2006 Second Place Persuasive Research Paper
Ethnic Enclaves: Lost in Their Own World?

Thesis: Although ethnic enclaves provide security for immigrants in the form of social and work opportunities, immigrants should seek to assimilate into mainstream American society by improving their language proficiency, seeking economic opportunities outside the enclave, and developing a strong loyalty to America.

Outline
I. Chinatown is a world separate from the rest of Los Angeles.
   a. The area is set apart by factors from language to food.
   b. The enclave makes it easy to avoid the mainstream.
II. What is assimilation?
   a. Assimilation is the process of sacrificing some parts of the original culture to become a part of the dominant culture.
   b. Assimilation has a negative reputation, but it doesn’t call for a homogenous America, just an America that defines itself.
III. Language proficiency is discouraged by functioning solely in the ethnic enclave.
   a. Enclaves provide a place where immigrants can ignore the difficulty of adapting to a new language.
   b. Ethnic media caters to the language of the home country.
   c. Social experiences usually consist of only the primary language.
   d. Ethnic businesses, restaurants, etc. do not challenge the immigrant to learn English.
IV. Ethnic enclaves discourage economic success outside the enclave.
a. Immigrants take job opportunities in the enclave and never search for higher paying jobs elsewhere.

b. Lack of language proficiency makes getting a mainstream job more difficult.

V. Being around mainstream American culture is necessary for cultural adjustment.

a. Socialization is a process of understanding the values of a culture.

b. To be re-socialized to American culture, immigrants must spend time immersed in that culture.

VI. Assimilation is not derogatory to ethnicity. (Conclusion)
Ethnic Enclaves: Lost in Their Own World?

Early one Sunday morning in March, my family drove through the winding freeways of Los Angeles until we reached the neat, quiet streets of Chinatown. We parked carefully between several cars on the road and climbed a flight of steps, past birdcages and dog kennels, to my stepgrandfather’s sister’s door. After knocking, Hayward’s sister greeted us rapidly in Cantonese, while my brother, Jace, and Hayward’s nephew, DuWah, exchanged high fives. After a few moments of visiting, with Hayward interpreting between my family and his sister, we walked to a restaurant for Dim Sung, a buffet style restaurant experience where servers bring around trays and each table takes the dishes they want. I surprised myself by eating most of the entrees, but a few of the food options were too bizarre to catch my interest, such as breaded rooster claws. Afterward, we walked through Chinatown with DuWah, noticing the brightly colored silk shirts in kiosks for tourists and signs with Chinese characters.

My day in Chinatown was interesting, exposing me to a world I had never before experienced. However, while my visit to an ethnic enclave expanded my view of the world, these nationality-specific neighborhoods limit the world for those who spend their lives within the boundaries, despite the benefits to beginning American life in an enclave. An immigrant may not know exactly the procedure of life in America, and the enclave is much closer to their previous life, with its members often following the same cultural patterns of their home country. However, while it cannot be denied that enclaves assist immigrants in their first periods of adjusting to America, eventually the enclave deters progress into the mainstream American society. Many immigrants focus their lives in a few city blocks, never expanding their lives beyond its borders. Although ethnic enclaves simplify the transition of immigration, immigrants should strive to assimilate into mainstream American society because remaining in their enclave does not encourage English proficiency, limits economic opportunities, and keeps the immigrants socialized to their own country. Immigrants should seek to separate from these enclaves and live in mainstream society.

What is assimilation?

The definition of “assimilation” is “the process of being absorbed into the mainstream culture” (Henslin, 2007, p GL1), but assimilation is a word with many connotations. Many immigrants feel that being absorbed is
the same as having their ethnic identity erased; by adapting to American customs and culture, such as clothing and language, they are abandoning traditions that defined their way of life. Richard Alba, a sociology professor at the University of New York at Albany, eloquently expresses this negative connotation: “As commonly portrayed – I am tempted to say, caricatured – assimilation is a radical, unidirectional process of simplification: ethnic minorities shed themselves of all that makes them distinctive and become carbon copies of the majority” (Alba, 1999, p. 7). However, assimilation does not have to denote a loss of cultural and ethnic identity. Alba states, “Assimilation does not require the absolute extinction of ethnic difference” (Alba, 1999, p. 21). Gregory Rodriguez, a contributing editor to the Los Angeles Times, expands on the idea of retaining ethnic identity with a definition of what assimilation is not: “Assimilation was never about people of different racial, religious and cultural backgrounds becoming homogeneous. Instead, as pioneering sociologist Robert E. Park wrote in 1930, assimilation is the process by which people of diverse origins achieve a cultural solidarity sufficient for natural coherence” (Rodriguez, 2004, p. 133). Despite America’s multiple diverse cultural groups, the country can still become a place with united goals and a feeling of patriotism. The negative reputation given to the word assimilation ignores the need for immigrants to become functional and comfortable members of the American population. With a foreign born population of about 13.2 million, and over 1 million immigrants entering the United States each year, assimilation is a necessity (U.S. Census, 2000).

**How is language proficiency discouraged by life in the ethnic enclave?**

One of the fundamental difficulties of immigrating to a new country, whether it be America, Lithuania, or Tonga, is the struggle of communicating effectively. Language proficiency affects employability, social life, education, and even simple tasks like grocery shopping. While there are some immigrants who already speak English fluently, many who come to America seeking a new beginning often lack the English skills necessary to achieve their dream. They want to find better employment opportunities, better living conditions, and more security, but inability to communicate prevents immigrants from finding a means to obtain these goals. Frustrated, transplanted, and uncertain, they seek refuge in an ethnic enclave.

Studies have shown that immigrants generally choose to live with others of their ethnicity (Bauer et. al, 2002). Because the people in an ethnic enclave are generally from the same country, they usually have the same
primary language. This creates a buffer for adjusting to the drastic differences of American life, but it also blocks immigrants from the rest of the world. While the familiar environment may smooth the transition into a foreign place, enclaves tend to harm the language abilities through the use of media in the primary language, social situations when only the primary language is spoken, and little immediate need to communicate with anyone in English.

In most ethnic enclaves and large metropolises that serve multiple cultures, media is available in languages other than English. New York offers 198 newspapers in languages other than English, from Arabic to Spanish. Los Angeles offers approximately 60 ethnic newspapers (Paul, 2001, p. 26). Multiple television channels are available, portraying anything from current events in the old country to subtitled soap operas. Immigrants, then, have no need to turn to American media because entertainment is available on a much more comfortable level. However, being exposed to media in English can greatly improve English proficiency. Hayward Gee, who immigrated to California from China when he was seven, said, “I probably learned most of my English from the TV… I watched a lot of westerns like ‘Gun Smoke.’ My favorite was probably ‘Have Gun, Will Travel.’ I used to always tell my uncle, ‘Hey,’ because they said that in the westerns, so he decided my [English] name would be Hayward” (personal communication, December 13, 2006).

Social experiences in an ethnic enclave are limited to others who speak the same language and have lived the same culture throughout their lives. While there may be a small degree of Americanization, for the most part these social encounters are limited to things in common with the home country of the immigrant. Staying in an area where English is less common does not encourage language proficiency, and can in fact discourage any contact with others of a different culture. When members of an ethnic enclave have a developed, fulfilling social network, they do not need to seek friendship or social contact elsewhere. While having this system already in place is convenient, lack of contact with the mainstream society is not conducive to assimilation. Young Yun Kim, author of a complex theory on assimilation into society, believes that in order to gain a good understanding of the primary language, immigrants need to expand their experiences outside the enclave and spend time communicating with members of the mainstream society.
Initially, the technical, informational, material, and emotional support of ethnic communication activities may be invaluable for strangers’ adaptation as they struggle to cope with enormous uncertainty and uprootedness. Yet such supportive ethnic communication experiences by themselves cannot make strangers acquire the necessary host communication competence. In the long run, ethnic communication reinforces strangers’ ethnicity, not adaptation, particularly if it is not supplemented or replaced by host social communication activities (Kim, 2001, p.243)

Living in an ethnic enclave also does not promote gaining English skills because these communities provide many alternative businesses and services so members do not need to venture into the unfamiliar American world. They can buy their food at ethnic grocery stores, go out for fancy meals at ethnic restaurants, and even have their money handled at ethnic banks. The ethnic enclave can provide almost complete separation from mainstream American society.

The more all-encompassing the enclave, the less likelihood of developing English skills, creating, in essence, a “language trap” (Bauer et. al., 2002). Enclaves have been studied with results showing that the lower English skills an immigrants have, the lower income they are likely to have. Lack of English severely limits opportunities to work in a non-ethnic setting.

**How is the ability to assimilate economically affected by life in the enclave?**

As stated before, the enclave life is not conducive to a successful life outside the enclave, especially economically. Because the enclave is so self-sufficient, the life of the immigrant becomes focused in their community, and if they ever seek to expand, it may become increasingly difficult to adjust to the workforce elsewhere.

When an immigrant first arrives in America, especially an immigrant without the English language, they are usually in immediate need of some form of employment so they can provide for themselves and their families. At first, the opportunities offered by an ethnic enclave may seem like the perfect solution to a very pressing difficulty. There are plenty of opportunities in enclaves for unskilled employment that does not require English to function, especially in restaurants where most of the clientele are also members of the ethnic enclave. However, while at first these job opportunities seem like a miracle, in the end they may trap a worker in the
enclave, unable to gain employment elsewhere. Angela Fuhn Chan, a student at Harvard and B.A. in sociology, argues that “choosing to enter the ‘enclave economy’ as an alternative to assimilation into mainstream society does not take into consideration the problems and effects of avoiding mainstream society altogether (Chan, 2004, p. 28). These problems may include fewer economic, educational, and social opportunities.

Chan also states several instances when poor working conditions in an enclave are perpetuated because the employers know their workers do not have an alternative place of employment, so they will not quit. Although there is the alternative of starting one’s own business in the enclave, many immigrants with the same services populate these communities causing a surplus of services. For example, in the Chinese suburban community of Monterey Park, California (the first city in the United States with an Asian majority), there are over eighty Chinese restaurants. These restaurants serve mostly the Chinese members of Monterey Park, and they all intensely compete for the patronage of their customers. With such a large amount of competition, it is very difficult to start a new business; therefore, many who seek jobs within the enclave work as servers or chefs in these restaurants. Occasionally, this circumstance causes the servers and chefs to be exploited. Because the workers have few other options for employment, the owners of the restaurants are able to enforce poor conditions and low salaries. “Employers typically draw on ethnic solidarity to enforce and maintain sweatshop conditions, including low wages and closure to union organizing” (Sanders & Nee, as cited in Chan, p. 28). This situation effectively puts workers in an ethnic enclave in an almost impossible to escape situation – they do not have the language skills and American experience necessary to get a good job in the mainstream American labor market, but they are not working in a good situation regardless. If immigrants consciously strove to gain language skills with the intent of eventually leaving the enclave, they would be better able to support themselves and their families, and they would work in much better conditions.

**Re-socialization to America is necessary for successful assimilation**

America’s past is centered in immigration. The original population of the country grew in bits and pieces as various areas of New England were settled by different groups of people. However, the country united under a center of ideals and became unified, although diverse. An important part of becoming assimilated and belonging in the American society is a love and respect for our common ideals as expressed in the Declaration

The proposition that all men are created equal, that inherited status should play no role in the nation’s life, that the law should treat all citizens alike, that government be designed first and foremost to prevent the majority from tyrannizing minorities: it’s hard to imagine a system better suited to provide freedom and opportunity for the millions who would eventually arrive on American shores (Jacoby, 2004, p. 298).

Although there are always issues of racism, misunderstanding, and culture shock, for a national unity it is necessary that immigrants identify and assimilate into America. For this to occur, immigrants must socialize.

Socialization is defined as “the process by which people learn the characteristics of their group – the knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and actions thought appropriate for them” (Henslin, 2007, p. GL6). People are socialized from birth, learning what their roles are, what is or is not appropriate, and the rituals that make up daily life. This socialization is so deeply engrained in our consciousness that entering a different country with a different social consciousness often produces the phenomenon known as culture shock – a situation when the norms of a country are so different from one’s regular life that they are unsure of how to handle it (Henslin, 2007). Re-socialization is possible to an extent, although the deepest engrained part of the consciousness always retains the first socialization. However, remaining in an ethnic enclave does not allow re-socialization to occur, because socially, the immigrants are still in their old country. Instead of learning new ways of living and what is expected in American society, immigrants in ethnic enclaves remain separate, and then feel surprised and unwanted when they receive negative sanctions, such as stares, whispers, or even obvious anger, for violating a norm of society. America’s culture and expectations are ever expanding and changing as more immigrants and cultures enter its borders, but adjustment is definitely necessary to feel a complete sense of security in mainstream society. Tamar Jacoby writes, “The more newcomers arrive from the old country, the larger and more all-encompassing these enclaves – both rich and poor – grow, reducing incentives to make the difficult transition to a mixed neighborhood” (Jacoby, 2004 p. 10).
This process is made much more difficult by living in an ethnic enclave. Instead of adjusting to a new culture and way of life, which is to be expected when one relocates to a new country, members of ethnic enclaves continue a life mentally, if not physically, in their home country. “These immigrants remain psychologically in their homeland, rather than in the host society,” writes Young Yun Kim, author of an intricate theory on the best way to adapt to a new culture (Kim, 2001, p. 126). Remaining in an enclave delays, often permanently, the development of a new social consciousness about their new country of residence. Assimilation is not a lack of regard for ethnicity.

One of the fiercest arguments against assimilation is that it demeans other ethnicities and seeks to perpetuate a dominant culture. However, the necessity of assimilating into American culture is not based on the idea that other cultures are of less worth. The way of life experienced in America is a hodge-podge of cultures, and as more and more members of what are currently considered minority ethnicities immigrate to the United States, our culture will have even more variety. Alba describes the amount of change occurring with the heightened amount of immigrants: “As long as contemporary immigration continues at a robust level, it will expand and reinforce diversity even if assimilation is a major pattern among second and third generation individuals” (Alba, 1999 p. 22). America has always been a country of immigrants, and will continue to accept immigrants into its borders for the duration of its existence. Each of these groups of immigrants has the right and freedom to their cultural practices and ways of life, so long as they do not infringe on the rights of others. However, no ethnic group can hold itself entirely separate from America. The values and patriotism that inspired this country’s freedom and have bolstered its existence for the past two hundred and thirty years must become important to all residents of America, native born or immigrant. T. Alexander Aleinikoff presents the idea that the variety of cultures present in America do not need to confuse the meaning of being American; instead, they can embrace the variety and constant birth of new ideas our multicultural society allows. Aleinikoff states, “A multiculturalism that denies the legitimacy of a national idea is mistaken, but a multiculturalism that informs the national idea makes a valuable contribution” (Aleinikoff, 1998). If immigrants can take the risk of leaving their comfort zone and truly try to become a part of American society, they will be
rewarded not only with an enlarged consciousness, but a part in the rich American heritage that has become part of their lives.
References


