

Mexican Americans as a paradigm for contemporary intra-group heterogeneity

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Abstract

Racialization and assimilation offer alternative perspectives on the position of immigrant-origin populations in American society. We question the adequacy of either perspective alone in the early twenty-first century, taking Mexican Americans as our case in point. Re-analysing the child sample of the Mexican American Study Project, we uncover substantial heterogeneity marked by vulnerability to racialization at one end but proximity to the mainstream at the other. This heterogeneity reflects important variations in how education, intermarriage, mixed ancestry and geographic mobility have intersected for Mexican immigrants and their descendants over the twentieth century, and in turn shaped their ethnic identity. Finally, based on US census findings, we give reason to think that internal heterogeneity is increasing in the twenty-first century. Together, these findings suggest that future studies of immigrant adaptation in America must do a better job of accounting for heterogeneity, not just between but also *within* immigrant-origin populations.

Keywords: assimilation; racialization; incorporation; Mexican Americans; heterogeneity; education.

Introduction

In every immigration era, certain groups are taken as emblematic of the period's problems and successes. What the Irish were to the second half of the nineteenth century in the USA, the Eastern European Jews and Italians were to the first half of the twentieth. Today it is the turn of the Mexicans. At 30 per cent of the total foreign born, they are the largest group in the contemporary immigrant stream. When their US-born generations are included, they are the second largest non-European ethno-racial group in the country.

There is irony in this new attention to Mexicans because they have been an immigrant group for more than a century, and before then, they were a large part of the original population resident on territory that was incorporated into the USA by conquest. This long history means that Mexicans belong not just to the immigrant and second generations, but also to the third and later ones, as well to a group that cannot be classified in generational terms because their ancestors were never immigrants.

This complex history of conquest *and* immigration affects current sociological accounts of the fortunes of contemporary Mexican immigrants and their descendants. These accounts vacillate between the more optimistic – drawing analogies between Mexicans and earlier immigrant groups (Perlmann 2005; Park and Myers 2010) – and the more pessimistic – arguing that Mexican Americans of all generations are stymied by an inability to compete in a post-industrial economy, historical and present-day racism, and the humble socio-economic position – and often unauthorized status – of their parents (López and Stanton-Salazar 2001; Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Racialization theories play a dominant role in the latter accounts, depicting Mexican Americans as systematically and enduringly disadvantaged by processes of racial exclusion (Massey 2007; Chavez 2008). The racialization account has been advanced by the seminal book *Generations of Exclusion* (Telles and Ortiz 2008), which draws on a longitudinal data set tracking Mexican Americans in San Antonio and Los Angeles from the mid-1960s to late-1990s.

Given the group's emblematic status and large presence, it is important to get the Mexican American story right. We argue that neither the optimistic nor pessimistic accounts do justice to the diversity of the Mexican American experience in the twenty-first century. Instead, we argue that its *internal heterogeneity* is a key and potentially paradigmatic aspect. Heterogeneity is reflected along a broad spectrum that includes vulnerability to racialization on one end – anchored in a combustible mix of factors including undocumented parental status, a concentrated Mexican American social milieu, residential segregation, and persistently low educational attainment – and assimilation to the mainstream¹ on the other – evinced by ethnically mixed ancestry, intermarriage, movement away from established Mexican American areas of concentration, and post-secondary education. Of course, many Mexican-origin individuals fall in between.

To uncover this diversity, we draw on the rich data assembled by Telles and Ortiz (2008) for *Generations of Exclusion*, supplementing it with 1970 and 2000 census data.² Our analysis of Telles and Ortiz's Mexican American Study Project (MASP) data unpacks key dimensions of *intra-group diversity*, such as educational attainment, mixed

ancestry and geographic mobility. Our procedures are mainly correlational because we are interested in identifying the characteristics associated with location along the mainstream/racialization spectrum.

We show that during the late decades of the twentieth century the concentration of Mexican-origin individuals at the less racialized end of the spectrum was already appreciable. We give reasons to think that this concentration continues to grow, but that so too does the concentration at the other end. Increasing heterogeneity indicates that what it means to be Mexican American is far from uniform. It is ever more contingent on other characteristics, such as how much education Mexican-origin individuals have, whether they are endogamously or exogamously married, and how close to or far from established Mexican American concentrations they live. Together, our findings suggest that future studies of intergenerational immigrant adaptation in America must account for heterogeneity, not just between but also *within* immigrant-origin populations.

Racialization and assimilation: an unresolved tension

Racialization refers to social processes that create and maintain systematic, unequal life chances between hierarchically ordered populations, where the superior one is generally described as the majority (whatever its numerical size) and the inferior one as a minority (Bonilla-Silva 1997). In race theory, the minority is seen as determined by exclusion from the majority group, which imposes on others descent-based categories that are invested with ideological content explaining inferiority (e.g. stereotypes) and justifying disparate treatment and outcomes (Omi and Winant 1994; Winant 2000; Massey 2007).

Race theories are not monolithic. Some put more emphasis on ideology and politics (e.g. Omi and Winant 1994); others on social structure (e.g. Bonilla-Silva 1997). Some see inequality, once generated, as systemic and durable; others allow for some individual mobility within a relatively stable group order. Some even envision shifts in the position of groups within a racial hierarchy (e.g. Bonilla-Silva 2004). What these theories share, however, is a primary focus on the mechanisms that produce and maintain unequal life chances, and therefore a suspicion about widespread assimilation as a mechanism that might bring about parity with the mainstream for many members of a racially defined minority. Absent large-scale social movements or overt political protest, race theories presume that it is difficult for most members of a minority to escape the negative impacts of categorical ordering and the 'definite social relations between the races' that it entails (Bonilla-Silva 1997, p. 469; see also Feagin 1991). Consequently, Omi and Winant (1994) insist on the strict theoretical

separation of race from 'ethnicity', with its historical connections to assimilation.³

Such ideas are illustrated in several major studies of Mexican Americans including, most recently, *Generations of Exclusion* (Telles and Ortiz 2008). The book mainly casts Mexican Americans as a racialized group suffering from a 'social stigmatization that is entwined in a series of economic, political, and social processes and practices', such as 'institutional discrimination' that 'includes the under-financing of public schools which mostly Mexican origin students attend' (Telles and Ortiz 2008, pp. 285, 288; see also Kozol 1992). Telles and Ortiz (2008, p. 265) acknowledge that assimilation to the mainstream is possible, but they argue that it is 'slow' and uncommon and, moreover, that later-generation Mexican Americans continue to 'experience a world largely shaped by their race and ethnicity'. Above all, they show that the assimilation problems of Mexican Americans register in an educational gap from white Americans, which persists into the third and later generations.

A sceptical stance towards large-scale assimilation puts racialization theory in a bind, just as the stubbornness of racial inequality is problematic for assimilation theories. Older conceptions of assimilation included the eradication of the social distinction and differences between two populations (e.g. Gordon 1964; cf. Brubaker 2001). But assimilation is better conceptualized as the decline – not disappearance – of a distinction for some portions of a racial, or ethnic, minority group (Alba and Nee 2003). The distinction declines when it becomes restricted to fewer, and more private, social domains. For members of groups undergoing assimilation, the social and cultural distance to the mainstream decreases, and life chances come to closely approximate those held by their peers in the dominant group who are similar in socio-economic origin, birth cohort and so forth. Assimilation in this sense is contingent rather than universal, and may produce heterogeneity within minority groups, as opposed to uniform racial exclusion (Brubaker 2001).

We demonstrate here the substantial scale of Mexican American assimilation in the late twentieth century and give reasons to think it is increasing over time. This assimilation, however, does not negate the potency of racialization for many Mexican Americans. In light of assimilation theory, our focus is mainly on the variations in social context associated with intermarriage, mixed ancestry and geographical mobility, and on their joint relationship to educational attainment, a primary measure of Mexican Americans' social status. Since racialization theory presumes that racial categories are hard to escape while assimilation theory argues that they can become 'blurred', we also consider dimensions of ethnic identity.

The paradoxes of generations for Mexican Americans

A first step in assessing the situation of people of Mexican descent is to be clear about the appropriate temporal measures of change. Because this group includes individuals who were colonized, descendants of immigrants from different historical periods, and contemporary immigrants, measuring change over time is not straightforward. Immigrant *generation*, the most frequently used temporal marker of assimilation, refers to an individual's family distance from the point of immigration, where the immigrants make up the first generation, the US-born children of immigrants constitute the second generation, and so forth. Generation was the temporal measure of choice for studies of European-origin groups. Mass immigration of the canonical groups in the literature took place during a compact period that extended from roughly 1890 to 1920, creating a strong correlation between the generational status of individuals and the time period of their birth, or *birth cohort*.

Thus, individuals of the same generation – for instance, the offspring of immigrants – also experienced major historical events – the Great Depression and the Second World War – at similar points in their life cycle. For them, generation simultaneously captured the effects of birth distance since immigration *and* historical events.

Because Mexican immigration has been ‘replenished’ for the last century (Jiménez 2010), its continuous nature complicates the logic of using generation in the conventional way. Comparing Mexican Americans across generations without accounting for cohort misses important *intragenerational* differences (Park and Myers 2010; Bean et al. 2013). For example, second-generation Mexican Americans growing up in the 1920s and 1930s attended highly segregated schools, came of age during the Great Depression and the Second World War, and entered the middle-adult years during a booming post-war economy. The second-generation children of post-1965 Mexican immigrants may also attend segregated schools, but they have come of age at the time of a globalized post-industrial economy, affirmative action and massive unauthorized immigration.

A related shortcoming of the conventional approach is that it fails to capture the effects of changes in the characteristics of Mexican immigrants over time. The average educational attainment in Mexico rose over the twentieth century, and educational attainment has been higher among Mexican immigrants in each successive cohort (Smith 2003). Thus, Mexican Americans who descend from earlier waves of immigrants trace their roots to immigrant populations who were more disadvantaged (in absolute terms) than those who come to the USA today. The disadvantaged position of these Mexican Americans is

owed partly to differences in the educational and socio-economic status of immigrant forebears.

Finally, there is the problematic inclusion of the descendants of non-immigrant Mexicans in a generational classification. One cannot make sense of their experience with concepts derived from immigration because that experience more resembles those of so-called colonized groups (Liebersohn 1961) – one, at least initially, of dispossession and exclusion and bereft of the optimism about social and material advance that is typically part of the immigrant's baggage. The colonial experience is especially relevant to the Mexican American communities near the Texas–Mexican border, including San Antonio, one of the two research sites for the MASP.

The MASP in geographical and historical context

To meet the challenges of identifying true change, we draw on the data and analyses presented in *Generations of Exclusion* (Telles and Ortiz 2008). The extraordinary data in the book come from a 1965 study of Mexican Americans in Los Angeles and San Antonio, the basis of the classic book, *The Mexican American People* (Grebler et al. 1970). Telles and Ortiz tracked down many of the original respondents and their now-grown children, making possible a view of intergenerational change among Mexican Americans during the late twentieth century.

Like many data sets intended for the study of ethnicity and race, the MASP data need to be set within their historical and geographical context in order to establish the valid range of the conclusions that can be drawn. It is important to begin with the sampling design for the original 1965 study. Since it focused on collecting data from individuals who were identifiably of Mexican descent, the ethnically focused design risks built-in biases against the more assimilated members of a group.

Implications of this sampling design are evident in two ways. First, for the sake of sampling efficiency, the original study was geographically confined to two cities with very large populations of Mexican Americans. Such cities offer more institutionally complete communities than do places with much smaller group populations, and therefore exert a stronger hold on group members, who have on average fewer socially intimate relationships with non-group members (Breton 1964). By contrast, in studies of cities and rural areas with smaller Mexican-origin populations, researchers have uncovered more contact between new immigrants and natives (Erwin 2003), and more social and other forms of assimilation among later-generation Mexican Americans (Jiménez 2010).

Second, the original sampling strategy within Los Angeles and San Antonio focused on individuals with so-called 'Spanish surnames'.

Counts of people with such surnames, provided by the 1960 census, were the only means available at that time for identifying the locations of Mexican American individuals and creating a sampling frame (Grebler et al. 1970, pp. 601–8, 631–47). The study design stratified census tracts by these counts, and within tracts of low and intermediate concentration, interviewers were instructed to pass by households with non-Spanish surnames. Intermarried Mexican Americans, particularly women, are thus likely to be under-represented in the original 1965 study (Telles and Ortiz 2008, pp. 50–1).

Finally, putting the original study in historical context, it was conducted in 1965–66, at almost exactly the moment when the civil rights movement was achieving its greatest legislative successes. Since Mexican Americans in some areas, especially in Texas, were forced to attend segregated schools prior to this point, the education of many were truncated, and the new generation of children had a socio-economic starting point not immediately much better than their parents had experienced. According to Grebler and colleagues (1970, p. 152), the educational attainment of Mexican Americans in 1960 was lower in Texas than in any other south-western state by a sizeable margin, and the educational gap separating the group from Anglos was the largest there. The role of pre-civil-rights-era institutional discrimination, and of school segregation in particular, did not affect only the parent sample of the MASP data; since the members of the child sample were born between 1947 and 1965, it is likely to have hampered some of them, too.

Intra-group heterogeneity and intergenerational change in the late twentieth century

Our analysis begins with markers of heterogeneity along three social-context dimensions – mixed ancestry, intermarriage and geographic mobility – using findings from *Generations of Exclusion* plus our own analyses of the MASP and US census data. We then show how these markers reveal heterogeneity in terms of two other dimensions: the first socio-economic (education) and the second identificational (ethnic identity).

Intermarriage and mixed ancestry

One of the most significant contributions of the MASP data concerns the children of intermarriages. Although there is an under-representation of intermarriages in the MASP data, the linkage of members of the MASP child sample to the family contexts in which they grew up is a significant advantage over more conventional sources. Telles and Ortiz demonstrate that intermarriage has been increasing intergenerationally

(i.e. between parents and their children) among Mexican Americans in Los Angeles and San Antonio. For instance, 15 per cent of the original second-generation respondents and 32 per cent of their third-generation children are intermarried. Almost all of these intermarriages involve Anglos/whites (Telles and Ortiz 2008, p. 176).

Intermarriage is selective of Mexican Americans who are distant in other ways from the core of the group. Having higher levels of education, growing up in less Hispanic neighbourhoods and being interviewed by phone (a proxy for geographic mobility) increase the odds of intermarriage with a non-Hispanic for Mexican Americans in the child sample (Telles and Ortiz 2008, p. 179). Thus, the children who are raised in intermarried families not only have a non-Mexican American parent but a Mexican American parent who is atypical for the group.

The children of intermarriages form a distinctive sub-population, which Telles and Ortiz (2008, p. 281) describe as follows:

The 9% of children with a non-Hispanic parent were less likely to know Spanish, were more likely to intermarry themselves, identified less with their Mexican origin, and were more likely to call themselves American. Such children were often perceived as and understood themselves as less Mexican.⁴

Being the child of intermarriage raises the odds of marriage to a non-Hispanic fivefold (Telles and Ortiz 2008, p. 180), suggesting strongly that the children of intermarriages are integrated into non-Mexican as well as Mexican social circles.

Children with mixed Mexican ancestry were, moreover, more common in the 1960s than the MASP data can reveal because of the limitations of the original sample. Consider the national marriage data for Mexican Americans in Table 1, which we constructed from the 1970 census. It was the first census to use a Hispanic-origin question, making it possible to identify Mexican Americans of all generations, not just those with Spanish surnames. In Table 1, we focus on marriages in which the woman was under forty years of age in 1970 in order to capture the family settings in which Mexican American children were then growing up. Otherwise, we try to match the population of marriages that Grebler et al. (1970) would have observed in Los Angeles and San Antonio in 1965–66: one or both partners must be Mexican immigrants or US-born Mexican Americans who were at least eighteen years old in 1965–66.

Since couples produce children, what matters for the composition of the child generation in the MASP data is the intermarriage rate in 1970 based on marriages, not individuals. This rate of intermarriage by Mexican

Table 1. *Marriage patterns of Mexican-descent individuals in the United States, 1970 US census (in percentages based on table total; shaded cells represent exogamous marriages)*

		Wife's origin					Total (n) marriages
		Mexican (born in Mexico)	Mexican (born in USA)	Other Spanish origin	White, non-Spanish	Other, non-Spanish	
Husband's origin	Mexican (born in Mexico)	10.4	4.9	0.8	1.0	0.0	57,800
	Mexican (born in USA)	6.7	50.4	1.7	10.0	0.6	234,200
	Other Spanish origin	0.7	1.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	7,800
	White, non-Spanish	2.1	8.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	36,300
	Other, non-Spanish	0.1	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	1,400
	Total (n) marriages	67,400	222,500	8,500	36,900	2,200	337,500 (100.1%)

Note: Restrictions: Mexican-born individuals must have entered the country no later than 1966 to be included, and wives must be between the ages of twenty-two and forty in 1970; individuals who married for the first time after 1966 are excluded.

Source: 1970 US Census, 1% Public Use Microdata Sample.

Americans in the 1970 census is 23 per cent (the sum of the shaded boxes in Table 1). Therefore, even if we assume that the fertility of the endogamous marriages is substantially higher than those of the exogamous ones, we should expect the percentage of mixed-ancestry Mexican Americans in the nationwide child generation in 2000 to be about twice as large⁵ as the percentage reported in the MASP data in that year.

As our analysis shows, intermarriage, arguably *the* yardstick of assimilation, was a significant aspect of the Mexican-American experience at the time that Grebler et al. (1970) collected the first wave of the MASP data, and the contribution of individuals with mixed ancestry to Mexican American assimilation patterns have been consequential. In light of the continued rise in intermarriage noted by Telles and Ortiz (2008) and other studies (e.g. Duncan and Trejo 2007), mixed ancestry, particularly with Anglo/white parentage, is certain to have become even more prevalent among later-generation Mexican Americans today.

Geographic mobility

Another benefit of the MASP data is that they allow for an analysis of how geographic mobility within the USA affects Mexican Americans' prospects for economic progress and social assimilation. Interest in geographic mobility has been increasing, given the dispersion of recent Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans away from 'traditional' destinations in the south-west and southern California into 'new' ones, where the social contexts in which they and their children live are different (Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2005; Massey 2008; Marrow 2011). *Generations of Exclusion* documents a small degree of geographic mobility among original respondents living in Los Angeles and San Antonio between 1965 and 2000, but much more geographic mobility among their adult children as of 2000. While 2 per cent of the original respondents had moved out of the San Antonio metropolitan area by 2000 and 15 per cent out of Los Angeles, 11 per cent of their adult children had left San Antonio by 2000 and 22 per cent had moved away from Los Angeles (Telles and Ortiz 2008, pp. 58–9).⁶

Geographic mobility is strongly related to mixed ancestry and intermarriage, as is indicated in Table 2, which we compiled from the MASP child sample. This table reveals that the least geographically mobile groups are those with unmixed ancestry who are endogamously married or still single. Even when they leave the core counties of Los Angeles and San Antonio they tend to stay close by, relocating to a suburban county in the same metropolitan region. Exogamous

Table 2. *Geographic mobility patterns by marriage and ancestry types, child sample of the Mexican American Study Project (in percentages)*

Geographic mobility	Child's ancestry			
	Unmixed Mexican		Mixed	
	Marital status/type			
	Single	Married (endogenous)	Married (exogamous)	
Still within the core county	74.1	77.0	44.7	56.3
Has moved to a suburban county	7.8	10.4	20.7	16.7
Has moved outside the metro area	18.0	12.6	34.6	27.0
Total (n) individuals (unweighted)	189 (99.9%)	345 (100.0%)	149 (100.0%)	68 (100.0%)

Note: $\chi^2 = 59.91$, d.f. = 6, $p < .001$

marriage, however, is associated with greater mobility, as many individuals move out of these metropolitan regions entirely.

Mobility is associated with surprisingly large and positive effects on assimilation indicators. This finding emerges from the multivariate analyses of the MASP data, in which Telles and Ortiz regularly include a telephone interview (versus one conducted face to face) as a proxy measure of geographic mobility. This proxy is one of the strongest determinants of earnings, income and net worth in 2000, increasing earnings by \$7,479, income by \$7,816, and net worth by \$25,650, net of other factors (Telles and Ortiz 2008, p. 153). It is also one of the strongest determinants of not living in a Hispanic neighbourhood in 2000, decreasing the percentage of Hispanics in respondents' neighborhood by 14 per cent (Telles and Ortiz 2008, p. 170). Finally, it is a significant determinant of intermarriage, limited Spanish proficiency and reporting no discrimination in 2000 (Telles and Ortiz 2008, p. 235; see also Appendix Tables B.3–6, pp. 299–306).

These findings suggest that while a substantial fraction of Mexican Americans and their descendants are at risk of racial discrimination and stunted social mobility within two of the most concentrated metropolitan areas of traditional Mexican settlement, a theoretically important – and numerically significant – proportion is in a more advantageous position by virtue of its geographic mobility. The extent of this geographic mobility has not only increased over generations for the specific cohorts of Mexican Americans in the MASP data, it has also increased more generally as the newest Mexican immigrant arrivals have dispersed outside of traditional areas of Mexican settlement.

Education

Telles and Ortiz (2008, pp. 274–7) rightly place education at the centre of their analysis of Mexican American disadvantage, showing that it is powerfully related to numerous socio-economic and other assimilation indicators. However, their conclusions that their 'evidence shows no educational assimilation' and that 'the third and fourth generation do worst of all, suggesting downward assimilation in education' (Telles and Ortiz 2008, p. 131) are too pessimistic a reading of their data. Analysing changes in educational levels by the combination of generation *and* birth cohort actually reveals consistent and positive progress. For instance, Telles and Ortiz (2008, p. 111, Figure 5.2) show that average years of education rose from 4.1 among first-generation parents of original respondents (who attended school in the 1900s–30s) to 10.0 among second-generation original respondents (who attended school in the 1930s–50s) and to 13.1 among their third-generation children (who attended school during the 1950s–80s).

Mexican Americans in the sample have also made progress to narrow the educational gap with non-Hispanic whites across these historical generations. The gap between whites and all second-and-later-generation Mexican Americans who attended school in the 1900s–30s was roughly 3.4 years, but 2.3 years for the Mexican Americans who attended school in the 1930s–50s, and just 1.3 for all third-and-later-generation Mexican Americans who attended school in the 1950s–80s.

Our concern here is with unpacking educational heterogeneity among later-generation Mexican Americans, the group for whom educational stagnation appears to set in. Hence, we show how respondents’ average years of education vary by original location, mixed ancestry and intermarriage. The data we have tabulated in Table 3 for the third and later generations demonstrate that the core of the educational problem in the MASP data is found among the endogamously married and single Mexican Americans of unmixed ancestry who grew up in San Antonio. Their education averages between 12.2 and 12.4 years; their counterparts who grew up in Los Angeles are not far above this range. All other categories of later-generation Mexican Americans have average educational attainments that are higher, generally by about a year.

Educational attainment is also related to whether later-generation Mexican Americans remain close to or within residential concentrations of the group. Decomposing categories of unmixed ancestry by geographic mobility, it appears that those who remain in San Antonio have the lowest education levels – although the numbers for the mobile are too small to be confident (data not shown). A similar connection

Table 3. Educational attainment of the third- and later-generation child sample of the Mexican American Study Project, by marriage and ancestry types and region of origin (in mean years of education)

Region of origin	Child’s ancestry			
	Unmixed Mexican		Mixed	
	Marital status/type			
	Single	Married (endogenous)	Married (exogamous)	
Los Angeles (unweighted n)	13.2 (56)	12.7 (99)	13.4 (74)	13.2 (35)
San Antonio (unweighted n)	12.2 (62)	12.4 (117)	14.1 (25)	13.2 (11)

Note: $F(7, 471) = 3.58, p < .001$

to mobility does not appear among those who grew up in Los Angeles, but the average levels of education are higher there.

This brief analysis points to the link between higher educational attainment, mixed ancestry, intermarriage and geographical mobility. As individuals distance themselves from the group's core, by marrying non-Mexicans or moving away from Mexican American concentrations, their education rises – and vice versa. This nexus carries important implications for the mechanisms of racialization, which are connected to spatial disparities in educational institutions. *Barrio* communities are also drained of the more successful Mexican Americans who, like all highly educated Americans compared with their less educated counterparts (Wozniak 2010), have more transferable skills and greater information about job opportunities in distant labour markets, and are more likely to move long distances to family and community settings that provide better opportunities.

Our analysis also indicates that, in the closing decades of the twentieth century, low educational attainment among later-generation Mexican Americans was most problematic in San Antonio, which is emblematic of communities strongly impacted by conquest and colonization. In Texas, this experience coloured the relations between Mexican Americans and Anglos well into the twentieth century, and the subordination of later-generation Mexican Americans was reflected in segregated school systems and unusually low educational attainment in the early 1960s, when the Grebler et al. (1970) study was launched. This experience should not be confused with the immigration experience, which characterizes the overwhelming majority of Mexican Americans nationwide.

Ethnic identity

Diversity among people of Mexican descent also registers in the form and salience of ethnic identity, which, because of factors such as replenishment of the immigrant population, the history of colonization and geographic dispersion, hinge on axes of both time and space. Across generations, Spanish-language use fades, intermarriage rates increase, and observance of Mexican customs and holidays declines, as does an affinity for Mexican music (Telles and Ortiz 2008). However, the replenishment of an immigrant population provides individuals who are generationally distant from the immigrant point of origin with new exposure to the symbols and practices that define Mexican ethnicity, while also reinforcing the racialization of Mexican-origin individuals, regardless of their generation, as perpetual foreigners (Jiménez 2010). Moreover, profit-making and political groups increasingly court Mexican Americans for their growing economic and political power, while an anti-Mexican-immigrant backlash racializes

the whole group as illegal and foreign (Chavez 2008). This ambivalence, particularly towards immigrants, intensifies variation in the form and salience of Mexican-origin ethnic identity nationwide.

Importantly, intermarriage has produced a Mexican-origin population that includes a large number of individuals for whom Mexican ancestry is one of many components of a multiethnic ancestral heritage. These individuals show flexibility in constructing their ethnic identity that does not exist for their 'unmixed' counterparts (Jiménez 2004; Lee and Bean 2010). In the MASP data, the odds that Mexican Americans with one non-Hispanic parent identify as 'American' or 'other' are more than twice that of their unmixed co-ethnics (Telles and Ortiz 2008, p. 305). In addition, the types of identity labels that Mexican Americans use to describe their ethnic origin display geographic variation. Mexican Americans in San Antonio are unusually likely to choose pan-ethnic labels, like 'Hispanic', and avoid ethnic-specific labels like 'Mexican' (Telles and Ortiz 2008, pp. 238–63). These choices likely reflect the fact that Mexican Americans in San Antonio have had to fashion ethnic identities in the face of a persistently strong hostility typical of the Texas border region.⁷

Our analysis focuses on two indicators related to social boundaries: how individuals present themselves and how they are likely to be perceived by others. One is the salience of a Mexican American identity (we contrast those who say that they 'hardly ever' or 'never' think of themselves as Mexican origin or as Chicano against everyone else); the other, the perceived likelihood that persons meeting respondents for the first time will think of them as having Mexican origin (we contrast those who say 'probably not' or 'definitely not' against all others). In the MASP data, about one sixth of Mexican Americans rarely think of themselves as Mexican (17 per cent), and more than a quarter believe that others are unlikely to perceive them as Mexican (29 per cent).

Having mixed ancestry powerfully and positively affects rarely thinking of oneself as Mexican or Chicano. Table 4 shows that mixed ancestry increases the odds of such a weak identity by more than 2.5 times. There is something of a countervailing tendency in the effect of age on the frequency of thinking of oneself as Mexican: Table 4 shows that younger respondents are, all other things being equal, more likely to identify in this way, perhaps reflecting the growing salience of Mexican ethnicity in contemporary America (Jiménez 2010). Education has no effect either way.

Believing oneself to be not easily identifiable as a Mexican American is positively related to education, intermarriage and geographic mobility. According to Table 4, a four-year increase in education – the difference between high school and a college degree – almost doubles the chances that respondents believe that they are *not* easily spotted as having Mexican ancestry. Intermarriage also more than

Table 4. *Logistic regression analysis of factors shaping self- and external identification as Mexican, child sample of the Mexican American Study Project (odds ratios)*

	Rarely think of oneself as Mexican/Chicano	Unlikely to be identifiable as Mexican
Education (years)	1.01	1.16
Mixed ancestry	2.60	1.56
Marital status		
Single	1.01	2.13
Exogamous	1.14	2.32
Endogamous	–	–
Geographical mobility		
Still within the core county	–	–
Has moved to a suburban county	1.37	1.02
Has moved outside the metro area	0.86	1.56
Gender (female)	1.11	1.24
Year born	0.96	1.00
Raised in San Antonio	2.36	0.57

Numbers in bold are statistically significant (.05 level).

doubles these chances, and moving away from Los Angeles or San Antonio lifts them, too. Skin colour, although not shown in [Table 4](#), may also play a role, with darker respondents believing that they are more likely to be identifiable as Mexican Americans. However, since skin colour was only measured in face-to-face interviews in the MASP, we cannot meaningfully compare its effect between the ‘stayers’ and ‘movers’ independently of geographic mobility.

The weakening of ethnic identity among Mexican Americans who are distant from the group’s core may even remove some individuals from the group, at least in a statistical sense. Alba and Islam (2009; see also Emeka and Agius Vallejo 2011) found that, across censuses, sizes of US-born cohorts of Mexican Americans declined to a degree unexplained by mortality. Presumably, some individuals who identified themselves on a census form as Mexican American at one point in time did not do so at a later point. This phenomenon does not mean that all of these ‘disappearing’ individuals have detached themselves entirely from a Mexican American identity, but rather that their attachment to it is no longer regular and reliable.

Conclusion

Our findings based on the MASP and supplemental census data paint a complex picture of the Mexican American situation. Racialization is

an appropriate characterization of the disadvantage faced by a large portion of the group, including many whose family roots in the USA extend back more than two generations. Although we cannot fully assess the role of skin colour, the disadvantages experienced by many Mexican Americans do arise from spatially concentrated forms of institutionalized discrimination, such as poor schools, and are buttressed by stigmatizing ideologies.

However, we find that another substantial portion of the group is in the process of assimilating into the mainstream in significant ways and does not face such extreme racialization. This portion is detectable through a series of markers on various economic, social and identificational dimensions, including high educational attainment, geographic mobility away from regions of Mexican American concentration, intermarriage and mixed ancestry. If we count those members of the MASP child sample who are intermarried, have mixed ancestry or who have moved away from their metropolitan region of birth, we arrive at 41.7 per cent of the total. This minority is not small, even without adjusting for the under-representation of mixed ancestry among them.

In addition, it is almost certain that this portion of the group is growing in size among later-generation Mexican Americans. In the 2000 census, Duncan and Trejo (2007, p. 246) found that nearly 50 per cent of the marriages involving at least one US-born Mexican American were to non-Mexicans, the lion's share of whom were non-Hispanic whites. Even if the fertility of the endogamous is higher than that of the exogamous, the high frequency of Mexican American intermarriage implies a substantial increase of mixed ancestry among later generations of the group compared to the situation in 1965 – the baseline year for the MASP data.

Other forces are likely to increase the size of the movement in an assimilatory direction. One is the ongoing geographic dispersal of immigrants away from regions of Mexican American concentration. Recent research shows that, unlike their counterparts in traditional destinations, Mexicans' place in the local racial hierarchies of new destinations has not yet crystallized (Hernández-León and Zúñiga 2005; Smith 2005; Marrow 2011). Also, despite rising segregation, largely due to new immigration, Hispanics in new destination metros are significantly less segregated and isolated from both whites and blacks than they are in traditional metros (Fischer and Tienda 2006).

But the concentration of Mexican Americans at the other end of the spectrum may also be growing. One reason is the large proportion of the Mexican immigrant population that has long-term unauthorized status – currently estimated at 6.7–7 million (Passel and Cohn 2011). Even as assimilation siphons off Mexican Americans who are advancing socio-economically and integrating socially, credible evidence shows that the mobility of a large part of the contemporary

second generation – including those who are US citizens born to unauthorized immigrant parents (Yoshikawa 2011) – is hampered because of the increasingly consequential effects of unauthorized status (Abrego 2006; Gonzales 2011). New research from Los Angeles suggests that for this very disadvantaged portion of the group, the negative legacy effects of nativity or legal status discrimination – rather than group-level racial discrimination – may better account for patterns of ‘delayed’ – rather than ‘blocked’ – intergenerational educational and residential incorporation (Brown 2007; Bean et al. 2011, 2013). Still, the strong association of unauthorized status with ‘Mexicanness’ helps to racialize the entire group as ‘illegal’, and therefore unfit for full membership in US American society (Chavez 2008; Jiménez 2010).

The heterogeneity of experience and social position is likely to be salient for Americans of Mexican descent in the early twentieth century and possibly paradigmatic for numerous other non-white immigrant-origin groups. For one thing, the ethno-racial turnover that will be produced in the labour market by the baby boomers’ retirement during the next quarter-century will create unusual opportunities for minority-group advancement and assimilation (Alba 2009). Simultaneously, many second- and third-generation members of contemporary immigrant groups will be held back by racial disadvantages, especially the inferior life chances associated with growing up in segregated neighbourhoods.

The results will seem paradoxical, as does the status of Mexican Americans in the MASP data. While there is the social acceptability signalled by relatively high intermarriage rates, there are also the high dropout rates and persistently low educational attainment of young people in some Mexican American communities. As Telles (2010) argues, and as recent empirical accounts suggest (Brown 2007; Bean et al. 2011; Vasquez 2011; Agius Vallejo 2012; Bean et al. 2013), no single existing theoretical model will capture this diversity, for both racialization and assimilation characterize the Mexican American group – and others. For example, some members of the West Indian community are well educated and economically successful, while others are downwardly mobile and geographically concentrated (Waters 1999; Portes et al. 2005). Many members of the traditional Dominican and Puerto Rican communities in New York City are hampered by persistent low education and high poverty rates, but newer arrivals exhibit greater class differentiation (Aranda 2008), and geographic dispersion into newer gateway settlements is taking place (Itzigsohn 2009; Oropesa and Jensen 2010). Racialization and assimilation *divide* these groups, too – highlighting intra-group diversity as potentially one of the defining features of patterns of immigrant-group incorporation in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. Following Alba and Nee (2003, p. 12), we understand the ‘mainstream’ as ‘that part of American society within which ethnic and racial origins have at most minor impacts.’
2. We thank Edward Telles and Vilma Ortiz for sharing the child sample of the MASP data. We take responsibility for any errors committed in our analysis of the data.
3. While scholars heavily debate the distinction between these two terms both in the USA and abroad, for our purposes it suffices to say that the boundaries around ethnic groups often derive more strongly from ‘insiders’ claims to perceived common ancestry, whereas those around racial groups often derive from ‘outsiders’ imposition of a social distinction based on perceived phenotypical and other differences (Cornell and Hartmann 2006).
4. Lee and Bean (2010) report similar findings from interviews with the offspring of Mexican–white intermarriages.
5. The children in these families generally belong to the baby boom cohorts, when fertility of non-Mexican women was very high. Assuming that the average exogamous family had 3.0 children and the average endogamous one 4.0, we would expect about 18 per cent of Mexican Americans born in this period to come from intermarriages.
6. These are likely to be underestimates of mobility since the mobile are harder to find in a follow-up study than are those who have remained in place.
7. There is, to be sure, variability in the racialization patterns of Mexicans over time and place within Texas (Montejano 1987).

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