Cultural Assimilation Patterns of Modern Immigrants

Today, I’m going to speak to you on the cultural assimilation patterns of modern immigration into the United States. By cultural assimilation, I refer to the four aspects of the individual’s world-view that determine how we communicate, behave, and interact with others. These four aspects are language, beliefs, values, and norms. Language is primary and/or secondary language usage, at home and at work. Belief refers to eschatological, religious, and ontological beliefs that provide meaning to our activities and goals. Value refers to the judgment and priority system of our activities and goals, such as the importance of work, family, leisure, and so on. Norms refers to the standards by which we rate proper behavior in customs such as hand-shaking, interpersonal dialogue, etiquette. These four aspects define culture, and the immigrant’s assimilation thereto.

Although each nation in the world will have many subcultures and subdialects, it is also characterized by one national culture and one national language or languages. Because America is a nation of immigrants, its culture is nevertheless unique, bearing the stamp of the original founders and beyond dating to 1611. Therefore, with each successive wave of immigrants into our nation, American culture has slowly evolved, borrowing cultural attributes from all immigrants. Historical immigration has ebbed and flowed, such as the German and Dutch immigration at the turn of the 18th century, the Russian and Irish immigration at the turn of the 19th century, and the Mexican and Asian immigration of the late 20th century. Each immigrant group has been welcomed and their respective cultures appreciated.

Amazingly, all waves of immigrant groups into the United States have had one trait in common: The cultural assimilation of each group has followed a single, predictable trajectory. No matter the country of origin and no matter the socio-economic status, the immigrant has invariably assimilated within two to three generations. The original immigrants did not usually speak English and did not assimilate very well; however, it is the children or grandchildren that spoke English with no accent and assimilated fully into American culture. Although each retains their family name and each celebrates their cultural heritage, their cultural assimilation refers to a parity of educational attainment and income with American society. Their *mode de vie*, or lifestyle, reflects the four aspects of American culture, the consummation of which is self-identity as “American.” The final result is that each American citizen has their own ethno-cultural heritage, yet is culturally assimilated to and united with other Americans in one national culture.

What I have just described to you is the Melting Pot analogy, otherwise known as the Tomato Soup analogy, which we were all taught in grade school. In striking contrast to this historical norm, social scientists over the last twenty years have observed a significant aberration from this historical pattern of cultural assimilation, not only in America, but also in Europe, which is also a hub of incoming immigration.

Two specific phenomena are apparent: First, it is observed that assimilation of all immigrating groups within 2 or 3 generations of arrival is no longer the rule. Instead, it is observed that certain immigrant groups are taking much longer to assimilate than other groups. In sociological terms, this is called inter-group variance of assimilation. Secondly, it is observed that a larger percentage of certain immigrant groups never assimilate at all, sometimes settling for dual citizenship. This phenomenon of transnationalism is exemplified by the immigrant that pays full allegiance to his/her nation of origin, e.g. voting, remittances, etc., yet he/she works and resides in the United States indefinitely.

According to social scientists, both phenomena are directly attributable to globalization: the first, inter-group variance of assimilation, is due to the globalized economy, which has polarized the socio-economic status of the labor market on both the global and national level. In the past, immigrants from different nations were within a shorter range of socio-economic discrepancy. For example, the average socio-economic status of a Mexican immigrant is quite lower compared to the average socio-economic status of the European immigrant upon emigration. This depends on the GDP and per-capita income of the country in question. This pre-existing discrepancy creates two completely different living circumstances upon arrival. The former immigrant is relegated to an ethnically heterogeneous urban setting, where assimilation is significantly retarded. This is known as an ethnic neighborhood enclave, where language and culture reflects that of the country of origin. The latter immigrant lives in an ethnically homogenous suburban setting, where assimilation is significantly hastened. Here, the common cultural bond is American, and parity of lifestyle is quickened in both educational and occupational terms.

The second phenomenon, transnationalism, arises from the globalization of communication and transportation. Until the 1950’s, most immigrants who packed up their family for a new land and citizenship considered the move to be a one-way trip. Logistically, their ties to their former country are greatly decreased, because return trips and phone call prices are astronomically priced. Application for U.S. citizenship was almost immediate and the family conformed to the pattern of the 2 to 3 generational assimilation. Currently, flights, inexpensive phone communication, and porous borders no longer sever ties to the country of origin. Therefore, the need for U.S. allegiance is greatly minimized, allowing for a vague, trans-nationalist allegiance, or at best, a dual-national allegiance.

These two phenomena, inter-group variance of assimilation, and transnationalism, both directly tied to globalization trends, strongly affect patterns of immigrant acculturation. Therefore, the Education Department should strongly consider how best to educate and acculturate America’s immigrating youth, in order to promote *language and cultural equity*. This pro-active initiative will determine the course of American national identity and culture, as it is affected by future immigration.

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1. Historical Acculturation of Immigrants
2. Modern Acculturation and Inter-group Variance
3. Neighborhood Enclaves
4. Circular Migration and Transnationalism
5. The Question of Socio-Economic Status as Determinant

Conclusion