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Origins and Destinations: The Second Generation in the USA

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As of the last census in 2010, one in four children in the United States had a foreign born parent. This growing “second generation” immigrant population represents the most diverse segment of American society: the children of cleaners, builders, and crop-pickers, as well as corporate moguls, inventors and scientists, their parents arrive from all corners of the globe and bring with them socialization experiences representing a wide range of the world’s cultural variation. Moving in a world where no one is free to cross state borders simply as they wish, today’s second generation also have families which span international boundaries, and unequal legal rights to move across them or even to reside in the country in which they are raised. Foreign origins, and inequality in legal status separates the experiences of the second generation from all others: as a result of these uniquely international influences on the lives of the children of immigrants, a sociology of the second generation requires an international perspective to understand the diversity in second generation school, work, ethnic attachment and political life. This article provides an overview of the second generation in the USA today and introduces this necessary international perspective, showing how it absorbs hypotheses from existing multiple theoretical frameworks – foremost assimilation and segmented assimilation. The utility of this framework is illustrated through two empirical examples: the relative importance of individual and group level variation in explaining second generation educational attainment, and the role of legal status in predicting political behaviours.

Immigrants are remaking America, doing so from bottom to top. At the bottom stand the workers doing the difficult, dangerous, and dirty work that most native-born shun, whether picking crops, cleaning toilets, or slaughtering and carving up the animals that appear on the American dinner table. At the opposite end of the spectrum, one finds the immigrant over-achievers, who, as inventors, corporate moguls, financiers, or Nobel Prize winners, often leave the native-born population far behind in the dust.

While the mass arrival of the foreign-born can be transformational, the immigrants’ most lasting legacy involves their descendants, starting with their children – the second generation. This second generation is the inevitable by-product of immigration itself: since the young are the people most likely to leave their old home in quest of a better future elsewhere, immigrants reach their new home at precisely the age when family formation occurs. Consequently, their arrival yields large numbers of children born in the society of immigration, yet socialized by parents who were raised in a different environment, one with expectations and orientations that are typically foreign to the place that their children experience as their native world. In beginning again, the parents start out in a new, strange country that has to be learned, triggering a process of adaptation that, even when successful, is almost always error-prone, transmitting the signal that they are somehow out of place. Moreover, moving

in a world where no one is free to cross state borders simply as he or she wishes, all immigrant parents commence anew as aliens, lacking the full rights enjoyed by the citizens of their adopted country, and often enough discovering that the route to joining the citizenry is arduous, long and sometimes impossible to successfully traverse.

This common background provides the scaffolding from which the children of immigrants get launched into the world. Despite these salient features that immigrant offspring almost all share they nonetheless don't turn out the same. All the while contributing to the greater diversity of the societies that their parents decided to join, these immigrant offspring are themselves incredibly diverse, standing out from their fellow second generation counterparts on myriad dimensions.

That straightforward observation motivates a rapidly expanding line of research that seeks to understand variation in the outcomes among the children of immigrants in the United States today. Who are the second generation today, and how do they differ from the immigrants that came before? Which second generation members are excelling, and which are struggling, in school and in work? Which children of immigrants will engage in US political life, and which will become disaffected? In other words, what are the main individual and group level characteristics

of immigrants and their children today that will predict the economic and political fault-lines of tomorrow?

The US Second Generation in Historical Context

Although the United States is the quintessential "nation of immigrants," the proportion of foreign born and their descendants has historically waxed and waned. As seen in Figure 1, following peak numbers during the last great wave of migration from 1880-1920, both the numbers and the proportion of the foreign born in the United States rapidly declined until the 1970s. The numbers then begin to pick up again in response to the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which eliminated nationality-based quotas on immigration in the United States, opening the United States to a new wave of migration from Asia, Africa and the Americas. As can be seen in Figure 2, the rapid increase in the proportion of the foreign born was matched by an increase in the diversity of their ethnic origins.

This foreign born population has now given birth to a growing second generation population: one in four children under the age of 18 in the United States currently resides with at least one foreign born parent. The diversity in origins from countries of varied levels of economic development is similarly reproduced in the household char-

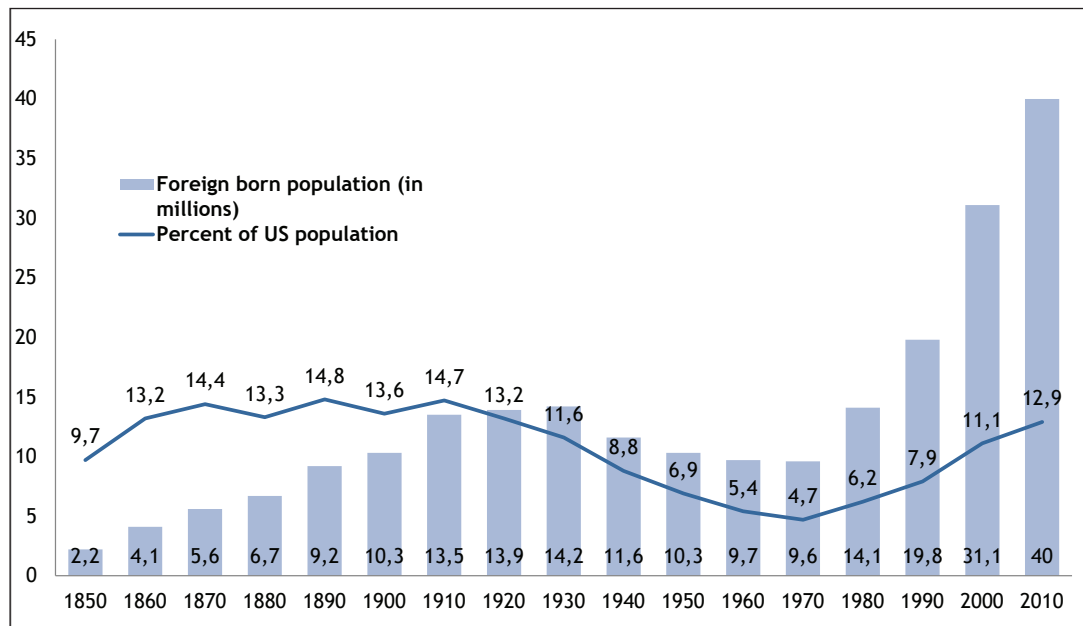


Figure 1. Foreign-Born Population and Percentage of Total Population, for the United States 1850-2010. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census of Population, 1950-2000, and the American Community Survey 2010.

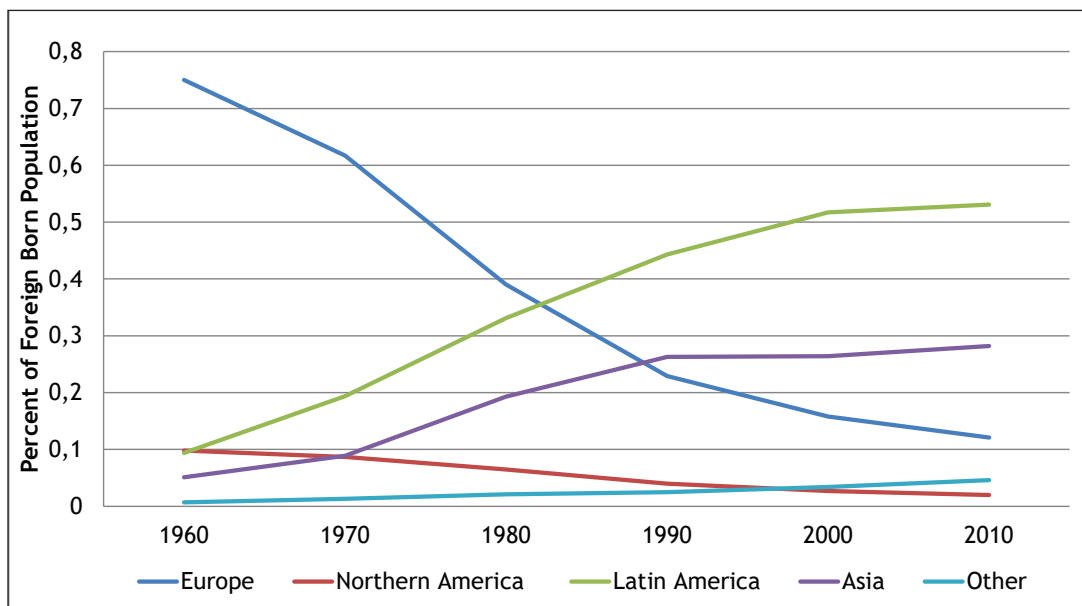


Figure 2. Foreign-Born Population by Region of Birth 1960 to 2010. Source: US Census Bureau, Census of Population, 1960 to 2000 and the American Community Survey, 2010.

acteristics of the second generation: more than 20 percent of children with a foreign born parent, regardless of their own nativity, had a parent with less than a secondary school credential (high school diploma), compared with just 5 per cent of children with native born parents. Moreover, due to increasingly stringent migration controls and high levels of undocumented immigration, it was estimated that in 2008, 8% of children born in the US have at least one parent without legal status.

Understanding the Trajectories of the Second Generation

Given this diversity in ethnicity, socioeconomic characteristics and legal status, both scholars and policymakers alike are concerned for the future of the children of immigrants today. The scholarly literature on the second generation has burgeoned in the past several decades. This work includes several new data gathering efforts on this population and emerging frameworks within the sociology of migration and ethnicity, designed to provide the empirical and theoretical basis to predict and explain variation in the socioeconomic outcomes of the children of immigrants. The main question motivating much of this literature is whether, and how, the children of immigrants will *assimilate*: in other words, if and how those with immigrant origins will come to resemble members of the host socie-

ty whose parents are native born. In most cases the greatest concern is predicting the upward mobility for the children of immigrants who are at the bottom of the socioeconomic distribution. The different answers that different theoretical perspectives provide hinge, in part, on underlying assumptions about the correct *level* of explanation: the individual or the group level.

The choice of the level of explanation determines the explanatory variables considered when explaining second generation diversity. For instance, we might be able to explain differences in second generation educational attainment by looking at differences in the educational resources at the individual level, with second generation immigrants whose parents had higher levels of schooling attaining higher levels of education themselves. However, we might also want to explain educational attainment by the characteristics of the *origin group* that a second generation member belongs to: the children of immigrants from a highly educated group, for instance, might be expected to have higher levels of education themselves, regardless of what their own parents' achievements were. Perhaps the two most influential models of second generation outcomes, neo- and segmented assimilation theory, differ in the level of explanation they foreground, with resulting differences in the factors they anticipate to be most important to predicting second generation outcomes.

Neo-Assimilation and Segmented Assimilation

Assimilation has long provided the master concept for understanding the transformations undergone by immigrants and their descendants. Put simply, this model predicts that over time and across generations, the characteristics of immigrants and their descendants will become more similar in those of the "core" US culture, loosely defined as "Anglo-American" and reflecting the European group with the longest history of settlement in the United States. This "classic" version of assimilation theory has been around in the United States for over a century, yet fell out of favour for positing a unidirectional, conformist vision of intergenerational change in which immigrant newcomers became increasingly similar to a narrow and static conceptualization of American society. This theory has more recently been revived and refashioned as "new" or neo-assimilation theory, foremost by Richard Alba in his seminal work with Victor Nee. This refashioned assimilation theory argues that assimilation occurs as individual immigrants forgo "ethnic" strategies imported from the homeland or found in the immigrant enclave in pursuit of valued goals, in particular socioeconomic attainment. Immigrants instead are incentivized to adopt behaviours and characteristics of the US "mainstream," a broader group which includes both racial and ethnic minorities. Neo-assimilation theory rests on the assumption that civil rights era changes in state policies "have increased the cost of discrimination...in non-trivial ways," making it possible even for today's racially diverse immigrants to make individual choices towards assimilation without being systematically blocked.

Assimilation theory thus points towards several independent variables that might predict second generation outcomes. The most important of these is simply time and exposure to US natives: immigrants who have resided longer in the United States should have better outcomes themselves, and be able to provide a better environment for their children, than otherwise similar immigrants who are more recently arrived and thus have had less opportunity to acquire the tools of the US mainstream. Similarly, immigrants and their children who have greater exposure to US natives, whether through more integrated neighbourhoods and schools, a more diverse work environment, or engagement in the US political process, should similarly be better off both socioeconomically and more politically and socially engaged.

Segmented Assimilation Theory

In contrast to the very individual focus of the neo-assimilation model, which anticipates that differences in second generation outcomes will be largely explained by differences in individual or family resources, segmented assimilation theory posits that the assimilation experiences of the foreign born and their children depends on contextual, structural, and cultural characteristics that operate at the *group level*, most prominently, their co-ethnic community. This theory emphasizes differences between groups: groups which are accepted by receiving country natives and groups which are discriminated against due to racism; groups with high average levels of resources and strong social capital that facilitates success among more vulnerable members and groups which lack these social resources; and finally those groups with direct and easy access to legal permanent residency and those for whom a large proportion are undocumented and hence consigned to live in the shadows.

Similar to assimilation theory, segmented assimilation theory anticipates individual level resources to matter in the lives of the second generation but further posits that group membership exerts an *independent causal* impact on second generation outcomes, and further that group membership *interacts* with individual level resources to either offset or exacerbate inequality at the individual level. Authors such as Portes, Rumbaut and Zhou argue that the impact of group membership can be conceptualized as the "context of reception" of one's national origin group in a particular locality: one facet distinguishes between predominantly white / European origin groups and non-white groups, due to racism both current and historical; another between highly educated groups and those of agrarian or lower skilled backgrounds; and another between those who are recognized as refugees or arrive primarily with work and education visas and those groups for whom a large proportion are undocumented.

The International Perspective

Combining the individual level variables of neo-assimilation theory with the group level predictors of segmented assimilation theory, my co-authors and I present what we have called *the international perspective*, a new, more comprehensive model of second generation variation which combines explanation at both the individual and group level while also keeping both sending and receiving country in view. Our forthcoming book *Ori-*

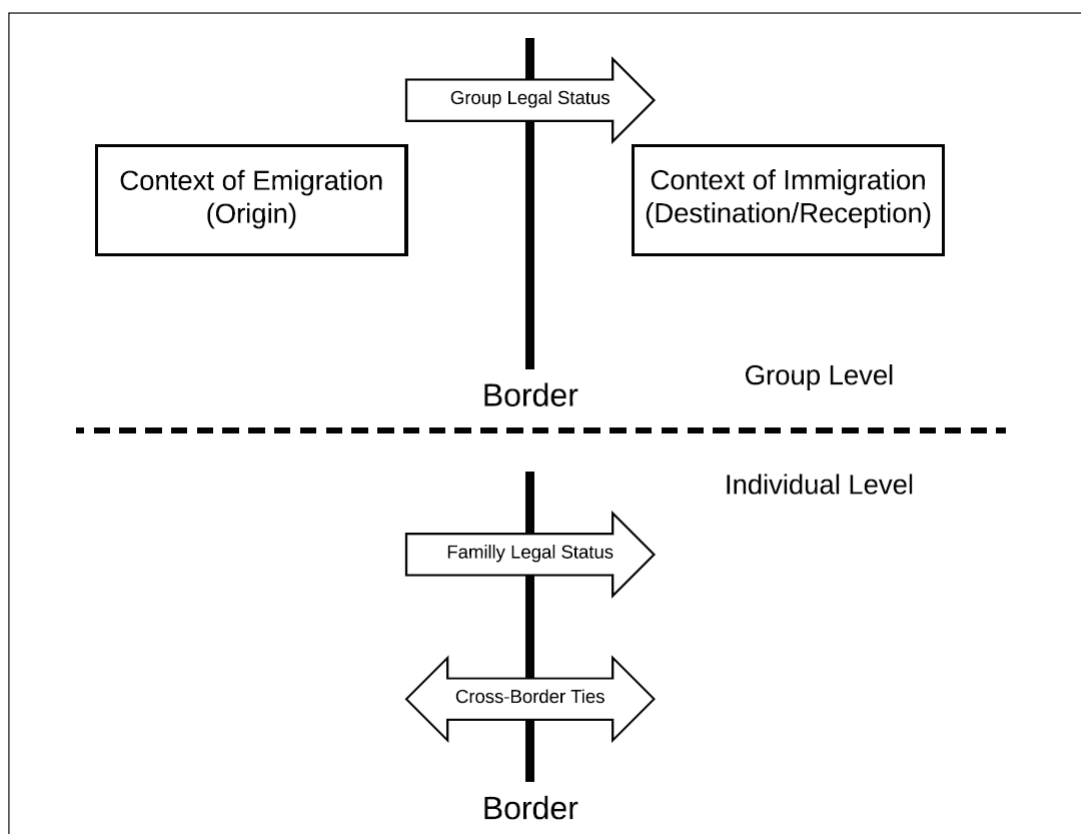


Figure 3.

gins and Destinations: The Making of the Second Generation elaborates this model in full, but below I sketch out the main idea and provide a few key findings.

The destiny of the second generation unfolds after migration; with few exceptions, scholars examine that process with their backs to the receiving country border. By contrast, the international perspective contends that the influences related to both the spanning and delimiting of national, political boundaries comprise the salient traits distinguishing the children of immigrants from all others. This perspective underscores the shared conditions linked to place of origins that produce inter-ethnic differences while also highlighting the household level at-entry characteristics and subsequent life course decisions that produce intra-ethnic, family-level variation.

Taken together, this explanatory model includes determinants of second generation difference mapped in a two-dimensional space, visualized in Figure 3 below. On the vertical axis, we consider the level of influence: what are the most important characteristics

of the immigrants themselves, and of the national origin groups to which they belong, in determining a range of socioeconomic, political, and cultural outcomes? On the upper half of this axis, which we conceptualize as the contexts of emigration and immigration, lie group-level traits: the salient attributes prevalent in the sending country and among the co-ethnic community residing in the United States. On the lower half, lie individual factors – similar to those emphasized in neo-assimilation theory. However, the international perspective also foregrounds *international* influences, namely social ties to the country of origin and their family level experiences of alien status.

On the horizontal axis, we consider the *location* of influence: unlike the children of US born parents, the children of immigrants are likely to be shaped by both group *and* individual level factors that operate on *both* sides of the US border. At the top right stand the context of *destination* factors which arise within the United States; at the top left are found the context of *origin* factors deriving from the countries from which the parents departed.

In the bottom half, denoting the individual level characteristics, are individual and family level traits which extend across places; the international locations of significant others and the ensuing cross-border engagements, as well as the initial legal status at arrival which reflects decisions made by both immigrants and states when the former are still living in the origin country.

The relative importance of these influences varies depending on the outcome under consideration. In the section below, we provide a few key findings from the application of this model to a range of second generation domains.

Some Key Findings with the International Perspective

The international perspective *synthesizes* the main insights of both the neo-assimilation and segmented assimilation frameworks while introducing new variables specific to the study of *international* migration that operate at both the individual and group level. Two main findings from this expanded model are, firstly, that individual level characteristics generally explain more variation in second generation outcomes than do group level characteristics; secondly, variation in legal

status, a distinctive consequence of international migration, is an important predictor of second generation trajectories.

Intra- vs. Inter-group variation

One of the key goals in understanding second generation outcomes is to identify the source of variation: is the most important determinant of second generation success in schooling, for instance, the characteristics of one's family and individual behaviours, such as highest parental education or language use in the home? Or are the most important determinants of educational attainment the characteristics of the immigrant community and sending country – group level characteristics – such as the average level of schooling or government reception of the national level group?

A unique feature of the multi-level model used in the international perspective is that it allows us to quantify the answers to questions such as these. Using multi-level models predicting the years of completed education among the children of immigrants in Los Angeles and New York, we estimated the associated rise in educational and occupational attainment among the second generation from moving to having the most favourable char-

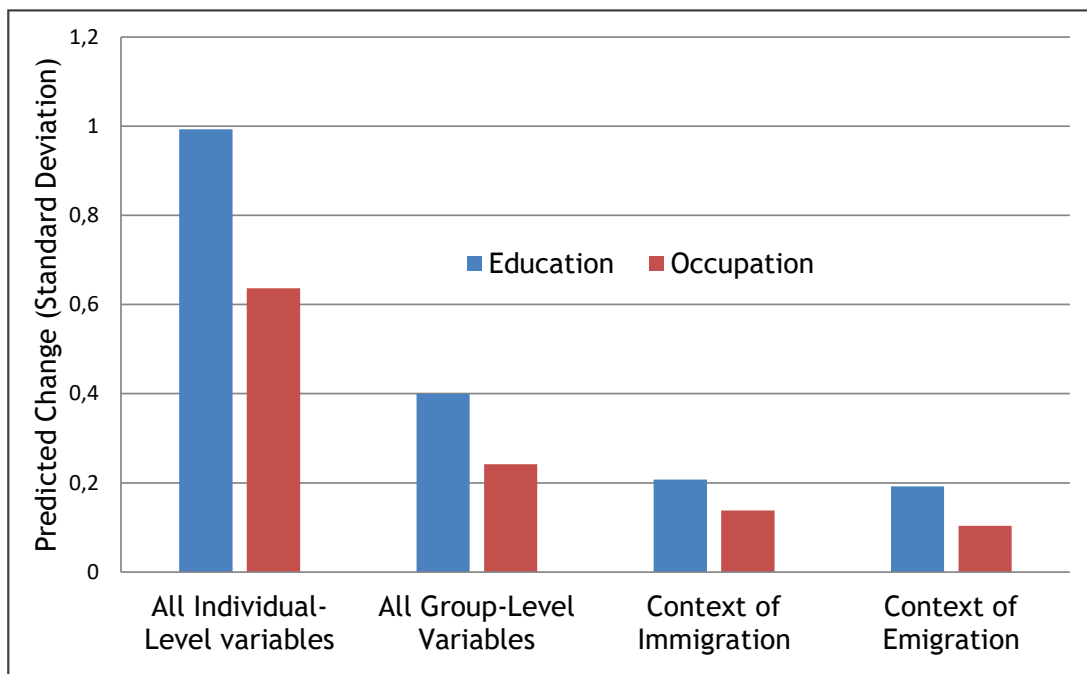


Figure 4. Source: Authors Compilations from IIMMLA and ISGMNY Data.

acteristics at the individual level (parents educated at the 75th percentile, parents with occupations in the 75th percentile, being a native born US citizen, etc.) from having to the least favourable characteristics at the individual level (parents educated and in occupations at the 25th percentile, lacking US citizenship, etc.). We then did the same with group level variables, including characteristics from the context of emigration and immigration such as group level schooling, legal status, skin colour, and sending country values. The results are seen in Figure 4 below. As can be seen, the associated increase in educational or occupational attainment with a shift in individual level variables is much larger than the shift associated with a change in group level variables. Moreover, it is clear that the context of emigration — the characteristics of the sending country — are as strongly associated with educational and occupational attainment as the characteristics of the context of immigration in the receiving country.

Legal Status

As seen in Figure 3, a key variable of interest in the international perspective is legal status — whether the second generation members themselves have citizenship, legal permanent residency, or are undocumented, as well as whether they are raised in a family in which all members have naturalized or where a parent remains outside the polity or lacks legal status altogether. Figure 5 below shows the distribution of citizenship within families of the second generation in New York and Los Angeles; the left hand bar shows distributions for those where the second generation respondent was born in the United States, and the right hand bar represents those who were born abroad but arrived before the age of 14. Among the children of immigrants born abroad, nearly one in five have yet to naturalize in adulthood, with parents who remain outside the citizenry as well. While all US born second generation members enjoy birth right citizenship, many grew up in families with at least one parent who never naturalized; in nearly one in ten cases, neither parent did.

Growing up in a family with non-citizens, or lacking citizenship directly, has real consequences for the children of immigrants. We find that the children of immigrants who remain foreign nationals complete, on average, about 0.8 years of schooling less than those who do naturalize; this disadvantage remains even after extensive individual and group level controls. Similarly, those children who naturalize later (after the age of 16) are also less

likely to be civically engaged, even in forms of civic participation that do not require citizenship. Finally, a lack of legal status among parents impacts even those children who go on to naturalize themselves: the children of immigrant parents in Los Angeles who likely entered without documentation are also less likely to be civically engaged.

Conclusions and Future Research

Those seeking to explain and predict the trajectories of the descendants of immigrants are faced with a formidable task. Just like the children of native parentage, the family, school, and local context will surely influence the political, social, and economic outcomes of the second generation. Yet *unlike* the children of native parentage, the children of immigrants will also be shaped by social ties which span international boundaries and the characteristics of the localities of the parents' origin countries as well as those found in the receiving country where they grow up. Moreover, the standing of the national origin group also matters — the level of social capital, societal reception, and legal context of the group as a whole exerts an impact above and beyond the characteristics of individuals and their families. The international perspective proposed here brings together this complex set of factors in a two dimensional framework, ordering factors operating at the individual and group level and in the context of emigration and immigration. We believe that this model can be fruitfully exported to other contexts beyond the United States, for further testing, elaboration and alteration which would surely shed light on the experiences of immigrant integration worldwide.

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