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## America's Newcomers and the Dynamics of Diversity

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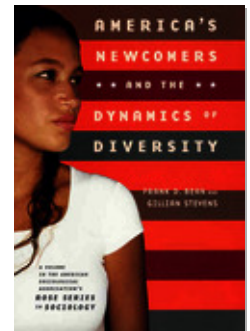
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## == Chapter 5 ==

### The New Immigrants and Theories of Incorporation

**J**UST HOW rapidly the new immigrants—by which we mean post-1965 immigrants—are becoming part of the American mainstream has constituted one of the major research issues fueling debates in recent years about the need to reform U.S. immigration policy. The general process marking this transition has most often been called assimilation. During the latter third of the twentieth century critics have often argued that this term has normative connotations that imply immigrants *should* become more like natives (see Brubaker 2001; Alba and Nee 1999; and Gans 1999b for discussions). This semantic controversy lies mostly outside the purview of this chapter, which examines theories about the convergence or lack of convergence between immigrant and native groups on various factors, including such variables as education and earnings. Most observers think that regardless of any prescriptive elements inherent in the notion of assimilation, immigrant group movement toward parity in education and earnings is practical and worthwhile (Hirschman 1983; Alba and Nee 1997). The normative liabilities of the term thus appear to apply less to phenomena like labor-market outcomes than to more socio-cultural phenomena.

As Richard Alba and Victor Nee (2003) have recently emphasized, early formulations of assimilation theory explicitly noted that newcomers affect their host societies even as these societies are affecting the newcomers. As we understand the term, then, assimilation means convergence of newcomer and host groups, with each affecting the other, not unidirectional movement of newcomers toward native groups. Because we are in agreement with a number of recent commentaries that have pointed out that neither the concept of assimilation nor concern with assimilation processes necessarily implies endorsement of normative goals as outcomes of the processes (Alba and

Nee 2003; Brubaker 2001; Morawska 1994), it is not in any "assimilationist" sense that we employ the concept of assimilation in our discussions below. We also use the more general concept of incorporation, by which we mean the broader processes by which new groups establish relationships with host societies. Assimilation is thus but one type of incorporation process.

A major reason incorporation matters in current debates about immigration is that today's "hour-glass" economy appears to offer fewer chances for economic mobility than was the case in earlier decades (Bernhardt et al. 2001). If true, this shift would have both policy and theoretical significance. At the level of policy, many observers often interpret evidence indicating unsuccessful assimilation as implying that U.S. policies for admitting immigrants are operating to select persons into the country with unfavorable chances of joining the economic mainstream. In theoretical terms, such evidence would suggest that substantive changes either in the characteristics of immigrants or in the structural circumstances confronting new arrivals are now inhibiting assimilation more than previously (see, for example, Massey 1995). The eventual successful blending of previous groups of immigrants and natives, often noted in earlier studies and predicted by assimilation theory, might thus be occurring less frequently among more recent arrivals to the United States. In chapter 6 we present research results on the economic assimilation of the most important new immigrant groups.

First, however, we consider the multidimensional nature of assimilation and the ways its processes may be changing in the case of the new immigrants. We treat the concept here as having two major dimensions, one economic and one sociocultural. As noted in chapter 1, sociocultural assimilation is the more complicated conceptually, in part simply because almost all observers would agree that economic assimilation is desirable whereas there is more ambivalence concerning sociocultural assimilation. But another reason is that sociocultural, unlike economic, assimilation, involves issues of racial and ethnic identity, particularly when immigrants arrive with national origins that differ from those of the ancestors of natives (Ignatiev 1995; Perlmann and Waldinger 1999). If natives define these immigrants as racialized minorities, the process can create or reinforce consequential discriminatory barriers (Castles and Miller 1998). Moreover, immigrant and native racial-ethnic definitions may be at variance with one another. For example, immigrants who are black may choose to see themselves as members of an immigrant group rather than as a racialized minority, whereas some natives may see such immigrants as members of disadvantaged minority groups (Waters 1999). How such

identifications affect and are affected by economic assimilation thus becomes an important question.

Those with alternative theoretical perspectives on immigrant incorporation tend to view the connections between economic and sociocultural integration differently. For example, those taking assimilation approaches tend to see certain aspects of sociocultural assimilation (like language acquisition and acceptance of broad norms and values) as precursors of economic assimilation, whereas those with ethnic pluralist perspectives are less likely to posit a relationship between the two. In fact, however, recent theory and research imply not only that facets of sociocultural assimilation are becoming less likely to constitute prerequisites for economic assimilation but also that economic assimilation may even sometimes influence sociocultural assimilation, thus emphasizing the dynamic interplay between the two (Alba and Nee 2003; Gans 1999a, 1999b). This is particularly well illustrated in the complicated case of racial or ethnic identity. Recent research on reactive ethnicity—or the hardening of ethnicity that often results from having experienced ethnic discrimination—shows how economic assimilation can influence sociocultural assimilation, as in the case where mobility-blocked immigrants develop “oppositional” identities as a result of their lack of economic success (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). In the next three chapters, we introduce research results about economic and certain dimensions of sociocultural assimilation separately because, as we argue below, increasingly, some aspects of sociocultural assimilation may be consequences rather than causes of economic assimilation.

## **Theoretical Models and the Issue of Changing Incorporation**

Addressing whether the pace of incorporation may be slowing thus involves considering the possibility that the nature of incorporation itself might be changing. To ascertain this, we must first understand theories of immigrant and ethnic group integration and the various kinds of factors they postulate as influencing economic and sociocultural mobility.

### ***The Assimilation Model***

The paradigm that has constituted the most prominent perspective on the issue of how rapidly immigrant groups attain upward mobility is *assimilation* theory, represented in the early work of Robert Park (1926),

William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki (1927), Oscar Handlin (1951), Irving Child (1943), Milton Gordon (1964), and in more contemporary writings of Herbert Gans (1979, 1988) and Richard Alba and Victor Nee (1997, 2003). This perspective envisions the process as one in which immigrants gradually begin to absorb and influence the cultural values and norms of the majority society, a process sometimes called cultural assimilation. In one of the most well developed early treatments of the subject, Gordon (1964) postulates several assimilation stages. After cultural assimilation (including linguistic) will come structural (educational, occupational and labor market, including wages, earnings, and employment), marital, and identificational assimilation. Within the structural category, some scholars draw a useful distinction between primary and secondary structural assimilation. The former refers to close, personal interactions between dominant and subordinate group members. The latter refers to "equal-status relationships between subordinate- and dominant-group members in the public sphere," for example, interactions structured by occupation, education, political position, and neighborhood of residence, and thus by implication labor-market factors (McLemore, Romo, and Gonzalez Baker 2001, 23).

The different stages of assimilation may occur at different rates among different groups. Gordon tended to view broad cultural assimilation not only as a precursor for other kinds of assimilation but also as irreversible. While the overall process may proceed through the stage of secondary structural assimilation without going further, once primary structural assimilation is attained, the process is likely to proceed to completion. In general, this viewpoint sees immigrant or ethnic and majority groups becoming more similar over time in their norms, values, behaviors, and characteristics. As noted above, while considerable debate has arisen over whether this similarity involves the subordinate group's becoming more like the dominant group (an "Anglo conformity" model) or the two groups' becoming more like each other (a "melting pot" model), in either case the model predicts a convergence of behavior and characteristics over time. This perspective would also entail the expectation that the members of later generations and those immigrants residing the longest in the United States would show the greatest decline in differences in behavior compared to the majority group. In this view, differences remaining by the third generation or later would reflect partial assimilation. In the case of labor-market factors, partial secondary structural assimilation could result in differences between the two groups in educational attainment and thus could account for later generational discrepancies in wages and unemployment.

### *The Ethnic Disadvantage Model*

Other observers view the assimilation model as insufficient to explain fully the integration experiences of immigrant groups, as we shall discuss. Another major (and more recent) stream of thought notes the frequent persistence of incomplete assimilation among immigrant groups. This perspective, which we term the *ethnic-disadvantage* point of view, is reflected in the writings of Andrew Greeley (1971), Gerald Suttles (1968), Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan (1963), Alejandro Portes and Robert Bach (1985), Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou (1993), and Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut (2001). To be sure, some of these writers emphasize ethnic pluralism as much or more than they do ethnic disadvantage. For example, some note the positive reasons for continued ethnic affiliations and activities, as Glazer and Moynihan did in *Beyond the Melting Pot*, which quite famously formulated a political-interest rationale for ethnic attachment. Such formulations provide a logic for the persistence of ethnic distinctiveness without assuming any accompanying ethnic group subordination. But in general, the major theme that runs through this literature is that increasing knowledge of the language of the new country and familiarity with its culture and customs often do not lead to increasing structural assimilation. Lingering discrimination and structural and institutional barriers to equal access to employment opportunities constitute obstacles to complete assimilation. Because socioeconomic opportunities for the first generation are evaluated relative to those in the country of origin, it is not until the second and third generations that the realization emerges that the goal of full assimilation may be more difficult and take longer than originally presumed. Such realities and the evaluation of them have social and cultural consequences, including the reemergence of ethnic consciousness. As Portes and Bach (1985, 25) note: "The rejection experienced by immigrants and their descendants in their attempts to become fully assimilated constitutes a central element in the reconstitution of ethnic culture."

As with the assimilation approach, this perspective would expect the immigrant generation to exhibit different characteristics than natives, even after taking into account other differences between immigrants and natives. By the second generation, however, language patterns and reference groups are in the process of shifting. For example, among first-generation Mexican-origin women, most (84 percent) have been found to use only Spanish at home (Portes and Rumbaut 1990), whereas by the third generation, the shift to English is nearly complete, with 84 percent using only English at home and 12 percent using both English and Spanish (Portes and Rumbaut 1990; Lopez

1982). Such patterns support the notion that the immigrant generation retains the country of origin as a primary reference group, whereas the third generation makes the transition to the country of destination as the reference group (Bean et al. 1994).

Part of the cultural and psychological conflict experienced by the second generation derives from the fact that it is socialized by the first generation, the group that evaluates its socioeconomic experience in the United States most positively. The result is strong efforts by the first generation to inculcate achievement aspirations in the second generation. Reinforcing the second generation's motivation to achieve is its desire to overcome the marginality involved in being caught between the old and the new (Child 1943). The second generation also begins to become more cognizant of the barriers that block access to complete assimilation, as it shifts its reference group to the United States instead of the old country (Hansen 1952; Bean et al. 1994). The second generation's experience of discrimination, together with a growing awareness of its relative socioeconomic standing compared to natives, undermines the second generation's motivation to transmit achievement aspirations to its children. Consistent with these ideas, Lisa Neidert and Reynolds Farley (1985) report a drop in average socioeconomic index score for third compared to second-generation groups, and Bean et al. (1994) and Reynolds Farley and Richard Alba (2002) find that levels of educational attainment and other labor-market outcomes in the third generation fall slightly below those of the second generation. Such findings suggest that real and perceived barriers to socioeconomic attainment can operate even in the third generation to discourage socioeconomic achievement, to reinforce the distinctiveness of the ethnic group, and reaffirm and revitalize ethnic patterns and customs.

### *The Segmented Assimilation Model*

Thus, incorporation appears to elude some members of immigrant groups, even as late as the third generation. Some analysts have concluded that uneven patterns of success do not significantly undermine the validity of the theory of assimilation, but rather suggest that the process may follow a "bumpy" rather than "straight-line" course (Gans 1992a, 1992b). Others have noted that just as some members of immigrant groups become cut off from economic mobility, others find multiple pathways to incorporation depending on their national origin, socioeconomic status, contexts of reception in the United States, and family resources, both social and financial (Rumbaut 1999). As a result, the incorporation experiences of recent immigrants are more

diverse than the scenarios provided by the assimilation and the ethnic-disadvantage models. Seeking to distill general tendencies from a multiplicity of trajectories, Portes, Rumbaut and Zhou (Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Zhou 1999) have amalgamated elements of both the straight-line assimilation and the ethnic-disadvantage approaches into a perspective they call *segmented assimilation*. They theorize that structural barriers limiting access to employment and other opportunities, obstacles that often are particularly severe in the case of the most disadvantaged members of immigrant groups, can lead to stagnant or even downward mobility, even as fellow immigrants follow divergent paths toward classic straight-line assimilation. Heavily disadvantaged immigrants may even reject assimilation altogether and embrace attitudes, orientations, and behaviors considered "oppositional" in nature.

The idea of segmented assimilation thus brings together elements of the classic, "straight-line," view of assimilation and the ethnic-disadvantage perspective. This combination represents a major advance in that it refocuses analytical attention on identifying the contextual and structural factors that separate successful assimilation from unsuccessful, or even "negative" assimilation. Portes and Rumbaut (2001) argue that it is particularly important to identify such factors in the case of the children of immigrants, or the second generation, because the operation at that level of significant structural impediments to mobility serves to thwart the onset of assimilation at perhaps its most critical juncture—the very beginning of the process among the children of immigrants (Rumbaut 1999). In essence, Portes and Rumbaut suggest that while many immigrants will find different pathways to mainstream status, others will find such pathways blocked and come to view themselves as members of disadvantaged and racialized minority groups as a result. Massey (1995) echoes these themes at another level in his arguments that new immigration and its meaning for opportunity and ethnicity are grounded in fundamentally different structural circumstances than was the case for previous generations of immigrants. The flows of new immigrants, especially those from Mexico, have occurred more continuously across longer periods of time than earlier migrations. In addition, economic transformations have resulted in increasingly segmented labor markets with fewer opportunities for economic and social mobility, especially for those with less education and lower skills. Moreover, the geographic concentration of the new immigration has created and sustained distinctive language and cultural communities on an unprecedented scale. In his view, these factors are slowing if not halting the traditional processes of assimilation that characterized European-ori-



gin populations and introducing a segmented opportunity structure that results in less movement away from ethnicity.

### **The Black-White Model and Mexican Immigrants**

As insightful and useful as theories of incorporation have proved in the past, they are not fully adequate for explaining the progress of immigrants in joining the mainstream. The segmented assimilation model provides perhaps the most adequate depiction, because it offers a basis for understanding the dynamics of both success and failure, but its formulation, perhaps unintentionally, tends to emphasize factors that make for difficulties rather than ease of incorporation. The perspective has also focused predominantly on the circumstances of second-generation immigrant children, and within this frame often on adolescents, whose incorporation experiences are necessarily incomplete. Moreover, the age and developmental stage of adolescents make them prone to the adoption of some of the rebellious and oppositional tendencies predicted by the hypothesis. Thus, it is possible that some of the evidence advanced in support of the perspective's predictions about negative outcomes are attributable in part to life course factors rather than barriers to incorporation. In its emphasis on the second generation, research on segmented assimilation risks accentuating the negative outcomes of incorporation processes.

But there is also another reason that existing theories of assimilation may not apply satisfactorily to the experiences of the new immigrants. The theories have been constructed partially on an old black-white model of racial-ethnic relations that is ill suited for application to new arrivals whose skin color is not only often indistinguishable from that of whites, but whose historical experiences differ considerably from those of both blacks and European immigrants. Existing theories of incorporation offer essentially an optimistic (the assimilation theory) or a pessimistic (ethnic-disadvantage view) picture of the process, or a mixture of the two (segmented assimilation perspective). Which of these views has predominated has depended substantially, if not always explicitly, on whether or not a given immigrant group was treated as a "racialized," disadvantaged minority group. Ethnic-disadvantage perspectives have tended to regard immigrant groups as nonwhite minorities subject to discrimination. Assimilation perspectives have tended to view them less in racial or ethnic and more in nativity terms. Thus, the issue of immigration is inextricably confounded with the issue of race and ethnicity in the United States. To be sure, these features of the two perspectives are a matter of degree

rather than absolute differences. Nonetheless, the question of changes in the pace of assimilation cannot be separated from the question of the extent to which the new immigrant groups tend to become disadvantaged and racialized minority groups in the United States.

The Mexican case exemplifies the difficulty of applying a strictly assimilation or ethnic-disadvantage perspective to new immigrants. Observers of the rise in the importance of the Mexican-origin population in the United States have often been uncertain how to characterize the experience of Mexican-origin persons in the United States and thus the degree of incorporation in the Mexican-origin population. Even though Mexican immigrants are diverse in terms of their migration status and modes of entry into the United States, the inclination has often existed (among both Mexican-origin persons themselves as well as others) to perceive the group's members in ways that often reflect the prior experiences of either European immigrants or African Americans. An assimilation perspective involves viewing Mexican-origin persons primarily as an immigrant group whose members have for the most part only recently come to the United States and whose incorporation may relatively quickly mirror that of earlier groups (Chavez 1989). In this view, one need only wait for natural incorporation processes to run their course, usually over three or four generations (McCarthy and Valdez 1985; Rodriguez 1999). An alternative perspective tends to envision Mexican-origin persons more as members of a disadvantaged minority group whose progress toward full economic parity with other U.S. groups is retarded by discrimination. In this view, substantial progress is not likely to occur simply with the passage of time but will require new policies both to help eradicate discrimination and to compensate for its past effects (Chapa 1990; Valdivieso and Dains 1986).

Analysts influenced by these two ways of looking at the Mexican-origin experience tend to organize economic statistics differently in seeking to shed light on the group's economic incorporation. Because the ethnic-disadvantage viewpoint is that all members of the group are subject to discrimination, its adherents tend to marshal data on income and jobs and other indicators for the entire national-origin group, irrespective of nativity status. By contrast, observers who treat Mexican-origin persons as members of an immigrant group tend to distinguish the foreign-born from the native-born on the grounds that the experience of Mexican-origin persons varies so much by nativity that data on this group must be disaggregated. For example, rather than arguing that discrimination shapes immigrants' experiences in the labor market, these observers hold that such outcomes as immi-

grant wages and employment are influenced more by English-language proficiency, human capital variables, and U.S. work experience. From this perspective, the examination of labor-market outcomes or other variables that include data on foreign-born and native-born persons lumped together is likely to yield misleading assessments of the economic achievements of many members of immigrant groups, especially Mexican-origin persons (see, for example, Bean, Berg, and Van Hook 1996; Trejo 1996, 1997).

Each of these points of view finds some evidence in support of its ideas. On the one hand, research suggests that persons of Mexican origin often face job discrimination, though not so much as African Americans (Bean and Tienda 1987; Perlmann and Waldinger 1999). Nonetheless, it is also evident that data aggregated by nativity present an incomplete picture of the accomplishments of those of Mexican origin. The gap in education and earnings between immigrant and native-born members of the same group clearly has more to do with origin-country differences in economic development than with discrimination. Bias resulting from the aggregation of statistics is likely to be especially severe in times of high immigration, as in the 1990s, when immigration, particularly from Mexico, rose because of the legalization programs associated with the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) and because of an economic crisis in Mexico (Bean et al. 1997; Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002).

Perspectives such as that of segmented assimilation argue that members of the new immigrant groups risk the kinds of outcomes that disadvantaged blacks have often experienced and that some national-origin groups are more vulnerable than others. At a minimum, sorting out the degree of economic progress among immigrant groups requires that research disaggregate racial and ethnic groups by nativity or (preferably) generational status. While this may seem like a banal observation, it bears repeating, as Rebeca Raijman and Marta Tienda (1999) have also emphasized, because even today it continues to be overlooked. Beyond this, understanding what is happening in the cases of the new immigrant groups requires recognition that even as incorporation may be occurring in regard to economic factors, it may at the same time be moving in opposite directions in regard to some sociocultural factors. Thus, the predictions of neither straight-line assimilation nor the ethnic-disadvantage perspectives, both of which are contained in the segmented assimilation framework, may fully characterize the experiences of many new immigrant groups. The new ethnic groups may not only have distinctive historical backgrounds, they also experience different modes of reception in the

United States (Portes and Rumbaut 1990; Portes and Zhou 1993; Bean et al. 1997). These factors may cause them to experience economic and sociocultural incorporation differently.

## **Existing Theory and Its Discontents**

An examination of the origins of the two major theoretical perspectives on incorporation may illuminate how incorporation perspectives may need modification for new immigrant groups. A key difference between the assimilation and ethnic-disadvantage perspectives is how they view the connection between structural and cultural incorporation. That relationship has implications for the persistence and reformation of racial and ethnic identities, which in turn may affect the likelihood of new "racialized" minorities developing. In the classic "straight-line" model of assimilation (Gordon 1964) and its many variants (Crispino 1980; Alba 1990; Gans 1992b), newcomers are expected both to affect and to be affected by the fabric of American life so that immigrant minorities become ever more indistinguishable from natives, at least after several generations. Emerging out of the predominantly European-origin migration that took place at the beginning of the twentieth century, the formulation of this model was influenced by literary and artistic metaphors emerging from the experience (and strategy) of incorporation adopted by Jewish immigrants to establish a foothold and gain economic mobility in the United States. Canonizing this view was Milton Gordon (1964), who postulated that at least some aspects of acculturation were necessary (if not always sufficient) precursors to structural incorporation.

The dissatisfaction that developed with the model had partly to do with its incomplete depictions of the experiences of European migrants, but also partly with the inability of its integrationist counterpart to explain in another realm the experience of African Americans in America (Glazer and Moynihan 1963). Although African American customs, practices, ideals, and values by the early 1960s had come to mirror those of the larger population to a considerable degree, still missing was satisfactory African American structural incorporation. The prevailing optimistic view at the time was that the removal of legal barriers would in fairly short order lead to substantial structural incorporation of African Americans (Glazer 1997). In reality, however, though the elimination of such barriers to blacks resulted in some improvements in black economic situations, gains fell far short of parity with whites, with consequences that could readily be discerned by the mid-1980s (Wilson 1987; Glazer 1997; Bean and Bell-Rose 1999).

At about the same time, it was becoming increasingly clear that

many white European groups continued to manifest aspects of ethnic distinctiveness despite their substantial structural incorporation (Alba 1990; Gans 1979; Waters 1990). Both of these trends contributed to the development of an ethnic pluralist perspective of incorporation that was predicated on the idea that cultural incorporation was neither inevitable nor necessary for structural incorporation (Greeley 1974). Researchers have demonstrated, however, that much of the ethnic revival among European immigrant groups during this period was symbolic, giving rise to the concept of *symbolic ethnicity*, at least among white ethnics (Gans 1979; Alba 1990; Waters 1990). As Mary C. Waters (1999) has noted, however, nonwhites, especially blacks, do not have the luxury of adopting "symbolic ethnicities." It was in part the reaction of nonwhite ethnics to lingering discrimination and disadvantage that contributed to the kind of ethnic revitalization emphasized by the ethnic-pluralist and ethnic-disadvantage perspectives.

Interestingly, the experiences out of which the assimilation, ethnic-pluralist, and ethnic-disadvantage perspectives arose and their assumptions about racial and ethnic group boundaries serve substantially to preserve distinctive racial and ethnic group identities. The multiculturalism of the United States in the latter part of the twentieth century, which both the ethnic-pluralist and ethnic-disadvantage perspectives reflect, emphasizes the worthiness of multiple racial and ethnic groups and the importance of tolerating the cultural differences manifested by such groups. At the same time, however, by taking the definition and thus the existence of such groups for granted and by assuming that the members of such groups will continue to see themselves in such terms in the future, multiculturalism tends to support the idea that sharp and distinctive boundaries divide racial and ethnic groups. Basically consistent with the tenets of multiculturalism, the ethnic pluralism and the ethnic disadvantage perspectives implicitly embrace the same orientation. Generally their assumptions are compatible with multiculturalism's effort to cope with the problem of barriers among groups by issuing calls for the tolerance of difference and the celebration of diversity, even while preserving the boundaries among groups.

The ethnic-pluralist and the ethnic-disadvantage paradigms thus basically accept the idea that the new immigrant groups are most appropriately viewed as nonwhite, "racialized" minorities. This is the case even though both the facial features and range of skin pigmentation of the groups to which the models have been applied vary enormously. Even the construction of "symbolic ethnicity" may be viewed as occurring in part because of multiculturalism, without whose triumph there would have been little need to reinforce and reify ethnic

distinctiveness (Glazer 1997). The ethnic-disadvantage perspective similarly assumes continuing racial distinctiveness, albeit with a main emphasis on the nonwhiteness of new immigrants, the most dark-skinned of whom are seen as especially likely to develop not only a strong minority consciousness but also one that assumes an adversarial posture toward the white majority. In this regard, its tenets parallel those of John Ogbu (1994), who notes that racial or ethnic groups that have been involuntary migrants to the United States are particularly likely to develop such oppositional orientations.

### **A New Model of Changing Contingency Between Economic and Sociocultural Incorporation**

The racial or ethnic identifications of the new immigrants may not follow the trajectories implied by the old models, a possibility that has been foreshadowed in the formulation of the ideas of "symbolic ethnicity" and "ethnic options" (Alba 1985, 1990; Gans 1979; Waters 1990). The assimilation and both the ethnic-pluralist and ethnic-disadvantage models, together with the historical experiences that have helped give rise to them (those of European immigrants and American blacks), seem inadequate to describe the situations and experiences of new immigrants in the later part of the twentieth century. As noted in chapter 2, most immigration during the 1980s and 1990s has been from Latin American and Asian countries (Portes and Zhou 1993; Neckerman, Carter, and Lee 1999). By the 1980s, only 12 percent of legal immigrants originated in Europe or Canada, whereas nearly 85 percent reported origins in Asia, Latin America, or the Caribbean (Bean et al. 1997; U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service 1998), converting the United States from a largely biracial society consisting of a sizable white majority and a small black minority into a multiracial, multiethnic society consisting of several racial and ethnic groups. Not only are the majority of the new immigrants neither black nor white, but the largest group, Mexicans, as well as many other Latinos, come mostly from mestizo backgrounds. Also, the vast majority of recent immigrants are Latino labor migrants who entered the United States in the West, a region of the country in which many areas have long shown more tolerance for racial and ethnic diversity than the norm in the rest of the United States (Lee and Wood 1991; Farley and Frey 1994).

The old models of cultural accommodation and bipolar racial divides thus appear less relevant to the historical and contemporary

experiences of Latinos than to earlier European immigrants (Rodríguez 2001; Suárez-Orozco and Pérez 2002). And such dichotomies are scarcely more relevant for Asians, who come from so many countries of origin and often are so socioeconomically diverse that no single set of experiences can be thought to have played a defining role in shaping their identities (Lopez and Espiritu 1990). If cultural accommodation facilitated structural incorporation in the past, this has not seemed apparent or necessary for today's newcomers (Gibson 1988), resulting in a further decoupling of whatever traditional linkages had been thought to exist between acculturation and economic mobility (Alba 1990; Neckerman, Carter and Lee 1999). Rather, many of today's new Asian and Latino immigrants seem to have adopted a path of "selective assimilation" (Portes and Zhou 1993; Zhou and Bankston 1998) or "accommodation without assimilation" (Gibson 1988). Under these conditions, racial and ethnic identities are likely to become less constrained than previously presumed and more flexible and dynamic than emphasized by either the straight-line or ethnic-pluralist models. As a result, multiracial identifications may be more likely among Asian and Latino immigrants than among either black Afro-origin immigrants or native-born blacks, as a consequence of both higher rates of intermarriage and greater tendencies to see themselves in multiracial terms.

If Latinos' and Asians' internal identifications are less constrained, this may be because the native-born population is now less likely to constrain them. According to the ethnic-disadvantage model, the native-born, largely white population assigns an identity to the groups that tend to have the lowest status and the darkest skin, regardless of the groups' self-identification (Waters 1999). By contrast, in an assimilation model, the self-defined and externally defined identifications gradually merge and melt away. But the very size and socioeconomic diversity of the Latino and Asian immigrant streams may make them more difficult for the native-born to categorize easily. The immigrant groups of the early twentieth century may have had much less between- and within-group variation and thus may have been easier to stereotype. The diversity among contemporary immigrants may render racial and ethnic boundaries more negotiable than in previous generations. This diversity does not mean that stereotypes have not developed, because they have (for example, Asians are seen as the "model minority"). But they are also less likely to be pervasive.

Processes of self-identification may interact with socioeconomic status in complex ways, providing further indication that the relationship between sociocultural and economic aspects of incorporation may be changing from the sequential form implied in the assimilation

model toward forms involving multiple contingencies and dynamic interplays. Racial and ethnic identification occurs at several levels: reactive, symbolic, and selective. Among those with the least status, reactive identification is most likely to arise from repeated discrimination and contribute to the subsequent hardening of oppositional attitudes. This interaction of socioeconomic status and identification suggests that ethnic identification is most intense among those of lowest status. Selective assimilation tends to develop among those with better prospects. Their status would make them more opportunistic than oppositional with respect to economic incorporation, and they would belong to ethnic networks and institutions with enough resources to offer greater support than available to poorer ethnicities in the ethnic enclave. In their case, high resource ethnic social ties would trump weaker interethnic ties, with the result that such people would be more likely to choose an ethnic identity. However, the choice might not entirely be theirs, since they might continue to face discrimination based on their ethnic or racial background. Symbolic ethnicity emerges among those who already are largely incorporated both culturally and economically. Such persons tend not to rely on co-ethnic networks and "ethnicity" for instrumental support but instead for expressive, individualistic needs (Alba 1990; Gans 1988). For them, ethnic identification is optional (Waters 1990).

Some research has found that the relationship between status and identification appears curvilinear (Neckerman, Carter, and Lee 1999). Ethnic identification seems to be highest among those of either lowest or highest status. Whereas reactive ethnicity may arise mainly among those of the lowest socioeconomic status, symbolic ethnicity seems most likely to occur among those of *highest* status. This stratum would have the most interest in its sociocultural heritage and the greatest freedom to assume an ethnic identity without incurring discrimination. The working class, on the other hand, would stand to gain the most from assimilation and might therefore shed much of its ethnic identity.

Such a curvilinear pattern would mean that the process of identificational assimilation, one of the seven types described by Gordon (1964), may increasingly occur autonomously from other types of incorporation. Gordon observed that the various dimensions of assimilation often empirically follow a sequence. Even though he also noted that this was not a necessity, the apparently growing separation of self-identification from other forms of incorporation is particularly striking. Identification is thus the one dimension of assimilation that is becoming both more subjective and autonomous; the other dimensions of assimilation named by Gordon involve behaviors or the atti-



**Figure 5.1 Cross-Classification of Skin Color and Socioeconomic Status**

|              |  | Socioeconomic Status   |                            |                            |
|--------------|--|------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
|              |  | Higher                 | Middle                     | Lower                      |
| Skin lighter |  | Symbolic ethnicity     | Straight-line assimilation | Straight-line assimilation |
| Skin darker  |  | Selective assimilation | Bumpy-line assimilation    | Reactive ethnicity         |

*Source:* Authors' configuration.

tudes of those outside the group. Thus, immigrants may be maintaining ethnic identifications despite considerable economic incorporation and despite social networks and perhaps even marriages that cross racial or ethnic boundaries, providing another example of attitude not always predicting behavior. Of course, such decouplings proceed most rapidly in the absence of strong discrimination or value conflict. Otherwise, external barriers would forestall incorporation. Among the low-status immigrants who face such external barriers and who develop reactive ethnicity, attitudes may remain tightly linked to behaviors. The independence of attitudes and behavior appears more likely to occur among the well-educated.

In general, skin color and socioeconomic status are likely to distinguish whether relatively "straight-line" assimilation, more "bumpy-line" assimilation, symbolic ethnicity, reactive ethnicity, or selective acculturation are most likely to emerge among new immigrant groups. As Waters (1999) observes, the concept of symbolic ethnicity applies best to the descendants of earlier-arriving white European immigrants, especially those of higher socioeconomic status. Among non-whites, the reaffirmation of "ethnicity" probably arises most in reaction to real and perceived discrimination, which immigrants of low socioeconomic status are most likely to encounter. Thus, if we cross-classify skin color and socioeconomic status, as in figure 5.1, we obtain the following six-fold indication of where straight-line assimilation, bumpy-line assimilation, symbolic ethnicity, reactive ethnicity, and selective assimilation might be most likely to emerge.

To the extent that such decoupling of self-identification from other forms of identification is occurring among the new immigrants, their ethnic identification may constitute an especially misleading indicator of their overall level of incorporation. Immigrants' actual behaviors, such as language usage and intermarriage rates, should be better indicators of sociocultural assimilation than subjective identification.

Although this point may seem obvious—language use and intermarriage have a long history as indicators of sociocultural assimilation—the advantage of behavioral indicators over ethnic identification deserves emphasis. Because the 2000 census has for the first time allowed individuals to identify themselves by more than one race, research in the next few years will inevitably focus on multiracial identities. Particularly if such research confirms the curvilinear pattern of ethnic identity among immigrants, observers who view such findings only through the lens of the old black-white model may mistakenly conclude that immigrants are not assimilating very rapidly, even if the overall behaviors of immigrants suggest otherwise. Fortunately, the census also contains data on language, educational level, occupation, and marriage that will provide a multitude of behavioral indicators of incorporation and thus a basis for a more complete assessment.

One question among the third and later generations of Asians and Latinos is the extent to which ethnic identity will remain reactive or selective, become symbolic, or, in the assimilationist model, disappear altogether. Racial and ethnic identity tends to be adaptable and thus may shift quite naturally during the process of incorporation. But the cross-sectional design of most studies of the second generation precludes study of the long-term evolution of identity and can unwittingly give the impression that ethnic identity is fixed. Because some of the largest changes happen in the third generation or later (Perlmann and Waldinger 1999), selective assimilation may well evolve into symbolic ethnicity.

A still larger question is whether immigrants are retaining their overall sociocultural and economic differences from the native-born population. On an identificational level, the answer appears to be yes. Members of immigrant groups of high and low status appear increasingly to be identifying themselves by racial or ethnic origins. But behavioral indicators of sociocultural assimilation such as intermarriage and language acquisition do not reflect any similar trends, suggesting a decline in ethnic separatism. Moreover, economically, such ethnic self-identification may be reflecting immigrants' achievements, in the case of symbolic ethnicity, or enabling immigrants to maximize achievement, in the case of selective assimilation. For immigrants who already enter with high socioeconomic status, retention of ethnic identity appears to have few costs and potentially many benefits. In fact, the rise of multiculturalism has mainstreamed the acceptability of diversity, so that retention of a *symbolic* level of racial or ethnic identification or even construction of a new pan-ethnic identity—

such as that of Latino as combination of multiple national origin groups—may paradoxically be part of the gradual process of incorporation. Because of these factors, maintenance of a racial or ethnic identification increasingly seems not to preclude other types of assimilation, and often even to be strengthened by both low and high economic assimilation.

## The Mexican Case

The implications of what we have been saying about possibly new patterns of ethnic identity are particularly important in the case of the Mexican-origin group in the United States. This group is large and distinctive for its low levels of education, as we noted in chapter 3. It is also both a “new” immigrant group (in the sense that large numbers of Mexican immigrants have arrived since the elimination of national origin quotas in 1965) and an “old” immigrant group (in the sense that substantial numbers of Mexicans have been immigrating to the United States for quite a long time). Of course, a few of the members of the Mexican-origin population are the descendants of persons who were living in the territory that is now the United States when it was still part of Mexico, which causes some observers to claim that Mexican-origin persons are more like colonized minorities than immigrants. Whatever one’s point of view on this matter, it nonetheless remains the case that the vast majority, indeed almost all, persons of Mexican origin in the country came as a result of voluntary migration (Bean and Tienda 1987; Edmonston and Passel 1999). As a consequence of this longstanding migration, the third and later generations in the Mexican-origin population are more numerous than similar generations for almost all of the other new immigrant groups. This means that some of the identificational dynamics by generation discussed above will have had a chance to manifest themselves. But it also means that a large fraction of the group is first or second generation and just beginning processes of assimilation.

But perhaps the most important dynamic for assessing the incorporation experience and success of the Mexican-origin group is the unauthorized status of so many of its first-generation entrants, both now and in previous decades. This separates the Mexican-origin group from all others, with the possible exception of Salvadorans and Guatemalans, whose numbers are substantially smaller and who did not migrate much to the United States until recently. Compared to other immigrant groups, then, and especially to other new immigrant groups, many Mexicans begin their immigrant experience with a

unique handicap: their unauthorized status. They thus start the process of economic and sociocultural incorporation from a particularly disadvantaged position. If we liken immigration to entering a house through the "front" door (or "heaven's door," to use the title of a recent book on immigration) and seeking to climb to the upper floors where the long-term natives live, then it is important to realize that vast numbers of Mexicans came not through the front door but rather through a back entrance that channeled them straight to the basement. So if the usual expectation is that it might take a certain amount of time for immigrants to climb the floors of the house (about three generations, according to traditional assimilation models), then Mexicans are confronted with having to climb at least an extra flight of stairs. So it is logical we should think of their experience as requiring more time to reach some semblance of completion, perhaps four or five generations rather than three if the latter is viewed as an average. Certainly there is no doubt that many Mexican immigrants have longer journeys ahead of them than other immigrant groups because of their unauthorized status and their lower levels of education.

Now consider what this may mean in terms of how natives perceive the success of incorporation among Mexican immigrants. On the one hand, the identification dynamics discussed above may lead more and more Mexicans to retain some measure of identification as "Mexicans," even in cases where successful economic incorporation has occurred, for the reasons noted above. We have already discussed above that many native-born Americans may misinterpret the manifestations and expressions of such Mexican identities as indicating the lack of successful economic incorporation among Mexican-origin persons in general, especially if the native-born perceive Mexican-origin persons as members of a disadvantaged "racialized" minority group. Add to this all of the new immigrants, both legal and unauthorized, who have come to the United States in recent years and thus have not had time to progress very far economically, and the picture of a poor and not very successfully incorporating population gets reinforced.

Yet another factor in perceptions of Mexican-origin immigrants is that the sheer increase in the relative and absolute size of this group during the 1990s created ever-larger ethnic enclaves, thus substantially adding to the visibility of the population. In short, the changing dynamics of ethnic identification, the increasing proportion of the population with incomplete incorporation, and the rising conspicuousness of the group all conspire to suggest a bleaker incorporation picture than may actually be the case among Mexican-origin persons in this country. We return in the next chapter to further discussion of these issues.

## Summary and Conclusions

Our examination of theories of incorporation and their applicability to the new immigrants indicates that ideas about incorporation must be revised if they are to fit the reception experiences of many of the new groups. The earlier theories of assimilation tended to assume that certain aspects of sociocultural assimilation preceded or occurred simultaneously with economic assimilation, and perhaps in certain circumstances even to act as a prerequisite for it. In the cases of the new immigrants, the question of racial and ethnic identification, which we view as one of the key facets of sociocultural assimilation along with language patterns and intermarriage, often seems to be shaped by immigrants' experiences with economic assimilation rather than the other way around. Some new immigrants develop their strongest sense of ethnic identity after they achieve a measure of economic success, the pattern and expression of this renewed ethnic consciousness often being reminiscent of the "symbolic" ethnicities that developed among European white ethnics during the 1960s and 1970s. Others maintain a strong sense of ethnic consciousness as a strategy for maximizing economic incorporation (Zhou and Bankston 1998; Waters 1999). Whatever the case, we suggest that the increased separation of sociocultural and economic assimilation has the effect of often confusing the American public about the nature and pace of overall assimilation. The continued manifestation of certain kinds of ethnic distinctiveness may reinforce the idea that integration may be proceeding slowly. Therefore an assessment of the degree of success of assimilation not only must focus on multiple facets of sociocultural assimilation like language acquisition and intermarriage but also must be sensitive to the fact that economic assimilation may increasingly occur independent of certain forms of identificational assimilation. We now turn our attention to the assessment of the degree of assimilation in terms of these multiple facets.