ASSIMILATION AMONG IMMIGRANT ADOLESCENTS:

NEIGHBORHOOD CONTEXT AND PARENTAL CONTROL

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Abstract

Segmented assimilation theory argues that there are many possible pathways of assimilation for immigrants to follow. This paper explores determinants of assimilation trajectories among immigrant families. Segmented assimilation theory predicts that the consequences of assimilation should differ according to local context. This theoretical framework implicitly assumes that immigrant families are passive agents subject to the influence of their local environments. However, if immigrant families experience divergent outcomes depending on local context, they may anticipate these consequences and adjust their assimilation behavior accordingly. It therefore follows that the decision of whether and how to assimilate may also depend on local context. I investigate the hypothesis that neighborhood socioeconomic status affects how immigrant parents guide their children's assimilation processes, and that therefore immigrant children's degree of assimilation varies systematically according to neighborhood SES. I operationalize assimilation as the degree of similarity between immigrant and non-immigrant youth with respect to peer-influenced at-risk behaviors.

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Introduction

The recent renewed wave of mass immigration to the United States has sparked attempts to re-think theories of immigrant adaptation and assimilation. One prominent theory that has emerged is "segmented assimilation" (Portes and Zhou 1993). Segmented assimilation theory argues that there are many possible pathways of assimilation for immigrants to follow. Furthermore, the theory argues that the consequences of assimilation, especially for children, depend on the particular assimilation pathway followed by an immigrant family. Thus, the theory focuses on both the *process* of assimilation and the *outcomes* of assimilation. In previous work (Greenman and Xie 2005, Xie and Greenman 2005), I have addressed the consequences of assimilation. This paper focuses on determinants of the process of assimilation. Specifically, I explore the relationship between the nature of an immigrant family's community and the assimilation strategy that it pursues.

Background

Segmented assimilation theory is based on the recognition that America today is very diverse, and that therefore there is no single context of reception for all immigrant families. Rather, the experiences of immigrant families are likely to differ greatly depending on the nature of the communities that receive them. Classical assimilation theory assumed that immigrant families would eventually settle among and assimilate into the native middle class. Such assimilation was assumed to be a necessary part of the process of upward mobility for immigrants. Segmented assimilation theory identifies this "traditional" type of assimilation as only one possible assimilation trajectory for contemporary families – henceforth referred to as "Path 1." Alternatively, an immigrant family may settle in an impoverished inner-city area. If it assimilates in this context, it may experience downward assimilation into the urban underclass ("Path 2"). Finally, an immigrant family may choose not to assimilate fully. This third possible assimilation trajectory – "Path 3" – involves deliberate preservation of the immigrant group's culture and values, accompanied by forms of assimilation necessary in order to achieve economic integration. The segmented

assimilation perspective suggests that this third path may be the most beneficial for immigrants living in disadvantaged contexts.

Segmented assimilation theory is thus explicitly concerned with both the process and the outcomes of assimilation. Paths 1 and 2 are both forms of complete assimilation. They can only be distinguished by the consequences of assimilation – that is, whether assimilation results in upward or downward mobility. Path 3 can be distinguished from Paths 1 and 2 by process – that is, partial versus complete assimilation. Much previous work based in the segmented assimilation framework has focused primarily on the differential outcomes of assimilation (i.e., Xie and Greenman 2005). To do so, it is necessary to take assimilation itself as a given condition, assuming that it is exogenous to the outcome. However, it is unlikely that assimilation behaviors and assimilation outcomes can be understood separately, because immigrant families may adjust their assimilation behaviors according to the anticipated consequences of those behaviors.

Current Investigation

This paper explores the possibility that immigrant families may adjust their assimilation behaviors in response to local contexts. Segmented assimilation theory predicts that the consequences of assimilation should differ according to the local context. This theoretical framework implicitly assumes that immigrant families are passive agents subject to the influence of their local environments. However, if immigrant families indeed experience divergent outcomes depending on local context, they may well anticipate these consequences and adjust their assimilation behavior accordingly. It therefore follows that the decision of whether and how to assimilate may also depend on local context. I propose to investigate the hypothesis that neighborhood socioeconomic status will affect how immigrant parents guide their children's assimilation processes, and that therefore immigrant children's degree of assimilation will vary systematically according to neighborhood SES.

Impoverished neighborhoods present a variety of dangers for children, especially adolescents. Segmented assimilation theory raises the possibility that immigrant adolescents may acculturate into "oppositional youth cultures" supposedly found in these neighborhoods. The theory does not explicitly take into account the possibility that immigrant parents may have the same concern, and may take a more active role in guiding their children's acculturation if they perceive the local context to be threatening. I propose that parents of adolescents living in disadvantaged neighborhoods will be more likely to insist on limited assimilation on the part of their children than

parents in more advantaged communities. If so, the end result will be that immigrant adolescents living in poor neighborhoods will be less assimilated than those living in wealthier neighborhoods.

For this research, I conceptualize assimilation as similarity between immigrant adolescents (a term I use to encompass both first and second-generation adolescents, or in other words all adolescents in immigrant families) and their non-immigrant peers. In other words, assimilation is defined as diminishing difference between immigrant and non-immigrant individuals with respect to a particular outcome, within a local context. I examine differences between immigrant adolescents and the non-immigrant adolescents in their neighborhoods with respect to the at-risk behaviors of delinquency, controlled substance use, and sexual initiation. These outcomes are appropriate for two reasons. First, they are among the outcomes that most concern immigrant parents as their children become "Americanized" (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Zhou and Bankston 1998). Second, they are all social behaviors, in the sense that adolescents usually engage in them in the company of others. Therefore, I can expect these outcomes to be particularly influenced by an adolescent's peer group. The extent to which immigrant adolescents are integrated into the local native peer group, therefore, could be expected to have a greater influence on these outcomes than on other types of outcomes (for example, educational outcomes).

My hypothesis is that differences between immigrant adolescents' outcomes and those of their native peers, within the same neighborhood, will be smaller in high SES neighborhoods than in low SES neighborhoods. I expect this relationship to unfold through a two-stage path: Immigrant parents will exert more control over their adolescent children in disadvantaged communities, including by controlling their assimilation behaviors; therefore, adolescents will be less integrated into their non-immigrant peer group in low-SES neighborhoods than in high-SES neighborhoods. Due to the resulting more limited peer influences in low-SES neighborhoods, there will be less similarity between the at-risk behaviors of immigrant adolescents and those of their native counterparts in poor neighborhoods than in wealthier ones.

Data and Methods

Data

I use data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Add Health). Add Health provides adequate sample sizes to examine adolescents in both Asian and Latin American immigrant families, although it is

not possible to examine many specific national origin groups. Add Health contains measures of neighborhood characteristics at the census-tract level, which I use to distinguish high-SES neighborhoods from low-SES ones. The survey contains a series of questions designed to measure parental supervision of and control over adolescents, including one that asks whether parents have any rules regarding friendship choices. I use these questions to operationalize parental control. Add Health also provides detailed information on participation in at-risk behaviors, from which I construct my dependent variables. The questionnaire also allows respondents' records to be linked with those of other students in the same school that they have identified as friends. This allows me to construct a measure of friendship assimilation, or integration into the non-immigrant peer group. Finally, the clustered sampling design of Add Health makes it possible to calculate neighborhood-specific levels of at-risk behaviors, which allows me to compare the neighborhood-specific level of at-risk behaviors among immigrant adolescents with those found among their native peers.

Methods

I use a multi-level modeling strategy, in which i adolescents are clustered within j neighborhoods.

Y – at-risk behavior (substance use, sexual initiation, or delinquency, modeled in turn)

X – vector of controls, including parental national origin, family SES and other characteristics, immigrant generation, and length of stay in the U.S.

N – Vector of neighborhood dummy variables

P – Neighborhood SES (1=low)

C – parental control

F – friendship assimilation

The subscript i refers to the individual, j refers to the neighborhood.

The superscript 0 refers to non-immigrants, while the superscript 1 refers to immigrants:

The primary dependent variable in my analysis is the difference in at-risk behavior between an immigrant adolescent and a comparable non-immigrant adolescent in the same neighborhood. Therefore, I first regress Y^0_{ij} on N and X for non-immigrant adolescents, yielding the following equation:

$$Y^0_{ij} = B^0_{0j} + B^1_1 X^1_{ij} + \varepsilon^1_{ij}$$

I then apply $B^0{}_{0j}$ and $B^1{}_1$ to my sample of immigrant adolescents in order to compute what the predicted value of

the outcome variable would be if they were non-immigrants:

$$\hat{Y}^0{}_{ij} = B^0{}_{0j} + B^0{}_1 X^1{}_{ij}$$

My dependent variable, defined only among immigrant adolescents, is then

$$\hat{Y}^0{}_{ij} - Y^1{}_{ij}$$

My analytical models are run on sample consisting only of immigrant adolescents[1], separately for Asian and Latin

American-origin youth. My first hypothesis is that the gap will be larger in low-SES than high-SES neighborhoods.

Therefore, my first analytical model is:

$$\hat{Y}^0{}_{ij} - Y^1{}_{ij} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 P_j + \alpha_2 X_{ij} + \varepsilon_{ij} \qquad\qquad (1)$$

(Henceforth I omit the superscript 1 from the right-hand side of the equations, since all variables and coefficients on

the right refer to immigrants). The quantity of interest here is the coefficient of low neighborhood SES, α_1. Based

on previous work (Greenman and Xie 2005), I expect that immigrant adolescents have lower average levels of at-

risk behaviors than their non-immigrant peers, implying that $E[\hat{Y}^0{}_{ij} - Y^1{}_{ij}] > 0$. If this is the case (which will be

verified empirically), a positive value of α_1 indicates that there is a greater gap in behavior in low-SES than high-

SES neighborhoods.

My next two models explore the mechanisms that might produce such systematic variation in the behavior gap

according to neighborhood SES. They test the hypotheses that that parental control will be higher in low-SES

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[1] The two-step estimation strategy, in which differences between immigrants and non-immigrants are incorporated

into the first-step calculation of the dependent variable, allows me to later restrict my sample to immigrants without

losing the ability to model differences between immigrants and non-immigrants. This is preferable because it allows

me to maintain comparability across models that do and do not include assimilation measures, since any model with

assimilation measures can only be run on a sample of immigrants. Thus, this two-step strategy allows me to use the

same sample (of immigrants only) for all my analytical models.

neighborhoods, and that immigrant adolescents will be less integrated into their non-immigrant peer group in such neighborhoods. My second-stage models are therefore as follows:

$$C_{ij} = \tau_0 + \tau_1 P_j + \tau_2 X_{ij} + \upsilon_{ij} \tag{2}$$

$$F_{ij} = \delta_0 + \delta_1 P_j + \delta_2 X_{ij} + \pi_{ij} \tag{3}$$

Again, the quantities of interest are the coefficients on the neighborhood SES indicators.

Assuming that there are systematic differences in C_{ij} and/or F_{ij} according to neighborhood SES, I will then estimate a final model that combines information from the previous models. The goal of this model is to see if some or all of α_1 (from Model 1) is explained by C_{ij} and/or F_{ij}:

$$\hat{Y}^0_{ij} - Y^1_{ij} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 P_j + \alpha_2 X_{ij} + \alpha_3 C_{ij} + \alpha_4 F_{ij} + \varepsilon_{ij} \tag{4}$$

The contribution of C_{ij} and F_{ij} to α_1 can be tested by observing changes in α_1 between models 1 and 4. The overall importance of C_{ij} and F_{ij} in explaining neighborhood-SES variation in $\hat{Y}^0_{ij} - Y^1_{ij}$ can be tested by nesting the two models.

References

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