BECOMING ETHNIC OR BECOMING AMERICAN?

Reflecting on the Divergent Pathways to Social Mobility and Assimilation among the New Second Generation[1]

Min Zhou
Department of Sociology, University of California, Los Angeles

Jennifer Lee[2]
Department of Sociology, University of California, Irvine

Abstract

As the new second generation comes of age in the twenty-first century, it is making an indelible imprint in cities across the country, compelling immigration scholars to turn their attention to this growing population. In this essay, we first review the extant literature on immigrant incorporation, with a particular focus on the mobility patterns of the new second generation. Second, we critically evaluate the existing assumptions about the definitions of and pathways to *success* and *assimilation*. We question the validity and reliability of key measures of social mobility, and also assess the discrepancy between the "objective" measures often used in social science research and the "subjective" measures presented by members of the second generation. Third, we examine the identity choices of the new second generation, focusing on how they choose to identify themselves, and the mechanisms that underlie their choice of identities. We illuminate our review with some preliminary findings from our ongoing qualitative study of 1.5- and second-generation Mexicans, Chinese, and Vietnamese in Los Angeles. In doing so, we attempt to dispel some myths about group-based cultures, stereotypes, and processes of assimilation.

Keywords: Immigration, New Second Generation, Assimilation, Identity, Mobility, Asian, Latino, Mexican

INTRODUCTION

It was no coincidence that the United States Congress overwhelmingly voted to approve a bill (HR 6061) that supported the construction of a 700-mile-long fence along the United States-Mexico border less than a month before the nation's

population hit the 300 million mark. There has been a dramatic change in the face of the United States since the population reached 200 million in 1967. Today, more than 14% of the U.S. population 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 (Bean et al., 2004). By contrast, only 67% of the U.S. population is now White, dropping from 84% in 1970. Much of the growth in the Hispanic and Asian populations is due to immigration. While President Bush has proclaimed that reaching the 300 million milestone provides "further proof that the American Dream remains as bright and hopeful as ever," many Americans seem much too preoccupied with the ongoing debate about immigration to notice or to celebrate (Ohlemacher 2006).

At the core of the debate is the question of 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 integrate 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.[3] 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. Signs of immigrant progress point to evidence that immigration replenishes the wellsprings of American dynamism and enriches American life.

As with so many ideological controversies, the issue of immigrant incorporation may be beside the point, as it hinges on the foreign-born, a transitional generation caught between their countries of origin and their new host society. A more fruitful barometer of immigrant incorporation would be 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, no less important, are they advancing to the point where they are on par with native-born Americans?

In this essay, we shed light on these questions by examining the patterns and pathways to mobility among the new second generation. First, we review the extant literature on immigrant incorporation, with a particular focus on the mobility patterns of the new second generation. Second, we critically evaluate existing assumptions about the definitions of and pathways to *success* and *assimilation*. We question the validity and reliability of key measures of social mobility, and we also assess the discrepancy between the "objective" measures often used in social science research and the "subjective" measures presented by members of the second generation. Third, we examine the identity choices of the new second generation, focusing on how they choose to self-identify and the mechanisms that underlie their choice of identities. We illuminate our critical review with some preliminary findings from our ongoing qualitative study of 1.5- and second-generation Mexicans, Chinese, and Vietnamese in Los Angeles.[4] In doing so, we attempt to dispel some myths about group-based cultures, stereotypes, and processes of assimilation.

THE QUESTION OF INCORPORATION:

Convergence to the Norm versus Intergenerational Mobility

The question of immigrants' progress lies at the heart of today's immigration policy debate. For more than a decade, the debate has centered on the question of whether

today's immigrants are of "declining quality," a phrase which implies that the skills of the most recent arrivals pale in comparison to their precedessors. Consequently, the matter of immigrant incorporation generates the most uncertainty and controversy. Some scholars warn that if we turn a blind eye to this "immigration problem," then today's newcomers and their children could easily become a burden on U.S. society and the economy (Huntington 2004). Especially at risk are Mexican immigrants, not only because many arrive with low levels of education, but also because many enter as unauthorized migrants, who lack the protection of legalized status. Among recent Mexican arrivals who came to the United States between 1995 and 2000, for instance, more than 80% are estimated to be here illegally (Passel et al., 2004). Legal status has profound implications for social mobility, not only for immigrants, but also for their children, whose educational and occupational trajectories are closely intertwined with parental citizenship status (Bean et al., 2006; Chavez 1998; Massey et al., 2002). Because Mexicans comprise nearly one-quarter of America's immigrant newcomers, the question of immigrant incorporation has often revolved around the issue of Mexican immigrant incorporation (Bean and Stevens, 2003). Because Mexicans start so much farther behind other new labor-force migrants, some fear that they will never be able to catch up to native-born Americans, a fear which leads to further anxiety about whether Mexican Americans will become mired in the bottom rungs of the occupational and pay structure and form a permanent and largely undocumented urban underclass (Borjas 1999; Grogger and Trejo, 2002; Huntington 2004).

Other scholars, by contrast, charge that such sentiments are overly pessimistic, alarmist, and little more than overblown hysteria that fuels public fear about immigration. This camp points to evidence that the majority of America's newcomers are not only successfully incorporating into their host society, but also achieving rates of economic and sociocultural mobility that are comparable to—if not better than—the earlier waves of European immigrants (Alba 2006; Alba and Nee, 2003; Bean and Stevens, 2003; Lee 2005; Perlmann and Waldinger, 1997; Rumbaut 2005). For example, recent longitudinal evidence has shown that Mexican immigrants have made considerable gains in three generations, significantly narrowing the educational and income gaps with native-born Whites (Perlmann and Waldinger, 1997; Smith 2003). Moreover, results from the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Survey (CILS) and the New York Second Generation (NYSG) study reveal that the second generation is generally doing better than their native-born counterparts (Kasinitz et al., 2002, 2005; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001, 2006). In addition, results from the Immigrant Intergenerational Mobility in Metropolitan Los Angeles (IIM-MLA) study consistently demonstrate visible patterns of intergenerational mobility with respect to education, median household income, and neighborhood socioeconomic status, as well as other key measures of mobility among all immigrant groups, and, most notably, among Mexicans (Bean et al., 2006; Brown 2005; Brown and Patel, 2005; Rumbaut 2005). The recent findings provide clear evidence that Mexicans and other low-SES immigrants are indeed following the time-honored path of socioeconomic incorporation: not only are they committed to assimilating into America's educational and occupational structure, but the children of immigrants are demonstrating impressive signs of intergenerational mobility.

While the second-generation has displayed significant progress by some measures, there are also, at the same time, visible indicators of downward mobility such as high school drop-out rates, teenage motherhood, male unemployment, and male incarceration (Portes et al., 2005; Portes and Rumbaut, 2006; Rumbaut 2005). These signs of downward mobility do not randomly appear among the children of different national origins but, rather, emerge in strong association with parental SES, family

type, and a group's modes of incorporation (Perlmann 2004; Portes et al., 2005; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). Therefore, it comes as little surprise that the question and the extent of the incorporation of low-SES immigrants and their children remain the most critical issues affecting the public policy debates about immigration reform in the United States.

Some of the debate stems from the fact that many recent immigrants have not yet had sufficient time to complete their incorporation experiences, meaning that social scientists have been unable to fully ascertain the final degree of recent immigrant incorporation. For example, because low-skilled immigrants such as Mexicans start so much farther behind native-born Americans upon arrival—with many entering as unauthorized migrants—it may take more than two or three generations until they complete their incorporation process. In addition, the debate ensues from the skills-mismatch hypothesis, which raises the concern that the U.S. economy (which has transformed from labor-intensive manufacturing to knowledge-intensive services) may not provide as many mobility opportunities for low-skilled immigrants and their children as was the case in the past. Finally, some of the ambivalence emerges from the differences in the way in which incorporation is conceptualized, defined, and measured.

In the existing literature, scholars almost uniformly assess immigrant incorporation by using traditional measures of socioeconomic attainment such as education, income, occupation, and home ownership, and then draw conclusions about the degree of incorporation based on the extent to which newcomers converge to the mean for native-born Americans. This approach stems, in part, from the fear that contemporary immigrants are of "declining quality" compared to earlier European arrivals. However, we maintain that, by relying on convergence to the mean as the sole or primary measure of mobility, past researchers have painted a sociologically incomplete portrait of immigrant and second-generation incorporation. We argue that, in order to provide a more complete assessment of incorporation, one must also measure the extent to which immigrant groups demonstrate *intergenerational* progress, that is, the extent to which the descendants of immigrants move beyond the SES measures of their parental generation. This is critical, for one can reach divergent conclusions about the degree to which an immigrant group is successfully incorporating into the U.S. social and economic structure depending on which measure one chooses to adopt.

One illustration of this point is that second-generation Filipino Americans exhibit significantly *lower* levels of educational and occupational achievement as compared to their parents, but their levels of SES attainment are similar to those of non-Hispanic Whites, and higher than those of the general American adult population. Although they are moving in a *downward* direction *vis-à-vis* the first generation, second-generation Filipinos benefit from their parents' exceptionally high level of human capital and, therefore, assimilate into the middle class nevertheless (Zhou and Xiong, 2005). By contrast, second-generation Mexican Americans evince significantly higher levels of educational and occupational attainment as compared to their parents, who arrived with such low SES levels that it is nearly impossible to drop any further. In their case, even while they achieve *upward mobility vis-à-vis* their parents, second-generation Mexicans still trail well behind the mean of the general population. So, while Filipinos may have achieved a higher degree of convergence to the native-born mean, according to traditional SES indicators, Mexicans have achieved a much higher degree of intergenerational mobility.

Because researchers and the broader public often employ convergence to the mean as the primary measure of mobility, they tend to rush to conclude that Mexican

incorporation is abysmally slow, raising grave concerns about the question of Mexican "assimilability." However, by employing the alternate measure of intergenerational mobility as a way of assessing immigrant incorporation, we may find surprising results that will lead us to reevaluate some premature assessments about immigrant "unassimilability."

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 (Child 1943; Gordon 1964), with its many variants (Alba 1990; Alba and Nee, 2003; Gans 1992; Waters 1990), 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 will become ever more indistinguishable from one another (at least after several generations). Implicit in the straight-line model is the notion that there is a single, uniform path to assimilation. Challenging this notion, Portes and Zhou (1993) develop the theory of "segmented assimilation," arguing that there is not one singular route to assimilation, but rather multiple pathways, a concept which has been further elaborated by other scholars (Neckerman et al., 1999; Perlmann and Waldinger, 1997; Portes and DeWind, 2004; Portes and Fernández-Kelly, 2006; Portes et al., 2005; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Rumbaut 1997, 2005; Zhou 1997). Portes and Zhou (1993) also challenge 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) reconceptualize 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 the 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, p. 163). Still, 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, with immigrants converging 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 that which leads to convergence to the middle class.

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. The CILS study, the NYSG study, and our IIMMLA project have defined and measured socioeconomic incorporation by the convergence (or lack thereof) between immigrants and the native-born (and non-Hispanic Whites, in particular) with respect to objective SES measures such as education, occupation, earnings, and home ownership (Bean et al., 2006; Brown 2005; Kasinitz et al., 2002; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Rumbaut and Portes, 2001). 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 were to step back and first inquire exactly how members of the second generation define *success*, and against whom they measure their progress, we may reach quite different conclusions about the level of success that they have achieved. We may also gain a better understanding of why certain groups pursue particular pathways rather than others.

Previous research has failed to raise the empirical question of whether second-generation outcomes are perceived and defined differently by the scholars who study immigrant incorporation and the people whom they study. The question, then, becomes: Is the way that we, as scholars, define *success* and *mobility* analogous to the way that members of the second generation define these concepts? Correlatively, if we were to reconceptualize our definitions and reframe our analyses accordingly, would we reach 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, a point underscored by the recent research findings of Fernández-Kelly and Konczal (2005).

In their study of second-generation Cubans, West Indians, and Central Americans in Miami, Fernández-Kelly and Konczal (2005) detail the creative ways in which the children of immigrants circumvent the traditional labor market in their pursuit of economic mobility. While the first generation toils in dirty, menial jobs in factories, grocery stores, and construction sites in order to secure a better future for their families, the children aim to escape the labor market constraints passed onto them from their parents, seeking meaningful forms of self-employment in the arts, entertainment, and even criminal activities. Employing the concept *expressive entrepreneurship*, Fernández-Kelly and Konczal (2005) illustrate how class, race, national origin, and generational status interact to give rise to new modes and pathways of incorporation that diverge both from the parental generation as well as from native-born, middle-class Whites. They find that the second generation defines *success* by grades of dignity, respect, independence, and economic self-sufficiency, rather than by traditional middle-class American values and norms or the conventional SES measures employed by researchers.

In addition, 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 achieved an extraordinary level of success, far beyond that of their parents, and thus attained a sense of personal fulfillment. By measuring their successes only through conventional SES indicators such as educational and occupational scales, these 1.5 and second-generation Mexicans would fall into the *unsuccessful* category.

The story of Nicolas illustrates this point. Nicolas 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 his father soon returned to Mexico.

His mother was left to raise Nicolas and his four siblings with the assistance of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) payments. Nicolas fondly recalls his early years in school in a predominantly White working-class community in the high desert of Los Angeles. He remembers having been an academically strong student who surpassed many of his classmates, in part, because his mother spent time with her children, teaching them to read, write, and solve math problems beyond what they learned in school. Although his father had only completed the first grade in Mexico, Nicolas benefited from having a mother with a trade school education.

While Nicolas 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 1500, Nicolas had to take a bus to the nearest high school, which was fifty-five miles away. It was during this time that he became acutely aware of the socioeconomic class differences that separated him from his classmates. Given the family's limited resources, he was unable to participate in after-school activities such as football because he was unable to afford the uniform. Moreover, staying for practice after school meant that he would have to forfeit the bus ride home, his only means of transportation to and from school. Nicolas soon became embarrassed that he had to take a bus to school, which became a clear and visible marker of his lower socioeconomic status.

After graduating from high school, Nicolas decided to forego college and attend a trade school. Having always had an interest in electronics, he was excited about the prospect of working in a field that would allow him to develop his technical skills and secure a job with a good salary. However, as soon as he learned that he needed to put a "down payment" on his fall tuition, he realized that he would be unable to enroll in his chosen trade school. Even though his mother offered to help pay for his trade school education, Nicolas declined her offer because he could not imagine placing another financial burden on his mother, whose welfare checks were already stretched so thin that she had difficulty "just putting food on the table" for their family. Disillusioned and unsure what he should do after graduating from high school, Nicolas 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 might get into serious trouble with the law, Nicolas's mother decided to send him to Mexico, to spend time with his father.

After a six-month stint in Mexico, Nicolas returned to the United States. Upon his return, Nicolas took out a government loan for $2500 and enrolled in a technical institute where he earned a certificate. Unfortunately, he later found that the school was not accredited, and his certificate was worthless in helping him to land a job. However, Nicolas was able to find an unpaid apprenticeship at a recording studio, and, after three months, he began earning $6.50 per hour. After working at that wage for a year, and frustrated by the lack of opportunities to move up in the company, Nicolas found another job at a different recording studio, where he was able to learn how to fix equipment and make cables from the technicians who worked there. Soon, his employer came to rely heavily on Nicolas, who clocked in over one hundred hours a week, eventually earning a hefty salary of $75,000 a year. Having mastered the skills of the trade, Nicolas decided to open his own business with a co-worker, and, after two years, his business finally began turning a profit. Nicolas is currently married and has two children who are in grade school. He also owns a five-bedroom, three-bathroom home (in a northern suburb of Los Angeles), which he bought for $130,000 and has since appreciated to $365,000.

While Nicolas's pathway to mobility has taken many detours, his achievements are remarkable considering that he was raised by a single mother on welfare who spoke little English and had only a trade school education. It is even more extra-

ordinary considering that his father holds only a first-grade education from Mexico and was not actively involved in his upbringing. Several important points about Nicolas's path to mobility are worth underscoring. First, given his parents' low levels of education, Nicolas's graduation from high school represents an enormous jump in intergenerational mobility. Second, Nicolas achieved not only a great deal of intergenerational mobility with respect to education, but also a great deal of intergenerational mobility with respect to occupational status and income. As the son of a mother who received AFDC to support her family, Nicolas's business ownership marks a significant jump in occupational attainment. Measuring what he has now from where he started, Nicolas recognizes that he has achieved much in a very short period of time. However, according to some of the traditional indicators of success, and when compared to the U.S. native-born mean, Nicolas may fall into the *unsuccessful* category because he has only completed high school.

By contrast, 1.5- and second-generation Asians tend to take normative routes to mobility; they attain extraordinarily high levels of education and often land prestigious, high-salaried, white-collar occupations in disproportionately large numbers. Although they have successfully navigated the rules of the mobility game and achieved "success" according to the normative definition, some Asian Americans have questioned their choices, especially given the many trade-offs they have made to get where they are. For example, some find that their lives revolve exclusively around work, leaving little room for leisure-time activities and personal relationships. Furthermore, many high-achieving Asian Americans are unsatisfied with their own achievements and feel unsuccessful regardless of how much education they have attained or how much they earn in their current positions, because they are more likely to compare their own success to that of even higher-achieving Asians—including their siblings and coethnics—than to average Americans. Consequently, while high-achieving Asian Americans may fall into the *successful* category based on normative measures, they may not feel successful because their reference group includes those who have far exceeded normative, native-born standards (Zhou 2004).

Sarah's story illustrates this. A 1.5-generation Chinese who came to the United States at the age of six, Sarah has parents who were highly educated and held professional jobs in China: her father was a math professor; her mother, a medical doctor. Like many high-skilled immigrants, Sarah's parents were unable to transfer their pre-immigrant skills and occupations into commensurate jobs in the United States and, therefore, 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 a middle-class suburb in Los Angeles, working as an acupuncturist serving Asian and Latino immigrants. Sarah's family first settled in an ethnically mixed community but soon moved to a predominantly White suburb where they were able to leave behind the problems of gangs and violence.

Sarah did well in high school; she took mostly Advanced Placement (AP) courses, earned a 3.5 grade point average (GPA), and she was a member of the high school debate team. However, she never felt that she was doing well enough because she always compared herself to her Asian friends, all of whom earned 4.0 GPAs. In her senior year of high school, Sarah applied to a University of California (UC) school and a prestigious private university in Los Angeles and was accepted to both. She chose the UC school for two reasons. First, she said that she just knew that "if you are Chinese, you go to a UC." Second, because of her family's limited financial resources, she saw no point in attending a private university, unless it was an Ivy League university, as she explains: "If you're not going to an Ivy, then why go to a private school?" While gaining admission to any of the UC schools or a prestigious private

university is an accomplishment in which any high school senior would take pride, Sarah explained that from her parents' perspective, getting into and graduating from college was just "expected" without question.

After graduating from college, Sarah worked first for a software company, then for a bank, before deciding to acquire a contractor's license. Soon after getting her license, Sarah opened her own business having seen firsthand that the way to "get rich" in this country was to own a business. For example, while her parents worked full time in their regular jobs, they also invested in real estate, which enabled them to accumulate wealth and purchase a house. Having applied the lessons learned from her parents, Sarah currently owns a contracting and design company, which she started seven years ago. While her salary varies according to the ebbs and flows of her work, she typically earns about $160,000 a year, enough to have afforded a home in an affluent Los Angeles suburb.

While Sarah 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 coethnic peers and her older sister, who graduated from law school and now works as a lawyer, she feels that she pales in comparison: "I don't have a graduate degree. I don't have kids." Explaining, 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 whether she plans to return to school for an advanced degree. Even with all of Sarah's markers of success—a profitable business and a beautiful home in an affluent Los Angeles suburb—her parents do not view her as successful because she has no advanced degree. At the very least, they hope that she will attain a master's degree, as Sarah explains, "They are traditionally Chinese and really stress education."

There are two points to underscore about Sarah's case. First, while Sarah has achieved success according to traditional socioeconomic indicators such as college completion, occupation, income, and home ownership, neither she nor her parents feel that she has achieved success. The reason is twofold. First, Sarah's parents—who are highly educated and were high-status professionals before migrating to the United States—have extremely high expectations for their children, which far exceed those of most native-born Americans. As a consequence, Sarah measures her own success relative to a reference group that includes even higher-achieving coethnics (including her sister). Second, Sarah does not feel that she has achieved intergenerational mobility because both of her parents attained higher levels of education than she has. In this respect, Sarah's educational attainment (while impressive by most native-born American standards) reflects *downward* intergenerational mobility.

There are many more illustrative examples from our in-depth interviews than we are able to elaborate upon in this essay. However, to advance our argument, we stress four critical points. First, we need to problematize conventional definitions of *assimilation* and *success* and, in particular, pay special attention to how and why members of the 1.5 and second generation conceptualize these notions. Second, we should revisit the commonly held assumptions underlying conventional models of intergenerational mobility, and develop alternative models to investigate why even the same normative pathways may lead to divergent outcomes. Third, we must examine more critically whether and how unconventional pathways to mobility may lead to positive mobility outcomes. Finally, by problematizing the conventional definition of *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 1.5 and second generation. This calls for an interpretivist approach that will enable researchers to uncover the mechanisms that drive the new second generation to pursue certain paths to mobility over others (Lin 1998). Findings from this critical approach will help further the theoretical debate about pathways to intergenerational mobility and immigrant incorporation.

PROBLEMATIZING *IDENTITY*

Earlier models of assimilation implicitly or explicitly suggest that complete assimilation means losing one's ethnic distinctiveness, dropping one's native language, and discarding old-world cultural ways (Child 1943; Glazer and Moynihan, 1963; Gordon 1964; Park 1950; Warner and Srole, 1945). According to these models, the normative expectation of all immigrants and their children is that they will, sooner or later, "melt" into society's mainstream and become indistinguishably American. While much of the debate about immigrant incorporation has focused on the question of socioeconomic mobility, another dimension of incorporation is sociocultural. To what extent are today's new immigrants and their children shedding their ethnic distinctiveness and culturally assimilating into the American mainstream?

Some of the U.S. public fears that today's newcomers are unwilling to assimilate and are disinterested in becoming American. Some scholars have fueled this public sentiment by asserting that the diverse lot of contemporary immigrants threatens the core Anglo-Protestant values and national identity on which the United States was founded, as evidenced, in part, by the choice to maintain an ethnic identity rather than adopting an American one (Huntington 2004). These concerns arise not only from the classic assimilationist assumption that mainstream American culture is uniformly based on White Anglo-Saxon Protestantism, but also from the naïve assumption that today's second generation exercises complete freedom to adopt whichever identities they wish and, more importantly, that others will accept the identities that they choose (Lee 2005; Lee and Bean, 2004).

Indeed, members of the second generation do not always identify themselves as unequivocally American. Instead, they may choose to adopt a number of different identities—ethnic, hyphenated American, American, panethnic, regional, or multiracial—which need not be mutually exclusive (Kasinitz et al., 2004; Rumbaut and Portes, 2001). However, unlike the children and grandchildren of European immigrants whose choice of ethnic identities is largely symbolic, the identity choices among non-White, second-generation youth are far more limited and consequential (Butterfield 2004; Waters 1999; Zhou and Lee, 2004). Previous research indicates that national origin, nativity, generational status, gender, ethnic environment, and intergroup contact are important factors in determining identity choices (Kasinitz et al., 2004; Keefe and Padilla, 1987; Kibria 2002; Lee and Bean, 2004; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Pyke and Dang, 2003; Tuan 1998; Zhou and Bankston, 1998; Waters 1999). Perhaps most importantly, non-White racial/ethnic minorities are subject to outsiders' ascription: the way in which others perceive them affects and limits how they choose to identify themselves.

Identity formation is a dialectical process that involves both internal and external opinions and processes, involving both what *you* think your identity is and what *they* think it is (Nagel 1994). To state that ethnic identity is simply a matter of choice is to ignore the structural context in which ethnic identities emerge. For instance, Black youth are the most vulnerable to outsiders' ascription; they may make intraracial

distinctions based on nativity, ethnicity, class, and skin tone, but the power of race as a socially defined status in the United States makes these differences irrelevant or less important than the racial label *Black* (Waters 1999). In her study of second-generation West Indian youth, Butterfield (2004) finds that that West Indians' immigrant and ethnic identities are irrelevant in a society that recognizes *Blackness* on sight, but little else. Furthermore, West Indians recognize that an African American racial identity carries with it a social stigma, so they often go to great lengths to distance themselves from African Americans. However, second-generation West Indian youth find this increasingly difficult, for they are "raced" in school—defined and treated as Black Americans—a point also underscored by Waters's (1999) study of West Indian youth in New York.

Similarly, Asian American youth find it increasingly difficult to retain a distinct ethnic identity, much less an American one, because other Americans consistently identify them panethnically as *Asian* and view them as foreign-born (Lee and Zhou, 2004; Zhou 2004). The model minority stereotype serves to heighten the sense of being Asian rather than being Chinese, Japanese, or Korean (Kibria 2002). While the label *Asian* may not be as consequential as *Black*, it does connote a foreigner status and constrains the identity options among the children of Asian immigrants. Because many Asians in the United States are foreign-born, U.S.-born Asians find that they must constantly assert their native-born status to others who often identify all Asians as immigrants (Lee and Zhou, 2004). How Asian American youth construct their identities in light of the imposed panethnic and foreign labels deserves further investigation. These questions are important because the way in which the children of immigrants choose to self-identify has profound implications for understanding processes of sociocultural incorporation and signals the degree to which they feel that they belong in their host society, and the extent to which they remain tied to their ethnic community.

We also find that the process of identity formation is highly affected by place and context. While the second generation may grow up in ethnically diverse urban areas, the type of racial/ethnic diversity itself varies across cities, even among high immigrant destinations such as Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Miami (Bean et al., 2004; Waldinger and Lee, 2001). In Los Angeles, for instance, the second generation is marked by a non-European plurality, dominated by the Mexican-origin population (Zhou 2000). Consequently, one of the most unique features of growing up American in Los Angeles is that the majority of second-generation Angelenos are neither Black nor White, but rather occupy a position "in between," at least at this moment in time. This emerging "in-between" status poses a challenge to a society that has long been divided by an impenetrable Black/White color line. It is not at all clear that today's children of Mexican, Central American, or Asian immigrants see themselves as either Black *or* White, or even whether they are likely to consider themselves as "people of color" or "racialized minorities" who feel closer to Blacks than to Whites. In fact, the degree to which they view themselves and are viewed by others as closer to Black or to White is highly ambiguous (Lee and Bean, 2004). The "in-between" and "dual" status, and the lack of historical rules that govern racial ascription, have provided greater flexibility in identity choices for members of the new second generation than for Black Americans (Lee and Bean, 2004). On the other hand, the constant negotiation between "American" and "ethnic" traits has fostered an *emergent culture of hybridity*, which mixes the elements of multiethnic cultures (Lee and Zhou, 2004). These sociocultural processes characterize a shared experience of growing up American among members of the new second generation in Los Angeles.

Preliminary results from our ongoing qualitative study of 1.5- and second-generation Mexicans, Chinese, and Vietnamese in Los Angeles show patterns that underscore these points. Of the fifty adult children of immigrants interviewed thus far, only a few identify themselves as unequivocally American, yet all distinguish themselves from White and Black Americans. The following examples provide a glimpse into the complicated processes of identity formation.

Peter is a second-generation Chinese who recently graduated from a UC school and now works as a paralegal for a large law firm in Los Angeles. He identifies himself as American and says that he has always thought of himself as American, but, he immediately adds, "When people ask me what I am, I only say 'American' because I was born here and raised here. If they continue to ask me, I will tell them that I am Chinese, but I am really just American." Peter also relays that sometimes at work he will tell people that he is "Asian" because "they get annoyed because [American] is not the answer that they want to hear." Peter goes on to say that he has always felt American, because "schools always stress that America is a melting pot." However, he is keenly aware that he is perceived differently. For instance, he explains, "When people ask where I'm from, I'd say 'New Jersey.' It is not a lie, I was born there. They are trying to pry. Why can't they be happy with American? They make an issue out of it, and I try to diffuse the issue."

Peter does not identify as Chinese or as Chinese-American because he feels no connection with recently arrived Chinese immigrants, nor does he speak Chinese, as he explains: "We don't have the same culture. If we can communicate, maybe, but we can't." Peter then astutely reflects upon the difficulty of navigating an American identity with an ethnically Chinese identity: "What I've noticed is that we live in a duality. Chinese people born in China do not look at us like we are Chinese. We were not born there and don't speak the language. In America, Whites see us as Asian. It's a duality. I don't really understand Chinese culture so I'm American, but Whites see me as Asian." Peter grew increasingly uncomfortable as he spoke about the tension between how he chooses to identify himself and how others identify him; although he labels himself as American, he feels that White Americans do not see him as American. Finally, when we posed the question slightly differently and asked whether he *feels* American, Peter admits, "I don't, I don't. Because even though I consider myself American, the people around me don't view me that way, so until that day comes, I won't feel fully American."

Peter's sentiments reflect those of many U.S.-born Asians who feel little or no connection to newly arrived coethnics, yet, at the same time, do not feel fully American. A second-generation Chinese woman, Melanie, explains, "I'm not totally Chinese or totally American; it's kind of a mix." Melanie grew up in a largely White neighborhood in southern California, and, like Peter, she feels little affinity to newly arrived Chinese immigrants. She feels closer to Whites than to coethnics and even candidly admits that she believes that Chinese immigrants reflect poorly on the U.S. native-born Chinese population as a whole. "For me it's embarrassing when they find those Chinese people smuggled in boxes in the ports. I am like, they are making us all look bad. But then I do feel bad for them," says Melanie. She continues, "You can't help but feel superior. I have to differentiate myself more so they don't put me in the same category. I wouldn't go out of my way to associate with recent immigrants. I'm too American. I grew up here. I don't know Chinese culture. I don't relate to them." Melanie expresses the need to differentiate herself from recently arrived coethnics because she recognizes that she—like other Asians and Latinos in Los Angeles—suffers from an *immigrant shadow*, that is, the perception that all Asians and Latinos are immigrants.

Among the second generation, there is a clear distinction between the recently arrived and the U.S.-born, with those in the latter category referring to the former as *FOBs*, an acronym for the derogatory expression "fresh off the boat." Like Peter, Melanie does not feel that she can fully claim an American identity because others often do not see her as such. While she feels "Americanized," Melanie explains that she cannot identify herself as White: "I'm White, but I couldn't tell you I'm White, because I'm Chinese." Here, Melanie conveys the tension between feeling more culturally similar to Whites yet being unable to adopt a White racial identity because of her Chinese ethnicity. Given Melanie's White cultural identity, she says that people refer to her as "a banana—yellow on the outside and White on the inside."

While some second-generation Chinese identify themselves as American, others adopt the hyphenated label *Chinese-American*, and some identify ethnically as Chinese. The identities that second-generation Mexicans choose are just as varied, ranging from American to Hispanic to Mexican-American to Mexican. For instance, Alonso is a second-generation Mexican who currently works as a general supervisor for a brokerage company. As a light-skinned Mexican who was born in the United States, Alonso unequivocally identifies himself as American, but he immediately justifies his answer by saying, "I was born here. I lived here all my life, and this is my home," and "English is my first language." He also reports that he has not experienced any racial discrimination, perhaps because "people often assume I'm White." For all of these reasons, Alonso has never felt uneasy about self-identifying as American. However, Alonso has experienced tension surrounding his identity from fellow Mexican students in high school who chastised him for "not being Mexican enough," not only because he looks White, but also because he does not speak Spanish fluently. As Alonso recalls, "This really upset me."

Other 1.5- and second-generation Mexicans choose to identify themselves differently depending on the context. For instance, Camila, a second-generation Mexican, explains that her identity is very "fluid" and shifts constantly, depending on the people with whom she interacts. She identifies herself as Mexican-American when she is among Whites, because she believes that it is important to specify the ethnic group to which she belongs. This is important, Camila explains, because she feels a strong need to present a more positive image of Mexican Americans to native-born Whites, who, in her view, hold negative stereotypical images of Mexicans. However, when she is with other Mexicans, Camila self-identifies as Latina, and when people ask her where she is from, she simply answers, "Los Angeles."

Outsiders' ascriptions also powerfully affect and circumscribe the choice of identities among 1.5- and second-generation Mexicans. For instance, when we asked Hermosa, a 1.5-generation Mexican how she chooses to identify herself, she responded emphatically, "I am Mexican. Never Mexican-American. Always Mexican." When asked why she chooses to label herself as Mexican, she explains that this is, in part, because people always identify her as such: "A lot of people think that if you are Brown, you are Mexican." Furthermore, "being Brown," or simply having the "Mexican look" often connotes foreign-born status. Seemingly benign questions such as "Where are you from?" even by the most innocent outsider can rouse suspicion and/or anxiety on the part of 1.5- or second-generation Mexicans and Asians. And the surprised reaction from other Americans when they hear unaccented, grammatically correct English from 1.5- and second-generation Mexicans and Asians only reinforces the immigrant shadow. For instance, Elena, a 1.5-generation Mexican, recalls, "When I tell people I'm Mexican, they often respond by complimenting my good English with no accent." The compliment actually offends her, as she asks, "What are Mexican people supposed to sound like?"

Another example of the consequences of the immigrant shadow is underscored by Ernesto, who, though born in the United States, was made to take an English-language proficiency exam at the beginning of every academic year during high school. The high school administrators who demanded this of Ernesto did not request the same from his White classmates, making him wonder why he was made to take the same test year after year: "Did they think I was going to forget [English] from one year to the next?" He also remembers being called a "foreigner" and a "beaner" during high school, making him feel that he was not accepted as an American.

Clearly, the identities for 1.5- and second-generation Asians and Latinos—fluid as they may be—are not symbolic or optional, as they are for European White ethnics. Compared to White ethnics, their choices of identities are more complex, and driven not only by nativity, class, and context, but also by outsiders' ascriptions. While they may feel American because they are U.S.-born, adopt culturally American traditions, and have little or no affinity to newly arrived coethnics, they believe that other native-born Americans do not view them as fully American because of their non-European ethnic ancestries. As non-Whites, they feel constrained in choosing an unequivocally American identity because other native-born Americans often narrowly define *American* as *White or Black*, thus excluding U.S.-born Asians and Latinos from the category altogether. This point underscores the need to broaden the conception of *American* to include the native-born of different hues and ancestries.

In addition, while White ethnics are able to claim a distinct ethnicity as Irish, Italian, or French without having to relinquish their American identity, Asians and Latinos have not been able to do the same. Claiming a European ethnicity does not preclude claiming an American identity, but claiming an Asian or Latino ethnicity may exclude an American identity. While the ability to claim multiple identities may be a fundamental part of the American identity experience for White ethnics, this privilege has not been extended to America's newest second generation. These constraints highlight the point that, if today's second-generation Asians and Latinos do not identify simply as American, it is not because they are failing to incorporate or because they are rejecting assimilation; rather, it is often because others do not view them as such.

CONCLUSION

As the children of the post-1965 wave of immigration come of age in the twenty-first century, they are making indelible imprints in cities across the United States. Based on recent research and the preliminary results from our study, we find that the adult children of immigrants are embarking on divergent pathways in their quest for success. Like other native-born Americans who follow multiple paths to mobility, we find that 1.5- and second-generation Latinos and Asians are pursuing routes that are just as variegated. As researchers, we should be cautious and refrain from assuming that one's pursuit of an unorthodox path to mobility or one's adoption of an alternate definition of success necessarily represents a failure to incorporate into the U.S. economy and culture.

Moreover, adopting an ethnic identity, a hyphenated identity, or multiple identities—rather than an unequivocally American identity—does not contradict what it means to be American. The preliminary results of our study indicate that there are a number of mechanisms underlying the choice of identities, not least of which are outsiders' ascriptions. It is important to underscore that when members of the new second generation do not choose to identify themselves simply as American,

it is not because they do not want to assimilate, nor does it mean that they do not see themselves as American. Often, it is because the ability to choose an American identity and to have that identity accepted by others is denied to them.

While we are just beginning to unravel the patterns of mobility and identity formation, it is clear that there are multiple pathways that defy convention. Our intention in this essay has been to highlight some of these avenues and to provide food for thought for further inquiry in the midst of the public debate on immigrant incorporation.

Corresponding author: Professor Min Zhou, Department of Sociology, UCLA, 264 Haines Hall, Box 951551, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1551. E-mail: mzhou@soc.ucla.edu

NOTES

1. The authors thank the Russell Sage Foundation for generously providing the research funding on which this study (#88-06-04) is based. We also thank Jody Agius Vallejo and Rosaura Tafoya-Estrada for invaluable research assistance, and Frank D. Bean and Leo Chavez for their insightful comments and suggestions.
2. This paper was completed while Jennifer Lee was a Fellow at the Center for the Study of Race, Politics and Culture and a Visiting Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago.
3. Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) publishes online newsletters to address these concerns, see ⟨http://www.fairus.org⟩.
4. The preliminary findings and interview data that we present in this paper emerge from our ongoing project, "Becoming 'Ethnic,' Becoming 'Angeleno,' and/or Becoming 'American': The Multi-Faceted Experiences of Immigrant Children and the Children of Immigrants in Los Angeles." The study is based on in-depth interviews of 160 1.5- and second-generation Mexicans, Chinese, and Vietnamese in the Los Angeles metropolitan region. 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. Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines, we use pseudonyms to protect the privacy of our respondents.

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