



## The management of cultural adjustment: Central-South-East European ethnic minorities in the USA

*Managementul adaptării culturale: minoritățile  
etnice din centrul, sudul și estul Europei  
în Statele Unite*

Lecturer Mihaela ARSENE, Ph.D.  
The Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies, Romania  
marsene1102@yahoo.com

### Abstract

*The paper focuses on one particular instance in the management of change as accomplished/implemented in the USA by the ethnic minorities originally from Italy, Greece and Romania. The author presents a diachronic survey of the literature against the author's own findings. The paper identifies common patterns in the cultural adjustment of all three ethnic groups surveyed and analyses them against the specific developmental pressures in each group. Historic, economic and sociological data contribute to outlining the distinct profile of each ethnic groups under investigation, as well as the assimilation patterns at work throughout its evolution in the new US cultural environment.*

**Keywords:** *ethnicity affirmed, ethnicity under attack, peripheral ethnicity*

### Rezumat

*Lucrarea analizează tipul de management al schimbării, așa cum a fost el implementat în SUA de minoritățile etnice provenite din Italia, Grecia și România. Autoarea prezintă un studiu diacronic inspirat de atributele socio-economice ale respectivelor minorități în SUA și care valorifică datele din literatură de specialitate și observațiile proprii. Lucrarea identifică paradigme similare în cadrul adaptării culturale realizate de toate cele trei grupuri etnice analizate, abordându-le din perspectiva presiunilor specifice cu care se confruntă în procesul de adaptare culturală. Cu ajutorul datelor istorice, economice și sociologice, se delimitează profilul caracteristic al fiecărui grup etnic în discuție, ca și tiparele assimilative care i-au determinat evoluția în contextual cultural american.*

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *etnicitate afirmată, etnicitate periclitată, etnicitate marginalizată*

**JEL Classification:** O15

### **Structure of the paper**

**T**he paper opens with a brief overview of the impact of ethnic identification and membership on groups and individuals. After these general considerations we will focus on some European minorities, highlighting the historical circumstances of their immigration to the USA and the family life patterns they introduced to their new country of adoption. Special emphasis will be attached to the evolution of their traditional family patterns under the influence of the new US social and cultural environment.

### **Key concepts**

“Minority” as a term appears to be quite misleading as it is not necessarily a reference to numbers, but rather to power. In the specific US context we are discussing, “ethnic minorities” or “ethnic groups” are terms which denote groups of people that have limited access to political and economic power on account of their non-Anglo ethnicity. Therefore they are non-dominant groups, which means that historically they have been denied access to real power and influence on the dominant/mainstream culture (Samovar, Porter, 1997). As a result, they are unlikely to hold positions of power or to be granted easy access to power and high status.

Ethnic minorities have values, world views, attitudes, life styles, and customs that are different from the dominant culture. Identification with a particular ethnic group often correlates with specific personality types. Researchers (Mindel & Habenstein & Wright, 1988; Samovar & Porter, 1997; Saravia-Shore & Arvizu, 1992; Hofstede, 1991; Trompenaars, 1994) have extensively documented the all-pervasive influence of ethnic identification on groups and individuals alike. The maintenance of ethnic identification and solidarity relies primarily on the family as the foremost transmitter of culture and the key factor in the children’s socialization process.

### **General information on the ethnic groups under consideration**

In our survey we will focus on the Greek, Italian, and, to a lesser extent due to the limited documentary sources available, the Romanian ethnic families in the US. These three groups share in common the place of origin, Central-South-East Europe, the historical circumstances that induced them to immigrate to the US, a Christian, non-Protestant religion, and a somewhat similar pattern of family life style and adjustment to the host country standards.

All the three ethnic groups immigrated to the US in significant numbers at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, until the outbreak of World War I. Their immigration was due to similar social and economic pressures, as well

as class oppression in their countries of origin. They were part of the “late immigrants” wave, as compared to the “early immigrants” from north western Europe.

A socio-economic analysis of these three ethnic groups reveals that early Greek, Italian, and Romanian immigrants were predominantly working class. In terms of geographic location, the first Greek immigrants came from southern Greece (Peloponnesos), the first Italian immigrants from southern Italy (Mezzogiorno) and the Romanian ones came from Transylvania, a Romanian province under Austrian-Hungarian rule at the time.

These early immigrants, irrespective of their place of origin, were pushed by economic necessity and the US was initially viewed as the place where one could find employment, therefore as a source of temporary income. Temporary because the early immigrants were mostly young men who intended to improve their financial situation in the US and then return home, or who wanted to have some income in the US so as to be able to support their families who, by necessity, had remained behind. All the three ethnic groups came to the US because of the local demand for cheap labour and intended to return to their country of origin.

As a rule, the early immigrants were poor and had limited education and skills. They came from agricultural communities and their working class and rural background may well account for their endurance, industriousness and thrift.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century immigration to the US represented a solution to the unemployment problem of Greece and Italy. This correlated with the low productivity and the weather dependence of the agricultural production yielded by the family plots that were constantly diminishing in size under the demographic pressure. With the Romanian immigration, class exploitation was further aggravated by the century-long ethnic oppression at the hands of the Hungarian gentry and nobility. Transylvania was colonized in the 12<sup>th</sup> and the 13<sup>th</sup> century by Hungarians and Saxons. Consequently, the Romanian native population was deprived of any rights, forced into serfdom and under risk to lose its ethnic identity through forceful Magyarization. Apparently the Hungarian authorities encouraged the Romanian immigration to the US for their own, statistical purposes, in an attempt to change the demographic structure of Transylvania in which they represented the dominant minority, with the Romanians as the dominated majority.

Later immigrants from Greece, Italy and Romania tended to have higher education and an urban background; they also tended to come as families that initially enjoyed the financial support of relatives and friends among the early immigrants.

Central-South-East European immigrants settled in ethnically cohesive neighborhoods and all the three groups went into blue-collar work, the only kind of work available given their limited skills. Unlike the earlier European wave of immigration - mostly from north-western Europe, who settled in rural areas and small towns - most south-eastern European immigrants were attracted by large

urban areas which afforded better opportunities of employment and which could better accommodate ethnic communities (Asitimbay, 2005).

All the three groups initially intended to amass some fortune in the US and then return to their homeland. Significant numbers actually returned, although most of them chose to make the US their permanent residence. Immigration from South-East Europe was drastically reduced after World War I, especially after the US Congress enacted the discriminatory law of 1924 which imposed a strict quota system. The 1924 law laid out the US immigration and naturalization policy until 1965 and favoured immigrants from the north-west of Europe.

Once that it became clear that the immigrants stood a better chance of economic success in the New World, they were joined by their families there or, if they had immigrated as single men, marriages with members of the ethnic community back home were arranged. It was not uncommon for the immigrants to travel to the country of origin, find a wife of the same nationality and religion, and return to the US to start a family that was to perpetuate an ethnocentric, traditional life style.

With all the three ethnic groups under analysis, the ethnic traditions, values, and ideals were maintained through two social institutions of critical importance: the family and the church.

### **Ethnicity affirmed: first generation ethnic families**

The first generation ethnic family in the US, be it Greek, Italian or Romanian, tended to preserve the family patterns from the country of origin. Therefore the first generation families were quite large, a pattern that was better suited to the agrarian economies in southern Greece, Italy, and Romania, than to the US urban environment and the immigrants' limited economic means. Despite the initial intention to replicate Greek, Italian, and Romanian life styles in their new country, these patterns had to be adjusted to the social and economic conditions available in the USA. Although a large number of children represented a considerable asset in an agrarian economy since they could provide free labour from an early age, the primary concern for the economic well-being of the family in its new US urban environment induced the families to limit the number of their children so as to match their incomes.

With all the ethnic groups under analysis first generation families scored high in terms of endogamy. As common with most newly arrived ethnic groups, strictly in-group marriages were the rule with the first generation of Greek, Italian, and Romanian immigrants. However, the rate of endogamous marriages tends to decrease with the following generations, which is considered to indicate increasing social amalgamation and diminishing ethnic identification. The increasing rates of intermarriage with each generation point to a general trend of ever growing assimilation, further emphasized by higher levels of educational attainment, since education has been long documented to have a significant assimilative influence.

In what follows I will highlight some major sociological dimensions that help define the ethnic identity in the USA of the three groups under analysis.

### *Sex Roles within the Family*

A survey of the traditional sex roles within the Greek, Italian, and Romanian families reveals interesting commonalities and parallel patterns. In the first generation all the three ethnic families can be safely described as patriarchal, male-dominated, close-knit social units, with the husband yielding authority over the family members in view of his role as sole financial provider for the family. As a result, the wife's role was traditionally confined to the private domain, that is the home, the church, and the ethnic community.

These early families evidenced segregated marital patterns in which husbands and wives had traditionally distinct, separate roles and responsibilities meant to promote the well-being of the family unit. In practice the mother actually enjoyed a considerable degree of power and influence in the family affairs, primarily due to her social and emotional commitment to the family. As a rule, first-generation immigrant women did not have employment outside the home and running the household was their top-priority duty. Although in the public domain the man appeared to exercise dominance over his wife and, implicitly, over the whole family, researchers consider that it would be more realistic to describe sex roles as rather complimentary than strictly differentiated along lines of general male dominance and female subordination, as this network of complementary roles was found to ultimately better serve the overall interests of the family.

Although in principle the first-generation father was the head of the family with all the three ethnic groups, the following generations attest to the erosion of the male-dominated family pattern. The generational change reveals a significant shift from the patriarchal family of the first generation to more democratic patterns of decision making and role attribution against a background of increasing egalitarianism, most likely under the influence of the local American family life style.

### *Attitude to Children*

The Greek, Italian, and Romanian immigrant family can be appropriately described as adult-centred rather than child-centred, in the sense that the household was run so as to satisfy adult needs primarily. Children were expected to respect their parents and the elder in general. They were also expected to act responsibly, very much like adults, and not to interfere with their parents' activities. Assistance in running the household was expected, if not demanded, especially from girls.

Immigrant parents commonly underwent significant personal sacrifices for their children. In return for unflinching parental support, the children were expected to strive to meet their parents' expectations, thereby accepting parents to regulate and guide their lives. The socialization process of immigrant children was meant to develop in them, from an early age, a sense of responsibility, that is

responsibility to the family and, later on, to the ethnic community. One of the highlights was the acquisition of the traditional ethnic values, with respect for parents reigning as the supreme family value. As a result, children grew up cherishing the firm conviction that there is no better way to express respect and appreciation for their parents' efforts than by becoming a credit to their family and to their ethnic community.

Due to the socio-economic constraints in their country of adoption, generally all first generation immigrant families shared the Protestant work ethic and the drive to compete for material achievements. They also revealed strong family solidarity - with marked emphasis on parental respect and authority - and ethnic pride. These are actually the very cornerstones of the child socialization process with first generation ethnic families.

#### *Attitude to the Aged*

To all the three ethnic groups under consideration the family appears to hold a central position in their respective value systems. The family was commonly perceived as a hierarchy with the parents at the top, commanding respect, love, and gratitude. As a result, the elderly tended to be more integrated into the family system and, implicitly, to have more frequent contact with their children than is the case with American families. The obligation to look after one's aged parents was perceived as a natural outcome of the family cycle. These extended families created more opportunities for interaction between the elderly and the younger generations, also in the form of rewarding grandparent roles for the aged. This strong family dependence and support successfully compensated the feelings of socio-economic redundancy and gradual withdrawal from social interaction that the elderly commonly experience.

Integration within the family activities granted them some degree of social interaction, made them feel useful to their dear ones and therefore helped to fight the social isolation that affects so many of the aged. It is no surprise that these ethnic families tended to reject the idea of placing incapacitated parents in nursing homes.

#### **Ethnicity under attack: second generation ethnic families**

The second generation ethnic family is the social unit in which the parents are both American-born of ethnic extraction or they have mixed parenthood, with one parent from the ethnic groups under analysis and the other of different ethnicity.

The common pattern for second generation ethnic families, irrespective of their ethnic origin, is the transitional stage, in which the ethnic traditions are gradually giving way to the environmental pressures for Anglo conformity. In this respect the second generation families experiences a more stressful adjustment

period than the first generation family because its members struggle with dual identities. They have been raised in two cultures: on the one hand the culture of their ethnic group - its foremost agents being the immigrant parents and relatives, the immigrant school teachers and priest, the ethnic group's religious and national holidays, their peers within the ethnic community, implicitly their values, assumptions, norms, world view, attitudes and the like; all these agents transmit the traditional ethnic culture which the young members of the ethnic group absorb unawares. On the other hand the host culture with its myriad influences conducive to assimilation or Americanization: the children of immigrant families attend American public schools, interact outside their ethnic group, are exposed to the values and institutional norms of the dominant culture. As a result they grow into socio-cultural hybrids with dual identities, products of their own ethnic culture and of the all-encompassing American one (Kim, 2001).

Torn between two cultures and life styles, the children of first generation immigrant families tend to succumb to assimilative pressures mostly in places affording limited ethnic support, such as small urban communities where fewer co-ethnics were found.

Three types of family life styles have been documented (Samovar & Porter 1997) to characterize the second generation families, and the Greek and Romanian ethnic groups in the USA are no exception in this respect.

The first type illustrates the marked interest to assimilate the values and norms of American culture as quickly as possible. This often led to abrupt and complete abandonment of the traditional Greek and, respectively, Romanian ways of life. This pattern was more common in small towns where the ethnic groups under discussion were either very limited in number or geographically dispersed. The objective was to pass for an American family; to this effect they shortened or Anglicized their surnames and often minimized or even discontinued interaction with their ethnic community. This pattern was also quite common with later immigrants who were generally better educated and came to the US as success-oriented, individualistic professionals.

The second type is the very opposite: it demonstrates uncompromising cultural identification with the ethnic community and a reduced degree of integration with the host culture. Not surprisingly, these families developed strong relationships and solidarity with their ethnic group and were usually working class.

Still the third type - the "hybrid" family - appears to be the most representative for second generation immigrant families. This type of family pragmatically incorporated ethnic traditional values alongside American ones, accommodating the home and the host culture and picking what suited them best from both of them.

### **Peripheral ethnicity: third generation ethnic families**

With all the three ethnic groups under analysis it can be safely stated that, with the third generation, ethnicity is found to gradually give way to class life

styles and patterns of behaviour. Ethnic identification becomes ever less significant while class identification tends to take its place since the members of the third generation family have internalized American middle class values. Therefore their actions reveal some of the dominant American behavioural patterns (“dominant” both in the sense of belonging to the dominating minority and also being the most representative). Any brief survey of the American cultural values and the behavioural patterns in which they are manifested will necessarily include action- and future-orientation, individualistic and pragmatic concerns, a clear indication that the ethnic groups have by now incorporated the values making for success in the American culture. As a result, they view themselves as primarily American and their interest in their ethnicity is commonly manifested in their symbolic liking of traditional ethnic food, music, and dancing. Their perception of themselves as first and foremost American accounts for their dying interest in maintaining the institutional aspects of their ethnic culture, such as .language, family traditions and strictly endogamous marriages. Researches demonstrate (Samovar, Porter, 1997) that a higher degree of assimilation correlates with a diminishing concern for ethnicity.

While ethnicity was the key characteristic of first generation immigrant families, by the third generation it came to be replaced by social class awareness. As a rule, the third generation is a status- and class-conscious generation, as much as their grandparents had been ethnicity conscious. The growing importance of social class in all significant matters, including starting a family, spells the decline of ethno- religious concerns.

The study of ethnic traits perceived as class-based in nature is enjoying wide-spread attention. Studies (Asitimbay, 2005), (Saravia-Shore & Arvizu, 1992) indicate that differences in income, education, and occupation among the members of extended ethnic families result in the dispersion and the isolation of the family members. Also the focus on family appears to characterize mostly the lower classes since this traditional ethnic value is viewed as hardly compatible with the individualistic and consumeristic trends of the US middle class. Just like their Anglo counterparts, middle-class Americans of Greek, Italian, and Romanian descent seem to value individualism highly, as manifest in their reluctance to maintain close relationship with their extended family network.

All the three ethnic groups in question reveal a drop in ethnicity with each generation, which strongly supports the cultural assimilation or “straight line” theory (Samovar & Porter, 1997). The theory advocates that higher incomes and access to the middle class correlate positively with acculturation and assimilation, to the detriment of ethnicity. Ethnicity is strongly manifested with working class families but, under the pressure of standardizing influences, it tends to swindle and ultimately disappear as later generations acquire middle class status. A general gradual movement away from ethnicity and the assimilation into the mainstream culture appear to be the prevalent pattern that develops with each generation of immigrant families.

Ethnicity was also found to correlate positively with older age, lower levels of education, and low occupational status. With later generation ethnic families that show economic and social mobility, ethnicity plays an increasingly marginal role, surviving mostly in the form of symbolic representations of the cultural heritage of origin. It is mostly peripheral and symbolic, private and voluntary. Ethnicity is not allowed to interfere in the social interaction with American people of a different ethnic background and is therefore reduced to the role of a mere ingredient of one's life style that is never perceived as threatening or divisive of the mainstream culture. Ethnicity is defined in most cases by nationality, religion, and language. With later generations of immigrant families, all these ethnic components have been so heavily eroded by the individualistic and consumeristic trends of the mainstream culture that ethnic cohesiveness is reduced to the often meaningless memory of another culture. Meaningless memory because it is no longer relevant to the perceived needs of the immigrants' descendents in their American environment.

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