Assimilation, Education, and Declining Ethnic Distinction: An Empirical Test of New Assimilation

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Assimilation theory was initially developed with the intention to describe how and why immigrants would assume the characteristics, traditions, and beliefs of native-born individuals. And while theories and empirical strategies have evolved over time, tests of assimilation continue to focus on immigrants, ignoring significant changes—both institutional and cultural—within the host society. This project takes another approach. I assess whether the mainstream has expanded as a result of the immigrant incorporation process. I test this by examining changes in educational curricula and resources in public school districts and schools in response to migrant flows.

BACKGROUND

Classical assimilation theory dramatically lost traction among social scientists and immigrant scholars over the past 40 years. While some argue it cannot adequately account for complexities among a diverse group of migrants, others object to the ethnocentric undertones of assimilation theory (Rumbaut 1994; Young 1998; Zhou and Portes 1993). In response to these critiques, classical assimilation has been reformulated to 1) better account for demographic changes sweeping across the U.S., and 2) allow for greater flexibility in the interpretation of the assimilation process.

Alba and Nee's (2003) reconceptualization of immigrant incorporation is a promising approach. Specifically, they argue that assimilation is best thought of as process of declining ethnic distinction, where social boundaries become blurred due to institutional change and increased interactions, ultimately resulting in growing similarities between racial and ethnic groups. The blurring of such boundaries is believed to fundamentally change the organization, culture, and meaning of immigrant culture as well as the American mainstream itself.

Despite the fact that assimilation has undergone significant theoretical and conceptual overhauls, empirical tests continue to assess a unidirectional process of change. That is, scholars

determine whether (and extent to which) assimilation occurs by examining characteristics and traits of *migrants*. Though assimilation has important implications for the well-being of immigrants and their offspring, it is also important to understand changes in the culture they are assimilating into.

This is not to say that changes in American culture have been entirely overlooked. A long line of work explores how American religion, cuisine, festivals, and consumption patterns have each been altered as a result of population change (Alba 1990; Hirschman 2012; Yang and Ebaugh 2001). The decline of ethnic distinction in products and food signals that both natives and the mainstream can potentially embrace immigrant culture. Scholarship on labor markets and criminal activity (Borjas 2003; Card 2007; Reid et al. 2005) also implies that the host society—both native-born individuals and institutions—has changed due to the presence of the immigrant population. As such, we would expect other dimensions of the U.S. mainstream to be affected.

Some of the most noted changes are associated with policy and institutions. When large-scale population change occurs, institutions must also adapt in order to effectively serve new ethnic groups (Coleman 2006).

As documented by Millard and Chapa (2004), a number of communities in the Midwest have changed the language requirements of their workforce in response to the massive influx of Mexican immigrants. Police officers are required to take Spanish language courses and cultural diversity training in one small Midwestern town. In another, social service workers are required to speak Spanish fluently. Although this evidence is taken from case studies, it suggests that immigration creates employment opportunities and benefits for natives who have a basic understanding of a second language. If natives are cognizant of both changing demographics and employment qualifications, we might expect increases in the availability of such programs.

With respect to educational systems, the new assimilation perspective implies that schools will *expand* their curriculum, training, and resources to facilitate the incorporation of these students. The introduction of foreign- language programs in schools, for example, could serve to legitimize non-dominant languages and cultures as part of the growing mainstream. Brint and colleagues (2001) find that elementary schools use classroom and school resources to encourage multiculturalism. Furthermore, the booming popularity of multiculturalism and diversity efforts may also change the educational decisions of natives. The need for institutions to serve immigrant communities may also provide incentives for natives to learn the language

and folkways of immigrant communities. These incentives should induce natives to learn and engage with immigrant cultures, mirroring the processes immigrants undertake to assimilate into mainstream culture.

The aims of this project are twofold:

1) To determine whether schools and school districts are more likely to change their educational curricula given increases in the immigrant population. By doing so, I look for evidence that a major U.S. institution has expanded its social and ethnic boundaries.
2) I also ask if areas that experience recent increases in immigration (new destinations) have responded differently than places traditionally characterized by large immigrant populations (immigrant gateways).

DATA AND APPROACH

I draw on two sources of data: the School and Staffing Survey and state- and county-level data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

The Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) is a nationally representative dataset that samples school districts, public and private schools, principals, and teachers. The SASS collects information on teacher and principal characteristics, general school conditions, programs and course incentives, district hiring and retention practices, and basic demographic information on students. The restricted-use data allow matching between districts and schools, and also permits matching to state- and county-level measures from the Census. Approximately 5,000 school districts are sampled during each wave of data collection, roughly occurring in 1993, 1999, 2003, 2007, and 2011. I focus on the following outcomes: whether schools provide instruction to maintain immigrant students' native language, the number of required credits for high school foreign-language courses, if schools provide translators/interpreters for parents who are limited in English proficiency, and whether school districts offer incentives for foreign language instruction. Together, these outcomes represent changing norms around language retention among immigrant students, increasing bilingual returns among native students, as well as demands for teachers/staff to communicate across cultural borders.

I also use the 1990 and 2000 Decennial Census for state- and county-level demographic measures. For later years of observation, 5-year estimates provided by the American Community

Survey are used for detailed county information. Measures of the local unemployment rate, poverty rate, median household income (in 2010$), the percent of population over the age of 25 who completed high school, and percent of workers in agriculture and construction will be employed in analyses. Also included in specifications are the percent of persons who speak any non-English language, which is likely a major predictor of school curricula.

Because I am particularly interested in changes over time, I use fixed effects logistic specifications to assess county/state change over time. Although this approach does not provide estimates for time-invariant measures, this is not a major limitation as I am primarily interested in observing dynamic change in local contexts. Because we might expect institutional change to slowly occur in response to the presence and needs of the immigrant population, lagged specifications will also be assessed. Taken together, this study can shed light on the complexities of assimilation and serves as a formal test for new assimilation theory.

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