

Understanding Family Change Across Generations: Problems of Conceptualization and Research Design

Charles Hirschman
University of Washington

OVER THE past quarter century, immigration has returned to center stage as a major issue in American society, politics, and academic scholarship. The percentage of immigrants in the national population is the highest since the first decade of this century, and in the cities of the West Coast, Texas, New York, Florida, and Illinois, immigrants and their children are visible in every major sector of the society and economy. Raymond Buriel and Terri De Ment addressed the question of sociocultural change for three of the most significant immigrant populations (Mexican, Chinese, and Vietnamese Americans) from the vantage point of family life and organization. The family is a strategic point from which to analyze changes in the lives of immigrants and their children. Families are the primary and most intimate units of reproduction and socialization, but they frequently also serve to mobilize labor, allocate resources, and broker communications and exchanges with other societal institutions. Moreover, change across generations in families is hypothesized to be the major mechanism of sociocultural adaptation from the origin to the host society.

Buriel and De Ment's chapter illustrates the promise and the dilemmas of research on sociocultural change among recent immigrant communities. The authors discussed a number of interesting questions, including family structure, socialization, and intergenerational conflict in light of empirical evidence from the research literature. They thoughtfully reported research findings and discussed problems of poor conceptualization and misleading interpretations.

The limitation of the survey, however, is that it is not clear what conclusions can or should be drawn from their broad review of the literature. The authors did not write a final summary or concluding discussion. In this brief chapter, I try to identify the problems of developing a body of cumulative research in this field.

MODELS OF SOCIOCULTURAL CHANGE AMONG IMMIGRANTS

Buriel & De Ment reviewed some of the inadequacies of assimilation theory and suggested an alternative model of biculturalism. Their characterization of assimilation theory is of a "straight line" model of traditional country-of-origin culture among the immigrant generation being replaced by Euro-American culture among the second generation. The authors suggested that this perspective may have been appropriate for European immigrants earlier in the century (they rely heavily on the interpretations of Stonequist and Child written in the 1930s and 1940s) but is inappropriate for Latino and Asian immigrants in recent decades. Although acknowledging the validity of many of their criticisms of the assimilation model, I am not convinced that the bidirectional model of sociocultural change is an improvement. The bidirectional model posits four acculturation adaptation styles with two additional points beyond Mexican oriented (the unassimilated) and Euro-American oriented (the assimilated): bicultural orientation, which means high competencies in both cultural worlds, and marginal orientation, which seems to include persons that fit in neither world. The assimilation model with all its limitations does not preclude individuals with bicultural status; indeed, a "half-way" position was often thought to be common for the second generation. The marginal orientation in the bidirectional model does not directly specify cultural content but seems to represent social or psychological maladjustment (i.e., gang membership was the example given). This is a different dimension than those reflected in the other three categories. Recall that the traditional assimilation model offered the hypothesis that those with bicultural orientations (i.e., who had deep knowledge of both worlds) would experience status anxiety. I am skeptical that this hypothesis has empirical support, but theories should be evaluated, in part, in their ability to generate testable hypotheses.

In spite of the critique of the assimilation model in the opening section of the paper, most of Buriel and De Ment's literature review assumes (at least implicitly) a unidirectional flow from immigrant cultural orientations to some sort of American cultural orientation. The bidirectionality hypothesis is not mentioned after its initial presentation as an alternative perspective. I do not have a new and improved theoretical framework to suggest for the field. I

agree that it is important to purge the assimilation model of explicit or implicit cultural biases, but I am not sure that there is an alternative theory to take its place. Most of the research literature is still organized around the expectation of cultural change in the direction of the host society. The field will be changed when a better theory is developed, but I do not see one on the horizon.

PROBLEMS OF COMPARISONS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Buriel and De Ment noted that most research on the Mexican American population and on Asian American populations rely on idealized and static portraits of family organization and cultural orientations at the time of immigration to the United States. In the better studies, there is some empirical comparison of characteristics between an immigrant group and a native born population of the same national origin. Cross-sectional comparisons of this type, however, are very unlikely to represent the historical process of sociocultural change across generations. Many studies have no measure of origin status, only a comparison of an ethnic population with some idealized picture of what it was like among immigrant ancestors.

The basic reality is that there are not monolithic cultures of origin and destination but rather cultural values are always in flux in both places of origin and destination. Moreover, there is always diversity within any population, and immigrants rarely represent modal types. Shifts from a "traditional" culture to an "American" sociocultural pattern can only be detected if these terms are well defined and are measured on common scales. Most important, secular changes over time may well be greater than cross-sectional comparisons between cultures or countries show. Recent Mexican immigrants are unlikely to represent the characteristics or values of the Mexican immigrants in 1900 who were the parents and grandparents of contemporary second- and third-generation Mexican Americans.

Just as Buriel and De Ment question the assumptions of homogeneous and static cultures of origin, I am dubious that there are clear modal values of American society or culture. Patterns of child rearing, socialization, and intergenerational support in American society presumably vary by geographic location, age, gender, economic position, and many other characteristics. It is difficult to know what "becoming American" means for immigrant groups. Most of the research reviewed by Buriel and De Ment did not consider comparisons with the general American population or typical findings from the general research literature on similar topics.

The review of empirical studies did not inspire great confidence about the state of knowledge in the field. Although part of the dilemma may be due to

the problems of clear theory and conceptualization, the generic problems seem to be poor data and inadequate research designs. Ad hoc samples, inconsistent measurement of key concepts, and cross-sectional analyses of hypotheses of social change appear to be the norm in this field. Such studies may be useful to generate interesting questions but can not really be used to measure the stock of knowledge about social change.