Lessons from an "old" Second Generation in the US: fresh evidence on assimilation theories

*Review Symposium of Origins and Destinations: The Making of the Second Generation*
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Abstract

Taking a multilevel approach and accounting for the complex interaction between sending and host countries, Origins and Destinations: The Making of the Second Generation brings new insights to the divergent outcomes of immigrant children in the US. Using the same data of several award winning books, it directly challenges some of the predictions of assimilation theories and the hyperselectivity model.

KEYWORDS: Second generation, immigrant assimilation, segmented assimilation, hyperselectivity, ethnic capital, multi-level models

The title of Luthra, Soehl and Waldinger's new book *Origins and Destinations: The Making of the Second Generation* does not give much away. Incredibly modest even, considering what the authors aims to achieve. It starts with a comprehensive review and critique of existing theoretical accounts on immigrant adaptation to date. It goes on to explain how new concepts and measures are constructed before presenting a rich and detailed examination of the complex interactions between origins and destinations, individual and group level variations in a bid to solve the enduring puzzles that surround the hugely diverging outcomes of immigrant children in the United States of America. The authors contend that

> the central question animating this book is purposefully broad and aims to demonstrate the utility of our methodology and our perspective across a variety of domains: *What are the primary individual- and group-level determinants of second generation variation in school, work, ethnic attachment and political life?* (p.2, emphasis in the original)

What do we make of such an ambitious and challenging endeavour? Award-winning books have mushroomed in the past two decades offering alternative theoretical perspectives ranging from segmented- and neo-assimilation, selective acculturation to hyperselectivity, just to name a few. Why are some Asian Americans so super successful compared to the Mexicans who are so dismally behind almost all other immigrant children? Is it the values and (the lack of) resources they inherited from their immigrant parents that put them in privileged or disadvantaged educational and occupational positions? In what sections of the American society were these immigrant youth growing up that would set them so far apart? The same old puzzles continue to linger. In Chapter 2 the authors pay homage to their predecessors one by one acknowledging the significant contributions of their influential work. What don't we yet know from the collective wisdom about the lives of the second generation in the US at the turn the millennium? Apparently lots, as the pages that follow tell us.

It appears that the authors are, at least in part, motivated by the dissatisfaction of claims that were never fully investigated in the major works reviewed, especially how "group-level constraints and family-level processes" interact with individual characteristics and a desire to debunk the myth of certain cultural superiority of some ethnic groups. From *Legacies, Inheriting The City, Parents without Papers* to *the Asian American Achievement Paradox*, all have left unanswered questions especially on group-level variation and intragroup differences. This volume takes on

the "giants" and subject their claims to rigorous empirical tests, using some of the same datasets but in ways that has never been attempted before. By analysing two surveys conducted on second generation immigrants in New York in 1998-1999 and Los Angeles in 2004, Origins and Destinations (O&D) brings us something new: a new multilevel analytical framework that examines both inter- and intragroup variations while simultaneously capturing the influence of contexts of emigration and immigration. The two surveys Immigrant Second Generation in Metropolitan New York (ISGMNY) and Immigration and Intergenerational Mobility in Metropolitan Los Angeles (IIMMLA) may seem dated but the lack of alternatives makes these the most appropriate data sources for empirical investigation of the lives of second generation immigrants. The pooled dataset yields just over five and a half thousand respondents aged 18-32 in New York and 20-39 in Los Angeles at the time of the survey, from sixty-seven nationalities in their own or their parents' country of origins.

The crucial task the authors of O&D set before them is to "conceptually recognize and empirically analyse the *multilevel* (my emphasis) structure of second-generation inequality" (p.47). The two gaps they wish to plug include taking into account family and individual characteristics as well as the characteristics of country of origin and cross-border ties.

One major advance of O&D is the departure from the conventional country-dummy variable approach in favour of the use of contextual group-level variables. Multilevel modelling makes this possible. This has clear methodological advantages when dealing with sixty seventy countries of origin in the mix. To be sure, banging in country-dummies comparing China, Guatemala with Russia to Mexico in any statistical models makes no theoretical or substantive sense. For a start, most immigration researchers will share the frustration of knowing nothing or precious little about the lives of emigrants before they leave their country of origin. Identifying a robust measure that can succinctly characterize a large number of the sending countries on the same scale is no mean feat. To operationalize the context of emigration, O&D uses two value orientation measures rational/secular vs. traditional and survival vs. self-expression values from the World Values Survey (WVS). The two variables from ninety-seven countries are plotted against each other in the global 'Cultural Map' developed by Ingelhart and Welzel (Page 57, Figure 3.1) Rationalism and self-expression appear to be largely positively correlated in most post-industrial societies such as Germany and France. More traditional and survival-oriented societies are found to be mainly immigrant sending countries such as Vietnam, Mexico, Colombia, El Salvador and the Philippines. In the subsequent multi-level analysis, these cultural values, aka context of emigration, are also found to be statistically significantly associated with a range of outcome measures for the second generation. This goes some way to illustrate its methodological utility of this approach in capturing country-level variations between a large number of origins. However, does this really address the selection issue that the authors are trying to grapple with (p.294)? As far as contextual variables go, would it not be simpler to follow the approach pioneered by Cynthia Feliciano (2005a) and develop an index of migration selectivity? After all, the authors are already using group level education in the destination as a measure of ethnic capital in the context of immigration. This is particularly so because one of the quantities of interest in this book is second generation's educational attainment, an outcome shaped by selective migration, as Feliciano (2005b) finds.

The authors make a compelling case for bringing in context of immigration in shaping the environment of reception, what Jeffrey Reitz calls "warmth of the welcome" (Reitz 2003), in which segmented assimilation and selective acculturation may or may not take place. O&D operationalizes this context of immigration with three group-level variables: group years of

education, average group skin color, and status prevalence scale to measure three understudied concepts: ethnic capital, skin-color stratification and migration-status disparities (governmental reception). It is somewhat surprising to see that there is virtually no effect of any of these contexts on educational and occupational status as the findings in Chapter 4 show. Almost all the action is captured by the individual level variables. This leaves the readers wondering perhaps other contexts are more salient in predicting socio-economic outcomes of the second generation. O&D is a single country study. The multilevel models it employs does not need to worry about country-level variations in multiple destinations. However, within the bounds of the US, other levels of context may equally be if not more important in shaping educational and occupational outcomes: neighbourhood or spatial segregation, ethnic composition of schools or school districts. The authors even use a nice education example to illustrate the use of multilevel models. It seems odd that this level of contextual effect would have escaped their attention, one that has been widely examined previously including Portes and Hao (2004). One would expect the pattern and level of neighbourhood segregation in the superdiverse Los Angeles and New York to be different from the rest of the US. The answer to this is not difficult to find. If so, how might this diversity interact with the context of immigration, and what intergroup and intragroup variations might we anticipate?

Another major contribution of O&D is the first empirical evidence it provides on the hyperselectivity hypothesis and minority mobility model developed by Lee and Zhou's (2015) influential *Asian American Achievement Paradox* (AAAP). For Lee and Zhou, the Asian exceptional success is largely a result of hyper-selectivity: immigrant children benefit greatly if their parents are significantly more highly educated than the overall level of education in their sending country and the average education of nationals in the receiving country. This works even when they are poor because imported cultural values the second generation inherit from their immigrant parents and the "success frame" they internalize will offset any economic disadvantages. O&D takes issues with these claims by examining the role of ethnic capital. They find no evidence of such hyperselectivity when examining parental group education and supplementary education. Instead the evidence they do find directly contradicts the hyperselectivity hypothesis: it is more about hyposelection in both samples where groups with the lowest levels of overall education did far worse than all others. Those who benefit most from supplementary language and ethnic schools are not East Asian second generation but Filipinos, Salvadorans and Mexicans (p.132). As the authors of O&D contend, perhaps the findings of AAAP would have been different if they did not just interview Chinese and Vietnamese, but also other Asian immigrant groups such as Koreans and Filipinos because the latter are also highly positively selected. Also, the hyperselectivity hypothesis would have been better tested in New York where the majority of Hong Kong Chinese immigrants come from working class backgrounds compared to their counterparts with highly educated Taiwanese parents in Los Angeles.

Perhaps we have reasons to be cheerful about some of the non-findings. The lack of a direct effect of group-level skin color on a wide range of socio-economic, cross-border and political outcomes may be good news. However, phenotype is far from the only or most important visible trait to provide a convenient marker for discrimination. Prejudice against and stereotypes of certain religious dress and clothing could be far more discriminatory. The rise of Islamophobia in both Europe and the USA have attracted scholars' attention in studying the processes of racialization of Muslims on both sides of the Atlantic (Garner and Selod 2015). Racialization and discrimination does not operate only at the individual level but also at the group level. A field experiment study in Britain finds that minorities from countries

with a sizeable Muslim population (Pakistan, Bangladesh, the MENA region) face severe discrimination when applying for jobs, whether or not religion was disclosed in the job application (Di Stasio and Heath 2018). We have seen the importance of religious values in shaping value orientations in the country of origin, which in turn are associated with a wide range of second generation outcomes, as the findings of this book show. It would seem that religion plays an equally important role in the context of immigration as well as that of emigration, at both individual and group levels.

Despite the potential risk of "historical imprisonment", O&D has more than amply demonstrated the intellectual and methodological value of using old data. It represents a major breakthrough in the immigrant adaptation scholarship by providing the much needed empirical evidence to unanswered questions previous work on segmented and neo-assimilation left behind. Connecting origins and destinations, tackling the "there" and "here", it provides important new insights on the lives of immigrant youth in the United States of America. For the first time, this rich and illuminating study allows us to see clearly how intergroup and intragroup differences interact with familial resources, individual characteristics, and the context of emigration and immigration in the making of the second generation.

Looking back on this Second Generation at the turn of the millennium, respondents in the IIMMLA and ISGMNY surveys will now be in their late thirties to early fifties. They had reaped huge benefits from the amnesty granted to undocumented workers and illegal immigrants in the eighties, though to a varying degree by country of origin, as well as the more receptive refugee policy during the same period. Perhaps I would not be accused of being reminiscent in saying that the "then" America represents a more open society, one that was more receptive to immigrants and difference than the "now" USA. As the authors rightly acknowledge, the world, particularly the world that involves cross-border movements, has undergone such rapid socio-economic and political transformations in the last two decades: far tighter border control, more draconian immigration legislations, intensified Islamophobia and hate crime, welfare retrenchment and the rise of far right governments or parties in many host societies including the US, all of which makes the terrain much harsher for new comers in today's US society, and the *new* second generation. Whether or not they came at a young age or were born on US soil, one thing is certain: if they look and sound different, their future remains bleak and uncertain.


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