New American Terminology and the Immigrant Identity

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Cover Page Footnote

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Many cities in the US have a "new" American Welcoming Center with welcoming programs aimed at helping immigrants integrate into American society (NAWC, 2022; COC, 2022a). The language used by these centers implies that (1) there is a desire for immigrants to change to fit into the society (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006), (2) all immigrants are new to America and need to fit in and (3) American identity is the primary identity of a new immigrant. 19 immigrants shared their stories with us. We used Riessman's (2008) thematic and dialogic analysis approach to analyze their identity and attitude toward the terminology used by immigration processes. We explored 4 emergent themes of tensions: independence vs dependence, stability vs instability, comfort vs discomfort and belonging vs alienation.

Keywords: narrative, immigrant, identity, new American, culture

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Many immigrants and recent citizens in the U.S. have undergone a lengthy and challenging process of acculturation and integration into American society.

Despite this, the label "new Americans" is often applied broadly to a wide range of immigrants, raising questions about how this term is perceived, particularly by those who have lived in the U.S. for many years. The immigration process often offers a limited number of identity categories on official documents, restricting the full expression of the complex identities that immigrants may hold beyond their legal status as "American" (Collier, 2005). These categorizations may not reflect the nuanced experiences of immigrants, prompting an investigation into how those engaged in immigration programs navigate these assumptions.

The U.S. immigration process can be lengthy and complicated, leading some cities to establish Welcoming Centers as part of their efforts to assist immigrants—a move that has earned the U.S. praise for its inclusiveness (The Welcoming Center, 2023). However, the labels used by these centers and by the U.S. government more broadly to refer to citizens and non-citizens can be problematic. Terms such as "illegal aliens" have been widely criticized for being dehumanizing and punitive (Bazar & Brown, 2009; Cunningham-Parmeter, 2011; Rucker et al., 2019). Such language can perpetuate stereotypes and limit the space for immigrants and racial minorities to express their identities fully (Housley et al., 2010).

A common label used by the U.S. government is "new Americans," which is intended to be inclusive by encompassing immigrants who are waiting for citizenship or planning to become citizens (Exec. Order No. 14012, 2021; Kerwin et al., 2021). However, this term has sparked debate. The label is applied broadly to recent immigrants, nonimmigrants, children of immigrants, naturalized citizens, and even first-, second-, or third-generation Americans (Gila, 2013; MacMillan, 2019; Pastor, 2016; Reny & Shah, 2018). The term "new Americans," while seemingly inclusive, often contributes to social divisions by reinforcing the power of labels and the implicit idea that certain individuals must be categorized separately from "established" Americans. This creates an "us vs. them" dynamic, which can perpetuate discrimination against immigrants.

In American history, adaptation of immigrants has often been viewed in the assimilationist lens, a process by which a nation integrates immigrants into its dominant culture, effectively transforming them to conform to established societal norms (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997). However, a counter narrative recognized that cultural adaptation could be a two-way street, where both the immigrant and the host society could evolve through interaction (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

First, the American identity has often been tied to an ethnocultural image rooted in European ancestry and whiteness (Devos & Banaji, 2005; Gila, 2013; Yogeeswaran et al., 2012). As a result, many immigrants prefer to highlight their heritage through hyphenated

identities, such as "Iranian-American" (Reny & Shah, 2018), rejecting the singular "American" label because it does not fully capture their sense of self.

Second, many "new Americans" face challenges with integrating into American society due to factors such as racial and ethnic identity, language barriers, and citizenship status. These barriers can limit their opportunities, including access to political office and social mobility (Ebert & Ovink, 2014; Reny & Shah, 2018). At times, some immigrants experience deracialization, where their identity becomes less tied to race within U.S. society, leading to diverse experiences of discrimination (Waters & Kasinitz, 2010). These dynamics highlight that the immigrant experience is not monolithic; how one is treated or perceived can vary significantly based on race, ethnicity, and cultural background.

The integration process itself can often place the burden of change on immigrants rather than their new communities, requiring them to adapt their identities or witness shifts in their environment (De La Garza & Ono, 2015; Naijian & Dixon, 2003; Raymond et al., 1974). This expectation of one-sided assimilation often ignores the potential for immigrants to influence the host society, challenging the dominant narrative of adaptation.

This essay examines how immigrants navigate their identities through the lenses of identity negotiation theory (INT), the integrated theory of cross-cultural adaptation, and differential adaptation theory. It explores how labels like "new Americans" influence the process of identity negotiation, often creating tensions and discomfort. By building on these existing theories, this study contributes to the fields of intercultural communication and migration studies by offering a more nuanced understanding of how language and identity intersect in the immigrant experience. Specifically, we argue that identity negotiation is influenced not only by cultural adaptation but also by the power dynamics embedded in institutional language and societal structures that seek to categorize immigrants.Additionally, Bishop (2013) examined power and representation in the U.S. citizenship and immigration services' guide for new immigrants and suggested that the "Welcome to the United States: A Guide for New Immigrants, promotes discourses of governmental safety and sovereignty in favor of shaping new immigrant arrivals into normative U.S. citizens" (p.155).

We contribute to understanding immigrant experiences with U.S. citizenship services through examining adaptation and emphasizing the ambivalent experience of adapting and interacting with an assimilation narrative and governmental-prescribed norms compliance. Therefore, the next section will outline the theoretical background of immigrant adaptation, focusing on how these contributions enhance our understanding of identity negotiation in a cross-cultural context.

Theoretical Frameworks

Gudykunst and Kim strongly advocated for an "assimilationist" perspective on cultural adaptation, emphasizing that immigrants need to adapt by modifying their behaviors and communication styles to fit into the host culture (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997). However, scholars like Kramer (2000), and later De La Garza and Ono (2015) have re-evaluated this approach, arguing that adaptation is a more complex process that can involve both change and resistance. This research draws from both Kim's (1995) and De La Garza and Ono's (2015) perspectives to better understand the nuanced and multifaceted process of adaptation.

Ting-Toomey's (2005b) identity negotiation theory (INT) highlights the importance of individuals having their identities respected and accepted in intercultural interactions. According to Ting-Toomey, identity negotiation is a transactional process where individuals attempt to assert, define, modify, challenge, and support their self-images. This concept is critical in understanding how immigrants navigate their identities as they interact with the host culture. Identity is not fixed, but continuously negotiated as individuals strive to reconcile who they are with how they are perceived by others.

Kim's (1995, 2001, 2005) integrated theory of cross-cultural adaptation complements INT by emphasizing the dynamic and ongoing nature of cultural adaptation. According to Kim, adaptation is characterized by cycles of stress, adaptation, and growth, which ultimately lead to greater intercultural competence. This theory underscores the importance of communication competence, social support, and cultural similarities in easing the adaptation process. Over time, immigrants develop a more flexible and inclusive sense of self, allowing them to function more effectively across cultures. Kim's (2008) concept of *intercultural personhood* further expands on this by describing how individuals can develop a fluid and adaptable identity that transcends cultural boundaries.

Building on these frameworks, De La Garza and Ono's (2015) differential adaptation theory offers a critical rethinking of the assimilationist approach. This theory challenges the notion that adaptation is a one-way process where immigrants must fit into the dominant culture. Instead, it suggests that immigrants can adapt in various ways, which may include influencing or even changing the host society. De La Garza and Ono argue that traditional adaptation theories often ignore the complexity of immigrant experiences, particularly in terms of power, agency, and the ways society can also adapt to accommodate immigrants. They highlight the need to recognize the ways in which immigrants shape their environments, not just adapt to them.

This article seeks to argue that immigrant adaptation is a complex, dynamic process. We argue that immigrant adaptation involves not only the pressures to conform and fit into the dominant culture but also the agency immigrants exercise in preserving their cultural identities and influencing their host society. We contend that the process of adaptation is multifaceted, combining elements of both accommodation and resistance and that immigrants negotiate their identities in ways that challenge the simplistic notion of assimilation. To explore these arguments, we pose the following research questions:

RQ1: How do immigrants narrate their own identity as "new" Americans?

RQ2: Why do immigrants narrate their immigrant identity as "new" or not so new Americans?

RQ3: How do immigrants narrate their experience of adaptation in association with the welcoming center?

Procedure of Story Collection and Analysis

This study's participants comprised 19 individuals (15 men and 4 women), all of whom have lived in the U.S. for over 10 years and are now citizens. The participants came from diverse backgrounds, including Syria, China, Ecuador, Ukraine, Belarus, India, Israel, and Ghana. The participants had different reasons for coming to the US and different incomes. They were selected through snowball sampling of the authors' networks. After the data was collected the participants were de-identified through assigning pseudonyms and deleting the original identifiers. One possible outcome is that the authors attracted people in their field, however, many of the participants were unrelated to the academic field. The interview guide is designed to collect participants' "big stories" about their journey into the United States and their experiences as "new" Americans (Freeman, 2002; Mishler, 1986). In addition to the interviews, field notes were taken during the conversations, which helped in the subsequent data analysis.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using a combination of Riessman's (2007) thematic and dialogic analysis methods. This approach created a dual-layered analysis: thematic (focusing on the content of participants' stories) and dialogic (examining how participants co-create their narratives and negotiate their identities in dialogue with the interviewer). By incorporating both thematic and dialogic facets, we captured not just what participants said, but how they said it, paying attention to tone, hesitations, and shifts in narrative flow. The idea that any voice is a "dialogue of voices" (Frank, 2012) underscores the necessity of recognizing the relational nature of narrative, which is why we focused on the interactional dynamics in the

interviews. Since the researchers themselves were immigrants, participants viewed them as insiders to the immigration process, which shaped the dialogic co-creation of immigrant identity during the interviews.

In using dialogic thematic analysis, we introduced an innovative approach that combines elements of both content and performance, advancing the research technique by offering a fuller understanding of how immigrant identity is negotiated in real-time conversations. This approach contributes to existing methods by integrating a performative aspect, acknowledging that identity is not just described but performed and negotiated within interactions. Future researchers might find this dual focus helpful for exploring other complex identity negotiations, particularly where power, status, and belonging are at stake.

While previous studies have used similar narrative methodologies, such as Riessman's (2007) focus on thematic and dialogic analysis, this study advances the method by applying it specifically to the immigrant experience in a context where the researchers themselves are seen as participants in the dialogue. For instance, in research by McKay-Semmler and Kim (2014) on the adaptation of Hispanic youth in the U.S., they utilized thematic analysis but did not fully integrate the dialogic component. While they focused on how interpersonal communication affects adaptation, their approach lacked the depth of dialogic interaction that we emphasize in our study. By contrast, our method considers how immigrant identity is not only told but performed and adjusted in dialogue with the researcher.

Our method also builds on work by Griffin and Phoenix (2016) who used dialogic analysis to explore identity formation in intercultural contexts. These studies focused on the interaction between cultural identities and communication strategies, but our contribution lies in applying this method to the immigrant experience in the U.S. and exploring how insider status (researchers as immigrants) affects the narrative co-construction process.

All participants were long-term residents (10 years or more) of the U.S. and citizens, which likely influenced their perspectives on identity and adaptation. The countries of origin spanned a wide geographic and cultural range, including Syria, China, and Ecuador which means that their immigration stories reflect diverse political, social, and economic conditions. Some participants fled political persecution or economic hardship, while others sought education or professional opportunities, leading to different reasons for immigrating and potentially different adaptation experiences.

Qualitative research, in its retroductive logic and flexible analytical approach, allows theories to emerge organically from the data while also shaping the theoretical frameworks applied (Edwards et al., 2020). The

diverse and often contrasting immigration experiences of the participants resulted in recurring themes of tension, such as stability versus instability, dependence versus independence, comfort versus discomfort, and belonging versus alienation. These tensions highlight the intricate and fluid nature of the immigrant experience.

Stability vs Instability

The theme of stability versus instability emerged prominently in the analysis as a key aspect of the immigrant experience in the U.S. Job opportunities, travel restrictions, and the overall sense of safety were central subthemes that shaped participants' descriptions of their desires for stability and their experiences with instability. These themes are interconnected, with work opportunities representing both a path to stability and a symbol of independence, which ties into the next theme.

For instance, Velocity explained that gaining permanent citizenship gave her the security and confidence to pursue further education: "As time progressed, my citizenship made me feel like I should go to school and further my opportunities," enabling her to secure stable housing and financial independence after her family's deportation. Sandy agreed on the importance of job prospects, believing that the struggle for opportunities in the U.S. is what defines an American, rather than a "new" American. His perspective highlights how immigrants often view their journey as one of struggle and adaptation to fit into society. However, differential adaptation theory challenges this by suggesting that adaptation need not always involve such conformity. Instead, immigrants and host societies can co-create new, hybrid cultural norms, where both parties influence each other's values and practices, leading to mutual transformation rather than one-sided assimilation.

The instability caused by restrictions also extended to travel. Both Marius and Janet expressed profound relief upon gaining citizenship, which allowed them the freedom to travel and work without fear of deportation or limitations. Janet remarked, "I wanted to have a regular life as any other person without limitations," and emphasized how her new citizenship granted her abilities, particularly with employment and international travel. Marius echoed this sentiment, explaining how his anxiety over jeopardizing his immigration status was alleviated by citizenship: "I felt relief. There was no more worry once I got [citizenship]."

Darius, who has lived in multiple countries, also highlighted how holding an American passport provided a sense of safety during travel, unlike his experiences with other passports: "[However,] American passport gives you more safe passage." Similarly, Sandy described the instability associated with non-immigrant visas, which he termed

"vulnerable visas" due to the arbitrary power immigration officers have to deny entry: "The officer has the right to deny entry right at the border for very arbitrary reasons, which is a huge power given to them."

Garrett added to this discussion by noting that citizenship removed his constant fear of losing rights or being treated as less than fully American: "There is always anxiety that if you don't have citizenship [you risk] not having all the rights and not feeling fully American." These narratives illustrate the tension between stability and instability that many immigrants face, particularly around job security, travel freedom, and overall safety in the U.S.

This tension aligns with Kim's integrated theory of cross-cultural adaptation, which views adaptation as a cyclical process marked by stress, growth, and adjustment to new environments. Participants like Velocity, Sandy, Marius, and Janet demonstrate this process as they move between uncertainty and security in their pursuit of stability. However, while this reflects a more traditional view of adaptation requiring immigrants to change, the next theme—dependence and independence—shows that not all immigrants experience adaptation in the same way.

Dependence vs Independence

The theme of dependence versus independence extends from the earlier discussion on stability and highlights the tensions immigrants face as they navigate their place in U.S. society. Garrett's reflection on feeling American through gaining citizenship transitions into this theme, where independence becomes a defining marker of what it means to be American. While the idea of the American Dream may be questioned by many, the immigrants in this study grapple with the tension between feeling dependent and striving for independence in their new lives.

Janet, who immigrated from the Soviet Union, grew up in a system where the government provided minimal support for its citizens, fostering a sense of shame around dependence. This upbringing influenced her perception of self-reliance as an immigrant in the U.S. Similarly, another participant from the same region shared this deep-rooted embarrassment about needing assistance, reinforcing the belief that carrying one's own weight is essential. For Janet, her only perceived difference as an immigrant before gaining citizenship was her inability to work, which she saw as a limitation on her independence. Darius, another participant, echoed this sentiment, stating that true American identity is marked by independence and not relying on the government for support.

Both Janet and Darius emphasize hard work and self-sufficiency as key aspects of their American identity. Darius, who came to the U.S. on

a tourist visa, highlighted his avoidance of government assistance, aside from medical insurance during the COVID pandemic: "I never needed any assistance. The only time I got assistance was medical insurance. Other time was during COVID, unemployment. Never needed any immigrational help." Darius believes that being American means contributing to the country, particularly through paying taxes, and asserts that self-sufficiency is the ultimate test of one's status in the U.S.: "As long as you are self-sufficient, America will give you what you want. If you aren't self-sufficient, they will question your citizenship." Darius's view aligns with Kim's theory of cross-cultural adaptation, which emphasizes functional fitness and the ability to navigate the host society successfully. His belief that true American identity is achieved through independence and contribution to society underscores the mutual adaptation process where both the individual and the host environment make adjustments to support integration. Darius joined many communities in the US that accepted him and celebrated his difference by allowing him to take days off for holidays and celebrating with him.

Janet's experience similarly centers on independence, but hers was driven by the need to overcome limitations tied to her immigration status. Dependent on her husband, family, and brief government assistance during her pregnancy, Janet quickly moved beyond these moments. She recounts these experiences without emotion, as though they were simply necessary steps to reach her ultimate goal: independence. "If I wasn't pregnant, I wouldn't have ever gotten any of it," she remarked, emphasizing her aversion to being in need. Her struggle for independence was deeply personal, tied to her desire to escape dependence on her husband and societal limitations as an immigrant.

Peter, like Janet, found his path to independence through education. As a gay man married with children, Peter's quiet confidence during his interview highlighted his belief in education as a leveling experience that fosters independence. He explained how college shaped his immigrant identity and allowed him to connect with others from diverse backgrounds, contributing to a sense of belonging: "Many people of many different backgrounds come to [college]. And it's sort of like a melding process… you learn [how to] participate." For Peter, education and political participation through voting defined his independence and his American identity. Peter's narrative reinforces the theoretical concepts of intercultural competence and personhood, as he integrates democratic values and participation into his identity as an American. His emotional response to receiving citizenship—expressed through repeated emphasis on the importance of voting—underscores his deep commitment to the principles of American democracy: "I thought it was incumbent on me to vote and be a political participant. … That to me was kind of what the system was about."

Garrett, a Syrian-American, also linked his independence and identity as an American to his job and contributions to society. As a doctor, his sense of belonging and service to the country through his work reflect the same values of independence and responsibility. Like Peter, Garrett believes that his American identity is tied to helping others and paying taxes, making his contribution to society central to his sense of self.

The tension between dependence and independence in these narratives is closely tied to the negotiation of identity and the development of intercultural personhood, as described by Ting-Toomey (2005a) and Kim (2008). Immigrants like Janet and Darius express a strong desire for self-sufficiency, which aligns with the adaptive transformation towards a more flexible and inclusive sense of self that transcends cultural boundaries.

Independence, while a highly sought-after state for many immigrants, is not a universal experience. Each immigrant in this study has taken a different path to achieving it: Garrett through his work, Peter through voting, and Janet through education. A differential approach to adaptation reminds us that immigrant journeys are diverse, and the meaning of independence varies for each individual. This reinforces the need to recognize the unique ways in which immigrants adapt and contribute to society.

Comfort vs Discomfort

The third theme is the tension between comfort and discomfort, which emerged from analyzing how participants responded during our interviews. Initially, we noticed a pattern of indirect responses, which led to a sense of frustration. Upon further examination, we observed that while participants felt comfortable discussing their immigrant identities with fellow immigrants, there was also a simultaneous discomfort in disclosing personal information, particularly when discussing immigration-related topics.

In conversations, we often experience a level of trust that facilitates a relaxed and open interaction, allowing for easier communication, whether through verbal or nonverbal cues. This trust fosters a comfortable atmosphere, making it easier to engage and share openly. The primary researcher felt this sense of ease with participants like Marius and Velocity, whom she frequently spent time with and even traveled with. Marius, from Egypt, tends to prefer structure and planning, while Velocity, from Ecuador, is more spontaneous and sociable. Both participants identify strongly with their cultural roots, and their connection with the primary researcher fostered a sense of trust.

However, when discussing immigration and government-related topics, this trust quickly dissolved, and the dynamic changed.

When the topic of the interview and consent procedures were introduced, the tone of the interaction shifted noticeably. Marius, who had been comfortable and informal, immediately expressed concerns about being recorded and wanted reassurance that the information would not come back to him. His hesitation and request to go "off the record" during discussions about his citizenship status demonstrated a discomfort rooted in mistrust of institutions. He explained, "The US government can strip you of the naturalization even after you are a citizen. It makes me feel anxious. Always feeling singled out, it is harder to belong. You are not immediately one of them [Americans], you need to feel validated." This fear reflects a discomfort in fully embracing the American identity due to concerns about the stability of citizenship, highlighting the vulnerability immigrants feel even after achieving legal status.

Velocity also shared a similar tension between comfort and discomfort. While she initially hesitated to be herself during the interview, once encouraged, she expressed herself more freely, swearing and joking about her frustrations with governmental entities. "Fuck the police," she said, "Fuck that, I am Latina." Although Velocity was comfortable with the primary researcher, the topic itself created discomfort, revealing how difficult it can be for immigrants to fully engage with these issues even in safe spaces.

Other participants, like Sandy, exhibited similar behavior. While he invited researchers to engage in a conversational tone, he shifted to generalizing about immigrant experiences when discussing sensitive topics, such as his interactions with immigration workers. Peter, another participant, frequently generalized as well, veering away from personal narratives and instead discussing immigrant assimilation in more abstract terms. "Immigrants should assimilate and participate in the culture, maintain continuity with the culture that they come from too, through generations," he explained, distancing his own experience from the discussion. This detachment likely stems from his educational background in data analysis, where objectivity and positivism are emphasized. By framing his narrative in neutral, general terms, Peter seemed to manage the discomfort of discussing more personal, potentially contentious topics.

This tension between comfort and discomfort is also linked to a broader fear of authority, as noted by Bishop (2013), who emphasizes that the U.S. government uses soft power to promote assimilation over integration through its interactions with immigrants. This fear likely motivates participants to oscillate between openness and guardedness, revealing a reluctance to fully express their authentic selves when

discussing their identity in relation to governmental systems. This dynamic highlights the challenges immigrants face in adapting to the host culture while maintaining their authentic selves, an area that requires further research.

The discomfort felt by immigrants when discussing their identities with institutions suggests that adaptation is not simply a process of individual change, but one that involves navigating institutional power dynamics. Differential adaptation theory urges us to consider that immigrants can also influence and change the host society, rather than being expected to solely assimilate and adapt to existing norms (De La Garza & Ono, 2015). This perspective opens up new avenues for understanding how immigrants negotiate their identities in ways that challenge and reshape societal expectations.

Belonging vs Alienation

The final theme that emerged in this study is the tension between belonging and alienation, a core aspect of the immigrant experience in the U.S. The process of adaptation is rarely linear, with participants sometimes feeling isolated and at other times finding ways to mold their identities to fit within American society. Central to this tension was the research focus on the term "new" American. Most participants did not take offense to the label, though some found it discriminatory. Despite efforts to keep the question neutral, many participants were indifferent to the term. Marius stated, "The term 'new' American – some people might object. I don't object. I am not American until I become American. You can't claim it the day you immigrate. Over time, I can complain, but I am American because I chose to trade my life to be here." For Marius, the term "new" had more to do with how long one has been in the country, dismissing its significance beyond that.

Darius shared a similar sentiment, viewing "new American" as merely a descriptor: "It is just a terminology. When do you stop being a new driver? When you have achieved an experience and reached some kind of level of achievement. When you achieve that independence." He associated American identity more with achieving independence rather than a term like "new." Participants like Darius and Marius felt their citizenship or green card status did not fully define their identity as "new" or "old" Americans. Garrett, however, had a different outlook, suggesting that the green card indicated a "new" status, while citizenship signified the end of that label. Sandy added another perspective, arguing that comfort with U.S. culture, rather than legal status, determines whether someone feels "new" or not. These varied responses reflect that while the term "new" American was not deeply significant for

participants, it did prompt reflections on their experiences of belonging and alienation.

The term "American" itself, rather than "new," was more impactful in shaping participants' sense of belonging. Many participants felt that connecting with American traditions, customs, and societal markers—like sports teams and national holidays—helped them feel more at home. Garrett, for example, described how his daughter's school involvement and identification with American symbols created a sense of belonging for him: "My daughter started kindergarten today. It was so fulfilling when one day she was in front of a banner that identified her as a Spartan, someone who belongs here." Garrett linked his emotional connection to these moments of cultural integration, finding meaning in these symbols and traditions. This exemplifies how immigrants internalize host cultural identities through adaptive processes, fostering a sense of belonging as they navigate the complexities of integration (Kim, 2008).

However, the sense of belonging was often contrasted with feelings of alienation. Although participants like Velocity found ways to belong, they also expressed discomfort with the idea that identifying as "American" might erase their cultural identity. Velocity stated, "I am a Latina. You feel like being called American erases your identity, especially when people say that I look white." Her assertion reflects the tension immigrants feel when trying to balance integration with the preservation of their cultural identity. This sentiment, as echoed by participants like Noah, highlights the desire to hold onto cultural heritage and resist complete assimilation. Noah, for instance, preferred the term "African American" over "new American," recognizing the distinction between a naturalized and a U.S.-born African American.

For many participants, their American identity was largely confined to legal contexts. Jeff mentioned, "I don't even call myself an American, unless for work purposes." This echoes Sorrell's (2019) finding that immigrants often link their American identity to legal or citizenship terms, rather than to their personal sense of self. Josh went a step further, arguing that the "new American" label segregates immigrants: "I don't think labeling us as new Americans is the best. I think it, in a way, segregates us from other Americans. ... If we are promoting inclusiveness and equity, we should avoid tagging them in a way that isolates them from the masses."

The experiences of participants like Garrett, Marius, and Sandy, who each faced different forms of racism and prejudice, reveal how alienation can sometimes push immigrants to hold tightly to their cultural identity as a source of strength and distinction. Sandy reflected on his long and difficult path to citizenship, explaining that had the process been easier, he might have been more accepting of the "new" label: "If they made it easy for me, and gave it to me in three months instead of 8

years, I'd be more receptive to the terminology. But because it was hard, I want to hold on." His desire to retain his identity as an "Indian American" reflects the broader tension between belonging to the U.S. and maintaining one's cultural heritage, a sentiment shared by Marius, Garrett, and Velocity.

The varied interpretations and reactions to labels such as "new American" stress the complexity of identity validation and recognition in the adaptation process. For some, these labels symbolize inclusion, while for others, they represent segregation or an erasure of cultural heritage. These differing perspectives illustrate the ongoing negotiation of identities as immigrants seek to find their place within American society, resonating with the dynamic nature of identity construction proposed by INT.

Ultimately, the tension between belonging and alienation shapes the immigrant experience in profound ways. Navigating these challenges requires continual negotiation, adaptation, and growth, aligning with Kim's integrated theory and Ting-Toomey's INT, which emphasize the importance of intercultural competence and a more inclusive, flexible sense of self. The following section will explore how the literature and theory interact with this thematic analysis.

Discussion

The themes that emerged from this study align with existing literature and theories on cultural adaptation, building upon frameworks such as identity negotiation theory (INT), cross-cultural adaptation (CCA), and differential adaptation theory (DAT). Over time, these theories have evolved to better reflect the complex experiences of immigrants as they navigate tensions between stability and instability, dependence and independence, belonging and alienation, and comfort and discomfort. These experiences are deeply intertwined with the processes outlined in Kim's integrated theory of cross-cultural adaptation (ITCCA) and Ting-Toomey's identity negotiation theory (INT).

According to Kim's theory, adaptation is a continuous, cyclical process where immigrants go through phases of stress, adaptation, and growth. This is clearly illustrated in the narratives of immigrants like Velocity, Sandy, Marius, and Janet, who oscillate between feelings of uncertainty and security as they navigate their lives in the U.S. Milestones such as acquiring citizenship, securing job opportunities, and gaining the ability to travel freely act as markers of stability, alleviating the stress associated with non-citizen status. This aligns with Kim's assertion that successful adaptation involves both internal adjustments and the ability to function effectively within the host society.

INT suggests that immigrants employ various communication strategies to assert and protect their identities, especially in situations where they feel vulnerable or scrutinized. This is evident in the discomfort expressed by Marius and Velocity when discussing their immigration status. Together, these theories show that cross-cultural adaptation is not simply about assimilation but involves a dynamic interplay of maintaining cultural identity while engaging with and adjusting to the new environment. This process leads to the development of intercultural competence and a more inclusive sense of self.

The immigrant experiences in this study reveal that traditional views of adaptation persist in the way immigrants navigate integration. Themes such as instability, alienation, and discomfort highlight that immigrants often face instability due to the challenges of the immigration process, which forces them to undergo significant changes. They hesitate to express themselves authentically because of discomfort and, as a result, experience alienation. All participants grappled with the painful process of change as they work toward integration.

While many immigrants in our study felt pressure to conform, their journeys were far from uniform. The theme of independence demonstrates that, although many immigrants are motivated by the desire for autonomy, their approaches to achieving it differ. Their identity journeys do not always culminate in adopting the "American" label; instead, many choose to carry their cultural heritage with them, attaching it to their American identity. Immigrants are not merely adapting to an existing American identity but are actively reshaping the definition of what it means to be American. They challenge the traditional image of America as portrayed in introductory guidebooks and contribute to creating new spaces and definitions of American identity.

This study explored three key questions regarding immigrant identification as "new" Americans or as Americans overall, and their assimilation experiences with welcoming centers. While some immigrants may have a smoother path to assimilating their identity due to racial, ethnic, or linguistic factors, all struggle with belonging and finding independence in a country that often fears immigrant dependence on resources and support. It is crucial to consider the broader implications of these findings for immigrant experiences, which will be discussed further in the following sections, along with the study's limitations.

Conclusions

This study was not free of limitations. One main lack of this work was that the questions did not address the heterogeneity of immigrants

directly, including issues such as language differences (e.g., British vs American English). As do many studies, it fell short in recognizing and prioritizing the systemic and structural differences that different races experience in the U.S. A future study should address this lack by asking questions directed at eliciting the effects of discrimination that many of the immigrants may have experienced differently due to their positional differences such as race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. The differential adaptation approach encourages us to recognize that not all immigrant stories are the same, and that immigrants may also influence and change the host society. Further studies should look into how immigrants change society they adapt into using ethnographic methods to observe those processes.

Finally, this is a community engaged project and the primary implication is application directly to improve the welcoming centers' functionality. Bodycott (2012) highlights the need for and benefits of developing internationalization policy and management procedures that reflect and support an understanding of the embedded cultural needs and expectations of immigrants and their families. The authors will work on a white paper with recommendations that the researchers compiled through the themes and data of this study.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the broader understanding of immigrant experiences by illustrating how identity is negotiated and redefined in the face of systemic challenges and cultural expectations. It calls for a more inclusive perspective on adaptation, one that acknowledges the multiplicity of immigrant journeys and the ways in which they contribute to the evolving landscape of American identity. As immigrants continue to shape and reshape the cultural fabric of the United States, their experiences highlight the importance of viewing adaptation as a dynamic and reciprocal process, rather than a one-sided expectation of conformity.

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