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Ethnic Identity Formation Among Basque-American Adolescents

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Cover Page Footnote

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Youth Choosing Basqueness: Degrees of Ethnic Identity among Basque Youth

Catherine M. Petrissans, PhD

Introduction

I can distinctly remember a moment in third grade when my teacher assigned a project; we were to each write a report on a country. Immediately I wanted to write about the “Basque Country”, but my teacher said I could not and would have to choose France instead. I remember being confused. I thought there was a Basque Country, but my teacher disagreed. I also knew that I was Basque, French, and American, but I didn’t know how these things all fit together. I also recollect asking my mother for help. I don’t recall what she said, but I do remember continuing to be confused. But I never again remember speaking about my confusion to anyone else. I recall going to the library and pulling William Douglass’ *Amerikanuak* (1975) off the shelf. As a child I was surprised to find that someone actually wrote a whole book about Basques and I was amazed that a non-Basque would be so interested in my culture. Gradually through my own exploration and mostly at the library, I slowly figured things out for myself.

But today children have access to the internet. They can google “Basque” and read all about it on Wikipedia. This has caused me to wonder. What are today’s Basque-American children thinking? Are they aware of their ethnicity? Do they think about their ethnicity? Are Basque-American children of today less confused than I was? Do they explore their ethnicity at the library the way I did or are they more likely to use the internet? And how are children influencing each other’s understanding of what it means to be Basque? Do they talk to their Basque and non-Basque friends about their ethnicity? Are children told they are Basque or taught how to be Basque by family members? If so, who aids in the construction of their identities?

To begin to answer these questions, I conducted interviews with one hundred adolescent and pre-adolescent children who attended an Udaleku held in Bakersfield, California from June sixteenth to the twenty-eighth, 2013. Interviews were conducted with fifty-one boys and forty-nine girls between the ages of nine and fifteen. Of the children interviewed, forty-five lived in Bakersfield, twenty-four were from the San Francisco Area, fourteen hailed from Chino, California, and seventeen flew in from Elko, Salt Lake City, Los Vegas, Reno, Fresno, and Winnemucca. Fifty-six of the children surveyed had previously attended camp, while forty-four participants joined Udaleku for the very first time. Thus, Udaleku brought together a diverse sample of Basque-American children from across the Western United States.

Together the North American Basque Organization and the Kern County Basque Club maintained responsibility for the selection of campers. In order to attend camp, each child had to be affiliated with a Basque club, had to be between the ages of ten and fifteen, and had to demonstrate proof of health insurance. As campers spent the evenings during camp with host families in Bakersfield, the feasibility of housing also played a role in admittance. After meeting initial qualifications, one hundred and two children were granted admission to camp on a first come first serve basis. And, of those admitted to Udaleku, one hundred were interviewed.

In this article multiple questions related to ethnic formation among Basque-American adolescents and pre-adolescents who have attended the two week long Udaleku will be considered. Have the children thought about what it means to be Basque?" What is the extent of camp attendees' confidence or confusion about their ethnicity as well as their "attempts at" or "methods of" exploring their ethnicity? At what age does the average Basque-American child begin to explore his or her ethnicity and what does this exploration entail? Do children talk to others about their ethnicity? Have children been told or taught they are Basque and, if so, by whom?



Udaleku participants playing the *txistu* or Basque flute at the final performance that concludes the 2 week camp. [Source: EuskalKazeta, 2013]

Literature Review

Social psychological research on ethnic identity formation among adolescents often stems from Erik Erikson's seminal work, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* in which Erikson (1968) located the search for and development of one's identity as the critical psychosocial task of adolescence. In the "identity versus role-confusion" stage identity achievement involves reconciling identities imposed upon oneself by one's family and society with one's need to assert control and seek out an identity that brings one satisfaction, feelings of industry, and competence. If the identity crisis during adolescence is not resolved, the individual will experience "identity confusion" and will be unable to successfully move to the next stage of development.

James Marcia's identity status theory (1973) elaborated on Erik Erikson's identity model to include identity formation processes that can be applied to many identities including ethnic identities. In Marcia's model, however, there is no identity achievement or confusion during adolescence nor does every adolescent necessarily experience a "crisis", but rather this stage is better understood as a time when choices are being re-examined and new alternatives are explored. For Marcia, both exploration and commitment are the two processes contributing to identity differences during adolescence. That is, whether or not (or the extent to which) one explores identity alternatives and whether or not (or the extent to which) one makes a commitment to chosen alternatives.

Combining both Erikson's (1968) identity formation model and Marcia's (1973) identity status theory, psychologist Jean Phinney (1990, 2000, 2003) proposed a progressive three-stage model of ethnic identity formation. In the "Unexamined Ethnic Identity" Stage, children give ethnicity little thought and/or derive their ethnic identity from significant others. Phinney considers these early experiences with others as crucial for children in regards to their ethnic identity development. During Phinney's "Ethnic Identity Search" stage, which typically occurs at the onset of adolescence, there is a questioning of accepted views of ethnicity and a greater personal understanding of ethnicity in a more abstract sense. In the final "Ethnic Identity Achievement" stage one's ethnicity is internalized. This stage is characterized by clarity about one's ethnic identity and a realistic assessment of one's ethnic group. Although a positive group-esteem is not part of the definition of Phinney's third stage, having a positive sense of ethnic group membership is often expected of individuals who have an achieved ethnic identity and is highly correlated with ethnic identity achievement (Phinney, 1992).



The author conducting an interview with one of the 100 respondents. [Source: *Bakersfield Californian*, 2013]

According to Erickson (1968), Marcia (1973), and Phinney (2000), ethnic identity is fluid and not fixed; it is constructed and modified as individuals gain an increased awareness of “self” over time. In the aforementioned models ethnic identity is an achievement that takes time and Erickson, Marcia and Phinney all agree that, in general, older adolescents are more likely to have an achieved identity than younger children. While Phinney (1989) argues that ethnic identity development is a process experienced during adolescence, much less research has examined ethnic identity in children under the age of twelve. In terms of younger children, researchers such as Bernal, Knight, Garza, Ocampo, and Cota (1990) have tended to assume that pre-school and elementary-age children are not capable of the abstract thinking skills that are required for deeper thought about what it means to be a member of one’s ethnic group. But more recent research has demonstrated that we should not underestimate children’s abilities and that, in fact, even young children in pre-school are able to understand nuanced conceptions of race and ethnicity (Van Ausdale and Feagin 1996, 2001).



Udaleku participants assembled by the Bakersfield “fronton” or handball court. [Source: *Bakersfield Californian*, 2013]

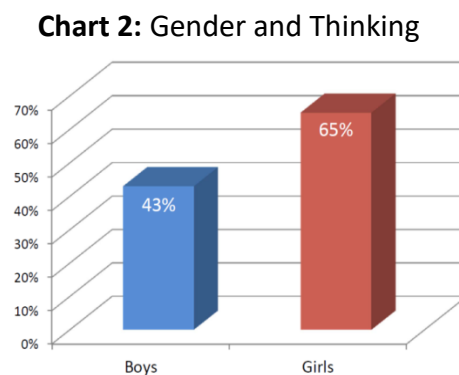
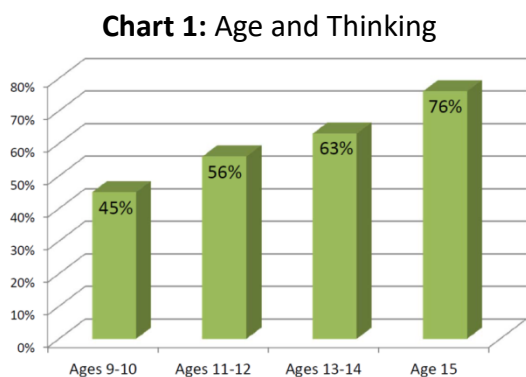
Another body of literature explores “collaborative peer culture” in which children and preadolescents together negotiate each other’s identities (Adler and Adler 1998; Corsaro 1988, 1992; Eder 1995; Fine 1987; Thorne 1993; Van Ausdale and Feagin 1996, 2001). Specifically, Valerie Ann Moore (2002) conducted research at two summer camps, and concluded that kids did not merely reproduce their parents’ or counselors’ race categorization schemes and assessments. Instead she found that while the kids’ collaborative peer cultures reflected the larger adult culture and community around them, their collaborative peer culture’s conceptions of race were also unique. In this regard, a goal of this article is to compare and contrast the ethnic identity formation of Basque-American adolescents and pre-adolescents between the ages of nine and fifteen who attended the Bakersfield Udaleku. At what age do Basque-American children begin to think about and explore their ethnicity? How do children explore their ethnicity? And is their sense of ethnic identity primarily derived from the self or from significant others?



Udaleku participants in the Kern County Basque Club’s park. [Source: EuskalKultura.com 2013]

Findings

An analysis of one hundred surveys revealed that the majority, fifty-four percent (54%) of those interviewed, have thought about what it means to be Basque. In terms of age, and as illustrated in Chart 1, the majority of nine and ten year olds have never thought about what it means to be Basque, but the majority of Basque-American children begin to think about their ethnicity between the ages of eleven and twelve, and that by the age of fifteen, the vast majority (76%) have contemplated what it means to be Basque. In terms of gender, and as illustrated in Chart 2, the majority of girls (65%) have given the question some thought, while far fewer boys (43%) report having thought about what being Basque means. Those with only a Basque father were slightly more likely (56%) to have thought about being Basque, and children from the Bay Area (67%) and Nevada (82%) also demonstrated above average rates of contemplating what it means to be Basque, as did those who reported coming to camp to learn, fifty-seven percent (57%) of whom also reported having previously thought about what it means to be Basque.



On a scale from 1-10, one representing “I am unsure of what it means to be Basque” and ten representing “I am totally confident of what it means to be Basque,” the average respondent received a score of 6.8. Interestingly, there was no significant correlation between “thought” and “confidence.” Indeed, in several circumstances those who had given the least thought, scored higher than average in terms of confidence. For instance, although fifteen year olds had reported the highest rate of “thought” with seventy-three percent (73%) of fifteen year olds reporting giving it thought, these same individuals also scored below average in confidence at 6.63. As revealed in Chart 3, although fewer boys (43%) had reported thinking about what it means to be Basque, a larger percent of girls (65%) indicated the same. And although girls indicated higher rates of thought than boys, at the same time, boys had slightly higher rates of

confidence (6.82) than girls (6.78). And, as illustrated in Chart 4, although those who were forced to go to camp had the lowest rate of “thought” with only seventeen percent (17%) reporting having thought about their ethnicity, these individuals also had the highest rate of confidence at 7.17. This rate was higher than for those who reported coming to camp to learn even though sixty-seven percent (67%) of those campers had reported thinking about their ethnicity. And, finally, while those from Wyoming and Utah had the lowest rate of thought at only 17%, they had the highest rate of confidence of any other group at 7.83.

Chart 3: Thinking, Confidence and Gender

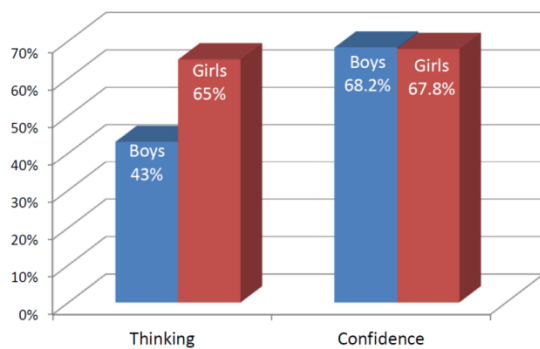
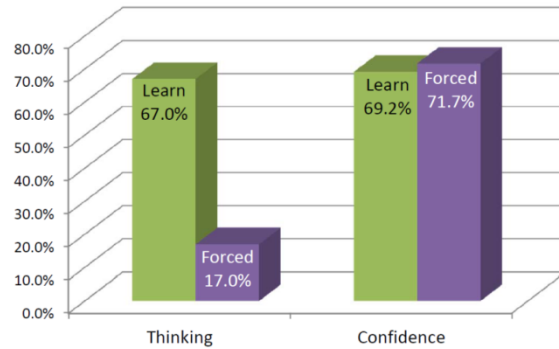


Chart 4: Thinking, Confidence and reason for camp



So what is going on here? Perhaps this means that children are relatively confused about their ethnicity or that thinking does not necessarily lead to confidence. Indeed, when pressed further and asked not just have you thought about what it means to be Basque, but have you actually explored the idea further, numbers drop even lower. While the majority of respondents (54%) have thought about what it means to be Basque, a minority (43%) have explored the idea further. Of those who have explored his or her ethnicity, the majority have done so by talking to others. In terms of age, and as revealed in Chart 5, there was a clear dividing line in responses, with the majority of nine, ten, and eleven year olds never having explored the question while the majority of those twelve and older having explored the question. And of the nine and ten year olds who had explored the question further, one-hundred percent (100%) of them, reported doing so by talking to someone they know. In contrast, the majority of children eleven and older who have explored the question have done so on their own, mostly through the internet, and secondarily at the library.

Chart 5: Age and Exploration

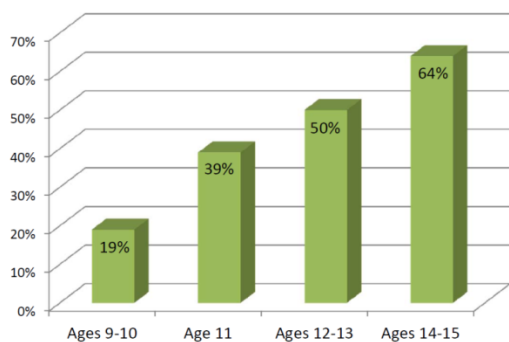
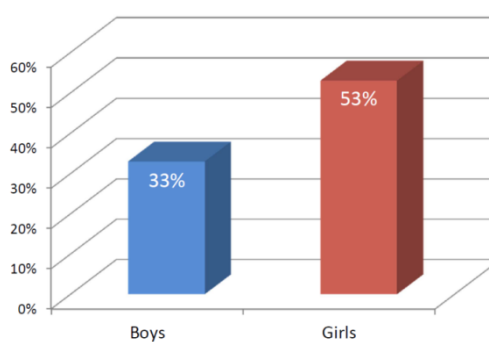


Chart 6: Gender and Exploration



In addition to age, gender differences regarding ethnic exploration also materialized. As pictured in Chart 6 above, the majority of girls (53%) have explored their ethnicity, whereas far fewer boys, indeed only thirty-three percent (33%), indicate having ever explored their ethnicity. Of those who have explored, and as illustrated in Chart 7, girls do more talking to others (52%) while boys are more likely to consult information on the internet (40%) for clarification or answers. In terms of family composition, those with only a Basque father were more likely (56%) to have explored his or her ethnicity. As shown in Chart 8, those from Nevada (82%) also demonstrated above average rates of exploration in comparison to children from all other cities. One hundred percent (100%) of those who were forced to come to camp indicated that they had never explored what it means to be Basque, while conversely, forty-two percent (42%) of those who came to camp to “have fun” and fifty three percent (53%) of those who came to camp “to learn” had further explored their ethnicity.

Chart 7: Gender and method of Exploration

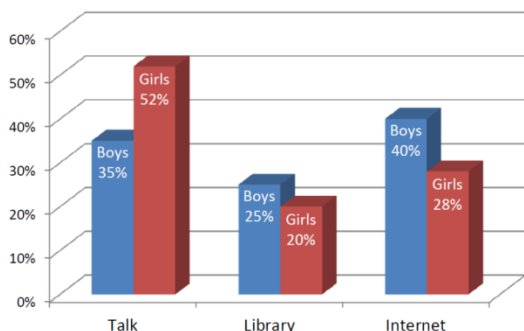
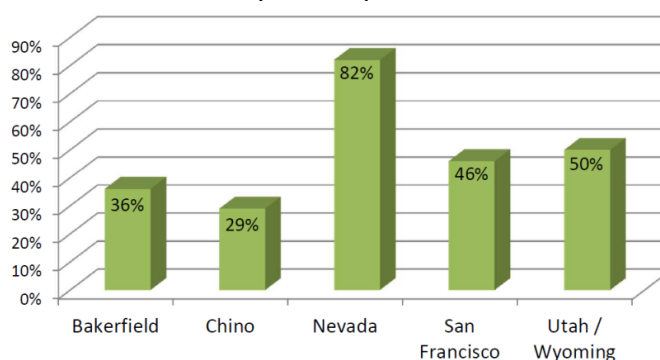
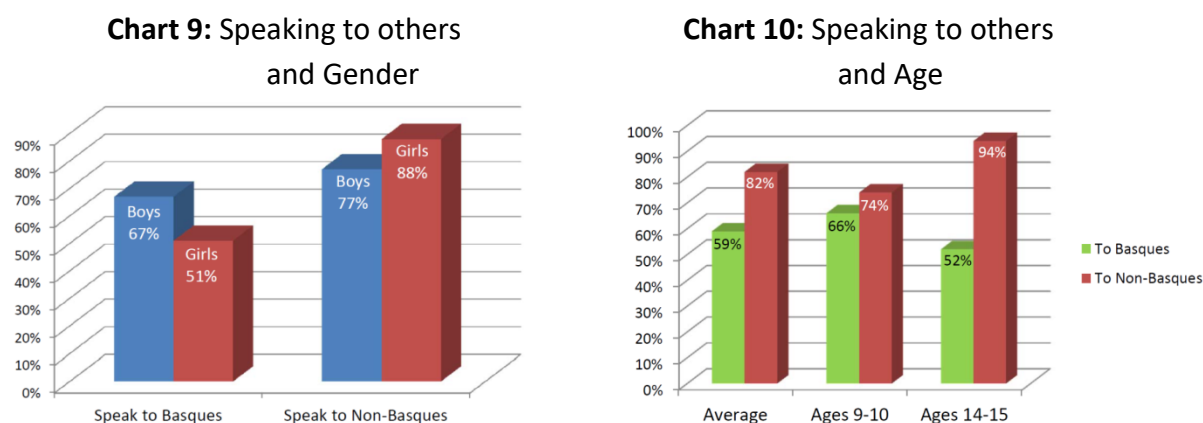


Chart 8: City and Exploration



The majority of respondents reported at least occasionally talking to friends about being Basque. More than half (59%), indicated speaking about being Basque with other Basques, but an even greater percentage (82%), reported communicating to non-Basques about their ethnicity. As illustrated in Chart 9, boys are more likely than girls to speak to Basques, while girls are more likely than boys to speak to non-Basques. And as revealed in Chart 10, age also makes a difference. While nine and ten year olds have an above average rate of speaking to Basques, older children who are fourteen or fifteen, have an above average rate of speaking to non-Basques. At eighty-six percent (86%), those with two Basque parents had a higher than average score of talking to non-Basque with thirty three percent (33%) indicating that they “often” spoke to non-Basques about their ethnicity.



As illustrated in Chart 11 below, children from Wyoming and Utah displayed the highest rate of talking to both “in-group” and “out-group” members, with one hundred percent (100%) of respondents from these states indicated speaking to non-Basques about their ethnicity. Meanwhile, campers from Chino had the lowest reported in-group (50%) and out-group (64%) communication rates. And as demonstrated in Chart 12, those who were forced to come to camp, revealed an interesting pattern of being far more likely than average to speak to fellow Basque “in-group” members. Indeed eighty-three percent (83%) of those forced to come to camp spoke to Basques, as opposed to the average rate of fifty-nine percent (59%). And conversely, those who were not forced to attend camp, were more likely to speak to non-Basques about their ethnicity.

Chart 11: Communities and talking to others

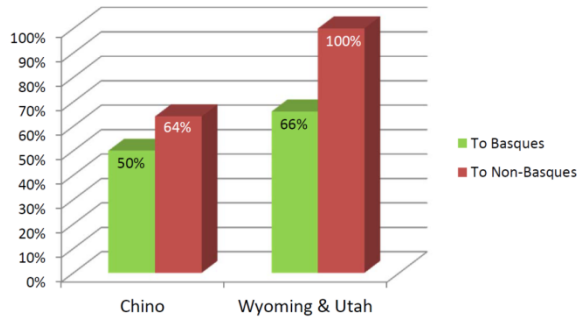
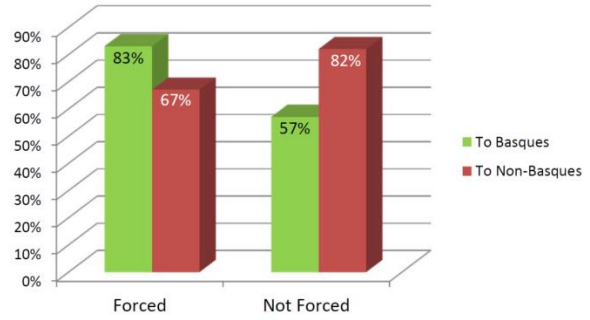


Chart 12: Forced to go and talking to others



The vast majority of interviewees (81%) report having been told they are Basque by family members. Interestingly, and as shown in Chart 13, gender makes a difference. While ninety-two percent (92%) of boys are told they are Basque, only seventy percent (70%) of girls report ever having been told they are Basque. Or conversely, thirty percent (30%) of girls report having never been told they were Basque, as opposed to only eight percent (8%) of boys. And not only are a greater percentage of boys being told they are Basque in comparison to girls, boys report being told they are Basque more often than girls. As Chart 14 illustrates, ten percent more boys than girls report being “often” told they are Basque.

Chart 13: Gender and being told by family members

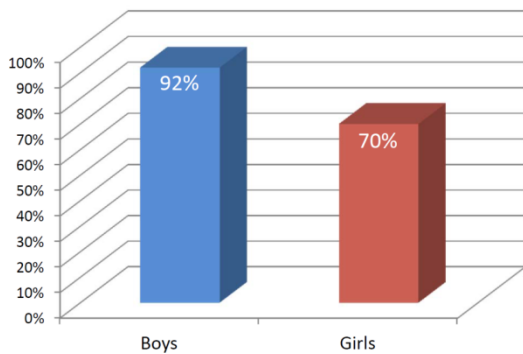
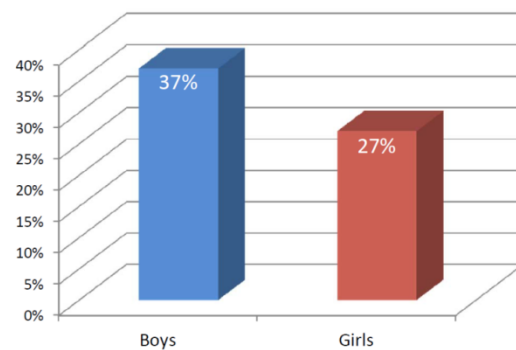


Chart 14: Gender and being told “often” by family members



Although girls are less likely to be told they are Basque by family members, surveys also reveal that overall mothers are the ones who primarily tell their children that they are Basque. Indeed, thirty-three percent (33%) of children report being told they are Basque by their mothers, thirty percent (30%) by their grand-fathers, twenty percent (20%) by their grand-mothers, and seventeen percent (17%) by their fathers. As illustrated in Chart 15, mothers are particularly likely to play a primary role in telling children they are Basque when children are twelve or younger, but fathers play a greater role in doing so when children are teenagers. And as pictured in Chart 16, grandmothers play a greater role than grandfathers when children are younger, and grandmothers become more involved than grandfathers when children are in their teens. More than any other family member, mothers exhibit the highest rate (40%) of telling their daughters they are Basque, while grandfathers (38%) have the highest rate of telling grandsons.

Chart 15: Age and who tells children they are Basque

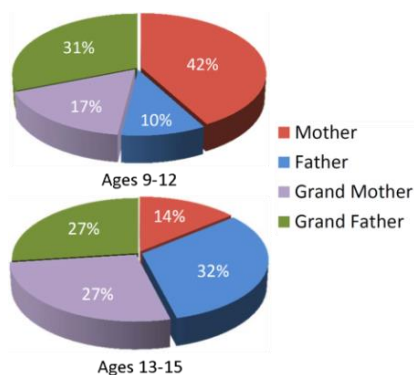
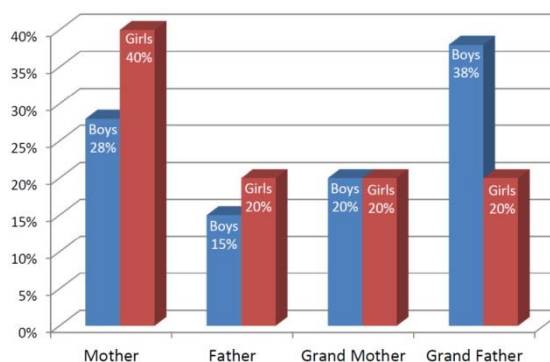


Chart 16: Gender and who tells children they are Basque



Whereas eighty-one percent (81%) of all interviewees report being told they are Basque, fewer (69%) report somehow being “taught” they are Basque. In addition to telling their children they are Basque, overall mothers are also the ones who primarily teach their children that they are Basque. Indeed, thirty-three percent (36%) of children report being taught they are Basque by their mothers, twenty-nine percent (29%) by their fathers, eighteen percent (18%) by their grand-fathers, and sixteen percent (16%) by their grand-mothers. In terms of gender, and as revealed in Chart 17, more boys (71%) report being taught by family members that they are Basque as opposed to girls (67%). Also, when it comes to gender and as illustrated in Chart 18, girls are more likely than boys to report being taught by their grandmothers, while boys report being taught more often than girls by their mothers, fathers, and grandfathers. In addition, surveys reveal that grandmothers are particularly more likely to teach granddaughters, while fathers are particularly more likely to teach sons.

Chart 17: Gender and teaching children they are Basque

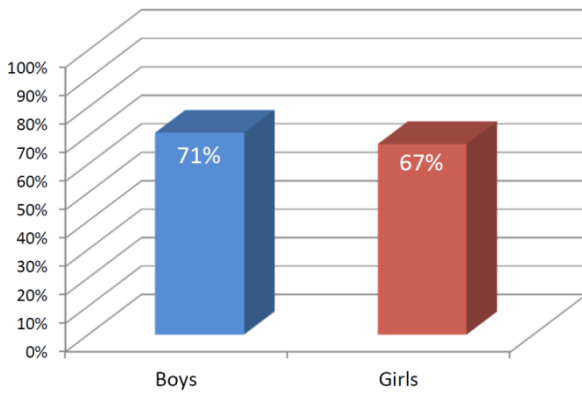
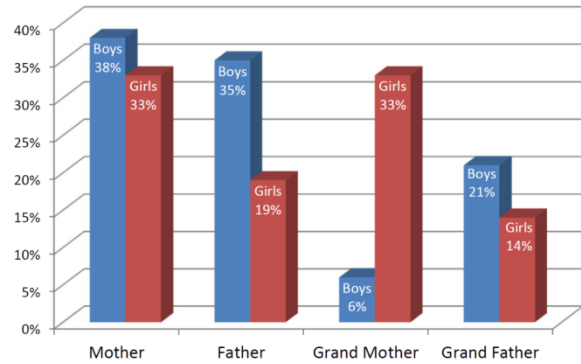


Chart 18: Gender and who teaches children they are Basque



Participants were asked “How Basque do you feel on a scale from 1 to 10” with one represented “I don’t feel Basque at all” and ten represented “I feel extremely Basque.” An analysis of surveys revealed that on average children reported feeling 8.65. However, as Chart 19 illustrates, although Basque ethnic identity among camp participants increases with age, even nine year olds have a relatively high degree of identity at 8.1. In terms of gender, and as noted in Chart 20, boys reported a slightly higher ethnic identity than girls. As Chart 21 describes, youth with two Basque parents expressed feeling more Basque overall than those with only one Basque parent. And, as revealed in Chart 22, children from Nevada demonstrated the highest average rate of Basque identity of all communities surveyed.

Chart 19: Age and Ethnic Identity

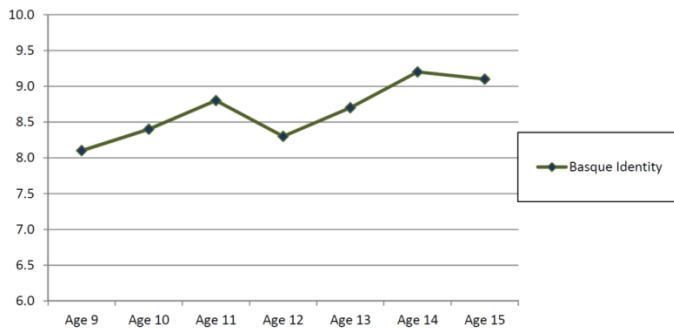


Chart 20: Gender and Ethnic Identity

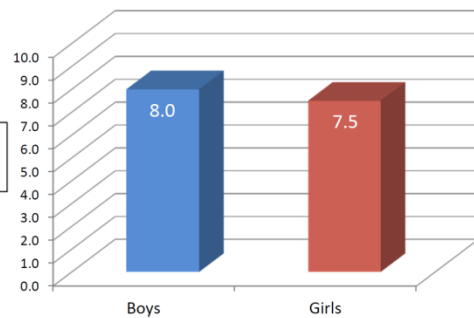


Chart 21: Family and Ethnic Identity

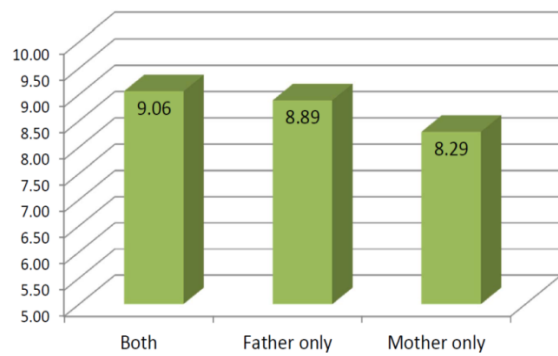
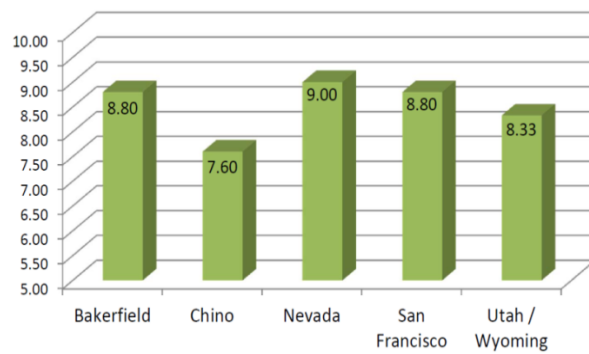


Chart 22: Community and Ethnic Identity



Udaleku participant hoping the other players call for “mus” to get some better cards in the Basque card game of *Mus*. [Source: *Bakersfield Californian*, 2013]

Concluding Analysis

In general surveys revealed that at least half of Basque-American youth have thought about their ethnicity. Interviewees report a high degree of confidence in their ethnic understanding and Basque youth overwhelmingly indicate that they “feel” Basque. While the majority of respondents reported having thought about their ethnicity, fewer than half of those surveyed have explored their ethnicity and when they did so it was primarily through talking to others. More than half of Basque-American youth indicated speaking about being Basque with other Basques, but an even greater percentage said they communicating to non-Basques about their ethnicity. The vast majority of Basque-American youth report having been told they are Basque by family members and also having been taught how to be Basque. Overall and more than any other family member, children report primarily being told that they are Basque, and taught how to be Basque, by their mothers.

In general thinking about ethnicity among those interviewed increases with age. And of those who have thought about their ethnicity, the majority will begin to do so between the ages of eleven and twelve. The older a Basque-American child is, the more likely they are to explore their ethnicity. While younger children report exploring their ethnicity by talking to others, older children are more likely to peruse the internet. And while nine and ten year olds speak to Basques more than the average Basque-American youth, fourteen and fifteen year olds are more likely than average to speak to non-Basques. Children are primarily told that they are Basque by their mothers. This is particularly the case when children are younger, while fathers play a larger role when children are teens. And although Basque ethnic identity among camp participants increases with age, surveys reveal that even nine year olds have a relatively high degree of Basque ethnic identity.



Udaleku organizers. The program is coordinated by a local group of Basque volunteers, and also some instructors brought over from the Basque Country. [Source: EuskalKultura.com 2013]

Data analysis revealed that although the majority of boys surveyed had not thought about their ethnicity and the majority of girls had, boys still exhibited a slightly higher rate of confidence in their understanding than girls. In addition to doing more thinking, girls also reported doing a good amount more exploring than boys. Of those, who had explored their ethnicity, the technique girls were most likely to use involved talking to others, whereas, boys were more likely to look to the internet for answers. Surveys revealed another gender difference, that is, boys are more likely than girls to speak to Basques, while girls are more likely than boys to speak to non-Basques. A particularly interesting finding uncovered in this research, is that boys are much more likely than girls to report being told that they are Basque and they are also more likely to be taught how to be Basque. And, perhaps as a result, boys report feeling more Basque than do girls.

In terms of family composition, Basque-American children with only a Basque father demonstrate above average rates of thinking about being Basque in addition to exploring ethnicity, while those with two Basque parents exhibited an above average rate of talking to non-Basques about their ethnicity as well as a higher reported ethnic identity overall. Camp attendees from Nevada thought about their ethnicity the most, explored their ethnicity much more than most of the other camp attendees and reported feeling more Basque than children from all other cities. Basque-American youth from Wyoming and Utah stood out with the highest rate of talking to both Basques and non-Basques about their ethnicity. Those who reported coming to camp to learn, were the most likely to have both thought about and explored their ethnicity. Meanwhile, of those who indicated having been “forced” to go to camp, one hundred percent (100%) said they had never before explored their ethnicity and were also more likely than average to speak to Basques, rather than non-Basques, about their ethnicity.

All in all, the one hundred Basque-American youth that attended Udaleku were clearly aware of their ethnicity and reported high rates of ethnic identity. About half had previously thought about their ethnicity, the majority beginning to do so around the age of eleven or twelve. The majority did not indicate being confused but, instead, reported being quite confident in their ethnic understanding. Fewer than half of the Basque youth explored their ethnicity, and those that did primarily did so by talking to others. Those who did explore their ethnicity were primarily girls, those with only a Basque father, and also children from Nevada. The vast majority reported talking about their ethnicity with other Basques, but even more commonly communicating with non-Basques. The vast majority indicated having being told that he or she was Basque and also being taught they were Basque by their mothers, but boys were quite a bit more likely to be told and taught than girls.



Udaleku participants during a meal break. [Source: *The Bakersfield Californian*, 2013]