Color, Race and Socioeconomic Assimilation: Young Adult Immigrant Generations in the Labor Market

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Extended Abstract

Introduction and Theoretical Perspectives

The expression "a nation of immigrants" originated as a descriptor of the United States (Kennedy, 1964). However, the phrase even more accurately depicts Canada. With a population slightly more than one tenth that of the United States, Canada admits a much greater proportionate share of immigrants to North America. As a result of past and present immigration, one in five of Canada's inhabitants (21.3 percent) in 2010 are foreign born compared with over one in ten in the United States (13.5 percent). Of all the traditional settlement countries in North America, Oceania and Europe, only Switzerland and Australia hold the distinction of having (slightly) higher percentages of foreign born in their populations than does Canada (23.2 and 21.9 percent respectively).

Not surprisingly, given the relatively large flows of migrants to Canada, the immigrant offspring population also is sizeable and occupies a proportionately large share of the overall population (Picot and Hou 2009). In contrast to the United States, the Mexican component of the 1.5 and second generation (and the third-plus) is virtually non-existent in Canada, paralleled by an absence of research on this small group. However, Canada like the United States has received immigrants from Africa, other parts of Latin America (largely in response to refugee flows), the Caribbean and Asia. As a result, the 1.5 and second generations are no longer "white," but increasingly include groups of color. The 2006 census shows that 40% of the 1.5 generation are persons of colour as are 20% of the second plus generation.

As in the United States, Canadian growth in the racially and ethnically diverse immigrant population has generated keen interest in the intersection of race and immigrant status and in how the intersection influences many aspects of integration. This interest also extend to analyses of immigrant offspring, generating studies in the educational achievements of immigrant youth while in school, and to a lesser extent on the socioeconomic attainments of the 1.5 and 2nd generations compared with the third plus generations. How well or badly immigrant offspring fare in the labour market is seen as Weberian indicators of life chances; moreover, within the large literature on immigrant assimilation, patterns are thought to correspond to distinctive models of assimilation. The linear or orthodox "assimilation" model suggests that the educational, occupational and earnings of immigrant offspring will be between those of the foreign born and later generations. The "success" model implies that the second generation will far exceed the socioeconomic attainments of either the first or third-plus generations. The "segmented" assimilation model argues that for at least some visible minority groups, the second generation will do less well than other generational groups and indeed may experience severe handicaps in the labor market (Alba and Nee 1997; Boyd and Grieco 1998; Kao and Tienda, 1995; Gans 1992; Zhou 1997).

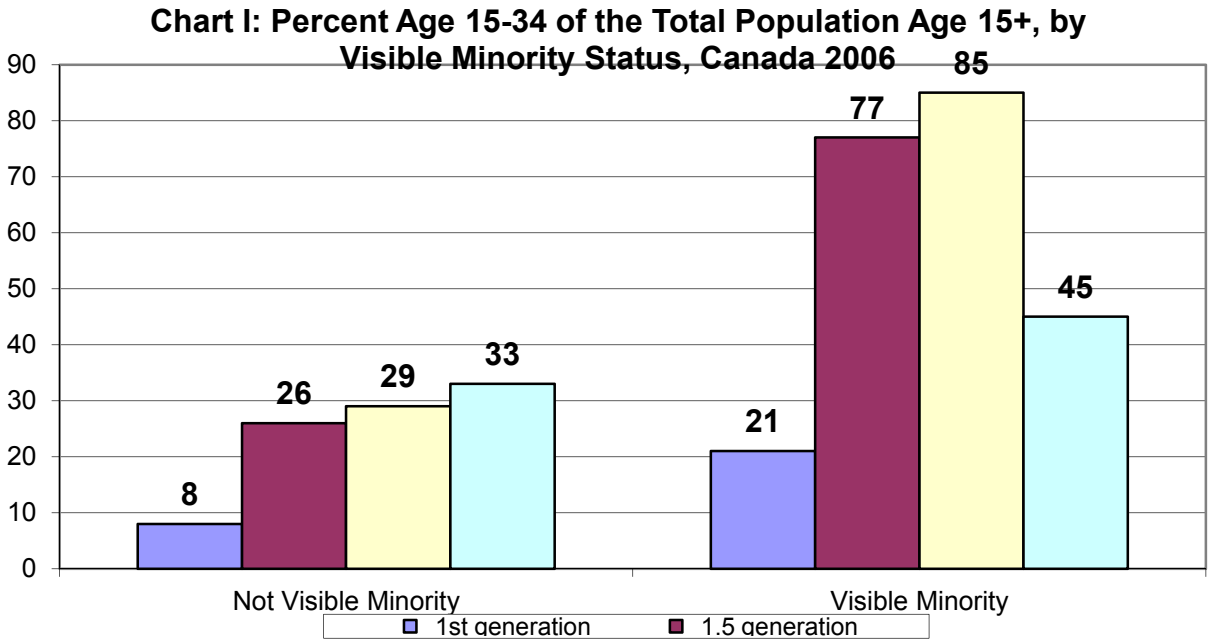
These models assume generations that are defined by descent, rather than by cross-sectional analyses where generations defined by birthplace either may not be related to each other or be part of the same age cohort. More recently, elements of these conceptual offerings have been recast into models of achievement where labor market advantages and disadvantages may reflect a racialized hierarchy, compositional differences between groups (referred to as the demographic heterogeneity approach, and the assimilation theory model (Kim and Sakamoto, 2010). This recasting is less theoretically rigorous than the case based models of segmented assimilation, but it better fits analyses of large surveys and the use of multivariate regression techniques to parse out the effects of differences between groups in factors (such as education) that are known to influence occupational and earnings outcome.

To date, investigations into the labor market integration of 1.5 and 2nd generation groups that are racially and ethnically distinctive primarily focus on earnings (see: Skuterud 2010) and are less common than studies of the educational attainments of school age youth. Yet studies that adopt the standard research design of selecting the prime working age group, 25-64, are problematic because of the age differences between racial and ethnically specific generation groups. If ethnic and racial groups that are very young are compared with a largely middle age or old white third generation, studies will inevitably find substantial wage disadvantage, even when age controls are included. This possibility is extremely likely because of the history of immigration policies and their impact on the origin composition of immigrants. As in the United States with its enactment of the Hart-Cellar Immigration Act of 1965, non-European migrants arrived in Canada only after changing immigration regulations in the late 1960s and the Immigration Act, 1976 which removed national origins as a criteria of admissibility, using family reunification, economic contributions and humanitarian concerns instead . The major compositional changes in origin flows did not occur until the 1980s and 1990s. As a result, the 1.5 generation arriving in the 1980s and the 2nd generation who were born during this decade are only in their twenties and thirties by the 2006 census. Chart I documents this unusual age skew for visible minority immigrant offspring.[1] Approximately eight out of ten immigrant offspring of color are under age 35 compared to less than three out of ten of the largely white population. As well, most of these immigrant youth are living in Canada's largest cities, reflecting the settlement decisions of their parents and the gravitational pull of Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal. Chart II shows the propensity of immigrant generations to live in Canada's larger cities (Census Metropolitan Areas)

The youthful ages of the 1.5 and 2nd generation of color and their concentration in Canada's larger cities require another strategy for assessing their labor market advantages or disadvantages, namely focusing on comparisons within the age group 20-34 and investigating

[1] The term "visible minority" was developed by the federal government to meet data needs of federal employment equity legislation in the mid-1980s and beyond. It includes ten subgroups: Black, South Asian, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, South East Asian, Filipino, Other Pacific Islanders, West Asian and Arab, and Latin American. People who declare they are members of the non-visible minority population are overwhelming "white," although the non-visible minority population also includes a very small number of aboriginals (less than 1 percent for our population of interest).

socioeconomic attainments for the Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) population. This sub-population is literally "at the starting gate" but gauging their successes or relatively disadvantages may anticipate their economic futures. I focus on this age group in my paper, distinguishing between young women and men, and comparing the attainments of the 1.5 and 2nd generation to those of the white third-plus generation for the following groups: Arab, Black, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Latin American, South Asian, South East Asian, West Asian and other groups of color[2]. The conceptual underpinning for these groups is racial rather than ethnic[3]. As such, the analysis investigates the extent to which a racial hierarchy exists or whether differences between groups reflect compositional differences. The analysis also addresses the assimilation model by showing that among virtually within all groups the 2nd generation has higher levels of education and higher proportions in managerial or professional occupations than the 1.5 generation or the third-plus white population. Income inequality however exists, particularly for men, and the reasons are discussed in the conclusion of the paper.



[2] In the United States, persons who self-designate as Arab or West Asian are considered white. However, in Canada they are considered to be persons of color (as are Latin Americans).
[3] Ethnic flux – the change of ethnicities by respondents - across the generations can be quite severe, making this variable less desirable in analyses that compare socioeconomic differences across generations.

Chart II: Percentage Living in CMA by Generation and Visible Minority Status, Populations Age 15+, Canada, 2006