

FIGHTING A GENERATIONAL DIVIDE:
An Analysis of the Interpretation of Ethnicity Between Filipino American
Generations from a Sociological Perspective

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Introduction

Many of us are familiar with School House Rock. It seems almost yesterday, we were watching the videos on our grainy classroom TV listening to a woman sing, “Lovely Lady Liberty with her book of recipes, and the finest one she's got is the great American melting pot.” This heartwarming song teaches children that America is a peaceful synthesis of cultures from all around the world, but as we get older, it becomes more apparent that this is not the case.

A racial group is a human group defined by itself or others as distinct because of perceived common physical characteristics that are held to be inherent. An ethnic group is defined as a collective within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood (Jimenez 11/1/21). The difference between these two concepts is subtle, but both are socially constructed divisions that prevent the pot from “melting”.

Due to the increasing globalization of the world, race acts as a division between groups of people, socially constructed to put certain groups in power (Cornell & Hartmann 2007). In particular, many Filipinos and Filipino Americans struggle with their racial identity due to the unique history of colonialism in the Philippines. Ever since the 1500s, the Philippines has constantly been dominated by other countries due to its optimal location for global trade and land that is rich in resources. There are few indigenous Filipinos left, and most Filipino culture is a synthesis of cultures that have colonized the country at some point (Larkin 1982). Because of this, Filipinos often struggle with their racial identity and connection to their culture. To further complicate things, the generational gap between first and second generation Filipino Americans is stark. Two interviews were conducted to study an instance of this. The findings of this study

report that though the subjects of this study all identify as Filipino American, the unique socialization of their generation has led them to interpret their ethnicity differently.

Respondent Information

The first interview was with a first generation self-identified Filipino American couple who immigrated to the United States in the 1970s, who have been married for over 50 years. For the sake of this interview, we will call them Jon and Mary. Jon and Mary grew up in the Philippines, but migrated to the United States in the 1970s, following the trend of many other Filipinos. After a few years of struggling to find work, Jon eventually found a job as an engineer, and Mary worked for an airline. They raised three children who were all educated in the United States, and live comfortably with their own families now. Jon and Mary are involved in American politics, and often flip between identifying themselves as Republicans and Democrats. Currently, they are retired and in their 70s, residing in Orange County, California. It should be noted that Jon and Mary are my grandparents, a relationship that might have affected their answers.

The second interview was with a second generation Filipino American who is a research associate at a policy research company focusing on data collection and evaluation. For the sake of this interview, we will call her Brenda. She was born and educated in the United States. In addition to her full time job, Brenda is active in an organization called Anakbayan which is an anti-imperialist organization of Filipino youth that organizes for national democracy with a socialist perspective in the Philippines. Brenda is currently in her 20s and resides in Washington D.C., using her optimal location to put pressure on the federal government, fighting for systemic change. She contacts legislators and senators regarding human rights in the Philippines and organizes collective actions to bring awareness to systems of injustice that affect Filipinos and

Filipino Americans. Both interviews were conducted in a socially distant manner over Zoom, and I would like to take the opportunity to thank all three interviewees for their time and their valuable contributions to this study.

Interview Analysis

Brenda has faced much different experiences than Mary and Jon in terms of racism. For example, Brenda can recall a time in grade school when her classmates made fun of her Filipino food, but Jon and Mary have lost court cases, been denied rental cars, and faced outright discrimination in their workplace. This is most likely due to the generational difference and society becoming more accepting over time, but also because of the difference in socialization between that of an immigrant and that of a Filipino American born in America. Race and ethnicity are social constructs, so it makes sense that people from the same country with different social experiences would interpret their race or ethnicity differently. Both interviewees were asked what they thought their race and ethnicity were at the beginning of the interview. Mary referred to her race as “Filipino with a little Spanish blood” but when asked about her ethnicity, she replied “Not anymore Filipino... maybe Filipino American because we’ve been here a long time”. The fact that she sees her ethnicity as something changing can be explained by the fact that ethnicity is a social construct (Cornell & Hartmann 2007). Her long term residency has instilled American culture in her, and consequently an American ethnicity. However, when Brenda, a Filipino American born in the States was asked about her race and ethnicity, she replies, “I see my race as being Filipino...I don’t think of myself as having an ethnicity...I don’t necessarily see my ethnicity as being Filipino”. The discrepancy here can be attributed to their connection with Filipino and American culture, since culture is a defining characteristic for ethnicity (Jimenez 11/3/21). Rather than focusing on their biological make up or physical

appearance, both Brenda and Mary considered their connection with Filipino and American culture before deciding what their ethnicity was. Since Mary feels connected to both Filipino and American culture, she identifies herself as Filipino American. Brenda, however, is more unsure of her cultural identity since she feels disconnected from both American and Filipino culture. She says, “I went to college and realized more and more that I was not a white person, and I realized that I felt very disconnected from my cultural heritage of being Filipino”. So why do two Filipino Americans feel so differently about their ethnicity? The answer lies in their past experiences and how they were socialized into their ethnicity.

When Jon and Mary immigrated to the United States in the 1970s, they were instantly met with the hardships of an economic recession. Jon recounts the struggle of trying to find employment in California as a Filipino immigrant. He says, “We were never treated equal. If you’re an immigrant with an accent, you are never treated the same.” He also brings up a story about how he and Mary were discriminated against by their neighbors and when they sued them in court for it, the court verdict was decided without even hearing Jon and Mary speak. Jon commented, “It gave us the impression that there is strong racism in the community still. It affects us emotionally up to now, and I don’t think we will ever get over it.” A traumatic experience like this would have a great impact on one’s racial and cultural identity and how they interact with the community. Since they have faced backlash for not fitting in with white culture, it would make sense that they would feel a strong desire to assimilate. In contrast to this, Brenda says she has only experienced targeted racism in the form of microaggressions. These different socializations would explain why Jon and Mary feel the need to assimilate into American culture, while Brenda actively tries to embrace her Filipino culture. Their social experiences

affect how they see their ethnicity, supporting Cornell and Hartmann's point that ethnicity is a social construct.

Cornell and Hartmann also refer to race as a social status. They claim, "the designation of race is, in and of itself, an assertion of power to define one culture against the 'other' and in doing so to create a rigid and presumably permanent social hierarchy". Brenda, Jon, and Mary have all internalized this. When recounting his experiences with racism in the workplace, Jon says, "But I accepted it, being a second class citizen, that's how it is". Similarly, when talking about her experience with racism, Brenda says, "I had internalized the racial hierarchy where white people are at the top, Asian people are kind of second, and Black and Brown people are towards the bottom." The main difference where Brenda differs from Jon and Mary is how they view the permanence of this racial hierarchy. Given their past experiences, Jon and Mary have accepted racism as something that will always be around. "There's always racism here...you cannot change that, Sagada. In my opinion, racism will always be here" said Mary. Brenda, however, is a community organizer and actively works to uproot institutionalized racism. When talking about her work, she says, "There is nothing I as an individual can do to change them on my own and it's only through organizations and collective efforts that you will change it". Despite their differing opinions on the permanence of racism, all interviewees acknowledge racism as an institution.

An institution is defined as a complex group of interdependent roles (duties and behaviors associated with a particular status) that, together, perform a social role and reproduce themselves over time (Berger & Luckman). We can think of different races as different roles, where there are certain societal cues that tell us how to act (Goffman 1959). Many people are conscious of their race in social settings, especially when they are in the minority, and act a

certain way because of this. In particular, Brenda mentioned how she began to question her identity when she went from living in a diverse community to a predominantly white college. Her role as a Filipino American changed based on her setting and the people around her, playing their racial roles in this social dramaturgy as well. Racism also performs a social role since race is a social status (Cornell & Hartmann 2007). Furthermore, it can give people of the same race a sense of belonging and inspire feelings of nationalism. Brenda wanted to feel more connected to her race, so she got involved in Filipino organizations that fight against U.S. imperialism. Finally, we can see that racism reproduces itself over time since it is embedded in stereotypes and deeply rooted in the economy (Jimenez 11/3/21). Thus, we see how racism is an institution and why it is so difficult to change.

Along with institutions, race played a notable role with the interviewees' relations to other pillars of society. One key finding is that even though the interviewees had similar values, they came to different conclusions about how they go about acting on them. A value is defined as a shared moral belief that guides individual and collective action (Jimenez 10/4/21). The values themselves are social constructs, since we assign values to characteristics that have no inherent meaning (Hummel 10/8/21). However, even though a value is defined as something that guides individual action, two people with the same values can act very differently based on their own socialization process with said value. We can see an example of this in Brenda, Jon, and Mary's experiences. One thing that they all value is equality and treating people the same regardless of their race. Mary cited an example of cultural graduations. Cultural graduations are graduation ceremonies specific to certain races or ethnicities, allowing the students to celebrate both their graduation and culture (Kopetman 2017). When talking about separate graduations for different cultures, Mary said, "It's not right for them. They have to assimilate in whatever they do. They

have to try to change society to be more inclusive....change the whole place. Don't look at your skin color." To Mary and Jon, equality is analogous to assimilation. Equality is also one of Brenda's values, but when talking about her motivation for community organizing, she says, "Capitalism and all these systems of oppression, including imperialism...they're not inherent to how things are...and because they're so fucked up, I want to change them. As someone with the resources, education and time to do this, I also feel the personal want and responsibility to try and address these systems of oppression." In contrast to Jon and Mary, Brenda interprets equality as anti-imperialism and uprooting the systems that cause racial hierarchies in the first place. These statements are reflective of all the interviewees' ideologies, since ideology can be thought of as an understanding of cause and effect (Jimenez 10/4/21). Despite having the same value of equality, Jon and Mary have a different ideology than Brenda, most likely due to their different socializations given past experiences, along with generational differences (Jimenez 10/4/21)

Conclusion

These two interviews from Jon, Mary, and Brenda provide important insight into the reality of the racial identity struggles of Filipino Americans. Racial tensions are evident throughout the United States for all people of color, especially the Black and Brown community. Effects of racial division manifest themselves in government representation, social status, the economy, and many other parts of society (Pew Research Center 2016). Within these racial divisions, we also see a division between different generations. Research pertaining to generational differences is necessary for understanding how viewpoints change over time. It also gives valuable insight to the socialization process of how people identify and interpret their race and ethnicity, since the socialization factors between the two generations lead to generational differences. The discourse surrounding tension between different generations of people of color is new, since there has been

a rapid increase in immigration starting in 1970 (Migration Policy Institute 2020). In particular, one problem in the Asian American community is older immigrants and today's youth not understanding each other's experiences. For Filipino Americans, this is further complicated by the fact that the United States has had a great influence on Filipino culture and migration. From these interviews, we see how Jon and Mary faced very overt racial discrimination when they first immigrated to the United States, and today they value assimilation, hoping to disregard their race in social situations. As a result of growing up in America, Brenda feels disconnected from her Filipino culture, but that racism through microaggressions made her feel disconnected from American culture as well. But given the historical injustice of how America colonized the Philippines, and Brenda's interests in uplifting the oppressed, she chose to embrace her Filipino side as a reaction, leading her to embrace it and fight for the separation of American influence on Filipino culture. These ideologies sometimes clash over the Thanksgiving dinner table, but analyzing the problem from a sociological perspective is necessary for creating a deeper understanding of each other and overcoming the communication barrier between generations.

Appendix

Interview Prompts

- What is your race? What is your ethnicity?
- What are your ways of staying connected to your culture?
- Do you participate in Filipino traditions?
- What do you think of movements in the United States to fight against racism?
- Have you ever experienced discrimination because of your race?
- Has your perception of your race or ethnicity changed over time?

Quotes

- “My cultural heritage is really through learning about history and learning about the present struggles of people back in the Philippines...I guess I feel more motivated to connect to my roots through history and activism rather than cultural traditions” - Brenda
- “I sometimes feel it in my job where the combination of being a person of color, not a man, and young, makes people surprised when I can do a good job” - Brenda
- “I have never had the regret of [coming to the United States] and I am proud that I stayed here and I accepted what’s here in the States and where I am” - Jon
- “Your dad and your Uncle John and Jamie- there’s a big change being a minority compared to our generation because they were educated here” - Mary

Respondent Information

Name	Gender	Occupation	Age	Parents Ed.	Education	Birth Place
Jon	Male	Retired	Mid 70s	Unknown	Bachelors	Philippines
Mary	Female	Retired	Mid 70s	Unknown	Bachelors	Philippines
Brenda	Female	Policy Research	Mid 20s	Bachelors	Bachelors	United States

**Age is an approximation to protect interviewees’ identities*

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