Immigrants' Cultural Identities as Sources of Civic Engagement

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Immigrant parents (first generation) and adolescents (second generation) from El Salvador and India ($N = 80$) took part in interviews on civic engagement. The immigrants were almost unanimous in regarding civic engagement as important. They also were engaged themselves, more so at the community than the political level. One third of immigrants were engaged in community activities that specifically had a cultural focus or occurred through cultural organizations, and the comparable number for political activities was 25%. Cultural motives (i.e., a cultural or immigrant sense of self) were twice as likely to be mentioned as sources of engagement rather than disengagement. Qualitative analyses of these cultural motives revealed seven engagement themes (e.g., cultural tradition of service) and three of disengagement (e.g., ethnic exclusion).

As the number of immigrants in the United States has reached unprecedented levels, public and academic debates have started to address the issue of their commitment to and engagement in the civic life of their new society (e.g., Huntington, 2004; Stepick & Stepick, 2002). Between 1960 and 2002, the proportion of the U.S. population that was foreign-born more than doubled from 5.4% to 11.5%. Also, currently about 20% of children and adolescents in the United States are foreign-born or have a parent who is, and this number is predicted to continue to rise (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). As the proportion of immigrants in a society reaches notable numbers, it is to be expected that questions will emerge about their commitment to civil society. Such questions arose in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as scholars and the public debated assimilation, the melting pot, and cultural pluralism (e.g., Bourne, 1916; Kallen, 1956; Zangwill, 1975). And such questions are reemerging now. Moreover, present-day globalization has added another dimension to the conversation. As transnational organizations, ease of travel, and worldwide media disseminations have rendered multicultural identities more likely, engagement with more than one nation has become more feasible (Arnett, 2002; Friedman, 2000; Jensen, 2003). Today, then, debates address not only the civic engagement of immigrants in their new society but also the relationship of such engagement or lack thereof to transnational commitments.

THE QUESTION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

Recently, Huntington (2004) argued that immigrants who maintain a cultural and immigrant sense of self represent a threat to the coherence of American civil society. In his view, immigrants who have multicultural affiliations will see their loyalties and time divided and hence will put less effort and energy into civic associations, public life, and politics in the United States. "Ampersands"—a favorite term of Huntington's—raise the specter of the "erosion of citizenship" and threaten "societal security" (ch. 8). According to Huntington,

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then, immigrants who maintain a cultural identity will pull away from engagement in American civic life.

Is this true? Huntington's claim is an empirically testable one. However, there has not been much research to address it. Recently, Stepick and Stepick (2002) surveyed the literature on the civic engagement of immigrants in the United States, with a focus on immigrant youth. They concluded that "few researchers have focused on immigrant youth and even fewer have examined issues of civic engagement for immigrant youth" (p. 247). Unlike Huntington, Stepick and Stepick (2002) suggested that immigrants' civic engagement may be motivated by their commitment to their cultural groups, in particular that discrimination against immigrants may motivate political activity to assert the voice of one's cultural group.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The aim of the present research was to examine the cultural dimension of immigrants' civic engagement or lack thereof. Four questions guided the research: (a) To what extent are immigrants civically engaged? (b) To what extent is their engagement focused on cultural or immigrant issues? (c) To what extent are motives pertaining to one's cultural or immigrant sense of self linked to the presence or absence of engagement? And perhaps most importantly, (d) What is the specific nature of the cultural motives for engagement and nonengagement? For example, do immigrants speak of diminished time for American civil life, of discrimination, or of something else?

Because there is limited research with immigrants on this topic, qualitative interviews were conducted that would tell us about immigrants' own conceptions of their civic engagement. Qualitative research is helpful precisely when we need to understand the indigenous categories emerging in new situations (such as immigrants' motives for civic engagement). Furthermore, qualitative research is particularly helpful when connections among phenomena are not well understood (such as between civic engagement and cultural identity; e.g., Jessor, Colby, & Shweder, 1996).

Because the two main sources of current immigrants to the United States are Asia and Latin America, data were collected for one group from each of these two parts of the world, namely, India and El Salvador. In 2001 and 2002, the largest number of immigrants to the United States from Asia came from India, and the second-largest number of Latino immigrants came from El Salvador (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005).

Furthermore, immigrants from India and El Salvador arrive in the United States under notably different circumstances and with access to markedly different resources. For example, over 60% of immigrants (aged 25 years or older) from India report having attained college degrees, whereas the comparable figure for Salvadorans is less than 5% (Zhou, 1997). The inclusion of these very different groups in the present study can serve two purposes. First, it adds breadth to the potential set of cultural identities and forms of civic engagement that the participants may discuss. Second, to the extent that there are similarities in the findings from these two otherwise very different groups, the results are likely to reflect something common in how immigrants to the United States (and perhaps elsewhere) negotiate citizenship.

From each cultural group, first-generation adults and second-generation adolescents were included. In order to understand present and future civic engagement, it is important to understand the engagement of not only adults but also adolescents (e.g., Flanagan, 2004; Flanagan & Sherrod, 1998; Flanagan & Tucker, 1999; Jennings, 2002; Youniss, McClellan, & Yates, 1997; Youniss & Yates, 1997).

The present study addressed political engagement (e.g., demonstrations, political fund-raising) and community engagement through school and voluntary associations (e.g., tutoring, coaching; e.g., Putnam, 2000). As Sherrod, Flanagan, and Youniss (2002) have argued, for today's youth and culturally diverse populations, research on citizenship needs to pertain not only to political and legal considerations but also to more general involvement with others in the community. Furthermore, research with youth has shown disengagement for political activities (Galston, 2001) but high rates of engagement for community activities and volunteering (Flanagan, 2004).

Finally, as noted above, this study addressed both behaviors and motives. This approach was based in cultural and developmental psychology. The aim was to capture immigrant adolescents' and adults' underlying psychological motivations for civic engagement and disengagement. What reasons would they provide to account for their behaviors? Research on people's account of their civic motives has been limited (e.g., Friedland & Morimoto, 2005; Pearce & Larson, 2006), and there appears to be no such research on immigrants' civic motives.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 80 immigrants residing in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. The sample consisted of two groups: Asian Indians ($n = 40$) and Salvadorans ($n = 40$). Within each of these two

immigrant groups, there were 20 adolescents between 14 and 18 years old ($M = 15.25$, $SD = 2.86$) and 20 parents ($M = 43.74$, $SD = 4.05$). (There was either a mother or a father for each adolescent.) The parents were first-generation immigrants (i.e., they arrived in the United States in their late teens or later). The parents' average age of entry into the United States was 24.54 ($SD = 4.61$). The adolescents were second generation (i.e., they were born in the United States or arrived prior to starting elementary school). Their mean age of entry was 2.69 ($SD = 2.06$).

The adolescent groups had even distributions of girls and boys (9 female Asian Indians and 12 female Salvadorans). In the two groups of parents, there was a predominance of mothers (14 female Asian Indians and 16 female Salvadorans). The participation of more mothers than fathers in research with families is common.[1]

As Table 1 shows, most parents were married. As expected, the Asian Indians had higher levels of education and income, compared to Salvadorans. The Asian Indians were particularly likely to hold professional or technical occupations, whereas Salvadorans held a broad range of occupations.

Participants were initially recruited through local religious institutions (Catholic churches and Hindu temples) and subsequently by means of snowballing. In accordance with recruitment criteria, the Asian Indian participants were of Hindu religious background and the Salvadorans were Catholic. Of all families contacted, 59% agreed to participate.

Procedure

Participants took part in a one-on-one, semistructured interview ($M = 77$ min., $SD = 21$) addressing civic engagement and other topics. In an effort to decrease socially desirable answers, the civic engagement questions were asked at the end of the interview. The expectation was that participants by then would feel comfortable and hence be most honest about the topic. Also, the questions required detailed answers (e.g., about the specific nature of engagement), making it harder to embellish.

The interview language for all Asian Indians and the Salvadoran adolescents was English (they were all fluent). The Salvadoran parents preferred to be interviewed in Spanish. The interviewers who conducted the Spanish interviews were of Salvadoran background and fluent in English and Spanish. For the Spanish interview schedule, standard back-translation procedures were used.

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[1]The nature of the data was dyadic, consisting of adolescent–parent pairs. The present focus on behaviors and motives that specifically were cultural, however, entailed a reduction of the data set that rendered dyadic analyses impossible.

TABLE 1
Parent Demographics

	Asian Indian	Salvadoran	Difference
Marital status (%)			
Never married	0	5	5.71 ns
Married	100	75	
Separated	0	5	
Divorced	0	10	
Widowed	0	0	
Other	0	5	
Education (%)			
Some elementary/junior high	0	16	40.25**
Completed elementary/junior high	0	11	
Some high school	0	16	
High school diploma or GED	0	16	
Some college	0	26	
College degree	32	5	
Postgraduate education	68	11	
Yearly family income (%)			
<$15,000	0	15	61.93**
$15,000–$29,999	0	10	
$30,000–$69,999	0	50	
$70,000–$99,999	21	25	
$100,000–$199,999	68	0	
>$199,999	11	0	
Occupation (%)			
Unskilled work	0	0	14.55*
Service	0	11	
Clerical, sales	5	22	
Business owner or manager	10	11	
Professional or technical	75	17	
Homemaker	5	22	
Not employed	0	0	
Other	5	17	

Note: X^2 values are indicated for marital and occupation, and F values for education and income.

$^*p < .05$. $^{**}p < .001$. ns = not significant.

Interviewers received extensive training in interview techniques. This included learning about the cultural and religious backgrounds of participants. Furthermore, two of the interviewers had resided in India. Almost all interviews (97.5%) took place in the homes of participants. This also increased the likelihood that participants would feel at ease.

At the outset of interviews, written informed consent was obtained from parents on behalf of themselves and their adolescents. Adolescents provided oral assent. At the conclusion of an interview, each participant received $25. They were also asked if they had questions or thoughts about the study.

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by professionals. For the interviews in Spanish, professionals first transcribed into Spanish and then translated into English. The transcribers were of Salvadoran background and fluent in both languages.

Materials

Participants answered 8 or 10 questions about civic engagement (depending on whether or not they were engaged). A question was asked for engagement in politics or civic affairs: "Are you involved in civic affairs or politics—and by that we mean things like writing letters to newspapers, taking part in demonstrations, fund-raising for political organizations, and going to civic or community meetings?" A question was also asked for engagement in community or school service: "Are you involved in school or community service—and by that we mean things like tutoring, coaching, or working with people in need in the community?" The aim of the questions was to elicit a broad range of civic behaviors (e.g., Sherrod et al., 2002).

Each of these two questions was followed by questions assessing the specific nature of participants' engagement (if they were involved), motives for being engaged or not being engaged, views on whether or not engagement is important for people in general, and motives for why engagement is or is not important for people in general.

Participants also completed a questionnaire that included demographic questions.

A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Coding

In order to code the data, three researchers reviewed interviews. This was done blind to participants' demographic information. As interviews were reviewed, coding manuals and a qualitative database were gradually constructed. The manuals were continuously refined in the process of reading interviews in order to account for all interview materials and to define clearly coding categories. The qualitative database recorded both the coding categories and the verbatim response for each participant answer. By sorting all verbatim answers in the database according to coding categories, the coherency of categories was continuously assessed and the coding manuals continuously refined. Once the coding manuals had been completed, interrater reliabilities were assessed on 20% of all interviews. These are reported below for each coding category.

In order to address the civic engagement of the immigrant participants and the cultural component of engagement or lack thereof, the data were coded in four ways.

1. *Engagement of self and others*. A distinction was drawn between "political" and "community" forms of civic engagement. Political engagement included activities such as voting, donating money to or fund-raising for political causes, political

membership, protesting, and taking contact with public representatives. Community engagement pertained to involvement through school and voluntary associations (e.g., cultural, leisure, social, and religious) in the form of activities such as volunteer work, monetary donation, membership, and leadership. The present distinction corresponds to the one made, for example, by Putnam (2000) between what he terms "political" and "civic" participation. The researchers coded whether or not participants were engaged (at the political and community levels) and whether or not they regarded engagement as important for people in general. Interrater reliability was 100%.

2. *Cultural behavior*. For every civic behavior that participants described for themselves, researchers coded whether or not it was focused on cultural or immigrant issues or had occurred in the context of an organization focused on cultural or immigrant issues (e.g., Comite Ispano de la parroquia, Gujarati Samaj, Kerala Association of Greater Washington, Latin dance group). Interrater reliability was 100%.

3. *Cultural motives*. For every motive that participants provided to explain engagement or nonengagement for self and others, the researchers coded whether or not it pertained to a cultural or immigrant sense of self. A cultural self included references to being "Indian" (participants almost never used the term "Asian Indian"), Latino, and Salvadoran. It also included references to participants' "culture," "roots," "tradition," and "heritage." A sense of oneself as an immigrant was less culturally specific than a cultural self-identification (e.g., "I, too, am an immigrant" versus "Some of us are Hispanic"). Apart from speaking of the self as an "immigrant," references to an immigrant identity included statements such as "having come to this country" and "being people of different countries." The cultural and immigrant senses of self were often tied to one another, and this was one reason that we chose to include both affiliations in this coding category. A second reason was to be able to address Huntington's (2004) argument that an identity encompassing nonnational elements, either immigrant or cultural, entails diminished commitment to American civil society. Interrater reliability for the coding of motives as either cultural/immigrant or not was 100%. (In additional coding, researchers differentiated whether motives primarily referenced a cultural or an immigrant self. This differentiation had little impact on the themes described below. Thus all motives will mostly be discussed together and for the sake of simplicity be referred to as "cultural." Occasionally, however, when the differentiation seemed relevant it will be noted.)

TABLE 2
Self's and Others' Civic Engagement (percent)

| Engagement | Adolescents | | Parents | | |
	Salvadoran	Asian Indian	Salvadoran	Asian Indian	All
Self's political	20	20	50	30	30
Self's community	80	95	75	75	81
Others' political	90	90	100	75	89
Others' community	100	100	100	100	100

4. *Cultural themes.* A further analysis of all cultural motives was carried out in order to identify diverse themes. Following a grounded theory approach, seven kinds of cultural themes pertaining to civic engagement were identified, and three for lack of engagement.[2] Interrater reliability was 83%. The researchers resolved disagreements through discussion.

Engagement of Self and Others

Table 2 shows that all participants considered it important for people to be civically engaged at the community level, and almost all also held this view for political activities. When it came to the immigrants' own engagement, 81% were engaged at the community level and 30% at the political level. Community engagement was an almost universal activity among Asian Indian adolescents (95%), and Salvadoran parents stood out in regard to politics where 50% were engaged. Among the present immigrants, then, it was the rare person who was not engaged. Furthermore, all thought that some kind of civic engagement was important.

Cultural Behavior

The next question addressed the extent to which the immigrants' own civic activities had a cultural focus or occurred through cultural organizations. Here frequencies showed that 25% of the participants who were engaged in politics reported culturally focused activities. The comparable figure for community engagement was 34%. The majority of the immigrants, then, were *not* engaged in culturally focused civic behaviors. Still,

cultural activities and organizations were notable venues of civic engagement.[3]

A focus on behaviors, however, provides only a partial understanding of the role of culture. For example, an immigrant might be civically engaged through a cultural organization by virtue of her social network, whereas her motives for engagement might not pertain to a cultural sense of self. Alternatively an immigrant's cultural self-identification might motivate civic behavior that neither is cultural in focus nor takes place through a cultural organization (e.g., if an immigrant draws upon a cultural tradition that emphasizes service to the needy).

Furthermore, the focus on the cultural dimension of civic behaviors addresses only engagement. It does not shed light on the extent to which a cultural sense of self might be linked to lack of engagement (Huntington's thesis). To obtain a deeper understanding, then, of the role of cultural identity in civic engagement or lack thereof, we turn to immigrants' own explanations of motives that underlie behaviors.

Cultural Motives

Table 3 shows that averaged across the four questions pertaining to lack of engagement, 11% of participants invoked one or more cultural motives. Certainly, then, it was quite rare for the present immigrants to speak of nonnational identity as a motive for themselves or for others to be disengaged from civil society.

Every fifth participant (averaged across the four questions on engagement) invoked a cultural sense of self to explain civic engagement and its importance. For the immigrants' own political engagement, 30% spoke of cultural motives. These numbers suggest that a cultural or immigrant sense of self is more of a motivator of civic engagement than a hindrance.[4]

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[2]In accordance with grounded theory, "open coding" was followed by integration of categories (based on their properties and dimensions). This process is also referred to as the "constant comparative method" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Glaser and Strauss, the originators of grounded theory, parted company on whether various techniques are necessary or even desirable for an approach to be considered grounded theory, including the use of data collected at one point in time (Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

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[3]A further breakdown of the participants whose activities were cultural into age and/or cultural immigrant groups will not be provided, as the samples would be too small to be meaningful.

[4]Here again a further breakdown of the participants into age and/or cultural immigrant groups would not be meaningful.

TABLE 3
Participants Providing Cultural Motives (percent)

	All Participants
Engagement	
Self's political	30
Self's community	16
Others' political	16
Others' community	16
Mean	20
Nonengagement	
Self's political	8
Self's community	14
Others political	13
Others community	n/a
Mean	11

Note: No participants held that it was not important for other people to be engaged at the community level, and hence no one provided reasons to explain this position.

Seven Cultural Themes of Engagement

But how exactly did participants speak of their cultural affiliation? The present content analysis of the cultural motives for engagement identified seven themes: (a) cultural remembrance, (b) tradition of service, (c) welfare of immigrant or cultural communities, (d) assistance to country of origin, (e) bridging communities, (f) building a new social network, and (g) appreciation of American democracy.

Cultural remembrance was where immigrants emphasized the need to remember and maintain their cultural identity and traditions. This theme was emphasized by both adolescents and adults. It was particularly common among Asian Indians. Speaking of her volunteer work at a temple, one parent explained:

Because I want to transfer whatever I have to [the] kids and especially [the] Hindu heritage, our Hindu culture and religion. As a child, I never had an opportunity to attend the classes and learn much about Hindu religion. But as I grew older, I understood the value of learning your own culture and religion. And I want kids to learn as much as possible while they are young. (P#039-020)

In a similar vein, an adolescent said,

I mostly like the speaking things I do because I want to uphold like the Indian community. I don't want it to, like, fade. I don't want to see it go bad over the years. I want like the culture to live on. And the best way for me to do that is to take an active role in Indian places, like the temple. (P#005–003)

To these immigrants, their cultural "roots"—a word used by many of the participants—merited tending, and hence their political and community engagement.

A second theme pertaining to a *tradition of service* indicated that part of Hindu Indian and Catholic Salvadoran traditions prescribed service to others. Parents especially spoke in terms of this theme. A Salvadoran parent invoked both her cultural and religious tradition:

Because it's a beautiful thing to feel that you are able to help, to feel that one serves someone else. (Interviewer: And why do you believe it's beautiful, where does that concept come from?) I think from our tradition. And also religion. The first commandment of God says to love God above all else and your neighbor as yourself. So this is a way of loving thy neighbor, helping him. (P#109-105)

An Asian Indian parent stated that, "in India, pretty much you volunteer" (P#031-016). Another explained, "Then you're working for some common goals. You're putting your self-interests aside, which is what I think comes from Hinduism because it says we're all connected. And you can feel that more if we all work together" (P#011-006). These immigrants, then, grounded their engagement in their cultural traditions, and their civic focus was on the welfare of others.

Some participants were specifically motivated to ensure or enhance the *welfare of immigrant and cultural communities*. Giving voice to this third theme, an Asian Indian adolescent described her political activity as a way "to voice opinions and get a government [that] supports everyone. Then if you are an immigrant, [you] are also cared for" (P#040-020). Similarly, a Salvadoran parent explained: "I too am an immigrant and it hurts me to see that there are people that are really suffering here and are in need. They are working and they need their permit. That's why I fill them out" (P#105-103). Some participants also expressed these concerns with representation and welfare in regard to their more specific cultural community. This was most notable among Salvadorans, and typically they spoke of the "Hispanic" community. Explaining the importance of political engagement, one parent succinctly said, "to improve Hispanic communities" (P#107-104). Another elaborated: "Because if you don't participate, it's as if you don't care. On the other hand, if you participate in all the activities, you are showing the importance of and interest in your people" (P#111-106). A Salvadoran adolescent added yet another dimension to the theme by arguing that engagement simultaneously improves conditions for Hispanics and counters negative reactions to his community. Explaining why he tutored, he said,

Because I want more Hispanic people to do better in school and do good. You know, so we won't be stereotyped.... So whenever I see like a Hispanic who's like me, who's doing good in school, I tell them straight up, "Don't mess up." (P#127-114)

Some participants, then, were motivated to tutor, help others complete applications for work permits, and take part in politics out of concern with the needs and accomplishments of their immigrant and cultural communities, as well as with the representation and respect afforded these communities within the larger polity.

The fourth theme was *assistance to country of origin*. Some immigrant parents turned an eye back to the country from whence they came. This desire to assist seemed inspired not simply by a sense of connection to the country of origin but rather by a comparison of conditions in the United States and the country of origin. In other words, there was a sense of obligation as a person from El Salvador or India now living in the United States. For example, an Asian Indian parent described his and his wife's donations to a fund that they had created at his old high school in India. The fund provided full tuition for numerous girls.

> See, girls in India—there's still a lot of gender difference. Girls are not treated well. They think that girls don't need education. And it's a vicious circle. The mother is not educated, and she thinks the same thing when [her] girls are born. But when the mother is educated, you break the cycle. And I'm breaking the cycle. (P#027-014)

A Salvadoran parent contrasted the economic conditions of the United States and her country of origin:

> My husband just came this Monday from El Salvador. He told me, "If you would just see, it's horrible!" People earn $120 dollars per month. You have to pay for lodging, food, and so on. He says, "That's why there are so many robbers." There are so many things over there, unemployment—so many things. Can you imagine the people that don't have a job? That's why, thanks to God, we help out our people. But can you imagine the people that don't have nobody here. Horrible! (P#111-106)

These adults were engaged in a form of civic behavior forged out of a sense of responsibility as immigrants. They were not motivated to provide assistance in their countries of origin out of a lack of connection to the United States. The present finding harmonizes with and adds to results from research showing that sending money to one's country of origin is positively related to volunteering and political participation within the United States (Barreto & Munoz, 2003).

The fifth theme centered on engagement as a means of *bridging communities*—of coming to know others in America and them coming to know you. An adolescent

enthusiastically prescribed school engagement:

> They should be involved in school! If you're new to the culture, new to life in America, you experience how things are in America. And like I've been living [here] for 12 years. Even for me, it's very nice to see things in a different perspective and to talk to different people, because not only are there Americans in these organizations, there's Asians, there's German, you know. There're so many different cultures in these organizations. It's nice! You see things from many perspectives. (P#038-019)

A Salvadoran parent said that through civic involvement, "we get to know this country better" (P#109-105), and an Asian Indian parent said, "This country draws people from so many different parts of the world and, you know the food, the arts, and stuff like that, it's very good to share that" (P#031-016). These immigrant adolescents and parents, therefore, reasoned that civic engagement serves to bring together diverse peoples at the civic table.

At the more individual level, too, civic engagement involved *building a new social network*. This theme especially sprung from an immigrant, rather than cultural, sense of self where one had left behind one's social network and now needed to find new and sympathetic friends and acquaintances. One parent said,

> I was waiting for my green card for 10 years and what helped me was to be involved in helping, like in the church [and] to be in touch with the school. That helped me a lot too. (Interviewer: So then, you say that personally it helped you?). Uh-huh, I met more people. One meets new people. (P#107-104)

At times, this theme also tied in with a cultural sense, as explained by a Salvadoran parent:

> I think that's what we lose when we come here. When you come from countries that have very little, their people are more community oriented. When they come here, there is isolation and disconnection. So for immigrants it's almost critical. To me, it's the way to keep people healthy—mentally healthy. Because when they have left their families behind, coming to a place where they find that they cannot talk to family, you know, it makes a whole lot of difference. It makes the transition easier. People are just better faster. (P#123-112)

Civic involvement, then, was one way to find new social support and to provide it to others.

The seventh and last theme of civic engagement centered on *appreciation for American democracy*. As in providing assistance to one's country of origin, this theme often sprung from a comparison of conditions

in the United States and the country of origin or the world more generally. One adolescent said,

> What makes America different from a lot of countries is that the freedom of speech grants people the right to say what they want on any issue, which is good. Definitely good—because it alerts people in things that they might not have been able to break down or able to notice. (P#028-014)

Also speaking of freedom to be engaged, one parent from India reflected at some length on the United States and India:

> You know, growing up in India, people think: "Oh, it doesn't matter what I do, nothing will happen." America is probably the only country on the face of this earth that was formed not with geographical boundaries or tribes but more as a philosophy of life. It has nothing to do with language or religion. But it has to do with certain, you know, the Constitution and the freedoms that the Constitution provides. And I think that's why it's such a magnet for people. And I find that having lived here for 22 years, I'm very Indian. The thing that always amazed me about Americans is . . . how they talk about things. . . . This is a country where you can do it. You have the freedom to do it. And, you know, it's worth your time. (P#031-016)

As immigrants, even as people with roots in other places, there was a desire on the part of some to seize the American forum for civic expression.

According to these immigrant adolescents and parents from El Salvador and India, their cultural and immigrant identities were notable sources of civic engagement. The connection between identity and action took many forms, including drawing upon cultural traditions of service, the desire to build new social networks, and appreciation of American freedoms. Some were activities building upon bonds with the country of origin or with fellow compatriots and immigrants living in the United States, whereas other activities created bridges to people unlike oneself.

Three Cultural Themes of Disengagement

When participants spoke of why they were not engaged or why it was not important for others to be so, a few invoked their cultural or immigrant sense of self. From their accounts, three themes emerged: (a) working hard, (b) ethnic exclusion, and (c) not having citizenship. (One caveat is that due to the low number of disengaged participants, these themes were based on a fairly limited number of motives.)

Speaking as immigrants, some adults explained that *working hard* left them without the time or energy to

be civically engaged. One Salvadoran parent said: "Because of the time. I don't have the time. I work a lot. And if I had more time, [then] yes. In our country, I was a tutor on literacy" (P#109-105). Another Salvadoran used similar language: "I am really working hard in America" (P#123-112). And an adult from India explained, "Everything was new when I came. Then I went to the university, and I had a baby, and I started working a lot. So it has been very engrossing" (P#011-006). These statements echo the perception of more than 90% of Americans that immigrants work hard—even harder than natives (AP/Ipsos Poll, 2006). The statements also suggest that for some, the time and energy going toward the immigrant adjustment process leaves none for civic engagement. The statements do not support Huntington's (2004) notion of time divided between countries. These immigrants were simply too stretched for engagement in any locale.

A few participants spoke of *ethnic exclusion*. Speaking of being accepted into and involved with the civic community, one participant said, "I don't know how my ethnic background is going to work on that" (P#020-010). Another elaborated,

> And you have to think [about] stereotyping. I think unless you are a White American male, you cannot make any changes in politics in this country. It will take a while. In India where you think only man is the bread-winner, you had the prime minister who was a woman. It'll be at least 10 years before we see a non-White come in on that post [here]. (P#025-013)

To these Asian Indian and Salvadoran immigrants, a sense of not fitting into American civil life and of not being welcome left them disengaged. This is in contrast to the Salvadoran adolescent above who also spoke of "stereotyping" but was motivated to counter and overcome it through tutoring of fellow Hispanic students. These findings go hand in hand with the findings of Stepick and Stepick (2002) and Stepick et al. (this volume) that experiences with stereotyping and discrimination can lead to immigrant disengagement from traditional electoral politics (see also Bedolla, 2000), although such experiences can also motivate engagement through other venues such as unconventional politics (e.g., demonstrations) and community service (e.g., tutoring; see also Lopez & Marcelo, this volume).

The third and last theme of disengagement was rare. It was that of *not having citizenship*. For example, an Asian Indian adolescent explained his lack of political engagement by saying, "Well, we're not a citizen. We're applying. Like we have green cards and everything, but we're not like a citizen of the United States" (P#038-019). This adolescent, however, was engaged at the

community level where he apparently did not see the absence of citizenship as mattering.

The few participants who spoke of cultural motives for lack of civil engagement did not speak of an affiliation for their country of origin subtracting from their American affiliation. They spoke of being too engaged with work to do things like volunteer, organize meetings, and tutor. They spoke of others leaving or pushing them out of the political square due to their ethnicity. And they spoke of electoral politics, where not having citizenship is a hindrance.

CONCLUSION

The present immigrant adolescents and parents from El Salvador and India regarded some form of civic engagement as important for all people. Moreover, they were engaged themselves, more so at the community than the political level. Lopez (2003) found that 75% of high school seniors in a national survey reported community service or volunteering within the past 12 months. Here, 87.5% of the adolescents (all but one of whom were in high school) described being engaged. The present sample is of course not representative of all immigrants. It is a small sample from one metropolitan area. Also, many were recruited through religious institutions that may have pushed for engagement (Putnam, 2000). Nevertheless, the present socioeconomically diverse immigrant participants were civically engaged.

The majority of the immigrants' civic behaviors did not focus on cultural or immigrant issues or occur through cultural or immigrant organizations. Still, somewhat more than a quarter of behaviors did. As Stepick et al. (this volume) note, these behaviors often draw on immigrants' bilingual and bicultural skills, such as translating for elders and completing immigrant work permits. The present research shows that they may also draw on bicultural consciousness and experience, such as when sending money back to one's country of origin and acting upon appreciation for American democracy.

Finally, when it came to the motives, the immigrants drew upon a large set of conceptions that were not tied to their cultural or immigrant sense of self. But even when they did invoke cultural motives, these motives were more often sources of civic engagement than disengagement. This finding contrasts with Huntington's (2004) thesis that cultural affiliation will detract from engagement in American civil life. True, one of the seven cultural themes of engagement pertained to providing assistance to one's country of origin. But the rest did not. Huntington writes that "money talks, and . . . the remittances flowing out of America do not speak English" (p. 213). The research here and elsewhere, however, suggests that it is not quite so simple. Here, those sending money were not motivated by disconnection from the United States but from a sense of responsibility of being in the United States. Also, remittances correlate positively with political engagement (Barreto & Munoz, 2003).

Apart from money, Huntington's broader point that affiliation with another culture subtracts from American civic commitment does not find support here. Upholding some of one's traditions and values does not simply make one that much less part of American civil society. For the present immigrants, many civic activities were grounded in their cultural or immigrant sense of self. As Hindu Indians, Catholic Salvadorans, Hispanics, and immigrants more generally, they were motivated, for example, by traditions of service, a desire to improve their own communities and establish bridges to others, and appreciation of American democratic rights and responsibilities. They were acting on their motives if not stretched too thin for time or excluded by stereotypes. In Huntington's view, more of one culture equals less of another. In contrast, the present research indicates that cultural identity is not a zero-sum game.

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