

# Assimilation and Its Discontents

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## Abstract

This essay offers a review of the scholarly literature on immigrant assimilation, looking at how classical assimilation theories explain the processes and outcomes of assimilation among contemporary immigrants and their offspring and how alternative theories are developed to address assimilation's discontents. The essay first revisits the commonly held assumptions underlying classical theories of assimilation and investigates why even normative pathways can lead to divergent assimilation outcomes. It then discusses new theoretical development in this area, highlighting the central ideas and conceptualization of the segmented assimilation theory and the neoclassical assimilation theory. The author emphasizes how multi-level determinants *interact* to produce unconventional pathways that have profound implication for success or failure of assimilation. She also suggests that researchers problematize the notions of "success" or "failure," paying special attention to how immigrants and their offspring, rather than social scientists themselves, imagine and frame these notions because subjective conceptualization can influence strategies that result in vastly different pathways and outcomes. The essay concludes with a discussion on issues for future research.

## INTRODUCTION

As a nation of immigrants, assimilation was an unspoken ideology in the United States. Newcomers of diverse origins and cultures were expected to shed their ethnic distinctiveness and "melt" into a single peoplehood—"American"—as soon as possible. Recall Theodore Roosevelt's proclamation that there was "no room in this country for hyphenated Americans" (New York Times, 1915, p. 1). At the turn of the twentieth century, the American public was deeply concerned about the assimilability of "new" immigrants of Southern and Eastern European origins with cultures quite different from those of "older stock" Americans. However, instead of a proactive national policy response aiming at assimilation, the American nation adopted a restrictive immigration policy, based on the national origins quota system, to largely cut off the flow of immigrants from outside Northern and Western Europe. "Americanization" programs were implemented through public schools in the hands of local

officials, all ran under the assumption that immigrants' cultures and ways were backward, uncivilized, and incompatible with American core cultural values of individualism, liberty, equality, and democracy. Assimilation was entirely left to market forces and immigrant's own agency—having the right values, work ethics, and perseverance.

Nonetheless, assimilation seemed to work wonders without much direct policy intervention. At the wake of the immigration reform in the 1960s, the seemingly unassimilable immigrants of Southern and Eastern European origins and their offspring had become fully assimilated and indistinguishably "white" (Lieberson & Waters, 1988). Even among Americans of Asian ancestry, assimilation outcomes were remarkable as Chinese and Japanese Americans, the groups that had been legally excluded from American society, made impressive inroad into the American mainstream and were applauded "the model minority" (Petersen, 1966; US News and World Report, 1966).

US immigration policy reform of the 1960s has brought about continuously massive influx of immigrants. The largely non-European, non-Protestant, culturally heterogeneous and socioeconomically diverse newcomers pose significant challenges to assimilation while changing the classical assimilation story. Some immigrant group members are able to obtain well-paying jobs in the mainstream labor market and own homes in affluent urban or suburb communities upon arrival while still speaking little or heavily accented English. Other immigrant group members struggle at the host society's bottom even with high aspiration and hard work, yet still find not only their own pathways to upward social mobility blocked but also those of their children who have been thoroughly acculturated.

In public discourse and scholarly work in recent decades, however, "assimilation" has become a highly controversial and politically charged term, partly because of its association with the ideal of Anglo-conformity, or "the melting pot," and forced Americanization, partly because of the daunting reality of assimilation failure and increased racial/ethnic inequality, and partly because of the effects of ethnic consciousness movements that promotes multiculturalism. In this essay, I review the scholarly literature to examine how classical assimilation theories explain the processes and outcomes of assimilation among contemporary immigrants and their offspring and how alternative theories are developed to address assimilation's discontents.

## FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

### THE CLASSICAL ASSIMILATION PERSPECTIVE

In the scholarly literature, assimilation, often used interchangeably with the term adaptation, integration, or incorporation, refers to the process by

which the characteristics of immigrant group members come to resemble those of natives in host societies. The classical assimilation perspective on immigrant incorporation has been influential in intellectual thinking since the early twentieth century. The theoretical orientation is guided by three explicit or implicit assumptions: an undifferentiated or unified host society; the inferiority or undesirability of things from the old world; and a natural, unidimensional, and irreversible process toward assimilation. Classical assimilation theories operate on the premise that the host society consists of a single mainstream dominated by a majority group (in the case of the United States, White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, or WASPs), that immigrants of diverse backgrounds must abandon their old cultural ways, including languages, values, norms, behavioral patterns and anything ethnic and learn or adopt the ways of the dominant majority group, and that their success is measured against the standards set by the dominant majority group, or by how much they eventually become indistinguishable from members of the dominant majority group. Even though immigrants initially find themselves in a situation what Robert E. Park called *the marginal man*, being simultaneously pulled in the direction of the host culture but drawn back by the original culture, they are gradually sucked into a race relations cycle of contact, competition, accommodation, and assimilation in a sequence of succeeding generations (Park, 1928).

The early formulation of the classical assimilation theory emphasized biotic and economic forces (impersonal competition) and social forces (contact, communication and cooperation) to the neglect of structural constraints. Other scholars have contributed to the theoretical development by considering the potency of contextual and institutional factors, such as phenotypical ranking and the racial/ethnic hierarchy, to be of paramount significance in determining the rate of assimilation (Warner & Srole, 1945). These scholars recognize that ethnic/racial minorities face more obstacles than others to assimilation because of their ascribed traits (e.g., skin color) and/or visibly different cultural traits (e.g., language of origin and religion). Differences in social status and access to opportunities based on language and culture will disappear over the course of several generations. However, the assimilation of readily identifiable ethnic/racial minorities, especially blacks, is likely to be confined within racial-caste boundaries for a lengthier period of time. Thus, ascribed characteristics and cultural traits interact with economic and social forces to set the speed of complete assimilation for various immigrant groups.

Milton M. Gordon (1964) has developed a multistage typology of assimilation to capture the complexity of the process. The typology involves seven stages: cultural, structural, marital, identificational, attitude-receptional,

behavior-receptional, and civic assimilation. As a necessary first step, immigrants begin their incorporation into their new country through cultural assimilation, or acculturation, referring to the change in cultural patterns to those of the host dominant group, such as language, beliefs, and values. The second stage is structural assimilation, referring to the establishment of the primary relations with host society's dominant group and the entrance into its formal and informal institutions. Structural assimilation is the most critical stage in that it influences the subsequent stages. *Marital assimilation* refers to widespread intermarriages. Identificational assimilation entails relinquishing ties and allegiance to the country of origin and the achievement of the host country's sense of peoplehood and national identity. The next two stages, attitude-receptional and behavior-receptional, refer to the changed attitudes and behavior leads to diminishing prejudice and discrimination based on ethnicity or nativity. The end result is civic assimilation, which indicates the absence of immigrant-native conflicts via complete convergence.

At the core of Gordon typology are cultural and structural assimilation. For Gordon, acculturation does not automatically lead to structural assimilation or any other types, but may take place and continue indefinitely even when no other type of assimilation occurs. He hints that ethnic groups may remain distinguished from one another for a long period of time because of spatial isolation and lack of contact. Structural assimilation, in contrast, is the "keystone of the arch of assimilation" that will inevitably lead to other stages of assimilation. Although vague about how groups advance from one stage to another and what causes change, Gordon anticipates that most ethnic groups will eventually lose all their ethnic markers and cease to exist as distinctive ethnic groups as they become fully assimilated.

From the classical perspective, sophisticated theoretical models are developed to empirically predict the rates and outcomes of assimilation. The most widely applied models are drawn upon insight from the classical stratification theories. The dependent variables are usually measured by levels of education, occupation, and incomes, among others, in reference to host society's dominant group or to the native-born segment of the national-origin group. The key determinants include family socioeconomic status (SES) and own human capital characteristics. Cultural assimilation is rarely considered a dependent variable but is instead treated as an important determinant of structural and other types of assimilation. Specifically, distinctive ethnic traits such as old-world cultures, native languages, and ethnic enclaves, as well as ethnicity in the abstract, are taken as disadvantages, or burdensome baggage, that hinder assimilation. However, these ethnic disadvantages should have fading negative effects on succeeding generations, whose members adopt the

primary language of the host country as their primary medium of communication and become more and more similar to natives in lifestyle, mannerism, outlook, and worldview. The length of time since immigration and nativity are thus considered vital in predicting assimilation outcomes.

Although complete acculturation of an ethnic group to the dominant American way of life may not ensure all ethnic groups' full social participation in the host society, immigrants are expected first to free themselves from their old cultures in order to begin rising up from marginal positions. America seemed to have absorbed the great waves of immigrants who arrived at the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, primarily from Europe. Before the surge of contemporary immigration of the 1960s, German, Irish, and Italian Catholics, Polish and Russian Jews, and most other Eastern European immigrants had achieved acceptance among an initially hostile native WASP population, and their offspring had thoroughly been absorbed into the society's white majority through residential, educational, and occupational mobility and intermarriages without much trace of their ethnic distinctiveness (Alba, 1985; Gans, 1979; Waters, 1990).

#### ANOMALIES

Earlier patterns do not seem to readily repeat themselves in contemporary times, where immigration to the United States is of a very different sort. In 1965, US Congress passed the Hart-Celler Act, abolishing the national origins quota system and replacing it with a preference system that favors family-sponsored and employer-sponsor immigrations. Between 1970 and 2011, the United States admitted nearly 33 million immigrants, 44% from Latin America (20% from Mexico alone), 34% from Asia, and only 13% from Europe. Post-1965 immigrant groups have not converged to the non-Hispanic white majority in the ways predicted by classical assimilation theories. Instead, empirical research has observed several anomalies. The first anomaly concerns the persistent intergenerational disadvantages. Classical theories predict assimilation as a function of the length of residence in the host society and succeeding generations. However, this is not how it seems to work. Edward Telles and Vilma Ortiz (2008)'s powerful longitudinal study of Mexican Americans is a case in point: members of the third and fourth generation had not experienced the erosion of ethnic identity, widespread intermarriages with members of the dominant majority group, residential integration, and attitudinal-receptive or behavioral receptive assimilation; and the initially low SES of the immigrant generation was reproduced through racialization in the next generations. Other studies have consistently revealed that longer US residence is correlated with more maladaptive outcomes, whether measured in terms of school performance,

aspirations, and behavior; that immigrant poverty is reproduced, rather than diminishes, in the second generation for some national origin groups but not others; that intergroup differences in levels of schooling and economic attainment persist in the second and later generations; and that human capital investment yields different returns for different racial/ethnic groups (i.e., schooling did not equally commensurate with occupational advancement for African Americans, Puerto Rican Americans, and Mexican Americans as for non-Hispanic whites across generations).

Another anomaly is what Herbert Gans describes as “the second generation decline” (Gans, 1992). Gans points to the significance of family SES and its interaction with culture that affect the assimilation of the “new” second generation (children of post-1965 immigrants). Immigrant children from less fortunate socioeconomic backgrounds had a much harder time than their peers from middleclass backgrounds to succeed in school and later in the labor market. While their families lack resources to guide them onto the paths to success, these children often construct their own acculturation in response to structural disadvantages. Schools, American peers, and the media exert powerful influences on immigrant children. The prevailing youth culture and the freedoms (particularly personal choices in dress, dating, and sexual practices) unavailable in their parents’ old country also overwhelm them. Because of exposure, these children are likely to develop expectations of life in America much higher than those of their parents; and they will neither be willing to accept immigrant parental work norms nor work in “un-American” conditions as many of their parents do. Thus, some of the children may not even be able to carry out their parents’ wishes and expectations of moving up and “making it in America,” much less to fulfill their own expectations, and their rapid acculturation reinforces their structural disadvantages. Gans considers these divergent patterns as various bumps (either imposed by the host society or invented by the immigrants themselves) on the road to eventual assimilation into “nonethnic” America.

Still another anomaly is the peculiar outcomes of contemporary immigrant incorporation. In America’s fastest growing knowledge-intensive industries, foreign-born engineers and other highly skilled professionals disproportionately take up various key technical positions and, for some, even ownership positions with limited acculturation. In some immigrant enclaves, ethnic life enriched by the development of ethnic economies opens up alternative paths to social mobility even without English language proficiency. In upscale middle-class suburbs, wealthy immigrants with sufficient financial capital purchase and move into homes, jumping several steps ahead and bypassing the traditional bottom-up order. However, in inner cities, working class immigrant families are struggling just to get by, combating poverty, crime, and social exclusion, without much hope to ever moving up to middleclass

status. But most vexing is the intergroup differences in academic achievement among those from similar social class backgrounds. While immigrant children are overrepresented on lists of award-winners or on academic fast tracks, many others from the same schools are also vulnerable to multiple high risk behaviors, school failure, street gangs, and youth crime.

These anomalies indicate a significant gap between theory and reality and raise concerns about the relevance and applicability of classic assimilation theories for predicting assimilation outcomes of post-1965 immigrants.

## CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

### SEGMENTED ASSIMILATION AS AN ALTERNATIVE THEORY

The segmented assimilation theory emerged in the early 1990s to address the anomalies. Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou (1993) first introduced the theoretical idea in their seminal work entitled "The New Second Generation: Segmented Assimilation and Its Variants among Post-1965 Immigrant Youth." As a middle-range theory, the segmented assimilation theory rejects the classical assumption of an undifferentiated and white middleclass core to which *all* immigrants assimilate and redefines the American mainstream as one that is shaped by the system of racial and class stratifications to exclude the marginal segments of the population. It places the process of becoming American, in terms of both acculturation and structural assimilation, in the context of a host society consisting of segregated and unequal segments and considers this process to be multidirectional leading to varied outcomes of convergence (to natives) as well as divergence. Unlike the classical theory that predicts eventual assimilation over time and across generations, the segmented assimilation theory focuses on predicting and explaining divergent outcomes, that is, why some national-origin groups are more likely than others to move head onto the host society's mainstream or to get trapped on the margins and are excluded from assimilating into the mainstream intergenerationally.

From the segmented assimilation perspective, three main patterns of incorporation among contemporary immigrants and their offspring are readily discernible. The first is the classical upward-mobility pattern: Acculturation and integration into the normative structures of the host society's mainstream. In America, this is a time-honored pathway of severing ethnic ties, unlearning old-world values, norms, and behavioral patterns, and adapting to the WASP core culture associated with middleclass status. The second is the downward-mobility pattern: acculturation and integration into the host society's margins. This is the pathway of adapting to the native or hybrid (native and immigrant mixed) oppositional subcultures associated with

marginalization—being trapped on the bottom rungs of the host society’s mobility ladder and in direct opposition to the WASP core culture. The third is a contemporary upward-mobility pattern: Socioeconomic integration into the host society’s mainstream with lagged or selective acculturation *and* deliberate preservation of an ethnic group’s values and norms, social ties, and community organizations. This is the pathway of achieving middleclass status based on resources generated within the ethnic community.

Empirically, segmented assimilation is measured by observable SES indicators, such as educational attainment, employment status, income, and homeownership, with reference to the host society’s dominant group or marginal groups. For the children of immigrants, indicators of downward assimilation may also include high school dropout, teenage pregnancy, and incarceration, for these variables are strong predictors of future low educational attainment, low occupational status, low income, and low likelihood of homeownership. Possible determinants include those individual-level factors, such as parental SES, English language ability, place of birth, age upon arrival, and length of residence in the United States, and structural factors, such as racial status and place of residence, which are specified in classical assimilation models. The segmented assimilation perspective diverts from the classical perspective with regard to the effects of these determinants. It assumes that the most determinants in the classical models are important by default but focuses instead the interaction between variables related to the group-specific contexts of exit and reception.

The context of exit entails a set of premigration characteristics, including social class status already attained by the immigrants in their homelands, resources that immigrants bring with them (such as money, knowledge, and job skills) to the new country, and immigrants’ means of migration, motivation, aspirations, and customary practices. These characteristics not only affect individual and family mobility, but also affect the national-origin or ethnic group as a whole. For example, an immigrant group overrepresented by the well-educated and highly skilled is likely to generate stronger ethnic capital that benefits all group members including those of low SES background. The context of reception includes a set of host society factors corresponding to group-level characteristics, including the social position of the ethnic group in the host society’s racial stratification system; public attitudes, government policies, and labor market conditions receptive or hostile to the group; and the strength and viability of the pre-existing ethnic community. The segmented assimilation theory posits that particular contexts of exit and reception *interact* to create distinctive modes of incorporation, or ethno cultural patterns and strategies of socioeconomic integration, giving rise to opportunities or constraints for group members,

independent of individual and family SES and other major demographic characteristics.

Numerous qualitative and quantitative works in the US context have produced evidence in support of segmented assimilation predictions. That is, immigrants and their children are unlikely to assimilate into a single mainstream; rather, they are moving upwardly, downwardly, or horizontally in a highly stratified society that is also racialized. While the trend of class reproduction (i.e., middleclass immigrant generation generally reproduces middleclass second generation) remains significant, racial/ethnic inequality in adaptation outcomes has also been strikingly salient across generations, defying the convention wisdom of assimilation and social mobility. On educational achievement, for example, second-generation Asians generally fare better than second-generation Latinos, as well as all native-born peers, of similar family SES; second-generation Chinese Americans of lower family SES fare better than their native-born non-Asian peers of higher family SES. On acculturation, second-generation members of some groups have abandoned their ethnic ways and have been thoroughly assimilated into the mainstream culture in terms of language, religion, values, and ways, but still find it hard to achieve success in structural assimilation. For example, Gonzalez (2011) shows that undocumented status and social stigma attached to it put some second generation members in a state of “developmental limbo.” Their legal right to education as a protected space is not extended beyond high school, and they face a bleak future with blocked mobility just like their parents even when they have been fully acculturated and adhered to the same aspirations as their American peers. There are also cases in which second-generation members of some group have achieved success on both measures of acculturation and structural assimilation, but still feel being excluded from the American nation, as in the example of Asian Americans as simultaneously the model minority and perpetual foreigners (Zhou, 2004).

#### SECOND-GENERATION ADVANTAGE AS A CRITIQUE TO SEGMENTED ASSIMILATION

Segmented assimilation, focusing on the interaction between class and race/ethnicity and between group-level and individual-level determinants, can be viewed as a more nuanced alternative theory to the classical perspective. It should be noted that downward assimilation is only *one* of several possible outcomes predicted by the segmented assimilation theory. Curiously, the segmented assimilation theory is often misinterpreted as suggesting and predicting one single outcome—downward assimilation—and thereby criticized as being overtly pessimistic about the immigrant second generation. Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, Waters, and Holdaway (2008) advanced a notion of “second generation advantage” as a critique to segmented

assimilation. On the basis of findings from their study of New York's second generation, they showed that all children of immigrants under study were doing better than their native-born comparison groups with no sign of downward assimilation: West Indians were doing better than African-Americans, Dominicans were doing better than Puerto Ricans, and Chinese and Russians were doing as well as or better than native whites. They suggest that all members of the second generation benefit from having more options than their immigrant parents to simultaneously maintain ethnic cultural beliefs and practices and create new norms and beliefs as they are moving ahead in society.

The point of disagreement seems to be on the reference group. In the segmented assimilation perspective, the reference is the generation population or non-Hispanic white. In the second-generation advantage model, the reference group is the native population of the racial group. I would caution that immigrant offspring of low SES family background and racial minority status are at a higher risk than others of being trapped in the host society's racial stratification system.

Nonetheless, to refute the segmented assimilation theory or to state that the second generation is doing just fine and is sooner or later moving into the mainstream middle class regardless of ethnicity or immigrant origin, one must demonstrate that *both* of the following cases are true: first, the proportions of those falling into the major indicators of downward assimilation (e.g., dropping out of high school, teenage pregnancy, and incarceration) are insignificant for each national-origin or ethnic group; and second, the differences in outcomes are randomly distributed across racial/ethnic or national-origin groups, regardless of the group's modes of incorporation.

#### NEOCLASSICAL ASSIMILATION THEORY

Richard Alba and Victor Nee developed a neoclassical assimilation theory in their seminal work, *Remaking the American Mainstream* (2003), to address the anomalies noted above while critically engaged with segmented assimilation. As the most enthusiastic defenders of assimilationism, Alba and Nee argue that the anomalies are merely adverse effects of contemporary structural changes that classical theories fail to anticipate. They point out that four decades of extremely low immigration between 1920 and 1960 caused gradual decline of ethnic communities and cultures but that the continuously high rate of mass immigration after 1965 has limited the host society's "breathing space" for absorbing and integrating immigrants as ethnic communities are constantly replenished. Moreover, the growing "hourglass" economy, with knowledge-intensive, high paying jobs at one end and labor-intensive, lowing-paying jobs at the other, has taken away several rungs of the mobility

ladder that are crucial for enabling immigrants, especially those with little education and few job skills, who started from the bottom to climb up. While these structural changes set new road blocks to assimilation, other major institutional changes, such as civil rights legislation, immigration policy reform, and multiculturalism, have reshaped the host society, making it more favorable for the assimilation of newcomers and their children today than in the past despite of persistent racial inequality. They thus contend that assimilation should work for contemporary immigrants too, because it worked so well in the past for turn-of-the-twentieth-century European immigrants under more precarious circumstances.

Alba and Nee's neoclassical assimilation theory reconceptualizes the American mainstream as one that encompasses "a core set of interrelated institutional structures and organizations regulated by rules and practices that weaken, even undermine, the influence of ethnic origins per se," that it may include members of formerly excluded ethnic or racial groups, and that it may contain not just the middle class or affluence suburbanites but the working class or the central-city poor. They suggest that all immigrants and their descendants will eventually assimilate, but not necessarily in a single direction and toward a single core as predicted by classical theoretical models. Their modified theory of assimilation allows much room for predicting immigrants, particularly those of non-European origin and low SES backgrounds, to incorporate into the mainstream at different rates and by different measures. Alba and Nee's so-defined American mainstream is all inclusive with no margins. Nevertheless, their notion of successful assimilation still explicitly refers to the incorporation into the middleclass core, not the segments of the mainstream occupied by working or lower classes.

#### KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The existing research on immigrant assimilation tells us that race, ethnicity, or national origin, matters in predicting outcomes. For example, being Chinese, Korean, or Vietnamese, has a significantly positive effect on second-generation school outcomes, such as GPA and high school graduation, and being Puerto Rican or Mexican has a significantly negative effect, even when controlling for socioeconomic factors such as parental education, occupation, and income. Moreover, children of Asian immigrants are doing better than other minority groups and whites, but children of Latino immigrants are still trailing behind whites by a significant large margin even when they fare better than their native coethnics. Therefore, exactly *how* ethnicity matters has remained unresolved, partly because of the conceptual muddle and partly because of data limitation.

Conceptually, ethnicity is often treated as a structural construct in some models and a cultural construct in other models, depending on the theoretical orientation of the researcher. The structural perspective emphasizes the influence of host-society's macro social structures, that is, the extent to which racial/ethnic minority groups are constrained by the broader stratification systems and networks of social relations within it. The cultural perspective emphasizes the influence of ethnic cultures and community forces. Social scientists from both perspectives have attempted to develop statistical models to quantitatively measure the effect of "structure" and "culture." Under ideal circumstances, these models would include indicators illuminating pre-migration situations. However, because of data limitations, many social scientists typically attempt to control for "structure" by documenting specific contexts of exit, identifying aspects of post-migration social structures, and operationalizing those components for which they have data. This is not only a conventional practice but also a reasonable approach, since many postmigration social structural differences (in the SES of persons who came to the United States as adults) are likely to either reflect, or be carryovers from, premigration differences. However, even the most sophisticated statistical model accounts for only some of the variance, leaving a large residual unexplained. More intractable are questions of how to conceptualize and measure ethnicity. Given the constraints of the data, many social scientists have tried valiantly to make progress on this front and have come up with measures that are ingenious, although not fully convincing. In the end, much weight is given to the effect of a discrete dummy variable of ethnicity, the exact meaning or contents of which remains a black box.

Since ethnicity cannot be simply viewed as either a structural or a cultural construct, how to measure it requires innovative thinking beyond existing theoretical frameworks. One possibility is to pay closer attention to mesolevel dynamics from an ethnic enclave perspective to look at how group-specific cultural values and behavioral patterns are interacting with both internal and external structural exigencies. Classical assimilation theories posit that ethnic enclaves are beneficial only to the extent that they meet new immigrants' survival needs, reorganize their economic and social lives, and ease resettlement problems in the new land and that, in the long run, they will become a trap inhibiting assimilation. However, ethnic enclaves are shaped by immigration selectivity, and may not be easily dichotomized as either a springboard or a trap for upward social mobility.

While some ethnic enclaves may decline into ghettos or 'super-ghettos' concentrating poverty, others can generate ethnic resources conducive to social mobility. Different patterns of ethnic change imply an interaction between macro structural forces and meso community forces, which produces varied ethnic social environments within immigrant neighborhoods.

Take Los Angeles' Koreatown for example. Koreatown is a typical urban neighborhood dominated by ethnic minorities (93%), the foreign born (69%), and the poor (31%). Most of the residents are recent immigrants from Korea, Mexico, and Central America. Korean immigrant children do better in school than their Latino peers even when they come from families with similar income levels. This is not because Korean families value education more than Mexican families, but rather they are exposed to different ethnic social environments. The Korean community has developed an extensive system of supplementary education. This ethnic system of supplementary education include nonprofit ethnic language schools and private institution, offering academic tutoring and enrichment, standardize test drills, college preparation, and related counseling services, to support immigrant education in addition to public education. In contrast, owing to negative immigrant selectivity with high proportions of the low skilled and undocumented, the Mexican community, located in Koreatown, lacks similar ethnic resources to assist immigrant children's education despite strong parental values toward education. Yet, neighborhood-based resources created by the Korean community are not accessible to other group members sharing the same neighborhood. Hence, how to develop better measures to capture meso-contextual complexities of the ethnic community will shed lights on our understanding of intergroup variations on outcomes.

Another possibility is to look beyond the national context to understand intergroup variation in assimilation outcomes. Current research has shown that contemporary immigrants are now found to achieve economic success and social status, depending not exclusively on rapid acculturation and entrance into mainstream circles of the host society, but on ethnic resources mobilized within diasporic communities, as well as (at least for some) on cultivating strong social networks across national borders. In this sense, immigrant transnationalism can serve as an alternative means to social integration into, rather than disintegration from, the host society (Zhou & Lee, 2013).

A third possibility is to pay closer attention to micro level processes from a subject-centered perspective, by which immigrants define and measure success based on their own lived experiences. In my collaborative research on Los Angeles second generation Chinese, Vietnamese, and Mexicans, we find that different ethnic groups frame "success" using different reference groups (Zhou, Lee, Vallejo, Tafoya-Estrada, & Xiong, 2008). That is, they judge how well they fare in society in comparison to their own ethnic group rather than to the society's dominant group—non-Hispanic white. These different frames of success produce variations on aspirations and expectations, which can either expand or constrain opportunities and consequently reinforce intergroup disparities. This subject-centered approach allows for microlevel

analysis within the macrostructural framework, enabling us to look beyond predictable patterns to understand both the obvious and subtle reasons group members make certain choices and pursue particular pathways.

Last but not least, in the existing research, there seems to be a disconnection between quantitative and qualitative studies. Sophisticated quantitative models have been developed to examine intergroup differences in outcomes but tend to produce similar results that largely miss the group-specific nuances, dynamics, and mechanisms of adaptational processes. Qualitative studies are attentive to details of these processes but lack generalizability. The different methodological approaches yield significant findings that inform each other. Therefore, future research should aim to develop better measures and multilevel models, through the mixed methods approach, to accurately capture the contexts of exit and reception in accounting for varied effects of ethnicity.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The scholarly literature on assimilation and its discontents underscores three important points. First, we should revisit the commonly held assumptions underlying classical theories of assimilation and investigate why even normative pathways can lead to divergent outcomes. Second, we should critically examine how multi level determinants *interact* to produce unconventional pathways leading to positive outcomes. Third, we should to problematize the notions of “success” or “failure,” paying special attention to how our subjects (immigrants and their offspring), rather than ourselves (social scientists), imagine and conceptualize these notions and examine why subjective conceptualization may influence strategies with profound implications for success. In sum, by innovatively engage in mixed-methods research, we can gain a better understanding of the reasons beyond family SES and acculturation, that account from interethnic disparities in assimilation. While the best research design can more accurately predict future possibilities, only time can tell about the real assimilation outcomes beyond the second generation.

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