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THE NEW U. S. IMMIGRANTS: HOW DO THEY AFFECT OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE?

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Abstract

The implications of recent immigration for race relations in the United States depend importantly on family cultural orientations among Mexican Americans and how this group is culturally perceived by Anglos. Because Moynihan's 1965 work (in)famously emphasized the need to change black family culture in order to ameliorate black poverty, his work still holds implications for understanding how cultural orientations affect changing color lines. Unfortunately, his partially insightful analyses inadequately foresaw that policies designed to alleviate poverty through the modification of family cultural patterns are likely to fail without parallel changes in structural opportunities. Similar limitations also often emerge from mis-characterizations of Mexican origin family cultural situations, which all too often are incongruously reified as either being unduly familistic (thus falsely implying Mexican origin families foster self-sufficiency) or largely governed by culture of poverty tendencies (thus inaccurately suggesting Mexican origin families depend on welfare). Here we review research suggesting that Mexican origin families are neither substantially familistic nor disproportionately susceptible to moral hazard, thus indicating that future Mexican origin economic advancement is likely to turn on the availability of structural opportunities. In-depth interviews with Anglos further suggest that Mexicans are not culturally viewed with the same degree of prejudice and discrimination as blacks, implying that the integration of Mexicans into American society, contingent on adequate economic opportunity, will probably progress more steadily than often feared, while that of blacks may proceed more slowly than often expected.

Oscar Handlin (1959; 1973) powerfully argued that much of U.S. history could be written in terms of immigration. To a considerable extent, this meant recognizing that the country had assertively sought settlers from northern Europe, initially to populate its rural frontiers and then subsequently to labor in its expanding urban industries (Zolberg 2006). In turn, such an "open-door" approach fostered the integration of European newcomers, many of whom faced considerable national origin discrimination but were nonetheless implicitly treated upon arrival as apprentice citizens for whom subsequent formal citizenship was taken for granted (Motomura 2006). Today, memories of the national origin diversity of historical

flows and their successful absorption appear to have faded, replaced for some by sharply etched impressions that contemporary immigration is generating racial divisiveness. While earlier immigration was never as easy or positive for the country as Handlin claimed (Gerstle 1999), the meaning of contemporary flows for the country's purpose and destiny looms more controversial than ever. Although worries about labor market competition almost always play in role in the emergence of immigration anxiety, much of the intensity of negative feeling about immigrants seems to derive from fears that contemporary newcomers, because they are non-European, threaten national identity more than did early twentieth-century immigrants (Reimers 1998; Huntington 2004).

Certainly the Hart-Celler Act of 1965, passed after a four-decade hiatus in immigration, modified the social logic of immigrant admissions through its abolition of national origin quotas. It thus led to both largely non-European entrants and profound changes in the racial and ethnic mix of post-1965 immigrant flows (Bean and Stevens 2003). As a result, by 2006, 38 million foreign-born persons were living in the United States, a number that exceeded the country's 34 million native-born African Americans (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2006). To be sure, in census data a few of these are students or visitors, but the vast majority consists of immigrants. And if we include the children of the foreign-born in the total, the figure would be over 68 million, more than twice the number of native blacks. Moreover, about two-thirds of those arriving since 1965 come from Asian, African or Latino countries (Office of Immigration Statistics 2007). Thus, about 42 million first- or second-generation non-white persons are now living in the country (i.e., non-white, non-black foreign-born persons and their children (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2006). In short, immigration trends since 1965 have resulted in a recent non-white minority that is larger than the native black minority.

As the country moves now nearly a decade past the millennium, what do these trends mean for racial/ethnic relations in the United States? What do they imply about the possibility of ameliorating the economic hardship faced by native blacks and outlined in the Moynihan Report (for a copy of the Report see Rainwater and Yancey 1967)? At a minimum they raise questions about whether W.E. DuBois's 100 year-old prophesy that the black-white color line would constitute the problem of the 20th century still retains relevance in the 21st century. Given the large numbers of non-white but also non-black immigrants who have come to the country over the past four decades, it becomes important to ask what kind of color line now exists in America (Lee and Bean 2007)? Is it a variation of the traditional black-white divide, with a line now emerging that separates whites from non-whites and looms ever more significant as immigration adds more non-whites to the population? Or has the old divide largely faded away altogether as a result of Jim Crow and discriminatory federal laws having been eliminated? As Brown et al (2003) note, such a view often seems to underlay the perspectives of those who advocate "color-blind" public social policies. Or is some entirely new structural divide emerging, one that perhaps involves multiple lines separating whites, blacks, and other non-whites, or maybe one separating blacks from non-blacks? This paper argues that yesterday's color line has been transformed into a black/non-black demarcation that undergirds racial/ethnic divisions, not a more complex tripartite structure. In this new bipolar pattern, many if not all new non-white immigrants seem now to fall on the white rather than the black side of the line.

What difference do such boundaries make? How do the kinds of racial/ethnic divides currently holding sway in America and reflecting the nature and availability of economic opportunities matter for the Moynihan Report's 40 year-old analysis of the black family, a study that coincidentally was released the same year the new immigration spawned by Hart-Celler began? We argue here they matter a great deal. The Moynihan Report brilliantly highlighted the devastating economic disadvantages faced by African American males in the

United States. It also insightfully portrayed the tangle of structural inequalities contributing to the development of such outcomes (U.S. Department of Labor 1965). However, the power of its analysis was compromised by its further assertions that black matriarchal family patterns both reflected and perpetuated instability and dysfunctionality in the black family (Rainwater and Yancey 1967). This conclusion generated a firestorm of protest from observers who feared such arguments fell perilously close to “blaming the victim” and embraced a culture of poverty thesis (Jencks 1965), which in fact they did. By focusing on the problems of the black family as the major factor limiting black economic integration, Moynihan’s depiction of the legacy of slavery targeted only part of the cultural problem. Another important part of the cultural legacy of slavery manifested itself less in the survival strategies of blacks than in the persistence of attitudes and stereotypes held by whites about blacks, cultural orientations that countless analysts thought would fade away once legal discrimination was curtailed (Glazer 1997). While the basic motif of the Moynihan Report did not gainsay this possibility, its formula for finding a locus for change falsely attributed to the black family a causal significance that actually more nearly lay in lingering white cultural value orientations and institutions. In short, its remedy was to treat the symptom, not the disease.

Today’s racial/ethnic boundaries matter because they shed light on the degree to which deeply embedded and ingrained cultural orientations operate with similar force for native blacks and new non-white immigrants. To the extent that racial discrimination against blacks continues today as in the past (at least in its effects if not its form), and to the degree that parallel kinds of discrimination similarly adversely affect non-white immigrants and their children, then the millions of additional non-whites who have recently come to the country, by enlarging the nation’s non-white minority group, might contribute to a worsening of racial/ethnic relations, exacerbating the harsh realities often referenced in statements that “two Americas” exist, one largely minority and poor and one more white and well-off. Stated differently, if the recent experiences of non-white immigrants were found to be substantially more like those of blacks than earlier European immigrants, non-white immigration could be expanding the kind of social devastation and divisiveness that Moynihan so cogently chronicled over 40 decades ago. What is centrally at issue for today’s color lines is thus the degree to which the disadvantages faced by blacks and non-whites derive from similar discriminatory legacies. What does the experience of the new immigrants, particularly the experience of contemporary Mexican immigrants who are especially disadvantaged in terms of education and who often enter the country with the additional handicap of unauthorized status, suggest about the degree of discrimination they face compared to blacks?

Such questions are never easy to answer. For one thing, it is difficult, indeed perhaps impossible, to disentangle cultural from structural forces, if for no other reason than change in one often seems to lead to change in the other. That is, they are endogenous. Given this, it often seems both necessary and to make common sense to begin either scholarly analyses or policy interventions with a focus on only one or the other. But however necessary this may be, it carries the unfortunate consequence of promoting political debate and partisanship over the preferred starting point, with those on the left favoring beginning with structural solutions and those on the right supporting culturally-oriented interventions. It thus induces analysts to overlook the inherent contingency of structural and cultural factors, which do not merely intersect in their influence, but rather depend on each other. This means both must occur for policy interventions to have much chance of success. Thus, generating employment opportunities are likely to be most effective when training and education programs that improve cultural “tool kits” and knowledge repertoires are also instigated. To put either in place without the other risks failure.

Ironically, any possibility of combining structural and cultural policy ameliorations as a result of Moynihan's analyses became lost in the Report's controversial political legacy. The potential policy impact of the its brilliant structural analyses, which might have constituted a basis for pointing to the interdependence of both kinds of factors, became overwhelmed by the controversy emanating from the Report's cultural conclusions about the black family. Moynihan attributed the extreme labor market disadvantages faced at the time by black males to structural deprivation deriving from persistent and long-lasting cultural prejudice among whites rooted in the historical legacy of slavery and expressed in legal strictures discriminating against blacks. His focus on the origins of the associated difficulties faced by the black family was also similarly insightful. However, the Report's implicitly derisive and patronizing characterization of the black family as involving the emergence of a matriarchal cultural form not in step with majority cultural norms about the family life was off-target. Not surprisingly, this conclusion was quickly and rightly attacked by many observers as insulting to blacks, as indeed it was (e.g., Carper 1966). It was especially denigrating to black women, whose strong initiatives and efforts then (and now) constitute heroic examples of compensatory actions taken to enhance family survival in the face of societally imposed black-male deprivation (Riessman 1966).

Ironically, this may have had the effect of reinforcing, if not instigating, a "cultural turn" in social science and political discourse, a tendency to look only to the family as providing answers to problems of poverty and inequality. Thus, while the political left castigated Moynihan for emphasizing the liabilities of the black family, the political right welcomed his drawing attention to the importance of family responsibilities. But both the left and the right, each in its eagerness to criticize the other about how to conceptualize the family, lent implicit credence to the idea that cultural change alone, as represented in this instance by family form and functioning, was of primary importance. The Report's emphasis on the black family, if not explicitly endorsing the idea that policy headway in ameliorating black disadvantage could best be achieved by focusing only on cultural factors that allegedly operate to perpetuate poverty (what is often termed a culture of poverty perspective), certainly lent impetus to that suggestion. In the decades after the Moynihan Report was issued, a veritable flood of analysts and commentators seized upon and promulgated the idea that what was needed to improve racial or ethnic disadvantage was for the poor, especially African Americans, to develop greater personal responsibility, something it was claimed could best (if not only) be inculcated by stable, conventional majority-group kinds of family relationships (Murray 1984; Sleeper 1997; Jacoby 1998; D'Souza 1995; Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1997). In such views, eliminating moral hazard and encouraging certain kinds of family forms and values was argued to matter more than changing structures or contexts in order to overcome social and economic inequalities.

It is against this backdrop that we seek to assess the kind and degree of racial/ethnic discrimination facing the new immigrant groups, especially Mexicans, and how it affects their own senses of racial/ethnic identity. Of all of the new non-white groups, Mexican immigrants and their descendants are most crucial for the country, because of both increasing numbers of Mexican migrants and mounting concerns about unauthorized entrants (most of whom are Mexicans) (Bean and Lowell 2004). Mexicans, whether legal or unauthorized, are by far the largest of the recent immigrant groups. In 2005 alone, 161,445 persons from Mexico became "legal permanent residents" (14.4 percent of the total) (Office of Immigration Statistics 2005). That same year, 300,000 unauthorized Mexicans also established *de facto* residency, bringing the total number of unauthorized Mexicans to 6.2 million (or 56 percent of all unauthorized persons) (Passel 2006). These numbers dwarf those from any other country. The second largest number of legal entrants in 2005 came from India (84,681 persons, or 7.5 percent of all legal permanent residents), while the

second largest number of unauthorized persons living in the country originated in Latin American countries other than Mexico (2.5 million, or 22 percent of the total unauthorized).

Observers at both ends of the political spectrum have often portrayed the American experiences of Mexican immigrants as closer to those of blacks than to those of earlier-arriving European immigrant groups. Some emphasize structural factors and some cultural ones. One cultural portrayal often argues that Mexicans exhibit unusually strong families because of their Mexican cultural heritage. Interestingly, this idea contradicts an idea other cultural observers have set forth, namely that Mexicans share with blacks a cultural proclivity for welfare dependency. Such contradictory positions are impossible to reconcile in substantive terms, suggesting that one or both may be wrong. Whatever the case, both share a similar claim that personal responsibility and "self help" as nurtured by strong family values are key factors in overcoming poverty. Both also imply these are lacking in the case of blacks, the former by asserting that Mexican immigrants culturally embrace stronger families, something that sets them apart from blacks, and the latter by arguing that Mexican immigrants become like African Americans in their development of cultural dependencies on welfare. Below we argue that each of these perspectives is inaccurate in the case of Mexican immigrants. We focus first on the question of the degree to which Latinos in general and Mexican Americans in particular are actually substantially more familistic in cultural orientation than other groups, second on the degree to which Mexican immigrants come to embrace cultural inclinations that incline them toward welfare dependency. Third, given the conclusions of the first two endeavors, we ask what non-white racial identifications, both as self- and other-perceptions, mean for emerging color lines in the United States, especially in the case of the new immigrants. Finally we discuss what such color lines mean for African Americans.

FAMILISTIC CULTURAL ORIENTATIONS AMONG MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS?

The importance of the nature and value of the family among Latinos in the United States is not a new question. Scholars and pundits have long debated whether U.S. Latinos in general, and the Mexican-origin population in particular, exhibit a greater emphasis on family than do other racial or ethnic groups (Lewis 1959; 1961; 1965; Valenzuela and Dornbusch 1994; Vega 1995). If, in fact, the family does carry more importance among Latinos, then further questions are raised about whether such emphasis exerts primarily salutary or debilitating influences on other aspects of Latino life. In short, are Latino families stronger and more supportive than other families, especially Anglo families? This is not a trivial question. Latinos overall, and Mexicans in particular, continue to lag behind the general population in education and earnings, despite indications of considerable Latino upward economic mobility over the past 30 years, especially in the case of native-born Latinos (Grogger and Trejo 2002; Bean et al. 2001). Family values frequently receive a lot of attention in the media and from politicians. For example, in the *New York Times*, David Brooks (2004) argues that escaping poverty is more a matter of culture than economic opportunity, more a result of embracing the right values (including family values) than of government programs that provide cash or support assistance. To what degree do cultural factors in fact account for variations in family patterns between Latinos and Anglos? By cultural factors, we mean those norms, values and expectations that are customary and taken for granted.

The literature on Latino families has focused on a long-standing debate concerning the accuracy of the traditional family-oriented Latino/a stereotype. These stereotypes are pervasive in both popular culture and social science literature (Baca Zinn 1998; Vega 1990). The Mexican American family, which dominates the literature on Latino families, has often been depicted as an especially cohesive unit, one favoring collective over individual needs

(Keefe 1980; Mirande 1977). Many scholars have described this as “familism,” which is thought to be a key component of traditional Mexican culture that immigrants bring with them to the United States (Baca Zinn 1982/83; Sena-Rivera 1979). Despite the nearly universal assumption of familism across many Latino groups, the empirical evidence supporting this view is actually quite limited. Ethnographic studies emphasizing the nature and strength of family cohesion in Mexican American families, for example, while quite rich in detail, cannot tell us whether such patterns are unique to Latinos, or whether similar findings would be found among, say, African American or non-Latino white families. Most population-based studies on extended family living arrangements, for example, merely infer the independent significance of culture in explaining family patterns, rather than provide direct evidence of it. Thus, Tienda and Angel (1982) assume the differences in extended family arrangements that remain after controlling for economic and social factors are evidence of cultural preferences. Likewise, Kamo (2000) concludes that “upward extension often results from cultural prescription of familism among...Hispanics” and that those living in ethnic neighborhoods are more likely to live in extended family households (223).

Overall, however, the social science literature has recognized that family patterns must be understood as responses to economic circumstances and social structural positions that are related to racial, ethnic, class, and gender inequalities (Baca Zinn and Wells 2003). The results of recent research call into question long-standing beliefs about the cultural determinants of marriage patterns and family living arrangements. While high marriage rates among Mexican Americans are often assumed to reflect strong familistic orientations, for example, recent perspectives point out the economic and situational foundations of marriage. Thus, marrying or remaining married may not necessarily reflect the influence of family values but instead be an adaptation to difficult social and economic circumstances. For example, the finding that the marriages of Mexican immigrants, who are of lower socioeconomic status compared to later generations, are not only less likely to divorce or separate than those of later generations, but also of those Mexicans living in Mexico, supports this view (Bean, Berg and Van Hook 1996). Thus, the authors of this study conclude: “the greater marital stability often observed among Mexican Americans, rather than reflecting a general cultural value characteristic of the entire ethnic group, owes much of its existence to the social, structural, and economic situations of immigrants, especially lower-education immigrants” (Bean, Berg and Van Hook 1996: 612). In other words, the fact that divorce rates among Mexican immigrants are lower than those for Mexicans in Mexico implies that exigencies associated with immigration itself rather than familistic cultural emphases explain greater marital stability among first generation compared to later generation Mexican origin persons, a result also found by Van Hook and Glick (2007) in their examination of Mexican origin household living arrangements.

THE CULTURE OF POVERTY HYPOTHESIS AND IMMIGRANT WELFARE RECEIPT

What does social science research reveal about the degree to which culture of poverty factors cause immigrants to display different welfare and employment patterns than natives? Many observers and policymakers appear in general to assume that immigrants are similar to poor natives in tendencies to exploit the availability of welfare, arguing that indeed the very existence of relatively universal public assistance acts as a “magnet” to draw newcomers to the country (Borjas 2003). Thus, policies providing welfare to immigrants have been viewed not only as discouraging hard work and individual responsibility (e.g., Murray 1984), but also as encouraging the immigration of persons seeking hand-outs rather than employment opportunities (Borjas 2001; Brimelow 1995). Such cultural orientations among immigrants are thought to be reinforced after they arrive in the United States, particularly when they reside in areas with high concentrations of poverty (Auletta 1982). Such circumstances are

seen as encouraging the learning and adoption of welfare participation as an acceptable way of life. Whether such orientations are thought to result primarily from severe long-term economic disadvantage (Auletta 1982), or from the loss of central-city jobs and lack of geographic mobility (Wilson 1987; 1996; Wilson and Neckerman 1986) associated with residence in inner-city neighborhoods, this view sees cultural orientations fostering welfare usage and dependency as acquired and reinforced by isolation from other more advantaged members of society and by the often geographic concentration of persons with such orientations in the same areas. Hence, a culture of poverty theory envisions welfare as linked to learned values whose influence works all the more strongly in areas where persons with similar orientations are concentrated (Bane and Ellwood 1994).

Much social science research, however, suggests an alternative to this view, often noting that the successful integration of immigrants is fostered by supportive social contexts providing opportunities for upward mobility and economic integration (Bloemraad 2006; Reitz 2003; Hechter 1971). For example, recent studies find that the probability of naturalization is higher in those states with more favorable and welcoming attitudes toward immigrants than in less receptive states, all else equal (Van Hook, Brown and Bean 2006). Such results suggest an additional welfare dynamic than one involving “moral hazard” or the culture of poverty. Among many poor immigrants, especially those whose primary reason for coming to the country is to find employment, the provision of assistance, in whatever form, may rather constitute temporary de facto settlement aid that helps to foster immigrant economic integration, particularly in the case of the large group of poorly educated Mexican labor migrants coming to the United States over the past three decades (Bean and Stevens 2003). Notably, the United States has not traditionally provided settlement assistance to immigrants except in the case of refugees. But tellingly, persons who enter as refugees subsequently experience greater earnings growth than other kinds of immigrants (Cortes 2004). This suggests that forms of “backdoor” help like cash and non-cash public assistance may provide “bridge” support to newcomers that facilitates their transition from time of arrival to subsequent labor market attachment, or from episodes of joblessness to periods of gainful employment, especially to the degree that immigrants differ from poor natives in fundamental orientations toward employment.

An alternative sociocultural perspective, however, emerges from the idea that immigrants arrive in the United States strongly expecting to work and thus are less welfare prone than natives. This viewpoint draws upon social psychological expectancy theory (Atkinson 1964; Fishbein and Ajzen 1975), which suggests that orientations and expectations about success in the labor market influence welfare reciprocity, the duration of welfare spells, and whether spells end in employment (Bane and Elwood 1994). People who “expect” they can get and keep work because they think they can do so (for whatever reason) would be hypothesized to be less likely to participate in welfare programs. Conversely, people without the confidence that they can control work-related outcomes would be more likely to become discouraged and less likely to seek work after welfare. As applied to immigrants, the idea would be that the acquisition of certain behaviors (i.e., welfare reciprocity versus employment) would have less to do with learning to accept dependency than with immigrants viewing their work prospects in the United States in positive or negative terms. When maladaptive behaviors occur they are thought most likely to emerge among those for whom there is a lack of sufficient perceived or real economic opportunity (Fernandez Kelly and Schaufli 1996: 31). The prediction of a cultural work expectancy model that immigrant women would be less likely to receive welfare, all else equal, accords more with the findings of the prior research literature than does a culture of poverty hypothesis (Bean, Stevens and Van Hook 2003).

Van Hook and Bean (2008) have carried out new analyses to evaluate these characterizations of immigrant public assistance reciprocity using SIPP data. Their results indicate, first, no evidence in support of the culture of poverty perspective. Immigrant welfare reciprocity, retention, and lower post-welfare employment levels tend to be concentrated only among newly-arrived immigrants and, for the 1.5 generation, they are not significantly different from those of natives. Welfare receipt thus does not appear to have become a permanent way of life for most immigrants. Second, while prior research has shown that immigrants tend to settle in higher-benefit states, thus appearing to support the view that welfare acts as magnet for immigrants, Van Hook and Bean find that Mexican immigrants are less likely to receive welfare in higher benefit states compared with those in lower benefit states, thus calling into question the “magnet” hypothesis. Such results further suggest that public assistance receipt may exert a positive effect on integration, functioning perhaps at times as a surrogate for settlement assistance, or at least as a way to help immigrants work their way out of poverty and off welfare. This is consistent with the predictions of the cultural expectancy perspective. Mexican immigrants leaving welfare are more likely to be employed in states with more generous welfare programs or lower unemployment rates rather than in states with less generous welfare programs or higher unemployment rates. Furthermore, welfare reciprocity and the transition to employment among Mexican immigrants tends to be more sensitive to state unemployment rate than it is among comparable natives, suggesting a higher expectation to work given labor market opportunities.

Such results support the idea that an unusually strong work ethic characterizes Mexican immigrants and thus that Mexicans reasons for using welfare are different and more temporary than those that often lead natives to welfare. For example, accounts of working poor natives characterize welfare recipients and former welfare recipients as sometimes fearful of leaving their neighborhoods to search for work or seek out new experiences. Shipler (2004: 125) writes “They did not want to leave their compounds. The outside culture, with alien rules and fearsome challenges, seemed so daunting that residents preferred work inside the projects.” Further, welfare recipients and former recipients often lack the “soft skills” necessary to obtain and keep a job, such as “punctuality, diligence, and a can-do attitude.” Immigrants, on the other hand, especially female labor migrants, have been selected for precisely the opposite characteristics (Bean and Stevens 2003). Their reasons for seeking welfare are undoubtedly different. They may go on public assistance simply because, as newcomers, they are unfamiliar with the labor market, do not possess well-developed non-familial social networks, and have less control over or ability to alter their circumstances in the United States. Unlike many of the reasons natives go on welfare, such reasons may fade with time, as would the need of such labor migrants for assistance.

TRANSFORMATIONS OF AMERICA’S COLOR LINES

The above suggests Mexican immigrants do not embrace the familistic or culture of poverty cultural orientations that are so often attributed to them. Rather, research on welfare receipt shows patterns that are consistent with the notion that a very strong work ethic drives much of their behavior. But this might not mean that other cultural forms of discrimination against today’s Mexican immigrants are no less severe than they are against blacks? As noted above, today’s immigrant newcomers have transformed a largely black-white society at the end of World War II to one now consisting of multiple racial and new nonwhite ethnic groups (Alba and Nee 2003; Bean and Stevens 2003; Sears et al. 2003). Moreover, America’s Latino and Asian populations are continuing to expand, and according to National Research Council projections, by the year 2050, they are likely to constitute about 25 and 8 percent of the U.S. population, respectively (Smith and Edmonston 1997). Other changes are also augmenting the racial/ethnic diversity of the United States, most notably

the rise in intermarriage and the growth of the multiracial population. Intermarriage is rising, increasing more than twenty-fold over a forty year period, from 150,000 marriages in 1960 to 3.1 million in 2000 (Jacoby 2001; Lee and Edmonston 2005). Today, about 13 percent of American married couples involve partners of different races, a significant increase that cannot be attributed to population growth alone (Bean and Stevens 2003). The upswing in interracial marriage is responsible in large part for a growing multiracial population, which became highly visible when the 2000 Census allowed Americans to mark more than one race to identify themselves. Currently, one in forty Americans identifies himself or herself as multiracial, and by the year 2050, this ratio could soar to one in five (Farley 2001; Smith and Edmonston 1997).

Each of these phenomena—the new nonwhite racial/ethnic diversity occurring through immigration, the rise in intermarriage, and the growing multiracial population—suggests that the traditional black-white color line could be losing salience and that new divides might be emerging. Lee and Bean (2008) have conducted research seeking to provide a sense of the nature of America's new color lines through the examination of both nationally representative census data and in-depth qualitative interviews with multiracial Americans, focusing specifically on Asians, Mexicans, and blacks. Information on the prevalence of and feelings about multiracial identification reflect the meaning of race in American society and perceptions about the permeability and rigidity of racial/ethnic boundaries. Such data also signal where group boundaries are fading most rapidly and where they continue to endure. As Gans (1999a; 1999b) argues, multiracial identification reflects the diminishing significance of the current racial scheme, which he predicts will become increasingly less relevant in each generation until it disappears into obscurity. Multiracial identification thus provides an important analytical lens through which to gauge the strength, placement, and shifts of America's color lines.

America's multiracial population: census data

The 2000 Census for the first time allowed Americans to mark “one or more” races to indicate their racial identification. This is a landmark change in the way the census measures race not only because it acknowledges the reality of racial mixing, but also because it reflects the view that race no longer requires an official construction as an absolutely bounded, exclusivist set of categories—a momentous shift considering that the United States had historically been hostile to racial mixture as evidenced by the legal invocation of the “one-drop” rule of hypodescent constraining the racial identity options for multiracial blacks (Dalmage 2004; Davis 1991; Farley 2002; Haney-Lopez 1996; Hirschman et al. 2000; Hollinger 2003; Morning 2000; Nobles 2000; Waters 1990; 2000b; Williams 2006). While only about 2.4 percent of the population identified itself as multiracial, a recent National Academy of Sciences study reported that, given trends in intermarriage, the multiracial population could increase to 21 percent of the population by 2050 when as many as 35 percent of Asians and 45 percent of Hispanics might have multiracial backgrounds (Smith and Edmonston 1997).

America's multiracial population is clustered in the western region of the United States, with nearly two-thirds residing in just ten states. In California, 1.6 million people identified multiracially, accounting for 4.7 percent of its population, or one in every twenty-one Californians. To help put this figure into perspective, the number of multiracial births already exceeds the number of black and Asian births in the state (Tafoya et al. 2005). A key sign of a growing multiracial population is its youthfulness. Among Americans who identified multiracially, 42 percent were under the age of 18, compared to 25 percent of other Americans. Moreover, the multiracial population is twice as likely to be under the age of eighteen. In California, 7.3 percent of those under the age of 18 identified multiracially, translating into one in every fourteen young Californians. The greater proportion of young

multiracials is, in part, a product of the increase in interracial unions, especially among the young, native-born Asians and Latinos.

Wide variations in rates of multiracial reporting also occur across groups. Twelve percent of Asians and 16 percent of Latinos identified multiracially in 2000, yet only 4 percent of the black population did.¹ The black rate of multiracial reporting was much lower compared to other groups, even after controlling for differences in age, education, nativity, gender, and region of the United States (Tafoya et al. 2005). Moreover, while the Census Bureau estimates that at least three-quarters of blacks in the United States are ancestrally multiracial, just over 4 percent choose to identify as such, indicating that most black Americans do not depend strictly on their genealogy to identify themselves, but instead, rely on the social construction of racial boundaries. However, that the rate of multiracial reporting is much higher among Asians and Latinos suggests that the historical absence of the constraining “one-drop” rule for these groups may provide more leeway in exercising discretion in the selection of racial/ethnic identities (Harris and Sim 2002; Xie and Goyette 1997).

In-depth qualitative interviews with multiracial adults

Lee and Bean (2008) also conducted in-depth interviews that showed that multiracial-background blacks are less likely to identify themselves in multiracial terms compared to Asians and Latinos, in large part because of outsiders’ ascriptions, which powerfully influence one’s choice of identities. Sociologists have noted that racial/ethnic identity is a dialectical process—one that involves both internal and external opinions and processes (Nagel 1994; Rodríguez and Cordero-Guzman 1992; Waters 1990, 1999). Researchers have also shown that outsiders’ ascription most powerfully constrains the racial/ethnic options for blacks. While blacks in the United States make distinctions based on ethnicity, class, nativity, and skin tone, the power of race—and blackness in particular—often overrides these internal differences (Kasinitz 1992; Waters 1999). They also asked the multiracial respondents about how they felt about their backgrounds, focusing specifically on the meaning and content that multiracial identification holds for them. They found that for most of the Asian-white and Latino-white multiracials, their ethnic identities were more symbolic than instrumental. While none denied the racial/ethnic mixture of their backgrounds, most felt that race held little consequence in their daily lives.

For the Asian-white and Latino-white multiracial respondents, claiming a white racial identity did not preclude them from also claiming an Asian or Latino ethnicity; they thought they could be white, yet also be Asian Indian, Japanese, Hispanic, or Mexican, signifying that Asian and Latino ethnicities are adopting the symbolic character of European ethnicity prevalent among white Americans. By contrast, the black multiracials interviewed were not able to do the same; they did not claim a white or nonblack racial identity and see such identities as accepted by others, signaling that black remains a relatively fixed racialized

¹We should note that “Latino” or “Hispanic” was not considered a racial category in the 2000 Census. The census form mandated two distinct questions regarding a person’s racial/ethnic background: one about race and a second about whether a person was “Spanish/Hispanic/Latino.” Someone who self-designated as “Spanish/Hispanic/Latino” could thus report any race. In the 2000 Census, 42 percent of Latinos chose “Other” as their racial category, and in both the 1990 and 2000 Censuses, 97 percent of those who marked “Other” as their race were Latinos (Anderson and Fienberg 1999; Grieco and Cassidy 2001; Rodríguez and Cordero-Guzman 1992; U.S. Bureau of the Census 2001). While the Census does not treat those of “Spanish/Hispanic/Latino” as a distinct racial category, we treat them as such here for two reasons. First, many Latinos see themselves as belonging in a separate category, as indicated by the fact that so many identify as “Other” race in the census. That is, they feel that the racial categories presented do not fit them well (Rodríguez 2000). Second, Latinos have been legally treated as a separate group, and often as a racial minority group that qualifies for and benefits from federal programs designed to assist disadvantaged minorities, such as affirmative action programs. Latinos have also been protected by Civil Rights legislation and the Voting Rights Act, both of which are aimed to help racial minorities (Glazer 1997; Skrentny 2002). Hence, not only do Latinos see themselves as belonging to a separate category, they are also often treated if they were a distinct racial category by the U.S. government.

category. The experiences of Asian-white and Latino-white multiracials thus differ starkly from those of black multiracials. Not only were Latinos and Asians more likely to report multiracial identifications, but such multiracials were more likely to describe their Asian and Latino identities as voluntary and optional rather than ascribed and instrumental, suggesting that the Asian and Latino identities reflect the symbolic character of white ethnicity.

Such findings indicate that group boundaries appear to be fading more rapidly for Latinos (and Mexicans) and Asians than for blacks, signaling that today's new nonwhites are not strongly assimilating as racialized minorities who see their experiences with race as akin to those of blacks, as would be predicted by the possibility of a white-nonwhite model. Moreover, neither does a tri-racial hierarchy model that would place Latinos and most new immigrants into the "collective black" category and label them as "racial others" seem accurately to characterize the racialization process of America's nonwhite newcomers. Instead, the experiences with multiraciality among Latinos and Asians place them closer to whites than to blacks. Moreover, that racial and ethnic affiliations and identities are much less matters of choice for multiracial blacks indicates that black remains a significant racial category. The lower rate of black multiracial reporting and the racial constraints that many multiracial blacks experience suggest that blackness continues to constitute a fundamental racial construction in American society. Hence, it is not simply that race matters, but more specifically, that black race matters, a result consistent with an African American exceptionalism thesis.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

A black-nonblack divide thus appears to be taking shape in the United States, in which Asians and Latinos are closer to whites than blacks are to whites (Gans 1999a; 1999b, 2005; Glazer 1997; Lee and Bean 2007; Quillian and Campbell 2003; Sears 2003; Sears et al. 2003; Waters 1999; Yancey 2003). Hence, America's color lines are moving toward a new demarcation that places many blacks in a position of disadvantage similar to that resulting from the traditional black-white divide. In essence, rather than erasing racial boundaries, the country is simply reinventing a color line that continues to separate blacks from other racial/ethnic groups. Thus, a black-nonblack divide appears to depict the color line at the moment. It is important to recall, however, that whiteness as a category has expanded over time to incorporate new immigrant groups in the past, and it may stretch yet again to include new groups (Gallagher 2004; Gerstle 1999; Warren and Twine 1997). Based on the patterns of multiracial identification noted above, Asians and Latinos may be moving closer and closer to a "white" category, with multiracial Asian-whites and Latino-whites standing at the head of the queue. This could indicate the re-emergence of a black-white color line. However, regardless of whether a divide were to fall along black-nonblack or black-white lines, the position of blacks could remain severely disadvantaged.

New non-white immigration could thus be causing Moynihan's warnings about black disadvantage to be overlooked once again, this time not for reasons of political controversy, but rather because of false optimism. If the new non-white immigrants fall along a color line that more strongly separates non-blacks from blacks than one that divides whites from non-whites, it could invite misinterpretation about progress in black-white relations in the United States. Because boundaries are loosening for some nonwhite groups, this could lead to the erroneous conclusion that race is declining in significance for all groups, with some observers arguing that race relations are improving at the same pace for all racial/ethnic minorities. However, the results of the research noted above suggest that the social construction of race continues to be more consequential for blacks than for Asians and Latinos. Not accounting for this difference could easily lead to the endorsement of a flawed logic that if race does not substantially impede the incorporation of Asians and Latinos, then

perhaps it no longer matters much for blacks either. Not only is this line of reasoning incorrect, it risks fostering support for so-called “color-blind” policies that fail to recognize that race and the color line have different consequences for different minority groups (Brown et al. 2003; Loury 2002).

Moreover, a logic of presumed “color blindness” fails to consider that boundary maintenance and change are two-sided processes that involve both choice, and perhaps more importantly, constraint (Alba 1999; Bobo 1997; Lamont 2000). This means that not only do members of racial/ethnic minority groups have to pursue entry and incorporation into social contexts occupied by the majority group, but also that members of the majority group must be willing to accept their admission. Both motivation and opportunity, both culture and structure, are important in these matters.

Based on patterns of multiracial reporting, it appears that Asians and Latinos are more actively pursuing entry into the majority group, and that whites are more willing to accept their entry compared to blacks. At this time, the boundaries for Asians and Latinos appear more elastic than they seem for blacks, consequently reinforcing the racial stigma attached to blackness (Loury 2002). The fact that boundary dissolution is neither uniform nor unconditional indicates that the United States cannot be complacent about the degree to which opportunities are improving for all racial/ethnic groups in the United States, particularly when a deep and persistent divide continues to separate blacks from all other groups.

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