

Center for Studies in Demography and Ecology



Group Assimilation During Periods of High Immigration: Methodological and Theoretical Issues

by

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ABSTRACT

Since 1965, immigration from Asia and Latin America has led to dramatic increases in the relative sizes of these groups within the United States. Attempts to analyze how high levels of immigration affect the assimilation of “ethnic groups” have been hampered by the failure to properly distinguish between the native-born and foreign born in empirical analyses, as well as by the conflation of the processes of “immigrant acculturation” and “intergenerational assimilation” under the more general rubric of “ethnic group assimilation.”

In this paper, I demonstrate the need to measure not only how immigration has changed the size of ethnic groups within the United States, but also how it has led to a shift in the internal composition within these groups favoring the first generation. More importantly, I show the need to better theorize the link between immigration, group size, and assimilation. While many researchers point to the different social context immigrants face today, fewer note the changed status of native born members of these “non-white” groups within the US, and how this in turn affects larger process of group assimilation.

Introduction

Within immigrant communities there are clear distinctions between those born in the United States and those born abroad. For the Japanese in the United States at the beginning of the century, these intra-group differences were demarcated by the generational terms “Issei”, “Nisei”, “Sansei”,¹ which marked the distance of group members from their land of origin. Similar distinctions exist today among ethnic groups newly arrived to the United States. For members of these groups, these distinctions serve not only to identify the place of members within the history of the groups’ settlement in the United States, but also indicate differences in attitudes and behaviors of members based on their exposure to their new environment.

Although researchers who study the assimilation process of "newer" ethnic groups are careful to distinguish empirically between native and foreign-born members in their models,² they seldom question how the divergent social forces faced by the immigrant generation and their children impact the study of "group assimilation." Making this distinction is particularly critical during periods of high immigration, a situation we face at present. I would argue that the conflation of these two processes, typically called “immigrant acculturation” and “intergenerational assimilation,” under the more general rubric of “ethnic group assimilation,” rests on the problematic assumption that these two processes are not just historically congruent but also inevitably bound together. This in turn, has slowed the development of theoretical models of assimilation, and made historical comparisons of the assimilation process difficult.

The primary goal of this paper is to clarify the link between immigration and the assimilation of “ethnic groups.” Accordingly, I begin with an overview of how the concept “group assimilation” has been defined and conceptualized in the early assimilation literature, before tackling the more theoretically and methodologically complex issue of how to analyze the demographic impact of high immigration rates on “group assimilation.” Next, I demonstrate the need to treat native-born and foreign-born members of ethnic groups as analytically distinct, to separate the impact immigration has on the size versus the composition of “ethnic groups,” and what this in turn implies for the social integration of these groups. In doing so, I show the need to better theorize the link between immigration, group size and assimilation. The paper concludes with an empirical illustration of the issues discussed, focusing on the marriage trends of those claiming Chinese ancestry in California from 1980 to 1990.

Defining “Group Assimilation”

The earliest use of the concept of assimilation in the social sciences can be traced to the work of Robert Park and his colleagues at the University of Chicago. Park and Burgess (1970: 361) saw group assimilation as being the “perfect” end product of the more general process of ethnic and racial group interaction. Park (1950) identified four major stages that marked the interaction of racial and ethnic groups that came into contact with each other: 1) contact, 2) competition and conflict, 3) accommodation, and 4) assimilation. For Park and Burgess (1970: 359) the fundamental form of group interaction in the United States arose from the continuous arrival of new immigrants, which in turn forced society to create ways to maintain order between disparate groups. They saw each new group’s arrival initiating conflict between their own and previous groups, as different groups competed for scarce economic resources. Critical to their

analysis was the idea that conflict was between groups rather than individuals, and that the level of conflict varied as a function of the size of each group (1970: 298-299). It was here that they differentiated between two processes that over time helped reduce this inter-group conflict: accommodation and assimilation.

Park and Burgess (1970: 305) saw accommodation as a societal response to overt conflict between groups, through the creation of a socially recognized “arrangement which defines the reciprocal relations and respective spheres of action of each (group).” They saw this as creating a relatively stable, if unequal, system such as one of caste, or a more transitory system of open classes. In either case, although direct conflict was subsumed, it remained latent as a potential force that could re-emerge with a change in situation between groups. In contrast to accommodation, which was seen as a social process allowing for the continuing survival of distinct groups, assimilation was seen as the slow process whereby new groups are absorbed and integrated into society (Park and Burgess 1970: 360). Although Park and Burgess (1970: 361-362) recognized that the type of contact between different groups played a significant role in influencing the spread of assimilation, their writings suggest that they believed that social contacts across group boundaries would eventually lead to assimilation.

While Park and Burgess’s model of race relations helped establish and continues to influence theoretical work in assimilation; it was Milton Gordon (1964) who created a clear set of definitions to guide empirical studies. Gordon’s major contributions to the assimilation literature were to identify the various dimensions of assimilation, and to describe the relationships of these sub-processes to the overall process of group assimilation. Gordon (1964: 70) identified seven dimensions of assimilation (cultural, structural, marital, identificational,

attitude receptional, behavioral receptional, and civic), with the two key forms being cultural and structural assimilation.

Gordon (1964) argued that the first stage that occurs for any new group is cultural assimilation, where the group adapts to the cultural patterns of the dominant culture, first learning the language and customs, then taking on the norms and values of the new culture. Gordon argues that this stage occurs for all groups and is merely a matter of time (inter-generational), and will occur even in the face of group members' attempts to maintain their culture. For Gordon, however, this stage by itself does not imply progression to further stages. For a group to fully assimilate into society, it is necessary for structural assimilation to occur; first through entrance into the institutions and organizations of society, then through primary contacts with members of the host society that this eventually permits. Once structural assimilation occurs, however, all other forms of assimilation "naturally follow" (Gordon 1964: 81). With the breakdown of boundaries between groups, there is increasing intermarriage between groups, and eventually the "minority" group begins to identify with the host society, at the cost of maintaining their distinctive identity.

Questions have been raised about the theoretical utility of the assimilation model, in particular, the assumed unidirectionality of the model. Besides general theoretical objections, it has been frequently argued that this model does not adequately capture the assimilation processes of different ethnic and racial groups in the United States (see Alba and Nee 1997, Barkan 1995, Hirschman 1983). This issue is particularly relevant today, as the United States faces a new wave of immigration that is radically changing the racial and ethnic make-up of its population.

Post-1965 Immigration

The recent wave of immigration can be traced back to the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments of 1965, which initiated dramatic demographic changes in the United States. With the passage of this act, which replaced the country by country quota system that had favored immigrants from Europe, and ended the ban on Asian entry, immigrants from Latin America and Asia began to dominate flows to the United States. Whereas the majority of previous immigrants came from Europe, immigrants from Latin America (38%) and Asia (45%) now make up more than 80% of the legal immigrants entering the United States (Fix and Passel 1994).³ This shift in immigration flows has had both direct and indirect consequences for the racial-ethnic composition of the nation; first, through the direct addition of new people to the national population, and second, due to the higher fertility rates of Asian and Hispanic immigrants (Fix and Passel 1994). Assuming no drastic change in immigration policy, Fix and Passel (1994) have calculated that by 2040, the Hispanic population will reach 64 million or 18 percent of the total US population, while the Asian population will reach 35 million, or 10 percent of the US population.⁴

The influx of these new immigrants has raised questions about the ability of the United States to incorporate members of these groups into the fabric of American society. The public debate over these issues has ranged from the impact these immigrants have on the overall economy, to their effect on the wages and employment of other minority groups in the United States (see the National Research Council 1997 publication for an overview of the economic impacts of immigrants on American society), to the increased influence these groups wield in the political arena. Underlying these other issues is the more general question of how these groups will assimilate into and affect contemporary American society.

Massey (1995) and Alba and Nee (1997) argue that there are several historical and structural differences that make it unlikely that the assimilation of immigrants from Asia and Latin America today will follow the pattern of previous immigrant groups. Massey (1995) identifies two key structural conditions that aided the assimilation of European immigrants; first, that the period of heavy immigration from Southern, Central, and Eastern (SCE) Europe was followed by a long hiatus of low immigration, caused both by the numerical ceiling placed on immigrants by the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1924, and the changing economic conditions in Europe; and second, by the sustained economic growth in the United States from WW2 to 1973, which aided the social mobility of native-born ethnics. Alba and Nee (1997) argue that the lack of new immigrants and the social mobility of native-born ethnics were enough to guarantee the demise of ethnic communities and the cultures they supported.

Both Massey (1995) and Alba and Nee (1997) see the situation facing Asian and Latin American immigrant groups in the United States today as far different from that of this earlier wave of European immigrants. Whereas the mass influx of European immigrants led to restrictive legislation, present legislation such as the Immigration Act of 1990 will allow for continued high rates of immigration (Alba and Nee 1997). In addition, development in Asia and Latin America has caused new economic goals for the citizens of these countries (Massey 1988), while greater linkages between less and more developed countries have facilitated their movement (Alba and Nee 1997). These factors will make it likely that new ethnic groups in the United States will be predominantly composed of the first and second generation until the middle of the twenty-first century (Alba and Nee 1997). Massey (1995) sees this continued influx of new immigrants creating a situation where forces toward the maintenance of “ethnic identity”

overcome forces of assimilation such as generation succession, social mobility and intermarriage. Massey (1995) argues that this is already the case with the Mexican American population in the United States, and sees a similar possibility for Asian groups in the United States.

Although Alba and Nee (1997) and Massey (1995) may be accurate in their assessment that conditions facing Asian and Hispanic immigrants today are less favorable than those faced by European immigrants in the past, we should not assume that this necessarily translates into conditions less favorable for the assimilation of the “ethnic group.” I would argue instead that another major social change within American society, and one that has not been adequately addressed in the assimilation literature, has been the decoupling of immigrant identity from ethnic identity in national policies and general social perceptions.

The Immigration and Naturalization Act Amendments of 1965 itself marked a significant juncture in this process, with the replacement of quotas based on national origins, to the present system based primarily on family reunification and meeting the labor needs of the United States. More importantly for the study of assimilation, I would argue that while it has become increasingly acceptable, both politically and socially, to seek to restrict or at least control immigration, it is becoming less permissible to make distinctions based on ethnicity (points that will be further elaborated).

This means that if we wish to assess levels of assimilation among newer ethnic groups, we need to create analytically distinct categories so we can separate between the process of immigrant acculturation and that of intergenerational assimilation. While it is clear that the immigrant generation has an important influence on the socialization of its children, the extent of its ability to instill “ethnic identification” in their descendants in the face of societal forces that encourage assimilation is a matter of empirical inquiry. The need to distinguish between foreign

and native born members of ethnic groups was clear for researchers who studied the early waves of SCE European immigrants. They recognized that while many immigrants could over time acquire language skills, and gain knowledge of the customs and norms of their new society ("acculturation"), this was different from assimilation which led to more permanent incorporation into the host society.

Park and Burgess (1970: 365), while clearly believing that immigrants could and should be able to participate in American society, recognize it is only in the second generation that there can be real assimilation. Gordon (1964: 241-244) makes the case even more forcibly, arguing that not only is the structural assimilation of immigrants "impossible of attainment in most cases", but that it is also "undesirable as a goal to toward which pressure might conceivably be exercised." Although Gordon (1964: 242) recognized that some exceptional immigrants could and would assimilate structurally into American society (most typically within the intellectual community), he did not believe this applied to the majority of group members. Gordon (1964: 244) argues that for most immigrants, the ethnic group provides not only the ties to their old way of life necessary to their sociological and mental health, but also allows for some degree of acculturation to American life. For our purposes, this suggests that we examine "acculturation" (or what Gordon called cultural assimilation) as a process which takes place for foreign born members of ethnic groups, with language proficiency being the key indicator. Assimilation, on the other hand, then becomes properly the domain of native born members of ethnic groups, with residential segregation and intermarriage among the key indicators of how far this process as progressed (Hirschman 1983).

Although Gordon never clarified the link between individual and group level processes for group assimilation, Alba (1999) gives an overview of some distinctions that can be utilized to

examine changes in relations between racial and ethnic groups. Alba (1999) discusses three types of processes that affect the boundaries between different ethnic and racial groups: boundary crossing, boundary blurring, and boundary shifting. Boundary crossing occurs when individuals cross from one group to another, without any real change to the boundary that exists between the groups (Alba 1999). This corresponds to the Gordon's exceptional immigrants who are able to fit into their new society, as well as to the historical cases of African Americans who passed as white due to the lightness of their skin. Here, even though individuals gain access to resources available to the dominant group, this has little effect on the larger social structure or on relations between groups. Boundary blurring and boundary shifting, on the other hand, correspond respectively to larger social changes where the social distinction of an ethnic or racial boundary becomes less relevant to group relations, or leads to a complete reconsideration of a group from ethnic or racial outsider to ethnic insider (see Ingtatiev 1995 for a historical illustration of this process for the Irish).

Today, while increasing attention is being paid to how immigrants from Latin America and Asia fare economically in the United States, as well as how their children are doing in American society, there have been few attempts to conceptualize the respective roles of "immigrant acculturation" and "intergenerational assimilation" for the more general process of group assimilation. While researchers have been rightfully concerned with the potential of newer ethnic groups, who have been historically treated as "ethnically" and "culturally" more distinct, to become assimilated into present day American society, the lack of attention to the generational composition within each ancestry group, as well as to societal changes that affect the second generation differently than in the past, has, I would argue, led to overly conservative projections of the ability of these groups to assimilate into American society.

The purpose of this paper is not, however, to adjudicate whether the assimilation of present day immigrant groups is progressing along the lines of previous groups, but instead to provide a framework to examine the relative importance of “immigrant acculturation” and “inter-generational assimilation” for the larger process of “group assimilation.”

Group Size

Implicitly or explicitly, most predictions for unfavorable outcomes for newer immigrant groups in the United States are based on the assumption that the larger the size of the ethnic group the greater the likelihood for the maintenance of boundaries between these groups and the society at large. In trying to measure the impact of increased group size on "group assimilation" we need to be careful to differentiate between effects due to changes in the internal composition within ethnic groups, and effects that reflect changes in social interactions between members of a given ethnic group and other groups in the society at large. While the present period of high immigration has increased the populations of groups from Asia and Latin America, there has also been a corresponding increase in the percentage of foreign-born members of these ethnic groups. Evaluating the effects of large scale immigration on inter-group dynamics requires us to examine not only its impact on the size of the ethnic group, but also its influence on the ratio of foreign-born to native-born within the group.

The two main perspectives that have been derived to explain how group size impacts social interactions between groups have been based on either the idea that an increase in the size of an ethnic group enhances its ability to create ethnic solidarity, or that an increase in an ethnic population heightens tensions between the ethnic group and other groups in society (see Table 1).

Table 1 about here

“Group Assimilation Models”

Model #1: Ethnic Solidarity

One way that the increase in immigration can be assumed to affect the long term assimilation of ethnic groups is if it translates into greater ability of foreign-born members of an ethnic group to create an environment favorable to the maintenance of ethnic identity (see Figure 1). Massey (1995) argues that because the new immigration to the United States is “linguistically concentrated, geographically clustered and temporally continuous” it makes it more likely that these ethnic groups will be able to retain their “ethnic identity,” therefore leading to slower rates of assimilation for these ethnic groups. While Alba and Nee (1997) and Massey (1995) make a strong case that the historical context that immigrants face today is less favorable than that faced by European immigrants in the past, it can also be argued that there are fewer barriers to assimilation for native-born members of ethnic groups. Whereas in the past legal policies barred group members from educational and work opportunities based on their ethnic identification, these legal sanctions no longer exist. Native-born members of ethnic groups are, therefore, more likely to be exposed to and participate in the groups and institutions of mainstream American society.

Figure 1 Here

Given that language is a critical carrier of the cultural values of a group, there is evidence that the “ethnic identity” of native-born members of various ancestry groups will be difficult to maintain despite the greater concentration of immigrant communities. In a study of language use among second generation members of different ethnic groups residing in south Florida, Portes and Schauffler (1996) show that even in the center of Spanish-speaking enclaves, not only are children of immigrants proficient in the use of English, but actually prefer to use it in everyday communication. Further, they found that parents had little success in passing on their native language to their offspring (Portes and Schauffler 1996). These findings are consistent with Gordon’s (1964) prediction that most children of immigrants will acculturate to their new environs. More importantly for the present discussion, it also opens up the possibility that members of the second generation may assimilate even in the face of greater solidarity on the part of the immigrant generation.

The question this poses, is which force will have a greater impact on the long term assimilation of ethnic groups, the conditions that facilitate the maintenance of ethnic communities, or the social changes that now allow native-born members of ethnic groups greater access to the institutions and cultural patterns of “American” society. Understanding the patterns of group assimilation therefore requires comparing the relative influence of the immigrant generation against that of social forces promoting “Americanization” on native-born members of these ancestry groups.

The ability of different ethnic groups to maintain ethnic cohesion across generations may therefore depend not only on how well the first generation is able to maintain an ethnic environment, but also on how well they can limit exposure of the second generation to the

dominant culture. For Chinese at the beginning of the twentieth century, this force was created externally by the ability of school boards to create “separate schools for children of Chinese or Mongolian descent” (Daniels 1988), while today this ability may be limited to immigrant groups that occupy areas where there are extreme levels of social segregation (i.e. migrant workers in agricultural areas).

Model #2: Group Conflict

Another argument for why newer immigrants are likely to face greater challenges to assimilation can be traced to the work of Park and Burgess. They (1970: 299) argue that as the population of minority groups begin to increase, the dominant group reacts by creating stronger discriminatory laws and customs, while a decrease in minority populations leads to greater racial tolerance (see Figure 2). Blumer (1958) further formalizes this idea in his model of inter-group dynamics. This perspective sees inter-group conflict as arising from competition for scarce resources, with the dominant group feeling a propriety claim to certain areas of privilege, and fearing that subordinate groups harbor designs on the prerogatives of the dominant race (Blumer 1958). In empirical studies group threat has typically been operationalized as the size of the racial or ethnic group (Taylor 1998, Quillian 1995).

Lieberson (1980) argues that when Asian immigrants first started coming to the United States in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century, they faced nearly the same levels of prejudice and discrimination as blacks. He argues that the increased conflict between Asians and whites, which originally arose when Asians began to compete economically with whites, was curtailed by restrictive legislation such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Reed Johnson Act of 1924. Extending this argument to the present it could be argued that as

immigration from Asia and Latin America again increases, we can expect to see greater conflict between these groups and other groups in the United States. As in the first model, this belief about the antagonism directed towards members of these new ethnic groups rests on assumptions about homogeneity within these groups, this time on the conception that foreign-born and native-born members of these groups will be viewed similarly by other groups in society.

Although it could, and has been argued, that the recent backlash against immigrants, most clearly captured by political attempts to restrict their flow, is due to their increased population (see Massey 1995, Sánchez 1997) it does not necessarily follow that this represents a shift in attitudes towards members of the ethnic group. In one of the rare studies examining white attitudes towards both blacks and other ethnic groups, Taylor (1998) found that whereas an increase in the local percentage of blacks lead to higher levels of traditional prejudice on the part of whites, increases in the populations of Asian-Americans and Latinos in different locales did not lead to increased anti-Asian American and Latino sentiment. One potential explanation for this discrepancy that Taylor did not explore is that increased numbers of Asians and Latin American immigrants may lead to increased anti-immigrant sentiments (Figure 2, Path 2), while increases in the total number of Asian-Americans and Latinos cause little change in how they are viewed as members of ethnic groups (Figure 2, Path 1).

Figure 2 Here

While it is may be true that historically those of Asian and Hispanic ancestry have been viewed predominantly based on their ancestry group, whether this is still the case today remains

to be seen. Blumer (1958) has himself argued that conceptions of groups can change over time depending on how definitions are “forged in the public arena.” Analysis of changing levels of prejudice and discrimination against “ethnic groups” will have to differentiate between general anti-immigrant attitude that may be shaped by the perception of their lack of cultural similarity, with prejudicial attitudes based on “ethnic” stereotypes. During the present period of high immigration it is critical that we do not generalize anti-immigrant attitudes as representing prejudicial attitudes against the ethnic group as a whole (see Quillian 1995 for a rare study which makes this distinction).⁵

Empirical Evidence

The most common evidence used to show that the assimilation of newer ethnic groups is not progressing along the lines of previous ethnic groups is based on empirical findings that “social distance” between members of these new ethnic groups and whites, as measured by such indicators as residential segregation and intermarriage, has begun to increase in recent years. These findings, however, have typically failed to take into account the changing composition of ethnic groups themselves. Two examples will be given to illustrate the necessity of controlling for the relative composition of foreign born and native born within ethnic groups if we are to predict future patterns of assimilation for these groups.

In a study examining trends in intermarriage for Asian American ancestry groups from 1980 to 1990, Lee and Fernandez (1998) found that the rates of Asian American inter-racial intermarriage declined from 1980 to 1990, which they argue counters other findings that have shown increased levels of intermarriage among different racial groups. They further claim that this represents an increase in social distance between Asians and other racial groups, which they

see in large part due to the dramatic increase in the populations of these groups. A closer examination of their own data suggests, rather, two different patterns emerging; one of decreasing levels of exogamous marriage for foreign-born members of ethnic groups, the second, of increasing levels of exogamous marriages among native-born members of each ethnic group (see Table 2). The decline in exogamy that they found for each ethnic group, therefore reflects more the dramatic increase in the percentage of the foreign born within each group (for Asians as a whole, the percentage foreign born increased from 58.6% in 1980 to 65.6% in 1990).

 Table 2 here

An alternative interpretation of their findings would be that for the foreign born population the increase in population allowed greater partner selection within members of their own ethnic communities, or is perhaps due to a higher percentage of married immigrants making up present immigrant flows, while the increase in exogamy for the native born, which occurred despite a corresponding increase in the size of the native born population of these groups, is the continuation of secular trends of lower social barriers to intermarriage between racial groups that has been found in other studies. So while in theory their findings could reflect lower levels of assimilation for Asian ethnic groups, an argument more consistent with the idea of assimilation proposed by Park and Burgess (1970) and Gordon (1964), is that these findings are an artifact of the changed composition of these groups. Consistent with this interpretation we find that the only Asian ancestry group with an increase in exogamy (from 34.2% in 1980 to 35.7% in 1990) over

the studied time period was the Japanese, the one group that is heavily dominated by native born members.

Frey (1996), in his analysis of the effects of large scale immigration on the distribution patterns of ethnic groups in the United States, makes a similar assumption to support his contention that we are heading towards the “demographic balkanization” of ethnic groups across the United States. Central to Frey’s (1996) explanation for the large scale demographic patterns emerging across metropolitan areas and states, is that different forces are affecting the destination choices of immigrants and of internal migrants. Frey (1996) argues that due to immigration policies that favor family reunification, and the need for new immigrants to depend on family and friends for economic aid, immigrants tend to congregate in traditional port-of-entry areas, while internal migrants, it is argued, are more apt to respond to general opportunities in the labor market. Frey (1996) further contends that immigration itself exerts a “push” factor on domestic migration from areas with large numbers of immigrants, due to a variety of reasons such as competition between low skilled immigrants and poorly educated native-born residents, perceptions that new immigrants put increased pressures on the social system of an area, or even general racial and ethnic prejudice.

While not questioning that immigrants and internal migrants are responding to different social forces, I would argue that Frey’s extrapolation of these forces to predict the future geographic distribution of racial and ethnic groups rests on the assumption that “ethnic group” patterns can be predicted merely from foreign-born immigrants. Although it is clearly true that present day immigrants are becoming spatially concentrated in a few major metropolitan areas and to a select number of states, this may only represent a temporary phenomenon. Historically, the spatial concentration of European immigrant groups to a few geographic regions decreased as

the impact of generation succession took place. Lieberman and Waters (1987) have shown that although the original settlement patterns of immigrant groups continues to influence the present day distribution of these ethnic groups, this impact declines over time. In general, they found that groups who came to the United States in significant numbers during the colonial period (such as the Irish, English, Scottish, and Dutch) had population distributions closest to that of the total population, while newer ethnic groups had distributions least similar to that of the overall population (Lieberman and Waters 1987).⁶

While it is true that immigration from Asia and Latin America is unlikely to slow anytime soon, over the long term it will be native-born members who determine the spatial patterns of various “ethnic groups.” To make long term projections about spatial patterns of these newer “ethnic groups” we will need to study whether children of these immigrants follow the settlement pattern of their parents, or whether they will be, as the descendants of Europeans before them, more affected by the economic forces that shape internal migration.

Endogamy and Exogamy among California Chinese

To illustrate the importance of differentiating between the effects of increased immigration on the size of ethnic populations and on the composition of these groups, I analyze trends in marriage patterns among Chinese in California from 1980 to 1990.⁷

Demographically and historically, the Chinese are particularly suited among Asian populations to evaluate the effects of increased group size on assimilation processes.

Demographically, the Chinese are the largest Asian group in the United States, making up 24% of the nearly 7 million people claiming Asian ancestry in 1990 (1990 US Census). In addition,

the Chinese have had the longest period of residency among Asian groups, thus affording them more time to establish communities. The Chinese also allow us the unique opportunity to examine how the effects of increased immigration on “group assimilation” may vary over time. Lieberman (1980) points out how increased immigration from China in the latter half of the 19th century led to restrictive measures against immigrants, as well as policies against the ethnic group as a whole. Park and Burgess (1970: 299) similarly point to the mollification of anti-Chinese sentiment from 1890 to 1900 once immigration became restricted. Limiting the scope of the study to California increases the likelihood that Chinese can find and establish links with other co-ethnics.

As has been emphasized previously, the primary concern of this paper is to show the need to decompose the effects of increased immigration on the size of the ethnic population from those due to changes in the internal composition of the group to properly assess assimilation processes. At the national level, during the ten year period of 1980 to 1990, the number of people claiming Chinese ancestry increased by 103%, from about just over 800,000 in 1980, to nearly 1.65 million in 1990. The majority of this increase was due to immigration, which reduced the percentage of native born Chinese from 36.7% in 1980 to 30.1% in 1990, even as the native born population increased from about 300,000 to over 500,000 (see Table 3).

 Table 3 Here

According to both those who argue that an increase in the size of an ethnic population enhances its ability to maintain group cohesion, and those who argue that this increase fosters

greater hostility from other ethnic groups, the growth of the Chinese population should be reflected in lower rates of interaction between its members and members of other ethnic/racial groups, an argument with historical precedents.

Following common practice, the social indicator used to measure group interaction is rates of intermarriage. In terms of inter-group relations, intermarriage has typically been identified as the ultimate outcome of assimilation, showing the acceptance of members outside ones' social group into the most intimate and primary relationship of family (Gordon 1964, Hirschman 1983, Kalmijn 1998). Intermarriage also has long term consequences for group dynamics due to its natural issue, mixed ethnic and mixed racial children, who create the possibility of further blurring of group boundaries (Kalmijn 1998).

Although marriage is obviously an individual act, it takes place within a social environment that allows us to examine and understand group relations. At one extreme, dominant groups may establish legal barriers to prevent intermarriage. Such was the case of intermarriage between blacks and whites in many Southern and Western states, until these laws were deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1967 (Heer 1980). On the other hand, minority groups themselves may attempt to restrict out-marriage through informal sanctions.

Data and Methods

The data used to illustrate this example comes from the 1980 and 1990 Public Use Micro Sample (PUMS 5% sample) of the United States Census. Although ideally we are interested in measuring the changes in incidences of marriage across time, the census only gives the prevalence of certain types of marriages at a specific time. This consideration is outweighed by the fact that the PUMS 5% sample allows for a large enough sample of California Chinese to allow disaggregation into foreign and native born members.

Findings

A cursory overview of changes in the prevalence of Chinese out-marriage shows an increase in endogamy over the ten-year interval (see Table 4). For both Chinese men and women we see a slight increase in endogamous marriages, from 89.3% in 1980 to 90% in 1990 for men, and from 86.6% to 87.1% for women. A closer look, however, reveals two patterns emerging. For the foreign born, as predicted, the increase in group size led to increased, albeit minor, rates of in-marriage (from 93.8% to 94% for men, and 90.8% to 91.0% for women). For native born members, however, we see a marked decrease in endogamous marriage, from 74.8% to 67.7% for men, and from 71.4% to 62.9% for women, a pattern found despite the fact that the native born population increased during this period. Although both native born men and women still prefer to marry someone within their ethnic group, the trend from 1980 to 1990 has been away from strict endogamy.

 Table 4 Here

Returning to the larger issue of group assimilation, this raises the initial question of whether increased rates of immigration have hampered ethnic assimilation. In a pure numerical sense, one could argue that group assimilation has decreased over the observed ten-year period. The point of this paper has been to show that the observed findings reflect more the impact of increased immigration on the composition of ethnic groups, rather than the creation of greater social distance between groups. To the extent that we believe that assimilation is best understood as processes affecting the second generation, the findings actually show that assimilation for Chinese in California is progressing despite a social context more favorable to the maintenance of social boundaries.⁸

Conclusion

As we enter the twenty-first century, increased immigration from previously under-represented areas such as Asia and Latin America is changing the ethnic composition of the United States. While this gives researchers the opportunity to compare the assimilation of these groups with that of immigrant groups from Europe at the beginning of the 1900s, the frequent failure to distinguish between processes primarily affecting the native-born versus those affecting the foreign-born has led to questionable projections about whether these newer groups are likely to follow the assimilation pattern as that of SCE Europeans.

Researchers who studied the assimilation of SCE Europeans were careful to distinguish between the native-born and foreign born in analyzing how successfully European “ethnic groups” were being incorporated into American society. Studies on the assimilation of non-

European groups, however, often groups native-born and foreign-born members of the ethnic group. This distinction may not have been as critical in the past, when ethnic identity often subsumed generational status in terms of how these minority groups were treated by the host society. While not questioning that racial and ethnic prejudice still exists today, I would argue that at least legally, the decoupling of immigrant status from ethnic status now allows native-born members of newer immigrant groups access to American social institutions, access which Gordon (1964) argues is necessary for long-term group assimilation.

I propose several specific suggestions that should help frame research on the assimilation of ethnic groups from Asia and Latin America. First, researchers should clearly distinguish between the native-born and foreign-born members of ancestry groups, thus differentiating between the outcome of immigrant adaptation and that of inter-generational assimilation. This will be greatly facilitated by the increased representation of native-born adult members of these ancestry groups in survey and census data in the near future.

Second, researchers need to distinguish between forces that affect the ability of immigrants to succeed in their new society, and those that affect the access of native-born members of ethnic groups to the institutions of American society. While historically this distinction may not have been empirically necessary for the study of non-European groups, we need to treat these processes as analytically distinct to see if this remains the case today. Whereas in the past laws have often limited the rights of individuals based on ethnic ascription, the overall trend in recent decades has been the universalization of rights to all US citizens.

Along these lines, it becomes necessary to not just examine trends in assimilation rates over time, but also examine what may cause the processes of immigrant acculturation and intergenerational assimilation to diverge over time. Finally, researchers should compare how

these processes vary across ethnic groups, so we can see how historical, geographic, or social conditions may influence the incorporation of these group into American society.

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Notes

¹ “Issei”, “Nisei” and “Sansei” represent first, second and third generation immigrants respectively. Other more specific identifiers such as “Kibei” also existed, which indicated an American born member of the Japanese community who had been sent back to Japan to be educated there.

² Researchers such as Portes (1988) have pointed out the need to further divide the foreign born into those who have primarily been socialized in the United States (the 1.5 generation), and those who have been raised abroad. Although this distinction presents additional complexity to the arguments that follow, it does not change the main thrust of the arguments.

³ Including illegal immigrants would further increase the percentage of total immigrants from Latin America and Asia.

⁴ Fix and Passel’s calculations are based on standard projections which assume that each person belongs to only one ethnic group, and have children of that group. Although these assumptions are very questionable, they do give a general picture of the changing composition of the US population.

⁵ Quillian (1995) makes this distinction in his study of attitudes among Europeans towards immigrants and racial minorities using data for the Eurobarometer Survey 30. Survey data in the United States has only recently begun to distinguish between attitudes towards immigrants versus that of native born members of ethnic groups.

⁶ Limiting their analysis to European groups, Lieberman and Waters found a correlation (r) of $-.72$ between the index of net difference (ND) of an ethnic group’s population to the United States population, and the group’s average length of residence in the United States compared to the English and Welsh.

⁷ This analysis is part of a larger project analyzing the inter-marriage of Asian ancestry groups in the United States.

⁸ Very similar results were found for Japanese and Filipinos, the two other Asian groups that had large enough samples of native-born members. For native-born Japanese, endogamy decreased from 81.4 to 70.8 for men, and 76.5 to 64.0 for women. For native-born Filipinas, endogamy decreased from 44.0 to 41.6. The exception to the general trend of decreasing endogamy was among male Filipinos, whose rate of endogamy increased from 46.4 to 50.4.