

Second-Generation Question Mark

By Tamar Jacoby

The Real Test Is How Immigrants' Children Will Do

Arjun Malhotra is a classic immigrant success story, albeit with a modern twist. His first entrepreneurial triumph was back at home in India, where he and five buddies started a business in his grandmother's attic; today, HCL is the largest information technology company in India. Since arriving in the United States in 1989, Malhotra has built two enterprises from the ground up, one of them an Internet consulting firm that expects to earn \$60 million in the coming year. Like countless immigrants before him, the soft-spoken, frugal engineer—he still wears a watch he bought in India 20 years ago—has managed to combine the best of both worlds: the discipline and drive ingrained in him in the old country and the unparalleled freedom to reinvent yourself that is the hallmark of America. Still, for all his success, Malhotra is worried about his children. “Are they going to have the same drive I had?” he asks. “I don’t think they will. I *had* to make something of myself. I had nothing else to rely on. But that’s not true in their case, and I think their lives will look very different than mine.”

It’s a common worry, and if anything, Malhotra’s is a mild case. After years of boundless optimism about the likely fate of immigrants and their children, the conventional wisdom among scholars who study them turned markedly darker about a decade ago. The concern began when economists warned of the “declining quality” of the migrants who have arrived since the 1960s, many of them unskilled and poorly educated, destined for the lowest rungs of the American economic ladder. Then, in the early ’90s, two seminal academic articles appeared—one by the eminent sociologist Herbert Gans, the other by Cuban-born scholar Alejandro Portes and a

young collaborator, Min Zhou—warning that the newcomers’ children might do even worse than their parents did. Neither essay was based on empirical findings; there was virtually no research yet on the new second generation. But both offered deeply troubling speculative scenarios, and two grim catch-phrases entered the social-science lexicon: “second-generation decline” and “segmented assimilation”—the likelihood, that is, that some immigrants will assimilate into the middle class, while others assimilate into poverty and the pathologies that come with it. Scholars and public alike began to notice disturbing indices: the large number of Vietnamese refugees on welfare, the rise in Dominican single-parent families, the alarming high-school drop-out rate among Mexican-Americans. Some pessimists began to talk with alarm about the prospect of a permanent immigrant underclass.

Nearly ten years later, the jury is still out. By now, according to informed estimates, recent immigrants and their children account for nearly 60 million Americans, or close to one-fifth of the population. Until recently, it was the parents who got most of the attention, with press and public drawn to their stirring

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stories of struggle and determination. But in fact, the successes and failures of the second generation, both those born here and those who come as small children, will be far more important in setting the course for ethnic America. Will they learn English? Will they assimilate? Will they make it into the middle class?

This second generation hails from dozens of countries and every conceivable social class, ranging from Arjun Malhotra's millionaire offspring to the children of illiterate Nicaraguan farm workers. The majority have not yet reached adulthood, and their fortunes are far from certain. Portes, now a professor at Princeton, predicts that most will follow a middle course. They won't move up as steadily or easily as the children of the European immigrants who arrived a hundred years ago; nor will they have as much trouble as the blacks and Puerto Ricans who began to enter the middle class in the 1950s. But even this scenario leaves room for a wide array of possibilities, and as their numbers grow a large question mark hangs over the second generation: What affect will they have on the nation they are joining?

The past decade has seen a small explosion of academic interest in the children of immigrants, and some of the research being done supports the gloomy predictions of the early '90s. Two major sociological surveys are under way. One, known as the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS), followed more than 5,000 young people over a period of several years and has produced countless articles and four books, with two more in the works. A second study, overseen by a trio of scholars based at the Russell Sage Foundation, is just now beginning to generate data and will also bear fruit in a welter of publications. Still other projects have zeroed in on particular communities, with researchers observing and inter-

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Someone Else's House: America's Unfinished Struggle for Integration.

viewing intensively among, say, Vietnamese refugees in New Orleans, or West Indian families in New York. Almost all of these scholars—a small and interconnected group—are heavily influenced by Gans and Portes (also the co-director of CILS), and much of their work reflects a shared skepticism. “The concern that the grown-up children of today's immigrants won't make it,” writes Zhou, “runs like a red thread through today's burgeoning scholarly corpus.”

The causes of this concern are many and varied. They begin with the educational backgrounds of the parents. Recent immigrants from some countries are highly skilled: over 60 percent of Indians, for example, have completed four years of college (compared to 25 percent of native-born Americans). But many other new arrivals come with little learning: According to one astounding count, in a full quarter of immigrant households, the *most* educated parent has completed less than 8 years of school. Many of these immigrants settle in harsh inner cities where jobs are scarce and schools are poor. Together, the combination of what social scientists call weak “human capital” and “structural conditions” can make it seem all but impossible for immigrant children to succeed.

Many of the enclaves where the newcomers settle are rife with crime, drugs, gangs, broken families, and poverty. Two reporters from the *Los Angeles Times* who followed second-generation graduates of L.A.'s Belmont High School tell story after story of young people threatened or swallowed by the street life around them. One pair of Vietnamese girls are hardly allowed out of the house except to go to school. An Eagle Scout from Colombia who wanted to be a policeman is crippled by random gunshot between rival gangs in his neighborhood. A promising Mexican-American art student must give up his career plans when his alcoholic father is killed in a car crash and he has to get a job to support the family. After nearly a decade of studying newly arrived families in impoverished

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white people they know are the ones they see on TV," explains John Mollenkopf, one of the three researchers running the Russell Sage study.

These experiences and the discrimination many immigrants encounter often drive them to angry, "oppositional" politics. Among the most disturbing of the CILS findings concern the racial and ethnic identities of the second generation. By the time they were seniors in high school, only a third of the young people interviewed identified themselves as Americans or hyphenated Americans. The rest—and even many who *had* seen themselves as "American" a few years before—now classed themselves as simply blacks or Latinos or, reverting back, Mexicans, Filipinos, and Vietnamese.

Still, for all the bad news, there is much—arguably a good deal more—that argues for hopefulness. According to the CILS results, immigrant high school students in the two cities studied, Miami and San Diego, have uniformly higher grades than their native-born classmates. They also drop out less: between half and a third as often. They do far more homework than the other kids in their neighborhoods, spending an average of two hours per day, compared to a national figure of about 30 minutes. Poverty and its hardships do little to dim their ardor: A full 50 percent of California's Vietnamese families are on welfare, but their children are the least likely of any to drop out, and most earn above-average grades. Two-thirds of those interviewed believe that hard work and accomplishment can triumph over any prejudice they've experienced, and about that many (the figure varies slightly with age) say there is no better country than the United States. Perhaps most important, virtually all are adapting linguistically: though nine out of 10 speak another language at home, by the end of high school, 88 percent prefer English. "English is winning," says Rubén Rumbaut, the other co-director of the CILS project. "This generation is going to switch to English even faster than the European immigrants of a hundred years ago."

New Orleans and Los Angeles, Min Zhou is overwhelmed by how difficult it can be just to get through an inner-city school. "It's a daily struggle to get there, never mind succeed," she says.

Still other researchers describe how immigrant kids are influenced—often negatively—by the native-born minorities they meet at school or work. Third- and fourth-generation Hispanics mock children of immigrants for doing their homework; they call them "wannabes" and accuse them of "acting white." Black co-workers instruct West Indians that what seems like rudeness from white colleagues is really racism. It doesn't help that many of the newcomers rarely encounter successful, educated Americans. "The only 'ordinary' middle-class

Many scholars who study the second generation now say that the pessimism of the early '90s was overblown. Though most of them feel there is reason for concern about the future, in fact it's hard to find a thoroughgoing pessimist in the bunch. There is no question that some groups are doing better than others: Chinese, Koreans, and Indians are invariably at the top of their class, Latinos—particularly Mexicans—are at or near the bottom. But in today's booming economy, even the least educated find work, and the overall performance of the CILS group has laid to rest most scholars' worries about a permanent immigrant underclass.

As for the prediction that many immigrants will assimilate into a "culture of poverty," this too seems exaggerated today. "Let's not confuse their lifestyle choices—their taste in clothes and entertainment—with real underclass behavior like criminal activity or dropping out of the labor force," argues Philip Kasinitz, one of the trio leading the Russell Sage study. "Eating junk food, watching TV, doing less homework, a loosening of family ties—that isn't 'ghetto,' that's America, and for all its problems, America is still a strong, vibrant society. I don't see how you can say we're doomed just because many immigrants' children are becoming more like us than their parents are."

Still other scholars—outside the small, interconnected band of dominating big research programs—make an even more hopeful case. "The issue—the only issue—is trajectory," says Gregory Rodriguez, an independent researcher associated with the New America Foundation. Rather than asking whether the children of immigrants are doing as well as average Americans, people like Rodriguez, Harvard professor Stephan Thernstrom, and RAND Corporation analyst James Smith suggest, we should be asking only whether these young people are becoming more successful than their parents. "In educational attainment, income, occupation, rates of homeownership—you name it—there is strong and clear-cut evidence of generational progress," says Thernstrom.

These more optimistic scholars reject the pessimists' premises and sometimes their numbers. "Yes," Smith explains, "20 percent of all Americans finish college and only 11 percent of Latinos do. But if you asked how many American children or *junior high school dropouts* finish college, you'd have a very different ratio—and that's the fair comparison with the children of Mexican immigrants." No one imagines the climb will be easy for newcomers like this, but in the long run the more hopeful scholars see little reason to be concerned, as long as the American education system continues to function adequately. "Not everyone arriving today is going to assimilate as fast as the Jews," concedes Thernstrom. "But think about the Italians or the Poles or the Slovaks. Like the poorest of today's immigrants they too came from rural, peasant backgrounds, and though it took them a few generations, they eventually integrated."

Which camp is right? The issue on which the pessimists are most plausible and troubling is the question of Latino educational attainment. With Mexicans accounting for between 20 and 30 percent of the second generation, they will do more than any other group to determine the bottom line for today's

newcomers. Yet—and there's no dispute about this—they are faring the worst of any recent arrivals, with Central Americans and Dominicans not far behind.

The Hispanic educational gap starts with the first generation and repeats itself among their children. Close to 60 percent of newcomers from some Asian countries have college degrees; less than 5 percent of Mexicans do. According to CILS, in the San Diego and Miami schools, Asian grades rarely sink below A and B; Latino averages hover around C or lower. Hispanics drop out more frequently than any other group; far fewer of them aspire to go to college. When they do embark on higher education many fewer get degrees, and this is eventually reflected in their occupational status. Nor can these gaps be fully explained just by class differences: Cuban Americans, who come from more privileged backgrounds than most immigrants, also have alarming dropout rates and among the worst grades of any group. "Latino educational attainment is the big elephant in the immigration data, and it's hard not to be pessimistic about it," says Mary Waters, the third member of the Russell Sage trio. "Statistically, the Mexicans dwarf all other groups. They're doing the least well in school, and they're assimilating into an economy that pays less and less to workers with lower levels of education."

Latino immigrants have an impressive array of strengths: among the highest labor force participation rates, strong families, and industrious work habits. But somehow these positive traits do not translate into school performance. Two anecdotes illustrate the critical difference: John Mollenkopf tells of listening to Chinese women in a New York sweatshop talking among themselves, in Mandarin, about which tutoring services would best prepare their kids to take the test for admission to the city's elite high schools. In contrast, according to Min Zhou, now studying Asians and Latinos in Los Angeles, immigrant Hispanic parents often seem alarmingly ignorant about their children's schooling—to the point that one mother in her study thought there must be something terribly wrong when her son had to change schools, though in fact he was only transferring between middle school and high school.

According to Zhou and Portes, ethnic communities are what make the difference for successful groups, and for some reason, in most immigrant cities Asians are proving better at creating communal enclaves. Asians of almost every nationality tend to have high rates of entrepreneurship, particularly entrepreneurship in their own neighborhoods. They form ethnic institutions and organizations that help transmit a seamless code of conduct, emphasizing the importance of education and ostracizing gang activity. Children in Los Angeles's Koreatown choose among a variety of after-school classes: karate, music, SAT cram courses, and others, paid for by their parents and the ethnic businesses in the neighborhood. In nearby Chinatown, middle-class Chinese from the suburbs come back to the enclave to go to church, and poorer mothers from the neighborhood listen to them chat about how their children got into college.

In contrast, according to Zhou and others, many Mexican immigrants don't expect to stay long in the United States. They

put down shallower roots. Their families are more isolated, and the organizations in their community are more concerned with migration issues than education. Even the newspapers in Los Angeles's immigrant enclaves reflect the contrast: The Asian papers are filled with ads for after-school classes and tutoring services, while those in the Spanish-language media are for immigration lawyers and international phone service.

The optimists answer this argument, too, with their mantra of "trajectory." According to the Census Bureau, Hispanic household income rose this year for the third year in a row. The group's unemployment figures have never been lower, and its poverty rates, extremely varied by nationality, are declining. Within 20 years of arrival, half of all Latinos own their own homes. "You can't equate not being Taiwanese with having an underclass mentality," maintains Rodriguez. "Mobility is everything, and apocalyptic talk only fans defeatism. What's needed is confidence—a sense of belonging and possibility—and the mobility we're seeing among Latinos today is creating that confidence."

What is the bottom line? How will most children of immigrants fare in America? Even several generations from now there may be no single answer. Different groups will climb the ladder at different rates. Some will assimilate faster than others. Some will find ethnic enclaves an advantage; others—arguably already the Cubans—will find that they eventually become a hindrance, providing so much of a safety net that many in the second generation get stuck there. Ultimately, as Arjun Malhotra and every immigrant parent before him has discovered, the newcomers' greatest advantage—their hunger and ambition—will erode. This is to be expected; it only means they are becoming more American.

But in the meantime, many members of the second generation are vaulting past their parents and anything their parents ever dreamed of. One of the CILS subjects, a 14-year-old Nicaraguan from Miami, explained to an interviewer who asked about her unusually good grades and study habits, "We're immigrants! We can't afford to just sit around and blow it like others who've been in this country longer and who take everything for granted." This, as Rubén Rumbaut points out, has always been America's "secret ingredient," and today as in the past, all Americans stand to benefit from it.

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