

# **Transnational Ties of Latino and Asian Americans by Immigrant Generation**

Emi Tamaki  
University of Washington

## **Abstract**

Sociological studies on assimilation have often shown the increased level of immigrant adaptation to American society as immigrants increase their exposure to the host society across generations. A logical corollary of assimilation research is that engagement with the country of origin will decline over generations as immigrant groups settle in the US. This view is challenged, however, by the literature on transnationalism, which emphasizes the continued home involvement among immigrants. Previous literature presents an interesting puzzle: is engagement with the country of origin at odds with assimilation to American society? This paper investigates the effect of generational status on the strength of transnational ties (measured as frequent visits to a country of origin) among Latino and Asian Americans. Preliminary analyses using a nationally representative sample of Latino and Asian Americans suggest a negative association between generational status and ties to the country of ancestral origin. However, this trend is not fully explained by the degree of socioeconomic adaptation and acculturation to the US, as assumed by the assimilation theory. The analyses also show different mechanisms of generational effect on transnational engagement among Latino and Asian Americans.

## **Background**

Sociological studies on migration have traditionally focused on the assimilation of immigrants to the host society. Past studies emphasized the processes of immigrant adaptation to American society through language acquisition, socioeconomic mobility, and marriage with native-born Americans (for example, Gordon 1964). In general, most empirical research shows the increased level of assimilation as immigrant groups are exposed to American society across generations (for example, Alba and Nee 2003). A logical corollary of assimilation research is that contacts with the country of origin would decline over time as immigrant groups become settled and adapted to American society. This view is challenged, however, by the emerging literature on transnationalism, which posits that continued involvement with the country of origin is a common pattern among immigrants (Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc 1995). In a recent study, Portes, Haller and Guarnizo (2002) find that transnational engagement among Latino immigrants is associated with higher human capital resources, such as higher education, higher occupational status, and longer length of stay in the US (Portes, Haller and Guarnizo 2002). Previous literature presents an interesting puzzle: is engagement with the country of origin at odds with assimilation to American society?

## **Literature**

Despite the importance of the question, previous researchers have been limited by conceptual as well as data issues. Analytically, the assimilation perspective and the transnational perspective conceptualize “assimilation” differently. On one hand, the classical assimilation perspective assumes that assimilation is a generational change. They view that immigrant groups increase their exposure to the destination society as the group go through generations (Gordon 1964). On the other hand, the transnational perspective often bases their analysis on the first-generation migrants and finds evidence of transnationalism among them. Exposure to host society, according to this perspective, is often equated to the number of years immigrants spend in the host country, and few study takes into account the subsequent generations (Kasinitz et al. 2002). The key question that remains to be answered, therefore, is whether the transnationalism continues to play a role among the second and third generations, in comparison to the first generation.

Research remains speculative as to the generational effect on transnationalism. Alba and Nee (2003) argue that transnationalism will decline significantly after the second generation because of language barriers between native-born children of immigrants and their relatives in the sending countries. They

claim that the cross-national ties will eventually disappear as later generations become fully assimilated to the US. Others expect that transnational engagement may not disappear completely even after the children of immigrants reach the third generation. Foner's analysis on Latino communities suggests that this is possible because of the low cost of airfare and the constant inflow of new immigrants from Latin America, which may sustain the transnational field for later generations (Foner 2005).

Empirical investigations have been constrained by the lack of generational and comparable data on transnationalism to test competing perspectives (Kasinitz et al. 2002). Previous studies of transnationalism have focused primarily on Latino immigrants. Despite the number and their socioeconomic, political, and linguistic diversity of immigrants from Asian countries, a general pattern of transnational engagement for Asian Americans has not been given a central place in the transnational literature (Portes, Haller and Guarnizo 2002). To the author's knowledge, no research has been conducted to systematically compare multiple generations across multiple racial groups.

To fill the gap in the literature, this paper investigates the effect of generational status on the level of home visits to the country of ancestral origin among Latino and Asian Americans, while accounting for individual-level characteristics such as the degree of assimilation to the US. The purpose here is to find the general trend of transnational engagement across generations and investigate whether or not the differences in transnational activities across generations and racial groups are a function of economic adaptation and acculturation to American society at the individual level. I also explore different mechanisms of transnational engagement among Latino and Asian Americans.

## **Methods**

Data for this study come from the National Latino and Asian American Survey (NLAAS). NLAAS collected information from nationally representative samples of adults from four Latino groups (Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, and other Latino descent), four Asian groups (Chinese, Filipino, Vietnamese, and other Asian descent), and a control group of non-Hispanic, non-Asian, white respondents. Household population aged 18 years or older, who met self-identified ethnic group criteria, and those who lived in one of the 50 states and Washington D.C. were asked to participate in the interview survey. Computer-assisted face-to-face interviews as well as telephone interviews were administered. Interviews were conducted from May 2002 to November 2003 in English, Spanish, Mandarin, Cantonese, Tagalog or Vietnamese (Heeringa et al. 2004).

Dependent variables used in this study include the overall frequency of return visits to the country of origin (since migration for the first generation respondents) and the number of visits in the 12 months prior to the interview. The key independent variable, a generational status, is measured as follows: foreign-born individuals who arrived in the US after age 12 are considered as the first generation; the native-born of foreign parent(s) and those who came to the US before age 13 (1.5 generation) are defined as the second generation; and the native-born of native parents are defined as the third generation. Other independent variables include demographic characteristics (i.e. age, ethnicity, gender, marital status, and the presence of dependents under age 18) as well as indicators of socioeconomic assimilation (i.e. education and household income per family member) and acculturation (i.e. perceived sense of discrimination in the US and English proficiency).

I conduct logistic regressions predicting the odds ratios of visiting the country of ancestral origin often or sometimes, as opposed to rarely or never. The results adjust for the hierarchical nature of the multistage cluster survey data. Analytic weights were developed for each sample respondent to take into account the three factors: 1) differences in individual selection probabilities; 2) adjustment for non-response; and 3) post stratification of the sample to 2000 Census population totals for geographic region, age, gender and ethnicity groupings of the survey population. Coefficients and standard errors were estimated using the Taylor series linearization method implemented in the SURvey DATA ANALYSIS (SUDAAN) software system.

## Results

The preliminary analyses suggest that for both Latinos and Asians, the higher order generation is associated with lower odds of visiting the country of ancestral origin. The negative effect of generation, however, is stronger for Asians than for Latinos. For Latinos, only the difference between the first generation and the third generation is significant at the .01 level. For Asians, the frequency of home country visits declines considerably as they go through generations. Being a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Asian reduces the odds of visiting parent's home country by 80%, while being a 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Asian is associated with a 90% decline in the likelihood of visiting the homeland of their grandparents. For Latinos, the decline in home country visits across generations is relatively moderate. Being a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Latino reduces the odds of visiting parent's home country by 23%, while being a 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Latino is associated with a 70% decline in the likelihood of visiting the homeland of their grandparents. These results are net of individual characteristics.

When controlled for the generational status, the ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic status influence the likelihood of visiting the country of origin for Latino and Asians in the US. The saturated model finds that Cuban and Vietnamese Americans are about 85% and 45% less likely to visit their countries of origin compared to Mexican and Chinese Americans, respectively. Being 55 years old or older as opposed to 18-24 years old is positively associated with the odds of frequent home country visits for Latinos. Gender is significantly related to home visits only for Latinos -- Latino males are about 30% more likely to visit the country of origin than Latino females. The education and household income are positively associated with home country visits among Latino and Asian Americans, respectively. The perceived sense of discrimination in the US is not found to be significant in explaining the likelihood of visiting the country of ancestral origin. For Asians, English proficiency is associated with higher odds of visiting the country of origin.

## Discussion

The current study suggests that the generation is an important predictor of transnational ties. As immigrant groups progress through generations, the ties with their country of origin become attenuated especially for Asian Americans. However, this trend is not explained fully by the degree of socioeconomic adaptation and acculturation to the destination society, as assumed by the assimilation theory. Introduction of education, income and measures of acculturation do not fully mediate the gross and net effect of generation. Moreover, the analyses find that frequent home country visits are positively associated with education (for Latino Americans) and household income (for Asian Americans), suggesting a complex relationship between assimilation and transnational ties. While exposure to American society strongly reduces the motivation to contact the country of origin, socioeconomic resources seem to enable immigrant groups to maintain their transnational ties.

**Figures**

Figure 1.

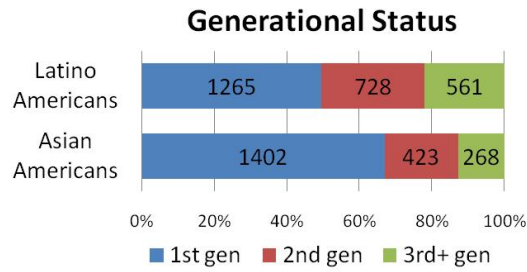


Figure 2.

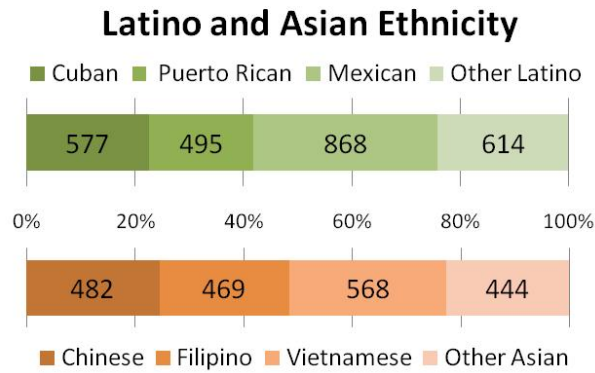
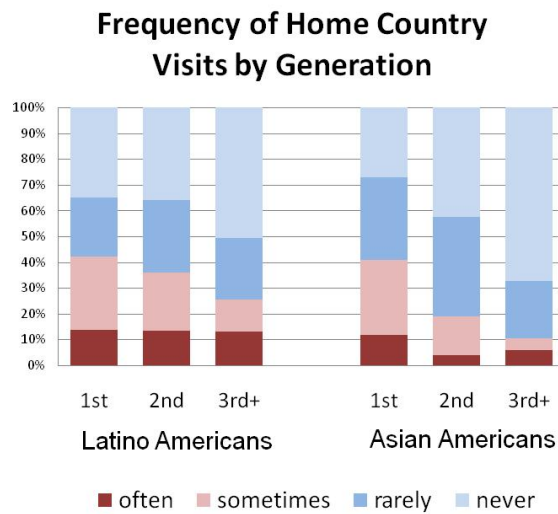


Figure 3.



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