

America: The Land of Opportunity

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Abstract

Despite the relative social and economic success experienced by the previous immigrants, immigrants in the United States today face unique challenges and difficulties adjusting to the American way of life. This paper explores three possible explanations for these difficulties including: lack of political socialization, low levels of education, and failure to advance in economic status, which has resulted in downward assimilation for new immigrant groups. Without a doubt, these three problematic aspects are intertwined and the success of Americanization relies on these codependent aspects of immigration. Possible solutions to reverse this trends and implications for American public policy will be discussed.

The United States of America is a nation founded on the idea that people could come from other countries in search of the American Dream, which is the opportunity for the chance to make a better life than what one is previously accustomed to. In theory, this concept is supposed to hold true no matter what your race, ethnicity, religion, or social class. Since the founding of this country, immigrants have sought out American refuge in pursuit of this American Dream. For many years, America, the land of opportunity, took in immigrants from all around the world. The Statue of Liberty even says, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." This concept created a nation that has a backbone rooted in immigration. As a result, the United States has turned out to be a nation that is rich in cultural diversity, but there is still a concept of being truly American.

A problem has surfaced in more recent years concerning the concept of becoming American. The more recent waves of immigrants are failing to assimilate into the American culture. The areas in which immigrants are failing to assimilate are fairly obvious. They are not involving themselves in the landscape of American politics. This failure to gain political socialization has resulted in the opinions of millions of residents of America to go unheard. Another form of assimilation that has failed to take place is educational integration among the children of immigrants. This has created problems, because children that go uneducated cannot possibly wish to obtain upward social mobility. A third area where recent immigrants have failed to "Americanize" is in the category of economic stability. Contributors to poor economic stability can be low wage job status, high dependency on governmental handouts, and inner city clustering. This economic unsustainability, like the other examples, can come as a result of failure to assimilate to the American culture. **If authorized immigrants continue to fail to**

assimilate into American society, they will face increasing difficulty achieving upward social mobility.

Literature Review

Political Socialization

It is absolutely essential for immigrants to be properly infused into American society if they want to achieve positive social mobility, so knowledge of the American political landscape is a key factor in immigrants becoming Americanized. Jack Dennis, of the University of Wisconsin, viewed political socialization as one of the main components of Americanization (Dennis, 1968). It appears that immigration has now grown into a new idea of becoming more American – that is, Americanization. According to Dennis’ article, an immigrant is forced into maturation suddenly, unlike that process of a natural citizen born in the United States, who has been able to grow accustomed with it throughout his life (Dennis, 1968). Once one has adapted to the knowledge of American politics and government, it becomes “less likely that these orientations will be eroded later in his life” (Dennis, 1968, p. 99). Obviously development plays a huge role in the life of an immigrant in the United States, and obtaining one’s own knowledge and political views creates that pathway for assimilation into the American society.

Richard Alba, one of the most influential scholars when it comes to the topic of immigration, looks into the second-generation assimilation among immigrant youth. Alba concludes, “assimilation-related research is giving false reassurance to the majority of Americans that all is well, when in fact a clarion call for urgently needed policy interventions should go out” (Alba, Kasinitz, Waters, 2011, p. 770). This declaration reiterates a very important fact, something needs to change if immigrants are to properly assimilate into American culture and

stop the trend of downward social mobility. With that being said, one of the main ways an immigrant can prevent that downward social mobility, is becoming involved in the American political culture. The implications of immigrants being politically involved are massive. Republicans and Democrats alike would be fighting for the millions of votes that the politically assimilated immigrants would bring. The immigrant population would have the power to influence government policy issues. This potential influence is what stresses the need for immigrant political socialization.

Assimilation through Education

Moving into the twenty first century, one would naturally think immigration trends would change. Charles Hirschman, in his 2001 scholarly article, states, “we cannot reach firm conclusions on the socioeconomic mobility of the late-twentieth-century wave of immigration to the United States: most of the immigrants have been in the country for a relatively short period, and the majority of the second generation are still children or adolescents” (Hirschman, 2001, p. 317). He suggests that because these immigrants tend to group together in the inner cities, weaker education is given to the children, which will create a future downward mobility among the second generation of these types of immigrants (Hirschman, 2001). This impressive ideological standpoint incorporates the same type of notion mentioned in Dennis’ literary work, by showing the inevitability of downward mobility among the immigrant population (undocumented or authorized) residing in the United States.

As noted in Dennis’ writings, the collaboration of L. Susan Williams, Sandra D. Alvarez, and Kevin S. Andrade Hauck reemphasize the necessity of acclimatization into the American culture. These scholars display this theory through a study of the integration of Latin American

students into U.S. schools. This insight, although focused on a specific group of immigrants, is an important piece of research, because it magnifies the struggles of the adaptation process.

Williams, et al. Make an incredibly valid point when describing one of the reasons that Latin American students have trouble adjusting to U.S. high school by stating, “Immigrant enrollment in Center City schools recently tripled, leaving administrations ill-equipped to cope with growing numbers of limited English proficient speakers (Williams, et al, 2002, p. 564). The obvious assumption is to believe that our schools in these high immigrant areas need to hire more staff that caters to the needs of these students, because if they do not become fully assimilated into the American culture, then they face the risk of downward mobility. Going along with the educational barriers that prevent proper socialization, University of North Georgia professor Maria Albo writes, “it is unrealistic to assume that all schoolchildren have access to the same educational opportunities in this country, however, providing a supportive environment in public schools could lead to assured political participation in the future” (Albo, 2008, p. 23). This useful statement ties in the earlier theory of Dennis, by using political participation as a gateway to social acculturation, and the reality, presented by the collaboration of Williams, Alvarez, and Hauck, of the lack of quality shown to support immigrant students through proper education. The downfall of the middle class immigrant is interesting, simply because the middle class immigrant is more educated. With that being said, the children are the future, so if a family is to eventually assimilate into American culture, the children must be handled with care in order to become Americanized.

Economic Implications

Following the theory that immigrants need to become Americanized to truly experience upward mobility, Margaret A. Gibson ventures into the topic of segmented assimilation. She uses

segmented assimilation to describe how some immigrants are following the normal pathway to upward mobility, but “others may be headed to a permanent underclass” (Gibson, 1997, p. 438). This borrowed theory can be attributed to the failure of some immigrants to infuse their selves into the American culture system, which would in turn propel them into an undesirable underclass.

Some scholars might say that opening the borders to all foreigners wanting to make a life in the United States is the solution to the social mobility slide among all immigrants, but Ana Avendaño believes that will not solve the problem that persists in our country. In her 2008 scholarly article, she pronounces, “it will take at least a decade, some say a generation, to reverse the U.S. economic, labor, social, and immigration policies that have left all workers in the United States in peril” (Avendaño, 2008, p. 24). In other words, simply opening our borders will not solve any type of problems, economic or immigration based, regarding the downward intergenerational mobility among any type of immigrant present in the United States of America.

In 2009, scholar Herbert J. Gans wrote an article covering the impacts of downward social mobility among immigrants and refugees and the effects these declines have on them and their children. Gans states, “Coming to America has sometimes meant economic and other kinds of downward mobility, frequently, although not always, by middle and upper middle class refugees and immigrants,” and thus declares his purpose for the article he has written (Gans, 2009, p. 1658). This exploratory outlook on the issue of downward mobility among immigrants focuses on a class of immigrants that is often not talked about, the middle to upper middle class immigrant. An article such as the one written by Gans is a vital piece of research, because the plight of the middle class immigrant is just as important as the downfall of their underclass counterpart. Building off of researching the downward mobility of the middle class, George

Wilson and Vincent J. Roscigno write about the downward social mobility among privileged occupations (Wilson and Roscigno, 2010). Their research focuses on the racial differences present in the factors that attribute to the phenomenon that is downward intergenerational mobility.

Hans Vermeulen's scholarly article uses the example of Greek immigrants between the United States and Germany. This is a very interesting comparison, because the European immigrants are often left out of the conversation when discussing immigration and downward mobility in the United States. Vermeulen states that "after their arrival in the U.S., the Greeks found work as unskilled [laborers], initially in the mines and in the construction of railways" (Vermeulen, 2010, p. 1221). After they integrated themselves into American culture, these Greek immigrants improved "their socioeconomic situation through both entrepreneurship and education" (Vermeulen, 2010, p. 1222). This prime example, chosen by Vermeulen, exemplifies the correct way to achieve positive social mobility throughout time. Kevin T. Leicht focuses on more of the economic situation that is preventing upward social mobility among middle class in America (Leicht, 2010). Leicht's research, combined with the research of Vermeulen and Waters, et al, definitely offers very important insight, which includes the need for immigrant workers to become assimilated into the socioeconomic landscape, to issues that plague efforts of immigrants to accomplish positive intergenerational mobility.

With all of that being said, it is obvious that assimilation into American culture is a critical issue facing the United States. Right now, there is an influx of immigrants that cannot achieve any sort of positive social mobility. Factors such as education, economic stability, and political socialization are major influential pieces to achieve this attainable goal. Something that is evident after completing extensive research on the topic, a hole in the field of research is that

many scholars are pointing out the issue and stressing the importance of the issue, but these highly educated people are not proposing viable solutions. Although this seems to be a slight problem when attempting to evaluate the issue of downward social mobility among today's immigrants, it opens up room for improvement for further research by the many educated scholars who are passionate about immigration.

Main Argument

The issue of assimilation

Assimilation is the process of merging minority groups into a dominant society. Williams, et al. describe assimilation by stating, "Early assimilation studies in the US which based findings on European immigration, portrays assimilation as synonymous with Americanization," which is where an immigrant becomes a person who shares American values, customs, and beliefs (Williams, et al., 2002, p.565). As a result of this process, the immigrant becomes one with American culture. Immigrants, authorized and unauthorized, come to the United States of America for different reasons, but "those who immigrate primarily for economic reasons may be more willing than political refugees to adopt the ways of the new country, and they may view their children's adaptation as a necessary strategy for achieving their economic goals (Gibson, 1997, p.433). This idea of economics being a driving force for Americanization is solid proof that if authorized immigrants fail to assimilate into American culture, then they will also fail to progress through upward social movement. If it was once seen as such a necessity for an immigrant to infuse oneself into the American way of life, then why are immigrants of every type experiencing downward mobility? Maria Albo, a professor at the University of North Georgia, acknowledges, "It has become obvious that today's immigrant groups are not

encountering a straight path to Americanization” (Albo, 2008, p.5). With that being said, one wonders what problems are the driving forces behind this lack of assimilation among the immigrants of today’s generation.

Problems associated with assimilation

One serious problem associated with why authorized immigrants are having trouble with advancing upward in social class is political socialization. It is highly important for residents of the United States to be aware of the political landscape, because in this country, everything is either political or economic. If a resident is not politically aware, then how are they supposed to vocalize their opinion whether it is about gay marriage, universal healthcare, or the current Presidential situation? Political involvement is one thing any American, eligible to vote, can use to make a stand for what he or she believes in. That being said, authorized immigrants and unauthorized immigrants could use the political platform to stand for what he or she believes in, thus furthering Americanization.

For some reason, immigrants seem to have difficulty infusing into American society. Jack Dennis investigates this in his scholarly article titled, Problems of Political Socialization Research. He states, “A standard, general hypothesis in this connection is that the earlier the person adopts a given set of political orientations, the less likely it is that these orientations will be eroded later in life. This hypothesis (or assumption) could be based upon psychoanalytic, ‘imprinting’ or other theoretical grounds. Thus it might be that the typical member in a given society has ‘completed’ the major portion of his significant political learning by middle adolescence. He is likely to exhibit little change thereafter in these respects” (Dennis, 1968,

p.99). This means that the early years of one's life are vital when it comes to the aspect of political socialization. Also, it may be nearly impossible to politically influence an adult who has grown up with different governmental and political beliefs. Still, these people have voices politically, as stated by the ideals that our nation is founded upon, such as having a government that is the voice of its people. Having that political voice is vital to the process of Americanization, and thus, political integration is highly important among authorized immigrants.

Another major problem that can be easily identified when it comes to an immigrant group's failure to infuse into American culture is the lack of strong education. If Americanization is to start somewhere, it should be through the education system. It is nearly impossible to promote upward intergenerational mobility without a youth that is properly educated. After all, Albo states, "It is essential for a society to properly socialize its youngest members, in order to maintain patriotism and support for the institution of government" (Albo, 2008, p.2). A main component of this socialization factor taking part in schools is the adoption of the English language, or linguistic assimilation. A prime example of this transformation can be seen in inner cities where immigrant parents, who speak little to no English, will take their children into the bank to act as a translator so the parent can make a deposit. A situation where the children of immigrants learn the English language while their parents have yet to adapt to it is an example of positive intergenerational mobility, but that is always not the case. Williams, et al. asserts, "as a group Mexicans experience several areas of disadvantage; one in four is poor and estimates place more than 40% Latino immigrant children in poverty. Latinos drop out of high school at an astounding rate of 46%. These disadvantages, coupled with a troubled history of relations between the U.S. and Mexico, fuel antagonism toward Mexican immigration and

encourage anti-Mexican stereotypes, contributing to an “ethos of reception” that shapes social relations, negative images are readily available and host communities, already faced with an inadequate infrastructure, are often unprepared for this unprecedented influx of immigrants (Williams, et al., 2002, p.564). This astounding series of statistics results in a lack of economic stability, due to prolonged educational struggles, among this certain group of immigrants which leads to the problematic downward social mobility.

Due to the continuation of educational assimilation struggles, economic dishevelment ensues. The lack of proper schooling leads to the immigrants in question being left with no other jobs but the ones that will pay minimum wage. These jobs consist of manual labor, fast food service, and odd jobs that result in a form of under-the-table payment. Many people believe that only illegal or undocumented, immigrants take these types of jobs, but this is a common misconception. Some of them actually have college degrees from their home countries, but they are working a lower wage job in order to feed their families. If these authorized immigrants have a college diploma, then why are they left with no other choice but take a low paying job? Unfortunately, this dilemma is present, because we are in a nationwide economic downturn. Herbert J. Gans addresses this topic by stating, “Perhaps because immigrants have typically headed for America when it was booming economically, immigration researchers have usually assumed that immigration would automatically result in upward economic and social mobility. Nonetheless, coming to America has sometimes meant economic and other kinds of downward mobility, frequently, although not always, by middle and upper middle class refugees and immigrants” (Gans, 2009, p.1658). This intriguing statement from Gans suggests that along with the backgrounds of the immigrants, the economic stability of the United States plays an integral part in the level of success that authorized immigrants will have once they decide

America is their land of opportunity. This theory could not be truer when applied to the current situation among documented immigrants that have migrated to the United States of America during this prolonged economic recession. Middle to upper middle class immigrants used to thrive in the American economy. This is presented in Hans Vermeulen's scholarly article when he talks about the nearly "28 million people [who migrated] to the United States. Among them Greeks who arrived mainly between 1900 and 1920. In total about 10 percent of the Greek population left for America, a similar percentage as in the case of Italy" (Vermeulen, 2010, p.1221). These groups took advantage of an economy that was ready to grow, and by the second generation (1960s and 70s) they stood out as highly educated individuals among ethnic groups (Vermeulen, 2010, p.1222). Due to the cyclical nature of the American capitalist economy, there will be periods of economic boom, but there will also be contrasting periods of economic depression, which can lead to suffering, in the form of downward social mobility, for immigrants.

Solutions to this issue?

With every problem there is a solution, but the solution is not always one that will take quick effect. Pertaining to the downward mobility present among authorized immigrants in today's society, there can be many solutions, but which of the many solutions can be more effective than the others? Some politicians and scholars view opening all borders as the proper solution to increase the social mobility among immigrants. Fewer restrictions on immigration may become a solution in the future, but there is not a good enough plan on the table for our government to delegate. Advocates of this option might say, "Workers coming into these sectors will be able to work in decent conditions, unlike the current immigrant worker population, because the new workers will not be 'undocumented'" (Avendaño, 2008, p.20). The problem

with this track of mind is the simple truth that the low-wage job sector has always been known to have exploitive conditions regardless of immigration status.

Other politicians and scholars suggest closing off our borders from all foreign persons looking for permanent home. Advocates of this plan of action may reiterate that “any more immigration threatens not only our culture, but the entire American way of life,” or that “Foreigners are displacing American workers [...] breaking into our country and stealing our jobs (Avendaño, 2008, p.18). They view the open borders policy as amnesty. The amnesty argument only applies to only undocumented immigrants, not the ones who are here legally (Avendaño, 2008). With that being said, this seems like a more viable option, for the time being, until we can formulate a successful plan to begin legalizing our undocumented immigrants for tax collection purposes. Along with legalizing undocumented immigrants at a responsible pace, the United States government could make the whole process of obtaining a visa easier, and they could also make it more expensive to obtain citizenship, creating more of a profit off immigration.

Conclusions and Future Study

Assimilation into the American culture is a lost practice for many reasons. It is yet to be determined whether or not this downward spiral in Americanization is a permanent problem or simply a cyclical one, but Ana Avendaño assures us that the solution to our current immigration troubles will not be discovered in our generation (Avendaño, 2008). Based on the information gathered from research, it is an obvious conclusion that immigrants who fail to assimilate into American society will never achieve the “American Dream.” Proper assimilation can be achieved through: having a strong, full educational background which includes linguistic

assimilation, becoming involved in the American political landscape and understanding your political responsibilities, and using these two important factors to gain stable employment and economic success. Obviously, research on the topic of immigrant assimilation and intergenerational mobility is not a closed book. It is an ever changing field of study that will continue to evolve as time passes. It is possible that American culture will adapt to the needs of the immigrants. An interesting topic for future research could be the adaptation the American culture is making to the needs of the millions of immigrants. This would be a fascinating topic, because change is needed if Americans are to unite with the immigrants, so if the immigrants fail to assimilate to the American culture, it is possible that the American culture will evolve into something that can accommodate the influx of immigrants seen in recent generations. Fields of study for this topic could be the inclusion of teachers in American schools that have the ability to teach in multiple languages to accommodate the children of immigrants who do not speak English. This can be seen through the many American students becoming familiar with the Hispanic culture and language, but this does not mean we will become a bilingual nation. Ultimately, America is still the land of opportunity, and it is evident, because people are still migrating to our borders in search of a more optimistic quality of life. The day that immigrants stop risking their lives to gain access to American soil is the day we cease to be America: the land of opportunity.

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