

## Two Cultures or One?

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### Abstract

*This article investigates the cultural identity of two female immigrants from Germany and Poland. Framing the study from the theories of assimilation and accommodation without assimilation, I use data in the form of observations and interviews to explore the ways in which each woman represents her own cultural identity. I draw on personal experiences, social networks, economics, language, and child rearing to show the factors that played into each woman's struggle to assimilate or to maintain her native culture. The question is raised of how these women's choices will affect their children as they develop their own identities.*

**Keywords:** Assimilation, Accommodation, Immigrant, European, German, Polish

### Introduction

My two brothers and I grew up in Massachusetts, just as our parents did. Our father is of English descent and a genealogy search that we conducted several years ago allowed us to trace as far back as my great-great grandfather who fought in the Civil War and was a farmer in Maine. In the 1930s, my grandparents made their way from Maine to Boston and then to Andover, Massachusetts, where they raised their family. My mother is of French Canadian descent and her family's oral history has told her that she also has American Indian ancestors. Before she was born, her parents emigrated from Canada in search of work, which they found in the mills of Lawrence, Massachusetts. Although she spoke some French at home as a child, my mother was schooled in English and eventually lost her French language proficiency. Years later, having been born and raised in Andover, Massachusetts, my brothers and I identify ourselves as English-speaking, as Americans<sup>1</sup>, as whites, and function as part of the mainstream US culture.

When my brothers married women who had grown up in Europe and then chose to live and raise their families in the US, the women became part of our family and, each to a different extent, a part of our culture. The uniqueness of their thoughts and feelings and the way in which they choose to raise their children is explored in this study through the themes of assimilation and accommodation without assimilation (Gibson, 1988). The ability and willingness of these women to assimilate into US culture is dependent upon a number of factors, and while one has strived towards assimilation, the other has struggled to maintain her native culture for herself and have her children experience it.

While it may seem logical to assume that these two women, being Europeans, would have similar views to one another, they are actually more different than alike. The maintenance of native language and culture is essential for my German<sup>2</sup> sister-in-law. Meanwhile, my Polish sister-in-law claims that she has tried to assimilate "big time." Could this be due simply to personal preference or are there other factors?

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, "America" is used synonymously with "United States" and "American" with "a member of the United States," except in the term "American Indian," which herein refers to the native people of Canada.

<sup>2</sup> Although I use their real names in this study, I also identify my sisters-in-law as "German" and as "Polish" although both have lived in America for approximately a decade. It should also be noted that my sister-in-law who grew up in Poland now considers herself to be "American."

## Theoretical Considerations

In this study, I use Gibson's theory of accommodation without assimilation to create a conceptual framework for data collection and analysis (Gibson, 1988). The term "assimilation" has often been used loosely and interchangeably with words that have distinct meaning, such as "acculturation." The less contentious and possibly more "neutral" definition that has become a politically-charged word, can be found in the dictionary where assimilation is defined as "the process whereby a minority group gradually adopts the customs and attitudes of the prevailing culture" (Dictionary.com, 2006). Those in favor of assimilation view it as the path to the American Dream and success in life's ambitions (English First, personal letter, 2004). Meanwhile, those opposed to assimilation view it as the "abandonment of ancestral culture and traditions" and as generating problems on an individual and societal level (Henry, 1999, p. 439). Despite the difference of opinions, assimilation theory does not actually predict whether one culture will overcome the other or whether the two will mix (Jones, 1996).

The concept of assimilation has roots in historical immigration studies and has been revisited by many scholars and modified to encompass studies that discredit old ideas within the theory. For example, segmented assimilation theory, proposes that members of different immigrant groups may follow different paths and participate in different social arenas (Nuñez, 2004). This is in contrast to the linear or "straight line" process of assimilation described by previous scholars in which all immigrant groups were believed to follow the same path towards possessing economic and social characteristics like those of the mainstream culture (Nuñez, 2004). The theory of segmented assimilation sees the social capital of the immigrant culture as a critical factor in the process of assimilation (Qian & Wong, 2001). In fact, it has been shown that when living in a disadvantaged community, immigrants fare better when they do not fully assimilate (Xie, 2004). Gibson's study of Sikh Indian immigrants in an American high school supports this claim. As we will see, the unassimilated families in her study lived at or near the official poverty level and maintained many elements of their culture, yet proved to be academically successful (Gibson, 1988).

Also crucial to the process of assimilation is what Portes and Zhou (1993) refer to as "the context of reception" that immigrants encounter upon arrival. This context of reception is created by the host government's immigration policies, the general population's attitudes, beliefs, stereotypes, and prejudices about immigrants, and the qualities of the immigrant enclaves (Nuñez, 2004). This context of reception shapes how immigrants, especially the children of contemporary immigrants, become "incorporated into the system of stratification in the host society" and determines to what segments of society immigrants and their children will assimilate (Zhou, 1997, p. 975). For example, assimilation consists of several distinct dimensions – economic, social, cultural, and political; and assimilation in one area does not lead into nor indicate assimilation in another (Skerry, 2004).

Spatial assimilation theory is another offshoot of assimilation theory and has its basis in the immigrant enclave model, examining immigrant groups where members live in close proximity to one another (Miles & Hou, 2004). This theory has been criticized because the degree of segregation from non-Hispanic whites is often the standard by which assimilation of immigrants is measured (Wright, Ellis, & Parks, 2003). It is important to note however, that many such immigrant enclaves exist and often serve an economic purpose. Gibson discusses ethnic economic enclaves in relation to the Sikh Indian immigrants in her study. Their case, she explains, shows "how a strong ethnic enclave can help promote rapid economic self-sufficiency" (1988, p. 44). She goes on to claim that US immigration law supports the formation of immigrant enclaves by allowing visas to the spouses and family members of permanent residents. Since the time of her study, however, the rules of immigration have become stricter, and visas are not always given to family members of immigrants, even if they have been "naturalized" as US citizens. See the United States Immigration Support website at [www.usimmigrationsupport.org](http://www.usimmigrationsupport.org) and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services website at [www.uscis.gov](http://www.uscis.gov).

Immigrant enclaves serve a social purpose in addition to an economic purpose. Choosing to live in an enclave can be a way for immigrants to maintain their identity as members of their native culture. By living in an area where everyone understands their native language, linguistically assimilated immigrants can choose not to speak English in an effort to maintain that element of their culture in their own lives as well as in the lives of their children. Skerry, a scholar in the field of immigration studies, uses this example to explain how the assimilated can actually "deassimilate" (2004). Assimilation is not irreversible and "to be 'assimilated' is not to have arrived at some sociological steady state" (Skerry,

ry, 2004, p. 28). Skerry also claims that assimilation is not a neutral process but is filled with stress, competition, and conflict. Counter-intuitively, this conflict is actually caused by the *desegregation* of different immigrant ethnic groups rather than their segregation. Thus, enclaves can also serve as a way for some immigrants to avoid the conflict that accompanies assimilation.

To exemplify this point, Skerry cites political scientists Cain and Kiewiet, who propose that much of the conflict and tension associated with assimilation is due to the varying expectations of first-, second-, and third-generation immigrants (Skerry, 2004). It is Cain and Kiewiet's supposition that first-generation immigrants are generally satisfied because the opportunities presented to them in the US are comparatively better than those in the country from which they emigrated. Conversely, second- and third-generation immigrants are in discontent because they have not achieved full economic, social, cultural, and political assimilation. As noted earlier, the context of reception not only indicates to what segments of society first-generation immigrants will be incorporated, but also their children and their children's children (Portes, 2004). In Gibson's study, the Sikh Indians claimed that they came to the US for economic opportunities and because they have relatives already living here. Whether they felt satisfied as Cain and Kiewiet claim most first-generation immigrants do, is questionable since they did not achieve economic success, unlike most Asian Indian immigrants at the time of the study (Gibson, 1988). The Sikhs, however, did not want their second-generation children to reach full assimilation. They cautioned their children to withstand the peer pressure to conform, to maintain their distinct Sikh identity, and to grow as a part of the Sikh community. At the same time, they urged their children to adapt to school rules and adopt behaviors of academically successful non-immigrant or "American" students (Gibson, 1988).

Acculturation is defined as the process whereby the attitudes and behaviors of immigrants are modified as a result of contact with the host culture. Beginning in 1914, Park, a "melting pot theorist," created a three-stage model of acculturation (Padilla & Perez, 2003). Contact, he hypothesized, had to occur first. Then, as newcomers began to interact with the dominant group, they would learn to accommodate their culture. Finally, he believed, the immigrants would fully assimilate. He saw assimilation as a linear, progressive process that was irreversible (Padilla & Perez, 2003).

Since the time of Park's and other linear models that were based on the assumption that acculturation leads to a weakening of ethnic identity, the study of acculturation has grown to encompass new ideas. Two-dimensional models suggest that both the immigrant's native culture and the host's culture play important roles in the acculturation process. Using a two-dimensional model, Berry (1986) recognized that individuals have a choice in the acculturative process (Padilla & Perez, 2003). Like Park, he saw a contact phase as being necessary, but followed by possible conflict and then adaptation (Torres, 1999). Berry identified four distinct varieties of adaptation as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

**Table 1: Four varieties of adaptation** (Adapted from Berry, 1986; *Acculturation*, 2002)

Type of Adaptation	Definition
Assimilation	Movement toward dominant culture
Integration	Synthesis of two cultures
Rejection	Reaffirmation of traditional culture
Deculturation/Marginalization	Alienation from both cultures

While linear and two-dimensional models of acculturation are still used, new multidimensional models have come to the forefront. Sodowsky and Plake (1991) have defined three dimensions of acculturation: assimilation, biculturalism (belonging to two different cultures at once), and observance of traditionality (rejecting the dominant culture in favor of the native culture). Research has shown that there are changing patterns of acculturation over three generations of immigrants. First generation immigrants most often remain separatist and have a strong identity with their native culture. The second generation adopts more elements from and more closely approximates the host culture. Surprisingly, the third generation shows a renewed interest in ethnic customs, values, and behaviors (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1983).

This is where the idea of accommodation plays into Gibson's theory. Initially proposed by Piaget (1972), accommodation is part of the adaptation process where immigrants react to new information



and experiences by altering their existing schemas or ideas. New schemas may also be developed during this process. By “accommodating” or making room in their concept of identity to learn the behaviors and skills of the majority group, the Sikh students became successful. Thus, the students did not reject their minority-group identity and culture, but were able to successfully participate in both the new cultural system and the old (Gibson, 1988). They did not see fully participating in the classroom and competing for academic success as compromising their identity. Indeed, they incorporated school learning into their identity through acculturation. The Sikh Indian immigrant students were academically successful because they adapted or “accommodated” values of the United States school culture into their identity without assimilating.

Resiliency theory plays into the idea of accommodation without assimilation. Benard (2004), who has been at the forefront of resiliency theory, explains that all people possess resiliency or the ability to overcome hardships during their development. In fact, she explains that those children whom researchers place “at risk” for having problems later in life, generally “overcome adversity and achieve good developmental outcomes” (Rutter, 1987, 2000 cited in Benard, 2004, p. 7). She cites social competence, problem-solving, autonomy, and sense of purpose as personal strengths that are manifestations of resilience in children. The strategies used by the Sikh Indians in Gibson’s study would fall under what Benard defines as autonomy. One attribute of autonomy, resistance strategy, was shown to be employed by academically successful Latino and African American students in a study by Mehan, Hubbard, and Villanueva (1994). In their article, Mehan and his colleagues expand on Gibson’s work with voluntary minorities (recent immigrants) by demonstrating that involuntary minorities (encapsulated minorities) can also adopt the strategy of accommodating without assimilating (Mehan et al., 1994). The African American and Latino students in the study negotiated between the culture of the school and the culture of the home by creating dual identities. They “developed strategies for managing an academic identity at school and a neighborhood identity among friends at home” (Mehan et al., 1994, p. 92).

Those whom we term “ethnic” immigrants are the central focus of research on immigration and assimilation today. What must be remembered for the purpose of this study is that my European sisters-in-law share white privilege with mainstream US society. Thus, while they may share cultural and language issues with other immigrant groups, they do not face racial discrimination as do Latinos, Asians, and other immigrants whose phenotypic characteristics allow them to be more easily segregated. Moreover, both of my sisters-in-law immigrated alone to partner with men who are members of the mainstream US culture, thus they were able to integrate quickly and were in a position to move towards assimilation if they wished.

In this study, we will see how my German sister-in-law, Petra, exemplifies accommodation without assimilation by maintaining her German culture and values for herself and her children while simultaneously choosing to adopt some aspects of US culture. My Polish sister-in-law, Kasia, on the other hand, could be better explained through assimilation theory because she has retained few elements of her Polish culture in her push to assimilate and have her children be fully “American.”

## Research Design

My approach to this study is both ethnographic and phenomenological. While ethnographies require long-term immersion or participant observation, in an attempt to “understand the culture of people or places,” phenomenological studies are smaller in scope and require extensive interaction with a small number of people in order to understand their life experiences (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p.94). I have known and been able to informally observe my sisters-in-law for about a decade each. While I have spent many days and even nights in their houses, they have spent an equal amount of time in mine. I have also been to Germany three times and Poland once, where I was introduced to their families and native culture. Thus, although I did not perform fieldwork as a participant observer, I am able to provide some ethnographic data.

As we will see, during my research, I was seen as a sister-in-law by Petra and Kasia, as a sister by my brothers, and as “Auntie Gail” by my nephews and niece. While my sisters-in-law were fully aware of my intentions and signed consent forms, they did not treat me as a researcher because I am so close to them. Plus, my relationship as a family member with them up until the time of my research gave me a certain amount of perspective that I could not possess if I was not related to them. I found

a role that offers advantages because it is naturally-occurring and spans years as well as a variety of settings (Adler & Adler, 1996).

From a postmodern perspective, Rist, author of the article, "On What We Know (Or Think We Do): Gatekeeping and the Social Control of Knowledge (1981)," explains that all reality is socially constructed. He cautions researchers to "not come into the setting with an elaborate theoretical framework that is then superimposed on what is observed" (p. 265). If this occurs, the "reality" that is "observed" may be skewed by the researcher's own "values, perceptions, and understandings about the world" (Rist, 1981, p. 264). Thus, while my long-standing relationships and close ties to the participants in this study help to frame what I formally observed and learned from the interviews, I also realize the limitations of my study. I am so close that it is impossible to not have preconceived notions about my own family members. In this study, I try to be as neutral as possible and refrain from judgment. For the purpose of this study, I performed two lengthy interviews and formally observed both Petra and Kasia in an effort to understand their experiences with immigration and assimilation.

## Analysis of Findings

Conducting research in Gary and Kasia's house and actually intending to observe elements of culture, my eyes and ears were sharpened. The mantle over the fireplace holds several reminders of Kasia's native land and a large, framed oil painting of Krakow hangs on the wall above. The most poignant piece on the mantle, however, was a statue of two dolls in traditional Polish clothing - a boy and a girl - holding American flags. Kasia had brought these dolls home from Poland and attached the American flags. My prior knowledge about Kasia came into play here because I have a photograph of her and Gary holding American flags in 2001, when she became a US citizen. These dolls, holding their American flags, are meaningful to Kasia because she identifies herself as both Polish and American. Even though she came here from Poland, she proudly holds the American flag. She told me, "I'm proud to be American. I want to feel this way. I wanted to belong somewhere... I want to be part of this big country."

In their article, "Immigrant Aspirations (1978), Portes, McLeod, and Parker explain that certain aspects of an immigrant's identity have "been hypothesized to affect the level of social-psychological assimilation" (p. 244). Thus, personality and choice do play a role in how much one feels she has assimilated. Kasia feels like she is American now and Petra still feels like she is German.

When I asked Kasia her feelings about being an immigrant she laughed and said that the word "immigrant" makes it sound like she "came with a bunch of people on a boat." As far as terminology, she wasn't sure whether she would identify herself as Polish-American or as American. While she feels like she is an American, she knows that when people hear her accent and ask her "what she is," they are not looking for the answer "American," thus she uses the hyphenated term, "Polish-American." She does not identify herself as simply Polish and explained:

*I think it's a slap in the face to insist that I am Polish after I've lived in this country for the past seven years. That's as if to say that I do not want anything to do with the United States....*

She says, "I'm like a double-citizen for now. Probably a few years from now I'm just going to say, 'I'm American and came here as a young girl.'" Petra, on the other hand, still identifies herself as German. She explained, "It's more, it's more an inside feeling, you know. I've been born German. I am German. I grew up there. It's my country."

There are other factors that play into one's level of assimilation. As aforementioned, Petra and Kasia possess phenotypic characteristics that allowed them to be received in a more favorable context than most non-white immigrants. Being blonde-haired and fair-skinned, neither one felt as though she had been discriminated against because of her immigrant status. In addition to saying how "cute" the accent was, people would also try to create social ties with them through their own ethnicity. Kasia told me that when people meet her, they first try to guess where she is from.

The second thing they do is they try to find any Polish phrases they ever heard. Everyone has some grandmother or distant cousin and they seem very proud. The third thing they bring up is every kind of food they know that is Polish.

Petra has had very similar experiences. She said that people treat her even more pleasantly when they learn that she is from Germany. She explained that,

*In the beginning, it sometimes really disappointed me because someone would say, "Oh, I'm German, too" and I'm like "Oh, where you from?" "Oh, it's just my great, great, great, great, great grand." And... I thought she might speak German and be German. ... It upset me because they claim, "I am German." You're not really German; you're American.*

Thus, Kasia and Petra do not have trouble interacting with people on a social level because many mainstream Americans are proud of their ancestral European roots. However, while both are married to American men, their social networks outside the home are different. Kasia's friends are all mainstream Americans with whom she communicates in English and met at her job as a computer programmer. They know her as "Kate Rollins," which is her "professional name." She says that with an American name, people do not concentrate on where she is from, but rather, on the work she produces.

Petra, on the other hand, who hyphenates her name in order to maintain her German surname, has a very close network of female friends who are also German immigrants. While some of the women have German husbands, others like her, are married to American men. Once a month, all of the women get together, with their husbands, for what they call "German Night Out." Petra says that she has "a much easier time bonding with the Germans than bonding with the Americans." She's not sure if it's because of Americans' hectic schedules and busy lifestyles or other differences in culture. While my status as sister-in-law has allowed me to meet most of Petra's German friends at parties and even attend one of the German Night Out get-togethers, I never noticed a difference in conversational style because they were speaking to me in English and were probably more guarded than if they were speaking amongst themselves in their native language. Petra explained that when they are alone together, they reminisce about life back in Germany as well as discuss cultural differences. Thus, while both Petra and Kasia do not have difficulty in interacting with mainstream Americans, Kasia chooses to socially assimilate and Petra generally interacts with other German immigrants.

As mentioned earlier, assimilation is multidimensional and another factor affecting assimilation that was apparent in the interviews was economics. First, there is the issue of employment. Petra discussed that when she was in Germany, she felt confident with her high school education and worked at a telephone company where she earned a decent salary. She said that if something were to happen to Paul, she would have to move back to Germany with the children because she cannot make good money in the US. As mentioned earlier, immigrant enclaves serve a social and economic purpose. Because Petra is living in a town that is mostly mainstream American, she has created a network of friends from her native country, but feels economically helpless if it weren't for her husband's income. Kasia, on the other hand, completed a master's degree in English at a university in Poland before immigrating to the US. Upon her arrival, she worked in a small grocery store and took computer classes. Now she works as a programmer at the same company as Gary and makes a high salary.

A major factor in assimilation for Petra and Kasia that is related to education and employment is money and the kind of houses they live in. Paul and Petra live in a modest house in Andover, a wealthy suburban Massachusetts town. Petra explains that she has become much more quiet and shy than she used to be.

*Part of it, I think, is because so many more people around me here are more educated and because Americans put such big value on their college degree. And I'm living in a town where there's lots of rich people living here and I kind of sometimes don't feel like I really fit in.*

Before becoming involved with her German friends, Petra was in Mother's Group, where she felt inadequate. Since each of the mothers hosted one meeting in their house, Petra was able to see how all of the other women in the group lived. She explained, "They were all above me, except one... [and that woman] seems to be really intimidated by [the other women's wealth, too]." Petra said that she is tired of feeling like "the little poor thing."

*I'd rather be with people that are more the same level kind of. I think I'd feel more comfortable. But I don't mind if you have a few that have more and a few that have less. That's okay. But, it's just here, I mean, you've grown up with it. You see these huge houses and they've just got everything. They're just not in your level. You can't talk to them about cleaning your windows because [they say], "Oh, I just hire someone."*

Thus, as far as economics, Petra does not feel as though she can assimilate in the town where she is currently living. Thus, Cain and Kiewiet's claim that first-generation immigrants are generally satisfied

does not hold true for Petra. The economic opportunities were plentiful in Germany, while here, she worked for a short time translating technical manuals, but made so little money that it was not worth her while.

Kasia, on the other hand, grew up in Poland while it was under the reign of communism. She feels appreciative of all the opportunities she has had in the US and has assimilated economically. She and Gary have just moved to a “McMansion” in the affluent, seacoast town of Newburyport, Massachusetts. When asking Kasia about how her life would be different if she were not living there, she replied,

*It all depends on the money... can you afford [a nice house] or can you not afford it? If you move to a ...different town and different school system and different neighbors, your culture suddenly changes.*

Kasia also explained that she feels more confident when she can tell people that she is a software developer and lives in a new house in Newburyport.

A third dimension of assimilation brought to light through the interviews is that of culture, alluded to in Kasia’s quote about money and being able to afford to live in a nice town. I asked Petra what culture means to her and she said it’s “different countries, different habits, different behaviors, and different things people believe in.” At the same time, she explained, “Americans and Germans these days aren’t so much different anymore” because they watch the same movies, there are more big supermarkets, and the larger stores no longer close for lunch.” One difference, however, that was noticeable at the time of the interview was the World Series. Petra said that her son, Chris...

*...was all excited about the Red Sox game. Then, of course, he asks me, “Who do you want to win- the Red Sox or the Yankees?” And I’m trying to tell him I’m not really into sports and I, I didn’t grow up in this country so I’m not even familiar with the difference between the Yankees and the Red Sox. And then, of course, I have to listen to him telling me, “Mama, you don’t know much.” And I’m trying to tell him what the sports in Germany are like - the soccer, the Formula One... handball, and tennis.*

Petra spends a good deal of time maintaining elements of her culture not only for herself, but to educate her children about their German heritage. Language is an important signifier of culture and as we already saw, Petra maintains a network of German friends so that she can continue to speak German on a regular basis. She also raised Chris and Hannah to speak German before teaching them English. In fact, she chose the names Christopher and Hannah because they are spelled and pronounced the same in German. Also, my parents now go by the names “Oma and Opa” rather than “Grandmother and Grandfather.” These German appellations were assigned before Chris and Hannah spoke English and they stuck. Now that Chris is in elementary school and Hannah is in preschool, Petra reads them books in German to help them maintain the language. Chris also attends German school after school once a week so that he can learn to read and write in German.

Another aspect of German culture that Petra maintains is the food. Every time she travels to Germany or a relative visits, we all get bags of German chocolate. Petra also makes homemade dishes from Germany on a regular basis. We often have Black Forest cakes at family parties and traditional German Christmas cookies. On the day I observed her at home, she was having the kids help her to make a German noodle called “spaetzle.” She had brought the noodle press here from Germany and serves the noodles with lunch or dinner on occasion. Chris already recognizes the difference between foods. For example he will say, “Oma Reinhilde [Petra’s mother] knows how to make that. Oma Toni [my mother] doesn’t.”

Petra’s German friends have children who play with Chris and Hannah and they sometimes communicate with one another in German. For the most part, however, Chris and Hannah prefer to speak English. Paul communicates with them in English, as does the rest of the family and of course, their peers and teachers in school. For six weeks every summer, Petra brings the children to Germany to visit with her family. There, they are able to interact and talk with all of their family members and really become a part of the German culture. This past year, Chris attended several weeks in a first grade German class and loved it. While Petra exhibits accommodation without assimilation, being able to function in both German and American settings, she is raising her children to do the same. She knows that their hearts are in America and that they will probably identify themselves as Americans one day, but she has made them official citizens of both the United States and Germany and hopes that they hold Germany and their German culture close to their hearts as well.

When I asked Kasia what she thought of culture, she said that it is

*a way of living. It's the values people cherish and that guide them through life and inform their choices. [It is also] the tradition and... beliefs people have and which influence how they live. That's culture.*

Unlike Petra, however, Kasia does not feel that she cannot assimilate and is not all too concerned about maintaining her native language and culture. Although she recognizes that she still possesses many elements of Polish culture such as praying and counting in Polish and being able to speak the language, she does not wish to cook Polish food or to teach her sons Polish unless they specifically ask her to do so when they are older. She feels that it is more important for her children to develop socially than to speak two languages at such a young age. She said that she is not teaching Luke, her two-and-a-half year-old son, Polish because he can learn it at any age and will be more successful if he is fluent in English early on.

*But now that he doesn't have a choice, I want him to assimilate and be successful and... he doesn't have a burning need to speak Polish right now since he's not living there and I don't intend to move in there.*

Any Polish that Luke learns is incidental. For example, Kasia's mother, Lusia, teaches Luke several what Kasia calls, "Survival Polish Words." And Kasia sometimes sings to Luke in Polish.

*Actually, I do sing him some lullabies in Polish because some of them are cute. It's not to teach him language just because you know, usually some lullabies are things you remember. Somebody sang them to you.*

In other words, if Kasia maintains cultural elements for Luke, it is just by chance whereas Petra makes a specific point of teaching her children about her culture.

Although we always get a full supply of *Milka* chocolate when Kasia goes to Poland or a family member visits her, Kasia has no desire to cook Polish food at home. She says that she likes Polish food, but it's more of "a party thing" because it is not healthy and requires too many fattening ingredients. Also, it takes too long to bake and she would rather spend her "time reading books than cooking pirogue."

Kasia wants her children to see Polish culture as something that is "exotic and fun." When I asked her how she would identify Luke, she said,

*He's not Polish. My son is not Polish. He's American. His father is American and he lives here. I want him to feel like he belongs somewhere and that is here - in America. I don't want two cultures to be competing. I want Luke to feel like he's American, but also know a little bit about Poland. I feel that my children should not have to choose between two cultures. They should feel like they belong to one and have an appreciation of the other.*

Thus, while Petra struggles to maintain elements of her German culture and give her children the ability to function in both cultures, Kasia has assimilated herself and wants her sons to be fully American, with some understanding of Polish culture.

## Conclusion

Kasia has worked towards assimilation and has reached economic, social, and cultural assimilation. Petra, on the other hand, has resisted assimilation and has opted for accommodation without assimilation. She maintains social networks that allow her to be more comfortable and maintains aspects of German culture, including language, in an effort to raise her children as bicultural individuals.

This difference between these two European immigrants exemplifies the idea that assimilation is not only about the context of reception. It occurs on an individual basis and with my sisters-in-law, it was dependent upon their individual personalities – both their innermost feelings about fitting-in as well as their well thought-out intentions about how to live and raise their children. Their individual circumstances as English-speaking, white women, who are married to American men is obviously not transferable to many immigrant groups. Non-white immigrants arrive to a different set of circumstances and

have less choice concerning assimilation or accommodation without assimilation. What we can take away from this study is that it is important to take into account that each individual is different. Even studying individuals on a group basis is inaccurate, for two women from Europe who share many of the same characteristics are experiencing their lives in the US differently and the way in which their children construct their identities and experience life will be different as a consequence.

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