

4-15-2015

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### Recommended Citation

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**Fluidity of Filipino American Identity**

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**Engaged Learning**

## **Abstract**

This research explores the identity issues of 1.5 and second generation Filipino Americans, specifically how they construct, shift, and maintain their identities. Having been colonized by the Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, and Americans to name a few, Filipinos have an interesting mix of race and culture – physically and internally Filipinos are a diverse group of people among themselves. Notoriously claimed to lack a sense of unique cultural identity and classified as racially ambiguous, Filipino Americans pose to be of unique stance because of their interesting background – predominantly Catholic, relative ease with the English language, early push towards American assimilation, yet still considered “Asian” in some spheres, while having Spanish influences. This research will take a more in depth look at the complexities of a fluid identity and the subcultures that exist within the Filipino American cohort.

## Statement

The primary motivation in pursuing this research was not just to have a piece of writing that could potentially be published (although that is fantastic), but rather, it stemmed from the existential crisis prompted by becoming a senior in college – what do I want to do? What do I love? What are my passions? Who am I? Where did I come from and why am I the way I am? As a “1.5 generation” Filipino American growing up in America, I constantly wrestled with the concept of identity. I always felt like I could belong everywhere, yet at the same time, belong nowhere – I always had such a diverse group of friends that I bounced back and forth from, my interests were all over the place, and it was always difficult to describe myself. I wondered if my Filipino American peers were experiencing the same thing, and wondered to what extent and what variations their experiences were as second-generation immigrants. Having the opportunity to sit down, listen to my Filipino American peers’ experiences growing up has been incredible.

I am very thankful to Dr. Owen Lynch for supporting and mentoring me throughout this whole research project – for encouraging me to pursue something that pulled on the heart strings, and for encouraging me to apply for the Engaged Learning grant of course! Without his advice, it would have been impossible to dig into the research and theories behind this paper. I am so thankful to Engaged Learning for funding this project, because, as it has been said before – this project could not have materialized the way it did without financial support. I have learned so much not just about myself, but academically I have learned copious amounts of research methods, theories and qualitative research skills that I could have not learned inside the classroom.

## **Introduction and Background**

### *Philippine History and Culture*

Filipino culture has been known to have a unique blend of Eastern and Western influences in contrast to the surrounding countries in Asia. From its history of the native people, “Negritos,” that originally inhabited the island, early influences from Indians, Austronesians, Arabs, and Malays, to Spanish colonization, American rule and Japanese occupation, the Philippines has been greatly exposed to distinctive cultures which have become a part of its own identity as a country and culture (Espiritu, 1995; Posadas, 1999; Lott, 2006; Basa, 2004).

### *Philippine Migration*

There existed three large immigration movements from the Philippines to the United States. Most Filipino Americans, since the 1960s have migrated as professionals and educated individuals to the United States (Posadas, 1999). The large population of the current 1.5 and second generation of Filipino American children resulted from immigrant parents who were part of the fourth wave of immigration after 1965 (Espiritu, 2003). This was due to the newly enacted 1965 Immigration Act that allowed for a dramatic increase of Asian Immigrants, in which the Philippines had the largest amount of professionals and educated individuals (Espiritu, 1995). Most Filipinos have migrated toward metropolises and reside in either the cities or suburbs surrounding the cities (Ramakrishnan, 2004).

### *1.5 and Second Generation*

The 1.5 generation is a label that consists of children born in a different country, immigrated to the United States at an early age, and were raised and socialized in the

American context. There is much debate regarding what age constitutes proper American socialization, but largely it has been before age of 13 years old (Basa, 2004). There is a spectrum of American acculturation among the 1.5 generation, however most attributes of the generation identify culturally with the United States. This cohort is known to be “inbetweeners” – raised by immigrant parents while being educated and socialized in the American context (Basa, 2004). The 2<sup>nd</sup> generation consists of children of immigrant parents who were born in the United States. They adopt and identify with American culture, as they are born and raised in the United States (Lott, 2006).

### *Ethnic Identity*

Ethnic identity construction consists of active decision-making and self-evaluation in (Phinny, 502). Specifically ethnic youths construct their identity in comparison to those around them – constantly selecting, rejecting, evaluating whether or not they are part of the “in-group” or “out-group” of distinct social groups (Portes, 2001; Tajfel, 1982). Identity is constantly evaluated and formed in the context of race, gender, language, socioeconomic status, religion, nationality and other characteristics (Portes, 1996). Specifically in regards to second generation ethnic identity formation, there is a focus mainly only on the influence of immigrant parents and their experiences in assimilation and integration into American culture, which does not provide enough research on the second generation youth (Portes, 2001).

### *Filipino American Identity*

Filipino Americans are considered to be “racial chameleons,” for their ability to blend in different cultures and have been considered to have “no culture” of its own (Espiritu, 2003). This cohort’s multifaceted identity is largely a compilation of color,

socioeconomic status, gender, and other characteristics (Min, 2002). Current research point towards the Filipino American cohort as a homogenous group and does not provide more insight in the culture of Filipino American youths.

## **Research Questions**

1. Filipino Americans have multiple forms of enacting static identity in the US, how do they create this identity?
2. How is identity a fluid concept for Filipino Americans?
3. How is identity a demanded performance based on racial assumptions?
4. What socio-cultural variations exist among Filipino Americans?



## Methodology

### *Research Design*

During October 2014-January 2015, 16 in-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted. The respondents were selected through a snowball sample which occurred through references from family members and friends. The participants consisted of sixteen 1.5 and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Filipino Americans who were full Filipino either born in the United States or in the Philippines, and then immigrated to the US on or before the age of 8 years old. The interviews were conducted in New York, New Jersey, California and Texas.

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Generation</b>	<b>Place of Birth</b>	<b>Location</b>
Charlie	Male	21	2nd	Belleville, New Jersey	NJ
Johnny	Male	23	1.5	Bulacan, Philippines	NJ
Warren	Male	22	2nd	Rahway, New Jersey	NJ
Skylar	Male	19	2nd	Torrance, California	CA
Ricky	Male	19	2nd	San Diego, California	CA
Clark	Male	21	2nd	Los Angeles, California	TX
Joseph	Male	21	1.5	Baguio City, Philippines	TX
Henry	Male	20	1.5	Manila, Philippines	TX
Santiago	Male	19	2nd	Welasco, Texas	TX
Stacy	Female	23	2nd	Mesquite, TX	TX
Clara	Female	20	2nd	San Antonio, TX	TX
Maddy	Female	21	2nd	Beaumont,	TX

				TX	
Katherine	Female	21	2nd		TX
Valentina	Female	20	1.5	Quezon City, Philippines	TX
Wesley	Male	23	1.5	Quezon City, Philippines	TX
Andrew	Male	21	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Brooklyn, New York	NY

*Description of the Sample*

All respondents were between the ages of 18-24 years old, five females and eleven males. Eleven of the respondents were second generation and five of the respondents were 1.5 generation. Of the eleven second generation respondents, two are from New Jersey, one from New York, three from California, and three are from Texas. Fourteen respondents associated with the Catholic faith to varying degrees, one was non-denominational Christian, and one did not practice any particular faith. The majority of participants were of the middle class background, however five are upper middle class. All respondent's families and upbringing were largely in suburban areas.

## Findings

Past academic research has revealed multi-ethnic identity formation of 1.5 and second generation Filipino Americans, however there is very little research on how Filipino Americans shift their identity labels from one group to another, what are the influences and characteristics of those cultural groups, and the shared culture of the Filipino American cohort. This present research will examine how 1.5 and second generation Filipino Americans construct their identity in relation to specific cultural and racial groups, their process of constructing their identity within these groups, and perceived characteristics of the Filipino American cohort.

From the interviews, the prominent cultural categories that influence Filipino American identity that emerged are – Black, Asian, White, Hispanic, American and “traditional” Filipino. It is important to note, however, that there exist more categories that respondents have acknowledged to influence their identity, but are beyond the scope of this research. Although there are common idiosyncrasies agreed upon among the respondents, certain attributes and definitions of each of these cultural categories vary among the respondents. Characteristics of each group depend on the participant’s exposure to these cultures, which are a result of each participant’s socio-economic status, geography and location, educational experience, family influence, physical appearance, and hobbies and interests.

“If anything, it makes me more interested, because I like to learn what other cultures are about, and what I think the Filipinos are, they’re very relatable. Just, the culture itself draws from all angles, because you know, Filipinos were colonized and having influence from Spanish, Japanese, American – especially American.”

**Andrew**

The findings reveal that Filipino Americans, because of their mixed cultural history and racially ambiguous appearance, are “predisposed” to have similarities to different cultures – much like a ticket to entry in that culture that allows them to move fluidly from culture to culture. Each stage of their life has been a constant process of entry and exit of any one or more of these cultures, depending on accessibility and exposure.

“And most of the time, people would mistake me for Chinese or like, Vietnamese. And they're like, "Oh, so what kinda Chinese or Vietnamese are you?" And then, they would be like, "Wait, you don't look Asian, you look Hispanic." They're like ... "You, you don't make sense." So it was like, really confusing as a kid. Because it's like, I would hang out, because I didn't look like, Oriental-type... I would start hanging out with the people who were like, Hispanic, Indian, like just kinda adapt to their culture a little bit.”

**Valentina**

Additionally, their point of similarity – “entry” – to each culture varies from person to person, but have large commonalities among the cohort as a whole. Throughout this process, Filipino Americans, by choice, actively accept or reject certain attributes of the culture they have just entered, constantly deciding whether it becomes part of their identity or not, much like a buffet – deciding aspects of each culture to make part of their identity. Immersion in a specific culture allows them to adopt certain aspects, make it part of their identity and carry it with them to their next cultural stage. However, it is important to note that Filipino Americans become acculturated in different circles in different degrees – some Filipino Americans only experience tension between being Filipino and American, while some Filipino Americans are exposed to different cultures and thus have more context to develop.

## **Filipino-American and Filipino**

All interviewees conveyed the importance of being Filipino and the culture. Overall, descriptions of Filipino culture were homogenous among the respondents – respect for elders, importance of family, importance of education, hard work, frugality, hospitality, and welcoming attitude. All respondents acknowledged Filipinoness as a part of their identity although there were variations of influence among them.

“Yes, being Filipino is very important to me. I, uh ... I mean (laughs) if I was not born as a Filipino, I would not be the person that I am today. Uh, growing up in the Filipino family definitely helped me realize things. Like, being very ... disciplined and respectful to your elders is, is a huge, huge part of the Filipino culture, which it should be in many cultures, though it's not. Um ... and just coming from an overall hard-working family, helped me pursue my goals and live out the same way that they did.” **Ricky**

All respondents acknowledged the disappearing identity and tradition of Filipino culture among the Filipino American cohort. They observe this among themselves as well as among their peers. Respondents varied between feeling more American or Filipino, with parental influence and social environment having profound impact on their exposure to Filipino culture and traditions. However, all respondents expressed, not only the importance, but also the desire to have a deeper understanding of their Filipino culture.

## **Filipino American and American**

“I guess, like.. in America, we kind of pride ourselves on being so diverse and stuff. And like ... I really like that about America, about America in general. It's just a lot like, you can always like, you can always strive to like ... make peace with people.”

**Santiago**

In prior research, respondents tended to group “white” and “American” together as one culture. However, it has been revealed through this research that although there is

still some mixing between the labels, there are more distinctive characteristics between the two categories among the respondents. Distinctively, participants associated and defined America with terms like “diverse,” “individualism,” “ambition,” and “materialism.” However, all respondents acknowledge the importance of American as part of their identity.

### **Filipino-American and Black**

“Growing up in Houston like, a lot of people say like, it's the ghetto, right? Like, a lot of people saying it's like, like black culture. But it's kind of true, because what happened was, I lived in like, like really, like, white-dominated neighborhoods. And then, even though I made friends with like, all those people ... Myself. Like, I don't know how, I think it was because my cousins lived like, closer to the city... I actually got into the black culture a lot. And also, because I played a lot of basketball... They were the only black kids who went to my school.” **Joseph**

Many Filipino Americans have interests and engage in activities that, as they have defined, are largely associated with black culture, specifically basketball, dance, hip hop, rap music, and sneaker and street wear culture. Respondents claim genuine interests in these activities and because Filipino Americans are largely part of the middle class and reside in cities or suburbs near metropolises, find accessibility to this culture. Also, because Filipino Americans collectively as a cohort share similar interests, some of the respondents claim their exposure to these interests from other Filipino American social groups and communities.

Many Filipino Americans find interest in performance, specifically in dance and directly acknowledge influence from this culture.

‘I was on a step team. Because I loved performing, but step was this whole aggressive thing that I was never really part of before, but I'm kind of shy and soft-spoken. But I knew how to talk to

people and how to present myself and to make myself likeable. Not because I wanted to be liked, but I wanted others just to be comfortable around me. It was mostly black but after a few years, it turned into a lot of Filipinos.” **Andrew**

A majority of male respondents claim the importance of basketball in their lives, having been influenced mainly by their fathers who were exposed to the sport in the Philippines, and has even been considered the “Filipino past-time,” and as one of the respondents, Joseph claims that he has been playing basketball “since I was in diapers... basketball – it’s one of the biggest things in my life.” Majority of male respondents claim growing up and being immersed in this sport. They recognize basketball to be an “American” influence in the Philippines, however they associate basketball culture with black culture, as their exposure to many of their “black friends” their friendships and relationships with derived from this specific activity and the predominant culture that comes from it.

Another example of an interest that has emerged among the Filipino American cohort is this urban culture that specifically revolves around street wear and the collection of sneakers.

“And then, my other, I see it more in basketball. Like, people who play basketball or collect sneakers, that tends to happen. I don't know why, they just watch the NBA. You see like, NBA players sitting with these like, fucking, highlighter-colored or, some crazy color lace for their sneakers- And it's just, so distracting. Like, you're not even watching the game anymore. You're just like, looking at their shoes, like- "I kinda want that." It probably started with Michael Jordan, too.” **Johnny**

In addition to shared interests, many Filipino Americans, although unexplainable, express being comfortable around black Americans and could identify with them.

“I think, throughout my whole life, I've been cool with black people.... Like, I know like ...I don't know if it's like, Jersey or if we're Filipino where like, I'm cool with black people, it's like. It's not like I'm trying hard to be cool with them, you know?”

**Katherine**

Although Filipino Americans have embraced and continue to be influenced by black culture, it is revealed that they choose which aspects of the culture they wish to be associated with and reject those that are primarily negative or contradict their own values. Also some respondents have stated that their relationships with their black American friends are very limited to the activities that they engage in and do not support more meaningful relationships. Specifically, respondents felt detached from this culture when it comes to the importance of family.

“Well, all my black friends hang out with their, just their friends. And sometimes, they don't like going home. Their mom's calling, they don't answer, they don't answer...I don't really see like, their brothers or, or their mom or their dad. Yeah, I don't really go over to their house.” **Johnny**

### **Filipino American and Hispanic**

“Mexicans tend to be like, really fun and outgoing and caring. And like, I know I'm Filipino, but, I'm more Mexican, really?” **Clara**

“I kind of see where family's a lot closer with uh, Spanish people and Filipinos. Uh, it's, it's like uh, you do anything for family, but friends can come second.” **Johnny**

Four of the respondents specifically identified with Hispanic culture, having been exposed to Spanish culture and being able to relate it with aspects of the Filipino culture. According to Clara, her ambiguous racial appearance allows her, to some extent, to blend in with Mexican community in a majority-Hispanic city that is San Antonio. Her neighborhood and schools were predominantly white and Hispanic, and has adopted the



Mexican culture as opposed to white culture by choice. For Clara, certain parts of Hispanic culture find similarities of Filipino culture. When asked what aspects of Mexican culture she such as the food, language, and family values.

“Yeah, food for sure. Um ... what else? I guess, stuff like parts of the language, you know. And like, the, you know how Filipino um ... like, older ladies are really like, loving or whatever. It's the same thing with like, Mexican abuelas. So I got used to seeing like, Mexican ladies as that kind, just really loving and always have food (laughs) and stuff like that.” **Clara**

When asked if it was easier for her to blend in Mexican culture, she responded that being racially ambiguous allows her to easily gain entry into the culture.

I don't think I look like, super-Filipino. Um ... because my mom doesn't look Filipino at all... She looks like straight Hispanic. So that's how come I don't think I look that Filipino. Because, if I said I was half-Mexican or something, people believe me. People have believed me.” **Clara**

One respondent, Valentina, describes her experience growing up in a predominantly white and Hispanic neighborhood. Because she immigrated from the Philippines, she was placed in English classes with other Hispanic students, which prompted many of her friendships and influence by Hispanic culture. Additionally, according to her peers, she looked like a mix between Hispanic and Asian, and was occasionally able to pass off as Hispanic. For a while she felt like a member of the Hispanic community, however overtime she claims she felt more and more disparate due to the language barrier, being part of the middle-upper class in opposition to her other Hispanic friends who were more in the middle-lower class, and educational aspirations. It

is also evident in the following statement how Valentina transitions out of the Hispanic identity begin to associate herself with white culture.

“Because I guess ... because the Mexicans started I mean, I guess, what I'm trying to say is like, pretty much, when I got older, everyone I used to hang out with when I was kid, they just started getting pregnant Not me! (Claps.) So it's like, I mean it's really funny like, all the people we used to hang out with kids, like, hang out in the neighborhood, they all have kids now. And then, it's only us. So, when I got to middle school and high school, I just started hanging out with white people more.” **Valentina**

### **Filipino American and Asian**

“And you do know these things where like, you... You hang out with friends, but then there's like, a point, there's like a limit to how, how much you tell your parents. Like, especially with like, Asian parents- You know? Like, I wouldn't say it's just Filipino parents. I would say it's like, Asian parents in general. Like ... "You can't stay out past a certain time." Like, they, your parents don't even tell you what time you have to stay, like, "What time is your curfew?" You just know! Like, you know what I mean! (laughs.)” **Stacy**

Respondents identified Asian culture as one cohesive cohort with similar characteristics such as strict parents and the importance of education. In addition, they acknowledge that in regards to racial labels, Filipinos are considered Asian. Furthermore, in school, Filipino Americans are grouped together with other Asian ethnicities primarily through advanced classes and cultural clubs. Not only do they become socially grouped with the “Asian” label, but also respondents have identified themselves as part of that group.

Since we were all Asian, people were like, "Oh, Asians are like, smart," so like, somehow we ended up at the same classes together in high school, and taking the same AP classes so it's like - I don't know, the Asian group. Or like, we're the smarter people.” **Charlie**

However, although Filipino Americans identify with the “Asian” label, they recognize discrepancies with aspects of Filipino culture and Asian culture. Respondents chose what aspects of Asian culture they accepted or rejected. When speaking about attributes of Asian culture they accepted, they included themselves as part of the “Asian” label, however, when referencing attributes of that they particularly did not identify with, they detached themselves from the label. Charlie explicitly identifies himself with the Asian label when it came to strict parents, “being smart,” and physical appearance, however when it came to Asian pop culture, he implicitly detaches himself from the label.

“He's just, we just live different, we just live separate lives. Like... he's not, I want to say he's more Asian than me. He's not, too, too much into Filipino culture, but he's into Asian and things like that, you know. Like he knows all about Japanese people, he goes to like, anime conventions, he reads manga. If you ever see his bedroom, it's like, all filled with like, Asian toys and whatever.”

**Charlie**

### **Filipino American and White**

“Like, you know what I'm saying, or like, the way he talks and dresses and like, the people's exposed to... It's not like they talk different, it's just the fact that like, his references. Like, you could just tell the way that ... he just reminded me of like, one of my white friends- Does that make sense? Like, like, the way he dressed. Like, he dresses really, uh, at the time, in high school. But he always dressed like, super-white white, like, preppy kinda thing.” **Stacy**

Most Filipino Americans become associated with white culture through socio-economic status, high education, and mainstream culture. The majority of the respondents

grew up in predominantly white middle to upper class neighborhoods and attended schools that were predominantly white. Generally, sentiments towards white culture were negative and associated with rejection of the Filipino culture. This “rejection” is gauged differently for each person but is largely associated with dress, a way of speaking, affluence and spending money. However, although five of the respondents identified as being part of a upper socioeconomic status, there still existed discrepancies in identifying with “white people,” in regards to spending money, specifically with Valentina.

“And then like, with white people, they were all talking about, like ... "Oh, look at my new purse! Look at my new phone! I have an iPhone!" All like that. And sorta like, even though like, I am like, considered upper class, my parents were very frugal.” **Valentina**

Respondents also tie this habit of spending and the idea of “luxury” closely or to white or American culture, even when it came to judging other Filipino American peers who exhibited those same habits. Johnny, specifically refers to stereotypes of the Filipino American cohort, describing them very negatively as narcissistic and indulgent.

“Probably fixing their combover with a, a frickin' comb, or they're vaping, they're freakin' on Instagram. Or, they're fixin' up their hella fresh car. That's like, probably, just a Honda Civic with a roll cage in it. Uh ... I don't know, they're spending a lot of money on luxury, I think. And it's like, stuff that you don't really, I'm pretty sure they're really into it, it's just stuff I wouldn't be into.” **Johnny**

Furthermore, some of the respondents largely associated white culture with lack of family values and lack respect towards elders, always placed in opposition to Filipino culture. Generally, the majority of Filipino Americans identified with the larger minority narrative in contrast to white culture. Stacy recounted growing up with pre-dominantly white friends, and for a while felt as if she “fit in,” because it was part of the greater

American childhood experience of sleepovers, going to the movies, attending church services and bible studies, and going to the mall. However, aftertime she realized that ultimately, “whiteness” was unattainable and that she could not fully identify with that culture, especially when it came to physical appearance and dating someone who is white.

“His whole family is white, Southern, and country. Like (laughs), I definitely felt like the oddball. Like, the good thing is, is the older brother was dating a Mexican girl. For the longest time, so I didn't really feel like ... it was something new for his family to mix those two, like, ‘Whoa, dark girl.’ Like, you know what I mean? But ... his friends even made KKK jokes (laughs). I would notice that I'm like, the only ethnic person there.” **Stacy**

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the this present research seeks to explore how Filipino Americans construct their identity, examine socio-cultural variations within the cohort, and expand on this concept of “fluidity.” Filipino American identity construction supports the previous research on their fluid identity, however, the process of identity construction is less fluid and more intentional – this research shows that respondents were actively choosing and rejecting certain attributes of cultures they were exposed to throughout their lifetime. Additionally, this research has expanded on the cultural groups and labels that Filipino Americans are largely influenced and categorized by – Black, White, Hispanic, and Asian. It is due to the multi-cultural and multiethnic background of the Philippines that 1.5 and second generation Filipino Americans can be welcomed and immersed in varying cultures.

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