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Success among Second-generation Migrants in the U.S.: the Portuguese experience

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Extended abstract

Background

The United States is often depicted as a melting pot of cultures, with diverse immigrant groups and their descendants contributing to its rich social fabric (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Telles & Ortiz, 2008). Among these groups, the second generation of Portuguese stands out as understudied group (Azevedo et al., 2023). Despite the distinct migration histories of their parents and varied integration experiences, second-generation Portuguese descendants likely share cultural identities that have shaped their pathways to success in areas such as education, socioeconomic status, and overall well-being.

While much has been written about the broader immigrant experience in the U.S. (Portes et al., 2005; Telles & Ortiz, 2008), there is a gap in understanding how second-generation Portuguese descendants navigate their unique challenges and opportunities. Moreover, the role of both familial and communal support networks in shaping the outcomes of second-generation Portuguese descendants remains largely unexplored.

Incorporation theories

Theories of incorporation delve into the dynamics of immigrant communities and their descendants, focusing mainly on processes such as **assimilation**, **integration**, and **acculturation**. These theoretical frameworks provide valuable insights into how migrant groups adapt to host societies and how their descendants balance cultural retention with socioeconomic advancement.

The classical **assimilation theory** posits that, over time, immigrant groups gradually adopt the cultural, social, and linguistic traits of the host society, leading to an erosion of their original identities (Alba & Nee, 2003; Zhou, 1997). This linear model, often associated with the Chicago School of Sociology, suggests that the 'success' of immigrant groups can be

measured by their alignment with mainstream socioeconomic norms, including education, language proficiency, and employment. However, the segmented assimilation theory challenges this perspective, arguing that assimilation outcomes vary widely depending on factors such as the immigrant group's origin, socioeconomic background, and the racial or ethnic barriers they face (Portes & Zhou, 1993). Portuguese descendants show higher educational and economic success in some areas with strong ethnic communities like New England, reflecting a more linear assimilation model (Azevedo et al., 2023).

In contrast, **integration theory** views assimilation as a two-way process, where both migrant groups and host societies undergo change. This theory is especially relevant in multicultural societies like the U.S., where descendants of migrants are encouraged to engage with the sociopolitical and economic systems without fully abandoning their cultural identities (Berry, 1997; Sam & Berry, 2010). For example, Portuguese descendants in states like Massachusetts, California, and Florida have established strong ethnic communities that retain cultural traditions while also integrating into the broader society (Ribeiro, 2000; Scott, 2009).

Finally, the **acculturation theory** focuses on how immigrant groups negotiate their cultural identities while adapting to the host society's norms (Berry, 1997). Unlike assimilation, acculturation permits the preservation of cultural heritage, such as language, alongside engagement with the dominant culture. This is particularly relevant for Portuguese descendants, who have maintained strong cultural and linguistic ties across generations. Recent studies reveal an increase in Portuguese descendants using Portuguese at home, signalling a revitalization of cultural identity among younger generations (Azevedo et al., 2023). This may also reflect a growing recognition of the importance of bilingualism and biculturalism in personal and professional spheres.

Support networks and the success of second-generation migrants

One of the most significant factors influencing the success of immigrant descendants is the role of support networks, both familial and communal (Portes & Zhou, 1993). These networks can facilitate socioeconomic mobility and integration by providing resources, information, and emotional support. Strong support networks help second-generation migrants navigate the challenges of adapting to a new cultural environment, access educational and employment opportunities, and maintain cultural ties (Ribeiro, 2000). They often act as a bridge between the immigrant community and the broader society, easing the transition and promoting upward mobility (Scott, 2009).

For Portuguese descendants in the U.S., these support networks have been historically useful (Azevedo et al., 2023). Portuguese have established a strong presence in regions like New England and California, creating tight-knit communities that foster social capital via cultural associations and business networks, for example (Lokensgard, 2007; Carvalho, 2010).

Research design

In this paper, we explore the success of second-generation Portuguese descendants in the U.S. in comparison to other European descendants, focusing on the role that support networks have played in shaping their outcomes. We also analyse whether their experiences align more closely with theories of assimilation or other models of integration. Specifically, we address the following research questions using the data and methods outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Research questions, data and methods

Research question	Data	Methods
How do second-generation Portuguese descendants in the United States experience 'success' compared to other European second-generation communities?	IPUMS-CPS, 2018 to 2023 complemented with statistical information from ACS, 2018 to 2023. 'Success' will be measured through as educational attainment, income, employment status, well-being and socioeconomic status. Control variables will include demographic, socioeconomic and geographic factors. Support networks will be measured through intergeneration transfers, such as having insurance by a household member.	Multivariate regression analyses
Which theory or theories best explain the 'success' outcomes of second-generation Portuguese descendants?	Findings from the quantitative analyse Literature on incorporation theories.	Comparative Theoretical Analysis (empirical evidence against key principles of each theory)

Expected findings

Based on the research ongoing, we expected that the second-generation Portuguese descendants in the U.S. will have distinct patterns of 'success' compared to other European second-generation communities. We anticipate that strong familial and communal ties within Portuguese communities will contribute positively to educational attainment, employment opportunities, and cultural preservation.

Furthermore, we expect to find that these outcomes do not fully align with a single theory of incorporation. Instead, the experiences of second-generation Portuguese descendants may reflect a combination of assimilation, integration, and acculturation processes, highlighting the complexities of immigrant integration in the U.S.

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