Immigrants Question Idea of Assimilation

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Body

Night is falling on South Omaha, and Maria Jacinto is patting tortillas for the evening meal in the kitchen of the small house she shares with her husband and five children. Like many others in her neighborhood, where most of the residents are Mexican ***immigrants***, the Jacinto household mixes the old country with the new.

As Jacinto, who speaks only Spanish, stresses a need to maintain the family's Mexican heritage, her eldest son, a bilingual 11-year-old who wears a San Francisco 49ers jacket and has a paper route, comes in and joins his brothers and sisters in the living room to watch "The Simpsons."

Jacinto became a U.S. citizen last April, but she does not feel like an American. In fact, she seems resistant to the ***idea*** of ***assimilating*** into U.S. society.

"I think I'm still a Mexican," she says. "When my skin turns white and my hair turns blond, then I'll be an American."

In many ways, the experiences of the Jacinto family are typical of the gradual process of ***assimilation*** that has pulled generations of ***immigrants*** into the American mainstream. That process is nothing new to Omaha, which drew waves of Czech, German and Irish ***immigrants*** early this century.

But in the current immigration wave, something markedly different is happening here in the middle of the great American "melting pot."

Not only are the demographics of the United States changing in profound and unprecedented ways, but so too are the very notions of ***assimilation*** and the melting pot that have been articles of faith in the American self-image for generations.

E Pluribus Unum (From Many, One) remains the national motto, but there no longer seems to be a consensus about what that should mean.

There is a sense that, especially as ***immigrant*** populations reach a critical mass in many communities, it is no longer the melting pot that is transforming them, but they who are transforming American society.

American culture remains a powerful force -- for better or worse -- that influences people both here and around the world in countless ways. But several factors have combined in recent years to allow ***immigrants*** to resist, if they choose, the Americanization that had once been considered irresistible.

In fact, the very concept of ***assimilation*** is being called into ***question*** as never before. Some sociologists argue that the melting pot often means little more than "Anglo conformity" and that ***assimilation*** is not always a positive experience -- for either society or the ***immigrants*** themselves. And with today's emphasis on diversity and ethnicity, it has become easier than ever for ***immigrants*** to avoid the melting pot entirely. Even the metaphor itself is changing, having fallen out of fashion completely with many immigration advocacy and ethnic groups. They prefer such terms as the "salad bowl" and the "mosaic," metaphors that convey more of a sense of separateness in describing this nation of ***immigrants***.

"It's difficult to adapt to the culture here," said Maria Jacinto, 32, who moved to the United States 10 years ago with her husband, Aristeo Jacinto, 36. "In the Hispanic tradition, the family comes first, not money. It's important for our children not to be influenced too much by the gueros," she said, using a term that means "blondies" but that she employs generally in reference to Americans. "I don't want my children to be influenced by immoral things."

Over the blare of the television in the next room, she asked, "Not all families here are like the Simpsons, are they?"

Among socially conservative families such as the Jacintos, who initially moved to California from their village in Mexico's Guanajuato state, then migrated here in 1988 to find jobs in the meatpacking industry, bad influences are a constant concern. They see their children ***assimilating***, but often to the worst aspects of American culture.

Her concerns reflect some of the complexities and ambivalence that mark the ***assimilation*** process these days. ***Immigrants*** such as the Jacintos are here to stay but remain wary of their adoptive country. According to sociologists, they are right to be concerned.

"If ***assimilation*** is a learning process, it involves learning good things and bad things," said Ruben G. Rumbaut, a sociology professor at Michigan State University. "It doesn't always lead to something better."

At work, not only in Omaha but in ***immigrant*** communities across the country, is a process often referred to as "segmented" ***assimilation***, in which ***immigrants*** follow different paths to incorporation in U.S. society. These range from the classic American ideal of blending into the vast middle class, to a "downward ***assimilation***" into an adversarial underclass, to a buffered integration into "***immigrant*** enclaves." Sometimes, members of the same family end up taking sharply divergent paths, especially children and their parents.

The ambivalence of ***assimilation*** can cut both ways. Many native-born Americans also seem to harbor mixed feelings about the process. As a nation, the United States increasingly promotes diversity, but there are underlying concerns that the more emphasis there is on the factors that set people apart, the more likely that society will end up divided.

With Hispanics, especially Mexicans, accounting for an increasing proportion of U.S. population growth, it is this group, more than any other, that is redefining the melting pot.

Hispanics now have overtaken blacks as the largest minority group in Nebraska and will become the biggest minority in the country within the next seven years, according to Census Bureau projections. The nation's 29 million Hispanics, the great majority of them from Mexico, have thus become the main focus for ***questions*** about how the United States today is ***assimilating immigrants***, or how it is being transformed.

In many places, new Hispanic ***immigrants*** have tended to cluster in "niche" occupations, live in segregated neighborhoods and worship in separate churches. In this behavior they are much like previous groups of ***immigrants***. But their heavy concentrations in certain parts of the country, their relatively close proximity to their native lands and their sheer numbers give this wave of ***immigrants*** an unprecedented potential to change the way the melting pot traditionally has worked.

Never before have so many ***immigrants*** come from a single country -- Mexico -- or from a single linguistic source -- Spanish-speaking Latin America. Since 1970, more than half of the estimated 20 million foreign-born people who have settled in the United States, legally and illegally, have been Spanish speakers.

Besides sheer numbers, several factors combine to make this influx unprecedented in the history of American immigration. This is the first time that such large numbers of people are immigrating from a contiguous country. And since most have flowed into relatively few states, congregating heavily in the American Southwest, Mexican Americans have the capacity to develop much greater cohesion than previous ***immigrant*** groups. Today Hispanics, mostly of Mexican origin, make up 31 percent of the population of California and 28 percent of the population of Texas.

In effect, that allows Mexican Americans to "perpetuate themselves as a separate community and even strengthen their sense of separateness if they chose to, or felt compelled to," said David M. Kennedy, a professor of American history at Stanford University.

To be sure, ***assimilation*** today often follows the same pattern that it has for generations. The children of ***immigrants***, especially those who were born in the United States or come here at a young age, tend to learn English quickly and adopt American habits. Often they end up serving as translators for their parents. Schools exert an important ***assimilating*** influence, as does America's consumer society.

But there are important differences in the way ***immigrants*** adapt these days, and the influences on them can be double-edged. Gaps in income, education and poverty levels between new ***immigrants*** and the native-born are widening, and many of the newcomers are becoming stuck in dead-end jobs with little upward mobility.

Previous waves of ***immigrants*** also arrived unskilled and poorly educated. What has changed, however, is the nature of the U.S. economy, which increasingly requires education and skills to assure an upward path.

Although the children of these low-income, poorly educated ***immigrants*** may grow up fluent in English, acquire more education than their parents and ***assimilate*** in other ways, research shows that "they will lag well behind other students, particularly in college attendance," said Georges Vernez, director of the Center for Research on Immigration Policy at the RAND Corp.

"Today, for instance, native-born Hispanic youths are 30 percent less likely to go on to college after high school and three times less likely to graduate from college than non-Hispanic white students," he told a House hearing last month.

Nationally, Hispanic youths are the most likely to abandon the classroom. Their dropout rate of 29.4 percent is more than double the rate for black Americans and four times higher than the rate for non-Hispanic whites.

Yet the statistics also show that the dropout rate for second-generation Hispanic students is higher than that for first-generation youths, suggesting that ***assimilation*** does not always work as intended.

Sociologist Rumbaut said his research has shown that the most disciplined, hardest-working and respectful students "tend to be the most recently arrived." They are the ones "who have not been here long enough to be Americanized into bad habits, into a Beavis and Butt-head perspective of the world."

Since the children of ***immigrants*** tend to adapt much faster than their parents, the result is often tension and divisions within families. ***Immigrants*** who arrive as adults to escape poverty tend to view their lives here as an improvement over what they left behind, but their children often compare their circumstances to those of other Americans and find themselves lacking. Some gravitate toward a growing gang culture that offers them an identity and an outlet for their alienation, according to researchers.

In Omaha, police, teachers and social workers attribute rising youth gang activity in part to an influx of Hispanic families from California. Ironically, many left California precisely to escape a violent gang subculture there but ended up spreading the infection.

"A number of families who moved from L.A. brought children who were already involved with gangs," said the Rev. Damian Zuerlein, the parish priest of the nearby Roman Catholic church, Our Lady of Guadalupe, which caters to the community's growing Mexican population.

Omaha now has an estimated 1,800 "hard-core" gang members, police say. Two main competing Hispanic gangs are believed to have several hundred members each.

And, as it is across the nation, the high school dropout rate among Hispanics is a growing concern here. In the 1995-96 school year, the most recent for which statistics are available, 12 percent of Hispanic students dropped out of Omaha public secondary schools, double the rate for non-Hispanic whites. According to Mario Remijio, a teacher at South High School here, many Hispanic teenagers drop out to get jobs under pressure from their parents.

In many cases, argues University of Nebraska sociologist Lourdes Gouveia, the problem is not a lack of ***assimilation*** to American culture, but too much of it.

"An attachment to one's home country, culture and language can be very positive" for ***immigrant*** children in U.S. schools, contends Gouveia. These attachments "help maintain a sense of identity and self-respect when the family drops in status," as often happens when foreigners immigrate. As a result, the Venezuelan-born Gouveia said, citing studies by Rumbaut and others, students who are the least "***assimilated***" often do better in school than other ***immigrants*** and sometimes top even the native born.

On the other hand, some critics contend, the United States should not be abandoning a concept -- the Melting Pot -- that has served the country well for generations, helping to maintain unity through two world wars. They worry that the traditional U.S. commitment to ***assimilation*** is breaking down from an incessant advance of "multiculturalism."

"On the whole, there is an American national identity that ***immigrants*** ought to be encouraged to ***assimilate*** into," said John J. Miller, author of a new book on the issue.

For all the concerns, the recent wave of immigration has brought some notable benefits to Omaha. The city is now home to about 20,000 Latinos, the vast majority of them concentrated in South Omaha. By all accounts, the influx has revived that part of the city. New businesses owned by Hispanics and other ***immigrants*** have sprouted up, lending an air of vibrancy to South Omaha's main street.

"Ten years ago, this area was dying," said the Rev. Zuerlein. "Stores were closing, and people were moving out."

The wave of immigration also has stirred new ethnic consciousness among longtime Latino residents, notably the ***assimilated*** descendants of Mexicans who came to Nebraska in the early part of this century to work on the railroad and harvest beets.

"When I was a kid, the Hispanics here all just about knew each other," said Virgil Armendariz, a Mexican American businessman who grew up in Omaha. "Now there are hundreds of families. . . . Until recently, we were pretty much invisible."

The influx has helped revive long-forgotten Mexican customs, he said, such as the special celebration of the quincean era, or 15th birthday. "People who were born here are starting to learn more about their culture," Armendariz said.

Next door to the Jacintos, Matt and Sharon Swanson are one of the few native-born families left in the neighborhood. They agree that the ***immigrant*** influx has "revitalized" the nearby main drag but say that gang activities, including drive-by shootings and occasional murders, have become a big problem.

"I see a lack of respect for other people's property," said Mickey Dalton, 50, a friend of the Swansons who lives nearby. The neighborhood is destined to turn even more Hispanic, with little prospect for ***assimilation***, he said.

"They're sticking to their own," Dalton said. "When the Czechs moved here, the big push was to learn English. You don't see that so much now. A lot of them don't want to learn English."

At the Guadalupe church recreation hall, several of the young Mexican ***immigrants*** who gather weekly say they want to learn the language but find it difficult because they came here in their teens or early twenties and

immediately entered a Spanish-speaking milieu. Some say their biggest problems come from Mexican Americans, known as Chicanos, who mock their attempts to speak English.

"I want to join the U.S. Army or Air Force, but because of the language, I can't," said Jose Fernandez, a lean 22-year-old from Guadalajara who briefly attended high school here before dropping out.

"When I'm around Chicanos, I feel ashamed to speak English," said Margaro Ponce, 23, who came to Omaha two years ago to join relatives. "Instead of helping you, they make fun of you," he said in Spanish.

Guillermina Becerra, 22, arrived nearly seven years ago and spent three years at South High, where she took courses in English as a second language. But she made no American friends and never became fluent. "When I went to other classes, I never spoke with anyone," she said. "When I spoke English, I think some people were laughing."

Becerra has four brothers -- one of them a U.S. citizen -- and two sisters here but is not a legal resident herself. She first entered the country with her sister-in-law's green card. She plans to stay in the United States because of greater "opportunities" here and hopes eventually to legalize her status and become a citizen.

But even if she does, she says, "I think I will still feel like a Mexican."

Graphic

Illustration, linda perlstein and laura stanton; Photo, william branigin for The Washington Post, America's Foreign-Born, Closer to Home 1920s Earlier this century, people came to the United States mostly from one continent -- Europe -- but they were by no means homogenous, ethnically or linguistically. In a time before people could easily phone, fly or fax home, it was not easy to retain ties to the motherland, and the need to ***assimilate*** into America was more compelling. Foreign-born Americans in 1920 by place of origin Europe 87% Canada 8% Asia 1% Latin America 4% Transplanted Europeans spoke at least 20 languages and came from as many countries. Germany 14% Italy 14 Russia 13 Great Britain 10 Poland 10 Ireland 9 Other 30 1990s Now, half of the country's foreign-born are from Latin America, most of them from Mexico. With their home countries a flight away and many speaking the same language, keeping a firm hold on one's ethnicity -- and in turn, keeping from total "Americanization" -- is easier. Foreign-born Americans in 1996 by place of origin Canada 3% Asia 27% Europe 17% Latin America 50% More than half the transplanted Latin Americans come from Mexico. Most speak Spanish, with some Portugese, French and English. Mexico 55% El Salvador 6 Other Central America 8 Cuba 6 Dominican Republic 4 Jamaica 4 Other Caribbean 6 South America 11 Americans born in Asia come from several countries and speak several languages. Philippines 18% China 12 India 12 Vietnam 11 Korea 8 Other 39 SOURCE: Census Bureau Above, a mural behind Omaha's Our Lady of Guadalupe Church is marred by Hispanic gang graffiti. Maria and Aristeo Jacinto, left, moved with their five children to Omaha from California to escape such influences and find better jobs.

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