



Edward Telles and Christina A Sue - Durable Ethnicity Book Symposium

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Consequential Identities: Mexicans in the US and Turks in Europe

Abstract

Edward Telles and Christina Sue's *Durable Ethnicity: Mexican Americans and the Ethnic Core* makes a key contribution to academic, social and political debates on international migration, assimilation, ethnicity, and identities. This novel account of Mexican Americans' manifestation of ethnicity draws on 70 qualitative interviews and a random sample of about 1500 US-born Mexican Americans. Written fluently and in a moving style, it probes the "cultural assimilability and Americanness" of Mexican Americans. This research and its findings are relevant to a broader range of audiences in the US and are of special interest to academic and public debates on immigration and integration in Europe. In what follows, I will reflect on the book's main findings and conclusions and review the newly developed symbolic-consequential ethnicity scale. I will conclude by discussing the relevance of the findings for the European migration experience and suggest the need for comparative research.

Introduction

When I was about to submit the *2000 Families* grant application in 2008, Bernhard Nauck, my co-applicant from Germany, told me about a recent book on multiple generations of Mexican Americans: *Generations of Exclusions: Mexican Americans, Assimilation, and Race* by Telles and Ortiz (2008). Nervous that I (then very new to international migration research) would miss essential previous research in my review and excited to learn more about research on multigeneration research on migration and integration which was and still is rare in international migration studies, I immediately ordered, read and incorporated this

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3 fascinating and novel research into the NORFACE funding application (Guveli et al 2016;
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5 Guveli et al 2017).
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8 The *Generations of Exclusions* research uniquely draws on the Mexican American
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10 Study Project's (MASP) large-scale survey data on four to five generations of Mexican
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12 Americans by following family members in the same family lineage. Its main aim was to test
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14 the leading assimilation theories on international migrants and their descendants on multiple
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16 outcomes such as socioeconomic status, education, identity, intermarriage and language. It
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18 represents the first comprehensive test of assimilation theories on the long-term
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20 intergenerational assimilation of Mexican Americans and was the first account of
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22 multigenerational change of any ethnic and migrant group in a destination society. My *2000*
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24 *Families* study followed, with its investigation of the multigenerational consequences of
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26 migration of the Turkish origin Europeans (Guveli et al. 2016a, 2016b; Guveli et al. 2017).
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31 In this earlier work, Telles and Ortiz (2008) reveal that even in the fourth and fifth
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33 generation, Mexican American's level of education stays low and poverty remains high.
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35 Telles and Sue's (2019) *Durable Ethnicity: Mexican Americans and the Ethnic Core* enriched
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37 the earlier research and added to the Mexican American Study Project (MASP) data with
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39 qualitative interviews to investigate the "cultural assimilability and Americanness", as they
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41 put it, of Mexican immigrants and their offspring. They make evidence-based contributions
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43 to the escalating discussions on "cultural war" in the US. In my view, this study has
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45 international relevance, although the authors frame their discussion mainly within the US
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47 debate.
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51 The study examines four dimensions of Mexican American ethnicity: ethnic identity,
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53 national identity, language and involvement in immigration politics. Each dimension is
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55 studied in a single empirical chapter. I should note that I very much like the chapter titles of
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57 Chapter 2, "*Mexican Americans*" which focuses on ethnic identity, and Chapter 3, "*Mexican*
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3 *American,*” on national identity. These two dimensions of identity *emphasize* different parts
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5 of the same thing. Moreover, these two identities are not competing loyalties; Mexican
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7 Americans find their ethnic and national identities “highly compatible and complementary”.
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10 The other two empirical chapters study the importance of language (Spanish – Chapter 4) and
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12 immigration policies (Chapter 5). On the one hand, the Spanish language is shown to be
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14 fading over generations but remains meaningful for most; on the other hand, there is much
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16 within-group variation in attitudes to American immigration policies. In the final chapter,
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18 they conclude Mexican American ethnicity is durable, although the strength and defining
19
20 power of *Mexican* identity varies across generations, context and individual characteristics.
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23 However, American identity is “unequally” important for all.
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29 *Symbolic and consequential ethnicity*

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31 To answer their research question on the extent to which Mexican Americans are
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33 culturally assimilative and embrace Americanness across generations since migration, Telles
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35 and Sue develop a symbolic-consequential ethnicity continuum. They identify a few
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37 characteristics to understand the variations on this continuum. Mexican Americans who score
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39 high on it experience more consequential ethnicity. The continuum includes three dimensions
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41 of ethnicity: 1) externally imposed ethnicity (by discrimination and exclusion, for example);
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43 2) an individual’s own cultural practices; and 3) an individual’s position and relations in an
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45 ethnic and social structure (ethnic core). That is, people who experience ethnic discrimination
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47 or whose ethnicity is externally exposed, who have a Mexican cultural lifestyle or who have
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49 strong relations within the ethnic community (ethnic core) score high on the symbolic-
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51 consequential ethnicity continuum. Male, discriminated-against and darker skinned Mexican
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53 Americans are more likely to score higher on the consequential side of the continuum than
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60 others.

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3 The symbolic-consequential ethnicity continuum is a core concept in the study. I
4 acknowledge the significance and social relevance of this newly developed continuum to
5 understand cultural assimilation and the persistence of ethnic identities. Telles and Sue
6 illuminate the power of this concept to explain their rich qualitative data. However, although
7 the continuum includes three dimensions, the study lacks a systematic analysis of how these
8 dimensions correlate on the continuum. That is, the three larger dimensions of the continuum
9 also include multiple dimensions, and the researchers should thoroughly analyse and identify
10 these multiple dimensions. Furthermore, a factor analysis would show how the dimensions of
11 ethnicity relate to the overall concept of symbolic-consequential ethnicity continuum.
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26 *Thinking beyond the borders and estimating the future*

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28 There is no consensus among scholars on the ultimate stage of assimilation. Some
29 consider high rates of intermarriage to be the final stage of assimilation because this indicates
30 a full societal acceptance of the ethnic minority group (Kalmijn 2010). *Durable Ethnicity*
31 shows that only two percent of Mexican Americans do not identify as Mexican/Latino or as
32 of Mexican American origin, and the overwhelming majority of these individuals are children
33 from the intermarriage of Mexican American and white Americans. Telles and Sue foresee
34 that intermarriage and the geographical dispersion of the Mexican Americans will eventually
35 result in full assimilation into mainstream society, and the significance of consequential
36 ethnicity will erode. The ethnic core will then dissolve or at least lose its signifying impact on
37 co-ethnic individuals. Ethnic core is defined as “a set of forces encompassing structures and
38 institutions that foster ethnicity, including ethnic neighbourhood, organizations, markets,
39 social networks, community and the media.” However, Telles and Sue also foresee the
40 Mexican American experience may continue to remain different from that of European origin
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3 migrants in the US. The continued migration from the neighbouring origin country Mexico
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5 will keep the Mexican American ethnic core salient and influential.
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8 Telles and Sue reflect on whether Mexican American ethnicity will remain salient in
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10 the future. They briefly compare the Mexican American experience to that of other ethnic
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12 groups, such as African Americans and Asian Americans, but again taking European origin
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14 Americans as the reference category. Mexican Americans are placed between the European
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16 origin Americans and African Americans, the latter having been in the US for centuries now.
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18 The authors assert African Americans created their “cultural forms, most notably in art,
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20 music, dance and literature, which have become increasingly accepted and recognized as
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22 central to American culture, in addition to cultural practices such as language, humor, and
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24 naming.” However, considering the long history of African Americans, it is logical to wonder
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26 why African American ethnic core has survived for centuries. I disagree that the African
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28 American ethnic core has been accepted and is an essential part of the “melting pot”. The
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30 expectation of policy makers and scholars from an immigrant group is to assimilate into
31
32 white mainstream American culture and society, not into the African American culture and
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34 society (see Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Alba and Nee 2009). Although a comparison of
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36 different ethnic groups was not the focus of the study, the work would have been stronger if
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38 *Durable Ethnicity* more systematically compared ethnic groups’ characteristics that enforce
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40 consequential ethnicity (gender, discrimination, skin colour, geographical concentration).
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49 *Mexican Americans to European Turks*

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51 European scholars have often acknowledged the leading position of the American
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53 scholarly tradition in international migration studies and theories (Crul and Schneider 2010;
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55 Guveli et al. 2016a; 2017). Migration is a core subject in the American sociology, with a
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57 great deal pioneering research. Its assimilation theories are often criticized but have yet to be
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3 replaced by better theories. For example, the case of Mexican migration is central, and the
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5 voluminous research on Mexican migration, along with other migration flows to the US after
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7 the 1960s, demonstrates the limitations of the classic assimilation theories (Portes and
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9 Rumbaut 2001; Alba and Nee 2009), but no one has offered another possible explanation.
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11 Moreover, some key questions remain unanswered. For example, which US migrant groups
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13 are exceptions to assimilation theories? Were the migration flows before the 1960s the
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15 exception in that they left behind their origin country's cultures or are the new migration
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17 flows after the 1960s the exception to assimilation theories? If we discover that the
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19 assimilation theories only explain European-origin migrants in the US, this might advance
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21 our understanding and allow us to develop better theoretical and empirical tools (Amelina
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23 and Faist 2010; Guveli et al. 2016a).

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25 Including migration flows to Western European countries in these comparisons might
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27 shed light on the trajectories of and changes in migrants' lives in the destination societies. I
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29 therefore think a reference to or comparison with the European migration literature on
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31 ethnicity, identity and integration would have increased the significance of *Durable Ethnicity*
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33 to an international level. For example, Mexican migration to the US and Turkish migration to
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35 Western Europe have some essential differences but also many similarities. The main
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37 difference is that Mexican migration includes a significant group of undocumented migrants
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39 whereas Turkish migration has predominantly been legal. Nevertheless, these two migrant
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41 groups have much in common, including group size, high levels of exclusionist attitudes
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43 towards them, preservation of origin country language and culture and strong ethno-religious
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45 organizations, which Telles and Sue call the "ethnic core". The 24 million US- born Mexican
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47 Americans constitute one of the largest migrant groups in the US; although there are no
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49 precise numbers, well over five million Turkish-origin people, or people with an ancestor
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51 originating from Turkey live in Western European countries. Furthermore, Telles and Sue
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3 (2019) show that Spanish is still very important for Mexican Americans, even those who
4 rarely speak it or cannot use it in their daily lives. This is very similar to the situation of
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6 Turks in Europe even in the third generation (Ganzeboom et al. 2015). Fear of migration
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8 from Mexico has been a hot topic in the election campaigns and public debates in the US.
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10 Similarly, in the UK, a main topic of Leave campaigners during the Brexit referendum was
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12 the threat that Turks would flood into the UK if the country remained in the EU. These
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14 similarities are very interesting, and a comparison of the American and European migration
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16 flows and their processes would provide pathbreaking new insights.
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22 One of the main differences between Mexican Americans and European Turks is their
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24 religion. Turks have a different religion than many in their Western Europe destination
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26 countries, whereas Mexican Americans have the same religion, Christianity, as the
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28 mainstream population, albeit with different customs and interpretations. The slow cultural
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30 assimilation of Turks in Europe has often been explained by their religion (Guveli 2015), but
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32 the Mexican American case shows that this cannot be a full explanation and, as such, needs
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34 more investigation.
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38 In short, comparative research will contribute to our understanding of the mechanisms
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40 behind migration and integration processes and will generate new theoretical and empirical
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42 insights and hypotheses to guide future studies.
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