Assimilation and Place in the United States: Testing Incorporation from Within

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Although immigrant assimilation theory remains a fiercely debated topic by migration scholars, few would deny that the incorporation process has major implications for the well-being of immigrants and their children. As such, a large literature continues to examine migrant lives for evidence of "assimilation." Unfortunately, most empirical tests look for indications of ethnic or cultural change at the individual-level. This stands in stark contrast to Alba and Nee's (2003) assertion that assimilation is a multidirectional and multilevel process in which the "decline of ethnic distinction" (p6) is achieved by change among migrants *as well as change among the host society itself.* The "mainstream," as it were, shifts to incorporate cultural traits, behaviors, and values that previously would have been defined as distinguishing migrants. Despite continued debate about some of the nuance of Alba and Nee's theory, the broader concept that the cultural context of receiving sites is changed by migrants is widely accepted: that the host society itself is reshaped by the integration of new immigrant groups. Yet very little research has attempted to measure this important aspect of assimilation theory. My work fills this gap by determining whether, how much, and in which domains, social and cultural indicators of the "mainstream" in receiving communities are changed by migrant flows. My research bridges scholarship on assimilation, new destination migration, and ecological aspects of population change to shed light on the fascinating process of aggregate-level incorporation.

BACKGROUND

For years scholars attempted to demonstrate - both theoretically and empirically - that immigrants would eventually be absorbed into the American mainstream. Although assimilation is often critiqued for being overly deterministic and ethnocentric, there is a move toward redefining the incorporation process to more accurately capture the complexities of our diverse society. Unlike past conceptions of assimilation theory, which posited that ethnic and cultural change was one-directional (where migrants were transformed by the receiving society), more recent work argues that the host society can be altered due to the presence of non-native populations (Alba and Nee 2003). In other words, what constitutes the mainstream itself is

changing as a result of immigrant incorporation. While some scholars may disagree, research continues to focus on individual characteristics of the foreign-born and their children while largely neglecting the host society. Indicators such as socioeconomic status, spatial concentration/diffusion, intermarriage, and language certainly contribute to our understanding of the assimilation processes in the United States (Waters and Jimenez 2005), but they tell us comparatively less about the dynamic transformation of places. I propose moving beyond individual-level analyses to test a crucial but neglected issue.

In this way, my research is similar to work in economics that has looked at aggregate-level ecological impacts of migration in the U.S. (Card et al. 2003). Yet unlike scholarship on fiscal or labor market characteristics, I am interested in identifying cultural and social indicators of change due to the presence of the foreign-born population. With the exception of a few ethnographies (i.e. Millard and Chapa 2004), there has been a dearth of research that test whether the American mainstream is becoming more diversified. Since this area of study is in its infancy, I borrow and expand on measures that have been identified in qualitative work as being particularly salient at an aggregate-level.

New immigrant destinations serve as an ideal opportunity to determine the extent to which the foreign-born population alters the receiving society for a few reasons. First, these areas experienced dramatic gains in their immigrant population in the past two decades; many new destinations had no presence of foreign-born persons before the 1990s. Second, institutions and resources that cater to immigrants, such as bilingual services and social organizations, were largely lacking in new destinations. This allows me to observe whether there has been an institutional response to changing demographic conditions. Finally, natives and immigrants are more likely to interact with each other than in established immigrant receiving areas (Waters and Jimenez 2005). The potential for interaction between residents may highlight how such relationships foster declines in ethnic distinction in a given area.

To determine whether a process of declining ethnic distinction occurs because of shifting contextual changes, individual-level measures, such as non-English use or frequency of dining in an ethnic restaurant, cannot be used. Based on the revised definition of assimilation, it is argued that places experience changes in their cultural and social characteristics; thus testing this theory requires the use of geographic data. In this study, I use counties as the unit of analysis. This choice provides two analytical benefits: 1) counties are specified as having boundaries that unify

a population, and 2) these geographical areas have a history of rich data on social and economic indicators (Curtis White 2008). Considering spatial dynamics is of major importance since it is likely that the relationship between social/cultural factors and immigrant populations differ across place.

My project thus has two aims:

1. To assess whether (and to what extent) the social, cultural, or institutions of a given county are influenced by the presence of immigrants
2. To test for variation and spillover in the assimilation process across the U.S. by using spatial data analytic techniques

DATA AND METHODS

I examine changes in the social, cultural, and institutional structure of U.S. counties using data from the 2010 U.S. census and the School and Staffing Survey (SASS). I also compile and merge data from a variety of up-to-date databases containing indicators on newspaper circulation, non-English television/radio broadcasting, ethnic restaurants and grocery stores, as well as non-English religious services offered in counties. The SASS provides information on whether schools in the area provide services to English Language Learners and census summary files 1 and 3 will be used to obtain overall population and demographic measures.

Following past research on new destinations, I use existing criteria for defining new destinations among migrants (Kandel and Cromartie 2004; Johnson and Litcher 2008). Counties will be considered high growth if the immigrant population increased by at least 150 percent between 2000 and 2010 and also had a foreign-born population increase of 1,000 or more. In order to provide a valid counterfactual or comparison group, counties located in the same state as new destination counties will be used as a reference group.

In addition to estimating a series of regression specifications, I will conduct a spatial analysis using the county-level data in GeoDa and a series of R packages. This analysis may reveal different types of assimilation regimes across U.S. counties and whether there is evidence of spill-over effects into contiguous counties. In combination, the analysis provides a set of estimates that will inform our understanding of the relationship between immigrant destinations and outcomes of interest, such as the proportion of ethnic grocery stores in a county. Analytic

maps will also be provided to further illustrate the spatial processes at work. By determining whether and where the foreign-born population has the ability to change mainstream cultural values, we can better understand the complexity of assimilation and how it is facilitated or hindered by social and cultural change operating at multiple ecological levels. Perhaps most importantly, the findings provide a critical foundation for future research on the welfare implications of assimilation; to properly assess the benefits or costs of assimilation processes, we must first improve how it is measured.

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