American elementary school children's attitudes about immigrants, immigration, and being an American

Christia Spears Brown

University of Kentucky, 125 Kastle Hall, Lexington, KY 40506, USA

The U.S. has recently seen rapidly changing demographics, largely fueled by immigration. In 2008, a total of 1,107,126 immigrants became legal permanent residents of the United States, most commonly immigrating from Mexico and People's Republic of China (Monger & Rytina, 2009). While the immigrant population is increasing, anti-immigration sentiments are ubiquitous, whether it be media coverage of the “Minutemen” who patrol the U.S.-Mexican border to “enforce immigration laws” (http://www.minutemanproject.com); repeated Congressional “English as the National Language” proposals; or controversies surrounding nationwide pro-immigration marches (CNN, 2007). These controversies are often framed around concerns about patriotism and a weakening of an American identity (Deaux, 2008). American children are explicitly taught about the ideals of a free country that welcome immigrants, yet are consistently exposed to these anti-immigration sentiments. As research has shown, children’s attitudes and reasoning are influenced by social context and exposure (Brown, Mistry, & Bigler 2007; Killen, Mclothlin, & Henning 2008). Despite the presence of this ubiquitous cultural debate on immigration, and children’s frequent interaction with children of immigrants at school (Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney 2008), little to no research has examined children’s perceptions of and attitudes toward immigrants and immigration.

Because an immigrant represents someone from another nation (i.e., a national out-group) trying to become a member of one’s national in-group, individuals’ attitudes towards immigration are informed by their sense of their national identity (Deaux, 2008). Research has previously examined the development of national identity among children. Studies (typically with British children) have shown that 10- to 12-year-old Dutch early adolescents are more negative toward immigrants (specifically, asylum seekers) than established minority groups (Verkuyten & Steenhuis, 2005). In addition, in a large-scale international sample, female adolescents were shown to have more positive attitudes toward immigrants’ rights than males (Torney-Purta, Wilkenfeld, & Barber, 2008).

The current study addresses four specific research questions related both theoretically and practically to the immigration debate. First, the study assesses White European American children’s identification and conceptualization of their national in-group (i.e., Americans). For example, we examine how much children identify with being an American, how they define being an American, and whether they believe certain ethnic groups are more American than other groups. Second, the study assesses White European American children’s knowledge of and attitudes about immigration, both legal and illegal. Specifically, it examines children’s endorsement of attitudes that are most commonly expressed by adults (e.g., whether immigrants take jobs from other Americans). Third, the study assesses White European American children’s stereotypes and attitudes about
immigrants, and whether these stereotypes and attitudes differ based on the country of origin of the immigrant. Finally, the study examines whether the strength of children's national identity is related to their attitudes and stereotypes about immigrants. Importantly, this study was conducted in a city reflective of much of "middle America": a predominantly (76%) White European American city, with 13% African Americans, and an increasing Mexican immigrant population.

The first research question addresses children's national identity, specifically what it means to be an American. One theoretical link between national identity and attitudes toward immigrants is based on the Common Ingroup Identity Model (Gaertnner & Dovidio 2000, 2009), which argues that the inclusion of out-group members into a superordinate common group leads to more positive attitudes toward that group. In other words, if individuals view immigrants as part of the national in-group of Americans, we would expect them to hold more positive attitudes toward immigrants (Esses, Dovidio, Jackson, & Armstrong 2001). In contrast, if individuals have impermeable in-group boundaries, they may maintain their negative attitudes and stereotypes. Thus, it is important to examine the extent to which individuals hold tight restrictions about who can and cannot be an in-group member.

One way to assess the permeability of the national in-group boundary is to ask participants to define what makes a "true" American (Devos & Banaji 2005). When adults were asked this question, they ranked being born in America as a rather unimportant criterion. Instead, the most highly ranked criteria for being a true American was they must respect America and its laws, followed by they must speak English, followed by they must live in America a long time (Devos & Banaji 2005). This suggests that adults support immigrants becoming Americans in general, and they allow certain immigrants to enter their national in-group. However, despite seemingly open boundaries, adults have rather narrow definitions of prototypical Americans, often based on the prototype of a White American (Devos & Ma 2008).

Specifically, although they were described as being born in America, Asian Americans and African Americans were rated by adults as "less American" than White Americans (Devos & Banaji 2005). Based on these findings, we hypothesized that White children would also have permeable in-group boundaries but would rate White Americans as more American than other American-born groups (including African Americans). We predicted that children with more prototypical restrictions about their in-group would hold more negative attitudes about immigrants.

The second research question relates to children's knowledge of specific issues often raised by adults surrounding immigration. Adults (often college students) often hold negative attitudes toward immigrants because they represent a symbolic threat, which is a threat to in-group morals and standards, and a realistic threat, which is a threat to the material well-being of the in-group (Stephan, Ybarra, & Bachman 1999). These perceived threats are often framed in the language of patriotism, but the patriotism is focused on protection (e.g., "We have to protect our country") rather than simply positive attitudes toward the country (e.g., "I love my country"). Many of these perceived threats are expressed in the media, and thus can influence children's attitudes about immigration. For example, a television commercial in 2010 by the Coalition for the Future American Worker argued that immigrants are taking jobs away from American workers. Adults also make a strong distinction between legal versus illegal immigrants (Deaux 2008), holding considerably more unfavorable attitudes toward illegal or undocumented immigrants than legal immigrants (Lee & Fiske 2006; Short 2004). No research has examined whether children perceive immigrants to pose the same types of symbolic or realistic threats as adults, and whether they distinguish between legal versus illegal immigrants. Further, no research has examined children's general understanding of why immigration occurs and their rationale for why it should be legal versus illegal.

Children's attitudes are likely to be different than adults' attitudes about immigration and immigration policy because of their developing cognitive abilities. For example, children in early rather than late elementary school are particularly likely to focus on concrete rather than abstract attributes (Keil 2006). Research has shown that, prior to age seven, children regularly emphasize concrete external qualities when describing people (Aboud 1988; Aboud & Levy 2000; Martin 1989). This is consistent with Piagetian theory, which notes that children in this age group tend to overemphasize observable qualities (see Inhelder & Piaget 1964). Thus, we hypothesized that early elementary school children, when asked to explain anti-immigrant attitudes, would attribute attitudes less to symbolic or realistic threats and more to concrete reasons (such as immigrants looking different). In addition, we hypothesized that children would be more negative toward illegal than legal immigrants. We also predicted that early rather than late elementary children would endorse legal ramifications for illegal immigration (e.g., they broke the law, thus they should go to jail) because of younger children's legalistic, rule-based moral reasoning in which it is rarely appropriate to break a law (Helwig & Jasiobedzka 2001; Tapp & Kohlberg 1971).

The third research question assessed whether children hold negative attitudes toward or stereotypes about immigrants, and whether those attitudes and stereotypes differ based on the country of origin of the immigrant. Research with adults indicates that Americans hold more negative stereotypes toward Hispanic/Mexican immigrants than Asian immigrants (Lee & Fiske 2006) or English immigrants (Short 2004). In general, Americans are more favorable to White immigrant groups than groups of color (Deaux 2006). Evidence suggests children will hold similarly differing stereotypes based on the immigrant's country of origin (Enesco, Navarro, Paradela, & Guerrero 2005). For example, by middle childhood, children are aware of different nationalities' stereotypes (Barrett & Short 1992). Though not regarding immigrants per se, Barrett and colleagues found British children, in line with cultural stereotypes, held more favorable attitudes toward Americans than Germans (Barrett et al. 2003). Children by age 5 also show preferences for children who speak their same language (Powlishta, Serbin, Doyle, & White 1994). This may be a result of same-language speakers being more easily included into a common in-group. Thus, in the current study, we hypothesized that children would hold negative attitudes and stereotypes toward immigrants, but these stereotypes would be more negative toward a Mexican immigrant than a British immigrant (who is both White and speaks English, and thus can more easily be included in a common in-group). As a point of comparison, children's stereotypes about Black Americans (who are included in White American children's national in-group, but not racial in-group) were also assessed. This comparison allows for a test of which bias is more prominent: racial bias or national bias. We predicted that, because of the current climate of negative immigrant sentiments, children would be more negative towards immigrants than other Americans, regardless of race.

The degree of negative stereotypes children hold toward immigrants may depend, however, on their own national identity. Based on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner 2004), individuals who hold an important group identity strive for positive distinctiveness and may in turn hold more negative attitudes about their out-group. In support of this theoretical rationale, research with adults has shown that a strong national identity is related to stronger biases against other nationalities (Reizábal, Valencia, & Barrett 2004) and more negative attitudes toward immigrant groups (Billiet, Maddens, & Beerten 2003; Verkuylten 2009) found similar results with Dutch adolescents, in which a stronger national identity was related to perceiving newcomer groups as more threatening, which in turn was related to less support for multiculturalism and immigrant rights. In the current study, in line with social identity theory, we hypothesized that White European American children with strong national identities would hold more negative attitudes and stereotypes about immigrants than children with weaker national identities.
Methods

Participants

Participants consisted of 90 White European American children (50 girls, 40 boys), ranging in age from 5 to 11 years. The mean age was 7 years, 10 months (SD = 1 year, 6 months). To examine age differences in attitudes about immigration, children were categorized into two age groups, based on a median split: younger children, ages 5 to 7 (n = 39), and older children, ages 8 to 11 (n = 51). These age groups also correspond with a qualitative shift in children’s cognitive development that is related to their endorsement of racial/ethnic stereotyping and prejudice (Aboud 1988).

All children classified themselves as “White” and no children were themselves first- or second-generation immigrants. Participants were recruited from the after-school programs associated with three elementary schools in a medium-sized city in the Upper South. Specifically, the city is 76% White European American, 13% African American, 5% Hispanic (specifically, 4.5% are from Mexico), and 3% Asian (specifically, 1% are Indian, .6% are Chinese, and .6% are Japanese). Of the total population, 8% are foreign born. The school district serves 35,429 students, of which 61% are European American, 24% are African American, 8% are Hispanic, and 4% are Asian, with 2137 students enrolled in English as a Second Language. The vast majority of Hispanic students are first- or second-generation immigrants from Mexico (whose parents are typically farm workers), and the majority of Asian students are first- or second-generation immigrants from India, China, and Japan (whose parents are typically medical professionals or academics). The specific three schools the children attended have approximately 83–84% White European American students, 5% African American students, 1–3% Hispanic students, and 3–11% Asian students. Thus, the children in the current sample have little contact with immigrants at school (although their degree of contact was not directly measured). Fewer than 20% of students qualified for free or reduced lunch. Analyses indicated no differences across school sites.

Only those children with signed parental consent, and who themselves gave assent, participated in the study. Approximately 75% of children who received consent forms (entitled “Living and Working in America”) returned them signed.

Procedure and measures

Overview

All measures were administered to the children individually in their after-school program by a female experimenter. To control for reading ability, all questions were read aloud to each child, and the experimenter wrote down the child’s responses. The measures are described in the order of the research questions, but in practice, the explicit measures about immigration and anti-immigrant sentiments were given last (the rest of the measures were counterbalanced). Upon completion of the measures, all children were fully debriefed and given a small toy from a “treasure box.”

Conceptualization of national in-group

To assess the strength of children’s national identity, they were asked, “How American do you feel?” Children responded on a 4-point scale, ranging from not at all American (1) to very American (4). A similar one-item assessment of national identity has been used previously (Pfeifer et al. 2007).

Children’s definition of Americans was assessed. Children were asked about their criteria for being a true American based on items adapted from Devos and Banaji (2005). Of particular interest was whether children held impermeable in-group boundaries (e.g., to be a true American one must be born in America). Specifically, children were told, “Think about what it means to be a true American. Some people say there are some things that make a person a true American, while others say that there is nothing that makes one person more American than another. What do you think it means to be an American?” The four criteria were: (a) “Be born in America,” (b) “Speak English,” (c) “Live in America most of their lives,” and (d) “Love America and try to live by its rules.” Children rated each criterion on a 4-point scale, ranging from not at all true (1) to very true (4).

Children’s attitudes about the prototypicality of Americans were also assessed. To measure the degree to which children differentiated Americans based on ethnicity, children were asked to think about people born in America (Devos & Banaji 2005). Specifically, they were told, “Think about people who were born in America. In your opinion, how ‘American’ are people in these groups? Remember, you are thinking about people born in America” (original emphasis). Children rated how American the following groups were: African Americans, White Americans, Latino/Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans. Children used a 4-point scale ranging from not at all American (1) to very American (4).

Conceptualization of immigration

To examine children’s knowledge of immigration and the immigration debate, children were asked, “Some people are upset when people move to the US from other countries. Have you ever heard about this?” Children responded “yes” or “no.” If they answered “yes,” children were asked, “Where did you hear about this?” They responded to 4 possible sources: TV, Newspapers, Parents, and School. To assess their knowledge of the reasons for immigration, children were then asked, “Why do you think people move here from other countries?” Their open-ended responses were recorded. There were no a priori codes created; categories were derived from emerging themes from the responses. Three primary themes emerged: to seek freedom, to seek greater material/financial opportunities, and to escape hostile conditions (described in detail in results). Once categories were created, the author and a research assistant independently coded every response. The interrater reliability was high (Cohen’s kappa was .97) and all discrepancies were discussed until agreement was reached on 100% of the responses.

To assess children’s attitudes about legal and illegal immigration, they were asked, “Do you think people should be allowed to move here from other countries? Why or why not?” Their open-ended responses were recorded. As before, there were no a priori codes created; categories were derived from emerging themes from the responses. Three primary themes emerged: because of freedom, because America is desirable, and because diversity is good (described in detail in results). Once categories were created, the author and a research assistant independently coded every response. The interrater reliability was high (Cohen’s kappa was .86) and all discrepancies were discussed until agreement was reached on 100% of the responses.

To assess children’s attitudes about the consequences of illegal (or undocumented) immigration, children were asked, “Think about people who move here from other countries even though it was against the law. What do you think should happen to them?” Children responded “yes,” “maybe,” or “no” to each counterbalanced option: (a) They should be sent back to the country they came from; (b) They should be allowed to stay in the U.S. if they have jobs; and (c) They should be put in jail for breaking the law.” These items were not mutually exclusive (i.e., although illogical, children could respond yes to all three) and were not intended to represent all possible options (e.g., allowing immigrants to stay in the U.S. even without jobs). Instead, because the study examined attitudes that are likely influenced by social context and exposure, the questions were designed to tap the options most frequently mentioned by adults in the ongoing cultural debates about immigration. For example, as of November 2010, Arizona has debated and passed a law that allows for the arrest of immigrants without legal documentation; in addition, current debate has also focused on whether immigrants with
jobs should be allowed to work toward legal status or whether they should be immediately deported (for a review of national polling questions asked of adults that taps each of these options, see http://www.pollingreport.com/immigration.htm).

To assess children’s attributions for anti-immigration sentiments – such as attributions to symbolic threat, realistic threat, or discrimination – children were asked, “Why do you think American people might not like it when other people move to America from other countries?” There were six counterbalanced attributions that were unique to the current study and designed to test both symbolic and realistic threats frequently mentioned by adults and racial/ethnic/cultural discrimination: (a) “Because the people who move here are not smart,” (b) “Because the people who move here take too much money from the government,” (c) “Because the people who move here are criminals (they break the law),” (d) “Because the people who move here take too many good jobs from other Americans,” (e) “Because the people who move here like different things than other Americans, like food and music,” and (f) “Because the people who move here look very different from other Americans.” Children rated each criterion on a 4-point scale, ranging from not at all true (1) to very true (4).

Stereotypes of and attitudes toward immigrants

Children were read 5 counterbalanced vignettes about different people (all men) who moved to their city from different countries or regions of the U.S.: from (a) Mexico, (b) China, (c) England, (d) California, and (e) a small town in their state. Each vignette included details about the person, specifically where the person moved from, that he moved for work, that he sent part of his money back home to help a family member, that he had a wife and one or two children, and what his hobby was (e.g., watching baseball). A picture of a person from the particular country accompanied each vignette. Of the two Americans, one was African American and the other was European American. Each picture was taken from a public source photography website, and each photograph was pilot tested with college students by asking them where they thought the person immigrated from. There was 100% agreement on the photographs of the people ostensibly from Mexico and China. After hearing each vignette and looking at the photograph, children were asked (a) how much money the person made, (b) how much school the person went to, (c) how hard the person worked, (d) how much their town/neighborhood wanted the person to move there, (e) how much they wanted to go to school with the person’s child, and (f) how smart the person’s child was. Children responded to each question using a 4-point scale, ranging from not very much (1) to very much (4).

Results

Preliminary analyses and overview

Preliminary analyses were conducted to test for differences based on gender. There were no gender differences (contrary to previous, larger-scale research, Tornney-Purta et al. 2008). For all analyses about immigration or attitudes toward immigrants, follow-up analyses were conducted to examine whether previous knowledge of the immigration debate was related to children’s responses. Previous knowledge of the debate was not related to responses. Therefore, the analyses collapse across gender and knowledge level, and examine age differences (based on a median split) between younger children, ages 5 to 7 (n = 39), and older children, ages 8 to 11 (n = 51).

Conceptualization of national in-group

American identity

Overall, children endorsed a strong American identity (M = 3.71, SD = .57), with 75% of children feeling “very American.” A one-way analysis of variance compared the strength of younger and older children’s American identity, F(1, 87) = .11, p > .50, η² = .00. There were no differences across age groups (M [SD]: younger = 3.68 [.66]; older = 3.73 [.49]).

Definition of Americans

To assess children’s criteria for being a true American, a 2 (age group: younger, older) × 4 (criteria: born in America, speak English, live in America most of their lives, love America) mixed ANOVA was conducted, in which the last variable was treated as a within subjects factor. Analyses revealed a significant main effect for criteria, F(3, 85) = 32.55, p < .001, η² = .54. Bonferroni analyses (used throughout) revealed that children rated the criterion that true Americans must simply love America and try to live by its rules as more accurate (M = 3.45, SD = .93) than all other criteria. They rated the criterion that people must speak English to be a true American as less accurate (M = 2.00, SD = .115) than all other criteria. The criteria that people must be born in America (M = 2.31, SD = .129) and must live in America most of their lives (M = 2.37, SD = .119) did not differ from one another. There were no differences across age groups.

Prototypicality of Americans

To assess whether children think some ethnic groups are more prototypically American than other ethnic groups, a 2 (age group: younger, older) × 4 (ethnic group: White American, Black/African American, Latino American, Asian American) mixed ANOVA was conducted, in which the last variable was treated as a within subjects factor. Analyses revealed a significant main effect for ethnic group, F(3, 86) = 29.24, p < .001, η² = .51. Bonferroni analyses revealed that children rated White Americans (M = 3.71, SD = .55) as more American than African Americans (M = 3.25, SD = .78), who were rated as more American than Asian Americans (M = 3.03, SD = .77), who were rated as more American than Latino Americans (M = 2.84, SD = .91). There were no differences across age groups.

Conceptualization of immigration

Knowledge of immigration and immigration debate

To examine how many children were aware of anti-immigration sentiments, and whether this differed by age, a chi-square test of association was conducted. Results indicated a significant association between awareness of immigration debate and age group, χ² (1) = 3.89, p < .05. Specifically, 36% of younger children had heard that some people were against immigration, whereas 57% of older children had. When asked where they had heard about it, 10% of younger and 18% of older children heard about it on television (no significant age difference); 8% of younger and 16% of older children heard about it in newspapers (no significant age difference); 10% of younger and 24% of older children heard about it from parents (no significant age difference); and 21% of younger and 41% of older children heard about it from school (significant age difference: χ² [1] = 4.32, p < .05). When asked “why” people move here from other countries, children gave three primary responses. Overall, 34% of children (43% of older and 23% of younger) gave responses referring to immigrants seeking freedoms available in the U.S. (e.g., “To have freedom and to not be bossed around,” “They want freedom. They don’t want to be ruled by a king. They want to have a choice on going to church or not!”); 21% of children (26% of older and 15% of younger) gave responses referring to greater material and financial opportunities in the U.S. (e.g., “Because the houses are bigger,” “They can get more money,” “Because there are better jobs and they can support their families better.”); and 10% of children (6% of older and 15% of younger) gave responses referring to immigrants escaping their home countries because of war, disease, famine, or political reasons (e.g., “Because like in Iraq there are many wars and price of rice and meat are going up,” “Some people in their country might be having a conflict.”). However, 19% of children (10% of older and 31% of
Children were more likely than expected by chance to endorse the children's endorsement of three possible orthogonal consequences. move here illegally, a chi-square goodness of assess what children thought should happen to immigrants who good country (goodness of countries even when it is against the law, 82% of children said no (80% allowed to stay in the U.S. if they have jobs, all younger and 65% of older children endorsing that they should be differed by age, with 36% of younger and 20% of older children endorsing compared to 16% of older children saying that they should be put in jail (35% endorsed this) did not differ from chance. To attribute, however, based on country of origin, such that both American children (i.e., White American and Black American) were rated as earning more money than the Chinese American, and (b) children who do not hold a prototypical ideal of an American (i.e., do not differentiate between Americans) differed in their stereotypes about immigrants, and whether these stereotypes differed based on immigrants' country of origin and child's conceptualization of their national in-group, children's responses to the vignettes were assessed. First, to assess whether children with a stronger versus weaker American identity differed in their stereotypes about immigrants, a variable was created for children with a strong American identity (children who rated themselves as being “very American” [n = 67]) and children with a weaker American identity (all other children [n = 23]). As the majority of children rated themselves as “very American,” and no children felt “not at all American,” the only comparison group was with children with a less extreme American identity. Second, to assess whether (a) children who hold a prototypical ideal of an American (i.e., differentiate between Americans based on their ethnicity) and (b) children who do not hold a prototypical ideal of an American (i.e., do not differentiate between Americans) differed in their stereotypes about immigrants, a variable was created to compare the two groups of children. Specifically, children's ratings of “how American” the three non-white American groups were (i.e., African American, Asian American, Latino American) were averaged. This average score was subtracted from the rating of the White American. Children (n = 33) whose difference score was 0 (i.e., they did not differ in their ratings between Americans) were compared to children (n = 57) who rated White Americans as more prototypically American than non-White Americans.

Next, a series of 2 (age group: younger, older) × 2 (American identity: weaker, stronger) × 2 (prototypical American: White prototype is more American vs. no difference) × 5 (country: Mexican immigrant, Chinese immigrant, British immigrant, White American, Black American) mixed ANOVAs was conducted, in which the last variable was treated as a within subjects factor. Regarding the question about how much money the immigrant earns, analyses revealed a significant main effect for country of origin, F(4, 78) = 3.53, p < .01, η² = .15. Means are presented in Table 2. Bonferroni post hoc tests indicated that children rated the White and Black American as earning more money than the Mexican immigrant. The Black American was also rated as earning more money than the Chinese and British immigrant. There were no effects of age or national in-group.

Regarding the question about how smart the child of the immigrant is, analyses revealed a significant interaction between American identity, age, and country of origin, F(4, 78) = 2.32, p < .05, η² = .11. Means are presented in Table 3. Tests of simple effects revealed that there were no differences across country of origin for younger children or older children who had weaker American identity. Older children with strong American identity did differentiate, however, based on country of origin, such that both American children (i.e., White American and Black American) were rated as significantly smarter than all three immigrant children. Regarding the question about how much the child would want to go to school with the child of the immigrant, analyses revealed a main effect for country of origin, F(4, 78) = 2.17, p < .05, η² = .10. Means are presented in Table 4 (Note: This test did not meet the homogeneity of variance assumption, but because this effect was based on a within-subjects analysis, the F test is robust without the
Members were described as being born in the U.S., White European ideal of an American.

Younger children wanted them to live there.

There were no differences (see Table 2) in how important immigrants’ jobs were, how hard they worked, or how much their town wanted them to live there.

Discussion

The current study addressed the general questions of what children think it means to be an American and what it means to be an immigrant. The first research question addressed children’s conceptualization of their national in-group. Results revealed that the children in this sample held a strong American identity. Further, although children considered some Americans to be more American than others, they believed that being an American is attainable by anyone and not based on nativity. Specifically, although all group members were described as being born in the U.S., White European American children in this sample considered White Americans to be “more American” than Black Americans, who were in turn “more American” than Asian Americans, who were in turn “more American” than Latino Americans. Despite these distinctions, children did not hold strict restrictions on what makes a true American. They considered the most important criterion to be that an individual loves America and lives by its rules; this was significantly more important than speaking English, being born in America, or living in the U.S. a long time. These conceptualizations of their national in-group did not differ across age groups, and suggests that children by early elementary school have conceptualizations of Americans similar to that of adults (Devos & Banaji 2005).

The second research question addressed children’s knowledge and attitudes regarding the immigration debate. Overall, many (although not the majority) of the children in this sample were aware of the immigration debate and almost all held positive attitudes about legal immigration. Specifically, one-half of older children and one-third of younger children knew that some people are against immigration. When asked why people immigrate to the U.S., the largest percentage of children, particularly older children, referred to immigrants seeking the freedoms found in America. Children also noted that immigrants move to America for more financial and material opportunities and to escape harsh conditions in their native country. A considerable number of younger children, however, could not give a reason for immigration, reiterating that children learn more about immigration over the course of middle childhood. When asked why people should be allowed to move here, the majority of children, again particularly older children, noted the ideals of freedom. Children seemed to have internalized the concept of freedom as a human right— it is both as a reason people seek out America and a reason we should allow them to live where they choose (see Torney-Purta et al. 2008, for an elaboration on children’s understanding of human rights). The finding that freedom was mentioned more often by older than younger children is consistent with cognitive developmental trends in which older children better understand abstract concepts and ideals (Helwig & Jasiobedzka 2001; Keil 2006). Younger children, in particular, also commonly mentioned that America is the best possible country to live in and it is understandable and acceptable for people to want to live here.

Although children in this sample are very positive about legal immigration (with 97% favoring of it), children did not support illegal immigration (with 82% opposed to it). However, despite being opposed to illegal immigration, the majority of children (63%) believed immigrants should be allowed to stay in the U.S. if they hold a job. This is higher than the national polling data that indicate that less than half of adults endorse this option as a means for illegal immigrants to gain legal immigration status (see Polling Report, 2010). It is unclear from the current study, however, whether children believe immigrants should be allowed to stay in the U.S. regardless of employment. In other words, many children may simply be eschewing any punishment for illegal immigrants (in contrast to the majority of adults favoring deporting or detaining illegal immigrants, Polling Report, 2010). The only finding in which children endorsed a punishment for illegal immigrants is when the youngest children in this sample favored a legalistic response to breaking a law (i.e., being jailed, but not being deported). This finding is consistent with research showing that younger children believe that any legal violation is wrong and should be punished (Tapp & Kohlberg 1971). In contrast, older children were very unlikely to endorse placing illegal immigrants in jail, supporting previous research showing that older children more so than younger children weigh personal rights and freedoms when justifying legal violations (Helwig & Jasiobedzka 2001). Thus, there may be a developmental trajectory in attitudes about illegal immigration in which young children favor a legal punishment (but only a legal punishment) for breaking a law, and older children tend to focus on personal rights and reject any punishment for illegal immigrants (despite their disapproval). These attitudes appear to change again for many individuals as they reach adulthood, although the reasons for

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<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Attributes for anti-immigrant sentiments by age group.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Age group</td>
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<tr>
<td>Younger</td>
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<tr>
<td>Older</td>
<td>1.39 (.84)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Combined</td>
<td>1.37 (.88)*</td>
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Note. Numbers represent means (standard deviations). Scores range from 1 (not at all true) to 4 (very true); Different superscripts indicate significant differences (p < .05) across attribution types. Numbers in bold indicate attribution types with significant differences across age groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Stereotypes about immigrants based on region of origin.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stereotype domain</td>
<td>White American</td>
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<tr>
<td>Money</td>
<td>3.31 (.85)*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Importance</td>
<td>3.34 (.82)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hard work</td>
<td>3.63 (.62)</td>
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<td>Town attitudes</td>
<td>3.08 (.85)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. Numbers represent means (standard deviations). Scores range from 1 (not at all) to 4 (very much). Different superscripts indicate significant differences (p < .05) across immigrants.
adults’ attitudes toward immigration are complex and multi-faceted. Future research should examine why children are opposed to illegal immigration and why they think certain consequences are more appropriate than others.

When asked why some people are against immigration, participants attributed this sentiment to the notion that immigrants look different and like different things from other Americans (as compared to taking too much government money, being criminals, or taking too many jobs). The finding that younger children, relative to older children, were especially likely to attribute anti-immigrant sentiments to the notion that immigrants look different than other Americans is consistent with developmental research. Considerable work has shown that children focus on observable, external qualities in person perception (Aboud 1988; Aboud & Levy 2000; Martin 1989) and often assume that skin color differences reflect differences in the inherent essence of the group (known as racial essentialism, Hirschfeld 1996; Mahalingam 2007). Related, this developmental trend is similar to findings in Brown (2006), in which younger children perceived teachers to be biased against students because of their skin color more frequently than older children, most likely because of the salience of the physical differences between people. This finding may also reflect the context in which these children live, one in which the majority of the community is White European American with an increasing Mexican immigrant population. To the children we tested, immigrants apparently do look different from the other Americans they see. Children in a community with a large Polish immigrant group might be less likely to focus on physical differences, for example.

Regardless of the developmental differences, children overall most strongly assumed that Americans are opposed to immigration because immigrants look different and like different things from other Americans. These attributions do not parallel adults’ beliefs (or at least adults’ explicitly stated beliefs) in symbolic or realistic threats (Stephan et al. 1999). In other words, children seem to endorse a strong positive type of patriotism (e.g., feeling “very American”) without also feeling the more chauvinistic type of patriotism (e.g., “Outsiders threaten our country”). These attributions have potentially important implications. First, it indicates that children attribute anti-immigration sentiments to ethnic/cultural discrimination. Research has shown that children at this age are knowledgeable about ethnic discrimination (Brown 2006; Brown & Bigler 2005), but no research has previously examined whether children perceive discrimination toward immigrants. This study suggests that children in this sample indeed perceive such discrimination. Second, this finding calls into question adults’ actual reasons for anti-immigration attitudes. Although purely speculative, perhaps children’s responses reflect adults’ actual (or even implicit) attitudes, minus the filter of social desirability that comes with age. Similarly, adults’ endorsement of symbolic and realistic threats as reasons for anti-immigration attitudes may be a form of symbolic racism (Tarman & Sears 2005), and children’s responses may be a more explicit reflection of the racial/ethnic prejudices underlying anti-immigration sentiments.

The third research question assessed children’s stereotypes and attitudes about immigrants based on their country of origin. Results indicated that children held differential attitudes about immigrants based on country of origin, with Mexican immigrants being viewed most negatively (although, no attitudes were entirely negative, but rather less positive). For example, the Mexican immigrant was perceived to make less money than either the Black or White American, his child was perceived to be less smart than either the Black or White American, and children wanted to go to school with his child less than the child of the Black or White American. This tendency to view the Mexican immigrant most harshly is consistent with previous research with adults (Lee & Fiske 2006; Short 2004), and reflects the most negative stereotypes in America being associated with Mexican immigrants. Although children reported not wanting to go to school with the Chinese immigrant relative to the two American children, children were less biased against the Chinese immigrant than the Mexican immigrant. The slightly more favorable attitudes toward Chinese immigrants may be their association with the positive “model minority” stereotype about Asian Americans (e.g., Park 2008). The difference between attitudes about Mexican versus Chinese immigrants also reflects the context in which the children in the current sample live. They live in a community with a predominantly low-income Mexican immigrant population who often hold manual labor jobs, and a relatively high-income Chinese immigrant population who are often medical professionals or academics. Thus, because the community make-up parallels stereotypes supported in previous research, the pattern of children’s attitudes is not surprising.

Table 3
Stereotypes about how smart the child of the immigrant is based on region of origin.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age/national identity</th>
<th>White American</th>
<th>Black American</th>
<th>Mexican immigrant</th>
<th>British immigrant</th>
<th>Chinese immigrant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Older</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong American identity</td>
<td>3.53 (.60)a</td>
<td>3.47 (.51)a</td>
<td>3.24 (.59)b</td>
<td>3.21 (.62)b</td>
<td>3.05 (.65)b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weaker American identity</td>
<td>3.23 (.59)</td>
<td>3.08 (.76)</td>
<td>3.31 (.63)</td>
<td>3.31 (.63)</td>
<td>3.54 (.52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Younger</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong American identity</td>
<td>3.72 (.53)</td>
<td>3.79 (.41)</td>
<td>3.41 (.82)</td>
<td>3.66 (.72)</td>
<td>3.72 (.53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weaker American identity</td>
<td>3.78 (.44)</td>
<td>3.44 (.73)</td>
<td>3.56 (.53)</td>
<td>3.33 (.50)</td>
<td>3.33 (.87)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined</td>
<td>3.57 (.58)</td>
<td>3.52 (.59)</td>
<td>3.41 (.67)</td>
<td>3.34 (.67)</td>
<td>3.37 (.68)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Numbers represent means (standard deviations). Scores range from 1 (not at all) to 4 (very much). Different superscripts indicate significant differences (p < .05) across immigrants.

Table 4
Stereotypes about how much they wanted to go to school with the child of the immigrant based on region of origin.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age/prototypical American</th>
<th>White American</th>
<th>Black American</th>
<th>Mexican immigrant</th>
<th>British immigrant</th>
<th>Chinese immigrant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Older</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White prototypical American</td>
<td>3.19 (.83)a</td>
<td>3.03 (.80)a</td>
<td>2.61 (.84)b</td>
<td>2.84 (.82)b</td>
<td>2.84 (.89)b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No prototypical American</td>
<td>3.15 (.81)</td>
<td>3.30 (.86)</td>
<td>2.95 (.89)</td>
<td>3.15 (.75)</td>
<td>3.00 (.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Younger</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White prototypical American</td>
<td>3.20 (1.0)</td>
<td>3.20 (1.2)</td>
<td>3.20 (.91)</td>
<td>3.32 (.95)</td>
<td>2.84 (1.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No prototypical American</td>
<td>3.69 (.63)</td>
<td>3.54 (.66)</td>
<td>3.23 (1.0)</td>
<td>2.92 (1.2)</td>
<td>3.38 (.96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined</td>
<td>3.26 (.87)a</td>
<td>3.21 (.91)a</td>
<td>2.94 (.88)b</td>
<td>3.05 (.92)b</td>
<td>2.96 (.96)b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Numbers represent means (standard deviations). Scores range from 1 (not at all) to 4 (very much). Different superscripts indicate significant differences (p < .05) across immigrants.
In addition, as predicted, children did not hold many negative attitudes or stereotypes about the British immigrant (i.e., they did not mind going to school with the British immigrant). British immigrants can be more easily incorporated into a common in-group identity (see Gaertner & Dovidio 2000) because of similarities in skin color and language, and this has been associated with more positive attitudes in children as young as 5 (Powlishta et al. 1994). Thus, it is easier to view British immigrants as similar to the prototypical American, and subsequently it is more likely that Americans can apply their positive in-group attitudes to the British immigrant.

Importantly, the study indicates that the White European American children in this sample did not show biases favoring the White American over the Black American. Decades of research have indicated that European American children hold racial biases against African Americans, and hundreds of studies have attempted to reduce such biases (for a brief review, see Pfeifer, Brown, & Juvonen 2007). The current findings suggest that children also hold biases (perhaps even stronger biases) against Mexican immigrants. Although children no doubt continue to hold racial biases not captured by this study, these findings demonstrate that immigration status is an important distinction among elementary school-aged children and should not be ignored. The implication of this finding is that anti-bias intervention programs in the U.S. — programs that rarely, if ever, address immigrant groups — are overly restricted in focus and miss the groups toward which many children hold biases.

The final research question assessed the relationship between national identity and attitudes toward immigrants. Findings indicate that older children with a strong American identity perceived the two American children to be smarter than all three immigrant children. This bias was not evident in children with a weaker American identity. This finding supports both theory, namely social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner 2004) in which individuals who hold an important group identity hold more negative attitudes about their out-groups, and previous research (Billiet et al. 2003; Reizabal et al. 2004; Verkuyen 2009). In addition, the degree to which children believed that a prototypical American is White moderated some of their attitudes about immigrants. Specifically, older children who believed that a White American is the most prototypical American wanted to go to school with both American children more than the Mexican immigrant’s child. This bias was not evident in children who did not differentiate across Americans. This suggests that children who hold tight restrictions around who is a true member of their national in-group hold more biases than children without such restrictions, suggesting that they are less likely to allow Mexican immigrants (or at least their children) into a common in-group. Both of these moderating variables were only relevant for older children. Previous research has found that national identity becomes more important across middle childhood (see Barrett, Lyons, & del Valle 2004), and perhaps the current finding reflects older children’s more sophisticated integration of their in-group conceptualizations and their out-group attitudes.

As with all research, there are limitations to the current study. For example, the current sample was ethnically homogeneous. Although ethnicity has not been a significant predictor of attitudes toward immigrants in previous work (Stephan et al. 1999), more current research should explore ethnic group differences in children’s attitudes toward immigrants. Unlike the current study, future research should address attitudes toward immigration among children of immigrants. In addition, the current study examines children’s attitudes about the immigration threats perceived by adults. Future research should examine whether children perceive unique threats from immigrants that differ from those of adults and explore the ways that children view important issues in immigration. Further, the current study did not assess parents’ role in shaping children’s attitudes about immigrants, and studies on the role of socialization in developing attitudes about immigration would be valuable. Finally, future research should tease apart the numerous confounds associated with stereotypes about immigrants. Immigrants differ in terms of race, language, generational status, and socioeconomic status. All of these variables likely affect children’s attitudes of immigrants, and thus should be examined independently.

In conclusion, this study suggests that elementary school aged children in this sample hold strong American identities and have flexible ideas about what it means to be an American. Further, by age 10, children seem to make important distinctions between both Americans and immigrants. White Americans were often considered more prototypical of Americans than other ethnic group members, legal immigrants were favored over illegal immigrants, and Mexican immigrants were viewed more negatively than immigrants from other areas (perhaps a reflection of the sample community). Furthermore, children’s own attitudes and American identities seem to influence their attitudes towards immigrants. Taken together, this study suggests that researchers who are concerned with the intergroup attitudes of children (and likewise, interventions to reduce negative intergroup attitudes) should more frequently examine children’s attitudes toward immigrants and immigration. Although this is a heated debate among adults, and often concerns abstract legal, financial, and logistical concepts, children are attending to the debate, forming their own attitudes about the issues, and endorsing stereotypes related to their attitudes. As immigration shows few signs of appreciably slowing and is increasingly debated in the news, understanding children’s conceptions of these issues is of growing importance.

References


