted hyphenated identities can be: (1) an indication of a positive, goal-oriented attitude with regard to education, and/or (2) an agentive construction facilitated by national education policies or by systems of education that is complementary of multiculturalism. Yet is it not also possible that hybrid identities are an indication of agentive contestation? In other words, we see in this book much evidence that suggests hybrid identity assertion can be an alternative response to the same circumstances that lead others to use situational ethnicity or psycho-social “passing.”

Per this lens, we can consider self-asserted hyphenated identity as an agentive response on the part of the immigrant to *contest* rather than accept the assimilation policies of a nation or a school. If we

revisit Vandeyar's chapter, there is an indication in the interviews she conducted that some students were self-applying hyphenated identities both in an effort to mitigate the pressure imposed on them to be South African, and to highlight their affinity for their nation of origin. Thus, hyphenated identities can be (3) an agentive construction meant to contest the dominant group's insistence on assimilation, and partially anchor oneself psychically to a geographically distant nation. In turn, hyphenated identities potentially provide a resolution to the problem of determining whether one is from "here" or from "there," replacing it with "both." So hyphenated identities can also be (4) an agentive construction rejecting the dichotomizing pressures of choosing between nationalities.

### **Complicating the Theorized Distinction and Outlining Next Steps**

As elegant as it may prospectively be to distinguish between the deployment of situational ethnicity versus the self-assertion of hyphenated identities, there are hazards and an incompleteness to such a distinction. First, as Sarroub (2005) illustrates in her well-regarded volume *All American Yemeni Girls: Being Muslim in a Public School* about transnational Yemeni youth in Michigan (in the United States), the same student may sometimes deploy situational ethnicity strategies and other times assert a hyphenated identity. This does not mean the student only sometimes is challenging the classificatory taxonomies of the state. Rather, returning to Becker's (1990) consideration of ethnicity as a kind of toolkit or repertoire from which one can draw to negotiate the world, sometimes the work of a newcomer in relation to the larger host society can be accomplished within the existing semiotic schemas and other times the most compelling action available to an individual can be to contest the classificatory schema to which they are subject. Clearly a next research step is to consider when transnational youth turn to one of these strategies versus the other.

Second, focusing on the logics of an individual youth in relation to the classificatory schema of the state risks under-theorizing the role and intent of the state in relation to the phenomena of core interest in the book. Comparing states and individuals has an inescapable

apples-versus-oranges flaw in that the two entities being compared are fundamentally distinct. Nonetheless, it is worth remembering that the accounts related here can be told from the state side of the equation (as London [this volume] and Lam Choy Fong and Yeoh [this volume] each illustrate) as easily as from the vantage point of the youth. In turn, as a complex expression of the societies that form them, states also act agentively rather than statically in response to their populations (including to newcomer youth). Finally, in a globalized interconnected world the number of states “interested” in a particular youth is often more than one.

In attaching or not attaching labels to students, states face pros and cons. For example, in the United States, as London (this volume) explains, for decades the state has collected demographic and outcome data on student achievement and, since the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, it has required that these data be parsed so that schools demonstrate success with each of a number of populations (European Americans, Hispanic Americans, African Americans, etc.) to avoid stigmatization and punishment for failing to make adequate yearly progress. Some have criticized this system as reifying socially-created distinctions and reinforcing stereotypes about group capabilities and orientations in an almost neo-Spencerian way. Yet defenders of such a system argue that these social categories reflect the ideations of the larger society and, as such, predate or are at least independent of their use by the state. And they would add that their use allows identification of need and targeting of resources. If students of particular backgrounds and identities consistently fare less well at school, then knowing which group faces this challenge and who is in the group may be antecedent steps to attacking the educational challenges of members of that group.

Defenders of the American system might distinguish U.S. practice from that of France where in 2005 the disenfranchisement of North African and other Muslim-descent youth exploded in riots in the *banlieues*, or working-class suburbs of Paris and many other cities. France, unlike America, refuses to collect official data coded with hyphenated identities like “North African-French” or “Muslim-French”, and so, in one sense, the French state is hamstrung in terms of understanding the likely substantial discrepancies in opportunity horizons and social experiences that pertain to socially-relevant markings of

identity difference. A second line of new research then that this volume suggests could be useful is comparative inquiry into the virtues and hazards of the state designating certain youth (or others) with hyphenated identities. To frame this mnemonically, if awkwardly: “To hyphenate or not hyphenate; that is the question.”

The work of Lam Choy Fong and Yeoh (this volume) points to another topic area for more inquiry: The educational role of the state beyond its political boundaries. Their chapter outlines efforts by the Singaporean government to preserve the cultural and political allegiance of its extraterritorial population through its National Education program. As Polish Saturday schools in Scotland and on-line means to finish Mexican school degrees at Mexican consulates in the U.S. illustrate, Singapore is hardly alone in supporting state efforts beyond the physical territory of the state to build and/or maintain ties to the “mother country.” This work reminds us that as we consider the role of the state in labeling or not labeling students with hyphenated identities and as we consider the roles of the state in shaping the context in which individuals choose to assert singular or hyphenated identities, we need to clarify which state or states we are referencing. When Hamann and Zúñiga (this volume) note that U.S.-born transnational students in Mexico, who by virtue of their U.S. birthplace automatically qualify for American citizenship, are more likely to identify as “Mexican American” than similar transnational students who do not have this birthplace-conferred citizenship, we are reminded that it is the policy of another state (not Mexico) that may be influencing how students are choosing to identify.

Finally, Vandeyar (this volume) notes a strategic move on the part of many of the transnational students she interviewed to assert not their South Africanness (hiding their non-South African origins), but rather a larger African identity. This may be in part a particular product of the colonial legacy of Africa and the comparatively weak affiliation with the nation-state as opposed to the ethnic group because the colonial boundaries now reified as states had little correspondence with the geographies on the continent of which groups lived where. But even if this is so, her chapter is a powerful reminder that the identities available for hyphenation are not only national. Indeed, “African” proposes neither to deny birthplace nor current country, but rather to transcend either in a unifying label that references both. In

an intriguing consideration of the long-simmering argument in the United States of which term was preferable “Hispanic” or “Latino” for those who by ancestry could assert either, Hayes Bautista and Chapa (1987) argued in favor of “Latino” as a chosen term that references common experience of people of the Caribbean and the Americas south of the Rio Grande River (the U.S./Mexico boundary) as objects of the neo-colonialism of the U.S.’s Monroe Doctrine, which was asserted back in 1824. Like Vandeyar’s students who identified as African, asserterers of Latino identity are referencing a heritage bigger than and different from just that of a nation state-tied identity. An additional realm for more research that this volume sets up then is the relationship between national and pan-national identities as both states and individuals use (or do not use) hyphenated labels.

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