

Impact of Ethnic and Anglicized Birth Names on Ethnic Identity Among Second-Generation Vietnamese Americans

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Introduction

- Names carry ethnic and racial connotations that contribute to the embodiment of ethnic identities and reveal an individual's identity to others (Pilcher 2016).
- Regarding ethnic and religious names specifically, Edwards and Caballero (2008) found that as children age, they may feel that the ethnic affiliation of their name singles them out from their peers; having an ethnic birth name could present identity issues that persist into adulthood.
- This study aims to explore how ethnic identity differs among young second-generation Vietnamese Americans given Anglicized birth names and those given ethnic birth names.**
 - Birth names include first, last, and/or middle names.

Methods

- One-hour, in-depth interviews were conducted over Zoom with eight 18-22 year-old second-generation Vietnamese Americans living in/from Philadelphia, PA & Houston, TX.
- 5 participants w/ Anglicized first names and ethnic middle and last names, 2 participants w/ ethnic first, middle, and last names, and 1 participant w/ Anglicized first and last names and an ethnic middle name.
- Recruited through Facebook, Reddit, Instagram, flyers, and snowball sampling.
- Each completed a screening survey then interview, and were offered a \$25 Amazon gift card as compensation.
- Interview guide included questions about their family, relationship with their name, connection to culture, and experiences relating to ethnic identity.

Results

- Within my sample, there are **three common name formulas**:
 - ethnic first, middle, and last name (EEE)**;
 - Anglicized first name, ethnic middle name, and ethnic last name (AEE)**; and
 - Anglicized first name, ethnic middle name, and Anglicized last name (AEA)**.
- Individuals whose names have at least one ethnic component experience **name-related tensions in childhood and adolescence** (during ethnic identity development), **often correlating with struggles over their connection to and strength of their ethnic identity**.
 - Antonia: "I had a phase where it [my name] didn't feel like me for a while. I was in elementary school and was getting bullied for being Asian. People would make funny little rhymes out of my name. But I've really grown into it, especially knowing the history of it."
- For EEE and AEE, these tensions come from two main sources: (1) the awareness and fear of name-related discrimination** that they might face in their lives, and **(2) interactions with others** who have misunderstandings, mispronunciations, and misspellings of the ethnic part(s) of their names.
 - Valerie: "I hated my last name. I was like, why can't I have a simpler white name? My first name is very white, but my last name is the complete opposite. I wished people could pronounce it a lot easier."
- For AEA, these tensions are also informed by their experience being multiracial**.
 - Now in college, Molly feels more connected to her Vietnamese heritage than before, but she still feels hesitant to share the Vietnamese part of her (including her Vietnamese middle name): "Because a lot of my [college] friends aren't white, I feel almost as if I'm emphasizing that Vietnamese half of me while I'm at college. [...] I sometimes feel bad about benefiting from being a half person of color."
- Tensions ease upon transitioning into adulthood**, especially when entering college, a new workplace, or other new environments where they're able to make Vietnamese, or other ethnic, friends and are able to connect and reflect on shared experiences with identity struggles. This applies even to those who grew up in and around Vietnamese communities.
- Still, EEE tend to have a harder time accepting their ethnic name**.
 - Trang: "I have such mixed feelings about [my name]. I want to hold onto the name that my parents gave me. Then the convenience — I don't want to go through having to explain to everyone, 'this is how you say it!' But I've never been called Trang [with the Vietnamese pronunciation] ever. So now, at this point, I'm like, 'I'm Trang [pronounced as *Train-g*, like *dang*]. Nice to meet you.'"

Conclusion & Future Directions

- All ethnic name-related tensions stem from their experiences navigating white spaces and are a consequence of white social institutions, but the severity and source of these tensions vary by name formula.
- Relationship to ethnic name and strength of ethnic identity are correlated.
- Tensions ease upon transitioning into adulthood, especially when entering new, diverse environments.
- Those with ethnic first names take longer to accept their name as first names can be markers of assimilation.
- This study is still ongoing. I intend to interview more individuals with EEE, AEA, and AAA name formulas, and plan to look into how these results connect to assimilation theories.

References

- Edwards, Rosalind, and Chamion Caballero. 2008. "What's in a Name? An Exploration of the Significance of Personal Naming of 'Mixed' Children for Parents from Different Racial, Ethnic and Faith Backgrounds." *The Sociological Review* 56(1):39-60.
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