The complexities and confusions of segmented assimilation

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Abstract

The concept of segmented assimilation is both the most important and the most controversial idea to have emerged over the past twenty years from the literature on the children of immigrants in the US. This article traces the origins of the concept, attempts to unravel the controversy surrounding it and to show how the concept has evolved. We consider the major findings from the largest and most widely cited research studies about the children of immigrants in the US. We find that segmented assimilation has been used both simply to describe the diversity of educational and economic outcomes among the children of immigrants and as a typology to explain those outcomes. The typology has been the more controversial use and has undergone several alterations since its introduction. We conclude that the emphasis on national origins in both description and explanation should be replaced with a focus on social contexts and processes.

Keywords: segmented assimilation; second generation; United States; educational outcomes; national origins; integration.

The concept of segmented assimilation is both the most important and the most controversial idea to have emerged over the past twenty years from the literature on the children of immigrants. A Google scholar search for ‘segmented assimilation’ in late 2009 yielded 2,700 citations. As a guiding concept segmented assimilation has been adopted by hundreds of researchers. At the same time others have assailed it. This article traces the origins of the concept to unravel the controversy surrounding it and to show how the concept has evolved from its first relatively simple three-category postulation to a more nuanced, complex framework that is a work in progress influenced by a growing body of empirical knowledge.
Antecedents and origins of the concept

Segmented assimilation is an elaboration of the classic concept of assimilation. Early definitions of assimilation emphasized the cultural and social dimensions of immigrants adapting and fitting into American culture and society. In 1921, for example, Park and Burgess referred to incorporation into a ‘common cultural life’ (1921, p. 735). Contemporary assimilation analyses, however, are more likely to focus on educational and economic outcomes as the most important and measurable considerations. For recent researchers, cultural attributes such as language use and social relations like residential assimilation versus segregation have been viewed as secondary or occasionally as causal factors determining educational and economic outcomes.¹

Segmented assimilation applies to the children of immigrants, that is, people who have at least one parent who was born abroad. This includes individuals born in the host country and those born abroad but who came to the host country while they were still children. Being born abroad, yet raised in a new host country has been called the 1.5 generation (Rumbaut and Ima 1988). The term ‘children of immigrants’ refers to both the second and the 1.5 generations (Portes and Rumbaut 2001).²

The concept of segmented assimilation could apply to the children of immigrants in any country, but it was developed specifically in reference to the US children of immigrants who arrived after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 lifted most of the severe restrictions on immigration to the US created in the early 1920s. The last great wave of immigration came mostly from Europe before the 1920s (Higham 1988; Foner 2006).

The first formulation of segmented assimilation appeared in 1993 when Portes and Zhou (1993) postulated that the children of contemporary immigrants were likely to follow one of three paths leading to different social, economic and cultural destinations. The first is that of traditional assimilation via acculturation and integration into the white middle class. The second is the opposite, a path to permanent poverty and the US underclass. The third path preserves immigrant values and community solidarity and leads to rapid economic advancement (Portes and Zhou 1993, p. 82). Subsequently, the concept was expanded to include other paths and also more broadly defined ‘empirically as a set of strategic outcomes in the lives of young second-generation persons’ (Portes, Fernández-Kelly and Haller 2005, 2009).

The outcomes considered are generally educational and economic, particularly how many years or what level of education and what occupation and income are attained. ‘Downward’ indicators are linked to curtailed education and poorer economic outcomes. Primary causes
attributed to ‘upward’ or ‘downward’ assimilation are usually structural, particularly racism and the economic opportunity structure.

The assertion that not all immigrants integrate in the same fashion is not new. Robert Park, the most noted progenitor of assimilation theory, noted: ‘Particularly where peoples who come together are of divergent cultures and widely different racial stocks, assimilation and amalgamation do not take place so rapidly as they do in other cases’ (Park 1928 cited in Gratton 2002).

The historical analysis literature confirms that second-generation groups from the first great wave of migration to the US confronted prejudice and discrimination and that different groups demonstrated different rates of upward mobility (Sassler 2006; Gratton, Gutmann and Skop 2007). Some among the generally high-achieving Jews demonstrated ‘downward mobility’ (Kessner 1977; Sassler, 2006). It took almost 100 years from the time mass immigration from Italy began in the late nineteenth century before the children of Italian migrants made it into the American mainstream (Perlmann 1988).

By the mid-twentieth century, the idea of three segments to assimilation emerged. The triple melting pot, as it was known, referred to immigrants assimilating into the culturally and ethnically defined categories of US society: Protestant, Jewish or Catholic (Kennedy 1952; Herberg 1960). Gordon’s classic work published in 1964 maintained that acculturation was inevitable, but he also anticipated the persistence of ethnic divisions (Gordon 1964, p. 159). In the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and the accompanying revival of white ethnicity, Glazer and Moynihan (1970) wrote of enduring ethnic and racial divisions in US society.

Throughout the 1970s and most of the 1980s attention shifted to the characteristics of the new wave of first-generation immigrants who had arrived in the wake of 1965 liberalizing changes to US immigration law. While educational anthropologists began examining young first- and second-generation immigrants in schools as early as the 1970s (Ogbu 1978; Suárez-Orozco 1987; Gibson 1989), there was relatively little scholarly attention directed to the children of immigrants until the 1990s when Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut began the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Survey [CILS]. Debate soon emerged on the possible outcomes for the children of immigrants.

The contemporary second generation

The current wave of migration that began after 1965 is notably different from the earlier great wave of primarily European migrants to the US. By 2003, over 50 per cent of immigrants were from Latin America and over 25 per cent arrived from Asia with much smaller numbers from Africa, the Middle East and Europe. The largest single
national origin group is from Mexico, contributing over 25 per cent of all immigrants to the US. The children of the current immigrants look different from the white mainstream, and the economic restructuring that began in the latter half of the twentieth century means that they are confronting an economy that increasingly rewards those with advanced education.

Gans (1992) observed that the children of immigrants from ‘less fortunate’ socioeconomic circumstances, especially if dark-skinned, faced the risk of being trapped in permanent poverty because they would lack job opportunities and would confront high rates of unemployment, crime, alcoholism, drug use and other problems associated with poverty and the frustration of unfulfilled expectations. A year later Portes and Zhou (1993) published the paper that initiated the debate on assimilation into different segments of society by the children of immigrants.

The dominant theme in current research on the children of immigrants is the determination of socio-economic integration, largely measured by academic achievement and labour-market attainment. When assessing the assimilation of the children of immigrants, to whom should they be compared? Often, on education and income measures, first- and second-generation immigrants fare well compared to native minorities, but not so well when compared to native whites. Also, many in the second generation fare well when compared to their parents’ generation, while others do the same or worse. In national datasets, along with focused studies in Miami, San Diego and New York, many children of immigrants exhibit higher educational achievement than the native-born (Hirschman 1994; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Kasinitz et al. 2008). In educational achievement, Asians and particularly children of Chinese immigrants, for example, tend to outperform both natives and other immigrant groups (Hirschman 2001; Portes, Fernández-Kelly and Haller 2005; Waldinger and Reichl 2006; Kasinitz et al. 2008). At the same time, children of immigrant Mexicans and some Caribbean populations tend to perform especially poorly compared to the native white population and other children of immigrants (Perlmann 2004; Portes, Fernández-Kelly and Haller 2005), yet these children show improvements over the educational attainment of their immigrant parents (Smith 2003). On measures of occupation and income, both first- and second-generation immigrants from Europe and Canada earn more than first- or second-generation immigrant groups from other places (Hirschman 1994).

Explaining immigrant outcomes

Apart from the populist anti-immigrant discourse, there is no dispute that there is great variation in the characteristics immigrant parents
migrate with and the context of reception they confront in the US; nor is there dispute that the educational and economic outcomes of the children of immigrants are highly varied. There is, however, disagreement on how to explain the diversity in the outcomes.

The factors employed to explain second-generation educational and economic outcomes fall into two general categories: 1) individual and familial and 2) community-related. Scholars generally agree which individual and familial factors are important. Disagreement, however, revolves around the role of community.

**Individual and family factors**

Parental socioeconomic status, usually measured by parental education, has consistently been the single most important variable in predicting children of immigrants’ education and subsequent income outcomes (see, for example, Portes and Rumbaut 2006). Children of immigrants with middle-class backgrounds are able to benefit from financially secure families, good schools, safe neighbourhoods and other hypothetically supportive formal and informal organizations that promote educational and occupational achievement. Accordingly, Portes and Rumbaut (2006, ch. 8) identify second-generation immigrants whose parents have high socioeconomic status as one of the segments of contemporary second-generation assimilation.

Family structure and child-rearing practices also make a difference. Compared to families headed by US-born parents, immigrant families exert more parental control and involvement and demonstrate higher parental expectations during their children’s adolescence (Keller and Tillman 2008), all of which contribute to academic achievement (Astone and McLanahan 1991; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Glick and White 2004). In contrast, children of immigrants raised by single parents are more likely to encounter academic difficulties as having a single parent is correlated with other risk factors such as low income, lower parental education and living in neighbourhoods with poor schools; also, children in these households often feel an obligation to help support the family through work (Fuligni, Tseng and Lam 1999; Fernández-Kelly and Konczal 2005; Mollenkopf 2005; Portes, Fernández-Kelly and Haller 2005; Harris, Jamison and Trujillo 2008).

Gender also demonstrates a consistent effect on both the educational and occupational achievement of the children of immigrants. Female children of immigrants tend to earn higher grades than their male counterparts and also complete more years of schooling (Kao and Tienda 1995; Fuligni 1997; Grant and Rong 1999; Zhou and Bankston 2001; López 2003; Rodriguez 2003; Feliciano and Rumbaut 2005; Portes, Fernández-Kelly and Haller 2005, p. 1026; Sanchez,
Colon and Esparaza 2005; Zarate and Gallimore 2005; Rumbaut 2008; Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2008). While some occupational choices remain traditionally gendered, females are more likely than males to aspire to and to attain the highest-status occupations, even those that are male-dominated (Feliciano and Rumbaut 2005). In spite of superior academic achievement and overall higher-status occupations, females still earn less than males. In San Diego and South Florida, the male children of immigrants earned more than $6,000 more per year than females of comparable family backgrounds and academic achievement (Portes, Fernández-Kelly and Haller 2005, p. 1026). Similarly, the female children of immigrants in New York earned less than their male counterparts (Kasinitz et al. 2008, p. 377).5

Legal status particularly impacts on advancement to higher education among the children of immigrants. Compared to those who remain undocumented, those who have legal permanent residence status have a much higher chance of advancing their education beyond the twelfth grade (Bean, Brown and Rumbaut 2004).6

There is a consensus that family socioeconomic status, family structure and relations, gender and an individual’s legal status are important determinants of second-generation educational and economic outcomes. And one of the segments described by Portes and colleagues refers exclusively to these characteristics. Parents who have high socioeconomic status are likely to have intact families and legal immigration status, and their children are likely to pursue advanced education and economic status (Portes and Rumbaut 2006, ch. 8).

There is substantial disagreement on what difference community makes to the attainments of children of immigrants. Does it matter where immigrants settle, who lives in their neighbourhoods and what kind of schools their children attend? These issues are central to two of Portes and Zhou’s three paths of segmented assimilation: those who do surprisingly well, particularly Chinese, and those who experience what they call downward mobility.

Community context

Segmented assimilation explains disproportionate success, such as that demonstrated by the educational attainment of some Asian groups, by building upon earlier research on enclave economies (Portes and Borocz 1989). Portes and his colleagues argued that immigrants in ethnic enclaves, most notably Cubans in Miami, received higher returns on their education because of ethnic solidarity that prompted community members to help each other. As applied to the children of immigrants, this argument draws indirectly on the work of various educational anthropologists, particularly John Ogbu (inter alia 1978, 2003), who argued that immigrants, whom he labelled as voluntary
migrants, had a positive orientation to education that spurs their children to excel in school and value education even when they attend poor schools and their parents do not have the resources to help them. Gibson (1989) argued that children of Punjabi migrants to Northern California achieved educational success in spite of their parents’ relatively low educational background because of parental pressure to avoid excessive Americanization and maintain Punjabi culture, most notably respect for education and for authority. Gibson labelled this process ‘selective acculturation’, a phrase that Portes and Zhou borrowed. Zhou and Bankston similarly observed that Vietnamese adolescents growing up in the US were constantly reminded of their duty to show respect for their elders, care for younger siblings, work hard and make decisions upon approval of parents – not simply within a particular family but in the community where other families practised similar values. These studies showed how communities can provide valuable resources even if they are not materially well off (Bankston and Zhou 1997; Zhou and Bankston 1994, 1998, 2001).

A close reading of the studies that point to the importance of selective acculturation indicates that, rather than the general retention of traditional culture, what is most critical is respect for one’s parents and specifically their desires for their children to achieve educationally. Louie (2004) describes how, in spite of low wages, many Chinese parents often pay to have their children enrol in afternoon and weekend tutoring programmes. The parental sense of obligation to their children’s education often keeps working-class Chinese immigrant mothers and fathers from divorcing even when they are unhappy together. Because their children recognize their parents’ sacrifices, the children also tend to put off marriage and childbearing until they have finished school and established themselves in careers (see also Tseng and Fuligni 2000).

Beyond the parental pressure to excel academically, cross-class ties within the Chinese community also appear to be important. Middle-class Chinese share their cultural capital, i.e. knowledge of how the US educational system works, by informing those of working-class backgrounds which public schools are best and which after-school academies produce the most successful students. In New York, Chinese-language newspapers also publish guides to the public school system that indicate which schools have the highest likelihood of launching students into prestigious universities. Co-ethnic communities are clearly important in the case of some Asian groups and may also play a role in the high educational achievement of other groups, such as Cubans who attend private schools in Miami and Russian Jews in New York (Portes, Fernández-Kelly and Haller 2005; Kasinitz et al. 2008).
Where co-ethnic communities do not display much solidarity, segmented assimilation argues that the children of immigrants can be more vulnerable to racism and experience downward assimilation.

**The context of reception and downward mobility**

Assuredly the most controversial critique directed at the first presentation of segmented assimilation was its assertion that association with and acculturation into native minority youth culture would lead to downward assimilation (Portes and Zhou 1993). Downwardly assimilating children of immigrants were described as adopting the adversarial stance towards education attributed to native minorities living in the same inner-city neighbourhoods. In Portes and Zhou’s view in the original segmented assimilation argument, downward mobility was fundamentally caused by conditions of racism, poverty and spatial segregation that include the presence of inferior schools in inner-city neighbourhoods.

Race and spatial segregation has always played a critical role in US society, and it continues to be important for today’s children of immigrants. Youth with disadvantaged economic characteristics residing in metropolitan areas are more likely to drop out of school than others (Landale, Oropesa and Llanes 1998). Mexican students, in particular, are likely to attend schools that seem to compound obstacles to academic achievement rather than alleviate them (Portes and Hao 2005). Pong and Hao (2007) found neighbourhood and school conditions are not only better for natives than for immigrants, but also immigrants’ children’s school performance is more negatively affected by poor neighbourhood and school conditions than it is for US natives attending similar schools. Hao and Pong (2008) also found that Mexican students are less likely to be exposed to favourable school characteristics than other students. Rodriguez (2002) found that achievement in maths was lower for Cuban and Nicaraguan children of immigrants in Miami attending schools with high proportions of African American enrolment. Attending highly segregated, primarily minority schools also reduces subsequent income. Portes, Fernández-Kelly and Haller (2005, p. 1035) found that each additional percentage point of fellow students who are from a minority in one’s high school reduced annual incomes six years after high school graduation by $250 per year.7

While few disagree on the negative effects of racism on employment opportunities, considerably more controversy has surrounded the assertion of the negative influence of US, particularly minority, peers and culture on the children of immigrants. The first formulation of segmented assimilation quoted ethnographic work among Haitians in Miami (Portes and Stepick 1993) and Mexicans in a northern
California agricultural town (Matute-Bianchi 1986). Both cases demonstrated some children of immigrants were rejecting the value of education, which, in turn, was likely to lead to low educational attainment and poor job prospects within the context of racism and an hour-glass economy.

The argument is a direct extension of John Ogbu’s explanation that native minorities’ have adopted oppositional attitudes and behaviour towards mainstream society that specifically place a low value on school achievement. Portes and Zhou (1993) argued that the children of immigrants of colour in poor neighbourhoods are exposed to the adversarial subculture developed by marginalized native youth to cope with their own difficult situation (Sullivan 1989). In order to be accepted by their US native peers, the children of immigrants have to acculturate quickly to the dominant surrounding peer culture.

There is ample evidence that many children of immigrants do quickly acculturate to the norms of their peers with whom they attend school. They learn English as quickly as possible and adopt styles of the presentation of self that allow them to ‘fit in’ (see, for example, Suárez-Orozco 1989; Olsen 1997; Stepick 1998). The argument that the adoption by the children of immigrants of native oppositional peer culture is a determinant of downward assimilation and resultant negative economic outcomes is reminiscent of Oscar Lewis’s concept of the ‘culture of poverty’ (Fernández-Kelly 2008, p. 119), which claimed that some poor were trapped in multi-generational poverty at least partially because of culture. Lewis clearly stated that the culture of poverty emerged only under particular structural conditions peculiar to capitalism. Nevertheless, many critics perceived his argument as a form of cultural determinism that claimed the poor are poor because of the values they choose to adopt, and not because of structural impediments like racism and poor educational institutions. Although not claiming the conditions are unique to capitalism, Portes, Fernández-Kelly and Haller do emphasize that ‘entrapment of these populations in low income urban areas is the structural condition that underlies the proliferation of pathologies of which they are the first victims’ (2005, p. 1008).

An emphasis on cultural determinism also overstates the causal strength of culture over structure. Kasinitz et al. (2008, p. 346) note that native white males are just as likely to engage in rebellious behaviours as the children of immigrants, but the consequences for rebellious native whites are typically different. What differs between native whites and the children of immigrants who are black or Latino is not the adversarial behaviours but how the larger society reacts to them. Blacks and Latinos, for example, are more likely to be ensnared by the criminal justice system. Among the children of immigrants studied in San Diego and South Florida, West Indians and Mexicans
had the highest incarceration rates (Portes, Fernández-Kelly and Haller 2005; Rumbaut 2008), while in the New York surveys native-born blacks and Puerto Ricans had been arrested more frequently than any of the immigrant groups (Kasinitz et al. 2008). While native whites engaging in oppositional behaviours may also be arrested, they are far more likely to have more family resources to help them and face a criminal justice system more lenient to them (Sullivan 1989). As Kasinitz et al. argue, ‘In this context their race is a “master status,” sociologist Robert Merton’s (1967) term for a characteristic that trumps all other personal characteristics’ (2008, p. 349). So, it is not oppositional behaviours in themselves that lead to negative consequences, but the combination of the behaviours in the context of US racist structures that lead to more severe consequences for blacks and Latinos who engage in such oppositional behaviours.

Kasinitz et al. (2008) argue that associating with native minorities not only does not produce downward assimilation, but can actually help upward mobility. These researchers report that the children of immigrants are likely to believe that they benefit by being characterized as non-white as this makes them attractive to universities and employers wishing to increase diversity (Kasinitz et al. 2008, p. 353).

We suspect that the potential advantages of identifying or being classified together with native minorities varies locally, regionally and according to job sector. Many of the economic gains of minorities since the Civil Rights struggle can be attributed to minorities’ increased access to and presence in public education and public sector jobs. In general, we hypothesize that where minorities have had the biggest impact politically, they will also have the most economic and educational opportunities. Thus, blacks, including the children of black immigrants, will have the greatest opportunities in general in the north east and the south. Second-generation Latinos will have the greatest opportunities in the south west and west. These opportunities are also subject to more specific local variation. Cubans, but not black immigrants, for example, will have the greatest opportunities in Miami where Cubans have seized political power, even though Miami is geographically part of the south.

We also feel that the consequences of adopting native minority cultural behaviours also depend upon the relationship to her/his parents that the child of immigrants has. As indicated above, children who recognize and respect their parents’ sacrifices for the children’s education are more likely to be educationally successful. On the other hand, to immigrant parents, their children’s adoption of alternative forms of clothing, music, foods and most importantly not respecting their parents or other adults is perceived as rejecting their ancestral culture and becoming American (Portes, Fernández-Kelly and Haller 2005, p. 1009). If the adoption of native minority behaviours creates
conflict between immigrant parents and children, what Portes labels cultural dissonance, then the children’s response to the conflict may include not doing well in school.

Empirically, there are some children of immigrants on paths that can be labelled ‘downward mobility’. The studies from San Diego and South Florida, Los Angeles and New York all report about 10 per cent of survey respondents had been incarcerated, although this ranges from a low of 3 per cent for Chinese in New York to a high of 20 per cent for West Indians in South Florida (Feliciano and Rumbaut 2005; Portes, Fernández-Kelly and Haller 2005; Kasinitz et al. 2008; Rumbaut 2008). Almost all of these are males.8

The predominant pattern for the majority of the children of immigrants who live in low-income areas among native minorities and attend poor schools is, however, not downward assimilation. Instead, the most likely socioeconomic outcome for the children of immigrants is horizontal or stagnant social mobility, i.e. the second generation reproduces the working-class status of their immigrant parents. In New York, for example, the children of immigrants had overall averages in both education and income that were higher than native minority African Americans and Puerto Ricans (Kasinitz et al. 2008). Portes, Fernández-Kelly and Haller’s (2005) re-consideration of segmented assimilation both minimized the discussion of culture’s role in downward assimilation and labelled as ‘marginal working class’ the majority who had neither downward mobility nor dramatic upward mobility. These were most likely children of immigrants whose parents had working-class status and weak co-ethnic communities.

The potential importance of ‘marginal working class’ follows directly from arguments about the changing nature of the US economy and particularly the decrease in the real value of the minimum wage. A marginal working-class status is characterized by low-skill, low-wage employment, with few benefits and probably instability. While no one has systematically empirically explored this status among the children of immigrants, it has been obliquely addressed. Smith (2006), for example, reports that many children of Mexican immigrants in New York, especially boys, have taken advantage of the ‘second-chance’ mechanisms that produce modest upward mobility. It remains difficult to determine if the majority of children of immigrants constitute a ‘marginal’ working class or something that might be more stable and central. The jobs they have are a major part of the restructured US economy and, while they are working class, most are somewhat better off than their parents.

A small but theoretically significant group are those who made it ‘against all the odds’, that is, those who appeared as if they should have been destined to downward assimilation yet exhibited significant upward mobility. Specifically these were individuals who had very low
family socioeconomic status, a negative context of reception and a single-parent family (Portes and Fernández-Kelly 2008, p. 22). All of these children of immigrants indicated that their parents strongly believed in education and their single parents controlled their lives so that they would not be distracted from focusing on education. Children of immigrant youth across the achievement outcome spectrum, however, frequently had similarly stern and controlling parents. Those who succeeded against the odds did not rebel against their parents but were instead motivated by a strong desire to please their parents. In contrast, those who did not succeed were more likely to value the supposedly more American values of individual freedom and self-satisfaction (Nicholas, Stepick and Dutton Stepick 2008).

Pleasing parents by focusing on studying, while necessary, is insufficient by itself for success against all the odds for students whose immigrant parents do not have the cultural capital to help locate and navigate the resources in the US educational system. For many Chinese students, community solidarity and orientation towards education make these resources available. Other communities do not have the solidarity and mechanisms to make this cultural capital generally accessible. School-based counselling in low-income schools is usually underfunded and lacking necessary resources to help students effectively (Acherman-Chor 2001). Succeeding against all the odds generally means stumbling upon someone or a particular programme that takes a special interest particularly in the individual student and provides information on what courses one should take, how to apply to universities and how to apply for financial aid (Konczal and Haller 2008; Portes and Fernández-Kelly 2008; Smith 2006; Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch 1995).

While a small group, those children of immigrants who do succeed against all the odds demonstrate that the broad structural forces of racism, poor neighbourhoods and substandard schools can be overcome. They also push scholars of the children of immigrants to yet another consideration of the formulas ascribed to the children of immigrants by the segmented assimilation framework.

**Segments or trends?**

At the most elemental descriptive level, segmented assimilation simply means that not all children of immigrants assimilate or integrate in the same fashion or achieve the same outcomes. While some groups on average already approach or even surpass the educational attainment of non-Latino whites, most do not. Others fail to complete high school and may end up in jail or as unemployed, unmarried young parents. Nevertheless, it does appear that most of the children of immigrants already surpass the educational and occupational attainment of native
minorities, that is African Americans, Puerto Ricans and third, or more, generation Mexican Americans. The educational and economic outcomes for most children of immigrants end up somewhere in-between the averages of non-Latino whites and those of native minorities, somewhere in the large middle span between the executive office suite and jail.

Given that the focus of current studies is on ‘children’ of immigrants who are now in their twenties or thirties, these ‘children’ could still show advances. Even harder to predict is if the third- or fourth-generation descendants of the current children of immigrants will assimilate, as predicted by Alba and Nee (2003). This ultimate integration is for the moment unknowable. Presently, the educational and occupational outcomes of many of the children of immigrants remain different from the standards defined by the averages for non-Latino whites. In this descriptive sense, segmented assimilation presently exists as a reality for a great many individuals.

Segmented assimilation can also be taken as a theoretical explanation for these descriptive differences, as a typology of trajectories and factors that determine or at least influence individuals onto one of these trajectories. The typology distinguishes: 1) the highly educated second generation that has its roots in either: a) parents who have high socioeconomic status and/or b) a co-ethnic community that highly emphasizes education and has high cross-class solidarity; 2) the working class that constitutes the majority of the second generation; 3) the approximately one-tenth who obtain relatively little education and experience incarceration or give birth while still adolescents and must curtail their education; and 4) the 1 per cent who defy the odds, who, in spite of having parents with low socioeconomic status, living in poor neighbourhoods and attending poor schools, manage to succeed.

Because migrants from particular nations often have similar socioeconomic status and confront similar contexts of reception, these characteristics are often projected as potential trajectories for children of immigrants from particular national backgrounds. Mexican immigrants, for example, generally have relatively low socioeconomic status, confront prejudice and discrimination and often have difficulty obtaining a legal immigration status. Accordingly, their children tend to have relatively low educational and economic outcomes. In contrast, Chinese immigrants may have relatively low education, but the Chinese community does not confront as much negative discrimination as Mexicans (or black immigrants) and it not only places an especially strong emphasis on education but more importantly has cross-class solidarity that provides information and assistance in obtaining the best education possible. Accordingly, the children of Chinese migrants often attain a relatively high education and good jobs.
National origin can be a proxy for mode of integration and family socioeconomic status, but it creates the risk of obscuring the underlying social processes that produce differential educational and economic outcomes for the second generation. Ethnographic research (e.g. Louie (2004) reveals that underlying processes not readily measured by surveys account for the observed national origin and ethnic differences. In this sense, the segments into which the children of immigrants assimilate reflect complex processes and trends rather than discrete social divisions. Although qualitative data originally inspired segmented assimilation typologies, most ethnographies have process as their focus, i.e. looking at questions of how or which path is taken by individuals to arrive at a particular socioeconomic destination. Increasingly we can find examples in the literature that, at least loosely, consider how the participants in qualitative studies might fit into one or another of the typologies offered by the concept of segmented assimilation. We believe it is the dialectic between such qualitative studies and the more representative, larger survey samples that will further refine the concept of segmented assimilation and contribute to its value as a typological framework.

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Notes
1. European scholars tend to prefer the terms incorporation or integration which avoid the implication that immigrants end up being indistinguishable from native members of the host society. The contemporary use of assimilation avoids this implication also and it is explicit in the concept of segmented assimilation. As currently used by most researchers assimilation, incorporation and integration are synonymous.
2. Segmented assimilation could also apply to later descendants of immigrants, i.e. the third, fourth and later generations. Presently, with the exception of Mexicans, there are too few of these from the current wave in the US to provide empirical data.
3. The incomes of second-generation Mexican men lag behind native whites, although they earn more than first-generation Mexicans (Valdez 2006; Waldinger and Reichl 2006; Waldinger and Lim 2008). In San Diego and South Florida over 20 per cent of the young adult children of immigrants had average household incomes greater than $75,000, while 16 per cent had less than $20,000 yearly family incomes (Portes, Fernández-Kelly and Haller 2005, p. 1018). In New York, native whites earn the most on average and native Puerto Ricans the least. In-between are the immigrants who are differentiated by national origin, with Russian Jews and
Chinese having the highest earnings and Dominicans earning closer to the native minorities (Kasinitz et al. 2008, p. 177).

4. For an academic review of the popular discourse and politics surrounding US immigration, see Chavez (2008).

5. The one exception was West Indian females who earned more than West Indian males in the New York study (Kasinitz et al. 2008).

6. Everyone born in the US is ipso facto a US citizen. For the 1.5 generation who were born outside the US, legal status does not affect their early education. The US Supreme Court (‘Plyer v. Doe’ 1982) ruled that all children in the US, regardless of their immigration status, have a right to a free public education through to the end of high school, i.e. the twelfth grade. The court, however, did not give immigrants without legal status (including the 1.5 generation) the right to attend colleges and universities at the same cost as citizens or legal permanent residents.

7. Portes, Fernández-Kelly and Haller (2005) do point out that these negative outcomes result also indirectly from low parental human capital, especially among Haitians.

8. The somewhat parallel path that curtails education for females is early childbearing.

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