How has American identity changed?

March 30 2011

First-generation West African immigrants from Nigeria and Ghana transition smoothly into major societal institutions, such as the workplace and the neighborhood, but have not built stable, mutually beneficial friendships and intimate relationships with native-born Americans, said Northeastern University professor Mindelyn Buford II.

Speaking at an interdisciplinary conference, “American Identity in the Age of Obama,” held last week at Northeastern, the assistant professor of sociology and African-American studies noted that Nigerian and Ghanaian immigrants “exhibit patterns of selective acculturation.”

The conference, cosponsored by the Humanities Center and the John D. O’Bryant African-American Institute, drew scholars from across the country, who highlighted the role of race, ethnicity and immigration status in shaping conceptions of what it means to be American.

“There’s not an easy answer to what aspects of American identity have or have not changed since Obama was elected,” said political science professor Amilcar Barreto, associate director of the Humanities Center. “It’s possible that any change is slow in terms of accepting members of traditionally marginalized groups in society.”

Buford analyzed the socioeconomic and interpersonal assimilation patterns of 45 Nigerian and Ghanaian immigrants who migrated to Maryland, many of whom sought better jobs and educational opportunities. She is conducting the research for a book on how class and race shape highly educated, foreign-born black immigrants’

assimilation trajectories in the United States.

According to Buford's study, 73 percent of Nigerian and Ghanaian immigrants had African Americans in their social networks, including colleagues, neighbors, significant others and acquaintances in volunteer organizations. Forty-nine percent of those surveyed had white Americans in their social networks.

The majority of participants, Buford said, enjoyed their experiences in the workplace and in the neighborhood, but seldom developed close relationships with their co-workers or neighbors. More often than not, for example, Nigerian and Ghanaian immigrants developed formal work relationships that "did not tend to extend outside of the workplace and work hours."

"Patterns of integration or isolation among these new immigrants have implications for their self-identity and imposed identification in contemporary U.S. society," said Buford.

Provided by Northeastern University

Citation: How has American identity changed? (2011, March 30) retrieved 17 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2011-03-american-identity.html

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