

IMMIGRANTS' PROGRESS: Ethnic and Gender Differences Among U.S. Immigrants in the 1980s

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ABSTRACT: *Using data from the June 1986 and June 1988 Current Population Surveys, we look at differences in occupational achievement, education, occupational prestige, and per capita income among a large number of first-generation immigrant groups. We seek to explore a central question in the debate about the economic prospects of immigrants: do groups convert education into occupational prestige in similar ways? To address this issue, we examine differences in estimated rates of returns to socioeconomic occupational scores for education among immigrant groups. Notwithstanding language difficulties and unfamiliarity with the labor market—characteristics that we could not measure with this dataset—the labor market experiences of higher-skilled immigrants appear not to differ appreciably from that of native whites of native parentage. By contrast, low-skilled immigrants are concentrated in low-level jobs where the structure of employment seems to limit the rewards to additional gains in skill.*

Assimilation is the grand theme of American immigration research. The classic sociological position, developed by the Chicago school, provided an optimistic counter to the dim assessments of the new immigrants prevalent at the early part of the century. Notwithstanding the marked differences that impressed contemporaries, Park, Burgess, Thomas, and others contended that the new immigrant groups would lose their cultural distinctiveness and move up the occupational hierarchy. Gordon's (1964) now-classic volume distilled the essence of the sociological view: immigrant/ethnic groups start at the bottom and gradually move up; their mobility takes place through individual advancement, not collective action. In the process of moving up, ethnic groups lose their distinctive social

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structure; they become like the core group, joining it in neighborhoods, in friendship, and eventually in marriage.

Though it retains its defenders, assimilation theory no longer shapes the direction of current immigration research. That the assimilation model works much better for some groups than for others is now the best-developed line of attack. "Straight-line" theory, as Gans (1992) put it, does seem to describe the trajectory of European-origin groups. But it is much less successful in accounting for the experience of non-European-origin groups whose presence in the United States has, historically, been less a product of voluntary than of coerced migration.

The distinctive characteristics of the latest wave of immigration to the United States confront the assimilation framework with an additional, indeed thornier set of theoretical problems. At the turn of the twentieth century, immigrants were a homogeneous population of persons narrowly concentrated at the bottom of the occupational scale: with domestic servants and general laborers dominating the ranks of immigrants, it was reasonable to assume that newcomers were similarly low-skilled and therefore entered at the bottom (Easterlin 1980). However, human capital diversity is the salient characteristic of the new immigrants to the United States, who differ from one another not only in national origin but also in skills and prior experiences. Though a substantial portion of the new immigrants is far more highly schooled than native whites of native parentage, many immigrants, particularly those from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, enter with skill levels well below native thresholds.

Another challenge to the tenets of assimilation theory comes from a change in the gender composition of the U.S.-bound migration streams. In a sense, assimilation theory was a story of the progress of immigrant men—a logical, if incomplete, approach for a time when men dominated immigrant ranks and most immigrant women spent a limited period of time in paid employment. But a crossover in sex differentials occurred more than 50 years ago (Houstoun et al. 1984), making a story about men far more deficient now that female immigrants are preponderant and play an important labor market role. Redressing that story to encompass the economic adaptation of women immigrants leads attention away from the assimilation framework in several respects. Most importantly, the costs and benefits of immigration differ among women and men (Pedraza 1991), raising the issue of how to account for trajectories that vary by gender.

As the new immigration has proved increasingly difficult to reconcile with the conventions of assimilation theory, recent sociological theorizing about immigrant adaptation has developed in a new vein. Current work has tended to recast ethnic progress as a collective search for mobility, in which contextual factors shape ethnic social mobility in ways that are not reducible to initial human capital differences. In conceptualizing the impact of contextual factors, researchers tend to invoke two distinct, though possibly related, dimensions of social structure. One dimension, exogenous to the group, is the structure of rewards, with returns to experience and skill varying among labor market segments—primary, secondary, or enclave—into which the group has been inserted (Portes and Bach 1985). A second

dimension, endogenous to the group, is the structure of immigrant networks. In the context of immigrant adaptation, transnational networks comprise a source of "social capital" (Coleman 1988), facilitating the search for jobs and housing and the organization of informal mechanisms of upward mobility. Just such an emphasis on the importance of contextual factors emerges in Portes and Rumbaut's recent synthetic work (1990). They specify three contextual factors—government policies, labor market characteristics, and the characteristics of ethnic communities—that yield distinctive modes of immigrant incorporation.

While abandoning the traditional assimilation framework, the most recent work remains ambiguous as to the enduring impact of context. For example, Portes and Rumbaut tend toward an optimistic account of the economic prospects of the newest immigrants, arguing that "immigration has been and will continue to be positive both in terms of filling labor needs ... and injecting into society the energies, ambitions, and skills, of positively selected groups" (1990:26). Yet, their contention that there are "two ways to 'make it' in America"—the entrepreneurial and the professional/managerial routes—implies that other modes of incorporation lead to less satisfactory outcomes. The example of Mexicans, with their "consistent labor market disadvantage ... and persistent gap in earnings, after controlling for education and work experience" (Portes and Rumbaut 1990:90), suggests that those groups inserted as labor migrants into the secondary sector will experience much slower rates of progression.

This article offers new insight into this evolving debate over immigrants' progress through analysis of the most recent information on the immigrant population of the United States. We use a merged sample of the June 1986 and June 1988 Current Population Surveys (CPS) to examine the socioeconomic standing of a wide range of first-generation immigrant groups. We provide the first view of how immigrants have fared during the 1980s, a period of greatly increased and diverse immigration and of economic changes that might impede the assimilation.

DATA

This article analyzes data from a merger of the June 1986 and June 1988 Current Population Surveys (U.S. Department of Commerce 1987, 1988). Both surveys included supplemental questions on country of birth, citizenship, year of immigration, and country of birth of parents. The CPS universe, which is the civilian noninstitutional population, encompasses foreign-born persons who are permanent residents of the United States, including undocumented immigrants as well as certain types of temporary foreign-born residents who satisfy the Census Bureau's "usual residence" definition.

Our analysis is restricted to first-generation employed men and women earners, ages 18 to 64, whom we compare with native-born whites of native parentage.¹ The first-generation population includes all persons born in foreign countries, as well as island-born Puerto Ricans, with the exception of persons "born abroad of

TABLE 1
Distribution of Employed Foreign-born, Ages 18 to 64,
by Region of Birth

	<i>N</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Europe	1,872	24.0
Asia	2,187	28.0
Western Hemisphere	3,111	42.4
Africa/Oceania	136	1.7
Uncodable	301	3.9
Total <i>N</i>	9,428	100.0

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce (1987, 1988).

American parents." We include groups with at least 50 or more male or female respondents. These criteria yield 22 first-generation groups of men and 20 groups of women.

Of the total sample of 122,059, the majority of the sample are native-born of native-parents (82%); 8% are second-generation immigrants; 6.4% are first-generation immigrants. Slightly less than 4% of the sample could not be classified into any generation grouping due to coding problems. Table 1, which presents the distribution of first-generation immigrants by broad regional aggregate, shows that post-1965 immigration has transformed the face of the foreign-born population, now mainly composed of persons of non-European origin.

ANALYSIS

The debate about the economic prospects of immigrants focuses on the differences in resources and labor market outcomes between immigrant and native workers. In this article, we compare immigrants to native-born whites of native parents.

In developing our standards of comparison, we followed the procedure adopted by Neidert and Farley's (1985) analysis of the November 1979 Current Population Survey. We contrast groups on four indicators of socioeconomic status: average years of school completed; the proportion with at least some college; per capita household income; and the average socioeconomic occupational score. In addition to describing differences among groups, we also seek to explore differences in the rate at which national-origin groups convert educational achievement into occupational status. We expect that immigrants will not fare as well natives in this process: language barriers, licensing requirements, and the lack of U.S. experience impede the transfer of occupational prestige to a new culture (Sullivan 1984). Differences in rates of return to education may also reflect discrimination in the labor market, differences in cultural values, or unmeasured effects. While some studies have examined this process among immigrant men, few studies have looked at immigrant women (but see Sullivan 1984).

Our model uses human capital variables that have been used in previous studies of immigrant economic adjustment: education (YRSED); marital status (MARRIED); region of residence (SOUTH); years of work experience (EXPER); and experience squared, measured as age-YRSED-6 (EXPERSQ). In addition, we include a variable for years in the United States (YEARSUS) in the regressions for the foreign-born groups.² Like Neidert and Farley (1985), we use per capita household income to describe income differences among groups. This measure is not ideal, because it is influenced by ethnic differences in earnings, family size, and receipt of transfer payments (Neidert and Farley 1985) and the age composition of the immigrant group (Martin and Poston 1977). Individual earnings is a better measure of economic well-being, but the 1986 and 1988 CPS obtained this information for only one-quarter of the samples.

Our analysis departs from Neidert and Farley in specifying the reference group, which they define as respondents born in the United Kingdom or persons of English ancestry. While that contrast reflects the historical conventions, it neglects the changing nature of immigration patterns, most importantly, the highly selective nature of current migration from the United Kingdom.³ Instead, we compare groups to native-born whites of native parentage (NWNPs).

ETHNIC DIFFERENCES AMONG FIRST-GENERATION IMMIGRANTS

Men

Table 2 presents data for white native-born men of native parentage and for first-generation immigrants from 22 countries. We sort the countries by broad geographical origins and then within each geographical category in descending order by mean occupational status. The educational indicators show that some immigrant streams are indeed highly selective. In contrast to the top-ranking immigrant groups, the educational levels (mean years of schooling and percent with some college) of NWNP respondents are at best of middling quality, falling significantly below newcomers from seven countries. Asian immigrants, and the one Middle Eastern group in the sample, Iranians, compare particularly favorably with NWNPs. The data on college education underline the disparity: 94% of the Iranians reported some college education compared with less than 50% of NWNPs. Immigrants from India, Korea, and the Philippines also report extraordinarily high levels of educational attainment, suggesting that these streams mainly consist of immigrants with professional-level skills.

By contrast, immigrants from 12 countries ranked below NWNPs on both educational indicators. Most, though not all Western Hemisphere immigrants fell significantly below NWNPs on at least one of the two educational indicators. But immigrants from certain European countries—in particular, Portugal, Greece and Italy—also belong to this less-skilled migration stream. Close inspection reveals important internal differences among this group of less-skilled immigrants. Mean years of schooling exceeds the 12-year mark among immigrants from four

TABLE 2
Foreign-born Men, Ages 18 to 64, Classified by Country of Birth, Characteristics of Groups,
and Occupational Returns for Educational Attainments

Group	Characteristics of Groups					Regression Analysis	
	N	Mean Years School	Percent Some College	Mean Occupational Score	Per Capita Income	Returns for Education	
						b	R ²
Europe							
Russia	52	14.7*	68	45.2	10,562	3.35	0.22
United Kingdom	180	14.3*	68	44.3*	14,258	4.98	0.38
Germany	240	13.8	55	40.0	14,023	4.29	0.39
Greece	69	11.5**	31	34.6	13,471	2.57**	0.36
Poland	91	13.7	53	34.1	13,298	2.69**	0.35
Italy	199	11.2**	28**	31.9**	10,875	2.81**	0.32
Portugal	125	9.9**	15**	28.5**	9,608**	1.96**	0.38
Asia							
India	191	15.8*	81*	53.0*	10,990	5.44	0.39
Iran	83	15.9*	94*	50.9*	13,189	4.34	0.24
Japan	98	14.2	63	44.8*	15,534*	4.47	0.30
China	209	14.3*	67*	43.7*	10,520	4.14	0.45
Korea	121	14.9*	76*	41.7	10,401	7.04*	0.48
Philippines	216	14.8*	76*	40.6	9,709	4.41	0.39
Vietnam	145	12.1**	44	29.6**	7,279**	2.21**	0.34
Western Hemisphere							
Canada	223	13.5	52	41.3	15,874*	4.09	0.36
Cuba	254	11.6**	35**	33.6	9,891	1.52**	0.25
Haiti	58	12.3	38	31.1	6,858	2.52**	0.39
Jamaica	92	11.7**	25**	30.9	9,387	3.23**	0.34
Colombia	63	12.2	38	30.8	9,775	2.62**	0.46
Dominican Republic	79	10.6**	17**	25.5**	5,253**	1.22**	0.27
Salvador	105	9.4**	25**	24.9**	5,190**	1.23**	0.30
Mexico	910	7.6**	8**	22.5**	4,930**	0.86**	0.18
United States							
NWNP	49518	13.3	48	37.5	11,561	4.83	0.41

Notes: N's shown are actual. All statistics were calculated using the standard CPS weights. Comparisons of means used Dunnett's *T* to reduce the probability of type 1 error.

The value of *b* indicates the change in occupational status associated with a one-year change in educational attainment. The model regresses the occupational socioeconomic score on education (YRSED); marital status (MARRIED); region of residence (SOUTH); years of work experience (EXPER); and experience squared, measured as age-YRSED-6 (EXPER²). In addition, we include a variable for years in the United States (YEARSUS) in the regressions for the foreign-born groups.

* Mean, proportion, or coefficient is significantly smaller than comparable parameter for the native-born of native parents (NBNP) group.

** Mean, proportion, or coefficient is significantly larger than comparable parameter for the native-born of native parents (NBNP) group.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census (1987, 1988).

countries—Colombia, Jamaica, Haiti, and Vietnam; immigrants from these countries also include a sizeable population with at least some college education. By contrast, a very small proportion of Portuguese, Dominicans, and Mexicans reported any college education.

Occupational status scores also underline the high achievements of the positively selected groups. At the top of the rankings stand the South Asian Indians; the distance between the occupational prestige scores for this group and for NWNPs exceeds the distance between NWNPs and Mexicans, the lowest-ranking group. Looking at the actual occupations to which the prestige scores correspond clarifies the distinctive ways in which these groups are placed in the occupational hierarchy. The Indians' score places the average man of this group among the ranks of government administrators (TSEI score 53); the NWNP score makes the average third-generation native white man a police supervisor; and the Mexican score leaves the average Mexican male as a taxi driver. Overall, immigrants from five countries ranked significantly ahead of NWNPs in terms of occupational status. Of these higher-ranking groups, four were, broadly speaking, of Asian origin: China, Japan, Iran, and India. Western Hemisphere groups dominate the tier of immigrants with occupational status scores significantly below the NWNP average. Only two European groups, Portugal and Italy, fall into this category.

Turning to the per capita income rankings, only one non-European group, the Japanese, ranks significantly above the NWNP level. Previously striking differences between Asian immigrants and certain Western Hemisphere groups are also greatly diminished: the incomes of Cubans are roughly comparable with those of Koreans and Filipinos. But the Western Hemisphere groups that fell at the bottom of the earlier rankings also report the lowest per capita incomes as well. Also, some European groups, like Portuguese or Italians, who share low levels of education, do relatively better in the per capita income rankings.

Are there similar differences in the patterns by which groups convert education into occupational status? Despite the superior educational and occupational achievements of certain Asian and European immigrants, only one group, Koreans, enjoys a rate of return to education that is significantly higher than the rate for NWNPs. The return to education for Italians, Portuguese, Greeks, Filipinos, and immigrants from all Western Hemisphere countries is significantly less than the estimate for NWNPs.

Women

Table 3, which presents descriptive statistics and regression results for first-generation immigrant women, shows a somewhat different picture than what we have for observed for men. The rank order of groups is surprisingly similar. Although in some cases, as among Koreans or Puerto Ricans, the disparity in ranks between men and women is quite striking, the overall rank-order correlations are high—Spearman's r 's = .89 and .86 for mean years of schooling and mean occupational score, respectively.

TABLE 3
 Foreign-born Women, Ages 18 to 64 Classified by Country of Birth, Characteristics of Groups,
 and Occupational Returns for Educational Attainments

Group	Characteristics of Groups					Regression Analysis	
	N	Mean Years School	Percent Some College	Mean Occupational Score	Per Capita Income	Returns for Education	
						b	R ²
Europe							
United Kingdom	171	13.5	53	38.9	15,592*	3.72	0.25
Germany	317	13.3	50	35.1	12,631	3.78	0.26
Italy	109	10.7**	22**	30.1**	10,588	1.72**	0.39
Poland	74	13.3	50	27.4**	13,360	2.62**	0.51
Portugal	93	10.1**	16**	24.2**	9,010**	1.15**	0.48
Asia							
India	95	15.7*	82*	47.6*	11,991	4.13	0.34
Philippines	294	14.7*	81*	37.7	11,060	2.48**	0.20
China	170	13.6	58	37.5	11,237	3.54	0.37
Japan	101	13.5	51	35.7	13,478	3.22	0.38
Western Hemisphere							
Canada	228	13.7	61*	40.3	17,163*	4.69	0.39
Cuba	180	12.0**	36	32.0**	9,741**	2.70**	0.41
Korea	153	12.9	42	30.2**	9,808**	2.57**	0.42
Jamaica	103	12.4**	39	30.0**	8,212**	2.00**	0.24
Vietnam	92	12.1**	40	28.7**	7,745**	1.29**	0.35
Haiti	66	11.3**	31	26.6**	5,953**	0.94**	0.43
Colombia	76	11.8**	31	26.2**	7,390**	1.87**	0.32
Dominican Republic	65	9.8**	24**	23.5**	5,678**	0.77**	0.44
Mexico	412	8.3**	11**	22.8**	5,241**	1.10**	0.26
Salvador	79	9.6**	17**	20.8**	6,131**	1.02**	0.30
United States							
NWNP	39766	13.2	46	37.3	12,662	4.57	0.35

Notes: N's shown are actual. All statistics were calculated using the standard CPS weights. Comparisons of means used Dunnett's T to reduce the probability of type 1 error.

The value of *b* indicates the change in occupational status associated with a one-year change in educational attainment. The model regresses the occupational socioeconomic score on education (YRSED); marital status (MARRIED); region of residence (SOUTH); years of work experience (EXPER); and experience squared, measured as age-YRSED - 6 (EXPER SQ). In addition, we include a variable for years in the United States (YEARSUS) in the regressions for the foreign-born groups.

* Mean, proportion, or coefficient is significantly smaller than comparable parameter for the native-born of native parents (NBNP) group.

** Mean, proportion, or coefficient is significantly larger than comparable parameter for the native-born of native parents (NBNP) group.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census (1987, 1988).

While the ethnic order differs little between men and women, positional characteristics show striking variation. First, the bifurcated pattern, with some immigrant men standing markedly above the NWNPs level and others markedly below, disappears among women on every indicator. Second, among the more selective immigrant streams, women are less advantaged.

Only Indian and Filipina women score significantly higher than NWNPs on the indicators of educational attainment. Though the difference is not statistically significant, Japanese and Korean women have less education than NWNPs, a marked difference to the situation among men from these groups, who do significantly better than male NWNPs. Italians and Portuguese, joined by all Western Hemisphere groups fall significantly below NWNPs on these same indicators.

In similar fashion, the occupational status ranking underlines the relative advantages of NWNPs women. Only South Asian Indians score significantly higher than NWNPs women, and the Indian advantage is quite modest in comparison to the situation among men. Whereas significantly higher levels of education are associated with significantly higher occupational scores among men, Chinese and Filipina women, though significantly better educated than NWNPs, have a lower occupational ranking. Overall, immigrants from 13 countries, including Italy, Poland, Portugal, Korea, Vietnam, and all Western Hemisphere countries, fall significantly below the occupational status score of NWNPs women.

Per capita income also shows only limited immigrant advantage. But here, the immigrant lead over NWNPs is almost entirely restricted to European origin groups: the incomes of immigrants from Canada, the United Kingdom, Poland, and Japan are higher than those of NWNPs, although the differences are significant only in the first two cases. Like men, Italian and Portuguese women, who are low-skilled and have low occupational scores, do relatively better on the per capita income rankings.

The regression analysis shows that among women, no group surpasses NWNPs in the rate at which education is converted into occupational status. But the extent of disadvantage on this count seems more extensive among women. Immigrants from the Western Hemisphere, Vietnamese, Filipino, and Southern and Eastern European immigrants report coefficients that are significantly lower relative to the returns for NWNPs. But two highly educated Asian groups—Chinese and Filipinos—also report returns to education that fall significantly below the NWNPs level.

In sum, the contrast between native-born and foreign-born women reveals few instances of immigrant advantage and very limited advantage when it exists. The disappearance of the immigrant advantage among women seems linked to two factors. First, among higher-skilled groups, there appears to be somewhat more selectivity among men than among women. College education reflects this disparity particularly well, most notably among the Koreans, where 76% of the men but only 42% of the women report some college education. Large differentials in college education also hold for immigrants from Japan and the United Kingdom.

Second, women have lower occupational rankings than men in every case, with the exception of NWNPs (where the occupational score for women and men is the same) and Puerto Ricans (where women have a slight advantage). This disparity has a particularly strong impact among women from groups where men rank high in prestige. Whereas women's occupational scores rank considerably below men's in the cases of Japan, Korea, the United Kingdom, Korea, India, Japan, and Germany, there is little or no difference among Mexicans, Dominicans, or El Salvadorans.

DISCUSSION

Diversity is the salient characteristic of the new immigrants to the United States, who differ from one another in national origins as well as in skills and prior experiences. Not only do starting points differ; more importantly, so do trajectories of progress, pointing to the importance of context and the differing effects of distinct modes of incorporation. Notwithstanding language difficulties and unfamiliarity with the labor market—characteristics that we could not measure with this dataset—the labor market experiences of higher-skilled immigrants appear not to differ appreciably from those of NWNPs. By contrast, not only do lower-skilled immigrants find low-level jobs, but the structure of their employment seems to severely limit the rewards to additional gains in skills. Thus, foreign-born Mexican men gain an additional 1.1 increment in occupational status for each year of schooling, whereas the same increase in education produces a 4.6 increase in occupational status for NWNP men, and a 5.7 increase in occupational status for foreign-born Korean men.

But our results also suggest that the new immigration presents challenges to the new lines of sociological theorizing, not just the older assimilation framework. Most importantly, taking gender into account suggests that the new ways of understanding how immigrants "make it" in America are essentially stories about men. Our discussion so far has emphasized the contrast to NWNPs, which looks much less favorable when the comparison focusses on women alone. Unlike the case among men, which highlights the deficits of NWNPs, few groups of immigrant women enjoy an advantage—statistically significant or otherwise—on any of the indicators. Also, the flip side of the coin is still less positive, since *within* country groups, women rank lower than men. Indeed, so great is the disparity that the category of high-skilled immigrant hardly seems an appropriate characterization for women at all.

Second, entrepreneurship may be a route to "making it," but this is more commonly true for a small, if significant, proportion of the group than for the group overall. To be sure, self-employment rates vary considerably. Among men, numerous groups—Canadians, Chinese, Colombians, Cubans, Germans, Italians, Japanese, and Russians—report self-employment rates equal to or slightly higher than the NWNP level of 12.2%. Only Greeks, Iranians, and Koreans, however, stand out as having considerably higher entrepreneurial rates. With the exception of the Iranians—heavily ensconced in the professions—high entrepreneurship seems to

be associated with occupational status of a middling sort. The case of Koreans is certainly instructive, with almost one-third of the men self-employed but a mean occupational score that differs little from that of NWNPs.

Consideration of gender further puts the "entrepreneurial" route to ethnic mobility in a different light. If relatively few immigrant women are "making it" as managers or professionals, entrepreneurship does not seem to offer a particularly promising alternative either. Though Korean women rank way ahead of all others in their rate of self-employment, they lag considerably behind Korean men. Also, no other group of immigrant women appears to have developed a notable concentration in self-employment.

Third, national origins seem to matter, suggesting that the precise historical circumstances under which some groups entered the U.S. economy have had enduring effects. Here, a comparison of European-origin with non-European origin groups is particularly illuminating. The European-origin groups register notable success in the ability to convert skills into income. Moreover, the European/non-European divergence holds at all levels of the skill hierarchy, with the Germans and even the Poles reporting incomes higher than those of the much better-educated Iranians or Indians, and the poorly schooled Portuguese faring far better than the Mexicans or Dominicans, whose educational levels are comparable.

Interpreting these comparisons is complicated by the income patterns that we report. As noted, among the highly skilled non-European immigrants, education is associated with occupational status but not with per capita income. Disparities in household size may account for this pattern, which is precisely what comparison of the highly educated Asian groups with the European groups suggests. For example, household size averaged 4.4 among the Filipino men and 3.8 among the Chinese men; by contrast, average household size among NWP men was 3.2, with all European groups except Greeks, Italians, and Portuguese at or below that level.

But if family size helps account for the depressed per capita incomes among high-skilled Asians, a different set of factors seems responsible for the high income levels of the low-skilled Europeans—for example, Greeks, Poles, Italians, and even Portuguese. While household size among these groups is relatively high, there may be other offsetting factors that lift income levels. For the most part, the lower-skilled groups are long-settled and earnings tend to rise with length of settlement. But the effects of settlement appear to be enhanced by the pattern of labor market incorporation. A large proportion of the Poles, Italians, and Portuguese in these groups work in construction and in manufacturing, where wages are high and occupational status is low. The Greeks are overrepresented in retail trade, where a heavy concentration in ethnic restaurants is likely: though retail and restaurant jobs rank relatively low in prestige, they offer better-than-average opportunities for self-employment, which in turn lift earnings (see Bailey 1987).

Thus, not only is it helpful to distinguish among modes of incorporation, but there appears to be internal diversity within a mode as well. The case of Mexicans underscores this point and directs attention to the historically contingent and

group-specific factors influencing patterns of immigrant adaptation. Proximity to the United States, the gradual implantation of migration networks from the 1940s to the 1970s, and the creation of transnational communities since then have resulted in large flows of documented and undocumented migration from Mexico. While many Mexicans have made a transition from agriculture to industrial and service employment, the linkage to agriculture is not yet broken, as more than 10% of the male Mexicans in our sample reported employment in farm work. Though Mexicans have moved increasingly into urban labor markets, they continue to converge on the secondary labor market in the Southwest and Midwest. Employers view Mexican immigrants as a valuable source of low-wage labor, and informal connections to settlers feed newcomers into firms with established Mexican networks. But these same factors make for a high level of intra-ethnic labor market competition, especially since educational deficiencies impede movement up the skill hierarchy. Since Mexicans are disproportionately represented among the ranks of the undocumented, illegal status also curtails work opportunities and increases their vulnerability. Thus, Mexicans remain at the bottom of employers' hiring queues, doing no better if not worse than recent arrivals like the Salvadorans, who arrive under the most unfavorable conditions (flight from war, hostile government policies).

CONCLUSION

Looking back a decade suggests that the patterns we describe in this article may indeed represent something new. Neidert and Farley's analysis of the 1979 CPS yielded conclusions that contrast significantly to our findings from the late 1980s. In 1979, only two groups of male immigrants, Mexicans and Other Southern Europeans, did less well than the core U.K. comparison group in converting educational attainment to occupational achievement, after controlling for background characteristics. Because current U.K. immigration is highly selective, we have chosen a reference group which has lower levels of socioeconomic achievement. Nonetheless, our results show that among men, many more groups (11) convert educational attainment into occupational prestige significantly less well than our native-born white comparison group, not to speak of immigrants from the United Kingdom. Among the groups falling significantly below the NWNP rates are Puerto Ricans, Italians, Cubans, and Filipinos, none of which exhibited a pattern significantly different from the U.K. core group in Farley and Neidert's earlier study.

At this point, it is not clear how to account for these shifts over a decade's time. One possibility is of course the hypothesis that immigrant flows are of declining quality. But just what "declining quality" means is not quite clear. If the hypothesis implies that the quality of today's immigration is inferior to earlier waves, either the large turn-of-the-century wave or the more modest flows of the 1945-1965 period, there is little support for such a contention in this article. Many immigrant groups surpass NWNPs in both skills and labor market performance, a clear

contrast to turn-of-the-century patterns. Of course, declining quality may imply deterioration over time in the skill base of immigrants from any single source and the surveys used for this article do not provide the data needed to assess that possibility. Nonetheless, the extraordinarily high levels of education shown by immigrants from countries like India or China—whose numbers have been steadily increasing over the past decade-and-a-half—suggest that the “quality” of these migration streams has been maintained as well.

The latest evidence on ethnic differences in the United States, which we report on here, provides further testimony to the strengths and limitations of sociological theorizing about immigrant adaptation. The classic assimilation model, implying a scenario in which groups start out at the bottom but move up over time as they become more like the core group, provides an incomplete map, at best, for understanding the contours of the contemporary immigrant experience. New research has emphasized structural and contextual factors—time, location, economic and political environments—as well as collectivist strategies—both socially embedded and group-sustained—that influence adaptation. While this work has provided new, suggestive concepts, such as “modes of incorporation,” interactions between context and such factors as gender or national origins are complex and not easily worked out. In the end, evidence from cross-sectional surveys like the 1986 and 1988 Current Population Surveys can only raise questions, not provide definitive answers. Yet, it seems unlikely that we can adequately understand the trajectory of the post-1965 wave of immigrants without taking into account their heterogeneity in both origins and experiences, as well as the diversity of circumstances under which they enter the U.S. economy.

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NOTES

1. Full assessments of immigrant adaptation require examination of second generation developments. Though the datasets we analyse allow us to identify second-generation respondents, a comparison between first- and second-generation respondents would not be appropriate and in some ways misleading. By definition, the youngest person in our sample would have been born in the early 1960s, before the enactment of the Hart-Celler Act. Consequently, this second generation population consists of the offspring of an earlier wave of immigrants. Many are likely to be children of the much smaller, and very selective, immigrant waves that arrived in the United States during the regime of restrictive immigration between 1924 and 1965. Thus, a first/second generation comparison would not mimic longitudinal processes since today's foreign-born population are not the parents of today's (adult) second generation.

2. While English-language proficiency is related to occupational attainment, and was included in the regressions run by Neidert and Farley, no data on language ability were collected in the 1986 and 1988 Current Population Surveys.

3. Higher-level immigrants are greatly overrepresented among recent arrivals from the United Kingdom. For example, data from the Immigration and Naturalization Service for 1983 through 1988 show that 55% of all U.K. arrivals who declared a prior occupation were professionals and managers. This compares to only 27% of all immigrants reporting prior occupations. Moreover, an exceptionally high proportion of U.K. immigrants are admitted as a result of employer sponsorship of highly skilled workers, suggesting that U.K. immigrants begin in a distinctively favorable relationship to U.S. employers. Not surprisingly, recent U.K. immigrants also rank high in terms of educational attainment: almost 31% of the 1970 to 1980 arrivals from the United Kingdom reported a college education or more, in contrast to 22.2% of arrivals from all countries.

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