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SYMPOSIUM: REFLECTING ON THE THEORY
OF SEGMENTED ASSIMILATION

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The limits and possibilities of segmented assimilation theory

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ABSTRACT

Segmented assimilation in its current U.S.-centric incarnation is more valuable as a sensitizing concept that suggests where analysts should look rather than as a transportable causal theory of intergenerational change. One of the assumptions behind assimilation theory is that there is a policy and normative consensus that immigrants should integrate into the population. Many states want labor migrants and refugees to be temporary, even if the reality is long-term residence. Their policy goal is that immigrants should not assimilate and there should not even be a second generation. Specifying temporal and spatial scope conditions and extending the notion of segmentation beyond ethnoracial groups to include social segments in societies of origin and destination are practical ways to push this concept toward a more broadly applicable theory.

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Segmented assimilation; second generation; downward assimilation; dissimilation; integration; temporary migration

Assimilation is a process defined by increasing similarity between groups or between an individual and a group. The concept of segmented assimilation elaborated in two seminal essays (Portes and Zhou 1993; Zhou 1997) and two empirical books (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes, Aparicio, and Haller 2016) usefully points out the heterogeneity of target groups in the destination society toward which immigrants and their descendants can become more similar. As Portes and Rumbaut (2001, 55) summarize, "the central question is not whether the second generation will assimilate to U.S. society but *to what segment* of that society it will assimilate." The studies claimed there were three dominant pathways. "One of them replicates the time-honored portrayal; of growing acculturation and parallel integration into the white middle-class; a second leads straight into the opposite direction to permanent poverty and assimilation into the underclass; still a third associates rapid economic advancement with deliberate preservation of the immigrant community's values and tight solidarity" (Portes and Zhou 1993, 82). The pathways that members of the second generation take are determined by their parents' human capital, stability of family structure, and the "mode of incorporation" – the type of welcome by the host state and society that varies by national origin.

This essay brackets the well-worn debates about whether assimilation and integration are distinct concepts or if assimilation should be abandoned as an analytical category

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given a history of nefarious uses (see the review in Alba and Foner 2015). I argue that segmented assimilation in its current U.S.-centric incarnation is more valuable as a sensitizing concept that suggests where analysts should look (Blumer 2017), rather than as a transportable causal theory of intergenerational change. There are many different notions of what makes a theory, even within sociology. In the formulation of Portes (1997, 807), theories must include four features: a description of specific instances of reality, identification of an issue to explain, identification of explanatory factors, and links with other predictive statements. The classical work on segmented assimilation meets this four-prong test in its description and explanation of the assimilation patterns in the 1990s and 2000s of the children of immigrants who arrived in the United States after 1965. However, the scope of the theory is quite limited. Specifying temporal and spatial scope conditions, particularly the many different legal modes of incorporation or exclusion that affect whether assimilation is even possible or desired by the hosts, and extending the notion of segmentation beyond ethnoracial groups, are practical ways to push this concept toward a more broadly applicable theory.

The theory and its case

The most provocative part of segmented assimilation theory revolves around the second pathway, called dissonant acculturation, in which children assimilate faster than their parents in ways that create negative outcomes. Dissonant acculturation is a version of "second-generation decline" in which the children of immigrants do worse than their parents (Gans 1992). *Legacies*, the leading empirical study, raised the specter that this pathway might become the most common of the three. "Were this outcome to become dominant among the second generation," warn Portes and Rumbaut (2001: xviii), "a new rainbow underclass would be the prospect facing urban America by the middle of the next century." The causes for this outcome, according to the argument, were threefold. Unlike previous immigrants to the United States, most post-1965 immigrants were not white and thus could not simply assimilate by changing their cultural practices in the face of racism. An hourglass economy in which middle-class jobs were becoming scarcer and government was cutting back social welfare programs impeded the social mobility that previous immigrants and their descendants enjoyed. Finally, working-class immigrants tended to concentrate with poor, racialized Americans in "isolated ghettos" in which an "adversarial subculture" among young people "entails the willful refusal of mainstream norms and values" (Portes and Zhou 1993, 76–83; Zhou 1997, 989).

I will leave to others the spirited debates about the empirical distribution of the three pathways and whether the posited causes hold up to explain patterns in the United States at the turn of the twenty-first century. These controversies include:

- What is the prevalence of the downward assimilation pathway (Alba, Kasinitz, and Waters 2011; Luthra, Waldinger, and Soehl 2018; Smith 2024; Tran and Valdez 2017)?
- Are the proposed drivers of the pessimistic scenario historically accurate, such as the notion that the non-white character of most post-1965 migration will delay assimilation as a consequence of host society racism, when whiteness itself is a labile construct and groups that today are considered racial insiders were cast as outsiders when they arrived (Perlmann and Waldinger 1997)?

- Notwithstanding high levels of ongoing racism, do the countervailing forces of anti-racism and celebrations of cultural pluralism that differentiate the America of 2000 from the America of 1900 offer no meaningful protection from discrimination (Alba and Nee 2003)?
- Does the U.S. citizenship enjoyed by the second generation not offer paths of mobility blocked for the quarter of immigrant parents who do not enjoy permanent legal status (Bean et al. 2015)?
- Is the immigrant labor market shaped like an hourglass (Capps, Fix, and Lin 2010)?
- Is there an "underclass" (Wacquant 2022)?

Setting aside the empirical controversies, if one agrees that segmented assimilation is a theory, that still leaves the question of how to define and interpret the case that was the basis for its elaboration (Ragin and Becker 1992). The classical formulations of segmented assimilation theory self-consciously sought to explain assimilation patterns of the "new second generation" in the United States during one historical period.

Expanding scope conditions

To what extent might the theory of segmented assimilation be made more generalizable? A useful theory should "'travel' in the sense of being applicable to different spatial and temporal contexts" (Portes 1997, 817).

The notion of "generation" that is core to assimilation theory cannot be assumed in all situations. Generation suggests (1) permanent immigration, as opposed to temporary or circular movement, and (2) family formation in the destination country. These conditions do not apply to migration regimes in many countries, particularly those outside the Americas which rarely assign citizenship by virtue of birth on the state's territory (*jus soli)*. For example, the highest relative levels of immigration in the world, and some of the highest absolute levels as well, are in the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The details of the kafala system of sponsorship have varied over time and across countries, but at its core, the system prevents all but the most privileged immigrants from establishing themselves permanently. In the most extreme example of the UAE, the foreign population is dominated by working-age males, whose children, if they have any, are raised in their parents' countries of origin (Fargues 2011). In short, the most intensive migration societies in the world have precious few second-generation immigrants, and those who do exist tend to be children of prosperous expatriates rather than a "rainbow underclass."

Temporary migration is increasingly common around the world, even in traditional "nations of immigrants" such as Canada, Australia, and the United States. Some temporary migrants may become permanent immigrants, despite the objectives of the original policies that facilitated their arrival, and raise children who constitute a second generation. Such is the story of the children of postwar "guestworkers" in northwestern European countries such as Germany. However, many countries have designed policies that effectively enforce temporariness and erect barriers to the family formation that would create a second generation. States and employers that seek temporary migrants often do not want assimilation. They deliberately select immigrants thought to be culturally different from the native population who will return at the end of their contract or working age. One

of the main thrusts of migration policy in the GCC since the 1990s has been to hire more workers from South and Southeast Asia, rather than other Middle Eastern countries, so that migrants will be culturally dissimilar and thus more easily exploited and deportable (Cook-Martín 2024; Fargues 2011). In many contexts of forced migration, protracted displacement yields generations of descendants of refugees who are not allowed to structurally integrate. For example, Palestinian refugees are prevented from full integration into the host societies of Lebanon and Syria. The state, not the kids, has an oppositional attitude (Arar and FitzGerald 2023).

One of the assumptions behind assimilation theory is that there is a policy and normative consensus that immigrants should integrate into the population. In all the settings described above where states want labor migrants and refugees to be temporary, even if the reality is long-term residence, the policy goal is that they should not assimilate, as shown in Table 1.

The assumption that immigrants should become like the native-born majority does not fit the historical pattern in Latin America either. Throughout Latin America in the 19th and early 20th centuries, a settler minority of elites born in the Iberian Peninsula and their descendants attempted to attract permanent immigrants. Their goal was not to invite permanent immigrants who were most similar to the native-born majority populations, which tended to be indigenous, Black, or mixed, or to encourage immigrants on arrival to become more like the native-born. Rather, elites encouraged the immigration of Europeans who would whiten the existing majority. The goal of nation-state building was not to change the immigrants, but rather, for immigrants to change the nation. In such a context, the children of immigrants have tended to vault into the national elite, even when their parents arrived with few resources, by virtue of the privilege of whiteness (FitzGerald and Cook-Martín 2014).

Segmented assimilation theory relies on the presence of an established "underclass" in the country of destination to drive downward assimilation. Recall that the stated mechanism explaining this pathway is that racism on the part of the majority lumps newcomers into the existing marginalized group, and second-generation youngsters respond to this hostile reception by adopting the adversarial attitudes of the established ghettoized minority. Scholars have questioned whether this model can apply easily to new countries of mass permanent immigration in Europe, where post-imperial immigration from former colonies to metropoles tends to be much more recent (Crul 2016).

The most explicit effort to test segmented assimilation theory in a European framework is Portes, Aparacio, and Haller's *Spanish Legacies* (2016) that analyzed the second

Table 1. Modes of incorporation and exclusion.

Ideal type of host society	Empirical example	Type of migration	State goal for migrants
All	GCC countries, Lebanon	Temporary migrant/ Prolonged refugee displacement	Do not assimilate
Settler society/ nation of immigrants	USA	Permanent	Assimilate to dominant majority
Dominant settler minority	19th and early 20th c. Latin America	Permanent	Assimilate to dominant minority and change majority
New country of mass immigration	Spain	Permanent	Assimilate to dominant majority

generation in Madrid and Barcelona. The primary countries of parental origin were Ecuador, Colombia, and Morocco. The study explicitly imported the U.S.-based framework in which "successful integration" involved overcoming the same three obstacles summarized as "racism; a bifurcated labor market; and the presence of deviant lifestyles as alternative adaptation paths" (p.23). While the study revealed some evidence of selective acculturation with positive outcomes, there was little evidence of downward assimilation. The book concluded that "children of immigrants in Spain appear to join the universe of young people in that country in a relatively smooth manner" (219). It is possible that a study conducted in Spain in the future, or in another European country with a longer history of immigration, including of racialized minorities from former colonies, might reach different conclusions. Simon's (2003) study of the integration of the Turkish, Moroccan, and Portuguese second generation in France found mixed mobility in which not all children of immigrants were doing better than their parents, but that the theory of segmented assimilation did not fully explain the pattern. Silberman, Alba, and Fournier (2007) note that one of the major barriers to labor mobility in France is anti-Muslim discrimination in which names play a major role, which is not a feature of U.S.-based segmented assimilation theory. The prominence that segmented assimilation theory gives to the pathway of dissonant acculturation and its causal mechanisms are rooted in a U.S. context that does not travel well to Europe.

Dual reference points

The crucial insight that immigrants have multiple reference groups toward which they assimilate can be further expanded to consider an important frame of reference for immigrants themselves – their country of origin. If assimilation is about increasing similarity to one group, dissimilation is the Janus face of increasing difference from another. Assimilation focuses on immigration and the increasing similarity, or convergence, with the destination country society, and in the case of segmented assimilation, its various subcomponents. Dissimilation, on the other hand, focuses on emigration and return migration. The point of reference is the country of origin, from which emigrants and their descendants diverge over time (FitzGerald 2013). Immigrants live a "double life" (Sayad 1979, 77) or have a "dual frame of reference" (Piore 1979), in which their countries of origin and destination anchor expectations and interpretations of experience. Studies of transnationalism emphasize the ongoing connections between places of origin and destination such that convergences take place to form a single social field (FitzGerald 2013).

The society in the place of origin is itself segmented. The sociology of dissimilation would benefit from greater specification of the segment that is a reference point for immigrants when they are interpreting the changes they observe in the second generation. The reference point for that change is not the whole of the national society of origin. It may be an idealized version of a countryside gemeinschaft, frozen in time, that ignores changes since the period of emigration, national heterogeneity, and the diffusion of norms and practices across borders that prevents the host society from being a tight cultural container.

Considering that every immigrant is also an emigrant, living with dual and even multiple frames of reference, calls into question the theory of segmented assimilation's claims of negative trajectories. For example, in 1996-1998, second-generation Mexicans in the

United States had 11.9 mean years of education. Yet first-generation Mexican immigrants had only 8.4 years of mean education. Moreover, Mexicans living in Mexico during the same period, a key reference group for immigrant parents with a dual frame of reference, had only 7.4 years of education. Segmented assimilation perspectives miss the big story – the sharp increase of 4.5 years of education experienced by second-generation people of Mexican origin in the United States compared to their peers in Mexico. That trajectory is the opposite of downward assimilation (Jiménez and FitzGerald 2007).

Assimilation research in the United States typically takes native-born, non-Hispanic whites as the reference population to which everyone else is compared. The 11.9 years of education for the Mexican second generation is less than the 13 years enjoyed by native-born non-Hispanic whites, but that differential declines over time as third-plus generation Mexicans reach 12.1 years of mean education. While there is a story of ongoing inequality between non-Hispanic whites and Mexicans, the slope of intergenerational change for people of Mexican origin is not negative. One might emphasize that the slope is gently positive or insist that the big picture is one of statis *after* the second generation, but by no means is the slope downward (Jiménez and FitzGerald 2007).

Looking ahead

The original motivation of segmented assimilation theory was that the contemporary United States had become more complex and thus needed a new theory to explain assimilation patterns (Portes and Rumbaut 2001, xviii). Yet all modern societies are complex and segmented. That complexity is the basis of the Durkheimian sociology that rose at the turn of the twentieth century during the same historical moment as the first great wave of transatlantic migration. Classical segmented assimilation theory does not go far enough in assessing the complexity of segmentation.

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 in an ethnic Olympic Games. The achievement of the Reds is measured against the Blues in various events (speed of language acquisition, etc …). Today's Reds are measured against the success of the Greens in the games of yesteryear (FitzGerald 2022, 174). Ethnicity, including the subset of race, is deeply consequential for the children of immigrants. However, the ethnoracial group is but one way of defining a social segment. Immigrants and their children also become more like particular occupational and recreational groups, religious communities, a kaleidoscope of subcultures, and regions. Los Angeles, the primary immigrant gateway, is a predominantly Latino city, and Mexican immigrants and their descendants assimilate to a Latinidad that cannot be understood by static notions of Anglo conformity (Alarcón, Escala-Rabadan, and Odgers 2016). Societies are marked by cross-cutting cleavages. The metaphor of segmentation should not be taken too literally to suggest groups that are discrete entities. The analytical risk of such a move is compounded when processes of growing similarity to societal segments are situational or change over the life course. Unpacking this level of nuance in segmentation is an open research field.

The main body of research in the theory of segmented assimilation is based on pathbreaking studies of students (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). The 1991–2006 Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study combining surveys and interviews is a formidable accomplishment. Of

course, even the most ambitious study must impose boundaries on its inquiry. An unresolved question is what will happen to teenagers and young adults over the rest of their life course. Age has a way of eroding the sharp edges of youth, especially the prevalence of engaging in criminal activities (Farrington 1986). There may be lifetime negative consequences for kids who cut class to smoke pot behind the gym and get in trouble with teachers and police, but it cannot be assumed they are damned to the lumpenproletariat for the rest of their lives. Authors in the early twentieth century decried the putative criminality of the children of Italian and Jewish immigrants (Bingham 1908; Ware 1935 [1994]). These children on average grew up to be "successfully assimilated" and set the benchmark against which the current second generation is invidiously compared.

More broadly, as studies of dissimilation show, for many immigrant families, becoming mainstream American is not an unalloyed good. Immigrant parents often fear that their children are adopting mainstream U.S. cultural practices and attitudes and moving away from more culturally conservative backgrounds in places of origin. For some Asian American immigrants, acting white signifies downward assimilation (Jiménez and Horowitz 2013). In this view, joining mainstream America is part of the problem. An immigrant-centered research approach attentive to this subjectivity would complement existing approaches relying on econometrics.

The most valuable contribution from segmented assimilation theory may not be its original apparatus, which relies on a disputed distribution of outcomes and explanations. Even if the patterns and their causes were accurately understood, the original theory was tailored to the U.S. case in one historical period. To realize the full promise of the concept requires several steps. First, specify the multiple possible reference points for immigrants and their descendants experiencing social change. These include societal segments in the destination country that do not neatly fall into delineated groups, and which include types of heterogeneity beyond ethnicity. Societal segments in the parents' places of origin may be relevant for subjective comparisons as well. Given the multiplicity of reference points, the notion of "downward" assimilation should be used much more carefully and sparingly. Second, specify the legal and other conditions under which intergenerational change is even *possible* (Abend 2022). The permanence of immigration and family formation in the destination country are precursors to creating a second generation in the first place. The policies that create these patterns are even more consequential than the more fine-grained modes of incorporation within the United States that are elements of classical segmented assimilation theory. Third, as the proponents of segmented assimilation would be the first to agree, longitudinal studies are needed across the life course to examine the distribution of pathways of convergence, divergence, and stasis. Three decades after the generative theory was created to understand one case, there is much work to be done.

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