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Moral bricolage and immigrant identification: The case of Romanian Americans

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Abstract

Immigration historians have illuminated the institutional forces that made possible Eastern and southern European immigrants' inclusion in the white racial category in the early twentieth century, initiating their ascent into mainstream America. Sociologists have shown that their descendants assimilated into American society while maintaining symbolic attachments to their ethnic roots. But, whereas current studies of immigrant racialization have focused on the strategies of immigrants of colour for asserting a higher position in the American social hierarchy, scholars have generally overlooked such processes for phenotypically white immigrants. This paper highlights first and 1.5 generation Romanian immigrants' strategies for navigating their ambivalent relationship to Americanness. While they assumed their whiteness unproblematically, Romanian Americans sought to distinguish themselves from whites and non-whites on the basis of their ethnicity. Furthermore, they used American values to distance themselves from their former compatriots. Through *moral bricolage*, Romanians made strategic use of desirable traits they associated with being Romanian and American, melding them into a particularly worthy ethnic identity.

Keywords: Immigration; symbolic boundaries; ethnic identification; moral bricolage; whiteness; Romanian Americans.

Introduction

As immigrants accommodate to life in a new country, they develop identificational schemas that position them relative to groups they encounter in their 'host' society, and transform the ways in which they think of themselves *vis-à-vis* their former compatriots (Itzigsohn and

Saucedo 2002; Morawska 2004; Levitt 2005). Immigrants moving to the US are met with a racial hierarchy that forces them to reconfigure their self-identificational schemas (Waters 1994; Ong 1996; Jacobson 1998; Ajrouch and Jamal 2007; Marrow 2009; Vasquez and Wetzel 2009). From a cultural perspective, the complementary and uneven processes of ethnicization and racialization can be understood as the construction of ethnic boundaries (cf. Barth 1969; cf. Alba 2005; Levitt 2005). I adopt this approach, and propose a complementary term, 'moral bricolage', to illustrate how first and 1.5 generation Romanian immigrants navigate the socio-racial landscape in the United States.

Definitions of what it means to be American have expanded to incorporate previously 'ethnic' elements, and 'being ethnic' has become an acceptable and even desirable identity marker (cf. Waters 1990; Alba and Nee 2003). Nevertheless, race remains 'a *fundamental* axis of social organization in the US' (Omi and Winant 1994, p.13, emphasis in original). Immigrants are not immune to the racial dynamics that permeate American society and attempt to assert some agency in the process of racialization. Previous studies have shown that immigrants of colour use moral frames to distinguish themselves from racial groups with whom they do not wish to be identified (e.g. Waters 1994; Lamont 2000; Marrow 2009; Vasquez and Wetzel 2009). Recent research on white immigrants has focused on the social processes that led to their 'becoming' white around the turn of the twentieth century (Roediger 1991, 2005; Ignatiev 1995; Jacobson 1998), and on the persistence of 'symbolic ethnicity' among later generations of white ethnics (Gans 1979; Alba 1990; Waters 1990). Yet few studies have examined how first generations of phenotypically white immigrants draw on moral and racial frames to negotiate their position in American society – possibly due to the assumption that they can easily fit within it. The case of first and 1.5 generation Romanians living in the Midwestern United States illustrates the complex relationship such migrants have with the American mainstream.

Participants in this study drew on American moral and racial discourses, and ethnic identity markers, to engage in an identificational process I describe as *moral bricolage*. I conceptualize 'boundary drawing' and 'bricolage' as complementary processes: as immigrants differentiate themselves from particular groups, they denote their affinity with others. They skilfully manage multiple referent groups, melding desirable traits into a coherent ethnic identity. This paper complements existing research on ethnic identification by illustrating the strategies that phenotypically white immigrants use to 'accomplish their ethnic identity' (Moerman 1974). First, I show how Romanians moving to the US from a society that is largely racially homogeneous begin to develop

identities as 'white ethnics'. Second, I illustrate how they assert their own Americanness to distance themselves from their former compatriots in Romania. In sum, they meld elements from their 'home' and 'host' societies to construct a particularly worthy ethnic identity.

Review of relevant literatures

Boundary-making strategies of immigrants of colour

Fredrik Barth (1969) introduced the concept of boundaries to studies of ethnicity, arguing that scholars should focus on the 'ethnic *boundary* that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses' (p. 15, emphasis in the original). I focus here on what Lamont and Molnar (2002, p. 168) have called 'symbolic boundaries' – the 'conceptual distinctions' that people use to make sense of the social world, and their place within it – and examine race and morality as boundary-drawing tools. Lamont (2000) demonstrated the power of this analytical approach by examining how working-class men in the US and France used the language of morality (e.g. discipline vs. incompetence, individualism vs. collectivism) to make racial and class distinctions.

Though not always using the concept of boundaries, studies of 'new' immigrants hailing from Latin America, Asia and the Caribbean have shown how members of these groups construct identities that challenge hegemonic racial ideologies (Waters 1994; Ong 1996; Kasinitz *et al.* 2008; Vasquez and Wetzel 2009; Paul 2011). Ong has argued that 'attaining success through self-reliant struggle' (1996, p. 739) can have a 'whitening' effect on Chinese immigrants in the US. In a study of Arab Americans in south-east Michigan, Ajrouch and Jamal (2007) have found that their respondents asserted their whiteness based on national and religious characteristics. These studies exemplify what Wimmer (2008) has called a 'boundary expansion' – a process in which the boundaries enclosing a dominant group shift, becoming more inclusive.

But boundary work aimed at dominant groups can also be used as a tool for upending the existing hierarchy – a 'normative inversion' in Wimmer's (2008, p. 1037) terms. Thus, Mexican Americans 'assert their social worth' by affirming their rich cultural heritage, contrasting it to what they see as white Americans' lack of culture (Vasquez and Wetzel 2009, p. 1559). Espiritu (2001) has shown that Filipina Americans used gendered moral values to assert their superiority over white girls. Another strategy for challenging the existing hierarchy is what Wimmer has described as a 'boundary contraction', a process in which ethnic groups disidentify 'with the

category [they are] assigned to by outsiders' (2008, p. 1036). Such is the case of middle-class second-generation West Indians and Haitians living in New York City, as well as poor Hispanics in the rural south (Waters 1994; Marrow 2009). These groups emphasized their ethnic values, attributing to African-Americans a 'lack of discipline, lack of work ethic, laziness, bad child-rearing practices and lack of respect for education' (Waters 1994, p. 805).

Whether through boundary expansion, normative inversion or boundary contraction, immigrants of colour make active attempts at navigating the American social and racial hierarchy. Like them, phenotypically white immigrants participate in the process of self-identification by signalling distinctions from, and affinities with whites and non-whites alike. Furthermore, as this study shows, they employ similar strategies *vis-à-vis* their former compatriots from Romania (an element largely overlooked by current scholarship). Together, such strategies hold a universal appeal in identificational struggles, particularly when moral worth is at stake. As I will show in the following pages, my respondents made strategic use of particular Romanian characteristics, as well as American moral values filtered through the lens of race, to build an identity of high social worth. In other words, Romanian Americans engaged in moral bricolage by melding together the desirable characteristics of their 'home' and 'host' co-nationals into an ideal ethnic identity.

White ethnicity

Studies of whiteness have flourished over the last two decades, highlighting the situated nature of this identity marker (Warren and Twine 1997; Twine and Gallagher 2008), and the privilege and power it denotes (Doane 1997; Frankenberg 1993, 2001; Lipsitz 1998). This racial category has seen multiple (if at times incremental) expansions over time, beginning with the waves of immigrants arriving in the US in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Irish, Southern and Eastern European immigrants initially occupied a paradoxical position in their host society: they were legally white, due to the naturalization law of 1790 that granted them citizenship rights as 'free white persons' (Jacobson 1998), but were socially assigned a status 'in between' whites and blacks (Barrett and Roediger 1997). The Irish were lifted out of this marginal space by their participation in the labour market, adoption of native whites' racist attitudes towards blacks, and by two powerful institutions – the Democratic Party and the Catholic Church – that welcomed them into their ranks and did not question their 'whiteness' (Roediger 1991; Ignatiev 1995).

The complexity of 'Americanizing' – and thus racializing – Eastern and Southern European immigrants was apparent in their own

ambivalence towards the social structure they were being fitted into (Barrett 1992; Barrett and Roediger 1997). Barrett and Roediger (1997) have shown that these immigrants were at times eager to take advantage of their legal status as whites and distance themselves from blacks, while at other times they sought to form alliances with them in a common fight for equality and labour rights. But such alliances were short lived, and the newly arrived immigrants learned from their Irish predecessors that being white meant being on the 'right' side of the racial divide (Barrett 1992; Barrett and Roediger 1997). Participation in the two world wars cemented their inclusion into whiteness (Jacobson 1998; Roediger 2005).

Researchers focusing on later generations of white ethnics have illuminated their structural and cultural assimilation into white America, demonstrating what Zolberg and Woon (1999), and Wimmer (2008) have described as a process of 'boundary expansion'. Alba (1990), Waters (1990) and Bakalian (1992) noted the decreasing constraints that being 'ethnic' imposed upon later generations of white ethnics, and emphasized the symbolic nature of ethnic identification for these groups (Gans 1979). Being ethnic entailed choices revolving around cultural practices that placed little burden on the lives of those who engaged in them. Moreover, as ethnicity becomes symbolic, whiteness comes to replace it as an unspoken marker of identity (Doane 1997; Torkelson and Hartmann 2010).

Historical studies of white ethnicity have illuminated the conditions in which European immigrants became white, but their focus has been on the institutional and structural forces that made such incorporation possible. Furthermore, while sociological studies have illustrated the meanings that later generations of white ethnics attach to their ethnic roots, few have discussed the ways in which early generations of white immigrants in the US make sense of their ethnic and racial identities in the 'host' society (but see Barrett and Roediger 1997; cf. Morawska 2004). My respondents assumed their whiteness unproblematically – a privilege they were not aware of as such – but this did not translate into their unconditional embrace of the 'American' identifier. Romanians' racial identification with whites granted them a secure place in the American social hierarchy, but their ethnicity allowed them to claim a superior moral and cultural status compared to American whites and non-whites. This suggests that immigrants may value race and ethnicity differently, and seek to claim categories of identity that reflect most positively upon them.¹ This study illustrates how early generations of phenotypically white immigrants engage in moral bricolage to assert a superior position in the American social hierarchy.

Methods and data

In a study of Poles and Russian Jews in Philadelphia, Morawska (2004) called for greater attention to the experiences of Eastern European immigrants – a group whose study in recent decades has been relegated to immigration historians. With more than a million residents in the US in the beginning of this decade (Romanian Embassy in the US 2010), Romanian Americans form a significant part of this immigrant group. Romania is a country of 23 million people situated in Eastern Europe, bordering the Black Sea and the Balkan Peninsula along its southern edges, and Hungary, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova along the northern ones. Its history of communism loomed large in the stories of Romanians whom I interviewed.

I explored Romanian immigrant identification through qualitative fieldwork with a Romanian community in south-east Michigan, involving in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations. In this paper, I draw on interviews with twenty-four participants, the majority of whom are women and all of whom espoused religious values: eighteen identified as Pentecostal, three as Seventh Day Adventists and two as Greek Orthodox. Fifteen of my respondents are first-generation immigrants; ten are 1.5-generation immigrants, having arrived in the US before the age of 12 (Kasinitz *et al.* 2008). I conducted the interviews in the preferred language of my respondents: all of the 1.5 generation used mostly English, whereas first-generation respondents chose Romanian (I am fluent in the language). I sought three types of information during the interviews. First, I asked my respondents about their move to and life in the United States; second, I examined the networks my respondents developed and the types of knowledge these have yielded; third, I asked what being ‘American’ and ‘Romanian’ meant to them. I learned about their racial frameworks as I asked participants to describe an American: ‘*Cum arată un American?*’ or ‘What does an American look like?’ The knowledge I gained about my respondents’ racial schemas was complemented by recurring references to moral schemas that I inductively identified while coding the interviews. The following analysis should not be taken to suggest that race is at the forefront of my respondents’ minds in their everyday dealings. Rather, I show that they made use of race as a lens to talk about Americanness, and their place in US society.

These data have certain limitations. First, the number of interviews restricts the reach of my conclusions. Second, asking respondents directly about what being Romanian and being American means to them can run the danger of leading interviewees to discuss such identifiers when they may have little salience in their own lives (for a longer discussion of the implications of such methodological choices,

see Moerman (1974) and Brubaker *et al.* (2006)). I sought to mitigate this risk in two ways: first, by raising these questions at propitious moments during the interview. For example, as interviewees described their lives in the US, I asked them to reflect more broadly on what it means to be an American and what an American looks like. Second, I focused my analysis on how my respondents deployed various identificational markers to position themselves in the American social landscape. As such, I follow Moerman's assertion that one should not ask 'who is [Romanian]?' but rather focus on 'when and how and why the identification [Romanian or American] is preferred?' (1974, p. 62). In the following pages, I highlight the moral bricolage that my respondents engaged in as they melded the American and Romanian characteristics they considered to be most valuable into a worthy ethnic identity. In this process, they constructed moral boundaries to distinguish themselves from whites and non-whites, and from their former compatriots from Romania.

Constructing a Romanian-American identity through moral bricolage

First- and 1.5-generation Romanian immigrants have an ambivalent relationship with Americanness: on the one hand, they see themselves as similar to white Americans because of their skin colour and dedication to hard work, while on the other, they construct moral narratives which distinguish them from white and non-white Americans. They had a similarly fraught relationship to Romanianness: they embraced some characteristics they associated with being Romanian, but strongly disavowed others. These narratives seem to converge on one goal: to paint a picture of themselves as particularly worthy of success in the United States.

Similarity and belonging

Institutional competency was a central theme in Romanian immigrants' discussions of accommodation to the demands of life in a new country. They became American in the spaces and through the activities of everyday life, such as going to the supermarket, learning how to drive, learning how to open a bank account, enrolling in school, and securing a job. An incremental increase in familiarity with such activities amounted to a sense of comfort they associated with 'home'. But this familiarity with the mechanics of living was only part of developing a sense of belonging. Learning about the racial and cultural landscape in the US is just as important to becoming American (Waters 1994; Kasinitz *et al.* 2008).

In discussions of what it means to be American, my respondents often referenced a group that to them embodied a superlative state of

Americanness: 'true Americans' or '*American* Americans'. Romanians viewed 'true Americans' as white; they described them as having been born in the US and descending from early European immigrants. Bianca, a woman in her late thirties living in the US for nearly a decade, pointed this out in her discussion of the US as a 'country of immigrants': 'even if [one is] *American* American and was born here . . . his parents were German, or their mother was born in Italy'. Bianca, like most Romanians, identified with these 'true Americans' racially and, to some extent, culturally.

When they mentioned skin colour explicitly, Romanian Americans did so to highlight their similarity to white Americans, crossing the boundaries between 'immigrant' and 'American'. In a first act of moral bricolage, they adopted the racial identifier of the dominant group both directly and indirectly. While telling me that she had never experienced any discrimination in the US, Carmen stated that Romanians do not suffer 'the disadvantage of *looking* like' they are not American as 'Asians or Indians' would. This opinion was echoed by Violeta, a middle-aged woman with a thick accent who had been living in the US for a decade at the time of our interview. She discussed similarity and difference in an explicitly racialized way, stating that 'you can tell when you see a [South Asian] Indian or when you see an American . . . I mean for [Romanians], until you speak, until you open your mouth, they don't know I am Romanian.' To Violeta, Romanians are similar enough to 'Americans' by virtue of their skin colour, to be 'mistaken' for Americans. But differences remain, and language competency was one of the most apparent.²

Mica's response represented a typical answer to the question of 'what an American looks like'. She and her husband had been living in the United States for nearly a decade, having moved to complete postgraduate educations. As we talked about her early experiences in the US, she pointed out that her academic advisors were immigrants from Great Britain and India respectively. In this context, when Mica stated that 'true Americans' were born in the US, I asked her to describe an American. She responded that her husband would have been a better person for me to talk to about this because his advisors were '*American* Americans'. She continued:

M: So he had two American advisors, a guy and a woman and they are both professors . . . What they looked like? You mean physically?

MC: Yes, physically.

M: So she was older, like 50 years old, 55 years old, and very nice and blonde and really, really nice. And the guy is a little younger, he is maybe 40 and he has two children and even he . . . he is very nice as well [laughing] . . . They are both very cool.

The race and ethnicity of the 'American American' advisors were left unspoken, unlike the ethnicities of Mica's own professors whom she identified as British and Indian. This is an example of how most of my respondents talked about 'American Americans': they seldom mentioned physical characteristics (though here Mica gives us a hint by describing the woman as 'blonde'), focusing rather on particular moral traits (the advisors were 'nice' and 'cool'). Two explanations could account for why some of my respondents did not mention race when describing 'American Americans': on the one hand, race may not be a salient category in their lives; on the other hand, my respondents' narratives reflect the dominant American discourse representing whiteness as the 'absent presence' in the lives of white Americans (Frankenberg 1993;³ Lipsitz 1998).

I argue here in favour of the latter explanation. My interviewees had a sense of US racial discourses, and were able to reproduce them in their narratives about American identity. They adopted the American racial hierarchy, and subtly reinforced it by referring only to white Americans descended from early European immigrants as 'true Americans'. This echoes findings that, while Americans are open to the idea of multiculturalism, between 10 and 17 per cent still identify 'true Americans' by their race and European descent (Takaki 1999; Schildkraut 2007). Furthermore, as I will show in the following section, whenever my respondents talked about non-whites, they referred to them specifically by their race and/or ethnicity, while seeking to emphasize their own differences from such groups. Lastly, Romanians can (and some explicitly do) identify as white, by virtue of the colour of their skin. Yet skin colour represented only a weak basis of identification with Americans; Romanians also embraced some American cultural and moral values, while disavowing others.

My respondents identified tolerance, freedom and egalitarianism as quintessential American social values, echoing dominant views in the US (Walzer 1996). Many of my interviewees described mundane situations in which they experienced Americans' openness and tolerance. Carmen, a middle-aged woman who moved to the US in her twenties, recalled: 'English being my second language, I did not speak at all. Not "hi", not "bye", I didn't know. But I didn't have any experiences where someone would not serve me at the store because I did not speak English.' This is illustrative of what Vertovec (2007) has called 'civil integration', the everyday interactions that foster a sense of belonging and 'civility' among people of different heritage who live in the same community. Experiences of 'civil integration' led my respondents to embrace other values they considered to be uniquely American. Egalitarianism was particularly meaningful to some. Mimi, a middle-aged woman who had lived in the US for less than a year at the time of our interview, thought that, unlike in Romania, 'here you

can be respected, even if your interlocutor is a person with very high status, you can talk as equals'. Lastly, 'freedom' opened life possibilities that my respondents perceived as truly American (in this respect they were similar to the Polish Americans and the Russian Jews that Morawska (2004) interviewed). Through these narratives, my respondents adopted the highly valued American characteristics that make the US the desired destination for migrants around the world (Paul 2011). This, along with their adoption of whiteness, was a significant step in Romanian Americans' ethnic identification through bricolage.

Identifying with Americans' cultural values challenged my respondents' sense of identity with their former compatriots. Many pointed out the disconnect they felt when talking to family and friends from 'home'. Nora had visited her relatives in Romania several times since her arrival to the US, but she 'couldn't find (her)self there any longer'. She still loved the culture, but found the 'Romanian lifestyle' foreign as she became accustomed to life in the US. Laura, who moved to the US while still a teenager, gave me the example of a conversation she had had with her cousins from Romania about their experiences attending college:

I went to college, I know what it's like . . . yeah, school is harder in Romania than it is here, but when you get to college, it's like . . . wow! (. . .) I had to study my butt off or whatever, and my cousins in Romania, they're all talking about how 'oh yeah, school, college is so hard!' [But] they don't show up to class, they don't do anything, but their professors say, 'OK, you want me to pass you, I want you to buy me a Christian Dior perfume!' That's how they pass their school! (. . .) They're thinking 'big deal, you're going to college, we know how that is!' You can't do that here! If I would say to my professor 'c'mon I'll give you 50 bucks', the guy would probably laugh at me and kick me out of the university, you know what I mean?

Laura distanced herself from the 'Romanian' way of doing things: while her cousins operated within a corrupt system where getting ahead is commensurate with one's ability to bribe, she worked hard to be successful. She drew symbolic boundaries between herself and her cousins – she distanced herself from them along moral lines, while espousing American values and attitudes. Like all of my respondents, Laura was proud of her ability to work hard and succeed. The mantra of 'hard work' was central to Romanian Americans' self-identification, but, as I show in the following section, it served a dual role in the process of moral bricolage.

Immigrants gain a particularly racialized form of cultural knowledge in the US, which influences their perceptions of where they fit within the American racial hierarchy (Waters 1994; Ajrouch and Jamal 2007; Marrow 2009). Phenotypically white immigrants come to adopt the racial categories of the dominant group and experience some affinities with this group (Barrett and Roediger 1997). My respondents thought of themselves as similar to white Americans by virtue of their skin colour; they found themselves on the 'right side' – the 'white' side – of the boundary demarcated by skin colour, thus claiming a secure place in mainstream American society. But, as they embraced some 'American values', they also discussed their differences from former compatriots in Romania, indicating their acculturation. Yet they did not completely cross over into 'whiteness', rejecting some of the values they thought of as American. As I show in the following section, while race afforded them a secure place in the American social hierarchy, ethnicity was the main basis for claims to uniqueness and social worth. Thus, Romanian Americans accomplished their ethnicity through moral bricolage, by choosing which aspects of Americanness and Romanianness they identified with.

Difference

My respondents distinguished themselves from 'true Americans' by attributing to them certain negative characteristics and thus 'contracting' the boundaries of what it means to be a 'good American' (Ecklund 2006; Wimmer 2008). Difference from Americans and similarity to Romanians from the country of origin was constructed around two major themes: family and work. Emphasizing 'traditional' Romanian values and culture was an important strategy in the process of moral bricolage.

Like Vasquez and Wetzel's (2009) Mexican American respondents, Romanian immigrants thought of white Americans as cultureless and lacking family values. One participant in this study thought that Americans 'lacked a cult of the family', which led them to have a more lax attitude towards marriage and divorce. The structure of relationships between children and their parents was seen as particularly problematic. Teodora moved to the US at an early age, and was the mother of a toddler at the time of our interview. She was particularly critical of what she perceived to be American parents' relative indifference towards their children: '[American] parents are like "I don't know what my kids are doing. They're moving out when they're eighteen. Can't wait to get rid of them," you know?' She contrasted that with the close-knit family that she grew up in, where tradition dictated that children live with their parents until they got married. My respondents spoke proudly of their devotion to enjoying good food

and spending time with their families; their concern for preserving 'Romanian family values' was paramount. These values were enforced by tight-knit Romanian networks which provided support for newcomers even years after their arrival in the US.

When discussing hard work, many of my respondents blurred boundaries between themselves and white Americans (Wimmer 2008), while setting 'bright' boundaries between themselves and non-whites (Alba 2005). Romanian immigrants thought of themselves as being harder working, more ambitious, responsible and disciplined than most Americans. This was perhaps their most important strategy in the work of moral bricolage and ethnic identification. Nicoleta described Romanians as hard working and willing to take on demanding jobs rejected by Americans. Nora told me the story of her move to the US, and emphasized how hard she had worked to succeed educationally and professionally. She attributed her ambition and drive to growing up in challenging circumstances:

Romanians . . . come with skills from [Romania]. We didn't form our mentalities and our discipline here, we formed it over there. And we formed it under communism. It was bad in a way, but as far as discipline was concerned, it was okay . . . But it was under those circumstances we formed our disciplined character that today promotes us, helps us and motivates us to be where we are. Let's be honest . . . because if we were spoiled . . .

To Nora, communism was a system that, while oppressive, taught Romanians how to be disciplined and hard working. Furthermore, the image of the 'hard-working Romanian' emerges in opposition to that of the less ambitious and 'spoiled' American. It is important to keep in mind here that, among Americans, those with most opportunities ('spoiled' in Nora's description) tend to be white. Nora is thus setting herself apart from 'true Americans' by emphasizing her ambition and greater willingness to work. Such statements are important tools in my respondents' moral schemas, allowing them to lay legitimate claim to opportunities in the US and to distinguish themselves from all Americans.

Like immigrants of colour, and their predecessors in the early twentieth century who distanced themselves from African Americans (Waters 1994; Barrett and Roediger 1997; Vasquez and Wetzel 2009), some of my interviewees drew distinctions along racial lines. Călin, a man in his early forties who had been living in the United States for nearly two decades, described himself as different from Native Americans and African Americans because, unlike Romanians, 'they

feel entitled and don't want to work hard'. He considered himself similar to whites because they work hard – an essential ingredient of success. Yet he was careful to emphasize his dedication to his family – unlike white Americans, he didn't 'work like crazy' nor was he solely 'driven to make money'. Călin thought of himself in degrees of difference; his boundary work reveals a complex identificational picture: while distinguishing himself completely from some racial groups, he adopted white Americans' dedication to hard work, but declared his difference from the latter based on what he perceived to be their lack of family values. He made strategic use of ethnic and racial categories, manipulating boundaries to emphasize his deserv- edness of success.

Others shared similar moral judgements regarding non-whites. Dorina and Marta, 1.5-generation Romanians in their early thirties, believed that African Americans' demands for 'special treatment' contradicted their aspirations towards equality. They thought of race-based opportunities as privileging particular racial groups unfairly, while penalizing Romanians who work just as hard, or harder, to achieve success. Dorina stated this in her discussion of Arab American business owners: 'we know that they get more breaks than the average [business]...we consider ourselves sort of American, like we're white Caucasian, you know? We're more American...so we don't get a break! But they do...because they're Arabic.' To Dorina, Romanians' skin colour helped them identify as American, but denied them the advantages of other ethnic groups. Whenever they referenced this perceived 'unfair treatment', my respondents did so to praise Romanians' work ethic and ambition: they were successful despite the lack of 'special' privileges. This strategy helped solidify Romanian Americans' claims to worthiness – it was the final element in their work of moral bricolage.

First- and 1.5-generation Romanians developed a classificatory system for what it means to be American and placed themselves within it based on ethnic, racial and moral schemas. They engaged in moral bricolage as they brought together the traits they thought of as most desirable, and distanced themselves from characteristics they did not want to be identified with. They saw themselves as similar to 'American Americans' by virtue of their skin colour, but disavowed the lax attitudes of such American Americans towards family. They constructed a hierarchy of 'hard work', placing themselves at the top, followed by white Americans, with people of colour being placed closer to the bottom. Through moral bricolage, Romanian immigrants claimed an identificational space in American society that legitimated their worthiness of success.

Conclusion

This study proposes the concept of moral bricolage as a tool for understanding how a group of Romanian immigrants to the United States think of themselves *vis-à-vis* those they identify as 'American' and their compatriots from the country of origin. Their 'bi-local' engagements (Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004) provided Romanian Americans with complex toolkits that they used to position themselves advantageously in the social hierarchy of their adoptive country. My respondents' identificational narratives demonstrated their ambivalence towards 'Americanness': on the one hand, they adopted American racial and moral discourses; on the other hand, Romanian Americans rejected some of the moral traits they associated with 'American Americans' and supplanted them with specifically ethnic characteristics. Furthermore, while they used ethnic traits to prop up their abilities and deservedness of success, they also at times sought to distance themselves from elements of Romanian culture they thought of as undesirable. In other words, through symbolic boundary work, they distanced themselves from American and ethnic traits they did not want to be identified with. Conversely, through a process I have called moral bricolage, they linked the most desirable characteristics they associated with Americanness and Romanianness, and constructed a unique, and uniquely deserving immigrant identity.

This research has implications for debates about the links between the processes of assimilation and transnationalism. Whereas previous works on transnational ties have shown their power to draw immigrants into an interstitial space between their 'home' and 'host' societies (cf. Vertovec 1999; cf. Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004), I suggest that such links can also serve to intensify the process of acculturation rather than detract from it. Early generation Romanian immigrants drew on their knowledge of their adoptive country, and their country of origin, to construct identities that aimed to resolve the contradictions of being at once an insider and an outsider to American society. They used both local and transnational ties to inform the ways in which they thought of themselves within the American racial and social hierarchy. For example, mundane interactions, as well as more sustained contact through work and school, gave my respondents the cultural knowledge to talk about their embrace of particular American values and their distance from others. Similarly, sustained contact with family and friends from their country of origin affirmed some of their common values, but also, and perhaps more poignantly, it enforced the gaps emerging between their experiences and attitudes. Transnational ties can thus serve a paradoxical role: while they maintain connections between immigrants and their former co-nationals, they can also make evident the growing distance between them.

This paper illustrates the situated and contingent nature of whiteness (Warren and Twine 1997; Twine and Gallagher 2008). My work shows that phenotypically white immigrants assume their racial position unproblematically, but still seek out ways to distinguish themselves from the dominant group. As such, they have an ambivalent relationship to whiteness. While race can serve as a way to secure a superior position in the American social hierarchy, ethnicity serves as a basis for claims of exceptional moral worth. Such identificational strategies are typical of immigrants attempting to navigate the symbolic space of 'Americanness'. Yet these same strategies can reify existing stereotypes about particular racial groups and about Americans more broadly (see also Paul 2011). Lastly, self-identification has implications for one's attitudes toward policy decisions, and future research can seek to link immigrants' emerging racial frameworks with their political attitudes, particularly on issues such as immigration and race-based policies.

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Notes

1. Such balancing of race and ethnicity is perhaps more possible now than it was a century ago. Eastern and Southern European immigrants arriving in the United States in the late 1800s and early 1900s faced an American society averse towards what it perceived to be the inferior 'races' of Europe. In contrast, today's mantra of multiculturalism and the impact of ethnic groups on the American mainstream (Alba and Nee 2003) have opened the door to the maintenance and valuation of ethnic traits previously devalued. Thus, immigrants can leverage their ethnic culture as a source of capital to position themselves in the American social hierarchy.

2. One of the most important markers of acculturation is language knowledge (Alba and Nee 2003; Kasinitz *et al.* 2008). Some respondents identified the 'language barrier' and having an accent as specific markers of difference. But language knowledge was also a marker of similarity and inclusion for those of my respondents who were able to shed their accent. Nevertheless, as Takaki (1999) recounts, perfect knowledge of the English language does not necessarily equate to being considered 'American'.

3. In a later work, Frankenberg (2001) argued that, due to the changing make-up of American society and increased interracial interaction, whiteness had ceased to be an

invisible marker of identity, rather becoming more visible to whites themselves. Here, I continue to reference Frankenberg's earlier formulation due to my respondents' own discussion of whiteness in ways that obscured the role of race in the privileges accrued to white Americans, drawing rather on the discourse of hard work.

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