Experiencing Everyday Discrimination: A Comparison Across Five Immigrant Populations

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Abstract Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, this article explores and compares the subjective experiences of everyday discrimination articulated by immigrants across five different national origin populations. The comparison reveals that discrimination is perceived, encountered, and experienced differently by immigrants from various national origins backgrounds. Further, from the perspective of immigrants themselves, discrimination is not just about phenotypical racial characteristics, but also about language abilities, class position, immigration status, foreignness, and personhood. The article describes some of the contexts or settings within which discrimination is encountered, including a discussion of both mainstream and minority contexts. The latter is rarely addressed in the literature on discrimination. Finally, using some hypothetical scenarios, it examines how immigrants of different national origins say they might react to discriminatory behavior. This exercise not only illuminates some intriguing variations across the five populations but also addresses broader discussion of confrontation as opposed to forbearance in the literature on discrimination.

Keywords Discrimination · Immigrants · Rights

Introduction

Eva, a 55-year-old Salvadoran woman who had come to the United States without papers in 1986 and eventually secured a green card, was asked to describe a personal encounter with prejudice or discrimination in the United States.[1] Speaking little English, she recounted in Spanish her difficulties with an English teacher, a "morena" (black woman), at a Dallas area community college. The teacher had taken a dislike to her and treated her unfairly, chastising her for not learning as quickly as other students. One day, Eva said, she asked the teacher a question. The teacher replied that she didn't have time to answer, directing the question to another student. Eva reported feeling angry and told the teacher that it was her job to answer the question. This led to a public altercation and from that time forward the teacher kept "messing with me." Eva reported being particularly devastated at the time of the final exam. The teacher was picking up the exams and when she came to Eva's, she leafed through it, announcing how many questions were answered incorrectly, and hence embarrassing Eva in front of the entire class. Eva left, crying, and has since lost interest in learning English. Eva indicated that the discrimination directed toward her was less about her race or ethnic identity than about her linguistic inadequacies. She was visibly upset and asked for advice on how she could learn English.

Manuel, a Mexican immigrant, reported feeling prejudice when he arrived in the United States at the age of nine. He was the only Hispanic in a white neighborhood in West Houston. He heard words like "spic" and "wetback" directed toward him by other students. "They asked me what stroke I used to swim across the river" and whether I "lived in a cardboard shack." Being Hispanic, he said, automatically labeled him as an alien. "It was horrible. I was beat up and spat upon. I started denouncing my ethnicity. I told people I was from Spain. Everyone was okay with that. For years I went like that. I never heard a positive

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[1] All names are pseudonyms.

word about Mexicans. 'Stinking Mexicans', 'F__ Mexicans', 'Dirty Mexicans'. It was impossible to clean it up." Eventually, he went to college and there he met others who had faced similar experiences but he also started to understand how the media shaped people's attitudes and it made him angry. By studying about Mexico, he regained his pride in his ancestry.

Eva's and Manuel's stories suggest the complex ways in which post-1965 immigrants to the United States have experienced and confronted prejudice and discrimination in a country where the foreign born comprised just under 13 percent of the total US population at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Many, like Manuel, have to deal with ethnic labeling. As Oboler (1995: xvi) has argued, the use of stigmatizing ethnic labels sets a group apart from the dominant group. "The label's negative connotations become manifested in the discriminatory practices that in turn designate the group's status in the society." Only by learning about his origins was Manuel able to reject the status to which he had been assigned by these labels and reclaim his heritage. Like most immigrants, Manuel was demeaned and excluded based on visible markers of difference. The most obvious marker of difference is skin color but, as Eva experienced, language or accent is another. Yoo et al. (2009) have quite recently focused on the dimension of language discrimination, attempting to disentangle it from the racial attributes that set immigrants, in their case Asian immigrants, apart. They observe that "many leading scales of self-reported discrimination exclude this dimension" (p. 727).

Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, this article explores and compares the subjective experiences of everyday discrimination articulated by immigrants across five different national origin populations. The comparison reveals that discrimination is encountered and experienced differently by immigrants from various national origins backgrounds. Further discriminatory acts occur not just in relation to phenotypical racial differences and English-language deficiencies, but also in relation to class position, immigration status, foreignness, and personhood. The article describes some of the contexts or settings within which discrimination is encountered, including a discussion of both mainstream and minority contexts. The latter is rarely addressed in the literature on discrimination. Finally, using some hypothetical scenarios, it examines how immigrants of different national origins say they might react to discriminatory behavior. This exercise further illuminates some intriguing variations across the five populations.

Theoretical Background

A broad, interdisciplinary literature characterized by a multitude of approaches and analytical frameworks

explores the impact of discrimination and discriminatory practices on the lives of immigrants. One approach emphasizes how these new immigrants negotiate the US racial hierarchy as well as the racialization of their own identities (Denton and Massey 1989; Omni and Winant 1994; Duany 1998; Bailey 2001; Tuan 1998; Foner and Frederickson 2004; O'Brien 2008). In their attempt to disentangle race from ethnicity, Cornell and Hartmann (2004:28) view race as a category imposed by others who uses it as the foundation for oppression and discrimination. "By sorting people into particular 'races' more powerful groups specify the position of the less powerful and thereby maintain their own power, status, and authority."

Social scientists have identified several contexts for racial and other forms of discrimination, but have particularly emphasized the labor market and the housing market. Kenney and Wissoker (1994), for example, demonstrate that Hispanics were less likely than Anglos to land job interviews and be offered a job. A number of economists have pursued a similar line of inquiry, identifying evidence of discrimination associated with economic attainment (Morales and Bonilla 1993; Nielsen et al. 2004), while geographers and sociologists have focused on a segregated labor market that steers different immigrant populations into particular employment niches as it steers them into particular residential neighborhoods (Denton and Massey 1989; Alba et al. 1995; Logan et al. 1996; Crowder 1999; Wright and Ellis 2000; Alba et al. 2000; Ellis et al. 2007). All of this research raises important issues regarding the exclusion or inclusion of immigrants but it does not adequately identify how segregation and discrimination are subjectively considered and processed by immigrants themselves, or how they have or might respond. For further theoretical insight into these questions, it is helpful to turn to the literature in psychology and more specifically to three dimensions of this literature: (1) the concept of perceived discrimination; (2) the difference between personal and group discrimination; and (3) the distinction between confrontation and forbearance.

Psychologists begin with the problem of what they call "acculturative stress"—that is, the acute and chronic stressors to the process of immigrant acculturation (Finch et al. 2000). One of these stressors is the perception that one is the target of discrimination, often referred to as "perceived discrimination" (Floyd and Gramman 1995; Noh et al. 1999; Liebkind and Jasinskaja-Lahti 2000; Moghaddam et al. 2002; Dion 2002; Noh and Kaspar 2003; Moradi and Hasan 2004, Moradi and Risco 2006). Perceived discrimination highlights the subjective experience of unequal treatment, and one line of argument has been that "the greater the perceived discrimination, the less successful the immigrants' incorporation into a receiving society" (Dion 2001: 524). Jackson et al. (1997) note that

rates of perceived discrimination vary across ethno-racial groups and are related to racial self-identification. Their research shows, for example, that the rate of perceived discrimination was 45 percent among Asians who self-identified ethnically as Asian but racially as white and 13 percent among Asians who ethnically and racially identified as Asian. Comparable figures for Hispanics were 23 percent for those who ethnically identified as Hispanic and racially identified as white and 12 percent for those identified both ethnically and racially as Hispanic.

With an interest in mental health outcomes in particular, many psychologists have tried to identify the factors that "mediate or moderate the relationship between the experience of discrimination and the psychological adjustment of immigrants" (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al. 2006: 294). Among the factors, they have identified are cultural values, social and ethnic community support (i.e., social networks), and ethnic identity. For example, Mossakowski (2003), in a study of Filipino immigrants, finds that having a sense of ethnic pride, being involved in ethnic practices, and having a strong commitment to a racial or ethnic group, all serve to alleviate the stress of discrimination. Finch et al. (2000), in research that compares native born/resident Mexicans with foreign-born immigrant Mexicans, find that "the more highly acculturated native born/residents of the United States are less likely to experience discrimination than their less acculturated counterparts" and further "those born outside the United States are more likely to perceive discrimination as their levels of English usage and acculturation increases" (p. 309). They suggest that greater masterly of English enhances a sense of discrimination.

Finch et al. (2000) also address the difference between perceptions of discrimination against a group and perceptions or experiences of personal discrimination. The former is generally reported at higher rates than the latter. These personal/group discrepancies have been explored by a few other researchers. For example, Taylor et al. (1990) show that Haitian and East Indian women in Montreal report more group than personal discrimination, while Dion (2001) found that Jamaicans and Somalis in Toronto perceived greater personal and group discrimination and showed more discrepancy between the two than did Poles (see also Dion and Kawakami 1996)—again evidence that there are important variations across cultural groups that merit further investigation.

A third area of inquiry by psychologists explores how individual members of minority or immigrant populations respond to the experience of discrimination and what this means for physical and/or emotional well-being. For example, Noh et al. (1999) ask on the one hand if confrontation (that is, filing a protest or making a report to authorities) "may mitigate the effect of perceived discrimination…because confrontation may alter the situation and reduce the sense of helplessness or victimization" (p. 194) or on the other hand if confrontation enhances distress because it escalates conflict. They observe that confrontation may not be available to everyone, particularly those who perceive themselves as powerless in particular situations. Confrontation is just one response. Another is forbearance—that is, passively accepting the experience or not reacting to it because conflict is avoided. However, as Noh et al. (1999) suggest, forbearance may enhance a sense of victimization. These authors also observe that confrontational versus forbearance responses may vary by cultural group (see also Kuo 1995) and argue, based on their research among southeast Asian refugees, that forbearance is effective in limiting depression outcomes especially among those with strong ethnic identification. Other scholars who have addressed this difference between confrontation and forbearance in relation to situations of discrimination have argued that context or situation is more important than culture in influencing the kind of response that is chosen (Mattlin et al. 1990; see also Eckenrode 1991).

This broad literature frames the following discussion of the subtle forms of everyday discrimination experienced by immigrants in the United States. The literature suggests that there are a number of dimensions to discriminatory acts, that they occur in a range of contexts, that they are perceived and reacted to differently by members of different populations depending on cultural background but perhaps also in relation to other factors including length of time in the country, and that the distinction between group and personal discrimination is important. This article attempts to illuminate further some of these theoretical issues, but pays particular attention to variations across immigrants of different national origins as well as to how immigrants themselves talk about their own encounters and experiences with everyday discrimination.

Methods

Data for this paper were collected as part of a broader baseline project on new immigration into the Dallas-Fort Worth area (DFW).[2] The project involved multiple research instruments and both quantitative and qualitative methods. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews with slightly more than 600 immigrants from five different

national origins—Asian Indians, Vietnamese, Salvadorans, Mexicans, and Nigerians—were conducted. These populations differ in their auspices of immigration, the human capital with which they enter the country, and in their experiences as members of the foreign-born population in the United States.[3] Using an anthropological methodology that involved multiple points of entry, purposive non-random samples for each population were created based on a host of criteria (for example, sex, religion, length of time since arrival, visa status) that reflected broad variations in each group that were identified through preliminary ethnographic field research and participant observation. In addition to basic socioeconomic and demographic questions, respondents were asked about their migration and employment histories, the organizations with which they were involved, their political participation both in the United States and at home, their social networks, and their contacts with the sending community, as well as some questions about citizenship/naturalization and identity. Since the interview schedule was semi-structured, research participants were often asked follow-up questions about their responses, a process that yielded rich qualitative data.

The interview schedule also included a series of questions about discrimination as well as real and potential engagements with law enforcement. Respondents were also asked a set of questions about hypothetical scenarios and how they would handle them. Among these, hypothetical scenarios were the following: If you witnessed a serious crime (for example, a person gets shot) what would you do?; If your car was stolen, what would you do?; If someone owed you a large sum of money (say $2,000) and you could not get that person to pay, what would you do?; If a minor child of yours was taken away from you by the government (for example Child Protective Services, what would you do?; If you applied for a job and you suspected that you were not hired because of your race, national background, or religious affiliation, what would you do?; If you worked extra hours and your employer refused to pay you more than the usual number of hours, what would you do?; and If you tried to rent an apartment and you were told that none were available, but you suspected that you were being turned away because of your race, national background, or religious affiliation, what would you do? While initially formulated to grasp how immigrants understand their political, social, and civil rights, several of these hypothetical questions also yielded qualitative data on how newcomers to the United States perceive and think about discrimination. Given areas of inquiry in the broader literature on discrimination discussed above, the responses to

two of these hypothetical scenarios—dealing with workplace and residential discrimination—are discussed in this article.

Facing Discrimination

In order to explore the difference between group and personal discrimination, research participants across all five populations were first asked whether they thought that members of their nationality group faced serious problems of ethnic or racial discrimination in the United States (Table 1).[4] More than 80 percent of Mexican research participants, both men and women, responded "yes," higher than the rate among Nigerian men, although 80 percent of Nigerian women responded "yes." Eighty-six of the Mexicans interviewed for this project were unauthorized at the time of the interview, and 80 percent of these responded that their group faced discrimination. Of the 40 Mexicans interviewed who had green cards, 90 percent answered "yes" and of the 44 who were naturalized citizens, 98 percent answered "yes." Mexicans in the DFW area believe that ethnic or racial discrimination is an issue for their nationality group no matter what their immigration or citizenship status and among those whom one might consider to "most belong"—that is, the naturalized citizens—the proportion is very close to 100 percent.

Fewer Salvadorans than Mexicans, among both men and women, thought that members of their nationality group faced serious problems of discrimination in the United States. Of the 15 Salvadorans who were unauthorized at the time of the interview, 47 percent responded "yes," while 59 percent of those with green cards (29 in total) said "yes" and 77 percent of those who were naturalized citizens (22 in total) responded "yes." Twenty-five respondents were under temporary protected status at the time of the interview, and of these, 64 percent said their group faced discrimination.[5] These proportions by immigration status are all lower than those among Mexicans but quite interestingly, and again like the Mexican-origin population, the more secure their immigration status, the more discrimination Salvadorans perceive. One might expect that the unauthorized in both these populations would express a greater sense of discrimination than those in various forms

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[3] For further discussion of recent immigration to DFW see Brettell (2008a, b). DFW has been identified as a new immigration gateway (Singer et al. 2008).

[4] Where totals do not equal 100% respondents said they did not know, could not say, or refused to respond.

[5] Temporary Protected Status is extended to foreign nationals when conditions in a home country (armed conflict, environmental disaster, other extraordinary events) prevent them from returning there safely or when the country is not able to adequately handle their return. TPS does not by itself result in a green card, but someone in this status may immigrate permanently under other legal provisions. See http://www.uscis.go.

Table 1 Does your group face serious problems of discrimination?

	Male		Female	
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
Salvadoran ($N = 103$)	56	44	70	30
Mexican ($N = 208$)	86	12	89	8
Indian ($N = 102$)	20	79	24	71
Vietnamese ($N = 100$)	42	56	37	61
Nigerian ($N = 100$)	64	36	80	20

Proportion responding yes or no by sex and national origin

Table 2 Have you personally encountered prejudice or discrimination in American society?

	Male		Female	
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
Salvadoran	39	63	48	52
Mexican	38	58	45	53
Indian	39	61	19	80
Vietnamese	42	56	34	66
Nigerian	70	30	70	30

Proportion responding yes or no by sex and national origin

of authorized status, particularly in the context of vehement and vocal national opposition to and criminalization of so-called illegals that has characterized the immigration debate in the United States during the first decade of the twenty-first century, but these data suggest that the unauthorized choose to keep a lower profile even in relation to the articulation of or complaints about discrimination while those who are authorized or citizens are more aware of their rights and may be more willing to articulate any infringement of them. This offers some reinforcement for observations made by Finch et al. (2000) about differences between less and more "acculturated" immigrant populations in relation to perceived discrimination. Worthy of further exploration are the differences between these two "Hispanic" populations—are Mexican immigrants more sensitive to discrimination because they are the more visible Latino population and the population most associated with being in the country illegally.

Indian men and women held quite opposite opinions from Mexicans and Salvadorans. Almost 80 percent of men and 71 percent of women claimed that their group did not face discrimination. Interviews with Indian immigrants, as well as the broader ethnographic literature, suggest that first-generation Indians in the United States have been quite overt in their efforts to promote a class identity, based on high levels of education, professional status, and income. "Merit transcends color" (Bhatia 2007, p. 164). While some research participants acknowledged the color divide in the United States, they frequently linked this to the obstacles they faced in claiming an American identity. For example, one adult male respondent with self-acknowledged political ambitions observed that "It would be more beneficial to my political career to identify myself as American, but with my name and my physical features I cannot escape the Indian identification. Whether I want it or not it is with me." A female respondent reported that when she says she is American her children correct her by saying "Mom, you are not white."[6]

The Vietnamese responses are more similar to those of Salvadorans although the weighting is reversed by sex. It is important to note that 85 percent of the Vietnamese respondents were naturalized citizens (an additional 11 percent were legal permanent residents) compared with 45 percent of Indians who were naturalized citizens (and 25 percent legal permanent residents). As this essay develops, explanations for these nuanced differences will become more apparent. Individuals from different nationality backgrounds identify different sources and contexts for discrimination.

Respondents were also asked whether they had personally encountered prejudice or discrimination in American society from any group (Table 2). Perhaps, not surprisingly, the Nigerians, both men and women, showed the highest proportion of "yes" answers to this question, followed by Vietnamese men. That these proportions differ from the proportions presented in Table 1 is significant. First, it supports observations in the broader literature on discrimination that suggests that individuals separate discrimination against a group from their own personal experience with it. However, the data presented here indicate that there are important differences in these forms of perceived discrimination (group vs. personal) across national origin groups. While Indians are less likely to claim that their group has experienced discrimination, more will acknowledge that they have personally experienced it. The balance is tipped the same way for Nigerians although not unexpectedly more claim to have personally experienced discrimination, not only in relation to color but also, as suggested above, in relation to language.

Conversely, more Mexicans claimed that they as a group are discriminated against than claimed to have experienced it personally. One Mexican respondent summed it up this

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[6] These remarks offer more support to previous observations about Asians being "forever foreign" (see Tuan 1998). Purkayastha (2005:

Footnote 6 continued

55–56) has argued that racialization is clearly crucial "in keeping the South Asian Americans 'ethnic,' in spite of their integration in terms of residence, education, and related facets of their lives." Khandelwal (2002: 172) describes attacks on Indians in New Jersey by so-called dotbusters New Jersey in the 1980s.

way "They don't pay us what is right; we cannot live in areas where we want to live; we don't have jobs that are adequate and accessible; we don't have access to health services and someone who looks like a mestizo will not get attention in a hospital." All these were sources for discriminatory behavior in his view. Although this research was completed before the massive immigrant marches that took place during the spring of 2006, Mexican immigrants are well aware of the broader societal hostility directed toward them and particularly toward their unauthorized status.[7] Again, the Vietnamese fall in the middle and the proportions are quite similar, suggesting that of all these groups, it is the Vietnamese who translate their personal experiences into a group experience. This may have to do with the shared experience of the Vietnamese as refugees who have fled the communist regime. More than half of the participants in this study entered the United States prior to 1980 and more than two-thirds prior to 1990.

These responses to a series of broad questions about prejudice and discrimination experienced personally or perceived as directed toward one's national origin group are provocative and suggest the need to delve more deeply into individual encounters. For this, we must turn to the qualitative data that emerged from this research. These data reveal that people talk about contexts of discrimination. It is some of these contexts that I now discuss.

Workplace Discrimination

In a study of ethnic segregation in the workplace and at home, Ellis et al. (2004) demonstrate that in the city of Los Angeles more intergroup contact occurs during the work day than in the home environment. "Labor markets and the technical division of labor within firms and institutions pull workers from different groups to the same sites of employment. While power relations among groups may be unequal at work, this contact is likely to have numerous consequences for attitudes toward difference" (p. 634). Clearly, there is greater cross-group interaction in the workplace than in neighborhoods, but aggregate spatial analyses access neither the nature of workplace relationships nor how immigrants actually experience their workplace. Participants in our research, across all five groups, described subtle workplace discrimination that influenced both raises and promotions, but the human capital differences among these populations nuance the experience of everyday workplace discrimination in distinct ways.

As mentioned above, first-generation members of the Indian population often choose to downplay their color and instead promote their class identity. However, this

population, precisely because of their high level of skills and education, is frequently vocal about "glass ceiling" discrimination in the workplace. As Sunil Bhatia has observed, "Many Indian professionals have clearly articulated that they did not reach the highest positions in their company because they were Indian; yet they were not willing to be considered as having racialized identities" (Bhatia 2007, p. 158).[8] Many of the Indian participants in our study demonstrated a similar ambivalence toward racism and discrimination, suggesting that you have to ignore it because it is everywhere. However, some did mention the "glass ceiling" workplace experience. One male respondent, for example, recalled trying to find work in the computer industry when her first arrived in the United States "I had a lot against me. I had an accent, I am brown, I was over forty." Another respondent said he felt he had been passed over for promotions because of his ethnicity, seeing less qualified and less competent individuals who are white Americans advance faster than he had. Another simply described feeling out of place. He recalled a tech leader with whom he did not get along because sometimes he challenged the leader's decisions when he thought there were more efficient ways to do things. The tech leader had a friend who did not challenge him, and this individual got the promotions. He classified this, however, as a personal bias, not a racist bias. But he also observed that he was the only Indian at his company and when everyone started discussing football, he had nothing to say or share—a cultural bias that also enhances difference and challenges some people's sense of and right to belong. Finally, one Indian respondent put a different twist on things, focusing more on citizenship than on race or ethnicity. He claimed that if he was a US citizen, he might have a hundred people working under him at this point in his career. "There is a barrier; it's a slow thing. You don't get the raises at the same pace….I have to apply for visas if I change jobs and I can't get two times the money at Boeing or Lockheed, because of the required security clearance." This response reflects a clear sense that full rights come with citizenship, including the right to contest any form of workplace discrimination.

The strongest comments on workplace discrimination came from Nigerians who suggested that sometimes it was their blackness and sometimes it was their Nigerian-ness that led to workplace discrimination. One respondent described his experiences applying for positions as a police officer. In one instance, in a DFW area suburb, he claimed to have made the seventh highest score on the exam but was not hired. When he applied to the Dallas Police Department, the white interviewer kept saying that he could not understand him.

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[7] For further discussion see Chavez (2008).

[8] See Shih (2007) for a discussion of "job-hopping" as a way to surmount the glass ceiling phenomenon.

Another Nigerian described a persistent pattern of workplace discrimination wherever he applied for work—from a pizza parlor in Atlanta to working as a consultant for Oracle. "Sometimes [discrimination] is subtle, sometimes it is open. But it exists." At Oracle, he said, the Indians and Africans were given the programing jobs while the whites got the jobs in management. Another stated quite bluntly "I have never experienced racial discrimination In terms of getting a job (but) I have been passed over for promotions because of race. I trained people who were later promoted over me. However, I did not go to court in order to protect my family."

Salvadorans and Vietnamese were focused on other contexts for discrimination; perhaps, because many of them are employed in high immigrant sectors of the economy. A few, however, did mention examples of workplace discrimination. One Vietnamese respondent described trying to find a job at a Vietnamese restaurant and they tried to pay him only $4 an hour. He concluded that they tried to do this because he was not a US citizen. But another suggested that when you take a new job, everyone is suspicious but once you show how well you can do it, attitudes may change, "especially if you help them with their own job and make them look good."

Perhaps, one of the most interesting findings was that Mexican respondents described workplace discrimination in two ways—that directed toward employees and that directed toward Hispanic customers at their respective places of employment. In the first case, the references are to not being paid equally, not being paid at all, or to discrimination that emerges for their inability to speak English well—an issue also of concern to the Vietnamese and Salvadoran research participants (see also Hein 2000). One Mexican, José, told a story of being hired by an "Anglo man" who picked him up at a day laborer center, was demanding in the work he asked for, and then pretended not to understand when José asked about his pay. While driving José back to the spot where he had picked him up, the man stopped for gas and while José was in the men's room, he drove off. A second reported that her mother was constantly demeaned at her place of work because she does not speak English, even though she has the skills for the job, and a third mentioned a coworker at a Chinese restaurant who is paid very little but who cannot leave the position because she is alone. "They ask her to do everything and she works many hours and receives hardly anything in pay." A third raised another form of discrimination in the workplace. When there are work accidents, he observed, the Americans receive help but the Hispanics do not—"they say, how great, it was a Mexican, it will be cheap."

Several Mexicans clearly articulated the discriminatory racial and class hierarchies in the United States that shaped their experience. "In Taco Bueno, one man reported, 'I see that the heavy work is for the Mexicans'. There are Americans, blacks, Pakistanis and Hindus working there. There are four managers, two Americans and two Hindus. The Hindus and 'los bolillos' have the privileges. 'Los fregados' are the Mexicans."[9] These hierarchies were equally manifested in comments about how Hispanic customers are treated at their places of work. One man who works at a Braum's Ice Cream Parlor said that Hispanics are "given the least possible." A second who works at Walmart said "When someone Anglo returns a product to customer service, even without a receipt, they take the item back. However, a Hispanic who has his receipt often does not get his money back or they give him a credit to purchase other things at Walmart. This makes me mad but there is nothing to do about it." These observations about broader discrimination directed toward Hispanics that are witnessed in workplace contexts further reinforce the importance of the analytical distinction between group and personal perceptions of or experiences with discrimination. They also offer a good segue to neighborhood and community arenas of discrimination that were identified by research participants.

Discrimination in Neighborhoods and Communities

Within neighborhoods and communities, racial profiling (couched as unwarranted encounters with the police) and residential segregation are the most commonly identified sources of discrimination. Vietnamese, Salvadoran, and Mexican research participants described incidents of harassment with area police.[10] One Vietnamese respondent, a police officer himself, reported an incident when he was on his way to temple. He was stopped by the police because, he thought, he was an Asian driving a nice car in a certain neighborhood. He reported asking the officer if "today was Asian day." When the officer found out that he was also a police officer, he told him that it was just a joke and let him go. Another Vietnamese respondent described leaving for a fishing trip with friends early in the morning. They were pulled over and arrested. "The cop said someone called and complained that there were some kids toilet papering their house. We all knew the cop pulled us over because our car was a low rider and the fact that we look Asian with spiky hair." One Mexican respondent offered a different perspective on local police who do not respond to calls from Hispanics as rapidly. "There is no equality.

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[9] *Bollillo* is a slang term like gringo used to refer to whites. *Fregado* refers here to the people who are toast or dead meat.

[10] Several inner ring suburban communities in the DFW area have implemented Federal 287 (g) legislation to verify the immigration status of individuals stopped by police for other reasons. See Brettell and Nibbs (2011) for a discussion of Farmers Branch, Texas.

There is a lot of discrimination in the application of justice. They do not punish the same crime in the same way for a black or a white as they do for Mexicans."

But even a few Indian research participants described encounters with police, particularly in the early years after 9/11. One man, a Sikh, described being at a McDonald's restaurant with a group of friends. They were discussing business and had some papers out on the table. The next thing they knew there were a group of police asking them who they were and what they were doing. They called the chief and he knew they were Sikhs and let them go. He said that his lawyer has recommended that he always have his passport and visa on him because it has become dangerous in the US.

Mexicans reported on forms of community discrimination most extensively. They talked about being ignored in banks, hospitals, and restaurants, or noticing that better service was given to those of other races or who were better dressed. "People are guided by appearances." One respondent described an incident in a store where a Mexican wanted to pay for food with stamps and the people said "the Mexicans only come to the US to use food stamps." Some Mexican parents complained that their children or Hispanic children more generally, were not given as much attention in schools or were treated unfairly. One female respondent remembered being in a high school biology class. The teacher asked if anyone had questions. Although she raised her hand, the teacher never recognized her. Another told a story about being in a private school where the majority of the students were "Anglos" and had money. "I was the opposite and they did not accept me; they viewed me as a minority who did not really belong in that school." For many Mexicans, discrimination is voiced as someone being treated as invisible, a lesser person, a nonperson, an insignificant person. It is about not being accorded respect.

This issue of invisibility, one rarely discussed in the literature on discrimination, was also mentioned by Nigerians. One described applying for a license to open a business. "I walked into the office and the lady just sat there and didn't acknowledge me. Then a white man came in and she immediately attended to him and when I told her that I was there first she said that he had called." Another recalled being in a restaurant with some white friends. When his friends ordered their food, the waitress took the orders with no problem. When he tried to order, she ignored him and would not look him in the eye. Although he was served food along with his friends, "the waitress continued not to speak or make eye contact with me during the whole meal. She would not speak to me because I was Nigerian." Nigerians also articulated the absence of trust in the public sphere. One research participant said that shop clerks always check his credit cards, even when no one else is checked. Another recalled this incident:

The first day that I came to America, I had got my luggage at the airport and came out onto the pavement to see if my uncle was waiting for me. I could not see my uncle anywhere. I asked this white man, who had a cell phone, if I could use it to try and locate my uncle. He gave me a very strange look and then told me 'no'. Then I saw a white woman ask to use his phone and he gave it to her with no problem. He gave her the phone because she was white.

Indians described subtle forms of stereotyping within neighborhoods where they settled. One female research participant recalled walking in her neighborhood (where there are no other Indian families) and someone new to the neighborhood stopped her to ask if she knew another cleaning lady who wanted to work. She said she responded that she would ask her cleaning lady. She also reported answering the door of her home and being asked for the "lady of the house." These behaviors, she concluded, stem from ignorance. One Indian research participant, for example, described buying a house a year earlier and before they moved in someone in the neighborhood came to ask whether they had purchased the house. "When we said yes, he muttered, 'there goes the neighborhood'." This respondent went on to report that this neighbor does not acknowledge them to this day. But reflecting on it, he claimed that while this incident blemished their experience, it did not diminish how they thought about America. People like this man, he stated, exist all over the world.

Discrimination in a Minority Context

So far, the discussion has focused on forms of discrimination experienced and articulated by research participants in workplace and community contexts where they interact with the "mainstream" white population. However, immigrants often live and work with other immigrants and with other minorities. Conflicts over employment, over who has a right to belong, and over how one demonstrates one's Americanness are also characteristic of these minority contexts.

Mary Waters ([1999](#)) has described how West Indian immigrants in New York City must balance their identities as West Indians, blacks, and Americans. She, and others who write about Caribbean people in the United States, mention the efforts that these immigrants make to distance themselves from African Americans. African immigrants are more recent arrivals, and hence, these issues are much less rigorously addressed for these populations, but the same, distancing can occur, particularly among African immigrants like Nigerians who often come with some education or pursue higher education once in the United

States. Their class position is an important part of their sense of who they are, and hence, experiences of discrimination are deeply felt. Several of the Nigerian research participants had stories about these issues of distance and differencing. One described an adjunct African American law professor he had in a class where he was the only African. From the time he entered the class, he said, the professor was condescending to him and harassed him. He said he worked very hard to be an exemplary student and excelled in all his classes.

> When the semester came to an end, this adjunct professor wanted to fail me. I took the matter to the Dean. The Dean called in the professor and I passed the class. Look at it this way, if I were a 2.0 student, I do not think that the Dean would have supported me. I heard later that this particular professor had wanted to be a judge, but a foreigner was appointed to the bench instead. Since that incident, he insists on giving foreign students in his classes a hard time.

A similar story was reported by another Nigerian who attended a university in Louisiana. The African American teachers asked him how he got into the program "because you have an accent. Africans are not supposed to be here. They think that Africans take their jobs. We are better with whites than blacks." Another Nigerian said that he had a black supervisor at his first job, and all his workmates were white. The supervisor gave him a very hard time and made him do a lot more than his coworkers. He described this as a form of "intra-racial" prejudice. Another Nigerian research participant explained this further by describing his experiences at the technical college he attended. He found that the teachers, many of whom were African American, did not respect Nigerians, mostly because they speak English with an accent he thought. He described one teacher who used to roll a piece of paper into a funnel and hold it to his ear when the respondent spoke—as an indication that he could not understand. He stepped back from this memory to comment on the tensions between Nigerians and African Americans, theorizing about its origins in the history of slavery and hoping that eventually it would diminish. It is important, however, to emphasize that these stereotypes operate in both directions. Another Nigerian participant commented "Many African Americans have not been raised in a family. They don't know the difference between right and wrong. Not like us or whites."

Salvadorans often described the problems they had with Mexicans and other "Latinos" but rather than characterizing it as racism they described it as a more generalized tension among Latinos of different backgrounds.[11] One

respondent said that he did not get an apartment because the manager, an Argentinean, considered Salvadorans to be lazy and people who do not pay the rent on time. Another described a Mexican American female boss who treats her badly and gives her a bad work schedule even though her boss knows that she needs to be home by a certain time. One Salvadoran female research participant, talking more broadly about intra-minority discrimination, began by describing the racism in her own family—that her mother would never accept a black husband. She went on to say that Central Americans, especially Guatemalans, tend to discriminate against Mexicans as do South Americans. Some Central Americans, she suggested, think Mexicans have it easier because they do not have to cross through several countries to make it to the United States. "Chinos"—meaning Chinese, but she was referring to all Asians—are "closed off to outsiders ("cerrados"). They tend to interact only among themselves." She noted that a friend reported being treated very differently from other customers when she went to a Vietnamese restaurant. She also noted that "Hindus" tend to marry only within their group. At that point, she also noted that most immigrant ethnic groups tend to isolate themselves in some way, discriminating against others. Although this response was itself full of ethnic stereotypes, it certainly underscores both the complexity and subtlety of intergroup relations and the construction of "the other."

While not raised frequently in this research, one Vietnamese informant, a business owner, reported the kinds of attitudes directed at Asians more broadly across the United States who run enterprises in minority neighborhoods and that in Los Angeles resulted in heightened tensions between Koreans and African Americans in the riots that erupted after the decision in the Rodney King case.[12] He said "This may sound strange, but as someone in a position of power, running a business, dealing with lots of minorities (particularly African Americans), I have had complaints filed against me. These complaints arose out of a sense of resentment and discrimination against me as an Asian American, and someone in a position of power."

Some Mexicans described discrimination directed toward them from "Chicanos" and others described it coming from African Americans. One reported, when describing language issues at the workplace, that African Americans think people are talking about them when they use Spanish. He reported one woman telling him not to speak his language. He then

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[11] These intra-group prejudices have deep historical roots in US immigration, especially in the treatment for those who come later by

Footnote 11 continued

those who come first. They are encoded in terms such as "FOBs" (fresh off the boat) or "Greenhorns."

[12] For analysis of the Rodney King incident and other conflicts between Asians and African American see Cheng and Espiritu (1989), Abelman and Lie (1995), Park (1996), Johnson et al. (1997), Lee (2002), and Lie (2004).

described another incident in a store where he ran after someone who was stealing (he was the manager). An African American in the store accused him of racism. Another respondent said that he had heard "a black guy call Mexicans lazy." However, some respondents noted that they were favored above African Americans for positions, thereby showing empathy and understanding for the difficulties that African Americans face. They equally observed that "gringos" are favored over all others.

Discrimination Exists But You Try to Ignore It

In his research on how African Americans deal with discrimination in public places, Joe Feagin (1991: 103) describes a range of responses ranging from withdrawal, to resigned acceptance, to verbal or physical confrontation, to legal action. What is the range of responses that characterizes first-generation immigrants? Do they simply ignore and rise above situations of discrimination—as mentioned above, a response captured by the concept of forbearance in the psychological literature on discrimination (Noh et al. 1999)? Or do they choose to pursue some sort of action and redress—that is, confront discrimination head on. In this research, participants were asked how they might respond to several hypothetical situations of discrimination. While the questions were posed initially to elicit an open-ended response (and recorded as such), the responses were also immediately coded by the interviewer into predetermined broader categories to which they most closely conformed. It is these categories, in response to two of the hypothetical situations that are presented in Tables 3 and 4.[13] Respondents were then asked to explain their response.

The first hypothetical asked research participants what they would do if they applied for a job and suspected that they were not hired because of their race, national background, or religious affiliation. Across all five groups, a high proportion of research participants said they would just forget about it and look for another job. Further, the reasoning for this was similar across all five groups. Individuals indicated that filing a complaint was not worth the time, effort, money, or trouble. Across all five populations, there were individuals who said that they would not want to work for an employer who discriminates and that there were other jobs to be had. "It is better to stay away from places where you know you are not welcome," said one Vietnamese respondent; "There are others job to find that will want you, so if they don't like you for your race—then

forget about them," said another. However, another Vietnamese respondent, who suggested that he might take some action, described his own learning process "This happened to me years ago, and I just forgot about it. Now I understand the system and know what my rights are." An Indian respondent said he would do nothing because he is pragmatic and it would not be worth it. But, offering a strategy of quiet resistance, he quickly added "I would tell all my friends that it was a lousy company and that they should not apply there for a job." Another Indian research participant offered an even more philosophical assessment:

It is just a job and I would not fight it because I know that with my skills I can find another job. I would not want to work in a place that does not give skills the highest priority when hiring; this is a company that will go nowhere in the big race and I would not want to be working for such a company. In the long run with this attitude they would lose out.

Several Nigerians also indicated that it was not worth it to file a complaint. The following response reflected that of several others who understood the challenges of a suit for job discrimination: "I'll do nothing, it's part of life. You can't do anything unless you have good evidence of discrimination and you're already on the job. If you are applying for the job there's nothing you can do." Nigerians and Indians were the most vocal about how difficult it is to prove discrimination at the time of employment. "I feel that this kind of discrimination is difficult to prove in most of the cases, because everyone knows discrimination is bad," said one Indian respondent. "Therefore, if it happens, it will most likely be in a situation where someone has said no to me, but I do not know whether the qualifications of the hired employee are better or worse than mine. It is difficult to prove what is going on in someone's head." A Nigerian said that he would want to make sure that he was being treated unfairly because otherwise the dispute would be dismissed for insufficient evidence. Another said "You cannot prove discrimination." Taking action "would 'red flag' your next job search." A female Indian respondent suggested that there are 1,000 reasons why one does not get a job. She then went on to add that her own personal encounter with discrimination was based not on her color or national background but because she is female. In some areas of engineering, she said, "people think women cannot do the work. They think it requires people with physical strength." "To work in computer maintenance," she suggested, "you are supposed to be on call and they do not think women can be on call 24 hours a day." But, she continued, "there is not much you can do about it. It is not my right, it is their right to give or not give me the job."

Several Mexicans said they were illegal and therefore did not have much choice in this matter. They had to lay

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[13] If the answer did not closely conform to one of the pre-determined categories, it was coded as "other." It is important to note that some respondents had difficulty relating to a hypothetical. Interviewers also probed for why people responded as they did.

Table 3 Proportion of responses by national origin to question "if you applied for a job and you suspected that you were not hired because of your race, national background, or religious affiliation, what would you do?"

	Salvadoran (%)	Mexican (%)	Indian (%)	Vietnamese (%)	Nigerian (%)
File complaint	14	18	28	25	45
Hire a lawyer	8	3	1	17	3
Forget about it	48	39	45	47	46
Get help from an ethnic organization	13	3	1	0	0
Other action	8	27	16	8	4
Do not know	9	10	9	3	2

Table 4 Proportion of responses by national origin to question "if you tried to rent an apartment and you were told that none were available, but you suspected that you were being turned away because of our race, national background, or religious affiliation, what would you do?"

	Salvadoran (%)	Mexican (%)	Indian (%)	Vietnamese (%)	Nigerian (%)
File a complaint	18	20	26	20	48
Hire a lawyer	9	2	3	19	8
Forget about it and look for another apartment	48	43	44	52	39
Get help from an organization	9	2	1	1	1
Other action	9	26	21	7	4
Do not know	7	7	5	1	0

low. As one respondent said, "those who hire you are those who command. If you don't have papers you cannot insist." Those who said they would not fight it often indicated, like those of other groups, that they did not want to work where they were not wanted; but others indicated that the lack of time or money would deter them from filing a complaint or fighting it. Others said they would look for another job. At the time, there was a sense that jobs were more plentiful than people might think today. While some respondents said they would seek out an organization for help, such as LULAC or one of the local regional associations (Casa Chihuahua, Casa Guanajuato), in general, Mexicans and Salvadorans were the least willing to file complaints precisely because it would bring them in contact with government bureaucracy and potentially expose their immigration status or their potential to legalize their status. For the few who indicated that they might complain, the idea that everyone has a right to work, including the undocumented, was an important principle. Some suggested that fighting discrimination is a way to educate people about its unacceptability. As one Mexican respondent put it, "if you ask that they treat you with respect, they will do it. But you have to demand it."

A second hypothetical question asked respondents what they would do if they tried to rent an apartment and were told that none were available but they suspected that they had been turned away because of their race, national background, or religion (Table 4). Again, a high proportion across all groups would forget about it, although the Nigerians demonstrated more reluctance than others. Most respondents just thought that there were many places to

live so why bother and as one Vietnamese respondent put it, "if they don't want my money, that's their problem." Another observed "I would just forget about it and look for another apartment. You can't change them; they will still discriminate against you and treat you badly if you fight and move in. That's too much trouble." More metaphorically, a Salvadoran women commented that "if no one answers at one door, one should knock at another," while a male compatriot stated that he would not want to live where he is not wanted and went on to suggest that if this happened to his children, he would expect them to fight it because they were born in the United States. Many Indian respondents were also philosophical about this scenario. As one observed:

> It is better to get away from there; staying will only cause more trouble in the future. I'll go somewhere I'll have peace of mind….The Brahmans have a saying, When a plant is small, you can bend it any way, but when it's a tree, you can't do anything to it… bend it at all.[14]

But, there were research participants across all groups who were indignant about housing discrimination and stated that this would lead them to file a complaint—from 18 percent of Salvadorans up to almost half of the

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[14] In March 2010, some apartment complexes in Euless, Texas (a DFW area suburban community), were turning away potential tenants who had Asian or Middle Eastern sounding names. A local citizen was quoted as saying "I was told that no one else wanted to live by these people. That they were dirty and they cooked with curry" (Smith 2010)".

Nigerians—or hire a lawyer to help them. One Vietnamese respondent said that he would talk to the owner and ask for proof that no apartments were available. If he was not satisfied with the answer he said, he would try to expose the injustice, "perhaps by contacting the press." Another Vietnamese reported actually experiencing housing discrimination. He described trying to buy a house as an investment, "but when the owner, who was an American veteran of the war in Vietnam, found out that I was Vietnamese, he backed out of the deal. When I went to talk to him about this in his office, he screamed at me to get out of his office and out of his country."

One Indian research participant suggested a way to get evidence of discrimination by saying he would ask an Anglo American coworker to call the same complex and see if an apartment was available, describing a unit similar to the one he had tried to rent. They would compare answers and if there had been a unit he said, he would go back and fight for it. Another Indian who had responded to the job question by saying that he would forget about it and look for another job but responded to the housing question by saying that he would fight it offered the following explanation for the different actions. On the job, he said, you would have to interact with the people who were racist and that would not be worth it. But, he continued, we all have a right to equal housing and you do not have to interact with your neighbors—so, it is less tied to others and that is why he would complain. Housing should be for all; employment depends on ties. A Nigerian, who claimed he would challenge it, reported that in one place where he had lived "the landlords put all Africans in one wing of the apartment complex and the whites in another." A Mexican respondent observed that there are many places to live but that if he was set on a place, he would find the appropriate authority to complain to. "Discrimination is legally punishable here," he observed, "but at least the laws work." Across all groups, there seemed to be a faith in the law on this matter and a belief that housing discrimination was easier to prove than job discrimination.

In summary, this hypothetical exercise yielded nuanced reasoning behind the responses that individuals across all five groups suggested they might make to discriminatory acts. Forbearance appears to be a characteristic response across all five populations but for different reasons and there are certainly individuals across all groups who were developing a sense of their rights such that they discussed possible modes of confrontation, particularly in relation to housing discrimination. What is most striking is that many of these research participants are fully aware of the fact that acts of discrimination are often subtle and hence that mustering the evidence to prove one's case may not be a challenge worth pursuing.

Conclusion

This article has compared experiences with and attitudes toward everyday forms of discrimination among first-generation immigrants to the United States from five different national origins. Individuals from all five groups have encountered both subtle and not so subtle discrimination since arriving in the United States. The subtle forms are manifested in not being acknowledged or recognized in public places—that is, being treated as if one is invisible and does not exist. This is discrimination against personhood and was articulated most clearly by Mexican and Nigerian research participants. Indian and Vietnamese research participants hold on more strongly to the notion that merit trumps discrimination and were more willing to acknowledge that, while the subtle slights are there, they are not serious. One Vietnamese offered a conservative perspective when noting, "If you are really good, you can overcome any handicaps associated with your race or ethnicity. If you are not very good at your job, then you may want to claim discrimination—it is a good excuse for failure. Of course, whether there is something to this claim depends on the circumstances, on the context." The idea of merit trumping color may extend beyond the Indian immigrant community but nevertheless members of both these immigrant populations have occasionally confronted barriers to success, promotion and full acceptance.

Even Nigerians, who acknowledge the phenotypical foundations of racism most directly, sometimes observed that discrimination is a product of history and one has to adapt to its pervasiveness. One noted, "whites in a shop won't wait for very long, some barbers still won't cut black hair; others won't cut white hair. ProCut is a white product, Supercut is a black product." A Vietnamese informant observed that "all people are racist at some level. Everyone discriminates because they want to be with their own kind. We must accept this natural fact and live with it…. We (as immigrants) often have to work for less money. This is the price you pay for being an immigrant—a foreigner. Younger people have less (sic) problems than older people because the young can speak English and they understand the system." This individual's comment about language is important. Across all five groups, research participants noted the low tolerance in the United States for those who do not speak English, do not speak it well, or speak it with an accent. This low tolerance can result in anything from subtle discrimination to racist epithets. It is a stigmatization of the foreign born in a country that is ambivalent about itself as a "nation of immigrants."

Other dimensions of human capital also influence the everyday experience of discrimination. Well-educated Nigerian and Indian immigrants identify discrimination in relation to their professional advancement, while low

skilled or unskilled Mexican immigrants emphasize their vulnerability in the labor market, something that is further affected by their immigration status. However, when confronted with hypothetical scenarios about job and housing discrimination, a significant number across all five groups, for one reason or another, said they would choose to ignore (forbear) the discrimination rather than confront it or seek legal action. Feagin (1991: 103) has observed with regard to African American coping strategies in the face of discrimination "in many situations, resigned acceptance is the only realistic response." This is a strategy shared by first-generation immigrants, many of whom do not feel they have the resources (including linguistic ability and legal status) to pursue a more confrontational response. But rather than to label these responses as resigned, it is more appropriate to view them as well-reasoned and strategic. That more of the research respondents were willing to react against housing discrimination than against job discrimination supports this emphasis on considered, strategic behavior. Over the course of time, it appears that immigrants, even those who are not yet citizens of the United States, begin to learn about their rights and hence evaluate when to exercise them. Clearly the data presented here are tantalizing and suggest an important area for further research.

While most theories of prejudice and discrimination focus on the sources of discriminatory behavior—in fear and scapegoating, economic competition, ethnocentrism, group boundary construction, socialization—here I have focused more on how these behaviors are perceived and processed by first-generation immigrants themselves in both mainstream and minority contexts. While there are important variations across the five populations included in this research, some of it associated with dimensions of human and financial capital, there are also many similarities in how skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled immigrants think about and cope with everyday forms of discrimination. Particularly revealing for example are the stronger perceptions of group discrimination articulated by Mexican immigrants by contrast with Indian immigrants. This difference suggests that the intersection of class and "race/ethnicity" is worthy of further investigation in research on discrimination against immigrant newcomers.

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