A Fervent 'No' To Assimilation In New America

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Body

For Guilienne Audelin, a 15-year-old Haitian-American who attends a predominantly black high school in Miami, ***assimilation*** is a dirty word. It means joining the ranks of the disaffected in her inner-city neighborhood, she said, and being stamped as a "dummy" by a broader American society that she believes does not see beyond color. It means abandoning her immigrant parents' dreams for her future, and she simply refuses to do that.

"Nothing could stop me from trying to have a better life than we have now," she said.

The first broad study of the children of immigrants in 50 years debunks a longstanding assumption about the American immigrant experience: that ***assimilation*** is the only path to success for immigrants' children.

Today's immigrants, like Guilienne's parents, are most likely to settle in inner-city neighborhoods, where ***assimilation*** often means joining a world that is antagonistic to the American mainstream. But, according to the ***new*** study by Johns Hopkins University, many prove successful by remaining in their insular ethnic communities and shutting out the apathy around them.

"This situation stands the cultural blueprint for the advancement of immigrant groups in American society on its head," said Alejandro Portes, the Johns Hopkins sociology professor who directed the study.

But the findings do not indicate that immigrants' children, like Guilienne, are growing up "un-American," attuned solely to the language and culture of their parents' homeland. In fact, the study found, most of them, while bilingual, prefer English to their parents' native language and speak it fluently, better than their parents' tongue. And most also hold on to the strong aspiration of social mobility through education that propelled earlier immigrants into the melting pot of American society.

Staying the Course

Guilienne (pronounced ghee-HYEN), for instance, is not daunted by the fact that her parents, a garbage collector and a nurse's assistant, have only eighth-grade educations. Neither are her dreams marred by the widespread poverty in her Little Haiti neighborhood, which many of her peers will not escape. Unlike some other Haitian-Americans, she has chosen to ignore the peer pressure to be cool, bored and indifferent, preferring to remain true to the immigrant values of her hard-working parents.

"I will stay in school as many years as they tell me I have to in order to become a judge," Guilienne said.

Nonetheless, she and today's other children of immigrants are far different from the earlier 20th-century immigrants' children, who felt they had to reject the Old World to get ahead in the ***New***. Today's children are predominantly Hispanic, Asian and Caribbean, facing racial barriers that did not exist for their European predecessors and economic barriers that threaten to condemn them to a swelling underclass.

Fifty years ago, the children of European immigrants were joining an expanding American industrial work force; today's second-generation Americans find their prospects for advancement in the working class limited.

The number of immigrants' children in the United States peaked in 1940 at roughly 28 million, but that number is expected to be surpassed any year now. In 1990, there were about 24.8 million immigrants' children, of whom about 7.7. million were born to immigrants who arrived after 1960.

Questioning Schoolchildren

Professor Portes, whose research was largely financed by the Mellon Foundation, collaborated with Florida International University in Miami and the University of California at San Diego to complete his study of immigrants' children. It is the first such study since Irving Child's work, "Italian or American? The Second Generation in Conflict," in 1943. Teams of interviewers questioned 5,000 children of immigrants in the eighth and ninth grades, primarily in Miami and San Diego, on subjects like language use, discrimination and patriotism.

Predictably, the answers reflected significant differences between nationalities and between Miami, where Hispanic immigrants increasingly dominate the political and business life, and San Diego, where anti-immigrant sentiment is considered high and power remains largely with a white elite.

For instance, 45 percent of the Miami children reported experiencing discrimination, as against 64 percent in San Diego. And in Miami, the 45 percent broke down to 66 percent for Haitian-American children, but only 29 percent for the Cuban-Americans attending predominantly Cuban-American private schools.

"We'd go into a high school where most of the immigrant children were black, and ask if they'd ever encountered discrimination, and you'd hear this loud, 'Pssh!', like, 'What a stupid question,' " said Lisandro Perez, a Florida International sociologist. "Then we'd go into a private Cuban school in Miami, and the concept of discrimination was so alien that students practically didn't understand the question."

Miguel Salvat, for instance, a 14-year-old Cuban-American, said he had never experienced prejudice and firmly believed that everyone in ***America*** has the same opportunities regardless of race or ethnicity.

But, in the same city, Guilienne said she often encountered discrimination. "In ***America***, they won't accept you for who you are," she said. "They look at the color of your skin, how you are dressed and how you look."

Speaking English

Although Miami is among the most bilingual cities in the country, 99 percent of the children interviewed there said they spoke English well or very well. And contrary to what many advocates of English-only and English-first laws might expect, 94 percent of the Cuban-American students said they preferred English to Spanish.

In San Diego, 90 percent of the immigrants' children said that they spoke English well, but 9 percent said they spoke it poorly. Among the latter especially were Mexican-Americans, with 14 percent saying they spoke English poorly, Vietnamese-Americans (19 percent) and Laotian-Americans (23 percent). About 65 percent of all children said they preferred English to their parents' native language.

The longer the children have lived in the United States, the better their English. "All the children are well on their way to being fluent English speakers, even, one could argue, on the way to monolingualism," Professor Portes said. "It is the parents' language, not English, that is endangered."

About 70 percent of Haitian-American and Filipino-American children barely speak their parents' native language, the study found. (Guilienne said she spoke Creole fluently but preferred "proper English.") On the other hand, it found that about 70 percent of the children of Spanish-speaking immigrants speak Spanish fluently.

Most of the children interviewed, particularly those in California, were reluctant to call themselves Americans. And few accepted the pan-ethnic labels Hispanic and Asian. Like Guilienne and Miguel, they preferred Cuban or Cuban-American, Haitian or Haitian-American, and so on.

"I am proud of my blood," Guilienne said.

Graphic

Photos: The longstanding assumption about the American immigrant experience that ***assimilation*** is the only path to success is questioned in a ***new*** study. For Guilienne Audelin, left, ***assimilation*** means being stamped as a "dummy" by a broader American society that she believes does not see beyond color. To Miguel Salvat, however, "whites and non-whites have the same opportunities in ***America***." (Photographs by Phillippe Diederich for The ***New*** York Times)

Graph: "At a Glance: Children of Immigrants" shows percentages of children whose parents are immigrants.

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