1 Class, Assimilation, and Mexican Americans

BRIAN REYES IS "LIVING THE DREAM" with his wife and two children in a charming middle-class neighborhood in Southern California. The exterior of Brian's sprawling, ranch-style home on Maple Circle was recently refreshed with a coat of light brown paint. Unfurled ferns and blooming begonias line the walkway and the lawn is a sea of emerald green. Brian's shiny new car is parked next to the family's minivan. Enter Brian's front door and step into a home that is tastefully decorated, with leather furniture, plush neutral carpet, a flat-screen television, and two large picture windows that look out onto an expansive backyard. Brian and his family exhibit all of the stereotypical symbols of middle-class life: the house in the suburbs, a fancy car, white-collar jobs, vacations, and weekends spent cruising in the minivan shuttling between Little League games and swimming lessons.

By all socioeconomic indicators, Brian is a member of the American middle class; however, his childhood was nothing like *Leave It to Beaver*, the iconic midcentury television show depicting middle-class suburban life. Brian used to visit Maple Circle as a young boy every week, but not as the playmate of the middle-class children who rode their bikes up and down the cul-de-sac. Brian would accompany his mother, who was employed as a domestic by several of Maple Circle's homeowners. As he explained, "My mom cleaned houses. She used to clean up and down the street here." Brian was raised in a *colonia*, a poor agricultural workers' community in sharp contrast to the sprawling ranch homes and well-manicured lawns of Maple Circle, by uneducated parents who toiled in low-wage, low-status jobs. Today, Brian Reyes holds a college degree, works as a midlevel manager, and owns a home on the very street where he once watched his mother scrub floors and clean toilets.

Latinos are the country's largest minority group, comprising 16 percent of the population—of which the Mexican-origin population constitutes nearly two thirds. Latinos' proportion of the population is expected to double by midcentury, a demographic change that is pushing the United States toward a society where whites will no longer be a numerical majority (Passel and Cohn 2008).[1] Immigrants have traditionally represented the prospect of success in America, but many scholars, political commentators, and laypersons fear that the growing Mexican American population will never achieve the rapid upward mobility and American middle-class dream that Brian Reyes exemplifies. These fears are rooted in the marginalized context of Mexican migration to the United States. Mexican immigrants typically migrate with low levels of human capital, they live in poor and working-class communities on arrival, many are unauthorized, and they face a society that is hostile to them (Bean and Stevens 2003; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Telles and Ortiz 2008). By adopting such labels as "illegal aliens," "government drains," and "unassimilable," the media has greatly contributed to common assumptions and widespread panic that Mexican immigrants' native-born descendants will remain poor and uneducated, becoming a permanent drain on America's coffers (Chavez 2008; Hayes-Bautista 2004; Santa Ana 2002). The majority of research on the Mexican-origin population in the United States unintentionally contributes to the idea that Mexican Americans will never assimilate into the middle class, by focusing primarily on poor and unauthorized workers and their similarly low-income children who remain in disadvantaged or working-class ethnic communities.

Brian Reyes contradicts worries, research, and pervasive stereotypes about Mexican Americans, and provides a more optimistic glimpse into the future, by demonstrating that the children of low-wage, poor, and uneducated Mexican immigrants can rise up from the barrio and achieve the American dream, yet we know little about the experiences of people like him. This is a book about middle-class Mexican Americans, a population that has been disregarded and left out of the pessimistic public, political, and scholarly debates surrounding Mexican Americans and their prospects for social mobility. The objective of this book is to examine the mobility paths, lived experiences, and incorporation outcomes of today's Mexican American middle class in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this population and a more promising outlook for the future.

Traditional and contemporary models of assimilation generally apply racialized or linear assimilation frameworks as group-specific models to

explain immigrant incorporation and adaptation. Drawing on the experiences of African Americans, proponents of the racialization perspective assert that the Mexican-origin population faces limited prospects for successful socioeconomic incorporation into the middle class. Their concern is that the Mexican second and third generations, many of whom are visibly nonwhite and most who are the children and grandchildren of low-skilled migrants, will be viewed as racialized minorities and face the added challenge of obtaining jobs in a restructured economy that ultimately leads to downward mobility or economic stagnation over the generations (Portes, Fernández-Kelly, and Haller 2005; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Telles and Ortiz 2008). On the opposite end of the spectrum, the traditional assimilation perspective argues that immigrants who achieve upward mobility will follow a pattern of linear incorporation into the white middle class (Gordon 1964). The burning question is, are the descendants of Mexican immigrants experiencing a pathway of downward assimilation or stagnation that is akin to the blocked economic progress of African Americans, or will the children of Mexican immigrants become upwardly mobile and incorporate into the white middle class? Of these two possible pathways, Mexican Americans who have entered the middle class are clearly not experiencing downward or stagnated mobility as the racialization framework predicts, but does this mean that middle-class Mexican Americans incorporate in a straight line into the white middle class? I show that neither the racialization or linear perspectives fully explains Mexican American incorporation because these group-based models overlook variations in incorporation pathways within immigrant national origin groups (Bean and Stevens 2003; Telles and Ortiz 2008; Jiménez 2010). In other words, incorporation might not be an either-or proposition of downward assimilation as a minority or upward assimilation into the white middle class. In this vein, scholars have recently proposed that the mainstream middle class is composed of more than just white ethnics (Alba and Nee 2003) and that there might be an additional pathway into the middle class—incorporation into a minority middle class through a minority culture of mobility (Neckerman, Carter, and Lee 1999). The central questions of this volume are, how do middle-class Mexican Americans experience life in the American middle class? Do middle-class Mexican Americans follow a linear assimilation trajectory where they disappear into the white middle class, or are they incorporating into a minority middle-class culture and community?

This book details the variations in experiences and incorporation pathways among middle-class Mexican Americans, variations that are largely

structured by class background. A consistent problem in research on Mexican Americans is a lack of attention to issues of class and the ways in which class background affects different spheres of social life and mobility pathways.[2] Recent innovative studies of structurally incorporated Mexican Americans primarily focus on one dimension of assimilation, ethnic identification (Jiménez 2010; Vasquez 2011), and do not examine the experiences of those who, like Brian Reyes, have achieved rapid social mobility. This book examines middle-class Mexican Americans who hail from varying class backgrounds and generations and who are at different points on the mobility journey, from 1.5- (born in Mexico and migrated before the age of 12) and second-generation (the native-born children of immigrants) middle-class pioneers to the second generation who were raised in middle-class households to later-generation (the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of immigrants) Mexican Americans who hail from both low-income and middle-class families. To elucidate mobility experiences and incorporation pathways, this book details the mechanisms that foster upward mobility into the middle class and examines different measures of assimilation, including giving back and family obligations, racial and ethnic identity, and civic participation.

As will become clear throughout the book, the different experiences, dilemmas, and opportunities associated with growing up in poverty or middle-class privilege shape incorporation pathways and also how Mexican Americans experience American middle-class life. I demonstrate that Mexican Americans who grow up poor face challenges stemming from their social mobility, which leads to the adoption of a class-based minority identity and a minority pathway into the middle class. I also show that those who are raised in middle-class households and neighborhoods closely approximate the linear assimilation model as they are more likely to view themselves, and are viewed by others, as closer to whites. By using class background as a comparative analytical tool, this book refines assimilation theory by delving into the middle-class Mexican American category to demonstrate that there are multiple pathways into the middle class, that assimilation into the middle class does not always entail becoming white, and that assimilating as a minority is not necessarily a liability.

While the book makes important contributions by applying an underutilized theoretical paradigm, the minority culture of mobility, to an understudied group, examining the incorporation experiences of the Mexican American middle class also has considerable public-policy implications. The relatively

young age structure of the Mexican American population[3] combined with the graying of the white population and the impending mass retirement of the baby boomers means that the growing second and third Mexican American generations will make up a significant proportion of the working-age population, with demographers estimating that Latinos will constitute nearly one quarter of the labor force by 2050 (Suro and Passel 2003). Minorities, especially the growing population of Mexicans Americans, are poised to fill the white-collar positions vacated by the baby boomers if they can close the education gap, making it critical to examine the mobility paths and educational and workplace experiences of those who succeed (Myers 2007; Alba 2009).

Defining the Mexican American Middle Class

Scholars disagree about the most comprehensive way to define and measure social class. Traditional indicators of class status are income, occupation, and education (Blau and Duncan 1967; Pattillo-McCoy 2000), and most studies examining the immigrant middle class define middle-class status by investigating only one or two of these economic gauges (Clark 2003; Schleef and Cavalcanti 2009). In this book, I define middle-class status as a combination of the following four attributes: a college education; a total household income over the national median, which was $50,221 in 2009; employment in a white-collar occupation or business ownership; and homeownership. Income is an important indicator because it affords access to material goods and middle-class patterns of consumption (Levy 1998). However, income alone is only one gauge of middle-class status, which is why additional measures of middle-class status are included. Income fluctuates with age, and when defining social class among minorities, occupation or the type of business one owns offers a measure of prestige and the job's promise as a career that affords a particular set of opportunities, middle-class social networks, and connections. For example, a well-paid Mexican American plumber may engage in middle-class patterns of consumption, but he is not going to run in the same social circles as a similarly paid Mexican American financial adviser (Alba 2009). Indeed, scholars have demonstrated that the combination of earning a higher-than-average income, having a college education, and being employed in a white-collar job correlates to subjective perceptions of being a member of the middle or upper class (Hout 2008). Homeownership is also an important measure of middle-class status because it is the single asset in which middle-class families hold the majority of their wealth (Conley 1999). And in America, homeownership indicates a

higher social standing and has traditionally been revered as the cornerstone of middle-class life (Clark 2003; Halle 1984).

The Mexican American respondents in this book are all employed in white-collar occupations or own businesses, and all make incomes well over the national median. Nearly three quarters of the respondents hold a combination of three middle-class indicators, and a quarter hold all four. Before I discuss the characteristics of my sample in greater detail, it is important to contextualize the middle-class Mexican American populations in the United States and in Los Angeles, California, the metropolitan region where this study is based. Table 1 details the nativity and generation, educational attainment, occupational status, and economic status (measured by homeownership, poverty rate, and total household income), by race and ethnicity for the United States using data from the 2008 Current Population Survey.[4] At the national level, the Mexican-origin population exhibits the lowest levels of education of any other racial or ethnic group. Only 7.3 percent of Mexican Americans hold a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 28.8 percent of whites, 16.1 percent of blacks, and 45.8 percent of Asians. Mexican Americans are also the least likely of all groups to be employed in middle- (service and skilled blue-collar jobs) to high-status occupations (professional, technical, white-collar occupations) and are overly concentrated in low-wage labor, as measured by the Duncan Socioeconomic Index (SEI), which scores jobs according to occupational prestige. At 53.1 percent, Mexican Americans have rates of homeownership that are slightly higher than that of African Americans (50.8 percent), but much lower compared to those of Asians (64.6 percent) and whites (79.1 percent). The Mexican American poverty rate is slightly lower than that of African Americans, and Mexican Americans barely surpass African Americans in total household income. In the aggregate, Mexican Americans appear to be a poor and uneducated disadvantaged ethnic group. However, these larger trends are artifacts of high levels of unauthorized and low-wage Mexican migration to the United States during the last half of the twentieth century that mask the progress of the relatively small but nonetheless significant proportion of Mexican Americans who are achieving middle-class status.

A clearer snapshot of the Mexican American middle class emerges when the data is disaggregated by generation since immigration as shown in Table 2. First-generation Mexican Americans (the foreign born) exhibit extremely low levels of education; nearly two thirds of the population lack a high school diploma. However, the proportion of Mexican Americans lacking a high

Table 1. Socioeconomic characteristics by race and ethnicity, United States, 2008

		Non-Hispanic		
	Mexican	White	Black	Asian
Total population	30,271,639	196,767,931	36,382,382	13,654,665
Nativity and generation (%)				
Foreign born, 13 or older at arrival (1.0 gen.)	28.5	3.0	5.8	51.9
Foreign born, under 13 at arrival (1.5 gen.)	10.1	1.4	2.1	14.4
U.S. born, foreign-born parent (2.0 gen.)	32.0	6.2	4.8	25.8
U.S. born, U.S.-born parent (3rd+ gen.)	29.4	89.3	87.3	7.9
Educational attainment (%)				
Less than high school	47.3	13.7	23.7	15.2
High school graduate	27.3	29.7	32.5	18.5
Some college	18.1	27.9	27.6	20.5
Bachelor's degree or higher	7.3	28.8	16.1	45.8
Occupational status index (%)*				
High	18.1	44.0	28.2	49.6
Middle	27.0	29.8	32.1	24.8
Low	54.9	26.2	39.8	25.6
Economic status				
Homeownership (%)	53.1	79.1	50.8	64.6
Poverty rate (%)**	23.1	8.2	24.5	10.4
Total household income ($)	53,428	85,091	52,989	94,893

SOURCE: Current Population Survey (2008).

*The high occupational status range consists of professional, technical, and white-collar occupations with Duncan Socioeconomic Index (SEI) scores above 51; the middle range consists of service and skilled blue-collar jobs with SEI scores between 25 and 50. The low range consists of jobs with SEI scores of 24 and below.

**In 2008 the poverty threshold for a family of four was $22,025 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2008).

school diploma decreases steadily with each generation since immigration, declining from 65 percent in the first generation to 29.1 percent in the third. In the same vein, the proportion of Mexican Americans who have attained "some college" more than triples from the first to the second generation, from 7.1 percent in the first generation to 26.9 percent by the second generation, and increases 1 percent to 27.8 percent in the third generation. While college graduation rates double between the first and second generations, from 4.9 percent to 9.5 percent, the national data show an increase of only 1 percent between the second and third generation since immigration.

    Relatively low levels of education over the generations have caused much alarm among scholars and policy makers, leading some to conclude that Mexican Americans are not assimilating as rapidly, and to the same extent, as their white ethnic predecessors. Scholars argue that the substantial increase in education between the first and second generations is attributable to a sense

Table 2. Socioeconomic characteristics of the Mexican-origin population by generation, United States, 2008

	Generation			
	1.0	1.5	2.0	3.0+
Total population	8,587,926	3,045,904	9,624,856	8,863,210
Median age	41	25	18	25
Educational attainment (%)				
Less than high school	65.0	45.5	36.1	29.1
High school graduate	23.0	29.9	27.5	32.7
Some college	7.1	19.9	26.9	27.8
Bachelor's degree or higher	4.9	4.8	9.5	10.5
Occupational status index (%)*				
High	7.8	17.6	27.8	28.3
Middle	17.2	28.1	36.8	35.5
Low	75.0	54.2	35.4	36.2
Economic status				
Homeownership (%)	43.2	45.3	55.4	62.4
Poverty rate (below poverty line; %)**	24.6	25.9	24.8	18.8
Total household income ($)	45,459	51,294	51,283	64,029

SOURCE: Current Population Survey (2008).

*The high occupational status range consists of professional, technical, and white-collar occupations with Duncan Socioeconomic Index (SEI) scores above 51; the middle range consists of service and skilled blue-collar jobs with SEI scores between 25 and 50. The low range consists of jobs with SEI scores of 24 and below.

**In 2008 the poverty threshold for a family of four was $22,025 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2008).

of immigrant optimism that is inherited by the second generation, whose parents' striving for the American dream propels children to do well in school (Kao and Tienda 1995). Sociologists Eddie Telles and Vilma Ortiz (2008) assert that this sense of optimism fades over the generations and is not enough to buffer against the forces of institutional racism in education that stigmatizes Mexican Americans, leading to a reversal of educational mobility in the third generation. The data examined here are cross-sectional and detail educational attainment by generation since immigration and do not measure intergenerational educational attainment within families; however, a number of scholars have employed a birth cohort method or intergenerational analysis to demonstrate that each generation of Mexican Americans improves on the educational attainment of the last (Alba 2006; Jiménez 2010; Reed et al. 2005; J. Smith 2003; Zhou et al. 2008). Intergenerational analyses demonstrate that Mexican Americans' seemingly slow educational progress represents a delayed, rather than stagnated or reversed, assimilation trajectory (Bean and Stevens 2003; Bean et al. 2011; Perlmann 2005).

The national CPS data show that Mexican Americans in the United States, despite their relatively low levels of education, make significant progress on other important indicators of middle-class status by generation since immigration (although they do not approximate the patterns of whites, or Asians, whose levels of economic incorporation surpass those of all groups, including whites). For example, more than a quarter of the relatively young second and third generations work in high-status occupations. Total household income and homeownership rates increase with each generation since immigration and the poverty rate declines.

How do Mexican Americans in Southern California fare on these measures? Table 3 details the characteristics of Mexicans, whites, blacks, and Asians in the Los Angeles metropolitan region. In the aggregate, Mexican Americans in Los Angeles score significantly lower on all the variables of class status compared to whites, blacks, and Asians. Nearly 50 percent of the Mexican-origin population in Los Angeles have not graduated high school, as compared to only 10 percent of whites, 15.7 percent of African Americans, and 11.9 percent of Asians. On the other end of the educational spectrum, only 6.6 percent of Mexicans hold a bachelor's degree or higher as compared to 35 percent of whites, 19.5 percent of African Americans, and 49.8 percent of Asians, the most educated ethnic group in Los Angeles (note that whites, Asians, and blacks in Los Angeles are more highly educated on average than their counterparts nationally). When it comes to employment, more than half of Mexican Americans in Los Angeles toil in low-status, low-wage jobs. Barely one fifth of Mexican Americans overall work in high-status occupations, compared to more than half of whites, 42.2 percent of blacks, and more than 50 percent of Asians. Just more than 20 percent of Mexicans live in poverty, a rate higher than that of any other group. The only indicator on which a different ethnic group scores lower than Mexicans is homeownership. Forty-six percent of African Americans in Los Angeles own a home as compared to nearly half of Mexicans.[5]

At first glance, the portrait of Mexicans painted by these data is one that bolsters the argument that Mexicans in Los Angeles are an overwhelmingly poor group, reinforcing fears that Mexicans will never enter the middle class. However, despite the prevailing image that Mexican immigrants and their children are persistently poor, uneducated, and unlikely to achieve upward mobility, a more nuanced portrait of Mexican Americans in Los Angeles emerges when we examine educational attainment and occupational and economic status by generation since immigration.