Immigrants and Minorities: Old Questions for New Directions in Research

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This article examines the questions and issues that should be included in the study of immigrant and ethnic group socioeconomic progress. Assimilation, opportunity structures and institutional responses to minorities and immigrants are discussed.

The aim of "making it" in American society—socioeconomic mobility—has always been a central goal of most immigrants to the United States as well as of minority groups long resident in the country. This idea is represented in the broad and often amorphous concept of assimilation that was the central theme of the modern study of race and ethnic relations begun by Robert Park and his students at the University of Chicago (Park, 1950; Park and Burgess, 1969:359-365). Though the many works of Park and his followers were too varied and inductive to fit neatly under a single theoretical umbrella (Geschwender, 1978: Chapter 2), their research contributed to what is broadly defined as the assimilation school of race and ethnic studies. While there are probably as many strands of the assimilation perspective or framework as there are proponents (or critics), there are several key elements that relate to the idea of ethnic socioeconomic progress.

The thrust of the assimilation hypothesis was not an assertion that immigrants and minorities were reaching parity with native whites, but that a narrowing of the wide socioeconomic gulf is the long-term outcome in a modern urban and industrial society. The competitive nature of economic organization and the democratic orientations of political institutions worked toward the progressive elimination of ascriptive ties. While some sociologists raised the assimilation perspective to a formal theory of change (Parsons, 1975), most empirical researchers considered it to be a broad multidimensional frame of reference to guide their investigations (Gordon, 1964). Although acculturation—the cultural dimension of assimilation—has
received considerable attention, it is structural assimilation in the socioeconomic realm that is most persistent and is the focus of this review.

For the first several decades of this century, ethnic studies were centered on the adaptation and assimilation of the wave of new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. The door to immigration from all sources except northwestern Europe was effectively closed with the restrictive legislation of the early 1920s. And with immigration removed as an issue of public controversy, the topic began to fade from the center stage of social research. In broad terms, the assimilation model proved to be an effective prism to study European ethnic communities. Ethnicity among second and third generation descendants of European immigrants remains an important cultural identifier (Greeley, 1974) and exhibits surprising vitality in the political realm (Glazer and Moynihan, 1970). However, residential segregation did decline (Lieberson, 1963; Guest and Weed, 1976) and there is little evidence that European ethnic origin has been a significant barrier to socioeconomic achievement in recent decades (Duncan and Duncan, 1968).

The economic gains of black Americans, at least for the modern period, were expected to follow the experience of European immigrants. In other words, as migration of blacks from the rural south to northern cities proceeded, there was an expectation of gradual progress and a narrowing of socioeconomic disparities. This hypothesis was taken as the title of Karl Taeuber's (1964) classic “The Negro as an Immigrant Group”. Yet as Taeuber clearly demonstrated, blacks in Chicago remain a world apart from whites in residence and socioeconomic status. The fact that racial stratification does not conform to the empirical expectations of the assimilation model is one of the strongest and most consistent findings of modern social stratification research (Duncan, 1969; Featherman and Hauser, 1978: Chapter 6). The standard explanation of discrimination, fed by the historical legacy of white racism, is impossible to refute. Yet as an ad hoc explanation, it does not tell us how or why discrimination is maintained (or for how long) in a modern industrial society.

In addition to the acute discomfort of the assimilation model caused by the research on racial inequality, other factors have sparked new interest into the broader question of ethnic stratification. One of the most important was the resurgence of immi-
migration both legal and illegal to the United States in the late 1960s and 1970s, along with the significant influx of refugees from Cuba and Southeast Asia (Massey, 1981). These new arrivals face quite different circumstances than European immigrants did earlier in the century. Moreover, the new waves of immigrants are themselves very heterogeneous and their socioeconomic progress in the United States seems too diverse to fit neatly within the standard assimilation framework (for an alternative perspective, see, Piore, 1979). Another development that is currently changing the field of ethnic stratification has been a series of innovative studies which have attempted to reanalyze and reinterpret the historical process of structured opportunities and socioeconomic mobility of American racial and ethnic minorities (Bonacich, 1972, 1976; Bonacich and Modell, 1980; Hechter, 1978; Lieberson, 1980; Light, 1972; Wilson, 1978; Yancey, Erickson and Juliani, 1976). All of these developments give rise to a reconsideration of basic questions about the appropriate conceptual and theoretical framework to guide this study of immigrant and minority group patterns of socioeconomic mobility.

In this article some significant issues that are important to the study of immigrant and ethnic group socioeconomic progress are listed and reviewed (ethnic community, minority group, immigrants are terms that will be used interchangeably in this general discussion even though their specific meaning is not always the same). While the eventual goal is one of integrated theory, we are far from a consensus on the necessary ingredients. What is needed at present is the more modest goal of a preface to empirical inquiry—a discussion of the questions and issues that should not be neglected.

There are three broad sets of factors that are relevant to socioeconomic progress of immigrants and ethnic minorities. These include: the initial characteristics of the immigrants; the structure of economic opportunities; and the reception or response by gatekeepers of the system (the host or dominant population). The relative effects of variables representing these broad domains are an empirical question, but the research literature provides the essential background for the selection, measurement and interpretation of variables for any empirical inquiry.

**POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS:**
**ASSIMILATION PERSPECTIVE**

The initial characteristics of the minority group are usually con-
sidered to be the important factors in most studies of socioeconomic assimilation. In fact, many studies do not consider anything but the characteristics of the minority population itself (a limiting bias of much research in both the assimilation and human capital schools of research). The two most common foci within the "characteristics" umbrella of variables are those related to human capital and sociocultural orientations, though there are other determinants that are often included.

Human capital variables refer to the set of learned skills that are rewarded by wages in the labor market. Economic theory identifies education as the primary indicator of human capital, but other facets such as length of work experience, specific vocational or on the job training and other attributes of workers are also included (Becker, 1975; for an economic critique of human capital theory, See, Thurow, 1975). The recent work of Barry Chiswick on immigrant socioeconomic progress represents the basic human capital approach, although he broadens the list of relevant variables to include length of residence in the U.S. and language skills (See, Chiswick, 1977a, 1977b, 1978a, 1978b, 1979, 1980). Most sociological research within the assimilation schools includes many of the same variables, but they are often labeled as resources, individual attributes or relevant skills.

The idea that motivates this line of inquiry is straightforward—minorities or immigrants may receive less than equal labor market outcomes because of the inferior skills or qualifications that they bring to the labor market. Since human capital differences rarely explain all of the observed economic inequality between the majority and minority populations, the explanation for the residual difference is often the subject of debate. Critics of the social order interpret it as employer or institutional discrimination (Siegel, 1965; Duncan, 1969; Hirschman, 1978), but the skeptic can speculate that unmeasured differences in human capital may explain the remaining inequality (e.g., quality of schooling; on the job performance, etc.).

With a less formal theory, the sociological approach can be freer to include other "resource" variables that widen the scope of the inquiry. Perhaps most important has been the inclusion of variables representing "social origins"—supports available from the family and community of origin. These are typically measured by the education and occupation of respondents' parents (especially the head of household), the size of place of birth (or youth) and other
characteristics of the early environment (number of siblings, farm background, etc.). This line of work is commonly labeled as the socioeconomic life-cycle (Duncan, 1967; Blau and Duncan, 1967; Featherman and Hauser, 1978). The advantage of such a life-cycle perspective is that it permits an interpretation of the links between the creation of inequalities in human capital variables and their subsequent effects on labor market success. For instance, if years of education (human capital) "explains" earnings inequality between a minority group and the majority population, there arises the logical question of whether some prior characteristic (rural background, poverty of family or origin) can explain the differences in education. If it does, the education does not "explain" the subsequent inequality, but has mediated inequalities across generations (though not examining ethnic differences, this is essentially the thesis of Bowles and Gintis, 1976).

There are a number of variables which are logically within the characteristics framework, but have received less than adequate attention, both empirically and theoretically. For instance, linguistic skills, especially knowledge of English, are often assumed to be important factors in the labor market success of immigrants. While Chiswick (1977b) finds that Spanish language upbringing lowers the earnings of Mexican origin men, Tienda (article in this volume) finds a more complicated process with different effects of English and Spanish fluency. English knowledge appears to have no effect upon current occupational status net of education and other background variables, while Spanish facility has a positive effect upon the occupational status of the first job. This is an area of research that requires careful examination to specify the important components of linguistic ability and the labor markets in which these may be important (Tienda offers some promising suggestions).

In addition to human capital, immigrants occasionally bring physical capital or money which is invested in entrepreneurial activity. The extent and significance of this practice is not really considered in most research on immigrant adaptation. Family structure and broader kin links often provide resources that minorities (and immigrants) can draw upon for physical and human capital investments. Light (1972) points to the moral community of Asian immigrant kin networks that required successful members to provide jobs, money and other assistance for fellow kinsmen, even if it lowered one's own consumption. He suggests that the more
Americanized family structure of the black community—with more atomized and competitive relationships beyond the nuclear family—weakened their capacity to follow the entrepreneurial path of socioeconomic mobility.

Although Light's interpretation is often labeled cultural, it is strongly rooted in the structure of family organization. I would prefer to reserve the cultural hypothesis to specify interpretations that posit immigrant success as due to ambition and other psycho-social orientations which reinforce commitment to hard work. This is a very influential hypothesis with considerable intuitive appeal and academic recognition (Rosen, 1959). But as with all interpretations that stress attitudes as the determinants of behavior, the causal direction is open to doubt. Perhaps most important is the omission of the structural conditions that give rise to and reinforce such attitudes. Moreover, it is a hypothesis that has been found wanting in several carefully done empirical investigations (Featherman, 1971; Lieberson, 1980: Chapter 7; Steinberg, 1981). A recent study by Stryker (1981) provides modest support for the cultural hypothesis, but I think the evidence still weighs against it. Future studies which argue that differential motivations can explain ethnic inequality (after controlling for human capital variables) must take seriously the theoretical critiques and counter-evidence on this hypothesis.

OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES

While variables that measure individual characteristics of minorities have dominated the literature, it is important to also consider the structure of opportunities open to immigrants and minorities. In an important statement, Yancey et al. (1976) argue that ethnicity, in its broad meaning as well as in socioeconomic patterns, is manufactured domestically rather than something that is imported from abroad. While immigrants do bring a certain amount of cultural baggage with them that shapes their initial preferences and orientations, it is the economic, residential, political and social institutions which absorb them in the new environment that shape their longterm outcomes (in cultural as well as socioeconomic patterns). For instance, the growth of modern industry (steel, rubber, meat packing, automobiles, etc.) in northeastern and northcentral cities absorbed the wave of eastern and southern European immigrants to the U.S. in the
1880-1920 era, just as the opening of the frontier had been consequential for earlier waves of immigrants. At the present, it is important to note that many key sectors of the American industrial economy began to stagnate just as the wave of new immigration began in the 1970s and as long depressed minorities were demanding full participation. Appeals to develop better attitudes toward work or to obtain more human capital must be considered in light of the employment opportunities which are available. As William Wilson (1978:107) notes, the low paying and menial jobs that are most often available to minority youth are not ones that provide chances for mobility nor create positive attitudes toward work (note the reversal in the causal direction of attitude and behavior from that implied by the assimilation hypothesis).

For both conceptual and practical problems (lack of data), study of the effects of opportunity structures on minority social mobility has lagged behind work in other areas. Under the broad heading of labor market effects on social mobility (for a review of the field, See, Kallenberg and Sorensen, 1979), we can consider city-, industry-, and firm-specific influences that may facilitate or constrain the socioeconomic gains of minorities or immigrants. The differential distribution of minorities across cities (or regions) could restrict opportunities and explain unequal economic success (Spilerman and Habib, 1976, offer this interpretation for Israel). For the United States, Stolzenberg and D'Amico (1977) claim that racial occupational differentials (black-white) are not explained by city effects, while Parcell (1979) finds the opposite is the case.

A specific version of the city effects thesis is the percent minority hypothesis (Williams, 1947; Blalock, 1957; and Frisbie and Neidert, 1977). The argument is that the larger the percent of a minority in the city (or area), the greater will be the discrimination by the majority against the minority (the intervening mechanism is the perception of potential collective action by the minority). This thesis was developed with particular reference to the black community in the United States.

Closely related to the city effects hypothesis is the structural impact of industries and firms on the differential patterns of labor force success across ethnic populations. Because new immigrants and minorities typically have fewer resources (skills, knowledge of the local market, contacts with employers) than the majority population, they are poorly equipped to enter the highly rewarded
sectors of the economy. Industries that are short of labor or offer lower wages are where most minorities must begin. Once a population enters into particular institutions, there are natural forces of informal networks that tend to reinforce concentrations in those organizations (same firms or similar industries). Once certain groups are disproportionately concentrated in certain sectors of the economy (e.g., garment industry, retail trade, construction, mining, public sector, etc.), impersonal economic forces such as technological innovation, interindustry competition and profitability may have substantial longterm effects on chances for ethnic mobility and advancement.

For instance, the employment of many European immigrants in the heavy industry sectors of the American midwest—Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Chicago, Detroit—enabled many first and second generation members of these populations to make real economic gains during the 1950s and 1960s as these industries prospered. Of course, the high wage levels in these industries were also a product of an aggressive union movement as well. The empirical analysis of industry and firm effects on social stratification is a frontier area of research (See, Beck et al., 1977; Stolzenberg, 1975; Baron and Bielby, 1980). Ideally, these structural effects upon minority groups and immigrants should be examined in historical perspective (therefore making the task a very challenging one for quantitative investigation).

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES TO MINORITIES

Closely related to available opportunity structures is the response (policies) of these organizations toward minority group members. It is important that this issue not be reduced to the level of popular attitudes toward minorities, though both are often related. Decisions about hiring, promotion and wages are not made by the public at large, but by gatekeepers in institutions whose interests may or may not coincide with popular sentiments. For example during the 1930s Henry Ford, who was one of the more bigoted men of his era, made it a practice to hire black workers in some of his automobile plants (Geschwender, 1977). His objective was not to break the barriers of racism, but to retard the spread of unionism.

It is not only economic organizations that require examination, but also the response to minorities in other major institutions, including labor unions, political parties, educational organizations
and social clubs. Knowing the details of what happened and why requires detailed historical study that is as difficult as it is necessary. Several recent studies reveal the value of addressing such questions.

Bonacich and Modell (1980) examine the changing character of Japanese American economic activity and ethnic solidarity during the 20th century. While some analysts suggest that the economic success of the Japanese in the United States is primarily the result of their ambition and hard work (Peterson, 1971), Bonacich and Modell show a much more complicated story. Because of the hostile reaction of the strong labor movement on the West Coast (who feared that Asian labor would undercut established wage levels), early Japanese immigrants were frozen out of the general economy. The only real opening was as agricultural laborers, which offered lower wages than urban work. Through the pooling of resources, early Japanese workers were able to buy land and establish a significant toehold in California's agricultural sector. With continued hostility from the general economy, self employment and kinship organization spread from the farm to many related urban activities. This situation fostered very strong ethnic solidarity as well as a strong commitment to education of the younger generation (where less discrimination was felt). When the intense discrimination from the general economy was finally relaxed in the post World War II era (after the ordeal of the internment), the highly skilled second and third generation Japanese Americans were able to penetrate deeply into occupations and industries of the general economy, and the strong ties of ethnic solidarity evaporated as the institutional pressures that reinforced them were lifted.

Lieberson (1980) contrasts the reception of black migrants in northern cities in the early decades of the twentieth century with immigrants and the children of immigrants from southern, eastern and central (SEC) European origins. Initially the situation of blacks in northern cities was not very different from that of the SEC European ethnics, and in some cases it was better. While both were at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, there is no evidence that blacks had fewer occupational or educational skills than SEC European ethnics or that their hunger for socioeconomic gains was any less. However, as Lieberson makes clear, blacks faced greater barriers towards participation in every institutional area: political, economic, residential, educational and social. Perhaps most significant was the response of labor unions. While European ethnics
were not initially welcomed, they were recognized as allies by the early labor movement and therefore gained entry into the skilled blue collar sector. Most craft unions were hostile to blacks and it was not until the industrial labor movement of the 1930s that blacks were begrudgingly accepted into many unions. Not surprisingly, many blacks remained hostile to the union movement. Since blacks were also denied entry into related areas of the economy and society (neighborhoods, schools), they fell far behind the progress made by European ethnicities in both pre- and post-World War II eras.

In recent work on the Cuban community, Portes (1981; and Wilson and Portes, 1980) demonstrates that "immigrant enclave" (the ethnic economy) can be a shelter that allows for the employment and promotion of new immigrants who would otherwise fare poorly in the general economy. In a pattern structurally similar to the Japanese case, Cuban workers can gain work experience and are rewarded for their skills (for an excellent analysis of the role of the ethnic economy, See, Light, 1972). Of course, such a situation depends upon the size of the ethnic economy and its competitive position with nonethnic firms.

While institutional discrimination and its reverse (preference and protection in the ethnic enclave) are frequently offered as interpretations for unexplained human capital differences, this does not replace the need for direct analysis of the institutional mechanisms at work.

**IMMIGRANTS AND MINORITIES COMPARED**

While both immigrant and ethnic studies deal with the same basic questions, there are important differences in research strategy that need to be considered in any effort to clarify theoretical directions. Perhaps most obvious is the time dimension. Studies of immigrant economic progress usually focus upon the short run problems of adaptation to the new environment. Many studies of ethnic and racial stratification tend to look at the long run, with generations rather than years being counted as independent variables. Of course, immigrants become labeled as an ethnic group as their length of local residence grows, but the line is a very indistinct one.

Following this logic, generation of local residence among ethnic communities is a critical independent variable (Lieberson, 1973). While foreign birth is generally considered a handicap to social
mobility, there is the crosscurrent of selectivity of migrants. Both international and internal migrants are usually highly motivated individuals who may have skills and other capacities that are not easily measured. Another factor is that many unsuccessful migrants return to their place of origin, with the consequence that the migrants who remain are an even more select population. Chiswick (1978b) presents the selectivity hypothesis as the explanation for the higher earnings of the foreign born (than the native born) after 15 years residence in the U.S. (See, U.S. Department of Labor, 1979). Similar findings are reported for black migrants to the north relative to blacks born in the north, though there is some controversy over the nature of the selectivity (Lieberson, 1978; Lieberson and Wilkinson, 1976; Long and Heltman, 1975).

There is no doubt that high motivations for extraordinary work effort are more typical among new immigrant (migrant) groups than for the population at large (See, Bonacich, 1972, for a structural interpretation of this pattern). When this is coupled with an entrepreneurial(self-employment)ethnic economy and reinforced by external hostility, the opportunities for "successful" minorities along with a strong sense of ethnicity are developed. How this relationship changes across generations is a fundamental question. As noted in the earlier discussion, this is simply not an individual-level (characteristics)phenomenon, but is closely entwined with the presence of an ethnic enclave, and the opportunities for schooling and employment in the general economy.

Residential segregation is another salient issue that crosscuts the study of economic progress among immigrants and minorities. From an ecological perspective, residential segregation is the single most important barrier to the equal participation of minorities in the broader society and economy (Hawley, 1944; Duncan and Lieberson, 1959). Not only are minority group members distant from jobs and opportunities of the larger society, they are cut off from informal associations that provide information and contacts that are important for socioeconomic mobility. While the "ghetto" can also be a refuge for new immigrants in a hostile environment, most second and third generation European ethnic group members have dispersed as social mobility occurred (Lieberson, 1963; Guest and Weed, 1976). This seems to have also been the path for Hispanics (Massey, 1981), but not for blacks (Taeuber and Taeuber, 1965; Lieberson, 1980: Chapter 9).
It is impossible to include all potentially important factors in every study. Availability of data and analytical design usually limit the scope of any inquiry. However, the real problem is the intellectual blinder of the investigator—the theoretical perspective that consciously or unconsciously shapes the choice of variables thought to be important. For many years, the assimilation model, which emphasized the characteristics of minority populations, was dominant. It provided a very loose theoretical framework, and had many branches and currents of related research and ideology. While many critics of the assimilation framework point to its ideological bias, it is often forgotten that much of the empirical research within the framework yielded negative results.

We are currently in a situation where there is no dominant theoretical school which guides the study of immigrants and minority group socioeconomic progress. The assimilation school, reinvigorated with the great methodological studies made in social stratification research, continues to foster important studies (Featherman and Hauser, 1978; Farley, 1977) of social change. Yet the work of Wright (1978) and Burawoy (1974) in emphasizing class structures and Bonacich's (1972, 1976) studies of split labor markets suggest that the explanation of the reasons for discrimination have been neglected. Long term historical studies represented by the works of Bonacich and Modell (1980), Lieberson (1980) and Wilson (1978) demonstrate that the present rarely explains itself. Even if the path to the optimal research strategy is not clear, we have no shortage of ideas or problems to address.

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