Assimilation Vs. Acculturation: The Competition for Cultural Integration

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Abstract

This essay explores the differences and similarities between assimilation and acculturation. The goal is to identify the distinct characteristics of these forms of integration and examine the pros and cons as it relates to immigrants in the United States while also providing examples of failures in other countries. This essay also examines the social distancing that occurs as immigrants attempt to “melt” into a host community’s culture. While it is not the intent to suggest one form of integration should be used over the other, this paper endeavors to highlight the advantages of creating immigration policies that give equal consideration to the strengths and weaknesses of assimilation and acculturation.
Area of Interest

The area of interest for this essay is the social distancing that occurs because of cultural integration. There is also interest in analyzing which forms of integration most benefit immigrants and the host communities.

Research Questions

What are the differences and similarities between assimilation and acculturation?

What are some of the challenges immigrants face as it relates to their choice to assimilate or acculturate?

Should greater emphasis be placed on assimilation rather than diffusing cultural, social, and religious traditions?

Discussion

The United States, a nation comprised almost entirely of immigrants and the descendants of immigrants, has lived in civic harmony for over two centuries. What has made the United States unique is its ability to merge various cultures, ethnic groups, and religions into one common culture known as the ‘American culture.’ According to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) 2015 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, approximately one million immigrants obtain lawful permanent resident status a year (Department of Homeland Security, 2016). The DHS Office of Immigration Statistics (OIS) reports that today over 30 million legal and 11.5 million illegal immigrants live in the United States. The total makes up approximately 13% of
the U.S. population (Immigration Data & Statistics, 2017). These statistics are consistent with trends reported by the Migration Policy Institute in previous years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Size of Immigrant Population ( Millions )</th>
<th>Immigrant Share of Total U.S. Population (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1.** Numerical Size and Share of the Foreign-Born Population in the United States, 1970-2014. Data source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2010 and 2014 American Community Surveys (ACS), and 1970-2000 decennial Census (Zong, 2016).

How these immigrants choose to interact and conform with society directly effects where and how they live, work, and worship. Some choose to assimilate; meaning they come to the United States and lose some (if not most) of the unique characteristics of their culture. Others choose to integrate; meaning they preserve some of the unique characteristics of their culture while becoming a complete member of society. In many cases, the host community is changed or influenced by the incoming immigrant population. This paper argues that creating immigration policies and programs that focus on assimilating immigrants coupled with finding commonality in values benefit both immigrants and host communities.

Cultural assimilation is a process in which an individual’s or group’s culture comes to resemble that of the host group (Alba, p. 66). This often requires an immigrant, or group of immigrants, to give up their cultural traditions to resemble the traditions of the host community. In the United States, it is expected that the culture of an immigrant or group of immigrants should begin to resemble that of the host community. For example, second generation
immigrants may choose to only speak English in lieu of speaking the language their parents speak. Subsequent generations of immigrants may also decide not to eat the foods their parents once ate or wear the clothing they once wore in their home country. Immigrants embrace the laws and public policies even if they are in direct conflict with the values of their home country. But what is often-times overlooked is cultural assimilation works in two ways. In some instances the culture of the host community can begin to resemble that of the immigrant group.

Yoku Shaw-Taylor, author of ‘Immigration, Assimilation, and Border Security’, discusses this conflict. He notes that the ideas of plurality, equality, and liberty are major features of American society. They bring immigrants and natural born citizens together. But these same ideals often lead to tension with threads of prejudice, stereotype, and profiling (Shaw-Taylor, 2012). This is especially the case with religious integration. Sometimes immigrants of a minority religious group can be made to feel isolated or discriminated against due to the host community’s public policies. There are times when rights related to freedom of religion, press, and speech are used as tools to mock groups of people whose religious views are opposite of the host community. The abuse of these rights has led to a lack of religious tolerance, unwillingness to accommodate, and, in some cases, death.

Take for instance the country of France. In recent years, France had seen a sharp increase in Muslim withdrawal from French society (Adida, p. 66). As media interviews suggested, the Charlie Hebdo attack in January 2015 only increased the divide (CNN, 2015). New York Time’s columnist Dan Bilefsky reported that the attacks were motivated by controversial cartoon depictions of the Prophet Muhammad. (Bilefsky, 2015). Charlie Hebdo’s cartoons often made jokes about Islamic leaders. Previous attempts by Islamic organizations to sue the newspaper’s republication of the caricatures of Muhammad under French hate speech laws were unsuccessful
(Leveque, 2007). As the former Deputy Director of the CIA Michael Morell suggested, the motive of the radical Islamic attackers was "absolutely clear: trying to shut down a media organization that lampooned the Prophet Muhammad." While there are valid arguments for the importance of protecting freedom of press, speech, and religion, the Charlie Hebdo attack illustrated firsthand how these ideals can create conflict between host communities and the religious minority.

A further and equally important example of how assimilation worked negatively in the opposite direction is the Jens Muller controversy of Germany. In an article titled, ‘German residents left outraged after mayor says young girls 'provoke' sexual harassment’, writer Alexander Sims shared a report originally published by German newspaper, Frei Presse (Sims, 2016). In it, a video depicts several parents attending a town hall meeting in Bad Schlema, Saxony. The Mayor, Jens Muller listened to complaints by residents regarding how young girls were subject to harassment by Muslim refugee children residing in an adjacent shelter. A man who was only identified as a grandfather raised fears that the harassment may increase when the young girls wear less clothing during the summer months. When asked by the grandfather for advice, Mayor Muller stated, “That’s easy, just don’t provoke them and don’t walk in these areas.” “It’s technically not necessary for the girls to walk there,” he added. “There are alternative routes for going to school.” His remarks sparked outrage from the crowd as they expressed that their rights to walk wherever they wanted in their city were being infringed. This example illustrates how a minority’s cultural aspects are absorbed in such a manner that the host community’s culture begins to be marginalized or lost.

By contrast, cultural diffusion or acculturation, is a process in which cultural beliefs, traditions, and social activities are spread from one group to another (Tomlinson, 2010). It also
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means the mixing of culture occurs within various ethnicities, religions, nationalities, and social groups. A key feature of cultural diffusion is cultural aspects of the host community are adapted without neglecting the cultural aspects of the immigration community. Mixing within these groups has increased with the advancements in communication, transportation, and technology. Customs such as what we eat, how we celebrate, and even how we speak are influenced by cultural diffusion. More simply put, cultural diffusion can result in the creation of a hybrid culture partially recognizable by both the host community and incoming immigrants. For example, an immigrant community may celebrate the thanksgiving holiday with Turkey and food from their native country. Music produced in the United States is often a merge of various cultures. According to Jacqueline Edmonson, author of ‘Music in American Life: An Encyclopedia of the Songs, Styles, Stars, and Stories That Shaped Our Culture.’, Latin American music has had a large influence on American popular music. Genres like jazz, rhythm and blues, and country music has been influenced by music from Spanish, Portuguese, and French-speaking countries and territories of Latin America (Edmondson, p. 639).

Like assimilation, cultural diffusion can be problematic when natives feel they are becoming the minority. It can result in the displacement of native cultural traditions, tensions between natives and immigrants, the spread of foreign diseases, and violence. Natives may even overtly reject acculturation as current events change. Such was the case in the state of Wisconsin. On August 5, 2012, forty-year-old Wade Michael Page fatally shot six people and wounded four others before shooting himself in the head as responding officers engaged him in a shootout (Ramde, 2012). Page was an Army veteran and American white supremacist (Ramde, 2012). In the aftermath of the shooting, Oak Creek Police Chief John Edwards declined to state the possible motives for the attack (Sohrabji, 2012), however, the FBI later concluded the shooting
was racially motivated (Sprusansky, 2012). It is worth noting that attacks against Sikhs were common in the United States following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Sikh men were often misidentified as belonging to the Muslim faith and discriminated against because of their turban headdress (Ahluwalia, 2010).

Advancements in technology has made it easier for immigrants to travel to ports of entry in a variety of ways. But the ease of travel has also made it possible for diseases that are exclusive to one country to spread to another. In 2012 the first case of Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) was identified and reported in Saudi Arabia (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, 2016). In a 2014 press release, the Center for Disease Control announced that MERS was detected in a traveler to the United States (CDC, 2014). Later in 2015, a citizen of Saudi Arabia who was infected with MERS travelled to South Korea and caused an outbreak of the virus (BDK, 2015). To date approximately 87 South Koreans have been identified as infected and 5 others have died from MERS (BDK, 2015).

Easing the Burden & Reducing Hostility

In a book titled, ‘Integration Nation: Immigrants, Refugees, and America at its Best’, author Susan Eaton explores the concepts of immigration and the benefits of integration versus assimilation. Eaton chronicles examples of what cities across America are doing to ease the burdens of immigrants and reduce tensions within the host communities. In one illustration, Eaton explains the success of Utah. In the early 2000s, Salt Lake City, Utah began receiving large numbers of Latino immigrants as the state solicited help to build the infrastructure used to host the Olympics. After the Olympic games, many of the immigrants chose not to return to the
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states where they came from. This resulted in new Spanish-speaking-families settling in Utah and many of the children being enrolled in the local school districts. Initially educators separated the Latino or Spanish-speaking students from the English-speaking students. According to Eaton, this practice is common across the U.S. Over time, educators began to realize that as the students were learning separately, the Spanish speaking immigrants were not achieving to their full potential, the schools lacked social integration, and the parents were not interacting despite their common interest. The school recognized they were fostering a separate and unequal educational system (Eaton, 2016).

Eventually educators in Heber City, Utah decided to try something different. They brought English and Spanish-speaking students together. This allowed for all students to learn in both English and Spanish; and students benefited from becoming bi-lingual. Eaton cites the experiment as an example of how both cultural assimilation and diffusion work together. The immigrant is not made to feel as though they must give up the important aspects of their culture and they learn the language of the host country. They can preserve assets that they entered the country and, in turn, the assets can be utilized in a way so that everyone can benefit. She later goes on to explain that programs such as these have become popular across the state of Utah. They are supported by local and state dollars and the waiting list to get into these programs remain long (Eaton, 2016).

The example provided by Susan Eaton is just one solution to easing tensions and making the integration process easier for both immigrants and host communities. It illustrates why it is important to create programs that help immigrants integrate in the United States. Equally important is the need for immigrants to be placed in environments where they are forced to learn the culture of the host community. In a presentation to the John Locke Foundation’s Shaftesbury
Society, Duke professor Jacob Vigdor explains that countries who have difficulties with economic growth and corruption are usually marked by ethnolinguistic fractionalization. Meaning, people residing in countries where the population consist of different groups that speak different languages tend to not to get along. He goes on to state that such a population has repercussions both politically and economically. When the people who are responsible for negotiating in business and politics lack a common language, the negotiations become very difficult. If deep tribal or ethnic alliances exist, agreements are even harder to reach (Vigdor, 2010).

Efforts should also be made to create opportunities where positive impressions of the United States on immigrants can be made. It makes it possible for immigrants to try to understand American culture instead of fighting against it. As a part of immigration policy, programs could also teach the importance of an immigrant’s existence as it relates to their native culture while placing emphasis on shared values.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are several examples of successful cultural assimilation. On the international front, Islam has spread to most countries; American born businesses like McDonald’s restaurants and Coca-Cola products can be found in most major cities around the world; and Christianity has spread from Israel to most regions of the globe. There are also several examples of successful acculturation within the United States. For example, the inclusion of districts or “towns” in cities that accommodate people from Armenia, China, Taiwan, and Ethiopia. The United States also recognizes professional hockey and state teams even though the
sport is primarily played in Canada. Additionally, Cinco de Mayo is recognized as an official holiday. Forced integration can benefit immigrants and host communities. Lack of exposure can lead to immigrants living in areas for several years without making any effort to learn the language or interact with people outside their comfort zone. Immigration policies should incorporate the advantages and benefits of assimilation and acculturation to ensure immigrants feel like they can interact with everyone while not stripping away their identity entirely.
References


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