

Mexican Americans and Immigrant Incorporation

Sociologists, public policy-makers, and the general public usually try to anticipate how modern immigrants and their descendants will become part of American society by comparing their experiences to those of European immigrants a century or more ago.

BY EDWARD E. TELLES

The European American experience of incorporation is often described using the language and framework of “assimilation,” wherein immigrants or their descendants eventually become an indistinguishable part of the dominant or mainstream society. However, an increasing number of sociologists argue that this may not always be true: today’s immigrants are far less homogenous and encounter distinct circumstances and conditions when they arrive in the U.S. and as they become part of its society. For example, unlike the immigration of predominately low-skilled Europeans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, today’s immigrants are mostly from Latin America and Asia, they have varied skills and educational backgrounds, and many work in labor markets that offer fewer opportunities than before. The experience of today’s immigrants with American society and culture, in other words, is more varied and uncertain than the old models can allow.

At the extreme, pundits like political scientist Samuel Huntington have argued that some new immigrants have not assimilated (or will not assimilate) and so they are a threat to American national unity. Similar, though usually more muted, claims about immigrant assimilation often involve cultural, economic and political worries about the new immigrants, which incidentally were similar to those raised during previous cycles of immigration. In any case, a careful examination of the evidence is important in order to design appropriate immigration and immigrant incorporation policies.

For examining the full range and complexity of the contemporary incorporation process, Mexican Americans, with their history, size, and internal

diversity, are a very useful group. Their multiple generations since immigration, variation in their class backgrounds, the kinds of cities and neighborhoods they grew up in, and their skin color may reveal much about diverse patterns of immigrant incorporation in American society today. Unlike the study of most other non-European groups, the study of Mexican Americans allows analysts to examine the sociological outcomes of adults into the third and fourth generations since immigration.

SOME HISTORY

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, about 30 million people of Mexican origin currently live in the United States, and 13 million of them are immigrants. Mexicans comprise the largest group of immigrants in the U.S.—28 percent—so what happens to them and their descendants largely reflects what will happen to today’s immigrants in general.

Moreover, Mexicans have been “coming to America” for over 150 years (before Americans came to them), and so there are several generations of U.S.-born Mexican Americans for us to study. (Ironically, analysts have mostly overlooked the fact that Mexican immigration is part of the old, or classic, period of immigration—seen as primarily European—as well as the new.) Each of these generations, successively more removed from the first-generation immigrant experience, informs our understanding of incorporation.

But first, we must start with approximately 100,000 Mexicans who instantly became Americans following the annexation of nearly half of Mexico’s one-time territory. Since that year, Mexican immi-

Telles, Edward E. 2010. “Mexican Americans and Immigrant Incorporation.” *Contexts* 9(1):28–33.
See <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/ctx2010.9.1.28.

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gration has been continuous, with a spike from 1910 through 1930. A second peak, beginning in 1980, continues today.

Mexico shares a 2,000-mile border with the United States. Until recently, Mexican immigration has been largely seasonal or cyclical and largely undocumented. The relative ease of entry and tight restrictions set by the U.S. government on immigrant visas for Mexicans have created a steady undocumented flow, which has increased in recent years. Demographers estimate that 7 million undocumented Mexican immigrants now live in the U.S.

The issue of race has also been important to the Mexican American experience throughout history. The U.S. based its conquest of the formerly Mexican territory (the current U.S. Southwest) on ideas of manifest destiny and the racial inferiority of the area's racially mixed inhabitants. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, race-based reasoning was often used to segregate and limit Mexican American mobility. However, prior to the civil rights movement, Mexican American leaders strategically emphasized their Spanish roots and sought a white status for the group to diminish their racial stigma.

These leaders associated their belief in whiteness with the goal of middle-class assimilation, which they saw as possible for groups like southern and central Europeans, who were not considered fully white at the time. Indeed, historians like David Roediger show that European Americans were able to become white and thus fully included in American society through state benefits, such as homeownership subsidies, that were largely denied to African Americans.

Mexican Americans didn't, however, succeed in positioning themselves on the "white track." Jim Crow-like segregation persisted against them until the 1960s, when a Chicano movement in response to discrimination in education and other spaces emerged among young Mexican Americans. The movement encouraged ethnic and racial pride by opposing continued discrimination and exclusion and drew on symbols of historic colonization.

Only a few Mexican Americans today can trace their ancestry to the U.S. Southwest prior to 1848, when it was part of Mexico, but this experience arguably has implications for the Mexican-origin population overall. This history of colonization and subsequent immigration, the persistence of racial stigmatization by American society and the particular demographics involved in Mexican immigration and settlement make the Mexican American case unique and informative.

THE MEXICAN AMERICAN STUDY PROJECT, 1965 TO 2000

In 1993, my collaborator, Vilma Ortiz, and I stumbled upon several dusty boxes containing the questionnaires for a 1965 representative survey of Mexican Americans in Los Angeles and San Antonio. We believed that a follow up survey of these respondents and their children would provide a rare but much-needed understanding of the intergenerational incorporation experiences of the Mexican American population. Indeed, based upon this data set, we initiated a 35-year longitudinal study. In 2000, we set out to re-interview 684 of the surviving respondents and 758 of their children.

The original respondents were fairly evenly divided into three generations: immigrants (1st generation), the children of immigrants (2nd), and the grandchildren of immigrants (or later generations—since immigration—the 3rd+). Their children, then, are of the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th+ generations. Using their responses from 2000, we examined change across these four generations regarding education, socioeconomic status, language, intermarriage, residential segregation, identity, and political participation.

We found that Mexican Americans experienced a diverse pattern of incorporation in the late 20th century. This included rapid assimilation on some dimensions, slower assimilation and even ethnic persistence on others, and persistent socioeconomic disadvantage across generations.

In terms of English language acquisition and development of strong American identities, these Mexican Americans generally exhibit rapid and complete assimilation by the second generation. They show slower rates of assimilation on language, religion, intermarriage, and residential integration, although patterns can also indicate substantial ethnic persistence. For example, 36 percent of the 4th generation continues to speak Spanish fluently (although only 11 percent can read Spanish), and 55 percent feel their ethnicity is very important to them (but, often also feel that "being American" is very important to them). Spanish fluency clearly erodes over each generation, but only slowly.

The results for education and socioeconomic status show far more incomplete assimilation. Schooling rapidly improves in the 2nd generation compared to the 1st but an educational gap with non-Hispanic whites remains in the 3rd and even by the 4th and 5th generation among Mexican Americans. (This stands in contrast to the European

immigrants of the previous century who experienced full educational assimilation by the 3rd.) Although we see that conditions for Mexican Americans in 2000 have reportedly improved from their parents in 1965, the education and socioeconomic status gap with non-Hispanic white Americans remains large, regardless of how many generations they have been in the U.S. The 2000 U.S. Census showed that, among 35 to 54 year olds born in the in the U.S., only 74 percent of Mexican Americans had completed high school compared to 90 percent of non-Hispanic whites, 84 percent of blacks, and 95 percent of Asians.

The graph at right illustrates the contrasting incorporation trajectories for Mexican Americans on Spanish language retention and education. While we see a large gain in education between immigrants and their 2nd-generation children, there is a slight decline in education to the 3rd and 4th generation. Figure 1 also reveals a slow but certain linear trend toward universal English monolingualism. In other words, educational assimilation remains elusive, but complete linguistic assimilation—or the loss of Spanish bilingualism—is nearly reached by the 5th generation.

Indeed, consistent with at least a dozen other studies, our evidence suggests that when the education of parents and other factors are similar across generational groups, educational attainment actually decreases in each subsequent generation.

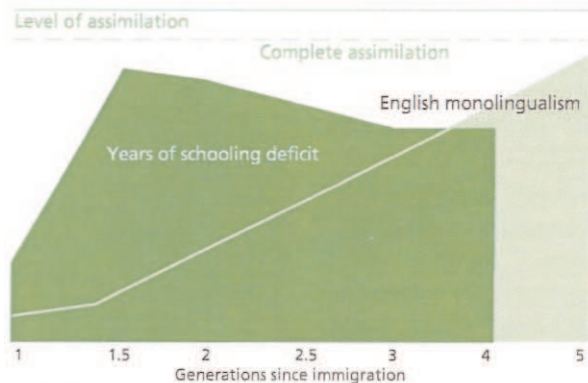
THE CONTINUING IMPORTANCE OF RACE AND ETHNICITY

A high percentage of the Mexican Americans in our study claim a non-white racial identity. Even into the 3rd and 4th generations, the majority see themselves as non-white and believe they are stereotyped because of their ancestry. Nearly half report personal incidents of racial discrimination. Race continues to be important for them, and Mexican continues to be a race-like category in the popular imagination in much of the Southwest. In addition, the predominance and undocumented status of Mexican immigration coupled with large doses of anti-Mexican nativism may stigmatize all members of the group, whether immigrant or U.S.-born.

In many places, Mexican Americans are intermediate in the racial hierarchy, situated between whites and blacks (and newly arrived Mexican immigrants). Our survey did not directly examine the process through which race or racial stigma lim-

its Mexican Americans. However, based on our in-depth interviews and other evidence, it seems that this occurs through both personal and institutional racial discrimination as well as through the internalization of a race-based stigma (which may affect

Educational and linguistic incorporation in 2000



Source: Mexican American Study Project (from multivariate analysis among children)

life strategies and ambitions, especially during schooling). The geographical proximity of an underdeveloped and misunderstood Mexico and the persistent immigration of poorly educated (and often undocumented) Mexican workers may also reinforce the low status and the self-perceptions of Mexican Americans.

Low levels of education across generations also slows assimilation on other dimensions. Less-educated Mexican Americans of all generations earn less, are in less prestigious occupations, and are less likely to own their home than if they had more education. They are also more likely to live among, befriend, and marry other Mexican Americans; tend to have more children than their more-educated counterparts; are less likely to strongly identify as American; are less likely to vote; and are more tied to the Democratic party.

Finally, the large size and urban concentration of this population facilitates in-group interaction and limits exposure to out-group members. It also provides a large market for Spanish language media. Along with these, the continuous flow of immigrants from Mexico reinforces Spanish language fluency and use and provides incentives for later generation Mexican Americans to continue speaking Spanish. Also, the common use of Spanish language may raise nativist ire, which, in turn, may sharpen ethnic and racial identities for later generation Mexican Americans.

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LESSONS FOR IMMIGRANT INCORPORATION

The Mexican American incorporation experience is not easy to sum up or generalize. But in many ways, that is precisely the point. The findings from the Mexican American Study Project demonstrate a range of outcomes and experiences. There are dimensions on which Mexican Americans assimilate as would be expected by the traditional (and most optimistic) theories. At the same time, there are other domains in which their experience is one of limited assimilation and even ethnic persistence. **Particularly problematic is their experience in the educational realm,** which leads to persistent socio-economic disadvantage across generations. Racial differences and stigmas can further contribute to these disadvantages, though the persistence of linguistic and other ethnic differences may be beneficial in other ways.

Perhaps because of immigration's centrality to the economy and social policies regarding immigrant incorporation, the heated immigration debates today are largely about whether or how long it will take the descendants of immigrants to assimilate in terms of schooling and the job market. In framing the debates about immigrant incorporation simply in these terms, we have neglected other dimensions of that process. The Mexican American case clearly demonstrates the multifaceted nature of the incorporation experience. Moreover, it has clear implications for how Americans—scholars and policy makers as well as the lay public—think about the incorporation of new generations of immigrants in their midst.

For example, there is a tendency to **exaggerate the consistency of assimilation across dimensions.** While examining the heterogeneous Mexican American population, we have shown that incorporation on particular dimensions may directly affect others and that the speed and direction of these dimensions may vary in unexpected ways.

To be certain, we have found that **education affects nearly all other dimensions of assimilation.** Moreover, we have also found that **residential integration** is a key intermediate variable where low education impedes one's ability to afford housing in an integrated middle class neighborhood, which in turn slows other dimensions such as intermarriage. A generation later, children who grew up in integrated neighborhoods and whose parents were intermarried are more likely to assimilate themselves. There may also be gradual assimilation on dimen-

sions like retaining an ethnic language and increasing intermarriage, at the same time that there is rapid assimilation on learning English or no assimilation on educational attainment after the 2nd generation.

The study of Mexican Americans also points to the importance of looking at the diversity of the immigrant incorporation experience within groups. Previous findings mostly compare group averages or statistical distributions. We find, for example, that Mexican Americans in the second generation and beyond have lower educational levels and are more likely to end up with working class jobs than other groups. But, we also found a diversity of economic experiences among Mexican Americans, ranging from a few who move into the middle class and fall out of the ethnic community to others who are poor and are strongly rooted in the ethnic community, even into the 4th generation.

We often forget about the importance of history. This is understandable since many immigrant groups arrived at a specific time point so most group members experienced the same historical events. Most Italians that came to the United States, for example, arrived in the first fifteen years of the 20th century and experienced World War I as immigrants, World War II as 2nd-generation ethnics, and as 3rd-generation Italian Americans fully integrated into the American mainstream by the 1970s.

For Mexican Americans, though, successive waves of immigrants have led to generations that experienced different historical events. We found that the experiences of incorporation for Mexican Americans depend largely on where they are inserted in history. The Mexican American Study Project disentangled generations-since-immigration from historical generations. By doing so, we found, for example, that the **educational gap with whites has been narrowing** for adults educated in the 1970s and 80s compared to those educated at mid-century. **Spanish fluency has also diminished** in recent decades for Mexican Americans of comparable generations-since-immigration. These are both indicators of group assimilation over historical time, though educational assimilation does not necessarily occur over generations-since-immigration.

Connected with this is the importance of examining multiple generations and at ages when they have completed their education and are well into their careers. Other empirical studies of incorporation have examined only the second generation that are in their 20s at the oldest, compared to their immigrant parents. This is largely due to the policy-related concerns of funders and researchers about

how the children of the current wave of immigrants are faring. Our respondents, though, include the 3rd and 4th generation as well and are in their 30s, 40s and 50s, ages when they are more likely to have formed families and to have already availed themselves of the second chances that American society often provides, including the GED and occupational skills training. This gives us a fuller picture of incorporation.

Previous studies of incorporation have also generally overlooked local context. We also showed substantial variation in how Mexican Americans growing up in Los Angeles and San Antonio were incorporated. Overall, Mexican Americans in San Antonio had more ethnic lifestyles and behaviors, including retaining Spanish fluency into the third and fourth generation, but they were more politically conservative and identified as white to a greater extent than their Angeleno counterparts. However, educational disadvantage was similar in the two urban areas. Variations in urban contexts are likely to affect how some immigrants or groups of immigrants and their descendants incorporate into society especially as some areas place greater demographic or political pressures on assimilation. These factors may help account for differences in the incorporation of Mexican Americans compared to European Americans, whose ancestors arrived to New York and other east coast cities.

Finally, many previous studies of incorporation have emphasized a core to which immigrants and their descendants assimilate. But the case of Mexican Americans reminds us of the importance of a long-standing Mexican American core, which has arguably been a dominant model for assimilation for descendants of Mexican immigrants in many Southwest urban areas. This ethnic-based core represents models for Mexican American incorporation including acceptable occupations or class positions as well as cultural styles and models of political action.

Americans like to repeat the American narrative of immigrant success and assimilation, but that story doesn't describe the experience of many of today's immigrants. Even worse, to insist on the assimilation narrative as the story of all immigrants ignores the need for policies that address the specific needs and situations of different groups of immigrants. This neglect—born of a certain kind of historical optimism—comes at the peril of the lives of many Americans. But it also limits educational policies appropriate for the American economy, which increasingly requires an educated, employed, and

integrated workforce and populace to maintain its international edge.

Perhaps the most basic and important lesson of the Mexican American incorporation experience, then, is the danger of trying to understand all immigrants with a single, one-size-fits-all model.

Recommended Resources

Richard Alba and Victor Nee. *Remaking the American Mainstream. Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration* (Harvard University Press, 2003). A modern theory of assimilation based on new immigrant realities and an analysis of official government data.

Brian Duncan, V. Joseph Hotz, and Stephen J. Trejo. "Hispanics in the U.S. Labor Market," in Marta Tienda and Faith Mitchell, eds., *Hispanics and the Future of America* (National Academies Press, 2006). Compares Mexican Americans to other Hispanic and non-Hispanic groups over three generations using recent government data.

Milton M. Gordon. *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion and National Origins* (Oxford University Press, 1964). The classic statement on the many dimensions of assimilation in the United States.

Phillip Kasinitz, John Mollenkopf, Mary C. Waters, and Jennifer Holdaway. *Inheriting the City: Children of Immigrants Come of Age* (Russell Sage Foundation Press, 2008). A recent study of the children of immigrants in New York City that finds rapid assimilation for the second generation.

Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut. *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*. (University of California Press, 2001). An analysis from the well-known Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Survey that shows various paths of incorporation for the second generation, including both upward and downward mobility.

David R. Roediger. *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White* (Basic Books, 2005). A historical work that shows how previously-stigmatized European groups were accepted as part of the white majority in the United States.

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