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Comment on Hartmut Esser/1

The Devil Lies in the Middle Range: Comments on Hartmut Esser's Comprehensive Model of Intergenerational Integration

by Richard Alba

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The prominence in the recent literature of two theories of immigrant-group incorporation – segmented and “new” assimilation – has led to a contest that at times seems motivated by the unfortunate assumption that one of these theories must be “correct,” the other not. Hartmut Esser’s paper is a valuable demonstration of how misleading this assumption can be, for he shows that in principle the two theories can be brought within a unified framework.

Esser’s paper is based on a core mechanism: the individual who makes choices according to a specific regime of expected returns for decisions in the direction of the mainstream versus those that keep him or her within the ethnic community, broadly construed. The key dynamic within the model comes from the changing returns over time associated with these options, as the relationship between the expected returns from the two is altered by changes within the ethnic community and in the larger society.

It is apparent from his paper that this simple model can yield the multiple outcomes that are widely discussed in the literature on immigration. To be sure, it is open to the objections that often greet simple economics models, such as the apparent assumption of perfect information. One could add in an immigration context the problematic nature of the assumption that options can always be neatly divided into the categories of mainstream vs ethnic community. A well-known phenomenon in the U.S. offers a case in point: entrepreneurial success in the immigrant generation, usually within ethnic niches, is frequently followed by the attainment of professional

status in the second, invariably through mainstream institution; eastern European Jews in the past and Koreans today exemplify this pattern.

Moreover, there appears to be tension in the current version of the model between individual and group outcomes. Although core of the model is posed at the level of the individual, in his discussion of the model situations Esser, frequently enough, points to what appear as group outcomes – for example, selective acculturation is equated with the “permanent establishment of independent ethnic communities.” This produces tension because, at the individual level, mainstream assimilation can be the dominant outcome while, at the collective level, ethnic communities, whose members are disadvantaged when compared to members of the dominant, mainstream group, are still prominent. In other words, a mixed situation is entirely possible.

Italians in the United States provide a suitable example. A century past the high point of their immigration (in the 1901-1910 decade), Italian neighbourhoods and business districts are still quite visible in the cities of heavy immigrant settlement, like Boston and New York. Yet, when examined on the individual level, the patterns that stand out are those associated with mainstream assimilation – e.g., socioeconomic mobility, residence outside ethnic neighbourhoods, and intermarriage. The prevalence of the assimilation pattern does not negate the existence of a minority of the group for whom the attractions of the ethnic community, including its economic opportunities, are sufficient to hold them in place. At the same time, by standard measures such as educational attainment, the members of this minority appear to be disadvantaged when compared either to other Italian-descent Americans or to the members of the mainstream. A few decades ago, this tension between individual-level patterns and the existence of vibrant ethnic communities misled some scholars about the power of the tide in favor of assimilation [see the classic statement by Gambino 1974].

While Esser successfully demonstrates that the models are compatible in principle, this proof is cast at a high level of abstraction, and as he notes at the end of the paper, the model is, at this point, far from applicable to research. I want to comment briefly on this abstraction, and on the challenges that would appear in the process of translation.

A great deal is packed into the expected utility functions, $EU(rc)$ and $EU(ec)$, and their curves. For these functions must allow for the influences of the full range of forces that affect the relative attractiveness of the mainstream as against the ethnic group. The translation from the very general formulation of the paper to the “middle-range” formulations from which research hypotheses can be generated presents non-trivial challenges. Indeed, it is likely that the segmented vs new, or mainstream, as-

simulation debate in the U.S. depends more on differences at this level than it does on differences in the understanding of the core mechanisms exposed in Esser's model. For instance, the role of race varies between the models, with segmented assimilation assuming that race creates a virtually impenetrable boundary while the mainstream assimilation model argues that the racial boundary can be blurred [Alba 2008]. In addition, the outcomes of research interest are different for the advocates of the two theories. The empirical research generated under the aegis of the segmented-assimilation model focuses much more on the "downward"-assimilation and selective acculturation outcomes than on the mainstream assimilation one, which, truth be told, it theorizes in the most minimal way. For those working within the mainstream-assimilation framework, interest is obviously directed to this outcome, though the existence of the others is recognized.

Moreover, the current, abstract version of the model does not make room, as I understand the model, for the heterogeneity *within* ethnic communities. That is, the expected utility functions presumably vary within a group depending upon an individual's social characteristics and context. We would expect them to differ for youngsters according to the socioeconomic position of their families or the character of the residential areas where they grow up (in the U.S.: mixed suburbs or ethnic communities). Both segmented and new assimilation theories address this heterogeneity – for example, basic to segmented-assimilation theory as applied to the U.S. context is the critical nature of the interaction between social class origins and spatial location (inner city versus suburban) in determining the subsequent trajectory [see Portes and Zhou 1993].

Finally, the discussion of the three outcomes focuses on a limited set of dynamics that appear to play out without exogenous change apart from immigration and absorption. This gives the model something of an ahistorical and context-free character – that is, it sketches a set of mechanisms and dynamics that operate regardless of historical setting and national context. But to fully understand, say, the dynamics behind the shifting social distance between immigrant-origin minorities and the dominant population, one often needs to invoke historically specific changes in the larger society. For instance, I argue that the mass assimilation of the descendants of European immigrants in the U.S., a process that involved the absorption of these groups and their previously marginalized religions, Catholicism and Judaism, into the mainstream, was concentrated in the 1945-70 period. For, in the quarter century following World War II, the hegemonic position of the U.S. in the global economy allowed for an expansion of educational and economic opportunities, generating what I have called "non-zero-sum" mobility, that is, a situation in which members of minorities can move upward without apparent threat to the life chances of members of the

dominant population. Such non-zero-sum mobility favors a relaxation of boundaries that separate the majority from minorities [Alba 2009].

In sum, Esser has taken a valuable step forward by demonstrating that both segmented-assimilation and new assimilation theories are consistent in principle with an underlying core mechanism. However, because there is such a distance to traverse between this abstract formulation and middle-range theory, there is plenty of room left for the theories to contest. Moreover, the emphasis of the theories varies – i.e., the parts of the landscape that they seek to illuminate minimally overlap. The interest of segmented-assimilation theory falls much more on the alternatives other than mainstream assimilation, while the interest of new assimilation theory is, as the name implies, precisely on this outcome. We are still left then with an intellectual division of labor.

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Abstract: In response to several special characteristics of the so-called “new immigration” and to the well-known weaknesses of classical assimilation theory, several theoretical suggestions have recently been made and discussed, including, in particular, the “Theory of Segmented Assimilation” and the “New Assimilation Theory.” In addition to the (classical) structural outcome of assimilation, these theories assume two other possible outcomes: ethnic stratification as the enduring social descent of following generations and selective acculturation as the social advancement by using and retaining ethnic resources and identities. This contribution reconstructs these theoretical developments and the presumed structural outcomes as special cases of a comprehensive model, i.e., the model of intergenerational integration, and systematizes sub-processes and single mechanisms outlined by the various theories. Another important result is the identification of conditions and background processes that do not necessarily occur empirically, but that underlie the different theories and structural outcomes as well as the proposed model of intergenerational integration.

Keywords: middle-range theory, assimilation, segmented assimilation.

Richard Alba is Distinguished Professor of Sociology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. His teaching and research focus on international migration and ethnicity/race in the U.S. and western Europe. His latest book is *Blurring the Color Line: The New Chance for a More Integrated America* (Harvard University Press, 2009).