

Exploring Ethnic Identity

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One of our core values is ethnic identity wholeness. We often say that Destino is a ministry to reach the campus and the world, but that we express the Gospel through Latino values. This entails an awareness of the fact that organizations possess a culture, and that we are intentionally choosing the culture whose values we are striving to possess. Part of that intentionality consists of exploring what it means to be Latino, to be bicultural, and why God has designed some people that way. This article is designed to help you engage with the concept of ethnic identity wholeness, whatever your own ethnic background might be, and begin a conversation about ethnic identity in light of the Gospel with students, disciples, and other staff.

Created with a Culture

God created each individual with a multifaceted identity that includes, among other things, gender, tastes and preferences, talents, family upbringing, and ethnicity. He intends for our whole identity to reflect his character, to be redeemed from sin, and to be used in building his Kingdom. We want to explore the ethnicity God has given us as we mature in Christ, and discover God's character and design in it. We deeply desire that everyone in the Destino *familia* would experience wholeness in their ethnic identity: power to live out who God made us, celebration of God's image borne in us, and freedom from shame and guilt. As someone experiences wholeness in his or her ethnic identity, she or he

will be better equipped to engage a multicultural and multiethnic society with the Gospel.

The Ethnic Identity Model

Orlando Crespo, author of *Being Latino in Christ*, put forward this model for understanding what it means to be bicultural—what tensions and perspectives a person of an ethnic minority background goes through. (Crespo, in turn, adapted this idea from Harry Kitano and Roger Daniels.) It is highly recommended that you read *Being Latino in Christ* for a more complete discussion of these concepts.

On the next page you'll see four boxes. You can think of them as quadrants of a graph. On the bottom, the x-axis represents how much someone identifies with his or her ethnicity. And then going up and down the left side, the y-axis represents how much a person feels assimilated to the majority culture. Thus there are four quadrants, or experiences of biculturalism a person can go through:

1. Low ethnic identity, High majority culture assimilation
2. High ethnic identity, low majority culture assimilation
3. Low ethnic identity, low majority culture assimilation
4. High ethnic identity, high majority culture assimilation

Ethnic Identity Model

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|---------------------|-----------|--|--|--------|
| Assimilation | High ↑ | High Assimilation/Low Ethnic Identity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies more as an American than as a Latino May speak little if any Spanish Feels at home in the dominant culture More likely to marry a non-Latino May be trying to distance themselves from Latinos or Hispanic culture Could possibly feel shame with ethnic identity (though not always) In friendships and social patterns relates to a high number of non-Latinos | High Assimilation/High Ethnic Identity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Moves back and forth between American and Latino cultures easily Might easily date or marry a person from any race or ethnicity At times feels at home with and distant from both cultures Can be/feel assimilated into majority culture but still retain a strong sense of ethnic identity Are interested in keeping their ethnic heritage alive and are quite knowledgeable about it Can serve as a bridge between cultures | |
| | ↓ Low | Low Assimilation/Low Ethnic Identity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aren't at home in either of the two cultures in which they find themselves Can find themselves in this stage due to rejection by either majority or minority culture (and often both) Can feel estranged, disenchanted and disillusioned | Low Assimilation/High Ethnic Identity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify more closely to their ethnic community than to majority culture May include ethnic minorities who feel white society will never treat them as equals Most likely will marry another Latino May have little interaction with majority culture in their daily life Likely to reflect Latino culture in language, tastes and dress Can include first generation Latinos who prefer speaking Spanish over English | |
| | ← Low | Ethnic Identity | | High → |

**Adapted from:*

- Crespo, Orlando, 2003. *Being Latino in Christ: Finding Wholeness in Your Ethnic Identity*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books.

Originally from:

- Kitano, Harry and Daniels, Roger, 1995. *Asian Americans: Emerging Minorities*. Second Edition. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. (Original study from Ethnic Identity and Assimilation, Kitano and Daniels 1988)

While the specific descriptions and examples in each quadrant are from a Latino perspective, the two variables of ethnic identity and majority culture assimilation can apply to a bicultural person of other ethnic backgrounds as well. It's important to stress that none of these four quadrants is a destination or an ideal for us to

strive for. Instead, this is just a way of understanding and talking about the tensions and interactions of being bicultural. That is to say, having a low or high degree of ethnic identity, or low or high comfort level with the majority culture are neither right nor wrong in and of themselves. They are just facts of life that a

person will go through, identifying with different quadrants in different seasons of life or even in different social contexts. The “good” or the ideal is recognition that the Lord is the creator of our whole identity. He intentionally creates all people with an ethnicity, and has used bicultural people in significant ways in his Kingdom.

Someone who is ethnically of the majority culture would not experience these tensions the same way because they’re not bi-cultural, but this is a good starting point for anyone of any ethnic background, majority or minority, to explore the culture God has given them.

Talking about Culture

Here are some discussion questions you can use as a jumping-off point:

Have you ever identified with any of these four quadrants?

People don’t stay in one quadrant their whole life, and in fact, sometimes a person can experience two, three, or all four in a short amount of time as they go through different experiences. *When is a time when you felt you moved from one quadrant to another?*

How do you identify at different times of the year? Starting school? When you’re at home? Around friends?

Being Bicultural in the Bible

Take a look at the lives of these familiar people in the Bible from the perspective of culture and ethnicity. These are great starting points for getting into the Word when talking about ethnic identity wholeness.

Moses. Lived as a Hebrew raised by Egyptians. Try reading the story of Moses and imagine which quadrants he might have found himself in at various points: as a young man in the palace, when he kills the Egyptian, when he is taunted by the Hebrew slaves, when he is living in Midian for several decades, at the burning bush, when he returns to Egypt.

Daniel. A Hebrew living in Babylon, he felt the tension of different values and customs, as well as intense pressure to assimilate to the prevailing culture. He even had a different name he went by in the majority culture. Have you ever gone by a different name in different cultural contexts?

Ruth. She married into another culture and lived as a migrant farmer for part of her life. She is one of only a couple women listed in Jesus’ lineage.

Esther. She struggled with whether she could do anything about the plight of her people when she was given a position of influence before the majority culture Persian king.

Paul. He was a Jew who grew up in a majority Greek city. He was bilingual (at least) and a Roman citizen. You can see how well he uses not just different languages, but different ways of looking at the world when he’s preaching among Jews, Greeks, and Roman audiences. He was specially equipped to take the Gospel to new frontiers in a way that Jesus’ twelve disciples perhaps weren’t.

Jesus. He is 100% God and 100% human. He experienced the limitation of his divinity while he was on earth. But this made him specially able to sympathize with our weaknesses and rescue us from our sin.

The New Heaven and New Earth is going to be a multicultural reality (See Rev. 7:9-14 and Rev. 21:22-

22:6). The apostle John records the vision he saw about eternity with God in the book of Revelation, and in it he sees people of distinct ethnic groups, languages, and cultural identity. In an ultimate reality where Jesus is the absolute center and focus of everything, the variety of human culture and ethnicity is explicitly mentioned as present and oriented toward worship of the Lord. Note Rev. 21:22-27: “the glory of the nations is brought into [the city.] Nothing impure will ever enter it...” What about our ethnicities and cultures is glorious and what is impure? These things, according to this passage of scripture, will last forever as part of the humanity God has created. Note for people of majority culture

If you're not Latino, or not bicultural, and find yourself a member of the majority culture trying to lead others in exploring ethnic identity, you might feel a little out of place or overwhelmed. But know this: you're welcome here and God intends to help you understand your own ethnic identity through this. If you engage with this concept as someone who wants to fully embrace who God has made them, you'll be enriched by this. Here are a couple notes for you:

Everyone has an ethnicity. Most majority culture Destino staff have an epiphany at some point that goes something like this: “I never realized that I'm white, and that that's actually a different culture!”

There is no cultural neutral. Everyone's understanding of relationships, power and respect, guilt and shame, and even spirituality is run through the grid of one's own culture. That's one big reason to explore what your culture is, as you engage in ministry across cultures.

It may feel awkward to you to facilitate a discussion about ethnic identity. But be honest about your own perspective and experience. Be sensitive but respond honestly about how others' stories make you feel.

See yourself as a facilitator of discussion, not as a teacher.

The ethnic identity model is a little different for people from the majority culture. Instead of identity and assimilation, you are probably experiencing degrees of awareness that you have a culture, and affinity to or distance from that culture. So for example, some staff go through a time when they get really excited about the realization that God gave them their (white) culture for a reason, but then may also have feelings of guilt or frustration as they start to see how other white people might be oblivious to their own culture, and the pain this can cause others.