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On the Dangers of Rosy Lenses

Reply to Alba, Kasinitz and Waters

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We commend the measured tone and clearly stated arguments in Alba, Kasinitz and Waters' commentary on our article. It is particularly welcome because, in combination with our own conclusions, it lays out before the relevant audiences the substance of the debate in this field. Based on the commentary's opening statement, it would appear that there are many points of agreement and that the remaining differences are mostly a matter of emphasis, a case of the glass being half full or half empty. If this were the case, there would be little justification for our original article or for this reply. On the contrary, our results and those of other researchers cited in the article's conclusion indicate that the attempt to normalize the situation by celebrating the progress achieved by the second generation is an instance of misplaced optimism. Not all kids are doing "all right," and the substantial number at risk of social and economic stagnation or downward mobility looms as a significant social problem. It is true that right-wing commentators may pick on these findings for their own purposes, but this is certainly no reason to obscure the facts. Laying a rosy veil over them is a dangerous strategy.

Cultural and Structural Perspectives on Immigrant Assimilation

A good part of the divergence in this field has to do with an emphasis on different aspects of the process of assimilation. Many scholars privilege a culturalist perspective where the emphasis is on immigrants, and especially their descendants, becoming indistinct from the natives. After they learn unaccented English, give up loyalties and concerns in their old country, and become fully involved in things American, the process is essentially complete. It matters little, from this perspective, where they end up in the hierarchies of wealth, status and power of American society. Alba's (2008:39-40) recent elaboration of the concept of mainstream, cited in AKW's comment, lines up closely with this emphasis; the concept is defined as "those spaces where the members of the majority group, including its working-class, feel at home." Presumably, when children of migrants come to feel at home in the same spaces, they can be regarded as properly assimilated.

Contrary to the dire warnings of Samuel Huntington (2004) and in agreement with Alba and Nee (2003), we are certain that this process is indeed taking place. As reported in earlier work (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes, Fernandez-Kelly and Haller 2005), knowledge of English is nearly universal in the second generation, and their aspirations and cultural orientations have become thoroughly American. What is remarkable in our findings is how fast foreign languages are abandoned and how quickly children internalize the goals, practices and concerns of the host culture. The question we thus pose is

not whether second-generation youths are assimilating, but *to what sector* of American society they are assimilating to. This ushers in the second perspective.

The structuralist perspective defines assimilation less by whether children of immigrants lose their languages and distinct cultural ways and more by whether they are able to ascend the educational and economic ladders into the American middle class. In that respect, this perspective is closer to the aspirations of immigrant parents themselves—much less concerned with cultural assimilation than with the socio-economic progress of their offspring (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). It is evident that, under present circumstances in the United States, the fulfillment of these aspirations is increasingly difficult. AKW reject the metaphor of a labor market “hourglass,” only to recognize immediately afterward the increasing inequality in occupational opportunities and incomes, which is essentially the same point: the progressive bifurcation between occupations paying near-poverty wages and those that effectively allow their occupants to lead a middle- or upper-class style of life (Massey 2007; Freeman 2007). In the present American context, dropping out of high school is almost equivalent to a life sentence of poverty.

AKW stress that there has been progress across generations and we agree, albeit with several caveats. First, “progress” is measured from the usually very low education and income levels of immigrant parents. Among many of the largest immigrant nationalities, such as Mexicans and Central Americans, the second generation could scarcely go lower, and its advancement leaves it still far from native white levels. Second, the progress registered so far—modest as our critics recognize—is predicated on *averages*. This means that the conclusion of second-generation “advantage” depends on figures that lump together quite disparate performances. Our own analysis has been driven less by a concern with averages than by a preoccupation with dispersion—that is, the yawning gap in the educational and occupational performance of different second-generation nationalities. Focusing on the distribution of educational and income outcomes across these nationalities leaves us quite skeptical about celebratory conclusions of second-generation mobility.

The New York study (Kasinitz et al. 2008) makes much of the superior educational and occupational levels of certain immigrant nationalities over native-born minorities, such as blacks and Puerto Ricans. These advantages are probably real, but two caveats are in order. First, this is a rather low bar, given the precarious situation in which native minorities find themselves. Certainly, this is not a standard that would satisfy immigrant parents whose sights are set on joining the true middle class. It is also not the standard by which a structuralist perspective would evaluate successful assimilation.

Second, the rather dismal situation of native minorities, which the New York study emphasizes, provides indirect evidence for downward assimilation and its consequences. It is certainly not the case that these minorities have been part of the New York population forever. They are instead descendants of earlier labor migrants who, for various reasons, failed to move up the socio-economic ladder, being confined to occupations and economic conditions not too different from those of the original migrant generations. The host of social problems that native minorities confront today—despite the

numerous official programs that AKW celebrate—reflects the reality of failed structural assimilation and its aftermath. The key question thus becomes: what is the likelihood of a repeat performance among members of the second generation disadvantaged by low parental human capital and a negative mode of incorporation? As noted in our article, that possibility has more than academic interest because it would entail repetition and extension of the trauma of poverty and marginalization affecting the nation's inner cities. It is at this point where the available evidence on segmented assimilation becomes relevant.

Segmented Assimilations on the Ground

AKW criticize some of the components of the Downward Assimilation Index, remarking that unemployment, poverty-level incomes and incidents of arrest are not unusual in early adulthood and may be overcome later in life. This argument is reasonable, although such conditions are certainly undesirable; groups experiencing them are also among the most likely to show higher rates in the other indicators of downward assimilation—high school abandonment, incarceration and teenage parenthood. Our critics' observation that teenage parenthood is a cultural trait inherited by certain immigrant groups (and hence not a serious problem) is beyond the pale. All empirical evidence indicates that adolescent childbearing is not only associated with poverty and early school abandonment, but represents a turning point in the life course, "knifing off" the youth's past from the present and seriously handicapping future educational and occupational progress (Elder 1974, 1998; Rumbaut 2005). This is as true of black teenagers in the inner city as of Mexican girls in the *barrio*. As Fernandez-Kelly (1995) has noted, motherhood is often seen as an empowering strategy by disadvantaged minority girls, ushering their entrance into adulthood. Pursuing this strategy, however, entails starkly negative chances for the future.

The work of Perlmann (2005), another critic of segmented assimilation, furnishes ironically strong evidence in support of the theory. As reported in our article, Perlmann finds that the rate of high school abandonment among Mexican-Americans is twice that of blacks of comparable age, and three times that of native whites. This happens when returns to education have spiked, creating a double handicap for the Mexican second generation. The dropout rate reported by Perlmann for Mexican Americans—33 percent—is very close to the figure in Table 2 of our article for the same group: Mexican Americans have the lowest level of educational attainment among all nationalities in the sample, with the exception of Laotian/Cambodians—another group severely handicapped by poverty and very low parental human capital.

CILS is not, however, the only source of relevant data on the three indicators of downward assimilation mentioned previously. Rumbaut (2005) assembled data from the 2000 U.S. Census, combining them with Current Population Survey data for 1998–2001. The merged data set allows him to estimate the size and relevant characteristics of the foreign-born first generation and the U.S.-born second generation, and to compare them with native whites and blacks. Rumbaut reports that while

high school dropout rates decline from the first to the second generation among all immigrant nationalities, close to a fourth of U.S.-born Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and Salvadorans leave school without a high school diploma. Their dropout rate is about three times higher than among native whites and more than five times that of second-generation Chinese and Koreans.

Rumbaut is also able to estimate rates of incarceration for young males, ages 18-39. While his figures differ from those found by CILS, the overall pattern is the same. He finds that rates of incarceration increase significantly from the first to the second generation for every nationality, but that the increase is greatest among groups at risk of downward assimilation. The percent of incarcerated second-generation males is more than five times the figure for the corresponding foreign-born generation among Mexicans, Laotians and Cambodians. The incarceration rates for these second-generation groups more than triples the figure for native whites and more than quintuples that for the children of Chinese, Indian and Korean parents (Rumbaut 2005). For the second generation as a whole, the incarceration rate among those without a high school diploma triples, increasing from 3.5 to 9.75 percent. This result highlights the interrelated character of assimilation outcomes in early adulthood, with school abandonment ushering in other negative results.

The same data set also provides information on adolescent and early adulthood fertility rates among females of different national origins. Fertility rates move in the opposite direction of incarceration figures, declining from the first to the second generations. However, the decline is steeper among some groups than others. Highest fertility rates are found among Mexican-American women, followed by U.S.-born Puerto Ricans. By age 24, about 30 percent of both groups have had a child, a figure comparable to that among blacks and double that among native white women. Female fertility rates for adolescent and young adult second-generation Asians—Chinese, Indian, Korean and Vietnamese—are negligibly low, representing less than a tenth of the figure among adolescent and young Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and Central Americans. Thus, the earnings of second-generation Asian families are higher and provide more stability for raising their third generations compared to Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and Central Americans.

These census figures essentially support the conclusions advanced on the basis of CILS data. Youths without a basic education, in jail or burdened by premature childbearing are certainly not doing “all right.” Instead, they are at risk of reproducing the story of permanent subordination and disadvantage among native minorities. It bears repeating that these minorities are, overwhelmingly, descendants of earlier labor migrants whose structural assimilation was blocked by barriers similar to those confronted by many children of immigrants today. It is certainly not the case that all children of immigrants are at risk of downward assimilation; those blessed with high parental resources and a positive, or at least neutral, mode of incorporation are well placed to move ahead educationally and economically. But their success also brings into stark relief the reality of those left behind, lacking the most basic means to compete in an increasingly challenging society.

A Note on Method

The two studies upon which is based much of the present knowledge, as well as the controversies concerning second-generation assimilation, are CILS and the New York survey reported in Kasinitz et al. (2008). Our critics note several limitations of CILS, including a sample restricted to two metropolitan areas and a substantial rate of attrition in the final survey. We agree, but with the caveat that regressions modeling sample attrition in this survey point to low parental SES and single-parent families in early adolescence as the primary determinants. As shown in our article, these are also significant determinants of downward assimilation such that, if the missing fraction of the sample had been retrieved, it is likely that rates of school abandonment, incarceration and adolescent childbearing would have been significantly higher.

We are less impressed by the claim that CILS lacks a native-parentage component, because wealth of data exists on native parentage youths—and is readily available elsewhere. We had little difficulty finding figures with which to compare our own results. Given the availability of such data, it appears unnecessary to spend scarce time and resources collecting redundant information from yet another native parentage sample. We opted instead for increasing the size and diversity of CILS' second-generation sample.

Inheriting the City is a wonderfully-written book that has received many accolades. As the authors themselves recognize, it is primarily a book about New York City: "We learned about the struggle and joys experienced by young adults coming of age in a tough town, a place of ever-present danger... but also extraordinary possibilities." (Kasinitz et al. 2008:3) We believe, however, that the proclamation of a blanket "second-generation advantage" in the conclusion is not warranted. This is so because of three methodological limitations in the design of the study. First, it is based on a telephone survey using random-digit dialing. This choice necessarily biases results upwards by excluding individuals and families without regular access to phones, a group that does not represent an insignificant part of the immigrant population (Rumbaut 2010).

Second, the response rate is just 53.3 percent, which means that almost half of the target sample refused or otherwise did not take part in the survey. The extent to which this refusal rate biases the study's results is not known and no systematic effort was made to compare respondents with refusals. We are told that response rates ranged from 67 percent among the Chinese to a low of 41 percent among native blacks, but this observation does not take us far. Most of the subsequent analysis proceeds as if the sample was representative of all second-generation young adults in New York when, in fact, it is not. Third, and most critical, this is a cross-sectional survey of the non-institutionalized population. This choice again biases results upward by excluding those individuals who, for one reason or another, fell out of this "normal" universe: those who were in jail or running from the law, living in the streets, returned to their home countries, were hospitalized, etc.

As noted in the conclusion of our article, if CILS had adopted the same design, the almost 20 percent of second-generation Mexicans and Jamaicans/West Indians and the 15 percent of Haitians incarcerated by the time of the final survey would have disappeared

from view, as well as a high proportion of those unemployed and living in poverty. Those who died or were wounded in street confrontations or who left the country also would have been excluded. Knowledge of these cases, illustrating poignantly the existence of downward assimilation among children of immigrants lead us to conclude that results of the New York study are upwardly biased and, hence, overly optimistic.

On “Headlines”

AKW find no apparent fault with Telles and Ortiz (2008), a study that documents like no other the pattern of inter-generational, socio-economic stagnation among Mexican-Americans. Remarkably, however, they criticize indirectly this study for providing ammunition to right-wing pundits who have used its results to buttress their anti-immigrant rhetoric. Taken to its logical conclusion, AKW’s stand means that social scientists should suppress problematic findings, lest they fall into the wrong hands. This is surely a dead end. Telles and Ortiz were correct in reporting their findings on racialization and “generations of exclusion” because knowing these facts is the necessary first step to setting them right. Pundits and politicians will always exist and will always try to use scientific results to their own ends, but this is no reason to veil the truth.

In the case of today’s second generation, the “headline” is double: on average, members are making steady, albeit modest progress, but there is also a sizable minority at risk of downward assimilation. If acknowledged, however, this fate is *preventable* through concerted external intervention. Results of the final phase of CILS (Fernandez-Kelly and Portes 2008) indicate how a minority of the most disadvantaged respondents were able to overcome multiple obstacles to graduate from four-year colleges and move into professional careers or post-graduate schools. In *every* such case, we identified the decisive presence of other actors—external volunteer programs and committed teachers and counselors who took a real interest in a child and steered him or her toward high educational achievement. Taking into account the size and rapid growth of the immigrant second generation and the obstacles toward structural assimilation in its path, benign neglect—fostered by headlines of blanket “advantage”—is not an option. We advocate instead vigorous intervention by government agencies and private volunteer programs in support of immigrant families, helping them overcome the multiple hazards of low human capital, poverty and mainstream discrimination and their children attain a modicum of education. Otherwise, the past risks repeating itself—as the condition of native minorities used as reference points in the New York study clearly shows.

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