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Italian American Ethnic Identity Persistence: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the persistence of ethnic identity among second- and fourth-generation Italian American emerging adults. In particular, the relational and college influences affecting its development were examined. The findings indicate that a distinct Italian American ethnic identity persists in this population, although it evolves with distance from the immigrant generation. We found that Italian American identity is relationally dynamic and shaped by many factors, most notably, family ethnic socialization, peer relationships, college experiences, ethnic pride, exposure to Italian culture, and life transitions. These findings extend our understanding of the cyclical nature of ethnic identity development within a specific ethnic group and the unique cultural forces shaping the identity of Italian Americans.

KEYWORDS

College; ethnic identity; ethnic pride; familial ethnic socialization; Italian American

Ethnic and racial identities are central in shaping individuals' values, beliefs, goals, and behaviors (Leong & Chou, 1994). In an increasingly diverse United States, ethnic identity development, as a central component of self-concept, will continue to matter. Many immigrants have transmitted ethnic identities to their children and grandchildren (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Weisskirch, & Wang, 2010; Waters & Jimenez, 2005). Later generations' identification with the cultural values and traditions of their ethnic and American identities has significant implications for psychosocial well-being, regardless of ethnic group (Schwartz et al., 2010). Yet, little is known about how third and later generations perceive their immigrant heritage and how it influences their educational and occupational attainment, particularly for post-1965 immigrants (Foner & Kasinitz, 2007). In addition, as the American culture evolves, we need a better understanding of how ethnic identity develops and to what extent it persists through generations of ethnic groups in 21st-century America.

It is common for scholarly and applied studies on ethnic identity to compare racial and ethnic groups to Whites as a uniform group (Alessandria, 2002; Schwartz et al., 2010). Few researchers have studied ethnic identity development in White ethnic groups (Ponterotto et al., 2001), which limits the application of the ethnic identity body of literature to these groups (Alessandria, 2002). "Although the experience of White ethnic immigrants can be perceived as qualitatively different from those of immigrants of color with regard to experience with ongoing and pervasive prejudice and racism, there is nonetheless great heterogeneity within White ethnic groups" (Ponterotto et al., 2001, p. 364). Many European immigrants have likely cultivated their ethnicities, traditions, and cultures, transmitting them to each successive generation, concurrently with efforts to assimilate to the majority culture (Waters & Jimenez, 2005). In an ever more global world, ethnic identity becomes increasingly significant for both ethnic majority and minority individuals (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Rodriguez, & Wang, 2007; Schwartz et al., 2010).

Over 17 million Americans identify their ancestry as Italian (more than 6 million report exclusively Italian ancestry), making Italian Americans (IAs) the fourth largest ethnic group in the United States (U.S. Census, 2014). Besides the group's size, the decision to study IAs was driven by the distinct nature of their cultural values (see Carter & Parks, 1992), their history as a marginalized White ethnic group, and the authors' personal connection to the group. 45

This study examined ethnic identity development, salience, meaning, and persistence among second- and fourth-generation IA emerging adults. Salience, meaning, and strength of ethnic identity influence one's sense of belonging, which is one of three critical dimensions of understanding ethnic identity. The others are cultural norms and values and experiences as a minority (Phinney, 1996b). Our focus on college-educated emerging adults is congruent with the literature that indicates that the college years are a time of significant identity exploration and heightened ethnic identity awareness (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Erikson, 1968/1994; Waters, 1990, 2001). The framework used was Phinney's (1993) ethnic identity development model. This model is useful for understanding ethnic identity development in emerging adulthood because it integrates Erikson's identity stage of psychosocial development, Marcia's social identity theory, and acculturation theory in a comprehensive model (Phinney, 1993, 1996a). Based on this model, we offered the following research questions: 50 55

- Q1: Does ethnic identity persist in second- and fourth-generation IAs? 60
- Q2: What is the process through which ethnic identity develops in IAs, from childhood through adulthood? 65
- Q3: How is IA identity persistence and salience in post-immigrant generations shaped by individual and social factors, such as Italian language competence, peer groups, family interactions, travel to Italy, and the college years? 65

This study extends our understanding of ethnic identity in several ways. First, it informs our understanding of how ethnic identity persists across generations. Second, it expands our knowledge of the cyclical nature of ethnic identity development within one of the largest and distinctive U.S. ethnic groups. Third, it elucidates the role of emerging adulthood in ethnic identity development. Finally, it extends the ethnic identity research to include the most recent generation of IA emerging adults. 70

Ethnic identity development

Ethnic identity is one part of an individual's overall sense of self that begins to develop in early childhood and traditionally crystallizes in late adolescence/early adulthood (Erikson, 1968/1994). Ethnic identity is "[a] dynamic multidimensional construct that refers to one's identity ... in terms of subgroups within a larger context that claim a common ancestry and share one or more of the following elements: culture, race, religion, kinship, and place of origin" (Phinney, 2003, p. 1). It evolves as awareness of ethnic groups' differences grows and individuals integrate their ethnicity within the larger context of identity. Ethnic identity develops through concurrent processes of exploration and commitment (Phinney & Ong, 2007). Phinney's model has four statuses: diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement. Diffusion is described as no examination and no commitment to an ethnic identity; foreclosure is commitment to an ethnic identity based on messages received by others; moratorium is a state of actively exploring one's ethnicity without making a commitment; and an achieved ethnic identity is a secure commitment to one's group after a period of exploration that results in viewing it in a positive light, a sense of belonging, participation in traditional activities, and knowledge of one's group (Phinney, 1996a, 1996b). Due to its cyclical nature, individuals will likely reexamine their ethnic identity throughout the lifespan and may return to an earlier ethnic identity status. Similarly, individuals can remain in a single status throughout their lives. 75 80 85

Members of all ethnic groups often acknowledge their family's culture(s) of origin regardless of their generation of immigration (Schwartz et al., 2010). Ethnic identities typified by ethnic pride and

examinations of cultural traditions have been associated with well-being (Pasupathi, Wainryb, & Twali, 2012). Acculturation literature shows that embracing one's ethnic heritage while identifying with the majority culture correlates with higher self-esteem more than other acculturation attitudes (Phinney, Chavira, & Williamson, 1992). Biculturalism has been positively related to well-being and negatively related to loneliness and depression (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001; Schwartz et al., 2010). Schwartz, Zamboanga et al. submit that "in multicultural societies, identifying with one or both sets of cultural values and practices may contribute to helping to consolidate a sense of self in emerging adulthood" for all ethnic groups, including Whites (p. 25). For adolescents, ethnic identity has been positively correlated with self-esteem, self-confidence, and purpose in life (Martinez & Dukes, 1997) and negatively correlated with loneliness and depression (Roberts et al., 1999). Among college students, a strong ethnic identity has been found to protect self-esteem and facilitate a positive transition to the college environment (Jourdan, 2006). It is important to extend this research to the newest generation of millennials, who have been raised in an environment of cultural pluralism and are known for their diversity (Dungy, 2011; Howe & Strauss, 2000).

IA ethnic identity persistence

Studies show that IA ethnic identity has persisted regardless of socialization to U.S. culture and adoption of its language (Cassarino, 1982; Gumina, 1995; Moro, 1997; Ponterotto et al., 2001; Waters, 1990). Research on IAs in the 20th century revealed that IA ethnic identity declined between the first and subsequent generations but was strong and stable among the second and third generations (Gumina, 1995; Moro, 1997). Single-ancestry IAs tend to score higher on identity measures than their mixed-ancestry peers (Moro, 1997). This variability in the salience of IA identity may be a function of acculturation strategies that changed in the IA community over the years. Theorists list four basic acculturation strategies: separation, marginalization, assimilation, and integration (Berry, 1997; Tadmor, Galinsky, & Maddux, 2012). Separation involves primary identification with the heritage culture and rejection of the host culture. Marginalized individuals do not identify with either culture. Individuals are assimilated when they identify with the host culture exclusively. Integration, also termed biculturalism, involves embracing both ethnic and host culture identities.

Italians arrived in the United States in two waves: the late 19th/early 20th century and after 1965. During the first wave, they were described as "degenerate, ignorant, lazy, dirty, destitute, violent, superstitious, and criminally oriented" (Marger, 2003, p. 213), viewed as impossible to assimilate (Sterba, 2003), and treated as a separate race from other White ethnic groups (Hartigan, 1997). Although for much of the 20th century IAs were pressured to assimilate, many retained their native cultural identities (Cassarino, 1982; Fuligni, 1998; Gumina, 1995; Moro, 1997; Ponterotto et al., 2001; Waters, 1990) and distinct cultural values (Carter & Parks, 1992). These include (a) valuing the present over the past and the future; (b) placing group goals ahead of individual goals; (c) expectations of family loyalty, insistence on emotional and physical closeness, and avoidance of separation from family; and (e) perceiving humans as shaped by the environment and unable to work against the forces of nature (Papajohn, 1999; Spiegel, 1982).

The retention of cultural values may have been a defense against discrimination (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Validzic, 1998; Gambino, 1997), a function of changing attitudes toward Italy and its culture, or a reflection on the United States' shift from assimilation to valuing biculturalism (Schwartz & Unger, 2010), as well as improvement of social status in comparison to newer, less "White-looking" immigrant waves, like Mexicans or Puerto Ricans (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010). Given the distinct nature of IA culture and the relative mainstream status of IAs in the U.S. society, biculturalism is the most likely strategy used by IAs today to cultivate their ethnic heritage. According to Schwartz and Unger (2010), bicultural individuals manifest ethnic pride but are also committed to integrating their culture of origin with the culture of residence and embracing values from both cultures. Status as bicultural is not reserved for immigrants and their children but may apply to anyone "living in ethnic enclaves, where the heritage culture is likely to be maintained across generations" (Schwartz & Unger, p.26). As such, biculturalism may persist for generations, particularly for individuals from groups easily

identified as not part of the majority group (e.g., different appearance, ethnic names). Individuals who adopt a bicultural attitude toward acculturation are likely to be comfortable interacting in either cultural context and with people from both groups, may have advanced reasoning capabilities, and may adopt coping mechanisms from both cultures. 140

Influences on ethnic identity development

Family ethnic socialization

Family of origin is a key factor in ethnic identity salience (Juang & Syed, 2010; Schwartz et al., 2007). 145
Cassarino's (1982) research on IA college students (second- through fourth-generation) indicated that maintaining values characteristic of one's ethnicity may not be a conscious decision but the result of retaining values passed down for generations. Families express ethnic culture at home through familial ethnic socialization (FES; González, Umaña-Taylor, & Bámaca, 2006). These socialization practices can be overt (e.g., conversations/teachings about culture, practicing ethnic traditions) or covert (e.g., 150
home décor from culture of origin, listening to ethnic music). Daha (2011) found that adolescents' retention of ethnic identity is influenced by family connectedness, ethnic language proficiency, participation in ethnic traditions and activities, ethnic community connections, ethnic pride, and commitment to cultural values. In Kiang and Fuligni's (2009b) study, emerging adults from a variety of ethnic groups reported the highest level of ethnic exploration and belonging in the presence of parents, 155
followed by same-ethnicity peers and different-ethnicity peers. FES is a universal and significant factor in adolescent ethnic identity formation (Umaña-Taylor, Bhanot, & Shin, 2006).

College experience

The college years may be especially important for development of ethnic identity. As individuals encounter people different from themselves they are more likely to explore their own ethnic identity 160
(Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Phinney, 1996a; Schwartz et al., 2010; Waters, 2001). Tsai and Fuligni (2012) found a positive link between engagement in extracurricular activities and ethnic search and belonging. Syed and Azmitia's (2009) study confirmed that students across ethnic groups continued to explore their ethnic identities and the intensity of these explorations grew throughout the college experience.

Taken together, existing literature suggests that ethnic identity is an important construct that 165
maintains various degrees of salience in postimmigrant generations. It is a significant component of one's overall identity and predicts psychological well-being. Its development and persistence is shaped by a multitude of factors, including but not limited to FES, peer interactions, and college experience. The present study extends this understanding to the most recent cohort of IA young adults by focusing on the persistence of ethnic identity across generations of this group, the process 170
through which it has developed, and the factors that have shaped it.

Methods

Because of the diversity among ethnic groups and varied interpretations of ethnic labels, Phinney (1996b) recommended using qualitative methods with single ethnic groups to improve understanding of ethnic 175
identity development processes. Using a qualitative approach afforded us an in-depth look into the multidimensional constructs of ethnic identity (Ponterotto, Costa, & Werner-Lin, 2002) and allowed us to consider contextual factors such as sociohistorical climate and individuals' interpretations of their experiences (Phinney, 2000; Ponterotto, 2002).

Participants

We interviewed 18 IA participants: 8 were second-generation (SG) and 10 were fourth-generation (FG).¹ 180
Participants were included in the study if they self-identified as IA, even if there were multiple ethnicities present. This decision was made due to Waters' (1990) finding that IAs of mixed ancestry tend to identify

as IA. Participants were aged 22 to 32 (see Table 1) and included recent college graduates, graduate students, and young professionals. Twelve participants were female and six were male. Convenience and snowball sampling was used to recruit participants through national IA cultural organizations, participant referrals, and the authors' institution. The generations were defined as follows: SG participants had at least one parent who was born in Italy and immigrated to the United States. FG participants had one or more great-grandparents who immigrated to the United States.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and conducted in person or by phone. Using an interview guide for consistency, participants were asked questions about the salience and meaning of their ethnic identity. Other questions in the guide addressed participant demographics, family immigration history, ethnic identity development influences, and changes in ethnic identity during college. Each interview concluded with "What does it mean to be Italian American?" All interviews were audio recorded and each participant was assigned a pseudonym. Approximately 1 year after the interviews were completed, participants were emailed two follow-up questions about their postinterview ethnic exploration and the interview's influence on them.

The data analysis included two steps: (1) thematic analysis and 2) thematic cross-case analysis. Codebooks were created for each participant and included a demographic summary, researcher impressions, definitions of ethnic identity status, and the inclusion criteria for each theme with references to relevant transcript quotes. Theme books, built from the coded transcripts, organized the data by generation of immigration and included quotes from each participant illustrative of the theme. The researchers analyzed the theme books for within-generation and between-generation similarities and differences. These observations, with references to supporting quotes, were put into a spreadsheet organized by themes.

Table 1. Participant Data.

Pseudonym	Generation	Age	Italian Language	Time in Italy
Sophia	Second	33	Learned at home and college, was an Italian teacher	Semester abroad; visited often in childhood and adulthood
Elisa	Second	23	Learned at home, high school, and college	Semester abroad; visited every other summer in childhood, every other year in adulthood
Marina	Second	24	Learned at home and college	1-week trip with Italian class; visited twice in 20s
Luciano	Second	23	Learned dialect at home; Italian in high school and college	First visit at 17; studied abroad twice in college and in high school with NIAF; regular visits for work
Angela	Second	32	Learned at home, studied it for second bachelor's degree	Visited every other childhood summer; in college visited 1–2 weeks at a time; spent 1 month in Italy while a stay at home mom
Maria	Second	29	Learned dialect at home, studied Italian in high school and college	Never visited
Victor	Second	30	Exposed to Italian at home through grandparents; Italian minor in college	Semester abroad and visited at age 10 with his father and in 2004 with a friend
Francesca	Second	24	Learned at home and in college; preparing to be an Italian teacher	Studied abroad for 6 months; went every other childhood summer; went every 2 years as adult
George	Fourth	35	Not formally, tried to learn from CDs and socializing with Italians	Several visits after college to research heritage and meet relatives
Stella	Fourth	22	No	Never visited
Jeremiah	Fourth	22	Learned in college	6-week study-abroad program
Margherita	Fourth	28	No	Vacation in Italy
Isabella	Fourth	30	Learned in high school and college	1-week program in high school
Teresa	Fourth	24	Studied Italian language and culture in college	Vacation after graduate school
Alfonso	Fourth	27	No, tried to learn from CDs	2 vacations after college
Anne	Fourth	24	No	Never visited
Joe	Fourth	29	No	Vacation
Kelly	Fourth	24	No	Never visited

Note. NIAF = National Italian American Foundation.

Assuring trustworthiness of the research

Establishing trustworthiness involves four criteria: credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A key component of credibility is data saturation; therefore, we developed an extensive interview protocol. Iterative questions were designed to minimize misunderstandings and social desirability. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 4 hours. Informal member checks (e.g., paraphrasing and checks for understanding) were conducted throughout all interviews to gauge clarity. To further improve accuracy, consistency, and neutrality, we used triangulation of analysts. Interrater consistency was achieved by having four analysts code and come to consensus on the same transcript. Analysts coded the remaining transcripts independently. Each transcript was coded by at least two analysts who convened to reach consensus on the codes.

Patton (1990) emphasized the value of design checks for establishing data credibility. Our method of determining dependability and credibility was an audit trail that involved reviewing all the study documentation to verify the logic of our conclusions and methodological decisions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Documentation of the emergent design was maintained in the methodological log. Throughout the study, we held constant conversations about the data collection and analysis. To account for any potential researcher bias, reflective commentary on each author is provided.

Person as instrument

I [first author] am a second-generation IA who is fluent in Italian and my ethnicity is a salient part of my identity. I have traveled to Italy regularly to visit relatives and studied abroad in Italy in college. I [second author] am a Polish American naturalized citizen. I arrived in the United States as an adult. I am reconciling my Polish identity with the process of becoming American. I [third author] am a third- and fourth-generation Russian and Lithuanian American. Much of the culture passed down to my parents is a mix of Jewish, Russian, and Lithuanian culture; my ancestors referred to all culture passed on as Jewish. I [fourth author] am a fourth-generation IA. Growing up I was exposed to the more “stereotypical” Italian family traditions, but my IA identity is not my salient identity. I [fifth author] am a fourth-generation IA. My family exclusively identifies with and participates in IA traditions, and I have remained in communication with relatives in Italy for many years. The authors’ combined diverse backgrounds have allowed for a variety of perspectives on the data. In addition, systems such as peer debriefing, member checking, purposive sampling, and the audit trail were in place to minimize each author’s personal biases.

Findings

Persistence of IA ethnic identity

We found that IA identity endured across generations, although the ethnic identity of the fourth generation was qualitatively different than that of the second generation. The IA identity changed as individuals’ exposure to the immigrant generation and their firsthand accounts of their family’s immigration and acculturation experiences decreased.

SGs saw their experiences as different from those of later generations because, as Luciano stated, “Italians today are different from Italians who came here 20, 30, or 50 years ago.” SGs noted their parents’ abilities to share their personal experiences of life in Italy, their acculturation challenges, and their emphasis on maintaining the culture through cultural values, language, food, traditions, and time spent with relatives and/or Italian communities in the United States distinguished them from their peers. For example, Marina said:

I think the fact that my parents are first-generation Italian makes me feel a lot closer to my culture. . . . [G]rowing up in my household . . . Italy was very prevalent, we speak Italian at home, we’re very cultural—we keep with the same traditions that they have in Italy.

Some SGs were careful to distinguish themselves from other IAs with respect to the authenticity of their cultural knowledge. Elisa said: 250

... [M]any of my friends are Italian Americans... I think I view my ethnicity a little different than theirs just because typically they have their whole family here, their grandparents and their parents, and I just have my parents ... my family is in Italy ... so I've had to retain the language and the culture just so I could relate to them better ... so I feel like there's this stronger connection with Italy.

Similarly, Marina said:

I always felt that there was a difference between people who are Italian that truly knew about their country and appreciated their culture and then those people that give in to the stereotypes ... that whole kind of like Italian American, very guido-ish look, and like the way they act. And I think there's a big difference in myself and ... those other people that really don't know anything about their culture. 255

The early to mid-20th century emphasis on assimilation in the United States played an important role in the ethnic identity development of IAs (De Fina, 2014) and consequently how it was transmitted to later generations. Several FG participants lamented that their ancestors' acceptance of the U.S. push for assimilation limited their parents' and grandparents' ethnic knowledge and ability to pass down family history and the Italian language, thus leaving participants with fewer resources to learn about their heritage. Theresa reflected this sentiment: 260

... I'm disappointed that nobody still speaks it, I mean my dad has his Italian pride, I guess. He knows a little, but like—I mean he has explained to me how they were oppressed for being Italians, like they were almost kind of like quick to try to blend in and—just disappointed. It would have been nice to keep it. 265

While the IA identities of participants from the FG were not as strong as those of the SG, we noticed that their descriptions of their IA identities gained strength as the interviews progressed. Many participants' responses to the follow-up questions indicated that the interview sparked an interest in further exploring their ethnic identity. Kelly, who had engaged in very little exploration, said: 270

I've been asking my Dad more questions about where we're from in Italy, why his grandparents came here, etc. He has been able to give me a little information on these things, but I don't think he knows that much about the culture either. I am actually planning on taking a trip to Italy next summer with a friend. I plan to try to visit the places in Italy where my grandmother and grandfather are from (in addition to Rome and Venice). I am hoping this gives me a better idea of the Italian culture and will help me feel somewhat more linked to the culture in which I belong, but feel so distanced from. 275

FG participants whose parents had assimilated to U.S. culture and felt less connected to their ethnic identity may need opportunities to "rediscover" their heritage.

Developing awareness of Italian ethnic identity 280

All participants had some awareness of their ethnicity at an early age through time spent with grandparents or great-grandparents, school projects about cultural heritage, or ethnic community events (for those in areas with high concentrations of IAs). For those with ethnic sounding names, interactions with others about the uniqueness of their names heightened their ethnic awareness. SG participants had strong ethnic identities and reported being aware of their ethnicity from birth. FG participants' point of initial awareness varied, although for most it was in elementary school. 285

SGs who grew up in ethnic enclaves had very strong ethnic identities due, in part, to their interactions with parents, IA community organizations, and peers. Francesca, who regularly traveled to Italy in her childhood, encapsulated the way several SGs felt about interacting with their SG friends and family.

When I spoke to my American friends, they didn't understand me. ... They understood that their parents went to work; they played video games ... hopscotch ... jump rope. They just didn't understand. And I had a very hard time making friends because of that. So when it came to making friends in my community and kind of sticking to people, it was always sticking with ... my own kind. 290

Ethnic pride

A sense of ethnic pride has been positively associated with biculturalism (Schwartz & Unger, 2010) 295 and retention of ethnic identity (Daha, 2011; Pasupathi et al., 2012). Ethnic pride was a consistent theme across all generations, although it was expressed in different ways. Valuing family ties and ethnic pride were central themes in all participants' lives. Contact with the immigrant generation positively impacted participants' ethnic identity development and pride. Ethnicity was presented to them by the immigrant generation, not just through symbols and traditions but also as a "way of being." Ethnic identity and pride were noticeably stronger in SGs than in FG participants. Similar to the literature on SG Americans (Foner & Kasinitz, 2007), participants across generations consistently reported an appreciation for the strong work ethic and sacrifices made by past generations as an influence on their opportunities for success. Three subcategories of ethnic pride emerged; each theme and an illustrative quote are presented below: 300 305

- (1) Pride as a buffer against negative stereotypes (prevalent among SGs)—Marina: "... I always felt extremely proud of everything that was my culture, even like of the Roman times. I always felt very connected to it. So everything that I've heard on the outside kind of never penetrated to me, because I already knew who I was." 310
- (2) Pride in the accomplishments of Italians and IAs and connecting oneself with those accomplishments—Jeremiah: "all these fields have amazing prominent Italians. ... I mean you have Enrico Fermi, who helped the Manhattan Project, and he was an amazing physicist, who moved to the United States after living in Italy. And you have Galileo who first pointed a telescope at the stars—and he was from Italy. And you have all these amazing artists and composers and writers. ... [I]t makes me feel like I'm a part of this great history and great lineage and great thinkers and creative people." 315
- (3) Pride in the IA work ethic and the sacrifices made by earlier generations—Alfonso: "... [S]omething I've kept in mind ... is just that for everything they went through to have someone in their family get here [Ivy League] ... [I]t just shows them that all the sacrifices they made have been worth it ... I really do feel like I'm representing ... not only my family but ... people that have Italian roots, sometimes." 320

These findings are consistent with Daha's (2011) observation that Iranian American adolescents' pride in their culture, history, and the accomplishments of Iranian Americans positively influenced ethnic identity.

Ethnic pride influenced some participants' career and academic decisions. For example, multiple SG participants were Italian language teachers or worked for Italian companies. One even wanted to be a lawyer because she appreciated the "Italian tradition of oration." For others, pride grew as they learned more about their culture and its history. Teresa reflected on the depth of knowledge and pride she gained through Italian classes in college and their influence on her ethnic identity "... with the culture classes and learning about immigration ... I guess you could say, it's increased my pride ... I feel more connected to it after learning more about it." 325 330

Influences on IA ethnic identity

Single versus mixed heritage

Monoethnic IAs, regardless of generation, had stronger ethnic identities than those of later generations with mixed heritage and felt they had an advantage over mixed-heritage peers. Sophia summarized this well:

I don't have to trace my roots for generations. I know exactly where my parents come from. I know exactly where my grandparents come from. ... I've been there, I've seen it, I've lived it, and I am very clear on my ideas as to who I am—my identity, my nationality, my culture ... and very proud of who I am. 335

Sophia expressed feeling “bad” for people who have to work hard to research their family history and who do not have a clear connection to their roots.

European Americans, particularly those of mixed ancestry, can opt to identify with whichever ethnicity they prefer to include in their self-description. However, these choices are limited by factors such as resemblance to group stereotypes, ethnic names, knowledge of family history, and societal ranking of one’s ethnic group(s) (Waters, 2001). Research indicates that IAs with mixed ancestry most often self-identify as Italian (Waters, 1990). This held true for our multiethnic participants. However, we noticed some variability within this subgroup. While their Italian heritage was generally more pronounced, they varied in whether they identified mainly with their Italian identity or felt that being mixed was their identity. Joe articulated this by noting that his Italian side was stronger but that he had to respect his mother’s Irish contributions as well. Although his name and physical appearance led others to frequently ask about his Italian ethnicity, he does not feel authentic unless he acknowledges both of his ethnicities. On the other hand, Jeremiah’s mother, though not an IA, emphasized instilling Italian culture in her children based on her positive relationship with her IA father-in-law.

FES

In general, a direct connection with the immigrant generation and/or SG was important in developing a strong ethnic identity. Our findings support the literature on FES (González et al., 2006; Hughes et al., 2006; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2006), biculturalism (Schwartz & Unger, 2010) and the relational context of ethnicity (Daha, 2011; Kiang & Fuligni, 2009a, 2009b; Phinney, Romero, Nava, & Huang, 2001) that points to the importance of parental efforts in maintaining the culture of origin.

SGs were closer to the Italian culture, as opposed to “Italian American” culture, through their parents’ and/or grandparents’ stories about the transition from Italy to the United States. The age and historical period at which parents and grandparents immigrated to the United States influenced their attitudes toward acculturation, which was reflected in their efforts to maintain cultural traditions. Most SGs had positive views of their ethnicity and experiences. However, some spoke of intergenerational challenges resulting from their SG status. For example, Angela resented her ethnicity in her youth because she constantly had to translate for her parents:

... [W]hen I was younger, it was hard. ... [M]y dad was like a stereotypical Italian guy, where like he basically just went to work, and made the money. ... [M]y mom had to handle everything else, but she didn’t know how to speak English very well, so like I’m the eldest daughter in the family ... like going to parent/teacher meetings. I had to go to like translate. I used to always hate that so much ... I used to hate that I had like so much pressure ... or even reading bills or doing things that like my mom like didn’t understand. ... I hated that, I resented that. ... But I had to do it because I was the oldest.

Angela also received mixed messages about acculturation (father emphasized assimilation, mother emphasized culture preservation). It was only during her first bachelor’s degree that she began actively developing her IA identity by engaging with same-ethnicity peers.

Access to grandparents in the United States and/or Italy was an important element in developing an IA identity, regardless of generation of immigration. Our study found that grandparents often served as cultural transmitters through their roles as caregivers, family historians, and the organizers of extended-family gatherings. For example Isabella, an FG participant, grew up on the same property as her grandparents and great-grandparents (separate houses). Her great-grandmother (immigrant generation) was her main caregiver from early childhood through high school. As a result, the salience of Isabella’s ethnic identity had more similarities with SG participants than her FG peers. For those SGs whose grandparents did not live in the United States, having opportunities to interact with them through visits, along with their parents’ stories about their family and culture, were important in developing an IA identity.

Consistent with De Fina’s (2014) finding that multigenerational family gatherings are important for transmitting culture and are where “the seeds of an interest in the heritage and language” are planted (p. 261), all participants reported that time spent with family through extended family

gatherings and traditional celebrations were important for gaining an awareness of their ethnicity. Luciano recounted intentionally using family gatherings as an opportunity to instill a sense of ethnic identity in his younger cousins.

In contrast, the three participants who had no link to the immigrant generation or SG had the least developed or salient ethnic identities in the sample. Each cited the lack of connection to the immigrant generation as a limiting factor in the salience of their ethnic identities. Participants like Stella were limited to symbolic links to their ethnicity such as an Italian last name, religious and culinary traditions, and values. Stella said:

I don't look very Italian because I have like the blonder hair and things like that, but when people do find out I'm Italian, it's the last name. The last name has probably been the biggest thing for me I guess, and it hasn't been a big thing for that matter at all. But I feel that—it's kind of interesting because I love my last name now—I used to hate it. But I think because so many people are interested in it, and because they know, wow, that's Italian. . . . I love that they can tell—not by how I look, but because my last name. . . . And have often thought about keeping it when I get married, which I probably won't do, but it's just something cool, because it kind of shows who I am in a way, but then it, you know, it doesn't.

For SGs, FES appears to continue into the college years. Out of the eight SGs in our sample, six females and one male were commuter students (no FG participants were commuters). According to Foner and Kasinitz (2007), immigrant parents often insist that their daughters stay nearby in order to monitor their social activities or have them contribute to the household, while males are encouraged to be more independent. This pattern becomes especially apparent when a daughter insists on greater independence. For instance, Maria reported experiencing clashes in high school between family expectations and her desire to go to college. Her parents wanted her to prioritize earning money at a part-time job over extracurricular activities that would help her get into college. Gaining permission to live on campus was a major struggle between Maria and her parents and grandparents, who expected her to be a commuter student. This struggle influenced Maria's selection of which IA values and traditions to adopt for herself.

Across generations, it was observed that when grandparents or great-grandparents passed away there was a decrease in contact with extended family. Losing the connection to the immigrant generation or SG caused participants to react in a variety of ways, from initiating a period of reclaiming their identity to distancing from their ethnicity for a time. Several participants cited the loss of a grandparent as a motivation to learn as much as possible from those who remained while they still had access to these important cultural resources. The hope was to prepare to transmit the culture and identity to future generations.

College experience

For many students, the opportunity for scholarships from IA organizations and the required application essays prompted research on their ethnicity. For participants like Margherita, whose ethnic identity was not as developed upon entering college, the process of applying for a National Italian American Foundation (NIAF) scholarship for her graduate studies sparked an interest in further exploration of her ethnic identity.

Eleven participants (8 SG, 3 FG) engaged in Italian language and culture courses in college. For SGs, their motivations for taking these courses often related to a passion for preserving and deepening their understanding of their culture coupled with career aspirations (e.g., working for Italian businesses, teaching Italian, working in immigration law). Luciano, along with several other SGs, became leaders in the Italian club and used the club to promote "authentic" Italian culture on campus. FGs who participated in Italian clubs or classes appreciated learning about their heritage, regardless of whether it represented modern-day Italian culture. Their motivations for joining Italian clubs and organizations seemed aimed more toward actively discovering their roots. For many later-generation participants, college courses provided their first opportunity to learn the Italian language and history.

When there was a lack of IA peers on campus, some participants felt the need to represent their ethnicity to prove IAs belonged. For example, Alfonso felt he had to prove that Italians could be “competitive” in an Ivy League environment. Marina experienced stereotyping by her non-ethnic peers during law school in Florida, which motivated her to seek support from same-ethnicity peers in an IA organization. 435

Q3

It is widely known that food has a significant cultural role for IAs. Adjusting to dining hall food can be a challenge for all college students, especially those who are IA. This was not a major concern for the SGs, as seven out of eight were commuter students. However, for many FG participants, adapting to dining hall food was one of the most difficult adjustments in college. For some, this initiated an interest in learning how to cook. 440

The geographic location of the institution often provided participants with additional opportunities to explore Italian culture through community organizations, festivals, and nearby Little Italy areas. For example, Margherita said of her exposure to the IA community around her graduate school: “I haven’t really had a large connection to it until I moved to Boston, which has a very big IA community.” 445

Peer interactions in college

Adolescence and emerging adulthood are a critical period in the development of ethnic identity. Individuals who attend college during this period of development often step outside their community of origin and expand their social circles with diverse peers and new activities (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Phinney, 1996a; Schwartz et al., 2010; Waters, 2001). Research shows that interactions with same- and different-ethnicity peers in college can intensify the exploration of one’s ethnic identity (Phinney et al., 2001; Syed & Azmitia, 2009; Tsai & Fuligni, 2012; Waters, 2001). Similarly, participants reported an increased saliency of their ethnic identity in high school and college. They also indicated that interactions with both same- and different-ethnicity peers increased their awareness of their Italianness and feelings of connectedness to the IA community. 450

Q1

Same-ethnicity peers. Our study indicates that same-ethnicity peers play a significant role in developing an IA identity. The SG participants and some of the later-generation participants involved themselves in Italian groups on campus and in their community. Many reported that the more they interacted with IA clubs, organizations, or same-ethnicity peers, the stronger their identities became. Angela stated: 460

I met my first Italian friend [in college]. . . . She was my first Italian American friend that I ever had—like, her dad was from Italy and her mom was a [second-]generation Italian American. That was the first time where I really started to appreciate being Italian American because like she had—her parents were strict like mine, and . . . I don’t know, I felt like I could relate to someone, you know. So that was pretty cool. 465

SG participants were more purposeful than their later generation peers in seeking out IA organizations and activities that emphasized what they viewed as “authentic” representations of Italian culture. Although what they considered authentic varied, almost all SGs disliked activities they viewed as promoting “symbolic” or stereotypical ethnicity, like mafia stereotypes and reducing the culture to food at the expense of acknowledging the many other contributions of Italians to U.S. culture. Taking leadership in Italian clubs was almost unique to SGs. 470

Participants across all generations in our study noted a stronger connection to their Italian heritage when romantically involved with Italians or IAs. Some participants reported feeling a weaker connection to their ethnicity when they were no longer involved in same-ethnicity partner relationships. In spite of the positive effect of same-ethnicity relationships on ethnic identity, participants who were in committed long-term relationships identified finding partners who embraced their Italian heritage and were willing to transmit it to future generations as being more important than the partner’s ethnicity. 475

Interacting with same-ethnicity peers was also an important element for developing ethnic identity among later generations. In addition to Italian clubs, these interactions came through ethnic communities at home, community organizations, IA friends from home and/or on campus, and 480

participating in events hosted by the NIAF. Interacting with Italian international students was a particularly eye-opening experience that resulted in an increased interest in one's Italian culture. For example, Jeremiah and Margherita discussed how socializing with Italian international students in both academic and social situations allowed them to experience Italian cultural activities and authentic representations of modern-day Italian culture. 485

Q2 *Other-ethnicity peers.* Consistent with the literature on ethnic identity development in college (Phinney et al., 2001; Syed & Azmitia, 2009; Tsai & Fuligni, 2012; Waters, 2001), it was the diversity on campus that raised participants' awareness of the idea that "not everyone does what my family does ..." This was especially true for those who had been raised in Italian communities. For example, Elisa said it took going to college and being surrounded by students from other ethnicities who ate different foods and had dissimilar ways of celebrating holidays to make her aware of the uniqueness of her upbringing. 490

Stella noted the importance of exposure to diverse populations in her ethnic identity development.

I developed ... a lot more through my college years, just because I was exposed to a lot more diversity ... not just specifically with Italians, but with everyone else ... you tend to share a lot more, especially with the religion classes. ... I think that's when I started thinking, oh wow; there is a lot more about me than I thought in high school. ... [M]aybe I should try to grasp the concept a little bit more and learn more about it if I can. 495

Anne shared a similar message when she discussed becoming acutely aware of her ancestry upon stepping into an urban college setting where she made friends from different cultural backgrounds who were proud of their heritage. Her desire to be able to contribute to peer conversations about their ethnicities led to exploration of her own roots. 500

Travel to Italy

Fourteen participants had spent time in Italy. The ranges of time they spent in Italy included ongoing visits throughout their lives for extended periods to visit relatives; study-abroad experiences (eight participants studied abroad in programs that ranged from 1 week to several months); and personal vacations (see Table 1). All participants who traveled to Italy reported feeling a greater connection to their Italian heritage; a sense of belonging while in Italy; and a stronger bond with their ethnicity upon returning to the United States. SGs also reported a heightened awareness of the American aspects of their identities while traveling in Italy. Of the four participants who had never been Italy, two reported that they were considering trips. 505 510

Regardless of the frequency and duration of their travels to Italy during childhood, SGs had strong ties to the culture and expressed great appreciation for their opportunities to travel to Italy and connect with their culture firsthand. For example, Marina's first trip to Italy was with her college Italian class. She reported feeling "overwhelmed" when she got off the plane as she could finally experience the culture she loved, directly. 515

Travel to Italy ignited participants' interest in learning about Italian culture no matter the length or purpose of the visit and regardless of immigration generation. This is an interesting extension of research by Hamad and Lee (2013), who found that (1) American students report a weaker sense of ethnic/cultural identity after studying abroad for a longer period of time and (2) individuals experience a period of acculturation to the host culture and deculturation to the native culture. In our study, the host culture reflected the participants' ethnicity and therefore may have contributed to the increased connection to their ethnic identity. 520

Italian language

Italian language proficiency led to a greater sense of connectedness to Italian culture for all our participants. Our sample supported De Fina's (2014) finding that multilingualism is preserved through multigenerational family gatherings where a mixture of Italian, dialects, and English with a few Italian words mixed in is spoken. All the SGs in our study learned Italian or a dialect at home; 525

FGs learned only a few Italian words and phrases at home. For FGs, Italian language was formally learned in high school or college (see Table 1), if at all, although many said they would have selected it for their high school foreign language requirement if it had been offered. 530

The past 20 years have seen an increase in the number of students studying Italian (De Fina, 2014). De Fina (2014) noticed that families' language preservation efforts were not only a motivating factor in IAs' efforts to learn about Italian language and culture but that there can be a long incubation for interest in learning Italian. Consistent with De Fina's findings, college was a period during which many participants chose to take Italian language and culture classes. 535

De Fina (2014) attributed the recent increase in IA college students studying Italian to their "nostalgic attachment to the language" (p. 260) and encouragement received for showing an interest in it. This is reflected in Jeremiah's decision to study Italian in college.

I came to the university and I was going to take Spanish as a second language requirement. But those classes filled up, so I decided to take Italian. And I started really liking the Italian language, and then I minored in Italian, and I've been getting a scholarship from the NIAF. 540

Similar to De Fina, we noticed that IAs who did not speak Italian fluently attempted to maintain some level of connection to the language. Speaking Italian was a source of pride and prestige for IAs. De Fina attributed this to the changing perceptions of Italians in the United States away from the stigma of the "poor immigrants" from the past. 545

During college trips to Italy, SGs who spoke Italian felt they had an advantage over their peers who were not fluent in Italian. SGs felt they could experience Italy more like natives due to their ability to communicate with locals and opportunities to visit extended family who could expose them to daily Italian life outside of tourist attractions. 550

De Fina (2014, p. 264) summarized our observations well when she stated:

... [E]ven though IAs have undergone a complete language shift, they still use language in their own creative ways to define who they are and what they stand for. Words, pieces of language and stories all contribute to constructing Italian American identities. But they also do so in specific ways, making reference to values, characteristics, and categories that are closely related to the contexts in which social practices take place. 555

Cyclical nature of ethnic identity in IAs

Our participants' experiences support Phinney's (1996a, 1996b) observations of the cyclical nature of ethnic identity. Regardless of generation, ethnic identity appeared to go through periods of increased salience tied to life events such as partner selection, marriage, births, deaths, and the normal identity development processes influenced by college. Sophia talked about the peak of her IA identity coming when she was traveling in Italy and in a relationship with a native Italian. However, when she returned to the United States she realized "it's still part of me, but not as much as it used to be in the prime of—I don't know, 10 years ago." 560

Isabella illustrated the cyclical nature of ethnic identity and emphasized the influence of generational changes in ethnic preservation efforts when she said: "I think if you really want to be involved in your ethnicity and your culture, I think the opportunities are there. ... [W]hen I was in high school and college and I did take Italian, that did keep me close to at least learning about the culture and what's going on." However when her great-grandmother passed away shortly after she started college, she "kind of shut it off for a while." Isabella attributed the pause in her exploration to her parents' lack of emphasis on their ethnic roots and traditions. She also connected this to the dwindling size of her extended family and the loss of her grandparents and great-grandparents, who had been the organizers of large family gatherings. 570

When there was a push from parents to assimilate, SG participants were more proactive in seeking out activities related to increasing cultural knowledge and awareness than their FG peers. Luciano and his father clashed over his efforts to preserve his ethnicity. Luciano said:

... [My father] understands that my ties to Italy are very strong and that I have tried to preserve the culture and identity much more. Yet I believe that this interview shed some light on the fact that sometimes, it cannot 575

always be explained exactly why it happens or how it happens, that it skips a generation. But more importantly, it is necessary that those like myself have an outlet to be with others who share the same ethnic identity, the same ties to a culture and language that one would think many others would embrace without question.

It is important to note that acculturation is not a one-time event; the culture of residence and the person are continuously shaped by each other and the immigration generation is not immune to the cyclical nature of ethnic identity. Angela reflected on her mother's Americanization as an impediment to instilling Italian culture and values in her daughter: 580

... [I]t kind of upsets me because ... I was kind of relying on my mom to really expose my daughter—for my mom to speak to my daughter in Italian ... do more Italian things, like the way she was with us. But I think what happened is, once we went to high school, she got a job—she wasn't a stay at home mom anymore, and she became exposed to American culture and had American friends and stuff like that. I don't know, I mean she still like cooks in Italian ... but it's not the same. It's not like when I was little ... 585

The above observation by Angela illustrates that acculturation of the immigrant generation is a lifelong process and, as such, impacts the ethnic identity development of subsequent generations.

Conclusion 590

This study confirms and extends existing literature on ethnic identity to include the most recent generations of IA emerging adults. Within this group, our findings support the theoretical assertions that ethnic identity evolves throughout the lifespan with peak periods of salience and exploration interspersed. Consistent with prior research, we found that a tapestry of factors influenced a participant's ethnic identity exploration, knowledge about Italian culture, and ethnic pride. These factors include distance from the immigrant generation and monoethnic versus multiethnic heritage, FES, language acquisition, individual and societal views on acculturation, as well as cultural and social experiences during college. Emerging adulthood and in particular the identity exploration that occurs in college was a crucial period of exploration for participants who took initiative to explore and ultimately commit to their IA ethnic identity. 595 600

While the nature of the IA ethnic identity may be less complex and the knowledge of the Italian culture may be less in-depth in FG IAs, the identity may be just as salient. That salience is affected by factors like the level of acculturation in prior generations and access to family members who came from Italy. Such familial contact is noteworthy because it affects how individuals feel about their ethnic identity, regardless of their generation of immigration. 605

Limitations and suggestions for future research

It is important to note that in the present study the sampling design and the interview protocol itself may have limited the range of findings obtained. Our questions focused on participants' experiences related to being IA. Although we were open to data regarding multiple ethnicities, we did not actively seek it. Future research should specifically explore the persistence of IA ethnic identity in individuals with mixed heritage. 610

All participants knew they were being interviewed about their IA ethnic identity, and some had conversed with family members to prepare for their respective interviews. Scheduling the interview itself may have stimulated exploration that would not have otherwise occurred. The ongoing ethnic exploration participants reported at the 1-year follow-up suggests that the interview had a lasting effect on some participants. Future research should further investigate the effects of this type of interview on ethnic identity development. 615

It is clear that ethnic identity development is cyclical and a majority of research focuses on adolescents and emerging adults. Given the important role of FES, future research should explore the salience and persistence of ethnic identity in middle-aged and older adults to better understand FES from the perspective of the generations actively involved in transmitting the culture to subsequent generations. Particular attention should be given to the role of ethnic pride. 620

A majority of our SG participants were commuter students; future research should investigate differences in ethnic identity between commuters and to those who reside on campus. This may influence the amount of contact with same- and different-ethnicity peers. All our participants attended 4-year institutions; future research should include community college students. 625

The influence of FES and peer interactions on ethnic identity development in second and later generations of IAs should continue to be investigated, with particular attention to the effects on those with mixed ancestry. Jourdan's (2006) study of the impact of family environment on multiethnic college student ethnic identity showed that when families encouraged multiethnic children to explore all facets of their identity, students adjusted better to college and had positive relationships with a more diverse group of students. When families marginalized any part of the multiethnic child's cultures, individuals tended to distance themselves from groups or individuals representing the marginalized ethnic group, and self-loathing and stereotyping of other groups were experienced. Further research should be conducted with other ethnic groups to determine whether the levels of salience and persistence we found are unique to IAs. 630 635

Although it is widely accepted that ethnic identity development is cyclical throughout the lifespan, most research focuses on its development in adolescence and emerging adulthood. Similarly, we noticed that life events such as exposure to diverse peers in college; partner selection; weddings; births; and deaths triggered further examination of ethnic identity. Researchers should explore how ethnic identity evolves throughout the lifespan and its implications for FES. 640

Note

1. Due to the historical waves of Italian immigrants in the early 1900s and 1960 s and 1970 s, we were unable to find third-generation IAs who fit our participant criteria.

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