

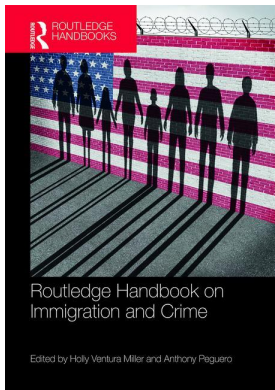
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3

THE CLASSICAL ASSIMILATION MODEL

A Controversial Canon

Ben Feldmeyer

Introduction

Throughout its history, the United States has experienced periodic waves of immigration, raising questions about how these populations would adjust to their new settings. Beginning with the European migration at the turn of the 20th century, scholars began to formulate ideas about how these processes of adaptation occurred. Their view was that immigrant populations would *assimilate* to American culture and structure over successive generations. Their families would slowly shift from being Irish, German, Italian, Polish, or Jewish, and would become “American,” shedding much of their ethnic identities as they were absorbed into American life. This “classical model of assimilation” dominated scholarly views on immigration for half a century and has become a foundational canon within research on immigration. However, this vision of assimilation has not gone unchallenged. In fact, perhaps no concept related to immigration has received more debate among scholars than the concept of assimilation.

This chapter provides a review and history of the classical assimilation model. In doing so, it traces the development of the classical assimilation perspective, outlining its core assumptions and claims. After outlining its history, this chapter will discuss the current state of the classic assimilation model and critiques of this perspective, highlighting recent observations, demographic shifts, and theoretical developments that raise questions about the validity of this once iconic picture of immigrant adaptation. Notably, we do not describe in detail all of the alternatives to the classical assimilation model (e.g., segmented and downward assimilation) because they are covered extensively in other chapters in this volume. Rather, our goal here is to review the foundations of the classical assimilation canon, highlighting elements of this perspective that remain applicable and others that have been challenged by more contemporary patterns of migration and shifting demographic contexts in the United States.

The Chicago School: The Classical Assimilation Model

Although processes of immigrant adaptation have been part of American history since before the United States was founded, the classical model of assimilation was not developed until the early 20th century. In the same way that American criminology began with the Chicago School, so too did assimilation theory. As nearly every introductory criminology textbook explains, Chicago experienced unprecedented waves of immigration, population growth, and urbanization at the turn

of the 20th century that fundamentally altered the social, physical, and demographic landscape of the city. To illustrate the magnitude of this growth, in the 1830s, Chicago was essentially a small town with less than 500 residents (Alba & Nee, 2003). Yet by 1880, a mere fifty years later, Chicago's population had grown to 500,000, and by 1910, its population would reach more than 2 million (Bulmer, 1984). In sum, Chicago had gone from a mere speck on the map to one of the largest cities in the United States by the early 20th century.

These patterns of urban expansion and population growth had tremendous impacts on Chicago and other cities experiencing similar changes. Furthermore, European immigration appeared to be at the heart of many of these changes. As Alba and Nee (2003) note, by 1910, nearly three-quarters of Chicago's population consisted of immigrants and their children. Chicago, like many other growing urban centers, had become a city defined by immigration, and scholars at the University of Chicago were perfectly positioned to record and describe these changes as they unfolded.

Park and Burgess (1925; see also Park, 1930, 1950) were the early pioneers among the Chicago School scholars to describe Chicago's urban expansion and outline the processes of immigration and adaptation occurring around them. They and their colleagues and students (e.g., Shaw & McKay, 1942; Warner & Srole, 1945; Wirth, 1928) saw several consistent patterns emerge as successive waves of German, Irish, Polish, Italian, Jewish, and Eastern European migrants (among others) relocated to Chicago. These observations formed the foundation of their iconic ecological model of city growth, which outlined the concentric zones of the city and described the patterns of invasion and succession experienced in Chicago neighborhoods. More importantly for the current chapter, these observations also formed the foundation for their views on assimilation and their explanation for how migrant groups adapted to life in the city.

Park and colleagues explained that once groups had arrived in Chicago, they quickly began to take on American practices as they adapted to their new neighborhoods, culture, environment, and work roles. In other words, they began a process of "assimilation." As Park and Burgess (1921, p. 735) described it, assimilation was "a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons and groups and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life." Similarly, in his depiction of "social assimilation" in the *Encyclopedia of the social sciences*, Park (1930, p. 281) described assimilation as "the process or processes by which peoples of diverse racial origins and different cultural heritages, occupying a common territory, achieve cultural solidarity." Or even more simply, Park (1930, p. 281) explained that an immigrant is assimilated "as soon as he has shown that he can 'get on in the country.'"

In their observations, Park and colleagues saw that first-generation migrants arrived on American soil with little connection to American culture or structure. The European groups coming to Chicago in the late 1800s and early 1900s were largely from small, rural communities and had been accustomed to rural life. Thus, as soon as they arrived in Chicago, they had to begin adapting to an urban setting and to new industrial work roles, which influenced everything from family life and parenting to gender roles and leisure activities (see Alba & Nee, 2003; Gans, 1974). For example, as Warner and Srole (1945) outlined, fathers became less present in the home and family due to the shift from agricultural to industrial work. In rural settings, parents had often worked alongside children, training the next generation of the family for agricultural work. Likewise, both fathers' and mothers' work roles had kept them near the home and in close contact with children. In contrast, the industrial jobs in their new urban homes drew men to worksites away from the home, which meant that fathers were increasingly separated from the family. In addition, because women were often excluded from the workforce, their roles became much more confined to the home and community (Warner & Srole, 1945). As a result, families and newly arriving ethnic groups were immediately faced with shifting cultures and routines as they were thrust into new urban environments and work roles. As Gans (1974, p. ix) suggests, ethnic immigrants "became an urban

proletariat, and almost at once had to shed those parts of the peasant culture which conflicted with their need to survive in the cities.”

Park and colleagues noted that immigrant groups increasingly began to rely on English, while use of their traditional languages faded over successive generations. In addition, ethnic groups began to take on patterns of American consumption as they were exposed to American media and advertising, purchased consumer goods, and participated in local recreational activities and entertainment (Gans, 1974; Park & Burgess, 1921; Warner & Srole, 1945). Essentially, the Chicago School scholars saw that as each group moved to inner-city Chicago, they were immersed in American life and began to work, talk, live, and play like others who were already there. After several generations, they slowly shifted from being clearly identifiable groups of ethnic immigrants to being enmeshed in mainstream American life and seen as “Americans.”

They argued that each of the ethnic groups migrating to the United States experienced what seemed to be “indistinguishable incorporation” (Glazer, 1993, p. 127). Researchers described a process in which groups would become more and more like one another through extended exposure and would blend together, with fewer and fewer signs of their origins remaining with each generation. At its core, this notion that groups would simply become more similar with exposure over time formed the underlying principle of the classical assimilation model, which by itself seemed fairly reasonable and was not that controversial. However, some of the other assumptions and additions to the classical assimilation model attracted much stronger criticism.

Assumptions of the Classical Assimilation Model

In describing assimilation, the Chicago School scholars cast it as a natural, inevitable, and unavoidable process, assumptions that have all been questioned extensively. The cycle of interaction, adaptation, and incorporation seemed to repeat itself with each successive group that passed through the urban core of Chicago. As such, Park (1950) and colleagues began to view this process as a standard, almost preordained, phenomenon that occurred with immigration. In the same way, they portrayed city growth as a “natural” process mimicking plant ecology, they also believed that assimilation was akin to a force of nature that was unavoidable and largely unstoppable (see Glazer, 1993).

In his own words, Park explained that this cycle of “contact, competition, accommodation and eventual assimilation is apparently progressive and irreversible. Customs regulations, immigration restrictions and racial barriers may slacken the tempo of the movement . . . but cannot change its direction; cannot at any rate reverse it” (Park, 1950, p. 150). After all, many different ethnic groups with varied cultures and backgrounds had settled in the urban core of Chicago. But several generations later, each group seemed to have moved toward the same end result. Nearly all of them had begun to merge into mainstream middle-class American life through similar pathways and with generally similar outcomes.

In line with this view, the classical model of assimilation has also been characterized as “straight-line assimilation,” based on the notion that each ethnic group experienced the same one-directional process toward integration (Gans, 1974; Sandberg, 1974). This model portrayed assimilation as a systematic process with a relatively clear beginning and endpoint. Each group started at a similar place as an identifiable ethnic group that was unaccustomed to American lifestyles, language, customs, and norms (though some more than others). They would then slowly progress along a multi-generational pathway toward full incorporation, ending when they were indistinguishably one-and-the-same with other members of mainstream American society. According to this model, traditions, culture, and language of their predecessors would largely be left behind as children and grandchildren moved along this pathway of assimilation, with only occasional tributes to heritage showing up at family gatherings, holiday meals, and special occasions (Gans, 1974). Scholars did acknowledge some differences among groups in their movement on this preordained path, but

as Alba and Nee (2003, p. 22) note, “the assumption that assimilation was the point on the horizon toward which all groups were moving, albeit in some cases with glacial slowness, was unquestioned.”

Notably, this classical, linear model of assimilation did not only describe changes in culture. It also described a structural and economic pattern of adaptation that portrayed assimilation as a form of “progress” and something that should be embraced by immigrant groups. According to the classical model, blending in with the American mainstream was beneficial and a necessary step to achieve economic success. After all, Park and colleagues had seen migrant groups repeatedly start from positions of poverty and then systematically move toward economic stability and financial success as they integrated into American life. Based on their observations, it seemed that the faster and more efficiently that an ethnic group could shed its distinguishing characteristics, the more quickly they could climb the ladder of social mobility. Ethnic status and “peasant culture,” as Gans (1974, p. ix) notes, were seemingly intertwined with marginal economic positions. Thus, adopting the traits of the American majority was considered essential for advancement, and maintaining an ethnic identity was seen as a barrier for success.

In fact, in some more controversial treatments of classical assimilation, the degree to which ethnic groups had blended into American social roles was itself used as a metric for their “success” (see reviews in Alba & Nee, 2003; Barkan, 1995). Perhaps the most well-known example was provided by Warner and Srole’s (1945) classic account of adaptation in *Yankee City* (a pseudonym for an urban area in New England), in which they rank ordered groups in racial/ethnic hierarchies based on their ability to integrate with white Protestant, middle-class American society. As they described it, these rankings highlighted an ethnic group’s ability to “unlearn” their own traditions and the “time taken for a group to disappear” (Warner & Srole, 1945, p. 283). Their ranking system placed Western European groups (e.g., English, German, Scandinavian) toward the top of the assimilation scale and Polish, Italians, Russians, and Eastern European groups in the middle. Last, they offered generally vague or grim expectations for assimilation prospects of darker-skinned groups, which they consistently placed at the bottom of their hierarchies.

Warner and Srole’s depictions of assimilation are generally considered to be among the more controversial pieces of this canon. Their racial rankings of groups in terms of their ability to achieve “progress” through assimilation have been extensively critiqued (see reviews in Alba & Nee, 1997, 2003; Glazer, 1993). Yet, even the less controversial treatments of assimilation originally suggested that being absorbed by American society was largely beneficial. For example, Robert Park depicted assimilation as a vehicle for economic progress of ethnic groups. In addition, Park and colleagues encouraged assimilation and portrayed it as desirable because they thought that it would make life easier for newcomers. Groups that remained unassimilated faced potential prejudice and restricted opportunities, and risked being seen as “outsiders” to the American mainstream. Thus, becoming more like the majority was seen as a way of easing the burden of an ethnic group (see Alba & Nee, 2003; Glazer, 1993).

Not only was this expectation for assimilation the dominant view of the Chicago School scholars, it was also the view of the American public and many supporters of ethnic minorities. The American populace was often impatient with ethnic differences and expected immigrant groups to integrate quickly and seamlessly into mainstream American life. Likewise, even those who were sympathetic to immigrant groups encouraged them to embrace assimilation, thinking it would help ethnic migrants achieve greater social and economic opportunities and would reduce their experiences with prejudice, discrimination, and inter-group conflict (see reviews in Alba & Nee, 1997; Glazer, 1993). Taken together, there seemed to be few people suggesting alternatives to straight-line assimilation or encouraging ethnic minorities to hold onto their identities. Instead, the chorus of voices overwhelmingly suggested that advancement and opportunity required abandoning one’s heritage in order to be fully absorbed into American culture.

Although depictions of assimilation focused on structural and cultural changes, crime was also tied to this vision of “progress” through assimilation. Scholars like Park and Burgess (1925) and Shaw and McKay (1942) famously documented that crime, victimization, and other social problems such as physical and mental illness were consistently clustered in the zone of transition. The newest arriving immigrant ethnic groups, no matter who they were or where they were from, were exposed to the most dangerous settings Chicago had to offer. Yet the problems of the zone of transition appeared to result from the structural features of the community and not to the characteristics of immigrant groups that lived there. Thus, as Shaw and McKay (1942) famously illustrated, the sooner each ethnic group was able to assimilate and leave the urban core of Chicago, the faster they could escape the poverty and crime found there. Based on their observations, assimilation into the American mainstream was thought to be an ethnic group’s one-way ticket out of the zone of transition and their key to economic opportunity, inclusion, and safety from crime. Thus, it is not altogether surprising that Chicago School scholars and supporters of early 20th-century ethnic migrants encouraged assimilation and assumed it was beneficial.

Milton Gordon: *Assimilation in American life*

The basic foundation for the classical assimilation model had been established by the Chicago School. Park and colleagues offered a vision of immigrant adaptation that was widely embraced by scholars and challenged by few throughout the first half of the 20th century. However, as research on the subject grew, it became apparent that there was considerable ambiguity about what was meant by the term “assimilation.” Each treatment of assimilation seemed to differ slightly from the next. Furthermore, even scholars like Robert Park offered conflicting views and descriptions of this process.

Recognizing these issues, Gordon’s (1964) book *Assimilation in American life* sought to clarify the concept of assimilation. In doing so, he also extended the classical assimilation model in key ways that conceptually sharpened thoughts on the topic and detailed the processes and pathways through which assimilation might work. As a result, his book has become a foundational piece in the canon on assimilation and a seminal work in research on immigration and ethnicity.

Gordon’s (1964) discussion begins by highlighting the many different ways that assimilation had been described and defined in the first half of the 20th century. He explains that as research on assimilation grew, the concept was used with little consistency and had been broadly applied to describe nearly any aspect of immigrant adjustment. For example, he notes that “assimilation” was described as cultural integration in some texts, but structural integration in others. Some definitions implied that assimilation required changes in ethnic identity (e.g., groups seeing themselves as “American”), while others simply required reduced prejudice and discrimination toward members of a group. Furthermore, some scholars saw assimilation as an entirely one-way process of being absorbed by the host society, whereas others argued that characteristics of an ethnic group would and could impact the host society. In sum, the concept of assimilation appeared to be widely used, but it was not exactly clear what scholars meant when they referred to “assimilation.”

Gordon helped redefine scholarly discussions of assimilation in several key ways. First, he separated the concepts of *acculturation* (cultural assimilation) and *structural assimilation*. As he noted, these two concepts had often been blended together and used interchangeably, even though they seemed to describe different processes that did not always coincide. According to Gordon, acculturation was a process of cultural assimilation, in which immigrant groups changed their cultural practices and adopted the language, behavior, and beliefs of the host society. In contrast, Gordon (1964, pp. 70–71) explained that structural assimilation occurred when minority groups gained full entrance into the “social cliques, clubs, and institutions of the core society” and were on an equal footing with the host population.

Notably, Gordon (1964, p. 77) believed there were key differences in the ordering and inevitability of each of these forms of assimilation. He argued that acculturation “is likely to be the first step of assimilation when a minority group arrives on the scene . . . and may take place even when none of the other types of assimilation occurs.” Similar to the arguments of Park and Burgess (1925), Park (1950), and Warner and Srole (1945), Gordon (1964, p. 60) suggested that acculturation was simply a natural outcome of “what happens ‘when people meet.’” Yet, he also implied that certain cultural traits were more malleable than others. Specifically, Gordon (1964, p. 79) argued that “extrinsic cultural traits” of ethnic groups, which included things like styles of dress and use of specific words and pronunciations, were typically the first cultural characteristics to change. In contrast, “intrinsic cultural traits,” which included religious beliefs, ethical values, and core components of a group’s heritage, were much less susceptible to cultural assimilation.

He also argued that acculturation did not guarantee other forms of assimilation. Many groups might adopt the modes of language, behaviors, and beliefs of the host nation, but still be denied full access to opportunities, jobs, and institutions within that society. In fact, Gordon (1964, p. 60) suggested that even with high degrees of cultural integration, some groups might remain in the “acculturation only” phase indefinitely. Gordon (1964, p. 81) argued that structural assimilation was the lynchpin of the assimilation process and that all other forms of assimilation would “naturally follow.” However, this level of assimilation came with a price, and in his view demanded the “disappearance of the ethnic group as a separate entity and the evaporation of its distinctive values.”

In addition to cultural and structural assimilation, Gordon suggested there were five other sub-processes (for seven in total) that occurred in the larger assimilation process. As he notes, many of these components of assimilation had been mentioned in previous work, but often only in passing or without explicitly outlining how they worked. Specifically, he explained that (1) “amalgamation” occurred as an ethnic group intermarried with the majority population; (2) “identity assimilation” occurred when a group began to identify with the host society over their ethnic origins; (3) “attitude receptional assimilation” was the absence or reduction in prejudice toward a group; while (4) “behavioral receptional assimilation” occurred with the absence of discriminatory actions toward a group. Finally, (5) “civic assimilation” was achieved when an ethnic group ceased to have value and power conflicts with the host society (Gordon, 1964, p. 71).

Gordon’s seven forms of assimilation captured many of the varying elements of adjustment and integration described in earlier research and provided a clear framework for assessing the degree to which assimilation occurred for groups. Moreover, his sub-types of assimilation lent themselves well to measurement and quantitative analysis. Thus, even though Park (1930, p. 281) had described assimilation as taking place “gradually and by degrees so slight that they are not open to observation or measurement,” observation and measurement became commonplace in assimilation studies following Gordon’s work.

In many ways, Gordon’s description of assimilation and its seven sub-processes had extended the classical assimilation model and softened several of the more rigid ideas in earlier writings. For example, Gordon did not describe assimilation as universally beneficial in the same way that early scholars had, neither did he encourage all groups to seek and embrace assimilation to the degree that others suggested. In fact, in some of his final remarks in the book, Gordon (1964) suggested that cultural pluralism is likely to be a part of the future of America as he highlighted the growing diversity in American culture. Yet, almost immediately after acknowledging this, he seemed to reverse course, arguing that there are substantial gains to be made through structural assimilation processes and risks in maintaining distinctions based on ethnicity and culture.

Gordon’s (1964) work also differed from earlier Chicago School models by acknowledging possible alternatives to a one-directional model of assimilation in which minority groups were simply absorbed by a dominant majority. Specifically, he described the prospects of a “melting pot” model of assimilation, in which groups were blended together, sharing elements of their culture, structure,

and practices. In addition, he described a “cultural pluralist” model of assimilation, in which groups maintained elements of their unique identities while interacting within larger society. However, despite these discussions, Gordon’s work is commonly seen as part of the classical assimilation canon and consistent with straight-line assimilation.

In part, this is because subsequent scholars drew heavily from his work in their discussions of straight-line, classical modes of assimilation. Yet, it was also because the “melting pot” and “cultural pluralist” models were far less developed than his “Anglo-Conformity Model,” which implemented his seven sub-processes and was highly consistent with the Chicago School’s earlier depictions of assimilation. According to Gordon’s (1964, p. 73) Anglo-Conformity Model, assimilation predominantly occurred in one direction as minority groups took on the characteristics of the “core” (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant) culture in the United States. To this point, as Gordon (1964, p. 244) noted in his concluding remarks, “American-born children of immigrants, the second generation, with exceptions based on the existence of a few rigidly enclosed enclaves, should be realistically viewed as a generation irreversibly on its way to virtually complete acculturation.” Thus, despite acknowledging the melting pot and cultural pluralism models, it was clear that he expected the lion’s share of ethnic change to occur among the minority group as they systematically became more like the host society.

Douglas Massey: The Spatial Assimilation Model

Gordon’s work provided a pivotal point in the development of the classical assimilation model by clarifying the central concepts and processes at work. However, this model would see further revision and clarification with the development of Douglass Massey’s (1985) “Spatial Assimilation Model.” Although the spatial assimilation model is seen as a distinct idea, it is also considered part of the classical assimilation canon and helped reintroduce “space and place” into assimilation discussions. Harkening back to the roots of the Chicago School’s ecological model of city growth, the spatial assimilation model focuses on housing, residence, and movement, arguing that the assimilation process is spatially organized and is largely shaped by where people live.

Massey explains that when migrants first arrive in the United States, they have typically been drawn to inner-city neighborhoods where housing is cheap, low-skill jobs are plentiful, and most importantly, where they can find others who are in similar situations and have gone through similar experiences. As Massey notes, immigrants do not randomly select where to live. Instead, they tend to “chain migrate,” following friends and relatives who have gone before them and established connections with employers, housing, and key institutions in a community (Massey, 1985, p. 318). Furthermore, these patterns of chain migration reinforce themselves, bringing more and more migrants to a community and creating well-worn pathways into inner-city neighborhoods.

Following the ecological model developed by Park and Burgess (1925), Massey (1985) explains that continuous flows of immigration into urban neighborhoods create patterns of invasion and succession, where foreign-born newcomers replace native-born residents that leave. Over time, the neighborhood becomes more defined by ethnicity and immigration and home to large concentrations of the foreign-born and their children. Upon reaching a critical mass of immigrants, sections of the urban core become clearly identifiable immigrant enclaves or ethnic communities. Furthermore, as this process continues, the immigrant enclave itself expands, growing in size and spilling into neighboring communities. In the end, it produces a highly segregated cluster of co-ethnic residents that share common ancestry but are often segregated from the native-born in isolated urban enclaves.

Notably, these urban immigrant neighborhoods offer benefits to newcomers. As Massey explains, ethnic neighborhoods have been attractive to new migrants because they provide social resources that “immigrants draw upon in adjusting to life in their new, urban environment” and which offer a first step toward upward social mobility in American society (Massey, 1985, p. 318). Likewise, research indicates that these spatially concentrated immigrant communities often provide a safety net

of social support and a familiar social and cultural setting, which acts as a buffer against the strains of adapting to a new environment (Bolt, Burgers, & van Kempen, 1998; Bolt, Özüekren, & Phillips, 2010; Massey, 1985; Peach, 1996; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). Enclaves have traditionally provided roots for upward social mobility and economic advancement, including assistance with housing, employment, transportation, childcare, finances, and language barriers (Bolt et al., 1998; 2010; Leach & Bean, 2008; Light & Gold, 2000; Portes, 1995; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Zhou & Bankston, 1994). Moreover, the shared ancestry and kinship ties in ethnic enclaves strengthen community cohesion and group members' attachment to mainstream institutions like work and family, which in turn insulate residents from crime and other social problems (Feldmeyer, 2009; Feldmeyer & Steffensmeier, 2009; Lee, Martínez & Rosenfeld, 2001; Martínez, 2002; Ousey & Kubrin, 2009; Portes & Stepick, 1993). Essentially, the spatial assimilation model explains that inner-city ethnic enclaves have typically served as the initial entry points for immigrants because they provide a softer landing and easier transition for newcomers as they adjust to their new environment.

However, these enclaves and ethnic communities are often temporary homes. Massey (1985) argues that, as ethnic groups adopt American lifestyles and ideals, they tend to seek greater residential integration with the native population. By the second and third generation, immigrant populations increasingly identify with the host society, and thus, have a greater desire to live alongside the native-born. As immigrant and native populations become more similar, this also decreases barriers and conflicts that might have barred an ethnic group's entrance into neighborhoods beyond the enclave.

In addition, Massey argues that a desire for social and economic benefits is often the prime motive for leaving inner-city enclaves. Soon after arriving, newcomers begin to recognize that social mobility in the United States (and other nations) is spatially arranged. Economic opportunity depends on where you live, and advancement often requires moving to places with better schools, higher paying jobs, and to communities with greater resources. Thus, as Massey (1985, p. 320) explains, "in order to improve its position in society and to gain access to richer amenities . . . an ethnic household typically moves." More often than not, this means moving out of the lower-income, inner-city enclaves that served as initial landing points for many immigrant families and dispersing into outlying neighborhoods occupied by middle-class, native-born populations.

Consistent with classical assimilation arguments, Massey (1985) described this spatial assimilation process as somewhat unavoidable and beneficial. For a century, nearly all immigration groups seemed to progress in a straight-line path toward spatial integration that began in segregated inner-city neighborhoods and moved outward toward the edges of the city. In addition, even though enclaves provided benefits, this model suggested that leaving the urban core was an indication of a group's rising social mobility and declining experiences of prejudice and discrimination. In sum, Massey's spatial assimilation model argues that the process of assimilation is tied to residence and that where groups live is central to their ability to assimilate. Furthermore, he suggests that assimilation for most ethnic groups requires moving to opportunity, and notes that full integration into mainstream society cannot truly be achieved as long as ethnic groups remain isolated in inner-city ethnic clusters.

Critiques of the Classical Model of Assimilation

In the preceding pages, we have described the core components of the classical assimilation model. In short, this model presents a vision of immigrant adjustment that occurs in a one-way, straight-line progression. Ethnic groups enter a host society as a clearly identifiable group, often settling in isolated inner-city enclaves that serve as temporary starting points. Ethnic immigrants are then thought to embark on an unavoidable process of "assimilation," in which they increasingly begin to live with, speak, act, work, play, and think like Americans. The classical model argues that all ethnic groups

undergo assimilation, and although the process moves more quickly for some than for others, integrating with the host society is the final destination toward which all groups are moving. Moreover, this model suggests that the faster a group blends in with the mainstream, the more structural opportunities they are likely to see.

For more than half a century, this classical model of assimilation was the dominant vision of immigrant adaptation. However, the concept of assimilation and especially the classical assimilation model has received intense criticism in recent decades and is no longer seen as the reigning perspective it once was. As Alba and Nee (2003) note, assimilation is now largely seen as an antiquated concept that is laden with Anglo-oriented biases and which ignores enduring patterns of diversity and multiculturalism in American society. Likewise, Glazer's (1993) essay, simply titled "Is Assimilation Dead?" poignantly captures the tenuous position of the assimilation canon and the classical assimilation model. Echoing Glazer, how did a model of assimilation that once dominated the discipline become so taboo that it has been relegated to a backdrop in discussions of immigration?

Notably, the classical assimilation model's fall from grace appears to have stemmed from a variety of faults and critiques. First, a key problem with this model is that it has been fairly ambiguous about what exactly assimilation means. Some definitions suggest more benign versions of integration in which people simply begin to take on the characteristics of one another with increased interaction (e.g., Park & Burgess, 1921). Yet others assume that minority groups will be completely absorbed by the majority, and that this process is a form of progress that should be embraced by the minority (e.g., Warner & Srole, 1945). Moreover, early conceptualizations of assimilation were unclear as to whether the assimilation process referred to cultural integration, structural integration, or other aspects of identity and adaptation, such as elimination of prejudice toward a group (see reviews in Alba & Nee, 1997, 2003; Barkan, 1995). Over time, authors like Gordon (1964) helped clarify the different sub-processes at work in the classical model, recognizing that assimilation likely had multiple components. However, as Barkan (1995, p. 38) aptly notes, descriptions of assimilation have largely seen only "marginal consistency" and a "muddling of meanings."

A second critique of the classical assimilation model is that, for much of its development, it was fairly light on theory. As outlined in this chapter, early depictions in the classical assimilation canon primarily offered descriptive accounts, highlighting the patterns and pathways through which ethnic groups adapt to a new host society. In contrast, Park and colleagues provided little theoretical explanation for the mechanisms behind these processes. In other words, the classical model gave considerable attention to the "what" and the "how" in assimilation processes, but offered little discussion of *why* these processes exist (see reviews in Alba & Nee, 1997, 2003). In fact, it was not until Shibutani and Kwan (1965) published their seminal book, *Ethnic Stratification: A Comparative Approach*, that classical assimilation moved beyond a descriptive portrayal and gained a more nuanced theoretical treatment that could account for the larger social forces driving assimilation processes. Specifically, Shibutani and Kwan drew upon symbolic interactionism to explain how humans naturally categorize people and define them based on perceptions of group characteristics. As a result, this process of defining and classifying people creates social distances between racial/ethnic groups and demarcations that inhibit interaction, integration, and assimilation. Thus, it is not until these social distances decline that groups are able to assimilate with the majority population. Notably, subsequent work would build upon and revise elements of Shibutani and Kwan's interactionist theory of assimilation. However, the key point for the current discussion is that, prior to their work, the classical assimilation model had developed without a consistent, cohesive theoretical story that could explain why these processes occurred.

Third, one of the key critiques of the classical assimilation model centers around the idea that ethnic groups would be completely absorbed by the majority group. As Alba and Nee (2003, pp. 1–2) describe, the expectation by many scholars was that "minority groups would inevitably want to shed their own cultures, as if these were old skins no longer possessing any vital force, and wrap themselves

in the mantle of Anglo-American culture.” In sum, the assimilation process seemed to demand that ethnic identity would evaporate as groups became fully immersed in a new host culture, leaving little to nothing of their heritage. However, research indicates that this idea of “total assimilation” is wholly inaccurate. As Higham (1975, p. 234) explained “no ethnic group, once established in the United States, has ever entirely disappeared.” In fact, research documents many examples of ethnic heritage and customs being preserved, cherished, and reinvigorated, rather than replaced or scrapped for another (see Barkan, 1995). Thus, if assimilation occurs, it does not seem to be the all-consuming force that the classical model portrayed.

To be fair, scholars now acknowledge that this idea of total immersion and erasing one’s ethnic identity may not have been what Park originally had in mind when describing assimilation. Rather, the “total assimilation” idea seemed to develop later from those who added to the classical assimilation canon, and from critics who pointed to more extreme versions of the concept to highlight its faults (see reviews in Alba & Nee, 2003; Greenman & Xie, 2008). Yet, this critique is not completely unwarranted. Early conceptualizations clearly did suggest that many ethnic characteristics would be wiped away and that assimilation required a “willingness of the dominant group to absorb and of the minority to be absorbed” (Wirth, 1945, p. 38).

A fourth critique of this model, related to the previous point, centers on the assumption that change is largely one-directional and that assimilation occurs in the “straight-line” path that Gans (1974) outlined. According to this model, the minority group experiences most of the change. In contrast, the host culture is seen as an established fixture that is relatively inflexible and is nearly impervious to change. As new ethnic groups are added to the population, they adapt, but the core society does not. Notably, founders of the classical assimilation model did acknowledge that some elements of ethnicity and minority group culture could creep into the host society and become part of the American social landscape. However, these were generally thought to be small changes and concessions, such as adoption of certain foods, clothing preferences, or words and phrases that do not shape the core culture or institutions.

Scholars have critiqued these assumptions because they ignore ways that American culture and institutions have changed in response to immigration and the introduction of new cultures. American mainstream culture may not be overhauled by each incoming ethnic group, but it also is not a concrete fixture. Rather, it is simply a combination of the peoples and cultures that make up the American populace, which is ever evolving and shifting. Eventually, concepts like the “melting pot,” cultural pluralism, and multiculturalism, which suggested that ethnic groups contribute to American culture, would gain momentum and become preferred over classical assimilation positions (e.g., see Alba & Nee, 1997, 2003). However, until this occurred, the dominant view on assimilation was that ethnic groups added little flavor to the “melting pot” and instead were simply absorbed by the American mainstream.

Fifth, one of the most damning critiques of the classical assimilation model is that it was thought to be an omnibus process that applied to all minority groups as they were slowly blended into the mainstream host society (Gordon, 1964). However, scholars have raised several serious questions and critiques about this assumption, arguing that for some, assimilation is neither guaranteed nor completely desired. Notably, for many early arriving European groups, the adjustment process may have closely aligned with the classical assimilation model. German, Irish, Polish, and Jewish immigrants tended to become increasingly integrated with native middle-class white populations after several generations. However, immigration has changed since this early era of European migration, and it is clear that the classical model of assimilation did not have Latino, Asian, and especially black populations in mind when formed.

In contrast to the European migrants of the early 1900s, immigration to the United States in the late 20th and early 21st centuries has largely come from Asia and Central and South America. These newer migrant groups come with wholly different cultural traditions and backgrounds. In addition,

their experiences of adaptation in American life are complicated by racial distinctions and histories of racial conflict and prejudice (e.g., Japanese internment camps) that were not experienced by earlier generations of migrants. Furthermore, and perhaps most concerning, African Americans have largely been ignored in the classical assimilation canon as it depicted how minority populations would interact with mainstream American culture (see review in Glazer, 1993).

Minority groups such as African Americans and contemporary immigrant groups (e.g., Mexican, Chinese, Vietnamese) face a history of barriers for upward mobility that earlier groups did not experience. Early scholars, like Park and Burgess (1925) and Warner and Srole (1945), argued that economic gains and integration would proceed at different paces for each group. However, they still assumed that all minority groups were moving toward integration, and moreover, desired to be absorbed into the Anglo-Saxon Protestant core of American society. Yet, even as they presented this universal model, they questioned whether it truly applied to blacks and whether integration would, in fact, progress for some minority groups.

Although each of these groups may experience some cultural shifts with time in the United States, integration and especially structural assimilation has been far from guaranteed for all minority populations. For decades, scholars have highlighted the barriers for employment, education, equal pay, and residential integration facing minority groups, describing their situations as akin to “American Apartheid” (Massey & Denton, 1993) and “Divergent Social Worlds” (Peterson & Krivo, 2010). Thus, it is no surprise that, as Glazer (1993, p. 135) notes, for many minority groups, the “American national ideal of inclusion, of assimilation, understandably rings false.”

Sixth, one of the greatest critiques of the classical assimilation model is that it equated assimilation with progress and advancement. Thus, it described a process in which advancement meant becoming like those in the host society and taking on characteristics of American mainstream populations to gain greater opportunities. However, as other chapters in this volume highlight in greater detail, adaptation and integration with native-born populations has not always guaranteed better outcomes for the second and third generation.

Perhaps the strongest critiques of this assumption have stemmed from the Segmented Assimilation and Downward Assimilation models (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Portes & Zhou, 1993; Zhou, 1997). As these models aptly note, the second and third generations do not always experience upward mobility compared to the first generation. Although some of the children and grandchildren of immigrants integrate into the structural and cultural life of the mainstream American middle class, others may not. In fact, as other chapters in this volume highlight, there is a tendency for second- and third-generation populations to have higher rates of crime, delinquency, and other social problems compared to first-generation migrants. Thus, these perspectives have raised considerable skepticism about the one-directional pathway toward “success” that the classical model described. Instead, scholars now suggest that there are multiple groups and cultures to which ethnic groups may assimilate, some of which could pull second- and third-generation migrants into gang activity, criminal environments, and disadvantaged communities that offer little opportunity for advancement. These perspectives suggest that there is no guarantee that becoming more like Americans naturally reduces crime and social problems for neighborhoods. Instead, it may depend upon the part of American culture to which a group assimilates.

Last, researchers have begun to reconsider some of the assumptions on migration described in the spatial assimilation position. As the reader may recall, Massey (1985) and the early Chicago School researchers explained how migrants moved into inner-city ethnic enclaves and then slowly integrated with native-born populations, moving outward toward the edges of the city (Massey, 1985; see reviews in Alba & Nee, 1997, 2003; Portes & Jensen, 1989; Sanders & Nee, 1987). Although this characterized early European settlement to the United States, immigration patterns have radically shifted since the 1990s. Immigrants have increasingly begun moving to rural communities and to non-traditional destinations inside the interior of the United States, rather than exclusively settling

in border cities and established immigrant gateways. Even within “traditional” destination cities, growing shares of immigrants are bypassing ethnic neighborhoods and are instead moving directly to suburbs, exurbs, and commuter zones in which foreign-born populations are more dispersed among the American-born and in which there is often no established immigrant enclave (Alba, Logan, Stults, Marzan, & Zhang, 1999; Alba & Nee, 1997, 2003; Donato, Tolbert, Nucci, & Kawano, 2008; Peach, 1996). Likewise, when foreign-born populations do move into traditional ethnic enclaves, they are leaving for other areas both in and outside of the city faster than in prior generations (Alba & Nee, 1997, 2003; Funkhouser, 2000). Thus, it is unclear whether this vision of spatial assimilation will apply equally well to a newer era of immigration that looks less like the early 20th-century migration to Chicago.

In light of these critiques and challenges to the classical assimilation model, it is no surprise that many have come to see assimilation as a flawed concept, inspiring Glazer’s (1993) oft-quoted question, “Is Assimilation Dead?” On the one hand, the classical assimilation model could hardly be described as thriving and has clearly fallen from its place of prominence within immigration research. But on the other, as Glazer (1993), Alba and Nee (1997, 2003), and others (e.g., Barkan, 1995) suggest, there still appears to be some life left in the concept of assimilation. At its core, the basic concept of assimilation still seems to hold value, suggesting that groups of people tend to take on one another’s characteristics, tendencies, and behaviors with increased exposure over time. For over a century, scholars have watched this pattern unfold as immigrant ethnic groups entered the United States and have slowly taken on many of the cultural characteristics and tendencies of native-born populations. As such, scholars like Alba and Nee (1997, p. 827) still maintain that assimilation “offers the best way to understand and describe the integration into the mainstream experienced across generations by many individuals and ethnic groups, even if it cannot be regarded as a universal outcome of American life.”

This does not mean that the critiques of the classical assimilation model should be overlooked. As described earlier, there have been some serious problems in early depictions of assimilation that have led the classical assimilation canon to its current state of controversy and disrepute. However, the classical model’s most serious flaws seem to lie not in the basic principles of assimilation, but in the model’s sweeping assumptions and claims that assimilation is inevitable, one-directional, and universally beneficial across all race and ethnic groups. Thus, despite its rocky past, social scientists are hesitant to toss aside the concept of assimilation altogether. Rather, scholars suggest that, at its core, assimilation continues to provide a valuable tool for understanding the experiences of immigrant adaptation and integration, even if the picture offered by the classical assimilation model was painted with far too broad brush strokes.

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