DIVERGENT PATHWAYS TO MOBILITY AND ASSIMILATION IN THE NEW SECOND GENERATION*

ABSTRACT

As the new second generation comes of age in the 21st century, they are making an indelible imprint in cities across the United States, compelling immigration scholars to turn their attention to this growing population. In this paper, we first critically evaluate existing assumptions about definitions and pathways to "success" and "assimilation" and question the validity and reliability of key measures of social mobility. We then advance a subject-centred approach to identify the underlying mechanisms that help explain the diverse trajectories and unequal mobility outcomes among the second generation. In doing so, we attempt to dispel some myths about group-based cultures, stereotypes and processes of assimilation.

MIN ZHOU

Min Zhou is Professor of Sociology and Asian American Studies at University of California, Los Angeles. She is the author of *Chinatown: The Socioeconomic Potential of an Urban Enclave*, the co-author of *Growing Up American: How Vietnamese Adapt to Life in the United States* (with Bankston) and co-editor of *Contemporary Asian America* (with Gatewood) and *Asian American Youth: Culture, Identity, and Ethnicity* (with Lee).

JENNIFER LEE

Jennifer Lee is an Associate Professor of Sociology at University of California, Irvine. She is the author of *Civility in the City: Blacks, Jews, and Koreans in Urban America* and co-editor of *Asian American Youth: Culture, Identity, and Ethnicity* (with Zhou).

There has been a dramatic change in the face of America since the population reached 200 million in 1967. Today's U.S. population, surpassing the 300-million mark since October 17, 2006, has become increasingly diverse: more than 14% is Hispanic (up from less than 5% in 1970), more than 4% is Asian (up from less than 1% in 1970) and about 12% is Black (up slightly from 11% in 1970); by contrast, only 67% is White (dropping from 84% in 1970). Much of the exponential growth in the Hispanic and Asian populations is due to international migration. Consequently, the new second generation – the children of post-1960 immigrants – has come of age in the 21st century. In 2005, their numbers reached more than 30 million (including 9 million foreign-born children arriving at or under 13 years of age) with a median age of 18.

Demographic changes have stirred up and heated public debate on immigration. At the core of the debate is how America's newest immigrants and their children are incorporating into their host society. Some worry about the "unassimilability" of today's newcomers – one-fifth of whom are of Mexican origin –, pointing to their non-European cultural origins, low education and job skills and their unwillingness to assimilate into the American way of life. There is also growing apprehension about a potential population explosion and its subsequent drain on natural, economic and social resources. Others, by stark contrast, laud that the majority of America's newcomers and their children are not only successfully incorporating into their host society but also achieving rates of social and economic mobility that are comparable to – if not better than – the earlier waves of European immigrants.

As with so many ideological controversies, the issue of immigrant incorporation may be beside the point as it hinges on the foreign-born, who are a transitional generation caught between their countries of origin and their new host society. In our view, a more fruitful barometer of immigrant incorporation is to study the mobility patterns among the later generations, that is, the 1.5 and second generations (i.e., those raised or born in the United States of immigrant parentage). Are the adult children of immigrants moving beyond the socioeconomic status (SES) of their parents, and just as importantly, are they advancing to the point where they are on par with native-born Americans? In this essay, we critically evaluate existing assumptions about the definitions of and pathways to "assimilation." We illuminate our critical comments with some preliminary findings from our ongoing qualitative study of 1.5 and second generation Mexicans, Chinese and Vietnamese in Los Angeles.[1]

Problematizing "assimilation" and "success"

The classic "assimilation" model has been subject to much controversy and criticism, as have the very concepts of "assimilation" and "mainstream." The classic "straight-line" model of assimilation, with its many variants, predicts that newcomers will both affect and be affected by the fabric of American life so that, in the long run, immigrants and the native-born become ever more indistinguishable from one another (Alba 1990, Gans 1992, Gordon 1964, Park 1950). Implicit in the straight-line model is the notion that there is one uniform path to assimilation. Challenging this notion, Portes and Zhou (1993)

developed the theory of "segmented assimilation" and presented the idea that there is not one singular route to assimilation but rather multiple pathways, a concept further developed by other scholars (Neckerman et al. 1999, Zhou and Bankston 1998). Portes and Zhou (1993) also challenged the uniform characterization of the American mainstream, which they view as segmented by both race and class rather than formed around an undifferentiated White, middle class core. By introducing race into their theoretical model, Portes and Zhou (1993) underscore that the U.S. system of racial stratification interacts with class, modes of incorporation and the larger social structure to produce divergent mobility outcomes.

Adding nuance to this line of thought, Alba and Nee (2003) re-conceptualized the American mainstream as one that may contain not just the middle class or affluent White suburbanites, but also the working class and poor urban racial minorities. By expanding their concept of the mainstream beyond the confines of the White middle class, Alba and Nee allow for the possibility that newcomers can assimilate into different parts of American society. Moreover, they argue that immigrants' experiences with intergenerational mobility are not unlike those of the native born; they astutely point out that "an expectation of universal upward mobility for any large group is unrealistic," and suggest that all immigrants and their descendants will eventually assimilate, although not necessarily in a single, uniform direction as predicted by the classic model (Alba and Nee 2003: 163). While Alba and Nee (2003) have broadened the conception of the American mainstream, they remain unchanged in their notion that successful assimilation necessarily connotes incorporation into the middle class where immigrants converge to the mean. Hence, although the pathways and outcomes to assimilation may be variegated, it appears that the only outcome that remains socially acceptable is one that leads to convergence to the middle class.

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Both the public and the research community often take it as a given that assimilation has normative connotations, suggesting that immigrants *should* become more like native-born, non-Hispanic White Americans. In fact, we have often defined and conceptualized a group's success by the degree to which immigrants and their offspring become more like non-Hispanic Whites, who comprise the majority of the American middle class and who also serve as the principal reference group against whom newcomers are measured. In doing so, we have accepted the assumption that all immigrants and their children define and measure "success" through a normative lens. Yet, if we take a step back and first inquire exactly how members of the second generation define success and against whom they measure their progress, we may reach different conclusions about the level of success they have achieved. We may also gain a better understanding of why certain groups pursue particular pathways over others.

Defining "mobility" and "success" from the perspective of immigrant children

Previous research has failed to raise the empirical question of whether second generation outcomes are perceived and defined differently among the scholars who study immigrant incorporation and the very people they study. In other words, is the way that we, as scholars, define "success" and "mobility" analogous to the way members of the second generation define these concepts? Moreover, if we were to re-conceptualize our definition of success and re-frame our analyses according to the definition of those we study, would we reach the different conclusions about mobility? Perhaps by lifting the frame that we have imposed on our research subjects, we can achieve a better understanding of the mechanisms that lead to divergent pathways to social mobility.

Based on field observations in Los Angeles, we have witnessed cases that defy normative pathways to mobility. For example, some 1.5 and second generation Mexicans drop out of high school yet successfully operate gardening and roofing businesses – occupational niches shunned by most native-born Americans. Their entrepreneurial success has allowed them to accumulate wealth, purchase homes in middle class suburbs and establish stable family households. Moreover, from their perspective, they have attained an extraordinary level of success far beyond their parents and have achieved a sense of personal fulfillment. However, if we were to measure their success through conventional SES indicators, such as educational and occupational scales, they would fall into the "unsuccessful" category. The following stories are illustrative.

The story of Noe

Noe is a 1.5 generation Mexican whose parents migrated to the United States when he was only six months old. His parents separated when he was very young, and he and his four siblings were raised by their mother in Lake Los Angeles, a predominantly White working class community in the high desert. During elementary school, Noe recalls that he did well and even surpassed many of his classmates, in part, because his mother spent time with her children and taught them to

read, write and solve math problems beyond what they were learning in school. Noe had the benefit of having a mother with a trade school education, even though his father had only completed the first grade in Mexico.

While Noe did well in elementary and junior high school, he fared less well in high school. Living in a very small community with a population of only 1,500 people, Noe had to take a bus the nearest high school, which was 55 miles away. It was during this time that he became acutely aware of the socioeconomic class differences that separated him from his classmates. Noe's mother received welfare to help support her children, and, given the family's limited resources, he was unable to get involved in after-school activities such as football because he was unable to pay for the uniform. Moreover, staying for practice after school also meant that he would have to forfeit the bus ride home, and, given that this was his only means of transportation to and from school, he could not afford to miss it. Noe soon became embarrassed that he had to take a bus to and from school, which became a clear and visible marker of his lower socioeconomic status.

Having always had an interest in electronics, Noe decided to attend a community college following high school and was excited about the prospect of working in a field that would allow him to develop his technical skills. However, as soon as he learned that he needed to put a down payment on his fall tuition, he realized that he would not be able to enrol because of financial constraints. Disillusioned and unsure what he should do after graduating high school, Noe turned to the streets and supported himself by taking odd jobs fixing cars, televisions and other small electronics. Worried that her son lacked direction and may get into serious trouble with the law, Noe's mother decided to send him to Mexico, where he spent time with his father.

Is the way that we, as scholars, define "success" and "mobility" analogous to the way members of the second generation define these concepts?

After a six-month stint in Mexico, Noe returned to the United States. Upon his return, Noe took out a government loan for $2,500 and enrolled in a technical institute where he earned a certificate. Unfortunately for Noe, he later found that the school was not accredited and his certificate was worthless in helping him land a job. However, Noe was able to find an unpaid apprenticeship at a recording studio, and, after three months, he was paid $6.50 per hour and worked at that wage for a year. Frustrated by the lack of opportunities to move up in the company, Noe found another job at a different recording studio in which he was able to learn how to fix equipment and make cables from the technicians who worked there. Soon, his employer relied heavily on Noe, who clocked in over 100 hours a week at this job, where he earned a hefty salary of $75,000 a year. Having learned the skills of the trade, Noe decided to open his own business with a co-worker, and, after two years, his business is finally turning a profit. Noe is currently married and has two children who are in grade school. He also owns a five-bedroom, three-bathroom home in Lancaster that he bought for $130,000 and has now appreciated to $365,000.

While Noe's pathway to mobility has taken many detours, his achievements are remarkable considering that he was raised by a single mother who received welfare, spoke little English and had only a trade school education. It is even more extraordinary considering that his father was not actively involved in his upbringing and holds only a first-grade education from Mexico. There are several important points about Noe's path to mobility that are worth noting. First, given Noe's parents' low levels of education, graduating from high school represents an enormous jump in intergenerational mobility. Second, not only has Noe achieved a great deal of intergenerational mobility with respect to education, but he has also achieved a great deal of intergenerational mobility with respect to occupational status. As the son of a mother who received AFDC to support her family, Noe's business ownership marks a significant jump in occupational attainment. Measuring where he is now from where he started, Noe recognizes that he has achieved a great deal in a very short period of time. However, according to some traditional indicators of success and compared to the U.S. native-born mean, Noe may fall into the "unsuccessful" category because he has only completed high school.

The Story of Shirley

Shirley came to the United States at the age of six. Her parents were highly educated and held professional jobs in China; her father was a math professor and her mother was a doctor. Like many highly skilled immigrants, Shirley's parents were unable to transfer their pre-immigrant skills and occupations into commensurate jobs in the United States and worked in jobs well below their skill levels. Her father worked a series of menial jobs before settling into a low-skilled job at an aircraft company, and her mother opened a small business in Orange County, working as an acupuncturist who serves Asian and Latino immigrants. Shirley's family first settled in Little Saigon but soon moved to a predominantly White suburb where they were able to leave behind the problems of gangs and violence.

Shirley did well in high school; she took mostly Advanced Placement courses, earned a 3.5 grade point average (GPA) and was a member of the high school debate team. However, when she compares herself to her Asian friends in high school, she feels that she was not as smart as they, all of whom earned 4.0 GPAs. In her senior year of high school, Shirley applied to and was accepted into a University of California (UC) school and a private university in Southern California. She chose the UC for two reasons. First, she said that she just knew "that if you are Chinese, you go to a UC." Second, because her family's limited financial resources, she saw no point of going to a private university unless it was an Ivy League university, as she remarks, "If you're not going to an Ivy, then why go to

a private school?" Shirley explained that from her parents' perspective, getting into and graduating from college was just "expected."

After graduating from the UC, Shirley worked for a software company, then for a bank and then decided to acquire a contractor's license. Soon after acquiring her license, Shirley decided to open her own business because she saw first-hand that the way to "get rich" in this country is to own a business. For example, while her parents work full time in their regular jobs, they also invested in real estate, which has enabled them to accumulate wealth and purchase a house. Shirley has taken the lessons she learned from her parents, and she currently owns a contracting/design company, which she started seven years ago. While her salary varies according to the ebbs and flows of her work, typically, she earns about $160,000 a year, enough to have afforded her a home in an affluent Los Angeles suburb.

While Shirley may be successful according to the traditional markers of socioeconomic attainment (i.e., a college degree from a top public university, owning a profitable business and home ownership), she does not feel that she is successful, at least not yet. She explains, "I'm not financially successful right now, but it is accessible." Furthermore, compared to her co-ethnic peers and her older sister, who is a lawyer, she feels that she pales in comparison because, "I don't have a graduate degree. I don't have kids." She also adds with a touch of embarrassment, "All of my friends in high school went to grad school except me." Her belief that she is not as successful as she could be is only reinforced by her parents who continue to ask her whether she plans to return to school for an advanced degree. With all of Shirley's markers of success, her parents do not view her as successful because she has not earned an advanced degree. At the very least, they had hoped that she would have a Master's degree, as she explains, "they are traditionally Chinese and really stress education."

There are two points to underscore here. First, while Shirley has achieved success according to the traditional socioeconomic indicators such as college completion, occupation, income and home ownership, neither she nor her parents feel that she is successful. Shirley does not feel fully successful both because her parents are more highly educated than she and because Shirley measures her success based on a reference group that includes even higher-achieving co-ethnics (including her sister). Second, while Shirley has done very well for herself, she has not achieved intergenerational mobility. Both of her parents are highly educated and worked as high-status professionals in China, and, given her parents' extraordinarily high levels of educational attainment, Shirley's educational attainment (while impressive by native-born American standards) actually represents downward intergenerational mobility.

Conclusion

The illustrative examples from our in-depth interviews underscore three critical points. First, we need to problematize the conventional definition of success and consider how members of the second generation conceptualize these concepts. Second, we should pay attention not only to the normative pathways that lead to expected outcomes but also to the less conventional pathways that lead to divergent outcomes. Third, by problematizing commonly held assumptions and definitions about success and the pathways leading to success, we can gain a better understanding of the reasons that underlie the educational and occupational choices made by members of the second generation.

As children of the post-1965 wave come of age in the 21st century, they are making indelible imprints in cities across the country. Based on our preliminary findings of the new second generation in Los Angeles, the adult children of immigrants are choosing divergent pathways to achieve mobility and success, and, as researchers, we should be cautious to refrain from assuming that adopting an unorthodox path to mobility or an alternate definition of success necessarily connotes failure to successfully incorporate into the U.S. social and economic structure. Indeed, we have already discerned that there are various definitions of success, complicated routes to mobility and various ways of measuring these outcomes.

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Notes

* This essay is based on Zhou and Lee's published paper "Becoming Ethnic or Becoming American? Tracing the Mobility Trajectories of the New Second Generation in the United States." *Du Bois Review* 4 (2007), p. 1-17.

[1] The preliminary findings we present emerge from our ongoing project entitled "Becoming 'Ethnic,' Becoming 'Angeleno,' and/or Becoming 'American': The Multi-Faceted Experiences of Immigrant Children and the Children of Immigrants in Los Angeles." The qualitative study is based on in-depth interviews of 1.5 and second generation Mexicans, Chinese and Vietnamese in Los Angeles, funded by the Russell Sage Foundation (#88-06-04). We examine how members of today's 1.5 and second generation define "success," how their prospects and outcomes of "success" are affected by national origin, class, immigration status and gender, and how they choose to identify themselves.