

Does Age at Immigration Matter? A Comparison of Asian Immigrants in Canada and the United States

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

In recent decades, many traditional destination countries for immigrants, including Canada and the U.S., have been transformed by the “new immigration”, a term used to describe high levels of immigration from non-European sources from the late 1960s onwards. Asians have become the largest and fastest growing minority population in Canada, making up about 10 percent of Canada’s population of thirty million in 2001. Asians are a smaller proportion of the U.S. population, at about 4 percent, but are the second fastest growing minority after Hispanics.

The rapid growth of new immigrant populations has revived questions about immigrant and ethnic group integration that were common at the height of European ethnic groups’ immigration to North America during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. That the majority of today’s new immigrants are also racial/visible minorities from cultures that are viewed as “more foreign” than that of European immigrants has increased concern over how they and their children are integrating into societies dominated by European-origin groups.

In particular, the new immigration has stimulated much rethinking about the classic assimilation tradition, the sociological paradigm that was built on the experiences of European immigrant and ethnic groups and that continues to dominate research on immigrants and ethnic groups in one form or another, implicitly or explicitly. A central premise of classic assimilation theory is that assimilation is a positive outcome and necessary for upward social mobility. Assimilation is assumed to be a linear progression to complete assimilation or integration by minority groups into the dominant society. Critics of assimilation theory have reacted to its underlying ethnocentrism that requires immigrant and ethnic minorities to assimilate to the Anglo-Saxon white Protestant mainstream. Classic assimilation theory is also viewed as offering an overly simplistic interpretation of the complex and different experiences of different immigrant and ethnic groups.

Critics of classic assimilation theory highlight differences between the new immigrants and European ethnic immigrants from past immigration in terms of composition or national origins and context of migration. In Canada and the U.S., Asian immigrants are racial or visible minorities, who were subjected to exclusionary and restrictionary immigration laws in the past. Given the tenacity and persistence of race as boundary, particularly in the U.S. with its history of slavery, many researchers question whether the new immigrants and their children will be fully integrated into mainstream white middle-class society.

Others, however, note that scholars increasingly see race as a social construction rooted in historical context. Thus, groups that are routinely considered white today (such as Jews and

Italians) were not in an earlier era. The racial climate has also changed with laws against racial discrimination, for example, civil rights laws in the U.S. and Canada's 1996 Equity Employment Act. While the new Asian immigrants can be expected to experience lingering effects of a racist past in both Canada and the U.S., many argue that it is unclear whether the new immigrants and their children face higher racial barriers, compared to the past, or whether contemporary racial barriers are qualitatively different from the past or how the meaning and perception of race may have changed.

In terms of altered contexts, today's new immigrants enter a Canada or the U.S. with polarized demands for skills and labour. When European immigrants arrived in large numbers during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the rapid expansion of manufacturing and urbanization provided ample jobs and opportunities for economic and social mobility. In contrast, today's service-based post-industrial Canadian and U.S. economies may be less favourable for absorbing large numbers of manufacturing-based workers. The so-called hourglass economy with relatively high demand for workers at the top and low ends squeezes many immigrants and workers whose education and skills, particularly language and training, do not match the new economy. The new immigrants are also more diverse in socio-economic backgrounds than earlier European immigrants and may also possess greater knowledge of their choice of destination prior to migration, because of previous visits, social networks, or through information available on the Internet.

A review of research motivated by critiques of classic assimilation theory leads us to conclude that there is no consensus on whether classic assimilation theory is obsolete. In the absence of consistent research findings and continued debate over classic assimilation theory and alternative theories of immigrant integration, we adopt a perspective that views immigrant integration as gradual, multi-dimensional, influenced by many factors, and that may be positive or negative, depending on outcome and the groups studied.

Research Objectives

There is an extensive literature on the new immigrants and their children, particularly in the United States. Researchers have examined many indicators of immigrant integration and immigrant generation integration, for example, educational attainment, income, home ownership, residential segregation, and intermarriage.

In this study, we focus on Asian immigrants only, and the role of age at immigration as the *key* explanatory variable in immigrant integration. Many studies have examined the role of age at immigration, in particular, the difference between the 1.0 generation (defined as immigrants who arrived as adults) and the 1.5 generation (defined as immigrants who arrived as young children). Results from these studies have generally confirmed the classic assimilation perspective on integration – that is, the 1.5 generation is usually more integrated than the 1.0 generation (for example, studies of intermarriage in both the United States and Canada). In our study, we provide the most detailed examination of this key variable by examining age at immigration in single years. The general expectation is that the younger the age at arrival, the more integrated the immigrant. However, we do not know if this pattern holds for all groups, and whether a

specific age is the critical cut-point, and whether this cut-point varies for different groups of Asian immigrants.

We examine two measures of immigrant integration: proficiency in host country language and home language. As noted earlier, there are many dimensions of immigrant integration (for example, education, income, home ownership, and intermarriage). We focus on language integration for several reasons.

First, proficiency in the host country language is essential for employment success, unless the immigrant remains in the immigrant enclave, but these jobs are usually lower-paid and generally less desirable. Second, most Asian immigrants have native languages that are different from the dominant languages of the United States (English) and Canada (where English and French are official languages). Language integration is therefore more challenging for Asian immigrants than immigrants whose native languages may be closer to English or French (for example, Spanish-speaking immigrants). Lack of language skills has been identified as a key factor in many Asian immigrants' difficulties with employment and career advancement. Third, greater proficiency in the host country language is also expected to facilitate integration in other ways, for example, social and friendship networks. Finally, we also examine home language as another indicator of language integration of Asian immigrants. Immigrants who retain their native tongues as their home language would be considered as less integrated.

As Asian immigrants in the U.S. and Canada are diverse in many ways, we compare the six largest Asian immigrant groups in each country, and they are the same groups: Chinese, Asian Indian, Filipino, Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese. We also compare male and female immigrants. By comparing the same groups in the U.S. and Canada, we expect this study to contribute new understanding of whether different factors such as ethnicity have similar or different effects on the integration of Asian immigrants in the U.S. and Canada.

Data and Methods

Data

The primary data sources for this study are the 5 percent public-use microdata samples from the 1990 and 2000 population census of the United States, and the 3 percent public-use microdata file from the 2005 American Community Survey. For the Canadian data, we examine the 20 percent restricted data from the 1991, 2001, and 2006 population censuses, as restricted data are needed for identifying and comparing Asian ethnic groups. These data are available at Statistics Canada's Research Data Centres, including the Centre at the University of Victoria.

Sample

The sample includes adults aged 25 to 60 years of age. This sample is used in order to include adults who have largely finished their schooling and are not too old to be affected by mortality. Institutional residents and those living in collective housing or military quarters are excluded from the sample. Because the study focuses on Asian immigrants, the sample includes all immigrants who self-identify as Asian ethnic-origin. We do not include non-immigrants because the outcome variables – host country language proficiency and home language – vary primarily

for immigrants and virtually all non-immigrants have proficiency in English (in the United States) or English and/or French (in Canada).

Variables

In describing the variables and analytical technique, we refer to U.S. data for illustration.

The two outcome variables – host country language proficiency and home language – are categorical variables coded as follows:

- Host country language proficiency is measured in five categories (does not speak English, speaks English not well, speaks English well, speaks English very well, and speaks English only).
- Home language includes 12 different Asian home languages, including a code for 11 specific languages and a code for “other Asian east and southeast languages” and English home language.

The models used to study the integration of Asian immigrants include temporal factors and socioeconomic characteristics. The temporal factors include three variables needed to study the role of age at immigration: (i) birth cohort, (ii) immigration cohort, and (iii) period. These three variables are defined as follows:

- (i) Birth cohort: year of birth and year of birth-squared selected from those aged 25 to 60 years in the 1990, 2000, and 2005 data sets. In practice, this means that birth cohorts from 1930 to 1980 are included in the sample.
- (ii) Immigrant cohort: year of arrival in the United States and year of arrival-squared as selected in the 1990, 2000, and 2005 data sets. Based on the age criterion, immigrants are selected who arrived in the United States between 1930 and 1980.
- (iii) Period: there are three periods for this study: 1990, 2000, and 2005.

The temporal model for the study includes the three key variables listed above. Age at immigration is easily derived from the estimates for the temporal model: age at immigration equals the difference between an individual’s birth cohort minus an individual’s immigrant cohort. For study purposes, we will examine the effects of age at immigration for hypothetical individuals whose age at arrival in the United States varies between 0 and 30 years of age. We also will want to examine possible variations in the effect of age at immigration over time; for this work, we will calculate the effect of age at immigration for immigrants arriving in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.

We include additional explanatory variables, such as Asian ethnic origin (Chinese, Asian Indian, Filipino, Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese), sex, and education.

Analytical Technique

We recode the two outcome variables into binary outcomes: language proficiency as “none or not well” (defined as “does not speak English” or “speaks English not well”) and “well or very well” (defined as “speaks English well”, “speaks English very well”, or speaks English only); and home language as “speaks English” or “speaks another language” at home.

The basic logistic regression model resembles the following:

$$\text{Binary Outcome Variable} = \text{Birth Cohort (B)} + \text{Immigrant Cohort (I)} + \text{Period (P)} + B*I + B*P + I*P + \text{Sex} + \text{Education} + \text{Ethnic-Origin}$$

This model is estimated for each of the two outcome measures of integration. Although all the regression coefficients are of interest, the coefficients for the temporal model are useful for derivation of the age at immigration, with calculation for variations over time, for Asian immigrants.

There is a special concern, however, with the analysis as described above. Some adult Asian immigrants marry or have cohabiting partners who may be Asian or non-Asian U.S. citizens at birth. For these individuals, we might expect different outcomes for host country language proficiency and home language. In other words, there is a problem of sample selection bias for Asian immigrants who are partnered with non-Asian immigrants.

There are three possible ways to deal with the issue. One fairly easy method is to limit analysis to those Asian immigrants who have an Asian immigrant partner or who are not in partnered arrangements, either because they live alone or live with others who are not reported as their marital or cohabiting partner. A second approach is to carry out separate analysis for Asian immigrants who are partnered with non-Asian immigrants and for all other Asian immigrants. This second approach leads to more complicated analysis, which may be difficult to interpret. A third approach is to undertake logistic regression analyses that takes sample selection bias into account, using what are now fairly standard statistical techniques based on the work of James Heckman and others. In our initial examination of the data, we will evaluate the relative merits of the first and third approaches, and proceed with data analysis accordingly.

Expected Results

Generally, we expect immigrants who arrive at younger ages to be more integrated, that is, in this study, to be more proficient in the host country language and to speak English at home. We do not know what the critical age is, however, and whether there are differences by Asian ethnic group, gender, or country.

Discussion and Conclusion

In the discussion and conclusion section, we highlight contributions of the research to current knowledge on immigrant integration, particularly the detailed examination of the key role of age at immigration in this study. We also highlight the strengths of a comparative study in advancing our understanding of age at immigration in the integration of several groups of Asian immigrants, and perhaps for other immigrants.