

A Process of Segmented Assimilation: the Evolution of Educational Aspirations among Immigrant Youth

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Segmented assimilation theory, originally proposed by Portes and Zhou (1993), posits that three possible forms of integration exist: the first is the traditional trajectory of assimilation, where immigrants and their children integrate into the white middle-class; the second is downward assimilation into the underclass and poverty; and the third is selective acculturation, which occurs when migrants experience rapid economic advancement while maintaining their ethnic solidarity, community, and cultural values. These respective paths ultimately lead to very different outcomes for the second-generation, resulting in diverging prospects for youth (Zhou 1997). Despite mixed evidence supporting segmented assimilation (e.g. Xie and Greenman 2011; Hirschman 2001; Waldinger and Feliciano 2004), some immigrant groups regularly fare better than others. For instance, second-generation Indian and Korean immigrants have lower high school dropout rates than second-generation Mexicans or other Latin American adolescents (Portes 2007).

However, the vast majority of such studies focus exclusively on completed education or labor market outcomes, whereas segmented assimilation describes a *process* of orientation away from schooling and mainstream values for some immigrant youth. I revisit this theory by documenting attitudes toward schooling over time and across generational status among first- and second-generation immigrants. Studying educational aspirations and expectations in this way better captures the ideational change that is central to the theory of segmented assimilation.

Background

Few factors are more central in influencing academic outcomes than educational aspirations. Early work in the status attainment tradition (e.g. Sewell et al. 1969) finds that aspirations have substantial effects on educational attainment, while simultaneously mediating the impact of family background. This finding has been replicated in more recent studies and is important for the academic success of racial/ethnic minority and immigrant populations as well (Raleigh and Kao 2010; Rumbaut and Portes 1996).

While aspirations reflect a student's dreams in ideal circumstances, expectations tend to be more reflective of objective circumstances and the student's current situation (Carter 2006). Empirical research consistently documents strong relations between expectations and such outcomes as school performance and educational attainment (e.g. Cheng and Starks 2002). For instance, students who anticipate graduating from college are less likely to drop out of high school than students with lower expectations (Driscoll 1999). Scholars also document racial and ethnic heterogeneity in educational expectations. While Asians expect to achieve higher levels of education than whites and all other ethnic groups (Goyette and Xie 1999), Hispanics tend to report the lowest expectations (Hao and Bonstead-Bruns 1998).

Changes in educational expectations across generations may be an important aspect of the immigrant incorporation process. First-generation immigrant youth expect to achieve higher levels of educational attainment than their native or second-generation counterparts; immigrant parents also have higher educational expectations for their offspring than U.S.-born parents (Glick and White 2004). It is not clear, however, whether this pattern is maintained throughout adolescence. Trajectories of expectations and aspirations throughout the educational career are an important aspect of socioeconomic attainment and may also change across generations. Further, group differences in such generational processes are implied by segmented assimilation theory. High aspirations and expectations should be maintained across generations for upwardly mobile groups, while aspirations and expectations should decline for downwardly mobile groups.

Research on both educational aspirations and expectations demonstrates that students' goals play a major role in guiding their subsequent behavior and achievement. Unlike the rich tradition of this literature in the general population, we still know much less about how the schooling attitudes of the first- and second-generation youth evolve during adolescence. Understanding this process speaks to decades of research on assimilation and sheds light on an understudied area of research. The goals of this study are threefold:

- 1) To identify the evolution of educational aspirations and expectations among youth with an immigrant background over time;
- 2) Assess if trajectories of aspirations and expectations differ by the generational status of adolescents;

- 3) If there is evidence that aspirations or expectations shift as adolescents' progress through school, I ask how early this starts, and how these youth fare in their early human capital attainment.

Hypotheses

The purpose of this paper is to predict the evolution of educational aspirations and expectations over time by using measures commonly implemented in the segmented assimilation literature. According to segmented assimilation theory, resources upon arrival, country of origin, duration of exposure to U.S. culture, and school environment each impact adolescent adaptation to the host society. In this study, attitudes toward schooling are conceptualized as important aspects of the path toward assimilation.

If immigrant groups experience divergent trajectories of incorporation, as segmented assimilation posits, we would hypothesize the following: students who identify as black or Hispanic, attend lower performing schools, and whose parents have lower levels of education and income will exhibit lower levels of educational aspirations and expectations, which will decline across generations (i.e. downward assimilation). Students who self-assess as Asian or white, who attend higher performing schools, and whose parents obtained higher levels of education and income are most likely to exhibit high aspirations and expectations, which should be maintained across generations (upward assimilation). I draw on two nationally-representative datasets to test these hypotheses.

Data and Method

This study will draw on data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS) and the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Add Health) to examine the evolution of educational aspirations and expectations among first- and second-generation youth.

The NELS is a nationally representative survey that interviewed approximately 24,600 eighth-graders during the spring of 1988. This longitudinal study consists of four follow-ups, occurring in 1990, 1992, 1994, and 2000, allowing me to observe multiple transitions that are critical in the life course. The NELS is an ideal dataset for this paper, as it contains detailed information about educational achievement and performance; parental resources and support; educational and occupational aspirations and expectations; and also asks information pertaining

to delinquency and peers. Further, the NELS offers insight to a critical period of youth development. As children approach and enter adolescence, relationships with peers and other non-family members grow in importance (e.g. Giordano 2003). In turn, these relationships have a considerable influence on adolescents' attitudes and behavior (Haynie 2001). While there is undoubtedly variation among students in their aspirations and expectations prior to eighth grade, a key tenant of segmented assimilation theory is that peer groups may exacerbate downward assimilation via delinquency or poor academic performance. Fortunately, the NELS begins data collection just as peers become increasingly important for adolescents.

The Add Health is a nationally representative survey of adolescents in 132 schools who were enrolled in grades 7-12 for the 1994-1995 academic years. Although this analysis primarily relies on the NELS, I will employ the Add Health data as a supplement. There are two reasons for this analytic decision: first, the NELS surveyed participants who were born in the 1970s; these adolescents likely experienced a very different context of immigrant reception as well as school environment than more contemporary cohorts. Second, the Add Health oversamples Chinese, Cuban, Mexican, and Puerto Rican youth, which allows me to document possible heterogeneity in the educational aspirations and expectations among specific ethnic groups. Together, these data are ideal for investigating this important process of assimilation.

I use multilevel growth modeling to analyze trajectories of aspirations and expectations among adolescents over time. Specifically, I employ measures commonly used in segmented assimilation research to explain any differences that may exist by generational status. In order to fruitfully address inequality in educational outcomes among youth with an immigrant background, it is important that we first gain a better understanding of their academic goals and the ways in which segmented assimilation operate.

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