New insights into assimilation and integration theory: Introduction to the special issue

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In all Western countries which have been the destination for large-scale migration over the past decades, integration and assimilation issues are heavily debated. This has certainly helped making Migration Studies one of the fastest growing fields in the social sciences, but it also created a certain pressure to produce fast and ‘digestible’ results. In that sense, the methodological and theoretical advancement of Migration Studies has not quite followed the rapid growth in the number of disciplines, researchers and projects involved. Some research ignores the complexities of the phenomena studied (or oversimplifies them in order to make results more ‘palpable’ for policy-making and the general public), in others the ‘explanatory reach’ of research findings remains unclear. To find about the actual ‘state of knowledge’ in integration/assimilation research is difficult, because of the increasing amount of studies on specific cases, groups or problems, but also because there is a lack of agreed-upon theoretical and methodological concepts and indicators.

Transatlantic discussions and comparisons, although also steadily on the rise, have had to cope with two quite different theoretical developments: in the US, the debate seems largely dominated by the pros and cons of segmented assimilation versus new assimilation theory, although obviously not all research is neither fitting into this dichotomy nor willing to serve it; in Europe, on the other side, the theoretical debate has not been as strong as to produce an independent counterweight to the American debate. Segmented assimilation theory has also been quite influential here, and many scholars have tried to apply it to European contexts. By far the most research in Europe remains within national boundaries, and despite the promising efforts of especially the IMISCOE network\(^1\), the continent’s unique variety and proximity of neighbouring national integration situations and
contexts is hardly sufficiently exploited until now – neither empirically nor theoretically.

Additionally, in transatlantic perspective, there is a widely assumed difference between the concepts of assimilation, taken to be dominant in the US debate, and integration in Europe. The term assimilation linguistically implies a referent to which immigrants and/or their offspring can become similar. In the American debate this referent has generally been ‘the mainstream’ and was revisited from time to time for an adaptation to changed political and demographic realities. The assimilation paradigm obviously originates in the American historical necessities to create common denominators for immigrant cultures in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Studying ‘successful assimilation’ thus has mainly meant to measure the degree of incorporation into patterns of economic and social ‘success’. On the other side, ‘assimilation’ is ambiguous. Especially in the area of economic activities, ‘ethnic enclaves’ and making use of resources within and of the communities, for example by ‘ethnic’ entrepreneurs, are positively valued as proven stepping stones for economic success and/or labour market incorporation. The European perspective on the US frequently overlooks that the notion of ‘mainstream’ (into which immigrants are supposed to assimilate) is not static and that it implies processes of change on both sides: immigrants and new ethnic communities can become American by retaining and celebrating their ‘own’ culture, albeit within an American way of institutionalization and with the ‘American’ aim of becoming economically successful.

While the American notion of ‘mainstream’ does not preclude variety and diversity, European ‘integration’ predominantly carries the implicit ideal of (a minimum degree of) cultural homogeneity – especially referring to language – as a prerequisite for social cohesion. In the European political debate, ‘successful integration’ is often discursively juxtaposed with the scenario of ‘parallel societies’, i.e. ethnically bound subgroups with supposedly very little connection to the wider society. ‘Ethnic enclaves’ or economic success within the ethnic community are not positively valued as a possible pathway to ‘integration’, even when ‘ethnic’ entrepreneurs prove to be economically highly successful.

In contrast to the often strongly polarized debates about integration in Europe, we can observe a lot of pragmatism in the ways in which state agencies and societal institutions respond to the specific needs of immigrants and their children, and to the cultural diversity of their clientele. Practices at the level of daily interactions sometimes even openly contradict official stances and rhetorics. A case in point here is the claimed preference of the national language over the use of the first language of immigrants, while state welfare agencies, for example, generally employ staff or interpreters with knowledge of the languages
of origin in order to be able to communicate well with their clientele. The pragmatisms of organizations and their employees is a strong and often overlooked aspect of integration and assimilation processes. Studying this aspect in transatlantic perspective would probably reveal more similarities than differences.

More explicitly than ‘assimilation’, the term ‘integration’ includes structural aspects of incorporation into society, especially with regard to educational achievements and access to the labour market. As part of the tradition of the stronger welfare states in Western Europe, there are more actively designed policies targeting ethnic minority groups to overcome inequalities. So, measuring ‘integration’ almost automatically means to look at the structural representation of immigrants and their offspring in educational careers and employment figures. To develop structural ‘indicators for integration’ has become a dominant trend among policy-makers and social research institutes. In a discursive ‘short circuit’ especially high levels of education are also seen by many policy-makers as the best way to prevent ethnic ‘separatism’ and self-marginalization. Quite differently from the US, religious affiliation and non-Christian religious institutions are very rarely considered as safeguards for social cohesion and integration, but rather the contrary: the growing institutionalization of Islam in Western Europe is observed with considerable scepticism – and continuously leads to debates about the building of mosques (e.g. Cologne) or minarets (e.g. Switzerland) as proxies for the difficulty to imagine Islam as institutionalized as Christian belief. In the US, by contrast, the building of mosques is considered far more a constitutional normality despite fears of terrorism and similar.

These differences between ‘assimilation’ and ‘integration’ reflect different discourses and institutional arrangements responding to the challenge of rapidly changing demographic realities as much in the US as in Europe. This should be taken into account whenever concepts and theories are discussed in transatlantic perspective. But, at the same time, there are also a lot of similarities in the phenomena to be studied. Especially with regard to cultural aspects the term integration actually means something pretty similar to ‘assimilation’. We believe that it is important to search for more common understandings of similar phenomena and to discuss terminologies with the objective of making them less bound to specific ‘national’ or even local situations.

This special issue brings together scholars from both sides of the Atlantic to discuss central theoretical aspects of assimilation/integration. Its aim is to explore the shortcomings in the American and the European debates on what happens to immigrants and their children when settling in a new environment, and to prepare the ground for the development of common terms and concepts. Since the American debate has been so dominant, most articles in one way or another
contribute to an advancement of the debate opened by segmented assimilation theory, but also adding evidence from research in Europe and gradually opening the focus to a more productive and broader conceptualization of assimilation/integration. All contributors have been involved in empirical research on issues of integration/assimilation over the past years, and therefore all articles are based on empirical evidence and an inductive approach to theory. We consider this the main strength of this issue.

In the first contribution, and as a sort of ‘laying the fundaments’, Alex Stepick and Carol Dutton Stepick (Miami) explain the origins of segmented assimilation theory and how it has undergone several alterations since its introduction, being thus far less static than its critics often presume. They also summarize the major findings about the children of immigrants in the US by drawing upon the largest and most widely cited research studies. Their main proposal for giving assimilation theory a new direction is that the emphasis on national origins in both description and explanation should be replaced with a focus on social contexts and processes.

Hans Vermeulen (Amsterdam) extents the critical focus not only to the application of segmented assimilation theory in Europe, but also to the idea that assimilation would have been simply ‘straight-line’ in the past and ‘segmented’ in the present. His comparative analysis of Greek migration to the US in the early twentieth century and to Germany in the 1960s shows that ‘ethnic retention’ was also a successful strategy in the era of ‘classical assimilation’, and that, on the other side, the existing models do not offer much to explain the success of Greeks in Germany in more recent years. Why two groups with low human capital and perhaps many other similarities nevertheless may follow different integration tracks can only be explained when pre-migration experiences and the use of ‘diasporic capital’ (i.e. community resources not restricted to the community members in the country of immigration) are taken into the account.

Based on the large ISGMNY survey on the second generation in New York, Mary C. Waters, Van C. Tran, John H. Mollenkopf and Philip Kasinitz replicate some of the central analyses and hypotheses of segmented assimilation, especially with regard to the connection between types of acculturation and socioeconomic mobility. One of the most interesting conclusions from their complex statistical analyses is that ‘dissonant acculturation’ only applies to a small minority of the second generation, and that in many aspects the latter rather resembles their peers of non-migrant parentage. Much alarmism and specifically designed models for explaining second generation participation in US cities thus seem exaggerated and overemphasizing ‘ethnic differences’. Underscored in these models are, for example, the negative effects of
racial discrimination and the benefits of a heterogeneous class structure within groups with a strong sense for maintaining ethnic ties.

The explanatory range of segmented assimilation theory is also at stake when Miri Song (Kent) asks ‘what comes after segmented assimilation?’ She points at the tension between the strong statements of segmented assimilation about supposed assimilation outcomes on the one hand and the limited biographical scope mainly on educational outcomes on the other. Based on British empirical evidence, she examines the biographical step frequently following education – and at the same time one of the most crucial issues in assimilation theory since Milton Gordon: (inter)marriage. The paper analyses not only the much higher rates of intermarriage in the British context as compared to the US, but also the differential modes of especially ‘racial’ intermarriage and how it can lead to very different social mobility outcomes.

Michael Eve (Turin) revisits the social (as opposed to ethnic) origins of the term ‘integration’ and adds a quite different empirical perspective: internal migrants from the south to the north in Italy. Looking at their social networks, he argues that migration leads to a reorganization of social networks which can produce a marked separation between groups – but not necessarily based on ‘foreignness’ or the segregation of different ethnic groups. The Italian case of internal mass migration has produced long-term, i.e. ‘second generation’ effects in terms of stratification and schooling similar to many cases of international migration. This illustrates that network effects are not necessarily built on citizenship disadvantage and ethnic differences, and that the focus of attention should probably be less on ‘nationality groups’ per se, and more on the constructions of social difference.

The final article, by Maurice Crul and Jens Schneider (Amsterdam), wraps up some of the central arguments above and looks at how the second generation and their peers from native parentage find a place and position in the context of dramatically changing ethnic and (sub)cultural realities in cities. Evidence from the large TIES3 survey on the second generation in Europe shows high degrees of local involvement in the second generation and the dwindling centrality of single ethnic belongings – which challenges established notions of ‘newcomers’ and ‘natives’ and gives a different connotation to the concept of ‘remaking the mainstream’. In their proposed Comparative Integration Context Theory, the authors argue that institutional and discursive contexts explain differences in the ‘integration patterns’ of the second generation across countries and cities.

Making use of very diverse kinds of strong empirical evidence – quantitative and qualitative, large survey data and case studies – the articles in this special issue thus not only criticize established models
(and the sometimes reductionist debates on who is right or wrong), they also give clear indications and hindsights for the most promising directions of future research. Its main merit, however, may be to further stimulate the transatlantic debate on the basis of broader knowledge and less dichotomized concepts.

Notes

1. IMISCOE (International Migration, Integration and Social Cohesion) is a Network of Excellence uniting 23 established European research institutes and over 500 researchers from all over Europe.
2. ISGMNY is the acronym for Immigrant Second-Generation in New York and was realised by the Center for Urban Research at the City University of New York (CUNY).
3. TIES is the acronym for The Integration of the European Second Generation, a joint study of nine research institutes in eight European countries. The study is introduced in detail in the article.

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