THE RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION OF MIXED-NATIVITY MARRIED COUPLES*

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This article examines the ways in which mixed-nativity marriage is related to spatial assimilation in metropolitan areas of the United States. Specifically, we examine the residential patterns of households with a mixed-nativity—and, in some cases, interracial—marriage to determine whether they are less segregated from the native-born than entirely foreign-born households. Using restricted-use data from the 2000 census, we find that compared with couples in which both spouses are foreign-born, mixed-nativity couples tend to be less segregated from various native-born racial and ethnic groups. Further, among both foreign-born Asians and Hispanics, those with a native-born non-Hispanic white spouse are considerably less segregated from native-born white households than from other foreign-born Asian and Hispanic households. We also find that even though nativity status matters for black couples in a manner consistent with assimilation theory, foreign-born and mixed-nativity black households still each display very high levels of segregation from all other native-born racial/ethnic groups, reaffirming the power of race in determining residential patterns. Overall, our findings provide moderate support for spatial assimilation theory and suggest that cross-nativity marriages often facilitate the residential integration of the foreign-born.

Assimilation has traditionally been conceived as the process by which people and groups acquire shared memories and values, and thus a common culture (Park and Burgess 1921). Milton Gordon, in his well-known *Assimilation in American Life* (1964), provided an analytical synthesis of assimilation theory and concepts. He argued that the assimilation process first involves “acculturation,” wherein minority group members adopt the cultural patterns of the host society; this process is followed by “structural assimilation,” which entails minority integration into primary groups and institutions, such as through close friendships and intermarriage. Contemporary assimilation theorists emphasize that assimilation need not be a one-way street, where minority members become more like majority group members. Rather, assimilation involves a general convergence of social, economic, cultural, and—the focus here—residential patterns (Alba and Nee 2003).

Some have argued that the incorporation of immigrant groups in U.S. society can be facilitated by mixed-nativity marriages between immigrants and the native-born (Bean and Stevens 2003). Such marriages potentially help acculturate the foreign-born spouse and other household members through a guided introduction to local norms and institutions. The extent to which households with mixed-nativity marriages are spatially assimilated is not well understood and thus is the focus of this analysis. In addition, mixed-nativity marriages that cross racial/ethnic lines might be all the more likely to live in integrated areas because they may signal an even greater dissolution of social barriers between groups (Bean and Stevens 2003). Intermarriage across nativity and racial/ethnic lines is likely indicative of structural assimilation along multiple dimensions.

The goal of this study, therefore, is to examine the residential patterns of households in which one spouse is foreign-born and the other is U.S.-born to discern whether they are, in fact, less segregated from native-born households than households in which both spouses

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are foreign-born. We further investigate whether households that are both mixed-nativity and mixed-race/-ethnicity have particularly low levels of segregation from others, and how the specific ethnic combination of the spouses affects observed patterns. Because of data constraints, very little is known about the residential patterns of mixed-nativity couples, and less yet is known about mixed-nativity and mixed-race ones. Thus, our analyses rely on restricted-use data from the 2000 census that provide geographically detailed counts of various groups not available in public-use census data files. We calculate levels of segregation (using the dissimilarity index) of mixed-nativity households and run regression models that control for group and metropolitan area characteristics to shed light on the predictive power of spatial assimilation theory compared with competing theories.

BACKGROUND

Three theoretical perspectives commonly used to explain how immigrants and minority groups become incorporated into society are assimilation, ethnic disadvantage, and segmented assimilation (Alba and Nee 2003; Iceland 2009).

Classic spatial assimilation theory posits that immigrant groups experience a process toward integration with a society’s majority group through the adoption of mainstream attitudes, culture, and human capital attributes (Alba and Nee 2003). The acculturation of the foreign-born and their children to the host society, as well as their socioeconomic mobility over time, are key factors in the assimilation process. Early in this process, groups may be segregated from the native majority for a number of reasons. The low socioeconomic status (SES) of many immigrant groups may mean that such individuals simply may not be able to afford to live in the same neighborhoods as the more-affluent native majority (Alba and Logan 1991; Clark 1986, 1988). People with low levels of human capital may also be particularly dependent on their ethnic communities (Alba and Nee 2003; Portes and Rumbaut 2006). Social networks—both kin and community—are key factors shaping where internal migrants and immigrants live (Castles and Miller 2003; Portes and Rumbaut 2006). However, immigrant group members are more likely to move into other residential areas if and when they become more socioeconomically similar to the native majority. Contemporary assimilation theorists emphasize that assimilation need not be a one-way street, where immigrants become more like native majority group members. Rather, assimilation involves a general convergence of social, economic, cultural, and residential patterns (Alba and Nee 2003). Applying assimilation theory to our study, we expect to see lower levels of racial and ethnic residential segregation among native-born group members than among foreign-born ones, since the latter are more likely to reside in segregated ethnic enclaves.

In contrast to the residential convergence of groups theorized by spatial assimilation theory, the ethnic disadvantage perspective (often termed “place stratification theory” in the residential segregation literature) emphasizes prejudice and discrimination among majority group members in shaping residential patterns of new or marginalized groups in a society (Charles 2003; Massey 1985). Discriminatory practices have included real estate agents steering racial groups to certain neighborhoods and unequal access of racial groups to mortgage credit, among other practices (Galster 1988; Massey and Denton 1993; Yinger 1995). With regard to preferences, ethnic groups often show strong desires to live in neighborhoods where their own group is highly represented, and they often avoid other ethnic neighborhoods. However, African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians are more likely than whites to express a preference to live in integrated neighborhoods (Bobo and Zubrinsky 1996; Farley et al. 1994; Zubrinsky and Bobo 1996). The effects of structural barriers are thought to be greatest for blacks in the United States because blacks have historically been perceived in the most unfavorable terms (Charles 2006). Despite some declines in discrimination in recent years, many believe that both discrimination and white avoidance of mixed or minority neighborhoods still play central roles in shaping