Becoming American, Becoming Minority, Getting Ahead: The Role of Racial and Ethnic Status in the Upward Mobility of the Children of Immigrants

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Given the long history of racism in the United States, observers have been concerned that labeling the children of immigrants as “nonwhite” could lead to their downward assimilation. The success of at least some members of the contemporary second generation points to another possibility. The institutions and strategies developed by previous waves of immigrants, the struggles for equality by long-standing minorities, and changing attitudes about race have become a source of opportunity and constraint for immigrant children.

Drawing from the New York Second Generation Study, the author of this article argues that programs originally intended to address the needs of earlier immigrant waves and those of native minorities, particularly African Americans, have become increasingly multicultural in focus. These programs have broadened their definition of what minority means and have, however unintentionally, come to serve as an aid to incorporation for members of today’s second generation.

Keywords: children of immigrants; downward assimilation; New York Second Generation; multiculturalism; minorities in the United States

When we look at the achievements of the contemporary children of immigrants to the United States, we are tempted to make comparisons to immigrants of the past. We usually focus on the attributes of immigrants themselves in an attempt to explain what it is about them that will create outcomes similar to or different from those of their predecessors. Yet,
while today’s immigrants and their children are obviously different in many ways from those who came before, perhaps more important is the question of how American society—that is, what Portes and Rumbaut (1996) describe as the “context of reception”—is different than in the past.

This is particularly true when we examine the role of racial and ethnic identity in shaping the incorporation of immigrants. The roles these identities play in the United States have changed dramatically in the years since the large waves of immigration of the early twentieth century. In some cases, changes came about in response to the challenges of incorporating new immigrants; in others, they are the unintended consequences of social movements and social policies that were initially only marginally concerned with immigrants. As a result, the ways in which American society deals with ethnic and racial differences have changed, creating significant consequences for today’s second generation.

In this article, I look at two cases in which institutions and policies created to incorporate racial and ethnic minorities in earlier times have fostered academic success among today’s children of immigrants. First, I look at the children of Russian Jewish immigrants and discuss the ways in which an established ethnic community with a long experience of fostering upward mobility in the face of discrimination has created a positive context of reception at least partially responsible for the current second generation’s rapid success. In the second case, I examine second-generation groups who are racialized as “black” or “Latino” and are, on the whole, far less successful, but who include a minority of young people who have “beaten the odds” and have experienced substantial educational success and upward mobility in spite of poverty, high levels of discrimination, and often modest parental human capital. In this case, I argue that the extension of civil rights movement strategies and affirmative action policies (broadly conceived) to a variety of groups “of color” and the legacy of African American struggles for inclusion have played a role in this success. I further argue that today’s second generation has particularly benefited from the post-Bakke reconceptualization of affirmative action policies, in which the goal of promoting “diversity” has largely replaced righting historical injustice.

Except where otherwise noted, the data in this article come from the “Second Generation in Metropolitan New York” study of immigrants in the New York metropolitan area (for more details on the study, see Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, and

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Waters [2004] and Kasinitz et al. [2008]). This study consisted of a survey of 3,415 eighteen- to thirty-two-year-old second- and 1.5-generation immigrants, from five large immigrant groups (Chinese, Dominicans, Russian Jews, South Americans, West Indians) plus comparison groups of native whites of native parentage, native African Americans of native parentage, and mainland-born Puerto Ricans; in-depth life history interviews with 10 percent of the sample; and a series of ethnographic studies of key sites of interethnic interaction. While the specific examples are drawn from the New York study, and in some ways may be specific to the New York context, they are broadly consistent with many of the findings in the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS)–III survey as well as other studies of the contemporary children of immigrants (see for examples, Smith 2008b [this volume]; Min and Kim 2002; Boyd and Grieco 1998).

The Changing Meaning of Minority Status

Many observers are concerned that the children of immigrants, particularly those who can be racialized as “nonwhite,” are in danger of downward assimilation into a multiethnic “underclass” (Gans 1992; Portes and Zhou 1993; Zhou and Bankston 1998; Portes, Fernández-Kelly, and Haller 2005). However, the fact that some members of the contemporary second generation have been successful suggests another possibility. For at least some of the children of immigrants, the institutions and strategies developed by previous waves of immigrants and in the struggles for equality by long-standing American minorities have become a source of opportunity.

Of particular importance has been the successful incorporation of earlier immigrants into American society and the creation of institutions for upward mobility that have broadened our definition of the American mainstream (Alba and Nee 2003). There has been a cultural shift from what Milton Gordon (1964) described as the “Anglo-conformity” model of incorporation dominant in the late nineteenth century to a version of what Lawrence Fuchs (1982) called “civic pluralism” that has greatly reduced the pressure toward cultural conformity on the part of newcomers. Today, many forms of diversity are not just tolerated, they are celebrated, particularly by institutions of higher education, in ways that would have been hard to imagine in earlier times.

To be sure, today, many young people from immigrant backgrounds report feeling out of place in elite educational institutions, citing a lack of preparation or a feeling of cultural disconnect. Because many of them have grown up in ethnic communities, they find that educational success has thrust them into situations in which they are surrounded by native whites, often for the first time in their lives. At the same time, the pressures for cultural conformity on American college
The pressures for cultural conformity on American college campuses and even in high schools has been greatly reduced compared to what immigrants faced in earlier times.

It should be noted that when the last large cohort of the children of immigrants was coming of age in the early to mid-twentieth century, higher education, particularly at elite institutions, was among the last area of American life they entered in large numbers. Even among groups we often think of as particularly education oriented, such as Eastern European Jews, higher education and the professions were not the dominant route of upward mobility until well after the group had a firm foothold in business and politics (Steinberg 1982). Indeed, as Karabel (2005) reminds us, the grandchildren of Eastern European Jewish immigrants continued to face significant limits on access to the most elite institutions of higher education into the 1960s. Furthermore, Richard Alba has argued that Catholics, and particularly Italian Americans, are still significantly underrepresented at such institutions, and thus in the higher ranks of the learned professions (Alba and Abdel-Hady 2005). Whereas higher education once lagged behind other arenas of American life in the acceptance of newcomers and their children, with today’s emphasis on diversity and representativeness, such institutions often lead the way (Bowen and Bok 1998).

New Jews?

Since the early 1970s, more than five hundred thousand Jews have left the former Soviet Union for the United States. Approximately three hundred thousand have settled in the New York metropolitan area. The children of this group in the New York Second Generation study have been notably successful: college education is nearly universal among the group, and they have slightly higher earnings and much lower arrest rates than native whites (Zeltzer-Zubida and Kasinitz 2005). In addition, they share a common belief that the most important route to upward mobility is education and the professions.

This strong cultural orientation toward education and the second generation’s success in attaining it may seem surprising in view of the fact that few of their...
parents hold professional positions in the United States, with many working in modest jobs such as taxi driving and factory work or as domestic workers. They also report, among second-generation immigrants, the highest rate of public assistance use by someone in their household while they were growing up, a rate comparable to that of native African Americans and Puerto Ricans. It is the group’s premigration background that holds the key to their achievement. In particular, their parents are far better educated than most immigrants, with two-thirds of our respondents reporting that both of their parents had college degrees. Many of these immigrant parents started over in the United States working at jobs far lower in status than those they had left because they could not speak English and their professional credentials did not translate easily (Kasinitz et al. 2008).

The group was thus highly endowed with what one might term “hidden social capital” and a strong parental push for the second generation to regain the family’s lost professional status (for more on this point, see Fernández-Kelly 2008 [this volume]). They also report experiencing very low levels of discrimination—far lower than are reported by second-generation immigrants “of color” and indeed lower than their own parents had experienced in the former Soviet Union or than Jewish immigrants had experienced in earlier times in the United States (Zeltzer-Zubida 2004).

It is not clear, however, that any of these attributes and advantages would have been sufficient to achieve the level of upward mobility the second generation has experienced without the support of a well-established local Jewish community rich in social service institutions that were themselves a heritage of earlier waves of migration. A dense infrastructure of groups dating from the early twentieth century, such as the UJA-Federation and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) or arising from the efforts to resettle Holocaust-era refugees, such as the New York Association for New Americans (NYANA), was well positioned to aid the resettlement process. Indeed, these groups, which had cut their teeth on the problems of immigrant and refugee incorporation, were by the 1980s facing real issues of “goal displacement,” struggling to find new roles in a community that had become quite prosperous.

The mission of immigrant resettlement and assistance, particularly around educational issues, was deeply embedded in these groups, and so it was not surprising when they turned with gusto toward helping the new group of impoverished Jewish immigrants that showed up on their doorsteps in the 1980s. In general, the existence of a large, wealthy, and well-networked “proximal host community” (Mittelberg and Waters 1992) played a significant role in easing the transitions of these immigrants (for comparable examples among Asian immigrants, see Zhou et al. 2008 [this volume]).

In many cases the Russian Jewish immigrants, or at least the second-generation children to whom we spoke, seemed unaware of the extent to which their families had received aid from the organized Jewish community. Of our 302 second- and 1.5-generation Russian Jewish respondents, 43 percent reported that their parents had received assistance from Jewish community groups at some point in the past. Yet, the officials at UJA-Fed and NYANA contended that they had extended assistance to well over 90 percent of Jewish refugees on arrival.
Furthermore, while roughly 3 percent of our respondents reported that they were still receiving such assistance when we interviewed them, a far larger number reported using community facilities and programs that are, in fact, paid for by these agencies (many believed that the funding for these services had originated from “the government”). Assistance from these community groups was often mixed with aid from governmental agencies and helped fill in the gaps of what the government provides. As one young man recalls,

Yes, I received assistance from the Jewish Community organization, and I’m grateful for them, because before the Welfare, it was a Jewish organization that helped us first, for four months, I think. . . . It was NYANA, . . . I think.

It appears that community-based social welfare agencies also played a role in helping New York’s Russian Jews access governmental assistance by making immigrant families aware of, and helping them to apply for, benefits. As a result, antipoverty programs became, in effect, resettlement programs. Many Russian Jewish families received some form of public assistance, usually SSI, shortly after arrival. (As refugees, they were also entitled to benefits other recent immigrants were not.)

The results of receiving government assistance were generally good for the recipients. While our Russian Jewish respondents were more likely than any of the four other immigrant groups we studied to report having received public assistance at some point while growing up, they were the least likely group to be receiving such assistance as adults at the time they were interviewed. Welfare, as it turns out, was very good for alleviating poverty among people with middle-class backgrounds. It allowed many parents of our respondents to spend time out of the labor force while they learned English, received additional training, and generally took steps to reestablish their human capital. It also connected young people with programs that encouraged their college attendance—although in fact, with well-educated parents, they usually needed little encouragement. Finally, SSI turned out to be particularly helpful for people in multigeneration families. It subsidized the immigration of grandparents, who in turn often became caretakers of children, thus permitting both parents to join the labor force.

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The social service groups also provided encouragement and funding for the newcomers to attend Jewish private schools, which allowed them to avoid many
of the problems of the public system but often put them into contexts more religious and socially conservative than they preferred. As one woman recalls about her schoolmates,

They had this project to “save Russian Jews.” But they were sort of disappointed in us! This [was] an Orthodox Day School. . . . They watched all these things on television about Refuseniks and these poor Russian Jews wanting so desperately to study Torah and not being allowed to. So now [in the United States] they will! But we did not want to study Torah! [Laughing] And they were not too happy with us!

As a result, many left the religious schools after a few years (Zeltzer-Zubida and Kasinitz 2005).

Despite the almost universal expectation of college attendance among the group, they are slightly less likely to attend elite colleges than our Chinese and native-white respondents. The reason is probably a strong expectation that young people live at home until they marry and stay relatively close to home even after marriage. As one young woman puts it,

In our culture, it’s like our thing. It’s not like you’re eighteen and you move out. . . . Like American people do it different. So it’s not like such a burden. And it’s not weird that I’m twenty four and I’m living at home or anything like that. If I wanted to, I could move out, but it’s fine. Like, I have a good relationship with my mother, I like being here with her, knowing her and my brother also. We have our independent lives, but it’s nice to come home at night sometimes with them, and I get enough alone time here.

Although many of the Russian Jewish second generation seem to forgo the opportunity to attend the “best” college in favor of commuting to less prestigious colleges in the New York metropolitan area, the decision does not seem to have greatly hindered upward mobility. It may be that the “social capital” and strong family bonds that staying close to home facilitates makes up for any lost earning potential from attending second-tier institutions (for comparable examples among Cuban American and Mexican American respondents in CILS, see Fernández-Kelly and Konczal 2005; Portes and Fernández-Kelly 2008 [this volume]). In sharp contrast to the Chinese respondents and native whites—particularly native Jews—the Russian Jews often marry relatively early and start families in their early twenties. Staying close to relatives who support the decision to marry and have children young may facilitate their ability to both start families and complete their educations.

Once on campus, the role of Jewish community organizations in the lives of many of the Russian Jewish second generation intensifies. At many City University of New York (CUNY) campuses in particular, Hillel, the long-established Jewish campus society, began to make significant outreach efforts to the Russians in the 1980s—usually at the urging of the social service agencies that support the group. Although CUNY has a long and celebrated history of serving New York’s Jewish community (and thus long-established Hillel chapters), Jewish enrollments had been dropping for decades. Thus, outreach to the Russians was a mission they took up with great enthusiasm.
This outreach, however, rarely did much to unite the Russians with members of the older Jewish community. As the Russians rarely spoke Hebrew or Yiddish, events “for them” were often held in Russian. In addition, Hillel tended to draw the most religious and socially conservative of the American Jews, whereas the great majority of the Russian students were highly secular. Finally, when celebrating “their” ethnic culture, the Russian students were as likely to be interested in Russian movies, music, and food as in American Jewish or Israeli cultural activities. Thus, Hillel’s outreach often led to separate activities under a common organizational umbrella.

In general, the presence of a well-organized receiving community turned out to be highly beneficial for the Russian Jewish second generation, both in terms of providing services directly and in helping newcomers access state resources. Obviously, such advantages are not available to groups who do not have a similarly prosperous “proximal host” community in the United States.

It has long been recognized that ties to a well-organized ethnic community or ethnic enclave can aid in second-generation upward mobility (for the classic statement of this argument, see Portes and Zhou 1993). However, in this case, it should be noted that community-based “social capital” seems to work through formal institutions, not social networks. Very few of our Russian Jewish respondents reported having relatives or friends in New York’s American Jewish community. While it is probable that many of the recent Russian Jewish immigrants are distantly related to Jewish New Yorkers whose families immigrated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the long historical gap between the two waves of Russian Jewish immigration, the great difficulty in communication, the experience of state socialism, and, of course, the Holocaust, meant that actual person-to-person connections were almost completely nonexistent. In contrast to most accounts of social capital, in this case ethnic mutual assistance seems to have taken place almost exclusively via formal institutions that are themselves a heritage to earlier struggles for incorporation. This institutional dimension of the incorporation process has, until recently, been largely neglected (for exceptions see Portes, Escobar, and Arana 2007; Marwell 2007).

Indeed, the notion that Jewish New Yorkers have assisted their newly arrived coethnics begs another question. Why are the new arrivals considered “coethnics” in the first place? By the 1980s, Russian Jewish immigrants and their long-time American cousins did not share a common language or many cultural traditions. Only about a quarter of our Russian Jewish respondents reported having an America Jewish close friend, about the same number as reported having a non-Jewish Russian close friend. The groups also had very different political attitudes. The American Jewish respondents were largely Democrats and highly likely to vote, while the Russians largely disdained politics, were the least likely to vote and, when they did, were more likely than any other group in our sample to vote Republican. Even religion was not much of a unifying force, since the overwhelming majority of the Russians were not observant. Thus, while the institutions of the “coethnic” community played a role in the upward mobility of the
newcomers, it is also probably the case that “coethnicity” is at least in part a product of the policies and activities of those institutions. (For a discussion of the interaction of ideas, social networks, and formal ethno-political organizations in the formation of ethnic groups, see Brubaker 2004).

New Blacks?

A second great change in the American context of reception lies in the way ideas about race and ethnicity were changed by the African American civil rights movement and its aftermath. This is particularly important for second-generation immigrants who, while not African American or members of other long-standing U.S. minorities, are nevertheless generally classified as “nonwhite” in the United States, a classification that in earlier times would have severely limited their life chances.

However partial their victories and unfulfilled their promise, the movements for racial justice of the 1960s served to delegitimate much of the de jure segregation and overt white supremacy that had been central facts of American life and law since the beginning of the Republic. They also contributed a repertoire of ideas and organizational forms for challenging racial subordination. In some ways, these built on the pluralist model of the European immigrants, but in others, they stood in contradiction to it. The forms of political action that emerged from the struggle for African American empowerment provided different ways of thinking about racial and ethnic difference. The extension of affirmative action programs to the children of immigrants, the emergence of ethnic studies programs on campus, and the general acceptance for many official and legal purposes of what David Hollinger (1995) has called the “ethno-racial pentagon” of five “racial groups” in the United States, all point to the extension of an “African American model” to other groups. Ironically, nonwhite immigrants and their children are often better positioned to benefit from this shift than many members of long-standing U.S. minorities—particularly African Americans.

In the New York Second Generation study, parents of the West Indian respondents—the group most likely to be categorized as “black” in the United States—were far less educated than those of the Russian Jews or native whites but better educated, on average, than the parents of African American respondents. They had been socialized in countries in which blacks were the majority and, like most immigrants, were highly selected on a number of criteria (Model 2008). Some of their second-generation offspring might not qualify for admission to highly selective colleges without affirmative action, having themselves grown up in racially segregated neighborhoods and often attending public schools that are inferior to those attended by whites. Even so, they were generally not as disadvantaged as native African Americans. And of course, both elite and nonelite colleges are more than willing to count them as “blacks” to demonstrate their own diversity. As one Jamaican respondent observed,
Interviewer: Have there been any specific times when you feel you’ve benefited from being Jamaican?

Respondent: Oh yeah. Actually, yes, because sometimes to get into certain schools, they lower the standards if you are a certain background, ethnicity, so to get into certain colleges, it was pretty okay.

Thus, while the educational success of West Indian immigrants is modest compared to that of Asian and white second-generation groups (including Russian Jews), it is substantial when compared to native African Americans (Kasinitz et al. 2008).

Nationally, the numbers tell a similar story. According to the American Communities Survey (2006), immigrants and their children (mostly West Indians) make up nearly 7 percent of the “black/African American” population aged eighteen to twenty-five. They are, however, almost 13 percent of blacks in college. At elite colleges, the difference is far more striking. Douglas Massey’s and Camille Charles’s National Longitudinal Study of Freshman (NLSF) is a detailed survey of students at national tier one private and public colleges and universities, as well as the top tier of liberal arts colleges (see Massey et al. 2007). In this survey, immigrants and their children make up 27 percent of the “black” respondents. Case studies suggest that at the most elite institutions the number is even higher. In 2004, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Lani Guinier told a Harvard black alumni group that at Harvard, immigrants and their children were now the majority of “black” students (Rimer and Arensen 2004).

Without the shifts in racial policies that followed the African American–led civil rights movement, this would not have been the case. The large number of West Indian immigrants who came to New York in the early twentieth century also had higher levels of education than African Americans (Reid 1939). Yet, in a more overtly racially segregated America, this did not really matter. Their life chances were circumscribed by race (Kasinitz 1992). Today, West Indian immigrants—as well as the Dominican, South American, and Chinese second-generation respondents in the New York study—are able to take advantage of the new institutional desire for diversity. Their presence in top colleges, corporate workforces, and public offices is often pointed to as evidence of the success of American multiculturalism and the ability of America to absorb large numbers of immigrants. But their presence also masks one of the greatest failures of American racial policy—the failure to cope with a heritage of past discrimination, especially with regard to native African Americans.

Why is this so? One need not subscribe to William Julius Wilson’s (1977) view that the significance of race in the United States is “declining” to share his insight that, for African Americans, racial oppression is multidimensional. It includes overt racist practices, covert racist practices, assumptions within the culture, and the residual disadvantage that is the result of past racist practices. The civil rights movement greatly reduced, although by no means eliminated, the first but was less successful against the second. The original, individualistic language of “civil rights” was generally not equipped to address the present-day effects of past discrimination. Affirmative action, perhaps the most controversial program to be
developed after the civil rights movement, is sometimes billed as a compensatory program to make up for past injustice.

It is also often conceived as a program to guarantee diversity and minority representation in education and the workplace. In recent years, the diversity rationale for affirmative action has become more common than the redress of past injustice. For elite colleges, this diversity argument was easy to mesh with past admissions practices that took account of regional origins, children of alumni, and other characteristics (Karabel 2005). As immigration increased after 1970, it was often not noticed how more and more of the beneficiaries of affirmative action were immigrants and their children. Thus, whether or not the second generation is aware of how much the African American struggles against racism have affected their lives, they are well positioned to take advantage of the results (see Graham 2001; Kelly and Dobbin 2001; Lichter and Waldinger 2001; Skrentny 1996).

In addition, many immigrants find themselves in a position to take advantage of resources within American black communities as well as what Neckerman, Carter, and Lee (1999) called “minority cultures of upward mobility.” Although scarcely noticed outside the black community, historically black colleges and universities have long played a role in educating Caribbean and the much smaller numbers of African immigrants. Far less well developed than those in the more prosperous Jewish community, these institutions have nonetheless long played a role in incorporating black immigrants. More recently, African American social clubs and support groups on historically white campuses have opened their doors to black immigrants. College and university programs in African American studies have often become a home to blacks of a variety of ethnic backgrounds, both among students and faculty. At the same time, such programs have become more conspicuously oriented toward the entire African Diaspora and less focused on the African American experience.

Once out of college, African American institutions continue to play a role in the lives of many young Caribbean Americans. There is a long history of Caribbean involvement in U.S. politics, in most cases as representatives of African American constituencies (Kasinitz 1992). In 2006, a second-generation Jamaican American, Yvette Clarke, was elected to Congress, representing a Brooklyn district that had been created years before under the Voting Rights Act to promote African American representation, but which had over the years become predominantly Caribbean. In our sample, West Indians were also the most likely second-generation group to work in the “black” ethnic niche—the public sector. In fact, they were more likely to work in the public sector than native whites, although less likely than native African Americans. They were also the second-generation group most likely to vote and most likely to belong to social and political organizations (Kasinitz et al. 2008). Finally, as Foerster (2004) notes, they are the most likely group to belong to a labor union, in many cases a union with African American leadership.

As with the case of Russian Jews and American Jews being classified as coethnics, the reasons for the inclusion of the children of black immigrants in the “African American” category are not initially obvious. To be sure, the groups have
a common (if distant) heritage in Africa and, in the case of Caribbean immigrants, a common history of slavery and the horrors of the middle passage. At the same time, the groups have considerable cultural and historical differences, to say nothing of the effect of immigrant selectivity (Model 2008). That they have come to be considered part of the same group is at least partially the result of the fact that both groups are seen by whites as being “black,” thus both suffering discrimination from whites. But black immigrants and their children are also African Americans because they have participated in African American communities. Indeed, these have often been the only communities open to them (Kasinitz 1992).

America’s most famous second-generation black immigrant, Barack Obama, was attacked early in his political career for not being really “black”—or not being black “enough” to represent a largely African American congressional district on the South Side of Chicago. His response was that he was black because of being treated as black—a fact he was reminded of any time he tried to hail a cab—and because he had chosen to be black. He had married an African American woman, lived in an African American neighborhood, attended an African American church, and was raising two African American daughters, as the American “one drop rule” defines them (Obama 1995). The first reason—that of reactive ethnicity—is something black immigrants have long experienced. The second factor—black ethnicity as in some ways “optional”—is something quite new. In either case, however, Obama’s status as an “African American” would then shape his subsequent institutional position, both within mainstream institutions and within those of the black community.

The emphasis on diversity may have allowed higher education institutions to sidestep the nation’s most vexing racial problem, the persistent poverty and exclusion of so many of the descendants of American slaves. The fact that children of immigrants have come to be categorized as members of native “minority groups” does not mean their experience has been the same as that of the native minorities. While they clearly do suffer much of the same prejudice and discrimination, they generally do not inherit the scars and handicaps of a long history of racial exclusion and discrimination. As the children of selected immigrants, they have some measurable and, no doubt, considerable immeasurable assets and strengths that native minorities do not share. Thus, they are poised to benefit greatly from institutions and programs dating from the civil rights revolution.

**New “Others”?**

Of course, immigrants and their children may seek to avoid being categorized as “black” or even to being “like blacks” for many reasons (Vickerman 1998). African Americans remain the nation’s most consistently oppressed minority group. Immigrants quickly come to understand this, and they generally seek to avoid the stigma of association with the group, even by analogy. However, at least in matters of educational mobility, increasingly in some situations even groups who are not phenotypically “black” may seek to identify with the African
American community. Robert Smith’s current work on what he terms “Black Mexicans”—young Mexican New Yorkers who seek out both the Afro-centric culture of Black advancement and the resources tied to it in their largely African American New York public schools—is a case in point (Smith 2006, 2008a).

Even for second-generation immigrants with no real connection to the black community, the civil rights model may have even more profound effects. Most of the second-generation Asian American professionals studied by Min and Kim, for example, report feeling more “comfortable with” and having “more in common” with whites than with blacks or Latinos. Yet, they still report feeling “moderate levels of kinship with African Americans and Latinos” as “these minority communities provide role models in fighting white racism,” role models that many perceive as missing in their own communities (Min and Kim 2002, 177; see also Rodriguez 2002; Espiritu 1992). Second-generation Arab Americans have also taken up the model of the civil rights movement and the notion of “blackness,” particularly on college campuses, often to the chagrin of their parents (see, in particular, Hammad 1996).

Since the 1960s, both mainstream civil rights groups and street-fighting Black Panthers have inspired their Latino, Asian, and Native American equivalents. Black studies on campuses quickly spawned Chicano studies, Puerto Rican studies, and Asian American studies—to say nothing of Jewish, Middle Eastern American, and gay and lesbian studies. Affirmative action for African Americans quickly expanded to other protected categories, including women as well as racial minorities (and even, at my university, Italian Americans). At least one major second-generation Mexican American writer, Richard Rodriguez, has caused some controversy by making his discomfort with this mode of incorporation a major theme. “As a young man,” he writes, “I was more a white liberal than I ever tried to put on black. For all that, I ended up a minority, the beneficiary of affirmative action programs to redress black exclusion” (Rodriguez 2002, 25-26).

With time, imprecise definitions and changing demographics have meant that programs designed for Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans have been used by the children of an ever-broadening category of “Latino” immigrants and their children. The replacement of justice with “diversity” as a rationale for affirmative action on campus and elsewhere has greatly facilitated this trend. Among first- and second-generation Latinos in the United States, about two-thirds are of Mexican origin. Yet, Mexican-origin students make up only 26 percent of the first- and second-generation “Hispanic” students in the NLSF. Unfortunately, the survey does not specify the origins of those students whose parents were born in the United States. Presumably, most of those “third-plus”-generation students have Mexican roots. But even if 100 percent did, Mexican-origin students would still be underrepresented on these campuses. At the same time, a growing number of “Hispanic students” are the children of immigrants from South America and Spain.

Why would students from such a wide variety of backgrounds seek out a minority designation? Too often, social scientists have simply assumed that being “racialized” as “black” or “Latino” can only have negative consequences for the children of immigrants, a view shared by many immigrant parents. Pervasive
racism can indeed be soul crushing, and the nihilism of the American ghetto can lead young people down many a self-destructive path. This view, however, oversimplifies what it means to be racialized as members of a minority group in post–civil rights America. Today, the heritage of the struggle for racial justice has given young people new strategies and resources for upward mobility. Thus, for the second generation, becoming “black” or “Latino” or “Asian” has positive as well as negative consequences, as the following interchange illustrates:

**Interviewer:** Have there ever been times when you felt you benefited from being Colombian or Hispanic?

**Respondent:** Just with the financial aid alone! I spoke with some friend outside in financial difficulties. I was telling him, “You’ve got to look for scholarships.” He said “Where the hell am I going to look for scholarships?” And I said “Gee, you’re white, I really don’t know what to tell you.” It opens up so many doors, just being a minority. Scholarships I qualified for were outnumbering the ones that other people were. So definitely a minority title helps in that sense.

African American (and to a lesser extent Mexican American and Puerto Rican) institutional structures and modes of organization have provided new models and institutions that were not present for immigrants in earlier times. These include schools and clubs and curricula designed to meet the cultural needs of blacks and Hispanics, “Latino” and Asian American studies programs, and even ethnically based professional groups and associations. The children of nonwhite immigrants have often taken up these models.

Of course, the social service networks within black and Latino communities are less well developed than those of the far more affluent Jewish community. Still, organizations dedicated to community uplift play a significant role in the lives of black and Latino young people, and over time, these groups have expanded their definitions of their client population to reflect a changing demography (Cordero-Guzman 2002). Even the organizations of relatively recently arrived groups may find themselves in a proximal host relationship with even newer groups.

**Conclusion**

This volume is about young people who have beaten the odds. Despite considerable handicaps, these children of newcomers have achieved success. The fact that in many cases they have done so with the aid of programs and policies designed to help others in no way diminishes their accomplishment. The fact that they have drawn on ideas and institutions that were created in earlier struggles for inclusion in the United States only reminds us that American society is never static.

However, a few notes of caution are in order. First, the role that higher education now plays for the children of immigrants must not lead us to forget that relatively few people in any of these ethnic groups will ever attend one of the nation’s leading universities. If the success of the educational “high flyers” does not occur alongside the more modest but equally important success of their
cousins who seek to leave poverty for the lower rungs of the middle class, the diversity of the elite institutions may amount to little more than tokenism.

Second, we should remember that most of the parents of the young people in our study entered the United States at a time when becoming “legal” was considerably easier than it is today. Increasingly, young people who have spent most of their lives in this country find themselves locked out of meaningful opportunities due to their legal status. This tragedy is where the greatest danger of creating an “underclass” now lies.

Finally, pointing out that immigrants benefit from programs and policies designed for (and often by) members of native minority groups may prompt calls to more narrowly restrict these programs to members of native minority groups or to dismantle completely affirmative action programs. However, I would argue that such programs should be supported because they have worked so well for immigrants and their children. The young people in this volume have been hampered by racial discrimination, substandard schools, and a lack of knowledge about the American educational system. These young people, many of them ambitious and often coming from families that invest a great deal in the success of the next generation, are well positioned to make use of such programs. Their success is our success as a society.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that attempts to encourage diversity in higher education have proved insufficient to address the depths of poverty and exclusion among native minority youth. My collaborators and I began our study of the children of immigrants in New York concerned that many were experiencing “downward assimilation” and coming to share the fate of long-standing American minority groups (Gans 1992; Portes and Zhou 1993). However, equally important is the danger that the relative success of the children of immigrants is now obscuring the problems faced by segments of the native minority population.

Facilitating the incorporation of newcomers and addressing the persistent disadvantage of long-standing U.S. minorities are both worthy goals. At times, efforts to accommodate diversity and to promote racial justice may come into conflict, but they are not fundamentally at odds. It is important, however, that we do not pretend to be doing one, while actually accomplishing the other. The challenge is to accomplish both.

References


