Towards a Common Theory of Second-Generation Assimilation: Comparing United States and European Studies on Education and Labor Market Integration

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2019

Progressive Connexions: 3rd Global Interdisciplinary Conference on Migrations

Abstract

Since the 1970s and 1980s, subsequent waves of so-called 'new immigration' have been arriving in the United States and Europe. In the US, this immigration started with the arrival of immigrants and asylum-seekers from Mexico, Central America, and Asia. In Europe, the trend began with the influx of Turkish and Moroccan immigrants and continues today with the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis. Anti-immigrant politicians on both sides of the Atlantic have adopted exclusionary and often xenophobic rhetoric to further their policies, arguing that these new immigrants and their children are essentially incapable of assimilating into Western society. A review of the literature reveals why the *classical linear theory* of second-generation assimilation is no longer relevant and proposes instead the contemporary *segmented assimilation* and *comparative integration context theories* developed by US and European researchers, respectively. A review of the findings of two state-of-the-art studies—the CILS project for the United States context and TIES project for the European context—provides empirical evidence that, despite undeniable obstacles, the new second generation is indeed able to assimilate into Western education systems and labor markets. Nonetheless, gaps in the existing literature also suggest the need for further research in the field for the creation of a more generalizable theory of *second-generation assimilation* before appropriate policy measures can be implemented.

Keywords: classical linear theory, segmented assimilation theory, comparative integration context theory, second-generation assimilation

Introduction

The recent electoral victories of populist politicians in both the United States and Europe have done much to reignite the ongoing debate about migration and integration policies on both sides of the Atlantic. Throughout his campaign trail, United States President Donald Trump won the votes of many supporters by singling out Latino and Muslim immigrants for what he framed as their inability to properly assimilate into American society. Similarly, in the European Union, parties such as Alternative for Germany and Italy's Northern League have gained popularity by tirelessly furthering their anti-immigrant discourses. While the topic of immigration is certainly not a new issue in either the United States or Europe, the mass appeal of such exclusionary—and frequently xenophobic—rhetoric reflects the fear and insecurity many people feel as their communities become absorbed into an increasingly globalized and multicultural world. In the case of the United States, immigration was historically dominated by the arrival of white European workers in the 19th and 20th centuries. Similarly, in Europe, people internally displaced by wars and conflicts as well as those heading west for work after the fall of communism defined the continent's migratory trends of the past century. The generally successful integration of white immigrants in Western countries resulted in the adoption of what became known as the classical linear theory of assimilation, whereby the second generation was expected to integrate fully into the local education system and labor market. Today, however, the unprecedented influx of immigrants and asylum-seekers from Mexico and the war-torn countries of Central America has had a significant impact on the ethnic and linguistic demographics of the United States. Likewise, the first major waves of immigrants from Morocco and Turkey to Europe in the last few decades as well as the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis have come as a shock to the largely homogenic nation-states of the European Union. This change in the status quo has done much to put the relevance of the classical linear assimilation model into question.

This article aims to contribute to the current debate by taking a step towards filling a crucial gap in the literature of comparative migration studies. While research focusing on the assimilation of immigrants has long been present in the social sciences, it is only in recent years that sociologists have begun to dedicate their attention to the children of immigrants, the so-called second generation. Since the first waves of 'new immigrants' from Latin America began arriving to the United States at the end of the 20th century, longitudinal studies have attempted to analyze the

assimilation of the second generation by tracing the youths' progress from education to the labor market. Later, comparative studies focusing on education and labor market performance were conducted in Europe in order to collect empirical data on the assimilation of the second generation of Middle Eastern and North African immigrants to the continent. Nonetheless, due to the limited cases of these studies, the lack of sufficient externally valid results has impeded the creation of generalizable assimilation theories. In order to bridge the gap between longitudinal and comparative approaches, this article presents a review of two novel studies in the field of second-generation assimilation—the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS) for the United States context and The Integration of the European Second generation (TIES) project for the European Union context—before concluding with a summary of the findings, an overview of their implications for policymakers, as well as suggestions for future research in the field.

CILS – Overview and Findings

By the time the third and final wave of the CILS survey was conducted in 2003, the average age of the sample was 24. The researchers managed to retrieve a total of 2,564 cases, approximately 85% of whom had participated in the previous wave of surveys and 70% of whom had participated in the original first wave in 1996. The sample comprised second-generation youths living in Miami and San Diego, grouped into nine national categories based on their family backgrounds—Chinese, Cuban, Filipino, Haitian, Jamaican/West Indian, Laotian/Cambodian, Mexican, Nicaraguan, and Vietnamese. At the time of the study, those nine national groups were representative of over 80% of the United States' immigrant population. The smallest nationalities were grouped into the 'other Latin,' 'other Asian,' and 'other' categories, the last of which comprised children of Canadian, European, and Middle Eastern immigrants (Portes, Fernández-Kelly, & Haller, 2009).

Figure 1a shows the characteristics of the first-generation immigrants from each national group in terms of three structural factors deemed critical for second-generation mobility: human capital (listed as percent less than high school, percent college graduates, annual average incomes, and percent in professional/executive occupations), family structure (listed as percent stable families), and modes of incorporation (listed as positive, neutral, or negative). Here, a marked difference between Chinese, Filipino, and Cuban immigrants, on the one hand, and those from Mexico, Haiti, Jamaica/West Indies, and Laos/Cambodia, on the other, can be observed. These

differences provide the background necessary for the analysis of Figure 1b, which reveals the existence of downward assimilation in the second generation through the variables of school abandonment, poverty, unemployment, early childbearing, and instances of incarceration (Portes et al., 2009).

Figure 1a – Characteristics of First-Generation Immigrants

Nationality	First Generation					
	Percent Less than High School[1]	Percent College Graduates[1]	Modes of Incorporation[2]	Annual Average Incomes[3]	Percent in Professional/ Executive Occupations	Percent Stable Families[4]
Chinese	4.4	64.3	Neutral	58627	47.9	76.7
Cuban	38.3	19.4	Positive	48266	23.3	58.8
Filipino	12.0	44.8	Neutral	49007	28.5	79.4
Haitian	35.5	12.6	Negative	16394	-	44.9
Jamaican/West Indian	20.7	18.0	Negative	39102	24.7	43.4
Laotian/Cambodian	45.3	12.3	Positive	25696	14.7	70.8
Mexican	69.8	3.7	Negative	22442	5.1	59.5
Nicaraguan	39.6	14.1	Negative	32376	7.2	62.8
Vietnamese	30.8	15.3	Positive	26822	12.9	73.5

[1] For persons 16 years or older.

[2] Modes of incorporation are defined as follows: Positive: Refugees and asylees receiving government resettlement assistance. Neutral: Non-black immigrants admitted for legal permanent residence. Negative: Black immigrants and those nationalities with large proportions of unauthorised entrants.

[3] Family incomes.

[4] Children living with both biological parents.

Sources: Current Population Surveys and Parental Survey of the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS). Originally published in Portes and Rumbaut, 2006, p. 25l

Figure 1b – Characteristics and Assimilation Outcomes of Second-Generation Youths

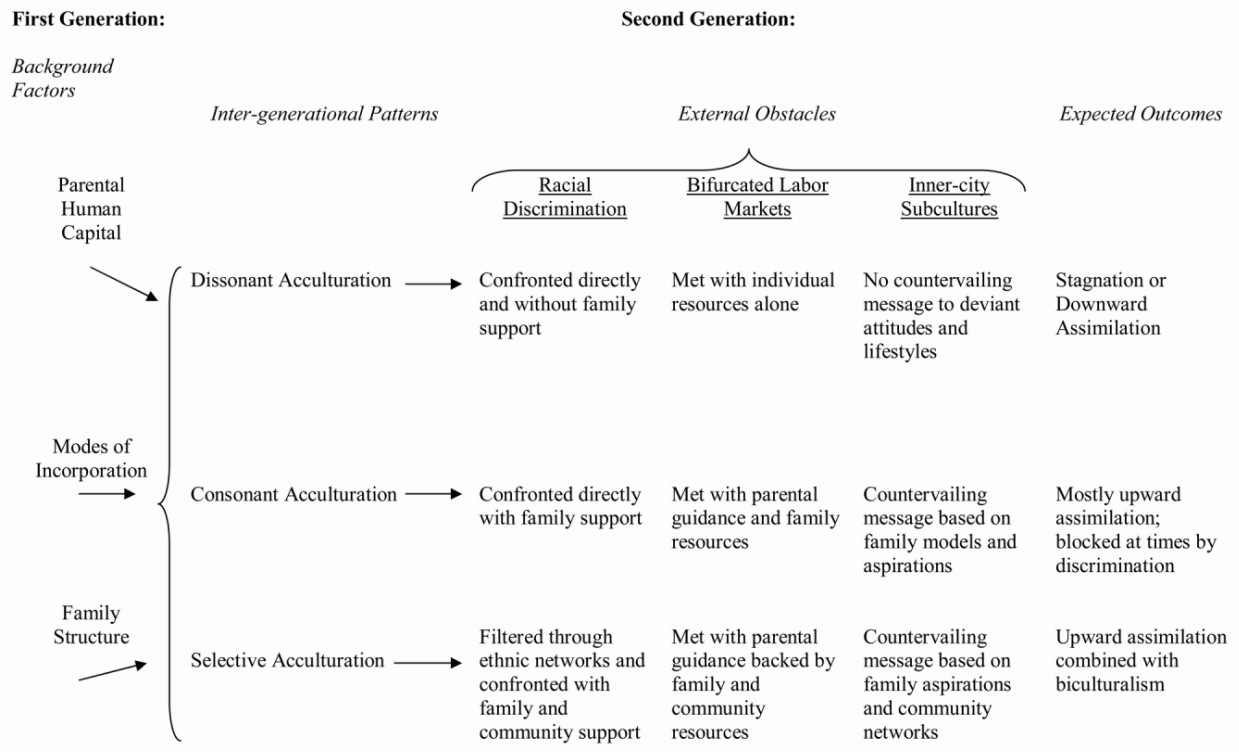
Nationality	Education		Family Income		Unemployed[5]	Has had Children	Incarcerated		N
	Average Years	High School or Less %	Mean $	Median $	%	%	Total %	Males %	
Chinese	15.4	5.7	57,583	33,611	2.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	35
Cuban (Private School)	15.32	7.5	104,767	70,395	3.0	3.0	2.9	3.4	133
Cuban (Public School)	14.32	21.7	60,816	48,598	6.2	17.7	5.6	10.5	670
Filipino	14.5	15.5	64,442	55,323	7.8	19.4	3.9	6.8	586
Haitian	14.44	15.3	34,506	26,974	16.7	24.2	7.1	14.3	95
Jamaican/West Indian	14.63	18.1	40,654	30,326	9.4	24.3	8.5	20.0	148
Laotian/Cambodian	13.3	45.9	34,615	25,179	9.3	25.4	4.3	9.5	186
Mexican	13.4	38.0	38,254	32,585	7.3	41.5	10.8	20.2	408
Nicaraguan	14.17	26.4	54,049	47,054	4.9	20.1	4.4	9.9	222
Vietnamese	14.9	12.6	44,717	34,868	13.9	9.0	7.8	14.6	194
Other (Asian)	15.2	9.1	58,659	40,278	4.5	11.4	6.7	9.5	46
Other (Latin)	14.4	25.5	43,476	31,500	2.2	15.2	6.4	18.8	47
Other	14.55	20.8	59,719	40,619	7.3	16.4	4.9	8.3	404

[5] Respondents without jobs, whether looking or not looking for employment, except those still enrolled at school. Source: Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS), third survey, 2002–03. Results corrected for third-wave sample attrition.

Based on the findings presented in Figures 1a and 1b, Figure 2 outlines how the process of segmented assimilation develops not only in theory but also in practice (Portes et al., 2009). The background factors of parental human capital, modes of incorporation, and family structure mix with the inter-generational patterns of dissonant (rejection of parental culture), consonant

(assimilation to host culture with parents), and selective (assimilation to host without rejection of parental) acculturation as well as the external obstacles of racial discrimination, bifurcated labor markets, and inner-city subcultures. The expected outcomes are the three possible pathways of the resulting segmented assimilation theory: upward assimilation, downward assimilation, or stagnation.

Figure 2 – The Process of Segmented Assimilation



TIES – Overview and Findings

In 2007 and 2008, the TIES survey was conducted to provide a systematic cross-national comparison of the second generation in Europe. The survey aimed to collect empirical data on education, labor market, and other integrational outcomes of second-generation Turks, Moroccans, and former Yugoslavians, aged 18 to 35, in fifteen cities: Amsterdam, Rotterdam (the Netherlands); Antwerp, Brussels (Belgium); Paris, Strasbourg (France); Barcelona, Madrid (Spain); Basel, Zurich (Switzerland); Linz, Vienna (Austria); Berlin, Frankfurt (Germany); and Stockholm (Sweden). A total of 9,771 interviews were collected—6,145 with second-generation respondents and 3,626 with respondents from comparison groups of youths with native-born parents in each country (Groenewold & Lessard-Phillips, 2012). Nonetheless, most results focused

on the education and labor market performance of the Turkish second generation, as Turks constituted the largest immigrant community in Europe with a population of over four million throughout the Union at the time of the study (Crul, Schneider, & Lelie, 2012). Moreover, because the majority of Turks arriving in Europe since the first waves of immigration in the 1960s have been low-educated workers, the sampling frame was designed to focus on second-generation respondents from specifically this kind of family background. Also, due to their relatively very small Turkish communities, the researchers decided to omit the Spanish cities of Barcelona and Madrid from this section of the study (Groenewold & Lessard-Phillips, 2012).

More or less in line with United States segmented assimilation theorists, the TIES researchers recognized four different paths of social mobility affecting second-generation Turkish youths in Europe. Fast upward mobility is characterized by a high percentage enrolled in higher education and a low dropout rate. This path was observed in Stockholm and Paris. As the researchers explain, "since access to higher education is less dependent on parental or other background characteristics and few students leave school early, the second generation experiences a generalized strong upward social mobility in relation to their parents' generation" (Crul, Schnell, et al. 2012, 127). Polarization was observed in the two Dutch cities of Amsterdam and Rotterdam as well as in Brussels and Strasbourg, where there is a high percentage enrolled in higher education but simultaneously a high dropout rate as well. Thus, "the trend is a significant share of respondents experiencing strong upward mobility and an almost equally big share leaving school early" (Crul, Schnell, et al. 2012, 127). Slow mobility is the result of a low percentage enrolled in higher education paired with a low dropout rate. This path was observed in the two Swiss cities of Basel and Zurich, where the majority of second-generation Turks entered the apprenticeship system. Finally, low mobility, characterized by a low percentage enrolled in higher education and a high dropout rate, was observed in the two German cities of Berlin and Frankfurt, the two Austrian cities of Linz and Vienna, as well as Antwerp. In these cities, over three quarters of second-generation Turks were in the vocational track or the apprenticeship system, while a significant amount left school early. Figures 3a and 3b illustrate this typology and present the education outcomes in each city context (Crul, Schnell, et al., 2012).

Figure 3a – Four Possible Pathways for Europe's Second-Generation Turks

	High % early school leavers	*Low % early school leavers*
High % higher education	Polarised mobility	Fast upward mobility
Low % higher education	Low mobility	Slow mobility

Source: TIES survey 2007-2008

Figure 3b – Education Outcome Typology for Europe's Second-Generation Turks

Countries and cities		*Early school leavers*	*Apprenticeship and non-tertiary*	*Higher education students*	*Typology*
Germany		33.1	61.9	5.0	Low mobility
Austria		32.3	52.5	15.2	Low mobility
Belgium	Antwerp	29.9	56.4	13.7	Low mobility
Switzerland		13.0	72.0	15.0	Slow mobility
Belgium	Brussels	34.9	40.3	24.8	Polarisation
Netherlands		25.9	47.2	26.9	Polarisation
France	Strasbourg	20.5	50.7	28.8	Polarisation
Sweden		9.0	59.0	32.0	Fast upward
France	Paris	10.3	37.5	52.2	mobility

Source: TIES survey 2007-2008

Based on their findings, the researchers propose "a school integration context typology for children of low-educated immigrants that can be used for international comparative research" (Crul, Schnell, et al. 2012, 152). They identify four types of school integration contexts that range from highly favorable to highly unfavorable. The most favorable school integration context is "an *inclusive* context in which immigrant children's learning abilities are the primary factor in placement into academic tracks and where immigrant parents' lower educational level is not a hindrance" (Crul, Schnell, et al. 2012, 152). At the opposite end of the spectrum is the most unfavorable *exclusionary* integration school context, "whereby the lower-class background of the immigrant parents prevents most children from entering tertiary education, but also makes the transition to an apprenticeship problematic for lower-class immigrant children. Among children whose parents offer little or no school support, many become early school leavers" (Crul, Schnell, et al. 2012, 152). In contrast, an *inclusive vocational* school integration context offers children of lower-educated immigrant parents a smooth transition to apprenticeships but makes it difficult for

them to later ascend to higher education. Lastly, in the *permeable* integration context, "there exist many opportunities to stream up, but also to be streamed down. This leads to highly polarised outcomes. Parents' support or lack thereof can thus be crucial; so is persistence among students themselves" (Crul, Schnell, et al. 2012, 152). Figure 4 deconstructs this school integration context typology into a number of key institutional variables in education systems across the seven countries to show which arrangements can bring favorable or unfavorable assimilation results (Crul, Schnell, et al., 2012).

Figure 4 – Institutional Arrangements of Proposed School Integration Context Typology

Countries and cities		School outcome typology	Institutional arrangements explaining tracking in secondary school	Institutional arrangements explaining % of early school leavers	Institutional arrangements explaining % of higher education students	Resulting school integration context
Germany		Low mobility	Vocationally oriented	Difficult transition to apprentice-ship	Further selection	Highly unfavourable
Austria			Preschool optional		Upstreaming downstreaming	
Belgium	Antwerp			Marginal vocational track	Down-streaming	
Switzerland		Slow mobility	Early selection	Smooth transition to apprentice-ship	Upstreaming and downstreaming	Neutral
The Netherlands		Polarisation		Marginal vocational track	Upstreaming and long route	Mixed
Belgium	Brussels		Comprehensive Preschool almost compulsory		Somedown streaming	
France	Strasbourg				Some stop after upper secondary	
Sweden	Stockholm	Fast upward		Automatic transition to upper Secondary school		Highly favourable
France	Paris		Late selection		Most enter higher education directly	

Source: TIES survey 2007-2008

According to the comparative integration context theory, the most favorable results are produced by education contexts such as the ones in Stockholm and Paris, which spur fast upward mobility through comprehensive preschool programs, late selection to vocational and academic tracks, smooth transitions through the school system, as well as good opportunities to enter higher education. In contrast, low mobility is the result of the education contexts in Germany, Austria, and Antwerp. In these contexts, preschool programs are less common and selection to vocational and academic tracks occurs at an early age, which results in many second-generation students being predestined for apprenticeships instead of higher education, giving them a disadvantage in the professional labor market.

Conclusion

Both the United States longitudinal and the European comparative studies have done much to show that the classical linear assimilation model of immigration is no longer relevant. In the United States, racial discrimination has had a greater effect on the modes of incorporation experienced by 'new immigrants' from Latin America and Asia than it did on their white European predecessors. This discrimination, in turn, is connected to the formation of ethnically or nationally segregated communities in the inner cities, where deviant subcultures have been shown to negatively influence second-generation assimilation. Combined with an increasingly bifurcated labor market that offers less middle-ranking posts, a considerable portion of today's second-generation youths will not assimilate with the same positive results as were once predicted by classical assimilation theory. For this reason, the exogenous factors of parental human capital and family structure are crucial to the assimilation of the new second generation in the United States. Keeping this in mind, European researchers have expanded the more relevant segmented assimilation theory to focus not only on exogenous background determinants but also on institutional contexts as well. Their research has shown that second-generation youths whose parents cannot provide high degrees of human capital are most likely to succeed in the labor market where the education system gives them sufficient time to develop their skills and interests before placing them on vocational or academic tracks.

Thus, it appears that both the United States and Europe may have much to learn from one another. In Europe, criticism that old multicultural policies are losing their relevance in the current age of transnationalism, changing identities, and super-diverse cities has spawned a push towards

more intercultural policy approaches. In the words of one of its principal proponents, "interculturalism places more emphasis on a contacts-based policy approach, aimed at fostering communication and relationships among people from different backgrounds, including national citizens. This approach focuses on common bonds rather than differences. It also views diversity as an advantage and a resource, and centres its policy goals on community cohesion and reframing a common public culture that places diversity within rather than outside the so-called unity" (Zapata-Barrero 2017, 1). Applied to the United States education system, such intercultural policies would focus on reforming the inflexible zoning districts of public schools, which in many cities still produce segregated 'ghetto schools' with considerable disparities of available resources and education levels. This is not to say, however, that there is nothing that Europe could not adopt from the United States. With its late selection into vocational and academic tracks, the United States education system is more reminiscent of those in France and Sweden, at least in this respect. Thus, the career paths of second-generation youths in the United States are not predetermined at an early age as they are in Germany and Austria, where many children are prepared for apprenticeships before being given a chance to properly develop their talents and interests.

However, due to the limited amount of studies on second-generation assimilation, a common and generalizable theory still seems out of reach. In the literature, there remains a lack of studies combining the longitudinal and comparative elements of the CILS and TIES projects, respectively. Moreover, the existing studies are contextually limited to a couple of cities in the United States and a handful of countries in the European Union. If current trends continue, migration to the West will only accelerate and intensify in the decades to come. While border walls and immigration bans might seem like viable solutions to some, history has shown that such policies will not withstand the realities of a perpetually globalizing world. The changing demographic makeup of Western cities must be accepted, and research-based policies that allow us to move forward together must be created.

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