

DEVELOPMENTAL PATHWAYS THROUGH MIDDLE CHILDHOOD

*Rethinking Contexts
and Diversity as Resources*

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LAWRENCE ERLBAUM ASSOCIATES, PUBLISHERS
Mahwah, New Jersey London

2005

Beyond Demographic Categories:
How Immigration, Ethnicity, and “Race”
Matter for Children’s Identities
and Pathways Through School

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Demographic questions in the United States, whether on census forms or social science surveys, have long blended national origin, ethnicity, and “race” into a set of color-coded categories. In 1900, the U.S. census categories included White, Black, Indian, Chinese, and Japanese. The 1935 *Handbook of Social Psychology* offered chapters on the social histories of the “White Man,” the “Negro,” the “Red Man,” and the “Yellow Man” (Murphy, 1935/1967). However, recent demographic changes are pushing the limits of demographic categories for science, policy, and educational practice. By 2000, immigration to the United States rivaled the high levels of 1910, with

¹We put “race” in quotation marks to emphasize its historical and social construction—with powerful effects—and not a given of biology or nature. Ethnicity, social class, and gender are also social constructions but less prone to be understood as biological essences.

present-day newcomers coming principally from Mexico, Latin America, and Asia, rather than the Eastern and Southern European origins of a century ago. And by 2030, children classified as Hispanic, African American, Asian American, and Native American are expected to constitute half of U.S. children under the age of 17 (Herrández, 1999). Demographers have responded to these changes by adding open-ended questions to the U.S. census to capture the increasingly complex configurations of immigration, ethnicity, and "race." On the 2000 census, one question asked about "racial categories" of American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, Black, and White; another question asked about ethnicity by differentiating Hispanic from non-Hispanic. In addition, adults responding for their families could also write in their own self-descriptions and check more than one category (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002).

As U.S. schools and communities have become more ethnically diverse, children's immigration, ethnicity, and "race" have become more important for research as well as for practices and policies shaping children's developmental pathways. As with gender, academic journals and funding agencies now require demographic descriptions of research participants. Accordingly, scholars have proposed guidelines for doing so, primarily based on parents' reports (Ehtwistle & Astone, 1994). This marks a great improvement over writings about the "universal child" that permeated research in the early 20th century, when diversity reflecting immigration, ethnicity, "race," social class, and gender either was not studied or was portrayed in terms of deficiencies and deprivation (McLoyd, 1990; Valencia & Black, 2002). Although scholars, policymakers, and practitioners continue searching for general patterns in development and pursue universal rights for children, they also probe how inequalities related to factors such as immigration, ethnicity, and social class may shape children's developmental pathways (García Coll et al., 1996). However, using demographic categories to study children's development can introduce other difficulties.

This chapter tackles these issues, first, by considering the limits of demographic categories for understanding the role of immigration, ethnicity, and "race" in children's developmental pathways through school. We then argue for studying these issues as part of individual, social, institutional, and community processes. To illustrate this approach, we use four questions from our MacArthur Network studies based on interdisciplinary theoretical foundations. We interviewed individual children, observed them interacting with peers and teachers, analyzed institutional practices of schools, and watched community partnerships that sought to support children's pathways through school (see chapters in this volume by Cooper, Domínguez, & Rosas; García Coll, Szalacha, & Palacios; and Thorne, for details about individual studies). Finally, we close with reflections for research, policy, and practice.

LIMITS OF DEMOGRAPHIC CATEGORIES FOR UNDERSTANDING IMMIGRATION, ETHNICITY, AND "RACE" IN CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT

To advance science, policy, and practice, scholars seek to describe and predict continuity and change in persons, families, institutions, and communities and to explain what factors enhance and impede development (Cooper & Demner, 1998). Demographic variables such as national origin, ethnicity, and "race" are often used to sort children and families into categories, facilitating comparison on indicators such as health, social skills, emotional well-being, or school achievement. However, consistent with critiques by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Whiting (1976), we argue that these categorical research designs may not fully serve descriptive, predictive, or explanatory goals.

With regard to descriptive goals, relying on mutually exclusive demographic categories for describing social groups neglects the growing numbers of children and families who describe themselves with more than one national, ethnic, or racial identity label (Lee, 1993; Nakashima, 1992). Further, larger sets of categories are often collapsed into dichotomies such as immigrant versus native-born, Black versus White, Hispanic versus non-Hispanic, or high income versus low income (Hirscheid & Gelman, 1994; Medin, 1989), obscuring variation within groups due to social class, immigration history, national origin, and so forth, while emphasizing differences and neglecting similarities between groups. In turn, these dichotomies can easily slip into hierarchies that imply one category is superior and the other inferior (Cooper et al., 1998).

Second, casting immigration, ethnicity, or "race" as fixed and stable qualities can convey that their meanings and related practices in one setting can predict meanings and practices across time and place. However, studies with adolescents and adults show these meanings change over time, vary across communities and geographic regions, and can also shift for individuals across the social contexts of their lives (Fernández, 1992; Root, 2002; Sanjeck, 1995).

Moreover, for explanatory goals, research that treats demographic categories as independent variables has been interpreted as if group membership provided causal explanations for group differences, such as in children's academic aspirations, school achievement, or intelligence (McLoyd, 1990). Such reasoning has been used to argue that such group differences are grounded in biology, although biological explanations of "race"-based differences have been discredited on scientific grounds (Barkan, 1992; Lewontin, 1982). In contrast, research on disparities in school funding and community economic resources points to these factors as central to children's academic pathways (see chapters by Blumenfeld et al. and by Stipek, this volume).

