##### University of New Mexico

## Underlying Determinants of Cultural Assimilation among U.S. Immigrants:

Is it Ethnic Identity or is it Structural Circumstance?

Sociology 580

## Dr. Tim Wadsworth

Department of Sociology

December 14, 2005

Tom Maestas

# **Introduction**

This research project posits a legal and socio-economic explanation for the lag in cultural assimilation among current Mexican immigrants. This project rejects the explanation of the Huntingtonian doctrine that ethnic identity is the principle determinant of cultural assimilation. This project hypothesizes that differing legal and socio-economic circumstances upon arrival into the U.S. affect each immigrant’s subsequent pattern of assimilation or non-assimilation.

It is hypothesized that through aggregation of individual data on the immigrant’s ethnic origin as well as their legal and socio-economic circumstance, the variant patterns of assimilation between immigrant groups is explained. An immigrant’s ethnic origin is determined by the nation of origin of the particular immigrant, not the individual’s genealogical ethnic roots or phenotypical characteristics. The concept of structural circumstance is operationalized by two variables. Legality of stay (as determined by the Immigration and Naturalization Service) and socio-economic ability both operationalize the concept of structural circumstance. Socio-economic ability is operationalized by occupational and income-earning power, educational achievement, and expected duration of stay in the host country.

Unfortunately, data collection on an individual basis is made very difficult by two parts of the subject material: legality of stay and immigrant transience. First, legality is an important indicator in determining structural circumstance, yet it is difficult to maintain a statistically honest answer from a survey. Secondly, both a local self-administered questionnaire survey as well as a multi-million dollar national database cannot track, in current time, the legal and socio-economic characteristics of an immigrant whose residence address and occupation/income are in constant flux.

Therefore, it is acknowledged that this research project faces more hurdles than many sociological endeavors. However, the analysis of the dynamics of the concept are essential to the question of whether ethnic identity is the principle determinant of the cultural assimilation of the immigrant, or whether the principle determinant is legal and socio-economic constraint upon arrival into the United States.

Literature Review

# Propensity of Assimilation is Based on Ethnicity vis-à-vis Huntington

# In the past, U.S. immigration has been likened to the Tomato Soup analogy, that is, tomatoes provide the substance, but immigration provides the herbs and spice. All immigrants regardless of origin and socio-economic circumstance find a niche in American society, eventually adopting its culture over one or two generations. However, Huntingtonian doctrine asserts an exception to the rule: Mexican immigration differs from past and present immigration trends. The generalization is that certain ethnic groups are less willing to culturally assimilate. According to this theoretical viewpoint, the ethnic identity and culture of the incoming Mexican immigrant repudiates, like oil with water, fundamental aspects of American culture such as language, values, and norms.

# For this cause, Huntington predicts a potential bifurcation, again like oil with water, of American society. This predicted bilingual and bicultural division will ultimately lead to a bicognitive American self-identity and culture. "Unlike past immigrant groups," Huntington writes, "Mexicans and other Latinos have not assimilated into mainstream U.S. culture, forming instead their own political and linguistic enclaves ... and rejecting the Anglo-Protestant values that built the American dream” (Huntington, 2004).

Based on two principles of national origin, immigrants of Mexican origin are less likely to culturally assimilate than other immigrant groups. The first principle is that of the uniqueness of Mexican immigration based on geography and history. Six facts differentiate Mexican immigration from other waves of past and present immigrant groups, thereby precluding comparison to historical precedent.

These facts are, 1) the ratio of geographical contiguity and economic disparity between the sending nation and the host nation, 2) the number and rate of immigration, 3) preponderant illegality of entrance and stay, 4) inter-state migrating pattern and formation of Mexican-only regional concentrations, 5) political and economic entente between sending nation and host nation, and 6) historical relevance that most southwest territory was previously under Mexican rule. According to Huntington, these national facts about Mexican immigrants lessen the need, in theory, for Mexican immigrants to assimilate to American culture. Huntington’s contention is that because of national origin, the Mexican immigrant is less likely to adopt American values than other immigrant groups, regardless of the structural circumstance of the individual.

The second principle is the lack of compatibility of Mexican immigrants to culturally assimilate compared to other immigrating groups into the U.S. Huntington writes that “many Mexican-American immigrants simply do not appear to identify primarily with the United States” (Huntington, 2004). Huntington claims that the two cultures are hardly compatible on many levels. For example, Anglo-Protestant culture is very individualistic and Mexican culture is community-oriented. Furthermore, Huntington asserts that career and ambition are high priorities of Anglo-Protestant culture, while family and leisure are prioritized in Mexican culture. For this reason, the Mexican immigrant is not willing to assimilate to the lifestyle and cultural norms of the typical American.

The indicators of lifestyle and American cultural norms are as follows: 1) Sole usage of the English language in public, 2) desire for high educational goals (especially among the youth), 3) continual desire for higher occupational goals (managerial positions), 4) continual desire for greater income, 5) intermarriage, 6) self-identification as American, 7) desire for naturalization and citizenship.

According to the Huntingtonian doctrine, Mexican Americans are less willing to pursue these goals than other immigrant groups. The primary reason is the ethno-cultural difference between the national culture of Mexico and the national culture of the U.S. For example, Samuel Huntington writes, "the cultural division between Hispanics and Anglos could replace the racial division between blacks and whites as the most serious cleavage in U.S. society" (Huntington, 2004). It is a common subject among political analysts that cultures from certain ethnic groups have differing compatibility with American culture. For example, South Asians (Indians, Bangladeshi, and Pakistanis) assimilate more quickly because their culture, through history, is more compatible with Anglo-Protestant culture. Upon arrival, they are already highly fluent in English and are familiar with Anglo-Protestant culture because of British colonial influence (Kurlantzick, 2002).

*Socio-Economic Status as Component of Structural Circumstance*

Current U.S. immigrants arrive with very disparate legal and socio-economic circumstances. These two indicators of structural circumstance determine the course of the immigrants’ stay. Accordingly, they determine the pattern of cultural assimilation for each immigrant and their ability to attain the same status and culture as the typical, middle-class American (Suarez-Orozco, 2000). Cultural assimilation follows hand-in-hand with upward career mobility. “[Assimilation] is the cumulative byproduct of choices made by individuals seeking to take advantage of opportunities to improve their social situations” (Alba, 1995).

Interestingly, the current immigrant arrives in an economic job market that is highly segregated. Using an hourglass metaphor, there is either “a well-remunerated, knowledge-intensive economic sphere [or] a service economy where low-skilled and semi-skilled workers continue to lose ground in terms of real wages, benefits, and security. Therefore immigrants fall into one or the other labor market” (Suarez-Orozco, 2000). It follows that immigrant groups are statistically divided along the same line as the economic and educational development of the nation of origin.

The U.S. immigrant from any national origin falls into two very different structural categories upon arrival. They range from highly skilled to unskilled and poorly educated, These circumstances strongly affect the immigrant experience and subsequent pattern of assimilation (Portes and Rumbaut, 1996). The lesser-skilled workers have the only choice of accepting jobs that offer no upward mobility and their housing is forced into urban, ethnically segregated neighborhoods. The highly skilled workers, with their education and language ability, are offered jobs that support a work and residence lifestyle that involves interaction with middle-class America, while at the same time prospering cultural assimilation. For this reason, Portes and Rumbaut (2001) identify two prominent types of immigrant assimilation. The first type is able to adopt mainstream American customs, speaks English, and is upwardly mobile within one or two generations. The second type, based on socio-economic circumstances, acculturates to inner-city subcultures, low education level and labor market, even after several generations.

# Expectation of Stay and Legality as Component of Structural Constraint

In the past, immigrants had few opportunities to communicate, visit, or even return to the sending nation, thereby facilitating the process of cultural assimilation. Expected length of stay and naturalization of the immigrant in the host nation is an essential element in the immigrant’s desire to assimilate. If the immigrant plans to stay temporarily in the host nation, there is less need to learn the culture of the host nation (Guarnizo, 2003). For example, one in five Mexican immigrants will choose to acquire American citizenship (Chavez, 1998). Guarnizo says that propensity to engage in entrepreneurial ventures varies systematically with the socially-expected duration (SED) of migration. In other words, temporary SED’s “preserve ties with the country and community of origin.” Of course, SED is primarily affected by legality of stay and the option to naturalize. Whether the immigrant works illegally, holds a temporary worker visa or is naturalized has a tremendous impact on the immigrant’s SED.

Because of mass transportation, transnationalism has revolutionized the concept of the immigration process by invalidating the traditional “clean break” assumption globalized communication and information technologies immigrants are no longer tied to one country (Suarez-Orozco, 2000). Furthermore, developing nations support dual-nationality in order to encourage monetary remittances from former emigrants temporarily residing in other nations. Developed nations encourage temporary worker immigrants in order to fill gaps in labor market. These factors affect both the expectation of stay and the legality question among immigrants into the United States. The bottom line is that immigrants that stay temporarily or expect to be deported for legal reasons are not likely to assimilate into American culture.

Based on this typology, this paper examines the four variables that best predict the pattern of immigrant assimilation.

## Hypothesis

This paper hypothesizes that 1) initial socially expected duration (SED) 2) initial socio-economic status (SES), 3) current legality, and 4) current socio-economic status (SES) predict the assimilation patterns of immigrating individuals. These four variables determine the immigrant’s desire and ability to assimilate to American culture. On the individual level, these four variables should explain differing assimilation patterns between ethnic groups. Therefore, this paper hypothesizes that ethno-racial origin is a spurious variable in determining an individual’s propensity to assimilate to American culture.

Hypothesis 1: The variable of initial socially expected duration (independent variable #1) is a primary determinant of subsequent cultural assimilation of the immigrant. This individual variable conceptualizes the immigrant’s reason for immigration, expectation about length of stay such as socially-expected duration (SED), expectation of naturalization, and expectation of upward mobility in the individual’s labor market.

Hypothesis 2: A second variable, initial socio-economic ability (independent variable #2), is another determinant of the subsequent cultural assimilation of the immigrant, although indirectly. It directly affects initial socially-expected duration of stay (For example, employer-issued work visa). It directly affects current legality, and it directly affects current socio-economic status. This variable is operationalized by the socio-economic status of the immigrant in the sending nation, such as education (previous skills and training) and monetary wealth. Also operational are the applicable skills and resources upon arrival in the host nation, such as the immigrant’s social network in both the sending and host nation, as well as his/her socio-economic status upon arrival.

Hypothesis 3: Current legality (independent variable #3) is a primary determinant of assimilation to American culture. This variable is a concrete reflection of initial SED, therefore more weight is given to this variable than to initial SED. Although they measure related concepts (wish to stay vs. legality of stay), there should be no correlation between the two. This variable is operationalized by the legality of the immigrant, as determined by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS).

Hypothesis 4: Current socio-economic status (independent variable #4) determines with whom the immigrant is most likely to live and work. As outlined in the literature review, living in a urban, ethnically segregated neighborhood leads to a different culture than living in a suburban, ethnically diverse neighborhood. Also, this current socio-economic status assesses career upward mobility with regard to initial socio-economic ability. This variable is operationalized by education attained in the U.S., employment earnings, and monetary wealth.

Hypothesis 5: Ethno-cultural attributes of the individual is secondary determinant of assimilation to American culture. Controlling for individual variables such as age, sex, and geographic location, ethno-cultural origin is not a determinant, it is hypothesized, of cultural assimilation, when accounting for the previously stated four variables. It is felt that the immigrant experience, in terms of length of stay and socio-economic company are the true determinants, not the history, culture, or geography of one’s nation of origin.

**Conceptual Model**

IV#1 initial SED

IND. CULT. ASSIMIL.

language

IV#2 initial SEA

norms

values

IV#3 current legality

beliefs

IV#4 current SES

Control Variables

Age, Sex, geographic location (state)

IV#5 ethnicity

## Operationalization and Measurement

# Independent Variables

# Independent variable #1, initial socially expected duration

# This research project shall employ four indicators. This individual variable conceptualizes the immigrant’s reason for immigration, expectation about length of stay such as socially-expected duration (SED), expectation of naturalization, and expectation of upward mobility in the individual’s labor market.

# Indicator #1: immigrant’s reason for immigration, i.e., pushed coercively from sending nation, or pulled (attracted) to host nation.

# Indicator #2: socially expected duration (SED).

# Indicator #3: expectation of naturalization.

# Indicator #4: expectation of upward mobility in labor market, that is, the desire to stay in America and adapt to American culture in order to progress one’s career.

# Independent variable #2, initial socio-economic ability

# This research project shall employ three indicators:

# Indicator #1: socio-economic status in the sending nation

# Indicator #2: education and skills applicable to employment in the United States

# Indicator #3: social and monetary resources available to the immigrant upon arrival, which are conducive to socio-economic attainment

Independent variable #3, current legality status and trajectory

This research project shall employ the degrees of legality as defined by the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Indicator #1: This scale ranges from illegal, temporary worker status, green card status, legal first-generational, and second-generational (born in U.S.)

Independent variable #4, current socio-economic status

This research project shall employ the following indicators:

Indicator #1: educational attainment in host nation

Indicator #2: employment earnings

Indicator #3: material possessions

Indicator #4: neighborhood SES

# Independent variable #5, ethnic origin of immigration

# This research project shall employ the following categorization:

Republic of Mexico, Central or South America, West Indies, Europe, Africa, Middle East, East Indies (South Asia), Asia.

*Dependent Variable*

Dependent variable #1, assimilation to American culture (as defined by Huntington)

This research shall employ the traditional aspects of culture, which include language, social norms, priority of values, and beliefs. This general definition is compatible with the Huntingtonian definition, which reads: “a people's language, religious beliefs, social and political values, assumptions as to what is right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate, and to the objective institutions and behavioral patterns that reflect these subjective elements.” (Huntington, 2004) In more succinct terms, the protestant ethic is usually referred “to be self-reliant, hardworking, and morally upright.” The dependent variable employs a factorial design.

Indicator #1: language, is based on language usage of English vs. language of origin according to the following indicators: a) language spoken at home b) language of media, c) English proficiency

Indicator #2: social norms, is based on the following indicators: a) work ethic, b) leisure activities, c) individualism, d) moral behavior

Indicator #3: , priority of values, is based on the following indicators: a) time priority, b) monetary priorities, c) political conviction

Indicator #4: , beliefs, is based on the beliefs about a) religion, b) rule of law, and c) role of government

**Data Production and Sampling Design**

### *Units of Observation and Analysis*

This research design observes and analyzes individual data about immigrants. Contextual effects such as neighborhood, workplace environment, state of residence are accounted for on the individual level. According to hypothesis, it is anticipated that varying assimilation patterns between immigrants on the individual level shall be predicted by the first four variables. The addition of ethnicity as a variable will provide a null effect upon the statistical significance of the aforementioned variables.

# Sampling Design

The data collection employs a mixed-mode survey, which will distributed by two alternative methods: mailed survey and group survey. The challenge of reaching out to a group of people which are economically, socially, and demographically diverse is to not leave out any particular portion of the group for any such reason. Therefore, missing and biased data are serious threats to the research design. This is a serious concern with regard to the legal status of the immigrant. Immigrant unemployment, homelessness, or mobility can further complicate the effort to survey all portions of immigrant America.

Therefore, the primary means of administering the survey questionnaire is a mailed survey compiled by a list provided by the Immigration and Naturalization Service. For obvious reasons, data will prove more erroneous, among those immigrants, which are illegally employed or residing in the U.S. It is reasoned that the supplement of a group survey administered in temporary work agencies, public transportation, and shopping markets would reach this diverse portion of the desired sample frame. In order to preclude haphazard data collection, this survey administration mode will utilize cluster sampling. The sampling frame includes all first and second-generation immigrants from all nations currently residing in America

A highly industrialized nation, such as Japan, will produce emigrants that are highly educated and skilled for the American job-market (Massey, 1995). A third-world nation will produce fewer emigrants with a high level of skills than a highly developed nation (Skerry, 2000).

It is important to not that the economic circumstances of the immigrant and his/her sending nation are often related. Currently, immigrants arrive from nations that are either highly developed or poorly developed (Suarez-Orozco, 2000). For example, American per capita income is four times higher than the per capita income of Mexico. In contrast, European and Chinese economies are on par with that of the United States. The United States desperately needs both low-skilled service workers as well as highly-skilled, knowledge-based workers. Therefore, immigration from both ends of the economic scale are facilitated into the United States. The ending result for the individual’s ability to assimilate is greatly different. In both cases, the United States’s labor market greets both kinds of immigrant with either a low-paying service job with few benefits or a high-paying knowledge-based job with benefits and upward mobility.

## Bibliography

Alba, Richard D. 1995. “Assimilation’s Quiet Tide.” *Public Interest* 119 (16): 3-11.

Chavez, Linda. 1998. “Our Hispanic Predicament.” *Commentary* 105 (6): 47-49.

Guarnizo, Luis E., Alejandro Portes. 2003. “Assimilation and transnationalism: determinants of transnational political action among contemporary migrants.” *The American Journal of Sociology*. 108 (6): 1211-1217.

Huntington, Samuel P. 2004. *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity*: New York. Simon & Schuster.

Kurlantzick, Joshua. 2002. “South Asians vs. ‘Older’ Immigrants.” *World and I*. 17 (11): 54-55.

Linton, April. 2004. “A Critical Mass Model of Bilingualism Among U.S.-Born Hispanics.” *Social Forces* 83: 279-322.

Massey, Douglas. 1995. “The New Immigration and Ethnicity in the United States.” *Population and Development Review* 21 (3): 631.

Portes, Alejandro, Ruben G. Rumbaut. 1996. *Immigrant America: A Portrait*: Berkeley. University of California Press.

Portes, Alejandro. 2001. *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*: Berkeley. University of California Press.

Skerry, Peter. 1995. *Mexican Americans: The Ambivalent Minority*: New York. Free Press.

Skerry, Peter. 2000. “Do We Really Want Immigrants to Assimilate?” *Society* 37 (3): 57-66.

Suarez-Orozco, Marcelo. 2000. “Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Immigration But Were Afraid to Ask.” *Daedalus*. 129 (4): 1-22.