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Toward a Social Psychological Understanding of Migration and Assimilation

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Abstract

The experience of migrating and attempting to integrate into a host society is personally and interactionally daunting. This article suggests ways social psychological perspectives may deepen our understanding of the interactional processes that shape experiences of migration and assimilation. We argue that existing migration literature highlights assimilation outcomes while undertheorizing the social psychological processes that constitute assimilation. In this article, we begin by showing how social psychological perspectives on migration relate to traditional sociological studies of assimilation by reviewing research on stereotyping and prejudice. Next, we review studies utilizing social identity theory and symbolic interactionism to explore how immigrants cast off stigma and give positive meaning to themselves. We conclude by suggesting how incorporating social psychological perspectives into research on migration and assimilation gives us important insights into the dynamic, interactive social processes that give meaning to those experiences.

Keywords

social psychology, immigration, assimilation, symbolic interaction

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Personal Reflexive Statement

Emily Cabaniss' interest in this topic stems from her early childhood friendship with a Colombian immigrant who taught her how to see the world through a different lens. Her academic pursuits reflect a longstanding commitment to understanding the processes that both reproduce and challenge social inequalities. She has conducted ethnographic research with young immigrant rights activists during graduate school and participates in advocacy groups that call for humane immigration policy reforms that acknowledge and respect the dignity of all people. Abigail Cameron's commitment to activism began in seventh grade when she peacefully refused to dissect a frog in Biology class. Her early connection with non-human animal rights led to a broader interest in other social inequalities in American society - specifically, the intersections of race/ethnicity, gender, and social class. Her scholarly and applied research for the Texas Department of State Health Services focuses upon racial/ethnic health disparities. She remains active in several animal rights advocacy groups.

Introduction

When people migrate, they often leave behind important sources of social support—their close friends and family members (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Parrenas 2001, 2008). And they also leave behind a way of life that is familiar, predictable, and in some cases quite comfortable (Aranda 2007; Wolf 2002; Zentgraf 2002). When they arrive in a new country, they often must navigate unfamiliar and sometimes hostile social institutions on their own and frequently with limited language abilities. Many, if not all, encounter discrimination at some point—sometimes for the first time (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Lan 2003). And many endure exploitative and demeaning work conditions in low-paid, unstable jobs. Others must negotiate contradictory or competing definitions of family or gender roles, especially as they enter the labor market (Espiritu 2003; Fernandez-Kelly 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Menjivar 2000). Still others confront the indignities of downward mobility when credentials and skills developed in their home countries are not acknowledged or rewarded in the ways they expect (Lamont 2000; Sennett and Cobb 1972). These and other conditions of migration and settlement complicate immigrants' efforts to "assimilate" into their new communities. They also highlight key limitations in the theoretical models we use to understand their experiences.

Prior to the 1990s, most scholars who studied the incorporation of immigrants into host communities drew on one of the two main theoretical models: assimilation (Gordon 1964; Park and Burgess 1921), in which acculturation to mainstream norms and values was thought to progress steadily through different stages, and cultural pluralism (Glazer and Moynihan 1963; Kallen 1915a, 1915b), in which immigrant groups are thought to adopt some host society customs while still retaining other unique aspects of their ethnic identity. Despite their apparent differences, both

models assume that, given enough time and generations, full assimilation into the mainstream will eventually and inevitably occur for all groups, although it may take longer for those who are stymied by racial and ethnic discrimination. In these cases, cultural assimilation—adopting the customs, values, and beliefs of the host society—is thought to occur more quickly since immigrants themselves initiate this process. However, structural assimilation—integration within all major social institutions—is thought to take longer because it requires more accommodation from the host community (Gordon 1964).

Although assimilation and cultural pluralism were theorized as different options for immigrants, in practice, most research has examined their integration strictly in terms of *assimilation* and mostly in regard to U.S. immigration. Early studies focused on the experiences of white European immigrants and tended to view assimilation as a steady, unidirectional process of immigrants casting off markers of cultural and ethnic difference in order to become like mainstream (i.e., white, middle class) Americans (Alba and Nee 2003). The image of "the melting pot" bubbling and blending and smelting diverse cultures together into a homogeneous mix became and has remained an iconic (if contested) representation of U.S. society for immigrants and the native-born alike.

While the process of assimilating seems to require immigrants to engage in some type of identity work in order to transform themselves into Americans, most research that draws on these perspectives has not focused on how these processes unfold. Instead, scholars who study assimilation tend to look for quantifiable indicators of progress, such as income, employment status, educational attainment, and health-care utilization, to tell them how different immigrant groups are faring in their transformation into Americans (Hirschman, Kasinitz, and DeWind 1999). Typically, they draw on cross-sectional or longitudinal survey data and compare outcomes for various immigrant and native-born populations for some set of variables. This type of research has produced invaluable information about the status of different immigrant groups and the kinds of challenges they face in the United States. For instance, scholars who study educational attainment have identified a high school dropout rate among Latina/os which has hovered around 30 percent since data were first collected on this group in 1972 (Lockwood and Secada 1999). They have also discovered that this problem is often associated with other difficulties, such as low grades, grade retention, poverty, and pressing family or work responsibilities (Lockwood and Secada 1999; Rumberger 1995). Others have documented immigrants' particular vulnerability to poverty (Van Hook, Brown, and Kwenda 2004).

Without identifying these broad statistical patterns, we could not begin to construct an accurate picture of the lives of contemporary immigrants in this country. As we strive for a more comprehensive understanding of the ways immigrants both shape and are shaped by U.S. society, we need to investigate more than outcomes and indicators of progress. We must also examine the processes that create those outcomes. Scholarship that builds on more contemporary variants of assimilation theory, such as segmented assimilation theory, suggest that there are multiple processes at play and that

they can lead to quite different outcomes (Portes and Zhou 1993). And interview studies that examine immigrants' experiences with discrimination highlight the challenges of navigating those processes (Rumbaut 2008; Waters 1999). How do immigrants, interacting with other immigrants and with members of the host society, contribute to these processes? How do they challenge them? These are the kinds of questions social psychologists are especially qualified to answer.

Why a Social Psychology of Migration and Assimilation?

Because social psychologists who study the lives of immigrants rarely draw explicitly on assimilation perspectives, their insights are often missed in the broader field of migration research. We can address this oversight by outlining specific ways social psychological research gives us more comprehensive understandings of the experiences of immigrants as they work to integrate into host communities. Drawing on insights from early Chicago School scholars, we argue that assimilation as a social psychological process involves the active negotiation of identities by immigrants and members of the host society. Assimilation understood in this way implies a struggle over meanings and the power to define oneself and others. This struggle does not manifest in a neutral context where immigrants and members of the host society start on equal footing and with equivalent tools. Rather, the dominant "host" group controls most cultural resources in the host society. This gives them more power to construct and disseminate images and ideas about who people are and where they should be positioned in a given society. For that reason, research that considers the cognitive processes that underlie stereotyping and prejudice formation gives us critical insight into the ways members of the host society shape the context of identification that immigrants enter.

From the perspective of immigrants, pervasive patterns of prejudice and stereotyping mean that they arrive in a new country not as individuals, but as members of groups about whom beliefs and attitudes have already formed. Thus, their efforts at defining themselves require them to respond to these negative images and expectations. The strategies they employ, then, can be seen as sometimes challenging social arrangements, and other times, reinforcing them.

The Social Psychology of Prejudice and Stereotyping

When people migrate, their ability to integrate into a host community depends in part on the response of those who are already living in that community. Robert Park believed this process was inherently interactive and required mutual accommodation and adjustments from immigrants and members of the host society (Park 1914; Park and Burgess 1921). However, he and other scholars (Gordon 1964; Portes and Zhou 1993) also recognized that negative attitudes and discrimination complicate the process.

Most scholars of prejudice draw from theoretical frameworks developed after World War II to explain whites' long-standing prejudice against blacks in the United

States. Reflecting these early influences, scholars currently explain prejudice against immigrants in three main ways. Some see it as rooted in the personality traits of individual people (Adorno et al. 1950), others see it as an outcome of normal cognitive processing (Allport 1954); still others see it as a response to feelings of threat (Blumer 1958).

Psychologists began examining the idea of a prejudiced personality in the 1950s. Adorno and his colleagues (1950) proposed that prejudice could be explained in terms of a set of personality characteristics that predisposes some people to feel more generalized animosity toward minority groups than others. These personality characteristics, they contend, develop in childhood, largely through socialization in an authoritarian household. Immigrants and other minority groups, thus, become scapegoats for their displayed childhood anger. Most empirical support for this perspective comes from correlational research that finds that people's attitudes toward different out-groups tend to cohere (Meloen et al. 1988; Scheepers, Felling, and Peters 1990; van Ijzendoorn 1989). Strong interattitudinal associations are presented as evidence of a unique personality configuration.

A more *social* psychological approach is reflected in the work of cognitive scholars who draw on Allport's (1954) definition of prejudice as "an antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalization" (p. 10). From this perspective, prejudice derives not from pathological personality complexes but from normal cognitive processing (Fiske 2005). For cognitive scholars, prejudice is a form of bias—a multidimensional concept that includes stereotypical thinking, prejudicial feelings, and discriminatory actions (Fiske and Taylor 2008; Zerubavel 1997). Thus, to understand how prejudice arises, they contend that we must examine its cognitive precursors.

Scholars who take this approach have focused on processes of categorization and stereotyping. Derived from research on person perception, these processes guide our thoughts and evaluations of others and help us predict, plan, and make sense of behavior (Fiske and Taylor 2008). Cognitive scholars find that when we perceive others, we tend to classify them initially into a few broad categories, often using readily accessible visible cues (Bruner 1957; Fiske and Neuberg 1990; Stangor 2009; Stangor et al. 1992). These "basic categories" are thought to serve a perceptual need for cognitive efficiency and provide a starting point for making sense of complex social situations (Rosch 1978; Rosch and Mervis 1981).

Stereotypes are the evaluative components of categorization. We use the "pictures in our heads" not just to identify others but also to formulate specific expectations about them (Lippmann 1922:3; see also Brown 1995). In this way, stereotypes serve as minitheories about what other people are like and why they behave as they do. People tend to stereotype when they lack the time, opportunity, and motivation to evaluate others as individuals (Fiske and Neuberg 1990; Macrae and Bodenhausen 2000). Because these conditions often prevail in interactions with unfamiliar people (including immigrants), some scholars argue that prejudice is the inevitable consequence of categorization and stereotyping (Bakanic 2009).

Cognitive approaches to the study of prejudice offer considerable advantages over personality perspectives. By showing how bias arises from normal cognitive processes, research in this area helps us understand the pervasiveness and durability of stereotyping. It also suggests the difficulty immigrants may face in negotiating their own identities in a host society. Despite these strengths, the cognitive approach to prejudice rarely probes the contexts and interactions out of which prejudice arises. Links between individual experiences and broader social patterns and structural conditions are typically ignored. Moreover, this body of research downplays the importance of power in shaping cognitive processes.

Threat perspectives offer an important corrective. By conceiving of prejudice as a response to feelings of threat, scholars suggest ways of understanding its contextual, relational, and power dynamics. Moreover, they direct attention away from individual experiences and toward collective practices and group interests (Berg 2009; Blumer 1958; Bobo 1999; Sherif 1966). In these models, prejudice is not a manifestation of an intolerant personality or a product of individual biased thinking. Rather, prejudice emerges from real or perceived competition over resources, power, and status. Many scholars who study prejudice as a response to threat draw on Blumer's (1958) "group position" model. A symbolic interactionist, Blumer, described prejudice as a general outlook reflecting normative ideas about where one's own group *should* stand in relation to other groups. From this perspective, members of a dominant group may come to feel that they are entitled to certain rights, statuses, and resources by virtue of their superior group position. If they believe that their proprietary claims are threatened by a minority group, members of the dominant group may respond defensively with anger or fear. Although Blumer's ideas are foundational to the threat perspective, the fundamental interactionist principles he espoused—especially attention to meaning and interpretation—are often not incorporated into empirical analyses.

Compared with research on the cognitive dynamics of prejudice, work on prejudice as a response to threat has proceeded along a narrower path. Most studies aim to specify different conditions that elicit or reduce feelings of threat among the native-born, such as perceptions of the actual or relative size of immigrant groups (Alba, Rumbaut, and Marotz 2005; McLaren 2003; Quillian 1995). Other scholars focus on the role of "contact" (Allport 1954) in moderating or exacerbating feelings of threat related to immigration (Dixon 2006; Dixon and Rosenbaum 2004; Hood and Morris 1997, 1998; McLaren 2003).

While this body of literature gives us valuable insights into the conditions that shape feelings of threat and negative attitudes, it offers weaker analyses of the *processes* at work. It seems that methodological imperatives, in a broad sense, have limited the types of analyses scholars have undertaken. Most studies of threat have used quantitative designs that preclude an actual investigation of interactional dynamics. Survey research, for instance, must collapse complex interactional processes into quantifiable measures, but important ideas and meanings are lost in the process.

Theoretical myopia, we contend, has further limited our understanding of the social psychological dynamics of antiimmigrant prejudice. Despite Blumer's influence over the conceptual development of threat perspectives, few scholars have interrogated the fundamental symbolic interactionist principles outlined in his model of prejudice as a sense of group position (for a comprehensive critique, see Esposito and Murphy 1999). That has left us with little understanding of how prejudice and feelings of threat arise from what people actually *do together* to give meaning to themselves and social situations. More than any other prejudice scholar, Blumer (1958) directs attention to the contextual and interactional dynamics of prejudice and urges researchers to focus especially on the efforts of elites to defend, legitimize, and normalize patterns of inequality. We often miss these dynamics when we study only statistical correlates of threat. As well, we frequently overlook how immigrants play an active role in reproducing systems of inequality as they negotiate and defend their own positions in the host society—a point we address next.

Migration and Identity

At its most basic level, migration sets in motion processes that deeply affect people and their identities. Although scholars and social critics have long expressed interest in the experiences of immigrants in the United States (e.g., Park and Miller 1921; Riis 1890; Thomas and Znaniecki 1918-1920), most research on their identities has developed in the last several decades. This period corresponds with a general shift among social psychologists from a focus on individuals and personal identities to groups and social or collective identities (Ashmore, Deaux, and McLaughlin-Volpe 2004; Cerulo 1997). Research involving immigrants' identities has proceeded along disciplinary boundaries reflecting long-standing patterns of academic provincialism (e.g., House 1977; Thoits 1995). Psychological social psychologists have focused primarily on the formation of ethnic identities, while sociological social psychologists have attended more to interactional and expressive processes of impression management. Although there has been some disciplinary crossover and conceptual borrowing, most has involved sociologists drawing on the insights of psychologists, especially on social identity theory.

The Limits of Social Identity Theory

Derived from work in cognitive psychology, social identity theory emphasizes conscious selection processes, psychological motivations, and individual choice (Tajfel and Turner 1986). From this perspective, social identities, including ethno-racial identities, are seen as self-schemas (Howard 2000; Oyserman et al. 2003) or "organized knowledge about one's self, the cognitive response to the question of identity: Who am I?" (Howard 2000:368). Reflecting its cognitive roots, social identity theory brings together ideas about categorization and identity formation.

In doing so, it suggests that people are not simply passive targets of automatic processes of categorization, but that they actively use social categories to identify themselves and resist undesirable labeling by others (Deaux 2006; Fiske and Taylor 2008; Howard 2000).

Social identity theory is rooted in the assumption that people have a basic need to perceive themselves positively and that an essential part of one's self-concept derives from membership in groups (Tajfel 1981; Tajfel and Turner 1986). Accordingly, people are seen as continually engaged in processes of social comparison between groups to which they belong and those to which they do not belong. When the outcome of these comparisons is positive, people are expected to feel good about themselves and their group membership. When the outcome is negative, they may feel badly about both (Tajfel 1981; Tajfel and Turner 1986). The latter scenario is thought to be particularly threatening to the self-concept; thus, social identity scholars have paid special attention to processes of social comparison.

The choice of comparison group can be critical because it influences how advantaged or disadvantaged a person feels as a member of an ethnic group (Tajfel 1981; Walker and Pettigrew 1984). For instance, Tropp and Wright (1999) found that Latina/o college students in the United States perceived themselves to be relatively disadvantaged compared to whites, but advantaged compared to blacks. Finally, scholars note that immigrants who perceive their group to be low status in a host country may see themselves as higher status compared to groups in their native country (Deaux 2006; Mahler 1995).

How people identify ethnically depends in part on their beliefs about the permeability of group boundaries (Mummendey et al. 1999). Often, experiences with discrimination shape these perceptions. For instance, Waters (1999) found that many first generation West Indian immigrants initially tried to disidentify with African Americans in the workplace and claimed to be more like their white coworkers and bosses (see also Merenstein 2008). However, persistent or especially blatant forms of racial discrimination often led them to view ethnic boundaries as more rigid. Indeed, correlational analyses generally find that experiences with discrimination are associated with stronger ethnic identification (Portes and Rumbaut 2001)—a finding that contradicts classic assimilation predictions about ethnic identities weakening over time. In research with multiple generations of Mexican Americans, for instance, Padilla (1980) found that the greater the level of perceived discrimination, the more likely participants were to identify with their ethnic group regardless of their level of knowledge or experience with their cultural heritage.

For members of marginalized groups, identifying ethnically may help defend their self-concepts against racial stigma and stereotyping (Deaux 2006; Phinney 1991; Tajfel 1981). In their discussion of segmented assimilation theory, Portes and Zhou (1993) argue that maintaining strong ethnic ties to one's culture of origin can buffer the effects of discrimination in the host society. Rumbaut (2008; see also Portes and Rumbaut 2001) makes similar assertions about the self-protective effects of "reactive ethnicity" among members of the second generation.

When immigrants and native-born Americans think of race and ethnicity (and nationality) in these ways, it complicates our understanding of social identities. These examples show, for instance, that people do not perceive an endless array of options in selecting ethnic identities: some have more choices than others. Moreover, they suggest that ethnic identification does not manifest within a stable and uniform set of social conditions, but is *patterned* by circumstances that impact some groups more than others. Perhaps because of the individual-centered approach of psychological social psychologists and the dominant use of quantitative methods, most research that draws on social identity theory has tended to miss these patterns.

We can say, then, that social identity research shows us the choices people think they have in identifying ethnically. However, this body of work largely ignores how social identities are conditioned by broader patterns of inequality, material conditions, and contextualized interactions with others. Moreover, research that takes this perspective tends to treat ethnic (and racial and national) identities as entities in themselves—things that immigrants put on or take off. This way of thinking about identities contradicts core principles of social constructionism that are at the heart of social psychological perspectives and leaves little room for understanding these creative processes. This is where symbolic interactionism offers important insights.

The Analytic Strengths of a Symbolic Interactionist Approach

Symbolic interactionists see the self as both a process and product of reflexive activity that includes our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors as well as our sense of ourselves as physical, social, and moral beings (Gecas 1982). Like social identity theorists, symbolic interactionists see people as agents who make choices and can effect change in their own lives and in the social world. But, symbolic interactionists also attend to interactive processes, material conditions, and structural arrangements that shape, constrain, and enable specific choices in everyday life.

Symbolic interactionists also distinguish between *structural* approaches (McCall and Simmons 1978; Stryker 1977; Stryker and Burke 2001) that emphasize prediction, statistical generalizability, and quantitative methods, and *traditional* approaches that emphasize the negotiation of meaning, interactive processes, and qualitative methods. In research with immigrants, the traditional model has dominated. This approach is grounded in the work of Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969) and borrows heavily from the dramaturgical tradition associated with Goffman (1959, 1963, 1967) and K. Burke (1966). Traditional interactionists see identities as socially constructed, emergent, and negotiated in face-to-face interaction. From this perspective, our identities are not fixed entities; rather, we draw on different cultural resources to create virtual selves and signal that we are certain kinds of people (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). In this way, identities are not meanings "attached" to the self (e.g., P. Burke and Tully 1977:837; Stryker and Burke 2001:286-87); rather, they are "indexes of the self" or signs that evoke meaning as interactants interpret and respond to each other's presentation of self (Schwalbe

and Mason-Schrock 1996:115). Thus, to understand the social world, we must attend to meanings that are negotiated in interaction.

Because traditional interactionists see identities as interactional achievements (Brissett and Edgley 1990), they contend that we can *work on* them—as individuals or in groups. Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996:115) describe identity work as "anything people do, individually or collectively, to give meaning to themselves or others" (see also Snow and Anderson 1987). Identity work, thus, involves both the collective development of identities "as widely understood signs with a set of rules and conventions for their use" and their use by individuals to craft images of themselves in interaction (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996:115).

Research on the identity work that immigrants do has focused primarily on their efforts to manage stigma. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, stigmatized identities, like all other identities, are created in interaction and are context dependent. As Goffman (1963:3) reminds us, "an attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another, and there is neither creditable [n]or discreditable in itself." Thus, stigma is not a fixed property of a person, but arises in the course of interaction as actors signal and interpret each other's signals (Blumer 1969). From this perspective, stigma can be *managed* in face-to-face interactions.

Perhaps the simplest way of managing stigma is to try to "pass" as a member of a nonstigmatized or less stigmatized group by withholding discrediting information or concealing the stigma (Goffman 1963). For immigrants who look like members of the dominant group, passing may be a viable option in some situations. Valenta (2009), for instance, found that some Yugoslavian and Iraqi immigrants could change their hair or clothing styles and blend into Norwegian society. But, they had to take care to avoid speaking because their accents acted as "stigma symbols" and gave them away (Goffman 1963). Similarly, after September 11, 2001, Marvasti (2006) found that many Muslim Arabs in the United States adopted more "American-sounding" names and gave ambiguous answers to questions about their ethnicity or nation of origin. Other immigrants conceal their identities by simply neglecting to correct misperceptions. Killian and Johnson (2006) found that North African immigrants to France were sometimes assumed to be from Portugal or Spain—countries that were considered higher status by mainstream French standards.

If people cannot pass, which is often the case for more visibly stigmatized groups, they may try to "cover" or acknowledge a stigma but deflect attention from it (Goffman 1963). Whereas the goal of passing is to control information, the goal of covering is to influence the meaning and interpretation of discreditable attributes by others. One of the most common strategies for accomplishing this is to use "identity talk" or "the verbal construction and assertion of personal identity" (Snow and Anderson 1987:1348). For instance, black immigrants to the United States sometimes emphasize their foreign accents or insist that they are "West Indian" (Foner 2001; Waters 1999) or "Dominican" (Bailey 2000; Toribio 2004) as a way of *distancing* themselves from color-based stigma in the United States. In other research, Ibarra (2002) found that immigrant elder care workers managed the

invisibility, dirtiness, and underappreciation of their work by *embracing* their roles as caregivers. In interviews, these workers described both the tedium and joys of caring for their clients as well as their unique expertise in balancing these elements. They also created opportunities to showcase their special caregiving talents, for instance, by giving their clients' adult children explicit instruction on how to behave properly around their ailing parent.

Other scholars find that immigrants try to deflect stigma by fighting back and trying to position fellow interactants in subordinate roles. As Weinstein and Deutschberger (1963:457) explain, "One can be in a subordinate position and still, through skillful playing, cast Alter [the other] into a 'one-down' identity, making it clear that Alter is not as superior, holy or infallible as his position might imply" (see also Strauss 1959, on "status forcing"). In his research with Arab Americans following September 11, 2001, Marvasti (2006) found that when they were singled out for "random" screenings at airports or were asked for extra identification, they sometimes demanded an explanation for the differential treatment. In doing so, they challenged the right of the other person to question them and simultaneously claimed a position of equality if not superiority in the interaction.

Other research finds that immigrants try to deflect stigma by "micromanaging" their relationships and interactions with others. For instance, Valenta (2009) found that ethnic minority immigrants in Norway carefully worked to keep their interactions with coethnic peers separate from those that included members of the dominant group. By maintaining distance between these social networks, they had more control over what they disclosed and could be more creative in their presentations of self (i.e., sometimes making up details). Other times, immigrants may try to personalize their interactions with members of the dominant group, for instance, by befriending them (Marvasti 2006; Valenta 2009) or telling emotionally gripping stories about their personal experiences (Cabaniss 2016). Through this process, stigmatized individuals create opportunities for presenting more extensive self-narratives that allow them to counter stereotypes and one-dimensional characterizations. In this way, they can transform themselves from "discredited" individuals into "whole and usual" ones (Goffman 1963:3). It is common, for instance, for immigrants to use humor strategically to establish common ground or to "facilitat[e] normalized role-taking" (Davis 1961:128). Other scholars note that openly displaying a stigma symbol can sometimes shield people from negative evaluations (Goffman 1963) or exempt them from certain role obligations (Parsons 1951). For instance, Molinsky (2005) found that when Americans were asked to evaluate practice interviews by Russian immigrant job seekers, they were more likely to overlook cultural faux pas (i.e., giving curt answers to interviewers) in assessing the interpersonal skills of immigrants with less English proficiency. These findings support Goffman's (1959) contention that we do not control all aspects of our presentation of self. Our performances include elements we intentionally "give" as well as those that we inadvertently "give off." In this case, immigrants did not purposely manipulate their English proficiency, but their language deficits still seemed to work to their

advantage. Other research shows that immigrants sometimes use language more strategically to manage stigma. For instance, Latina domestic workers may resist demands for respect from their employers by pretending not to understand them (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). By feigning a language barrier, they breach the social rules and conventions governing relations of "deference and demeanor" and implicitly reject the demeaning identities implied by them (Goffman 1956).

Thus far, we have emphasized strategies individual immigrants may use to manage stigma and negotiate identities. However, some strategies implicate other immigrants and can harm their group as a whole. Schwalbe and his colleagues (2000) describe this strategy as "defensive othering." Unlike "oppressive othering," whereby a dominant group marks another group as inferior for the purposes of excluding or exploiting them, defensive othering is an adaptive response to oppression that subordinates the use to elevate themselves above members of their own group. In this way, they reject a stigmatizing label without challenging its demeaning connotation, thereby giving tacit legitimacy to the stigma.

While most research examines the efforts of individuals to manage stigma (e.g., Snow and Anderson 1987), identity work is also accomplished through group process (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). An essential part of crafting a positive collective identity involves finding ways of subverting the dominant ideologies that impose stigma (Wolkomir 2001). For some groups, this is not especially difficult if there seems to be little redeeming value in the dominant group's characterization of them. For instance, Salzinger (1991) found that Latinas who joined a domestic worker job placement group actively tried to cast off the "dirty work" stigma by professionalizing their image. They did so by teaching new members specific cleaning techniques, providing English lessons, openly discussing problems that arose in interactions with employers, modeling ways of refusing requests for uncompensated labor, and supporting each other for quitting jobs that were overly exploitative. Through this process, workers developed shared symbols and codes for signaling that they were skilled professionals and created regular opportunities for affirming that identity (e.g., Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). Along the way, they developed a collective "professional" identity that each could use to claim more power in their interactions with their employers. This process also enabled them, as a group, to counter the demeaning ideologies of the dominant group.

For others groups, however, the dominant ideologies that marginalize them may simultaneously provide resources for seeing themselves positively or for gaining access to valuable social networks. Under these circumstances, developing a subcultural identity may be a more contested process. For instance, Asian Americans sometimes embrace the "model minority" stereotype because it implies that they are morally upstanding, smart, and hardworking (i.e., not like *other* minorities). However, this static characterization leaves little room for negotiating other identities and can alienate Asian Americans whose circumstances (e.g., low grades or economic hardship) preclude them from claiming that identity (Ajrouch 2004; Pyke and Dang 2003). Reconciling these conflicts can complicate subcultural identity projects.

As an example, Pyke and Dang (2003; see also Espiritu and Tran 2002) show how second generation Vietnamese Americans developed a bicultural "normal" identity that was defined largely in terms of what it was not: fresh off the boat (FOB) or whitewashed. Drawing on dominant stereotypes of Asian Americans as either unassimilable or model minorities, they constantly monitored their presentations of self for signs that they were too FOB or whitewashed. However, they often disagreed about the meanings of their codes—especially about what qualified as "whitewashed" since many of them wanted to do well in school and achieve upward mobility. Sometimes, their efforts to define a clear bicultural identity were subverted by "normals" who occasionally embraced the whitewashed label, taking pride in their ability to blend into white middle-class culture. Much research on the second generation touches on similar, unresolved struggles by young people to carve out distinct bicultural identities that allow them to simultaneously embrace elements of their cultural heritage and those of the host society (Kibria 2002; Kurien 2005; Wolf 2002).

Finally, the identity work done by some immigrant groups to repair stigmatized identities may require certain subgroups to accept even more oppressive values and norms than those mandated by the mainstream culture. For instance, Espiritu (2001) found that Filipina/o Americans sometimes responded to the stigma of racism in the United States by constructing opposing narratives of Filipina sexual virtuosity and white female promiscuity and using them to assert their superiority over the dominant group. In this way, young "chaste" Filipinas embody the moral integrity of the ethnic community. By signaling "ideal" feminine virtue, they can claim positive self-identities vis-à-vis white women. On the other hand, rejecting this identity can alienate them from members of their coethnic community who are counting on them to cooperate.

Symbolic interactionist research complements research by social identity scholars by fleshing out the contextual and interactional dynamics that shape immigrants' identity work. This body of research has given us important insights into the ways immigrants resist stigmatizing identification by others and actively work to construct more positive meanings. Even so, interactionists, like social identity scholars, have tended to emphasize the efforts of individual immigrants to construct personal identities and has deemphasized collaborative processes. As well, research that takes an interactionist approach has focused rather narrowly on one side of the interaction: that of the immigrant. Scholars have given scant attention to the ways members of the host society construct their own identities in face-to-face interaction with immigrants. Thus, we know a good deal about how immigrants experience and respond to stigma but very little about what dominants are doing to actively diminish immigrants' self-images.

Discussion and Conclusions

In this article, we demonstrated how social psychological perspectives contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of migration and assimilation. If we think of

assimilation as a social process that involves both immigrants and members of the host society, attention should focus on interactions between those groups. For it is there that we can see what immigrants and members of the host society are doing, individually and with others, to shape different outcomes. Social psychological research, thus, helps us understand the cognitive and interactional dynamics of assimilation.

This review shows that immigrants enter a host society not as individuals but as members of groups about whom beliefs and attitudes have already formed. Research that takes a cognitive approach shows how quickly people categorize, homogenize, and evaluate others, often with little conscious awareness. This not only helps us understand the pervasiveness and durability of stereotyping but also suggests the challenges immigrants face in trying to define themselves in a host society. Research that focuses on perceptions of immigrants as threats suggests that these attitudes do not arise from decontextualized thought processes but take shape within particular social contexts and under certain structural conditions. This body of work suggests that prejudicial attitudes arise when people believe their access to valued resources, rights, and privileges is threatened or that their way of life will somehow be undermined by too many newcomers.

While research on the cognitive precursors to prejudice and perceptions of threat give us important insights into how members of the host society think about and construct immigrants, they offer limited ways of understanding how attitudes are shaped through group processes and social interaction. We have argued that these limitations in many ways reflect the overwhelming dominance of quantitative methods in research. The qualitative studies we have highlighted that focus on symbolic interactionists' understanding of prejudice as a response to threat show how negative attitudes arise in interaction and are embodied in practices that justify privilege. We would add that these types of studies also suggest how expressions of prejudice reflect implicit claims by members of the dominant group to certain identities and social statuses.

Our review of the social psychological literature also shows that once immigrants enter the host society, they actively negotiate positive identities despite pervasive patterns of prejudice and stereotyping. Research on social identity suggests that immigrants devise various cognitive strategies for giving positive meanings to themselves and countering stigmatizing identification by others. By altering their reference groups, immigrants can mentally elevate their status vis-à-vis other groups and protect their self-concepts from perceptions of relative disadvantage. As well, by choosing ethnic labels that have more positive connotations, they can claim higher status identities.

Research that draws on interactionist perspectives shows how immigrants also signal through their presentation of self that they are essentially good and worthy people. This body of work illustrates how immigrants actively resist negative imputed identities through what they say and do in interactions with others. It also shows that many contemporary immigrants spend a lot of time engaged in particular

types of identity work—those who involve managing stigma. This suggests that identity work does not take place under a neutral or uniform set of conditions but is patterned by differences in power, status, and resources. Moreover, it shows how immigrants sometimes contribute to these inequalities by learning the dominant prejudices of the host society and using them to claim status or leverage privileges in ways that oppress others.

Despite important insights, research on identity work has focused almost exclusively on the experiences and perspectives of immigrants themselves. While scholars generally allude to the types of things dominants are doing that elicit certain responses from immigrants, they rarely focus directly on those things. Because this review finds that immigrants actively work to manage stigma imposed by dominants, it is important to examine the behavior of dominants to understand immigrants' motivations to counter negative characterizations. The downward assimilation of some second generation immigrants into poverty and the "permanent underclass" (Portes and Zhou 1993; see Cameron, Cabaniss, and Teixeira-Poit 2012, for a critique), for instance, may be understood as an adaptive response to stigma and discrimination in the broader society. However, we need empirical research that focuses not just on their response and concomitant marginalization but also the actions of dominants in shaping a social environment that sometimes feels hostile and exclusionary to newcomers. With its focus on meanings and interpretations in face-to-face interaction, symbolic interactionist research could give us just those insights.

Future work on the social psychology of migration and assimilation might also focus on the "side bets" dominants have riding on being seen as certain kinds of people and to whom they feel accountable (Schwalbe 2008). Lan (2003), for instance, found that young middle-class Taiwanese employers actively sought middle-class Filipinas for domestic work in part because they thought these women reflected well on them and signaled their own status and worth. In this example, their identity work aimed to claim status not just vis-à-vis immigrants (subordinates) but also vis-à-vis their peers (other dominants).

Other research might continue to probe group processes. The few studies that have considered how immigrants work together to construct positive identities have generally downplayed the class resources required. Research on domestic worker co-ops (Salzinger 1991), for instance, found that established members (mostly married women who previously claimed upper–middle-class status) generally looked down on new members who talked too much about money and not enough about the moral value of their work. If this response is common, we might suspect that immigrants most in need of help in constructing positive identities are alienated *because of* their need and the meaning that has for coethnics who claim higher status. Social psychology provides tools for understanding how these situations arise and contribute to patterns of inequality. At the same time, it suggests how these patterns might be arranged differently to promote and support the well-being and dignity of all people.

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