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GEOG 310

21 November, 2019

Children of Immigrants: An Examination of Academic Literature Concerning the Long-Term Assimilation and Wellbeing of Today's Immigrant Families

I. Overview and Summary

Since the 1960's, America has seen dramatic changes to the socioeconomic and ethnic makeup of its immigrant population. With these changes, the academic discourse concerning the long-term assimilation and wellbeing of the families of these immigrants has changed in turn; new theories have been crafted, and new predictions have been made. This paper intends to analyze the discourse around these changes, determine the differences, and hypothesize how future generations of immigrant families may fare.

As immigrant families assimilate into American society in large quantities, it is important that the scientific community assess both the effects of American society on immigrants, and the effects of immigrants on American society and its values. The article "When White Is Just Alright: How Immigrants Redefine Achievement and Reconfigure the Ethnoracial Hierarchy" by Tomás R. Jiménez and Adam L. Horowitz does just that by focusing on long-term, multigenerational assimilation of immigrant families into the American ethnoracial class structure, as well as how growing communities of immigrant families help to shape this class structure. Due to the cultural differences these immigrant families bring from their respective homelands, these authors argue that the achievements accomplished by individuals cannot be

measured by comparing them to the achievements of whites, and that doing so reinforces unfair and racist stereotypes of non-whites as underachieving and lazy. They also contend that more scholarly attention should be dedicated to the effects that immigrant communities have on the existing American ethnoracial strata, not just on the effects that the ethnoracial strata has on immigrant communities. To support these points, Jiménez and Horowitz conducted a study in Cupertino, California, a city with a large, high-skilled Asian population. This study revealed that the social structure and value of achievement in Cupertino, especially in schools, have been defined by the large Asian community there; academic and economic success of individuals is compared to Asians instead of whites. The authors conclude from these findings that large-scale and long-term immigration can dramatically change the social strata and ethnographic encoding of achievement and value.

While research concerning Asian immigrant communities has provided considerable insight into the assimilation process, immigrants from Latin America and Mexico are another ethnic group that deserve scrutiny. The study "Second-Generation Decline or Advantage? Latino Assimilation in the Aftermath of the Great Recession" by Van C. Tran and Nicol M. Valdez addresses this by first summarizing the major trends and changes in Latino immigration and settlement in the United States in the recent era of immigration. Specifically, they describe how the Latino population has grown to be the largest minority in America, the emergence of second-generation Latinos as a significant adult demographic, how the socioeconomic status of Latino immigrants and immigrant families has become more diverse, and the shift of immigrant destinations from traditional gateway cities to new emerging areas. The authors then focus on evaluating how the Latino immigration population has fared economically with these recent

shifts, especially in the wake of the 2008 recession. They conduct a study using statistical analysis to assess these issues, and find that there are significant differences across the Latino population in response to these changes. Of the different Latin American groups represented in their study, Mexicans—and especially undocumented Mexicans—fared the worst in the wake of the financial crisis and are showing the least economic growth across generations, while other groups like Cubans are showing significant growth and resilience to financial crises. The authors note that part of this discrepancy may be due to how racialized the Mexican population tends to be in America. Finally, they find that there are signs of stagnation in economic mobility in third and higher generations, and there is no notable economic benefit for immigrants choosing to settle in new destinations instead of traditional gateways.

The paper "Becoming Ethnic or Becoming American? Reflecting on the Divergent Pathways to Social Mobility and Assimilation among the New Second Generation" by Min Zhou and Jennifer Lee also examines the mobility and assimilation process of the children of immigrants, as well as analyzing how second-generation immigrants self-identify and how their communities shape that identity. The authors also critique and question some of the processes and concepts that are common in the immigration research field, arguing that complex topics like "assimilation", "success", and "identity" cannot be easily defined and measured, and each have different meanings and contexts for different people; therefore, each concept deserves further scrutiny and study. They support their arguments with personal testimony from second-generation immigrants, highlighting the differences between each person's struggle with assimilation, self-identity, and success, as well as conventional understanding of these topics.

A crucial aspect of the assimilation process is the effect that it has on the family and community surrounding and supporting those that assimilate. The article “Segmented Assimilation and the Socio-Economic Integration of Chinese Immigrant Children in the USA”, also by Min Zhou, addresses this aspect by focusing on the community and family characteristics of the children of Chinese immigrants adjusting to life in America. According to Zhou, the place of Chinese American families in society has shifted dramatically since 1965, when the American government began allowing Chinese immigrants to live and work more freely here. Before 1965, immigrant families from China were almost entirely dependent on established communities in cities—known colloquially as Chinatowns—to a degree of separation from American society that the adoption of American culture was extremely rare. After this separation ended, however, Chinese American communities and families faced new problems as they began to adjust to the American lifestyle. The strict, academic-success-focused parenting style with which many adults of the time were raised began to conflict with the more relaxed nature of American culture, causing conflicts between children and parents. At the same time, many families saw comprehensive role reversals, as children became English-language interpreters for their parents and, therefore, took on some family responsibility. Zhou goes on to describe how Chinese Americans have managed to integrate into American culture by embracing their ethnicity, with the help of Chinese schools, and maintained their close-knit communities to influence American culture itself.

These studies, along with several others providing context and further research, offer an informative look into the academic discussion of long-term immigrant assimilation in America and an idea of what the future of the children of American immigrants may hold.

II. Scholarly Predictions of Immigrant Assimilation and Wellbeing

These papers, while all part of the same discussion, focus on different aspects of the assimilation process and the long-term prosperity of immigrant communities. A common thread throughout this selection of articles, however, is the emphasis on the complex nature of the topic. Two compare their findings and conclusions to the predictions of the spatial assimilation model (Alba et al. 1999; Brown 2007), arguing for its expansion or replacement with a more enhanced model. Such a model, segmented assimilation (Portes and Zhou, 1993), is mentioned in a vast amount of scholarly discourse since its proposal (e.g. Jiménez and Horowitz 2013, Tran and Valdez 2017, Zhou and Lee 2007, Zhou 2014).

These articles, as well as the rest of the selections, seem to agree that the spatial assimilation model proposed by Douglas Massey in 1985 (Alba et al. 1999) is inadequate for describing the trends of today's immigrant populations. The Mexican immigrant population, for instance, is often considered to be an example of the flaws in spatial assimilation theory; despite their proximity to both cities and suburbs, Mexican immigrant families have proven to be slow (Brown, 2007) or unable (Tran and Valdez, 2017) to assimilate into American society and move out of ethnic enclaves, due in large part to their origin and destinations. This phenomenon is accounted for, however, by segmented assimilation theory, which considers national origin and destination areas to be factors in assimilation.

The Asian American population, on the other hand, is considered by these authors to be an example in favor of segmented assimilation on the opposite side of the socioeconomic scale. Whereas Mexican immigrants tend to work in lower-earning professions and have a lower

annual income (Alba et al. 1999), immigrants from Asia tend to be high-skilled and have distinct socioeconomic advantages, allowing them to move directly into suburbs and avoid the roadblocks to assimilation that the Mexican population faces (Alba et al. 1999; Zhou 2014). However, due to multiple factors including civic ostracism (Kim, 1999), a struggle with personal identity (Jiménez and Horowitz 2013), and a desire to retain ethnic culture and connections (Zhou 2014), many Asian American communities have elected to selectively assimilate, adopting certain aspects of American society while remaining distinct and independent (Portes and Zhou 1993; Zhou, 2014). By presenting these conclusions, these authors indicate that they believe that segmented immigration, or one of its variants, is the most correct and all-encompassing theory.

In addition to assimilation, this selection of articles is also concerned with the long-term economic and social prosperity of immigrant communities and populations. For the most part, these articles find reasons to be optimistic for second-generation immigrants; for instance, while the results do vary by national origin, Tran and Valdez (2017) present evidence supporting the children of Latino immigrants' abilities to advance beyond their parents' generation in wealth and status. Asian immigrant families, too, are believed by these authors to have positive economic and social trajectories, especially with the help of their established, prosperous, and politically powerful ethnic communities (Zhou and Lee 2007). The success of these immigrant groups, according to Tran and Valdez (2017), is dependent on national origin and socioeconomic status upon entering the country, while the area in which the immigrant families settle, notably, seems to have little bearing on their chance of success. However, there is evidence that, for the third generation of immigrant families onward, socioeconomic gains over the previous generation are limited (Brown 2007, Tran and Valdez 2017); this indicates that there may be a

ceiling on the social, political, and economic power these immigrant groups can attain below that of the white majority. For the most part, however, these articles show that the scientific community focused on the long-term success of immigrant families believes that the future looks bright for successive generations of immigrant families, provided that the observed trends are allowed to continue.

III. My Own Predictions of Immigrant Assimilation and Wellbeing

Based on these readings and the material presented in class, I am cautiously optimistic about the future for today's immigrant families. The results found by Tran and Valdez (2017) are reassuring, as it shows that immigrant families are able to both grow in socioeconomic status and weather severe financial catastrophes, and the power of ethnic communities demonstrated in these articles (Portes and Zhou 1993; Zhou 2014) shows that immigrant families can achieve success and stability without fully assimilating into American society. If the trends presented in these papers continue, I expect that future descendants of today's immigration will find stability, either within American society or clustered in ethnic communities. A large presence of an immigrant community in an area has been seen to occasionally be met with respect and tolerance (Brown, 2007), showing that, in at least some areas, immigrants may be able to integrate socially instead of economically. Some groups may be faced with more challenges than others; Mexican Americans already face intense discrimination and racialization (Tran and Valdez 2017; Zhou and Lee 2007; Brown 2007), which I do not expect to change, and Asian Americans are often considered "too foreign" to be truly American due to civic ostracism (Kim, 1999). These groups may face low economic mobility and difficulty being considered American, respectively; however, if these groups continue to grow in political power and influence, they may have a

chance to shape American society to more easily accommodate them. On the whole, I expect immigrant groups to find some way to live in, or even shape, American society and culture, and to improve their families' wealth and status in the process.

IV. References

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