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Segmented assimilation: some reflections on a three-decade concept

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This rejoinder traces the origin of segmented assimilation theory and addresses the critical comments by highlighting some key points in the evolution of the concept and empirical research from the early nineteen nineties to the present.

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The panel that created the basis for this symposium was held at the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting in August 2024 in Montreal Canada. The motivation to organize this panel was to reflect on the complex evolution of an idea born thirty years ago. Since we were the authors of the article where the concept originally appeared, we were particularly interested in this evolution and the thoughts about it of other experienced colleagues. In this rejoinder, we wish to build on their comments by highlighting some key points in the evolution of the concept from the early nineteen nineties to the present. Before doing so, we must, however, extend our thanks to the authors of the four preceding essays – Philip Kasinitz, Onoso Imoagene, Wendy Roth and David Fitzgerald for their acceptance of our original invitation and their willingness to revise their commentaries at the ASA panel for publication in this symposium.

Segmented assimilation: origin and early evolution

As Max Weber noted in his memorable 1919 essay, “Science as a Vocation” (Weber (1919) 1958), it is not the case that one can will ideas or insights by personal determination alone. One does not choose ideas to put forward; instead, ideas “choose you”, often in unexpected ways. This commonly happens in the course of an investigation when one is

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trying to make sense of a complex and often unexpected set of realities, historical or contemporary. In Weber's case, the idea that inner-worldly Protestant asceticism infused the world-views and behavior of early European entrepreneurs came to him in the course of his profound investigation on the origins of modern rational capitalism and the possible interface between religious ideas and economic behavior (Bendix 1962; Weber (1919) 1958).

At a much more modest level, we were casting about in the early nineteen nineties for some sort of explanation of the puzzling differences that we were observing in the patterns of adaptation of immigrant groups and their offspring to American society. Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut (1990) had just published the first edition of *Immigrant America: a Portrait* and Min Zhou and Carl Bankston had just finished collecting data on a study of Vietnamese refugee children in New Orleans, and at a meeting in Atlanta, we concluded that the true frontier in the study of immigration concerned the second generation, not the first, which had so far been the target of most earlier studies. In preparatory interviews for what was to become the initial phase of the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS), we discovered a great variety in the situations and outlooks of children of immigrants and immigrant children that did not conform to the until then "canonical" view of a uniform assimilation path into the American middle-class "mainstream".

As Kasinitz (2025) notes in his commentary, the concept of segmented assimilation was formulated *before* the data from the first and follow-up CILS surveys had come in. It helped, however, that, about the same time, Min Zhou had published her study of New York's Chinatown which confirmed the significance of immigrant enclaves for the survival and economic ascent of immigrant group and their offspring into their host society (Zhou 1992). These combined observations suggested to us the idea that the process of assimilation of children of immigrants was not homogeneous and, moreover, that the differences followed predictable paths dependent on the human capital, social capital and economic performance of the first generation.

As the CILS study progressed in the field, we elaborated on the original insight of discrete paths of adaptation culminating in the now familiar typology of straightforward entry into the middle class driven by high educational capital in the parental generation, comparably successful adaptation among children of well-organized ethnic communities drawing on their social capital; and the much more problematic destiny of children of working-class parents, often in undocumented status and lacking significant social support. The second path – success out of co-ethnic solidarity and resources – was further buttressed by the publication of Zhou and Bankston (1998) in their study of the Vietnamese community of New Orleans. Vietnamese refugees had managed to rebuild an ethnic community in a poor urban neighborhood drawing on their cultural resources and religious connections centered on a Catholic church – Mary Queen of Vietnam. Relying on the solidarity and resources of this community, the children were able to move ahead in school and into college, avoiding the dangers and lures of street life in the nearby ghetto (Zhou and Bankston 1998).

So, by then we had a typology of immigrant second-generation adaptation but not a theory. The question was: what factors would lead immigrant youths in one direction and not another? By the century's end, the first and second waves of the CILS had been completed, and Portes and Rumbaut were hard at work analyzing the data and preparing

results of the study for publication. The answer to the question arose from this effort. It became evident that what happened to the children largely depended on what had happened to the parents and that these experiences were linked to three factors: the education or human capital that immigrant parents brought along; the solidarity and cohesion of their families and co-ethnics communities; and the way that immigrants were received both by the American government and society at large.

At this point, we had a theory that not only identified discrete paths of adaptation but also singled out their determinants. Moreover, the theory was testable by gathering data on the parental generation and predicting, on that basis, what would happen to their youths on average. For example, we could pretty much predict the average educational and occupational trajectories of children of Korean and Indian immigrant professionals; as well as those of unauthorized Mexican and Central American manual workers. Exceptions do exist, and we will address that topic below but, overall, the structural forces identified by the theory hold. These are graphically portrayed in Figure 18 of the Fifth Edition of *Immigrant America* (Portes and Rumbaut 2024, 285).

Not incidentally, the theory fits well with the story of the Nigerian second generation, as told by Imoagene (2017) in her book and in her essay for this symposium. In terms of the theory, the Nigerian first generation faces a problematic mode of incorporation associating it with the African American population but counteracts this with very high levels of human capital and of co-ethnic solidarity. Ethnicity in this case, is not a minus but a definite plus because it impresses on the youths the value of both “Nigerianness” and educational achievement. Imoagene’s is the latest entry in a series of stories of second-generation success stories predicated on the same set of factors. They include second-generation Cubans (Perez 2001); second-generation Vietnamese refugees (Zhou and Bankston 1998); second-generation Chinese, Vietnamese and Koreans (Lee and Zhou 2015; Zhou and Kim 2006).

Not everyone makes it to the upper-middle and upper classes, even among these advantaged youths, but the power of structural factors weighs heavily on their educational and occupational trajectories and is faithfully reflected in group averages.

The downward assimilation path

As Kasinitz (2025) appropriately notes in his comment, the bulk of attention provoked by the original essay focused on the third path identified by the theory – downward assimilation. This is not surprising because this path directly contradicted the then dominant consensus on assimilation, namely that it was a uniform process undertaken, at greater or lesser speeds, by all foreign-origin groups. There were variations in the process but, at the end, everyone joined, culturally and economically, the so-called “mainstream” of American society (Alba and Nee 2003; Gordon 1964).

The theory of segmented assimilation did not question the cultural and linguistic transformation of immigrants and their descendants, but it asked “to what segment” of the host society they were assimilating, educationally and economically. Everybody learns English and American cultural ways, but it makes a world of difference whether they do so while pursuing advanced studies and eventually joining the professional world or quit studies after or even before high school graduation and go to low-wage work in Wal-Mart or the corner grocery store. Worse still, premature

abandonment of secondary school is often linked with street life, joining gangs, early child-bearing, and frequent encounters with the police. These realities do not sit well with the rosy image of an upward assimilation process undertaken by almost everyone.

Downward assimilation does not necessarily imply going to jail or having children in adolescence, but it means stagnation in a lower segment of society with occupational and economic outcomes not much better than the parental generation. This is also the conclusion reached by Telles and Ortiz (2008) in their landmark *Generations of Exclusion* study. Maria Rendon (2019) concludes her own careful study of second-generation Mexican-Americans growing up in poor areas of Los Angeles on this note:

... the Latino second generation already faces difficult odds in their efforts to enter the American middle-class ... Most will remain within the ranks of the working poor and working-class, despite their great optimism and determination to fare better than their parents (229).

Kasinitz (2025) remarks that “downward assimilation and downward mobility sometimes happens – but it is relatively rare”. On this point, we disagree. Downward assimilation, understood as stagnation into the lower strata of society accompanied by a series of undesirable outcomes, happens all the time. Its “rarity” is a consequence of its invisibility because most of the victims drop out from view. It takes dedicated effort, such as that undertaken by researchers like Bankston and Zhou (1997), Vigil (2002), Fernandez-Kelly (2008), Gonzales (2016), Rendon (2019), and a few others, to render the invisible visible. Surveys of the at-large population in urban areas seldom reach this depth and are thus prone to over-optimistic conclusion (Haller, Portes, and Lynch 2011).

But even with census and survey data, the stark disparities in the life course and outcomes of different groups of second-generation youths are apparent. Take a look at the figures in Chapter 7 of the Fifth Edition of *Immigrant America*, published in 2024. They are based on data from the Census’ Current Population Survey (merged data from the March supplements of 2016–2021) and merged samples of two large second-generation surveys in Southern California: the Immigration and Inter-generational Mobility in Metropolitan Los Angeles (IMMLA) and CILS-California sample (Portes and Rumbaut 2024: Ch. 7).

Here are some illustrative figures: college graduation ranges from 69.8 percent (CPS) and 63.8 percent (IMMLA and CILS) for children of Indian, Chinese, Korean and Filipino parents to 18.1 percent (CPS) and 19.3 percent (IMMLA and CILS) for children of Mexican and Central American parents. Ever-arrested second generation males range from 10.7 percent for children of the first group of nationalities to 27.8 percent for the second. Corresponding figures for ever-incarcerated males are 4.8 percent for the first group and 16.9 percent for the second (IMMLA and CILS). Childbearing young females (before age 20) are 6.7 percent for the first group in contrast to 30.4 percent for the second (IMMLA and CILS) (Portes and Rumbaut 2024: tables 40-41).

No matter how studied, through quantitative surveys or detailed ethnographies, the stark differences in outcomes among children of different national origins are real. So are the difficult circumstances confronted by second-generation youths at risk of downward assimilation because of limited schooling or negative outcomes in adolescence. We should emphasize that determinants of the downward path are largely shaped by structural forces constraining opportunities for upward social mobility despite high individual aspirations to do so. “I am so close to success that I can almost taste it”, one of our young

informants told us in jail where he was sent for drug dealing, but from which, he expected to be released fairly soon. “I would so much want to go to Miami-Dade College, but I have realized that college is not for me”, a young Haitian woman already burdened by two infants in her early twenties told us.

Significance of the second path

While the downward assimilation path garnered most of the attention, the first path – upward mobility in the second generation drawing on parental human capital and economic resources – was scarcely questioned. This is not surprising since this is the “canonical” path of entry into the middle class assumed by many past theorists. Somewhat neglected has been the second route – educational and economic success drawing on family and group resources, primarily the social capital present in the co-ethnic community. This path is important both for theoretical and practical reasons. First, because it can compensate for limited parental human capital and wealth. Second, because these benefits are not based on personal merit or effort but come to the person by virtue of membership in a group, primarily the co-ethnic community. Third, because the resources available through social capital are varied and, while in many cases they are a means for upward mobility, in others, they can lead to mere survival and economic stagnation.

Examples of success out of disadvantage on the basis of co-ethnic social capital abound in the literature. They include, for example, Zhou and Bankston’s (1998) study of second-generation Vietnamese in New Orleans; the studies of differential educational attainment among second-generation Koreans, Chinese and Vietnamese in comparison with children of Mexicans and Central American parents in Los Angeles (Zhou et al. 2008; Zhou and Kim 2006); Portes and Patricia Fernandez-Kelly’s study of “success out of disadvantage” among some second-generation Mexicans in San Diego and Nicaraguans in Miami (Fernandez-Kelly 2008). Similarly, Imoagene’s study of Nigerians, summarized in her above commentary, can be read as a social capital success story (Imoagene 2017). While high parental human capital is also present, Imoagene emphasizes how values and expectations in the Nigerian immigrant community also propel children upwards in educational attainment. The story is quite similar to that reported by Jennifer Lee and Zhou (2015) on Asian educational success. In both cases, parental human capital and co-ethnic social capital create a winning combination.

In other instances, however, social capital can be a stagnating force. This happens when the resources that it provides are linked to economic survival within a downtrodden community that, simultaneously, reinforces membership in it. Carol Stack (1974) was the first researcher to note in *All Our Kin* that urban black ghettos need not be devoid of sociability. On the contrary, constant exchange of favors – from childcare to borrowing small sums of money – were essential for the survival of individuals and families. The same note was sounded in Mitchell Duneier’s classic study of black adults in Chicago and in Fernandez-Kelly’s description of the Baltimore ghetto (Duneier 1992; Fernandez-Kelly 2017). Telles and Ortiz’s *Generations of Exclusion* can also be read as a social capital story, where membership in the Mexican ethnic community is a source of personal identity and economic survival, but also promotes stagnation in the same subordinate socio-economic positions across generations (Telles and Ortiz 2008).

In her commentary, Wendy Roth (2025) raises the question of what happens to future generations of immigrant groups who have succeeded in passing the first generation on the strength of co-ethnic solidarity and social capital. In particular, what would the ethnic identities of these succeeding generations be? In our view, ethno-national origins may persist in future generations, but mostly as a useful means to preserve some kind of distinct identity away from the enormous uniform mass of non-hyphenated Americans. Such identities are essentially wearable – they can be used in some settings to highlight a distinct profile but can be discarded in others. This has been, as well, the experience of descendants of white immigrants in the past.

We invite those who happen to be college professors to rehearse the following experiment: if you have a reasonably numerous class, ask your students where do they come from, that is, what is their ethno-racial identity. You will find that most “white” students respond with something like: “... I am half Italian on the part of my mother; and one-fourth Finnish and another fourth German on my father’s side”. The main exception will be African Americans who, lacking an immigrant past, most commonly reply: “just American”.

The only other exception are phenotypically-identifiable descendants for whom ethnicity is not “wearable” because they carry their physical distinct characteristics with them at all times. For example, descendants of Asian Indians or East Asian Koreans and Chinese cannot simply “pass” as white Americans but are compelled to explain their ethnic identity in most social situations. This has given rise to the complaint among second-, third- and even fourth-generation descendants of Asian immigrants that they are “perennial foreigners” having to repeatedly answer the question with anxiety from white associates and interlocutors – “where do you come from?”

While this might be an irritant for many, the effect among those who have managed to reach the middle – and upper-layers of American society is relatively mild. In such cases, ethnicity becomes a topic of “cocktail conversation”. The irritant of being asked again and again – “where do you come from?” can be countered with a reciprocal question to white interlocutors – “and you? where are you from?” (generally answered with the same cocktail of European-origin nationalities described previously).

Nationalities as units of analysis

In his commentary, David Fitzgerald (2025) notes that:

Along with other versions of assimilation perspectives, the literature on segmented assimilation is written as if there were ethnic groups moving through time in a competition with each other as in an ethnic Olympic Game. The achievement of the ‘Reds’ is measured against the ‘Blues’ in various events ...

The image is vivid, but the critique is misplaced if it means getting rid of nationalities as units of analysis. Such a recommendation would lead inevitably to the analysis of individuals, but that analysis would find that individuals are imprinted by their national origins in a multiplicity of areas.

People seldom migrate as individuals but as part of groups who share common experiences of departure, entry and adaptation. Inevitably, such groups are defined by a common nationality. While there are always individual differences, it makes sense to

treat nationalities as collectivities because of a common fate among most of their members in the country of destination. For example, while it is true that there are many professionals among Mexican immigrants and many manual workers among the Chinese, the group averages tell a different story. Nationalities are consistently associated with different endowments of human and social capital and confront a common mode of incorporation when arriving in America. This is the story told by Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994), Telles and Ortiz (2008), Rendon (2019), and so many other researchers of Mexican migration; as well as Light and Bonacich (1988), Zhou (1992, 2009), Min (1996), Zhou and Kim (2006), Lee and Zhou (2015), and many other scholars of Chinese and Korean migration.

Over time, it can happen that the origins and modes of incorporation of a particular nationality change significantly. When that happens, the shift becomes a significant topic of study. The social origins and modes of incorporation of Chinese immigrants in America were very different at the start of the twentieth century than at the beginning of the twenty-first (Zhou 1992, 2009). So was that of Cuban exiles before and after the Mariel exodus of 1980 (Portes and Bach 1985; Portes and Shafer 2007; Portes and Stepick 1993). On the other hand, it is remarkable how consistent the Mexican migrant flow has been over time, both in its social origins and modes of incorporation (Cornelius 1998; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Massey 1986; Massey, Durand, and Malone 2003; Telles and Ortiz 2008).

Over time, national origins are decisively linked to all three determinants of alternative adaptation paths – immigrants' human capital, social capital and modes of incorporation. When unforeseen historical events affect the character and composition of a given migrant flow, all three determinants change accordingly.

We close this essay with renewed thanks to the participants in this symposium and the hope that its publication will garner greater attention of relevant publics, both in the academic world and in public life.

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