

Ethnic Identities, Language, and Economic Outcomes Among Dominicans in a New Destination*

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Objective. This study examines how racial/ethnic self-identity interrelates with language ability, skin tone, and years in the United States and with indicators of socioeconomic attainment for Dominican immigrants in Reading, Pennsylvania, a new destination city that had a nearly 800 percent increase in the Dominican population between 1990–2000. *Methods.* In-depth ethno-surveys conducted with a sample of 65 Dominican-origin adults are the basis for the descriptive analysis. *Results.* Based on open-ended responses, nearly 43 percent of immigrants described themselves with a specific ethnic identifier (Dominican) and 41 percent use a more general panethnic identifier (Hispanic or Latino). Panethnic self-identity is interrelated with stronger language ability, lighter skin tone, and more years in the United States, and with better indicators of socioeconomic status. *Conclusion.* Race/ethnic identity is an important component of Dominican immigrant assimilation in this new destination context.

Since the mid-1960s, the United States has received a substantial flow of immigrants and witnessed a marked shift toward Latin American and Asian countries of origin. While this latest wave has raised old questions about the social and economic impact of mass immigration from comparatively poor

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countries, the realities of the new immigration have also spawned theoretical advances and fresh lines of inquiry. Immigration scholars have shown increasing interest in the geographic redistribution of the immigrant population away from traditional cities of destination and toward new settlement communities (Durand, Massey, and Charvet, 2000). This spread to new destinations raises important questions about the context of reception for immigrant outcomes.

We focus on this issue through a case study of Dominican immigrants in the new destination of Reading, Pennsylvania. Dominicans are a particularly salient group to study in several respects (Torres-Saillant and Hernández, 1998). First, among all Latinos, they are a sizable and growing ethnic subpopulation. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Dominicans are the fourth largest immigrant group from Latin America and the Spanish Caribbean (following Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans). The Dominican Republic now ranks ninth among all countries in legal immigrants admitted (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2003:Table B), and approximately 1 million Dominicans live in the United States (Logan, 2002). Second, Dominicans are noteworthy for their relatively high poverty rates, raising concerns about the ability of new destinations to provide needed economic opportunities and about the impact of Dominicans on these places. Third, often very dark skinned yet Spanish speaking, Dominicans have an ambiguous status in the U.S. racial hierarchy, and thus stand to provide novel insights into issues of racial and ethnic self-identity (Grasmuck and Pessar, 1991; Itzigsohn et al., 1999; Itzigsohn and Saucedo, 2002). Finally, Dominicans are moving to new destination communities (Itzigsohn, 2004). In 1990, nearly 75 percent of the half-million Dominicans in the United States lived in the traditional gateway destinations of New York, Bergen-Passaic (New Jersey), and Miami. By 2000, the share of the 1 million Dominicans in the United States who lived in these traditional destinations decreased to approximately 63 percent (Logan, 2002; Portes, 1996).

In this article we address the following questions. First, what is the racial/ethnic identity of Dominicans in Reading and, in particular, their use of Dominican versus panethnic terms in self-identification? Second, how does this ethnic self-identification vary by other key immigrant stratifiers, including self-assessed skin color, Spanish- and English-speaking ability, and years of residence in the United States? Finally, how do those who claim Dominican versus panethnic self-identity differ along basic indicators of socioeconomic status? In addition to addressing these questions, and as a way to place the migration to Reading in a national context, we describe Reading vis-à-vis other numerically prominent new destinations for this group.

Reading as a New Context of Reception

Historically, Reading's economy was built around transportation and iron foundries that served military forces during the 18th and 19th centuries.

A natural transshipment point, Reading's location on the Schuylkill River linked the city to Philadelphia and beyond and fostered transportation that also grew along the Union Canal. In the 19th century, the Reading Railroad was built and became one of the city's most famous attributes. In the 20th century, textile mills were critical to the city's growth. Latinos, particularly Puerto Ricans, first came to Reading to work in these mills, entering the labor force during World War II and taking the place of workers fighting in Europe and the Pacific. Puerto Ricans remain an important minority in the area to this day.

As the textile industry faded, many factory jobs disappeared. Reading entered a new economic phase as retail outlets filled the empty and abandoned factories and Reading's labor force gravitated to the service work that grew in the area. Currently, new groups, particularly Mexicans and Dominicans, are moving to Reading. At the same time, however, the outlet malls are closing and many have moved to nearby Lancaster. In response, Latinos, among others, are moving into small-scale service and small business ownership. Others find work in agriculture. Berks County, where Reading is located, ranks third in the state for agricultural production, and Latinos, particularly Mexicans, find work around major crops (fruit, vegetables, and mushrooms).

This thumbnail history sets the context of the migration of Dominicans to Reading. How does Reading compare to other new destinations for this group? Table 1 provides simple descriptive information for the six metropolitan areas with the fastest percentage increase in their Dominican population (among those with at least 400 Dominican residents in 2000) and, for comparative purposes, New York City. The Reading metropolitan area (i.e., Berks County) had the third fastest growing Dominican population during the 1990s, increasing 796 percent or almost ninefold. Compared to

TABLE 1

Metropolitan Areas with Fastest Dominican Population Growth, 1990–2000

Dominican Population	Raleigh, NC	Grand Rapids, MI	Reading, PA	Charlotte, NC	Harrisburg, PA	Daytona, FL	New York, NY
1990	74	186	308	113	95	106	351K
2000	904	1,912	2,758	923	720	776	603K
% change	1,122	928	796	717	658	632	72
% of Hispanics	1.2	2.8	7.6	1.2	3.7	2.5	25.8
% of total population	0.08	0.18	0.74	0.06	0.11	0.16	6.5

SOURCE: Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research, SUNY-Albany. Mumford point estimates based on data drawn from 1990 and 2000 U.S. Census.

other new destinations (Raleigh, NC; Grand Rapids, MI; Charlotte, NC; Harrisburg, PA; and Daytona, FL), Reading stands out in a number of respects. First, reflecting its history of Hispanic in-migration, 7.6 percent of Reading's population is Hispanic, which is more than double the community with the next closest percentage Hispanic (Harrisburg). Although still very small, the percentage of Reading's population that is Dominican is considerably higher than in these other new destination communities, and the percentage of all Reading Hispanics that are Dominican (roughly one in ten) is comparatively high. Additional data for these metro areas (not shown) indicate that, compared to these other new destinations, Reading has a high percentage white and low percentage non-Hispanic black. Indeed, Hispanics outnumber blacks by nearly three to one in Reading, whereas blacks outnumber Hispanics in the other new destinations. The Hispanic population in the Reading metro area is dominated numerically by Puerto Ricans (22,038 in 2000 or 60.6 percent of all Hispanics). Also, Reading is comparatively disadvantaged economically, with high rates of poverty and unemployment, and a very low national ranking on a measure of economic vitality. In short, Reading represents an interesting test case for issues of self-identity and economic circumstances. Dominicans are not greatly outnumbered by blacks, and they are residentially more intermingled with blacks than in any of the other settings. The city's Hispanic population is otherwise dominated by Puerto Ricans who share a Caribbean heritage. This particular racial/ethnic context of reception may intensify the salience of self-identification and identification by the wider community. The concentration of Dominicans in this economically struggling and declining area represents a worst-case context in which to examine household economic attainment and explore the various trajectories suggested by segmented assimilation (Portes and Zhou, 1993).

Research Methods

To answer our research questions we analyze data from an in-depth ethno-survey containing a mix of open-ended and fixed-response items and conducted with a sample of 65 Dominican-origin adults in Reading during the fall of 2004. The ethno-survey instrument consisted of 12 sections, including a household roster, and sections on socioeconomic data, identity, linguistic ability, migration history, transnational ties, community and social ties, discrimination, stress, health, material wealth, and the geographic locations of daily activities. The ethno-survey was conducted face to face in Spanish or English (as chosen by the respondent) using computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) software loaded onto laptop computers. The survey was administered by field research teams consisting of the principal investigators and their bilingual graduate research assistants.

With finite resources, randomly sampling small groups living in populous places is extremely difficult. Consequently, existing studies of Dominicans

often resort to snowball sampling techniques (Duany, 1994; Itzigsohn and Saucedo, 2002; Levitt, 2001; Levitt and Waters, 2002). In addition to snowballing, we relied on a random sample of Census blocks in Reading that were sampled probability proportionate to size of their Hispanic population based on the 2000 Census. We canvassed these randomly sampled blocks in teams of two field researchers. Although the number of Dominican households we discovered and approached in this way was in accord with the relatively small number of Dominicans as a percentage of all Hispanics in Reading, non-Dominicans often identified nearby Dominican households to approach. Those individuals who did identify as Dominican were highly receptive to being interviewed on the spot or at a later arranged time. Like other studies, we also employed snowballing sampling, asking Dominican respondents for referrals of other Dominican households nearby. Finally, part of our sample is a convenience sample, as we stationed interviewers in a number of popular Dominican restaurants in downtown Reading. In all, we completed interviews with 65 Dominican adults. Although we cannot claim statistical generalizability to all Dominicans in Reading, we feel we obtained a broad spectrum of this population, judging from the sizable variation across key indicators such as gender, age, economic status, language use, and skin tone (see Table 2 for sample characteristics). A limited number of sample characteristics directly comparable to 2000 U.S. Census data for Dominican-origin adults in Reading suggest our sample was reasonably representative. For example, sample and Census estimates (respectively) for median age (40, 36), mean household size (3.6, 4.2), home ownership (33.8 percent, 39.8 percent), and public assistance receipt (21.5 percent, 17.9 percent) were similar. The same comparison for percent male among those 18 or older (52.3 percent, 41.5 percent) suggested that our sample consisted of more males than Census data would suggest for Dominicans in Reading.

Findings

Race and Ethnic Identity and Representation

We posed open-ended questions concerning race in order to provide respondents with the opportunity to indicate their racial identities using their own subjective classifications, rather than those of the researchers. Specifically, we asked: "What race do you consider yourself?" After their initial response to this question, respondents were also provided the opportunity to indicate up to two other terms that they might use to describe themselves. Table 3 presents the first ("top of mind") choice that the respondent mentioned. As shown in research on other groups (Landale and Oropesa, 2002), these results suggest that the overwhelming majority of respondents conflate ethnicity and race. In other words, most use "ethnic" identifiers to classify themselves racially. Specifically, as shown in Table 3,

TABLE 2
General Characteristics of the Sample (N = 65)*

<i>Household Size</i>	
Mean	3.6
SD	1.6
Range	1-9
<i>Age</i>	
Mean	39.4
SD	13.0
Range	18-68
<i>Male</i>	
<i>Skin Color (Respondent Assessed)</i>	
Very light (<i>muy clara</i>)	15.4
Light brown (<i>morena clara</i>)	49.2
Medium brown (<i>morena media</i>)	26.7
Dark brown (<i>morena oscura/o</i>)	7.7
Very dark brown (<i>morena muy oscura/o</i>)	1.5
<i>Marital Status</i>	
Married, spouse present	46.9
Married, spouse absent	7.8
Cohabiting	6.3
Divorced or separated	18.8
Widowed	1.6
Never married	18.8
<i>School Enrollment</i>	
Enrolled full time	10.8
Enrolled part time	3.8
Not in school	73.8
<i>Years of Education</i>	
Mean	10.5
SD	3.7
Range	3-16
<i>Birthplace</i>	
United States	4.6
Dominican Republic	93.8
Puerto Rico	1.5
<i>Employment Status</i>	
Full time	55.6
Part time	9.5
Unemployed, looking for work	19.0
Unemployed, not looking for work	11.1
Retired	3.2
At home (homemaker)	1.6
<i>Housing Tenure</i>	
Owned	33.8
Rented	64.6
Other	1.5
<i>Receive Public Assistance (TANF)</i>	21.5

*All cell entries are percentages except where indicated.

TABLE 3
Race/Ethnic Self-Identity

	N	Percent
<i>Specific Ethnic Label</i>		
Dominican/a/o	26	43.3
<i>General Panethnic Label</i>		
Hispanic	(28)	(46.7)
Hispano/a	4	6.7
Latino/a	19	31.7
Spanish/Español	2	3.3
<i>Other Labels</i>	3	5.0
Mestizo/a	(6)	(9.9)
Indio/a	2	3.3
Other	2	3.3
<i>Total</i>	60	100.0

approximately 43 percent of respondents describe themselves with a specific ethnic identifier (“Dominican/o/a”) and 42 percent use a more general panethnic identifier (“Hispanic/o/a and Latino”). The latter figure increases to 47 percent when we include the 5 percent of respondents who indicated that they were “Spanish.”

The literature on racial and ethnic identification stresses the extent to which identities are dynamic and socially constructed and formed through interactions with residents of the host country as well as with co-ethnics (Nagel, 1994; Omi and Winant, 1994; Portes and Rumbaut, 1996; Waters, 1990). Racial identity is also integrally implicated in ethnic identity formation. It involves both self-appraisal as categorization by others, often based on physical appearance. In the United States, darker-skinned persons have little option to deny their racial/ethnic background when categorized by others on the basis of skin color. Light- and dark-skinned Dominicans offered similar comments.

[Dominicans and African Americans] are the same. They differ in culture. Sometimes a black person turns out to be Dominican.

People think I’m black because I’m dark skinned and I always talk English and act black.

Studies of the effect of contextual change on identity demonstrate that racial identity, too, is situational, related to the ways people construct and interpret their environment (cf. Itzigsohn, Giorguli, and Vazques, 2005). As observed by Either and Deaux (1994:244), in a new context the maintenance of an identity requires “remoooring the identity to new social supports.” In the United States, there are three types of ethnic identities that

immigrants may take: (1) a specific identity that ties the individual to the culture and ancestral nation of origin; (2) a general panethnic identity that extends across specific nations of origin to a general heritage that groups share (e.g., Hispanic, Latino); and (3) a hybridization that retains the specific cultural referent of the group merged with an Americanized identity (e.g., “Dominican American”). Typical was the following response:

When they ask me where I come from, what I am, I say: Hispanic-American. Hispanic and Latina mean the same. When they ask me what race I am, I say: Latina.

I prefer to use Dominican, but American when there's racism.

Although nearly all the respondents rely on panethnic or specific identifiers to classify themselves racially, their conceptualizations are clearly tied to their use of Spanish. For example, only six of the 28 respondents who mentioned a panethnic label as a first choice used an Americanized term such as “Hispanic” or “Latino.” On the contrary, over two-thirds thought of themselves using the Spanish equivalent to these terms—“Hispano/a.” In contrast to some other ethnic groups, none of the respondents used a hybrid term to classify themselves. Although one respondent indicated that s/he was “half Dominican, half American,” none of the respondents used a term such as “Dominican American.”

Most of the respondents (83 percent) used one racial/ethnic term to describe themselves, 12 percent use two terms, and 5 percent used three terms. The majority of the respondents who selected two or more responses typically selected “Hispano/a” first and “Dominican/o/a” second, or vice versa. Only a couple of respondents considered native Dominican classifiers and other native Dominican terms such as “trigueño,” “mestizo,” “blanco,” or “indio” important and worth mentioning.

We followed the racial identification question with a question that asked respondents whether they had disregarded any terms that they considered, what those terms were, and why they were discarded. Only a few respondents reported considering any additional unreported terms. These results suggest that there is a minimal degree of information that may be lost in using a single open-ended question to measure race. A single question will capture the racial identities of most respondents. However, a nontrivial number of respondents have both panethnic and specific ethnic labels that they use to refer to themselves.

We turn finally to the ways in which Dominican versus panethnic self-identity varies by skin color, Spanish- and English-speaking ability, years of residence in the United States, and socioeconomic characteristics (see Table 4). First, we asked respondents to assess their own skin color along a five-category scale from “very light” (*muy claro*) to “very dark” (*muy oscuro*). (This variable correlated very strongly with an interviewer-assessed skin tone using the same scale.) Those who claim Dominican

TABLE 4
Correlates of Dominican Versus Panethnic Self-Identity*

	Dominican	Panethnic
<i>Skin Color</i>		
Very light	12.0	21.4
Light brown	44.0	57.1
Darker	44.0	21.4
<i>Spanish-Speaking Ability</i>		
Very well	50.0	79.3
Well or not well	50.0	20.7
<i>English-Speaking Ability</i>		
Very well or well	34.6	37.9
Not well or not at all	65.4	62.1
<i>Years in the U.S.</i>		
1-7	29.2	25.0
8-15	37.5	35.7
16+	33.3	39.3
<i>Years of Completed Education (Mean)</i>	9.4	11.7
<i>Employed</i>	50.0	71.4
Males	69.2	82.4
Females	30.8	58.3
<i>Personal Income</i>		
Low (<\$15K)	60.0	45.8
High (\$15K+)	40.0	54.2
<i>Public Assistance Receipt</i>	15.4	21.4
<i>Food Stamp Receipt</i>	26.9	22.2
<i>Home is Owned</i>	30.8	39.3

*All cell entries are percentages except for Years of Completed Education (Mean).

identity are decidedly less likely (12.0 vs. 21.4 percent) to say they are light skinned, and more than twice as likely (44.0 vs. 21.4 percent) to say they were “medium brown” (*moreno medio*) or darker when compared to those claiming panethnic identity. With respect to Spanish-language ability, almost four out of five panethnic respondents said they spoke Spanish very well, compared to only half of all Dominican self-identifiers. A rather high percentage of both groups, approaching two-thirds, say they speak English not very well or not at all, though again there is a slight disadvantage for Dominicans versus panethnics in this respect. Finally, panethnicity is more likely to be claimed by those Dominican-origin respondents who have resided in the United States a longer period of time, suggesting that more recent arrivals claim a national identity that then becomes co-ethnic in time. Lacking longitudinal data, this possibility remains speculative only.

Concern over immigration is driven in large part by the economic circumstances of immigrants, and the implications of these circumstances for individual and families, as well as the wider communities and regions in which immigrants concentrate. Our findings are suggestive of some

advantages to those claiming panethnic versus Dominican self-identity. Comparisons along indicators of socioeconomic status in the remainder of Table 4 address this more directly. We highlight four general observations. First, compared to those whose first response to our race/ethnic identity question is “Dominican/o/a,” self-described panethnics (e.g., “Hispanic,” “Latino/a”) are better off. Dominicans have less education (9.4 vs. 11.7 years), are less likely to be employed (50.0 vs. 71.4 percent) (a difference that is seen among both males and females), more likely to be in the lower half of the income distribution (60.0 vs. 45.8 percent), and are less likely to own their own homes (30.8 vs. 39.3 percent) when compared to their panethnic counterparts. It is important to remember that all these respondents understood that the survey was of Dominicans, and almost all were born in the Dominican Republic. That those who claim a panethnic identity are in somewhat better economic circumstances is intriguing.

Summary and Conclusions

The new immigration has raised old questions about the social and economic impact of immigrants on U.S. society; however, its unique character has generated new lines of inquiry. Our analysis bears on two of these emerging areas of study. The first is the movement of immigrants away from traditional gateway cities and toward new destination communities (Singer, 2004). The second is the way in which immigrant groups define themselves ethnically and racially, and how these definitions are affected by and map against prevailing conceptualizations of race and ethnicity in the United States (Landale and Oropesa, 2002; Waters, 1994). These two lines of inquiry are not unrelated. That many new gateways are smaller in size and have smaller immigrant communities both increases the immigrants’ potential impact on these destinations, and may increase the salience of divergent views of race and ethnicity between immigrants and the wider community. As a group, Dominican immigrants are well suited for an empirical analysis of these issues. They are moving in significant numbers away from their traditional gateway of Washington Heights in New York City and toward new and smaller cities—either directly from the Dominican Republic or via the New York area. At the same time, Dominicans are phenotypically diverse and hail from the Caribbean where notions of “race” are more complex and feature an array of categories that go far beyond typical white versus black distinctions in the United States.

Here, we have focused on Dominicans residing in Reading, Pennsylvania. Reading is a small and economically struggling city with a vibrant, well-established, and growing Latino community embedded within a rather white and agricultural region of the commonwealth. It is also a city with a rapidly growing Dominican population that is attracted to the area due to the preexisting Latino community, the low cost of readily available housing, and

the perception that it is a relatively safe and tranquil place to live. Analyzing data from an ethno-survey conducted with a sample of 65 Dominican adults in Reading, we ask three simple but important questions. First, when presented with an open-ended question on their race, how do Dominicans define themselves? In particular, do they use domestic notions of black versus white, or do they invoke Dominican or pan-Latino terms? Second, does this ethnic self-identification vary by other key immigrant characteristics—notably skin color, Spanish- and English-speaking ability, and years of residence in the United States? And third, does self-identity vary importantly by indicators of socioeconomic status?

We found that Dominicans in Reading construct their identities along one of two lines; some chose panethnic terms (Latino/a, Hispano/a), while others self-identify as Dominican (Dominicano/a). As the term “black” or African Caribbean is widely rejected in the Dominican Republic (Howard, 2003), it is hardly surprising that none of our respondents self-identified as black in their “top-of-mind” response. In his study of Dominicans in Providence, Rhode Island, Itzigsohn (2004) likewise found very few self-identifying as black (5 percent). However, several of our respondents did regard themselves as very dark skinned and recognized that they are sometimes regarded as black by members of the wider community.

Barring strong preexposure to the U.S. media and culture, immigrant groups from Spanish-speaking countries do not often arrive with notions of panethnicity. Rather, terms like Latino/a or Hispanic are U.S. contrivances used to categorize a large and diverse group of people. In short, panethnicity is something that is adopted. This is consistent with our finding that the use of panethnic identity was more common among those Dominicans who had spent more years in the United States. Interestingly also is that panethnics had lighter self-assessed skin tone than those identifying as Dominican. Finally, that panethnics are lighter and have been in the United States longer is consistent with a number of economic advantages of this group. Specifically, compared to Dominicans, panethnics were better educated, more likely employed, and had higher incomes and home-ownership rates.

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