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Immigrant socioeconomic mobility in the United States: Mechanisms of inequality and the role of ethnic capital

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Abstract

We review recent social science research on the socioeconomic mobility of immigrants to the United States by focusing on the educational, occupational, and income attainments among immigrant adults, the first-generation, and the educational attainment of their children, the New Second-Generation. Existing research has identified significant inequalities in educational attainment between second-generation Asian and Latinx immigrant groups. Researchers have also highlighted the importance of ethnic capital for mobility, but we find that they have largely proceeded with the assumption that co-ethnic ties are easily available as a benefit for immigrants upon resettlement. We propose that future research on immigrant socioeconomic mobility should incorporate conceptual insights from economic and cultural sociology as well as use comparative ethnographic research designs to directly observe how ethnic capital operates to challenge or reinforce patterns of socioeconomic inequality.

1 | INTRODUCTION

By 2060, the children of immigrants in the United States will account for 18% of the national population. Among the 43.1 million immigrants who live here today, 52% and 26% were born in Latin America and Asia respectively, but by 2065, Asian immigrants will become the nation's largest immigrant group (Pew Research Center, 2015a). However, while increasing immigration has raised the visibility of Asian and Latin American ethnoracial groups, differences in their rates of educational attainment have persisted and therefore created vastly different trajectories of socioeconomic mobility for their descendants. For example, whereas 33% of all U.S. undergraduates under age 23 have

parents who never attended college, only 28% of second-generation Asians have immigrant parents who did the same, while the comparable statistic for second-generation Hispanics is 54% (Staklis & Horn, 2012). Indeed, the differences observed among immigrants' average levels of education have led to cultural stereotypes that racialize advanced degree attainment and support it for second-generation Asians but frame it as exceptional for second-generation Latinos (Ortiz & Telles, 2012; Vallejo, 2015). To be sure, these stereotypes essentialize achievement as an outcome of group belonging in ways that social scientists strongly reject. And yet, scholars do not fully understand why individual-level affiliation with the national origin group matters for the socioeconomic mobility of different immigrant groups.

In this paper, we first review the empirical research on the educational, occupational, and income attainments observed among adult immigrants and find that scholars identify the average human-capital attainment of an immigrant group in the United States as a key causal factor that explains immigrant intergroup disparities. Specifically, we find that when measures of group-level education among immigrants are disproportionately higher than those of nonmigrants in immigrants' home countries, scholars see evidence of "ethnic capital," what we could define, following Portes (1998), as the *potential* for immigrants and their children to secure benefits by virtue of membership in co-ethnic social networks or co-ethnic social structures (c.f. Bankston, Caldas, & Zhou, 1997).

We then proceed to review the literature on outcomes among the children of immigrants and find that scholars have argued that ethnic capital positively affects individual-level outcomes for otherwise disadvantaged members of the second-generation, even when the co-ethnic ties that produce it do not always benefit the first, or parental, generation. That is, for some groups, even the children of working-class immigrant parents draw academic benefits from college-educated co-ethnics due to the high levels of human capital associated with their national origin community. Here, however, we find that researchers have largely proceeded with the assumption that ethnic capital is easily available as a benefit for co-ethnics upon resettlement, without demonstrating why the presence of immigrants from a given country, and the cultural practice of ethnic identification among them, subsequently translates into an advantage for the second-generation, especially when it is unclear how it benefits the first-generation to produce ethnic capital. Hence, in the conclusion, we propose that future research on immigrant socioeconomic mobility would be well served to incorporate conceptual insights from economic and cultural sociology as well as use comparative ethnographic research designs to directly observe how social capital becomes ethnic capital when exchanged among immigrants to better explain its role in challenging or perpetuating intergroup differences in socioeconomic mobility.

2 | FIRST-GENERATION AMERICANS: THE SOCIOECONOMIC OUTCOMES OF IMMIGRANTS

Among immigrants from various sending countries who settle in the United States, wide inequalities in education (Feliciano, 2006b; Jasso, 1988; Telles & Ortiz, 2008; Waldinger, 2001) and occupational skill level (Duleep & Wunnava, 1996; Martin, Lindsay Lowell, & Martin, 2001; Zhou & Logan, 1989) have persisted from as early as the 1970s (Borjas, 2008). As we show below, these intergroup differences are inherited by descendants of these groups and thus reproduced across time, signaling the enduring effect of average group-level attainments (Bean, Brown, Bachmeier, Fokkema, & Lessard-Phillips, 2012; Bean, Leach, Brown, Bachmeier, & Hipp, 2011; Gonzalez, 2005; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Below, we describe trends in the levels of educational attainment, occupation, and home ownership among the first-generation of the largest immigrant groups in the United States to identify the advantage they are positioned to provide to the second-generation. Paradoxically, the literature shows that despite the fact that co-ethnic ties do not always contribute to labor market gains for the first-generation, they do provide an advantage for the educational outcomes of the second-generation for many groups.

Theoretically, these patterns were originally articulated in Portes and Zhou's (1993) now seminal segmented assimilation theory, one of two dominant theoretical perspectives on contemporary immigrant assimilation. According to this perspective, the immigrant-receiving context could partition integration pathways, resulting in

positive or negative socioeconomic outcomes for the second-generation. For instance, if families are unfavorably received based on noneconomic factors such as racial phenotype or legal status, such unfavorable reception could negatively impact their socioeconomic trajectory. Therefore, contextual factors such as the availability of ethnic capital, or lack thereof, are partially responsible for tracking individual second-generation youth into divergent segments of the American opportunity structure and intergenerational patterns of mobility.

In contrast, Alba and Nee's neo-assimilation theory (Alba & Nee, 2003) emphasizes structural-demographic conditions of immigrant integration and sees ethnic capital as one of many elements that reshape dominant American social culture. This perspective questions the static racial order implicated in the segmented assimilation model and maintains that as more immigrants arrive, they remake the very society into which they assimilate. Eventually, then, the salience of ethnic capital and the sociocultural boundaries it relies upon are both thought to fade as greater shares of foreign-born Americans arrive and slowly transition to a demographic majority (Alba, 2005). Below, we review how each of these theoretical perspectives speaks to educational attainment, wages and occupations, and home ownership of the first-generation Americans, with a special focus on the role of ethnic capital.

2.1 | Educational attainment

Extensive research suggests that many of the material inequalities observed between immigrants today originate in a series of immigration laws passed in the 1960s (Alba & Nee, 2003; Waldinger & Bozorgmehr, 1996; Waters, Ueda, & Marrow, 2007) known as the Hart-Celler Act or Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 (Kennedy, 1966). These laws changed how immigrants are selected for admission to the United States in two key ways, and as a result, magnified the socioeconomic differences between immigrants who arrive with prior governmental authorization and those who do not. First, whereas historically immigrants were primarily admitted from Northern and Western European countries only, these laws expanded admission from non-European sending countries including those in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Second, these laws prioritized the admission of the most highly educated immigrants from a given country and their extended family (Keely, 1971). As a result, U.S. immigration officials selected employable visa applicants, those with a baccalaureate degree at minimum, in science and technical professions since these industries were projected to contribute most profitably to U.S. economic growth (Bhagwati, 2009; Duleep & Wunnava, 1996). Moreover, legislators reasoned that high-skill immigrants would earn higher incomes than lower skill immigrants, enabling them to pay greater income tax and further increase federal revenue. Over the past 50 years, these policies concentrated the proportions of college-educated adults among the most populous immigrant groups in the United States, including those coming from China, India, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Korea (Batalova & Fix, 2017), leading scholars to call these and other groups with disproportionately high levels of college-educated adults *educationally selected* (Feliciano, 2005).

Educationally selected immigrants are not randomly drawn, representative samples of their home countries (Borjas, 1988; Piore, 1979). Instead, they are socially mobile, college-educated residents of their home societies who opted to emigrate, two observable characteristics that distinguish them from the majority who stay behind. For example, Chinese, Indian, Korean (Hsin & Yu, 2014; Lee & Zhou, 2015; Tran, 2018), and Iranian immigrants (Der-Martirosian, 2008; Feliciano, 2006b; Maghbouleh, 2017) in the United States for the last decade have shown college completion rates of at least above 50%, which is greater than both the U.S. general population where the average rate is roughly 30%, and the college completion rates in their respective home countries where the average educational attainment rate often hovers around 10% (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012). While the average education level of specific national origin groups varies, *many* other immigrant groups including Nigerians, Armenians, and Cubans (Tran, Lee, Khachikian, & Lee, 2018) all show educational attainment rates that surpass the average rate in their respective sending countries. According to this literature, immigration reform concentrated high levels of human capital among these and other educationally select groups, and research later found that high group-level high human capital is a necessary precondition for ethnic capital (Feliciano, 2005). However, although scholars agree that high group-level human capital of the group is beneficial for the U.S.-born children of immigrants, or the

second-generation (Borjas, 1992) in line with the segmented assimilation model, it is unclear how this demographic attribute of an immigrant group becomes a social resource for disadvantaged co-ethnics of the first-generation, or adult immigrants.

2.2 | Wage and occupational outcomes

For example, even if much scholarship surrounding the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act emphasizes the law's instrumentality in attracting educated immigrants, scholars often overlook the fact that only a minority of immigrant admissions to the U.S. since 1965 have been the employment preference immigrants discussed above, which problematizes how ethnic capital is generated. In fact, Duleep and Regets (1996a) show that among visa holders whose admission is numerically limited, such as those who immigrate to work in the United States, only 20% of visas are issued to entrants on the basis of their educational attainment or occupational skill level alone. But the overwhelming majority, 80% of visas, are earmarked for family reunification entrants, or the adult children and siblings of existing U.S. citizens and the spouses and children of those family members (Duleep & Regets, 1996b). Thus, the majority of immigrants arriving post-1965 are those admitted under the family reunification provisions of the 1965 immigration reform law, which enabled the arrival of the "spouses, minor children, and parents of U.S. citizens … without regard to numerical limitation" (Duleep & Regets, 1996a: p. 572). Here, research shows that family-based migration plays an important role in facilitating robust small-business performance among immigrants, providing support for the idea that co-ethnic ties can play a protective role for immigrants' socioeconomic outcomes (Duleep & Regets, 2014) since extended family are typically the co-ethnics immigrants socialize with most regularly during resettlement.

Where wages are concerned however, we see that co-ethnic ties do not necessarily help, which problematizes how ethnic capital is generated. Allen (2009), for instance, finds that co-ethnically rooted work opportunities reduce earnings for female refugees. Further, when considering wages of foreign-born white men, Chiswick (1978) found support for the hypothesis that at the population level, these immigrants tend to earn less than the native-born, even though they eventually converge as they earn more American work experience. Among male and female immigrants who are admitted as family reunification entrants, Jasso and Rosenzweig (1995) also find that despite having lower education than occupationally and educationally select immigrants, the majority of family reunification immigrants naturalized and enjoyed higher wage growth than skilled immigrants throughout the 1980s. Moreover, although they initially earn less than better educated immigrants, these immigrants' earnings converge with occupationally and educationally selected cohort peers over time (Duleep & Regets, 1996a). On the surface, these findings suggest positive outcomes for immigrants that could generate ethnic capital.

However, Chiswick, Lee, and Miller (2005) demonstrate that there is a migration wage penalty which begins when immigrants decide to emigrate and pay initially for their downward mobility in occupational prestige (cf. Akresh 2006, 2008: Nicklett & Burgard, 2009; Ro, 2014). This suggests that although family reunification and employment preference immigrants' wages converged in the past, it likely came as a result of underemployment among the higher skilled. However, when immigrants in recent cohorts do see upward labor market mobility Akresh (2008) shows that high-skill, or employment preference immigrants, as opposed to family preference, refugee, or diversity preference immigrants, gain in their occupational prestige and recover any losses quicker than others, suggesting co-ethnic ties with them could provide access to ethnic capital. Paradoxically, however, Tegegne (2015) suggests that relying on such social ties with other immigrants leads to *lower* initial occupational prestige for Asian and White immigrants—the exact groups that ought to benefit from ethnic capital (Bankston et al., 1997; Tran et al., 2018)—but not Hispanic or Black immigrants, partially due to their relatively higher premigration occupational status. These findings again problematize why high-skill immigrants would maintain ties with co-ethnics, or how these ties even become beneficial, a question that has been debated through at least two schools of thought. On the one hand, there are scholars who draw on the segmented-assimilation model and advocated that residing in ethnic enclaves, or areas with high concentrations of co-ethnics, facilitates immigrant incorporation (Portes & Jensen, 1989, 1992) and provides

noneconomic benefits such as a sense of community (Zhou & Cho, 2010). On the other hand, scholars in the neo-assimilation framework argue that ethnic enclaves bring benefits only selectively and, more generally, hamper assimilation (Sanders & Nee, 1987).

Research also shows that the unequal skill composition of immigrant cohorts leads to the spatial pooling of immigrants' community resources, such as information about labor market conditions in ethnic enclaves that benefit later arriving immigrants (Zhou & Logan, 1989) but also introduce problems such as business competition and exploitation (Kim & Hurh, 1985). For example, as Rosales (2013, 2014) illustrates in her ethnographic work on street vendors, relying on co-ethnic social ties for job opportunities may actually constrain undocumented immigrants' as their co-ethnics who provide such opportunities are also in a position to exploit them. Indeed, employers can illegally withhold the wages of their co-ethnic employees who they know cannot take legal action because they are either unfamiliar with their legal rights or are in legally precarious situations.

In terms of wages, Painter and Sanderson (2017) show that industrial channeling, or preparing for post-migration employment in an industrial niche prior to emigration, among Mexican immigrants leads to a significant wage premium, suggesting having co-ethnic economic ties improves job placement and wages (Aguilera & Massey, 2003). Despite these co-ethnic ties, however, real wages fell at least 20% between 1970 and 1990 among undocumented immigrants to the United States (Massey & Gelatt, 2010), even when worker productivity and skill increased during the same period (Gentsch & Massey, 2011; Massey & Gelatt, 2010). This points to persistence of labor market discrimination on the basis of citizenship in the context of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), a federal mandate in 1986 when employers were sanctioned from hiring undocumented immigrants (Gentsch & Massey, 2011; Orrenius & Zavodny, 2009). Comparing several immigrant and native groups with longitudinal data on earnings, Villarreal and Tamborini (2018) find that Black and Hispanic immigrants are less likely to earn parity in annual income with native-born Whites than are White and Asian immigrants, but they almost nearly earn parity with native co-racials and co-ethnics (native-born Blacks and Hispanics). This suggest that whether ethnic capital has a positive impact on wages and earnings may vary across ethno-racial groups and citizenship status.

2.3 | Home ownership

In terms of other economic outcomes such as home ownership, however, research does suggest that co-ethnic ties can be beneficial, by enabling immigrants to accumulate wealth that can then be transferred to descendants, providing a substantial economic advantage for the second-generation. Nationally representative pooled survey data show that not only does home ownership become more likely as immigrants marry, age, and have children (McConnell & Akresh, 2008), but that co-ethnic networks play a protective role in facilitating this process. Specifically, when deciding between renting, owning or living for free, the authors observe a statistically significant co-ethnic benefit for Mexican immigrants that makes these immigrants "more likely to own than rent but … less likely to own than to live for free (McConnell & Akresh, 2008:151)," when they reside in states with higher proportions of co-ethnics (cf. Toussaint-Comeau & Rhine, 2008). Additionally, McConnell and Akresh's (2008) quantitative study also shows that Asian immigrants have higher rates of owning as opposed to living for free when in spatial contexts with greater proportions of co-ethnics, but Western European immigrants show lower rates of owning versus renting under such conditions. Still, these authors do not unpack what mechanisms are responsible for these co-ethnic effects, but some studies suggest that there is likely some deliberate coordination between individual immigrants and co-ethnics for home ownership.

For example, Munda and Oyelere (2017) rely on Census Microuse data from 2000 to 2012 to assess determinants of homeownership among immigrants in the United States before and after the 2009 recession and discover that homeownership rates declined *less* for immigrants than natives both during and after the recession because "birthplace networks," double the likelihood of being a homeowner in the postrecession period. These scholars measure birthplace networks as "the proportion of the sample population in the state that is from the birth country of an immigrant" (Mundra & Oyelere, 2017: p. 20) but predicate this operationalization on normative expectations that

immigrants who share a common birth country are more likely to engage in prosocial behavior with one another than with others in the context of reception. Similarly, Logan, Zhang, and Alba (2002) advance an *ethnic community model* of residential choice whereby immigrants prefer to settle near co-ethnics even when alternatives are not cost-prohibitive. However, that ethnic homophily among immigrants occurs is more of a normative assumption in this and similar studies rather than an empirical observation. In other words, although there is empirical evidence that the presence of co-ethnics is potentially beneficial for home ownership, we understand much less *why* presence of co-ethnics has more weight for this outcome than for other indicators of socioeconomic status.

3 | THE NEW SECOND-GENERATION AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

While the findings about the impact of co-ethnic ties on immigrant socioeconomic mobility remain mixed, there is greater scholarly consensus on the benefits of ethnic capital for the second-generation of educationally select groups. Here, research is more resolute about the role of ethnic capital in fostering intergenerational mobility within immigrant families. Researchers have attempted to assess how much of an advantage some children inherit from their immigrant parents to discern whether these children's later life attainments qualify as upward mobility, as class reproduction (Zhou, Lee, Vallejo, Tafoya-Estrada, & Xiong, 2008) or perhaps as downward mobility (Haller, Portes, & Lynch, 2011; Portes & Zhou, 1993). Among the second-generation of educationally select groups, primarily those from East Asia, this research attests to the educationally protective role of ethnic capital, whereby co-ethnic community ties—those between immigrants from the same country—provide norm enforcement of high educational attainment for even the working-class families in these groups. Among second-generation Latinx groups, however, where the average college attainment level among immigrant adults is lower, recent research suggests that within the broad Latinx racial category, intraracial relationships among Latina teachers and Latinx students may be beneficial (Flores, 2017) but the role of co-ethnic ties among immigrants from the same home country remains undertheorized, leaving scholars unsure how ethnic capital can become an asset for upward mobility in this population.

Concern for the life chances of the children of immigrants gave rise to scholarly interest in what is called The New Second-Generation (Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, & Waters, 2004; Kroneberg, 2008; Portes & Zhou, 1993), consisting of U.S.-born individuals whose foreign-born parents arrived in the United States after the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act (Zhou et al., 2008). Where research has considered occupational attainment, almost all analyses find that the second-generation invariably outperforms the first-generation in occupational attainment (Farley & Alba, 2002). When disaggregated by parental national origin, however, these analyses indicate that members of the second-generation racialized as Asian tend to hold occupations with higher prestige scores than cohort peers of Latin-American origin. However, recent analyses question the extent of this advantage among Asian-Americans and show that except for Chinese-Americans, the largest Asian-American immigrant group, many second-generation Asian-Americans do *not* outperform native-born 3rd+ generation White cohort peers, despite their academically superior credentials (Tran, Lee, & Huang, 2019). However, research on these outcomes is still emerging (Feliciano & Rumbaut, 2018) as the median age for this cohort is 38, compared to 46 for U.S. adults overall (Cohn, 2013). Indeed, most findings on second-generation outcomes concern their educational attainment (Feliciano, 2009; Patacchini & Zenou, 2016), which we summarize below.

Building from the Wisconsin School model of status-attainment research (Haller et al., 2011; Portes & Böröcz, 1989; Portes & Fernández-Kelly, 2008; Portes & MacLeod, 1996; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Zhou & Bankston, 1998), scholarship on second-generation educational attainment initially used parental education measured in years of schooling to predict how much education the second-generation would complete. This research initially examined secondary school outcomes (Buriel & Cardoza, 1988; Suarez-Orozco, 1987; Suárez-Orozco, 1989, 1995; Vigil, 1983; Warren, 1996), and later tertiary education as the nationwide demand for college rose through the 1990s (Deil-Amen, 2015; Domina, Conley, & Farkas, 2011; Gelbgiser, 2018; Rosenbaum, 2001). Early studies found cause for alarm among immigrants racialized as Hispanic due to the persistently high high-school dropout rates observed

among this population (Valencia, 2011; Vigil, 1983, 1999). As captured in the segmented-assimilation model, Portes and Zhou (1993) warned that these dropout rates would compound with other contextual factors, such as racialization, to facilitate "downward assimilation," whereby the second-generation assimilates, but into economically unfavorable segments of society. As access to college has expanded however (Goldrick-Rab & Pfeffer, 2009; Pfeffer & Hertel, 2015; Rosenbaum, 2001; Schofer & Meyer, 2005), research shows that the second-generation of most immigrant groups complete more education than their parents, which also holds true for most Latinx groups (Alba, Kasinitz, & Waters, 2011; Tran & Valdez, 2015; Waldinger & Catron, 2016). Below we review educational outcomes among second-generation Asian and Latinx immigrants, given that the vast majority, 78%, of immigrants to the United States today arrive from Asia and Latin America (Pew Research Center, 2015b) and that scholarly consensus surrounding how ethnic capital works is strongest around second-generation educational outcomes.

3.1 | Second-generation Asian Americans' educational attainment

Dating to as early as 1966, journalistic publications racialized Asian-Americans as "model minorities" (Lim, 2015) and made this label an indelible feature of scholarship in this area and one that scholars would spend generations undoing. Still, scholars have also found consistently high educational attainment of second-generation Asian-Americans (Byun & Park, 2012; Hsin and Xie 2014; Lee & Zhou, 2017; Liu & Yu, 2016; Ochoa, 2013) and have tried to understand what contributes to these patterns. Specifically, researchers showed that second-generation Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, and South Indians report the highest rates of advanced degree expectations, as early as eighth grade (Kao, 1995), which is an important early predictor of later educational attainment (Feliciano, 2006a; Karlson, 2015; Schmitt-Wilson & Faas, 2016; Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1969). Later research also showed high levels of attainment and years of schooling completed by Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, and South Indians (Foner, 2000; Haller et al., 2011).

Prior to research on ethnic capital and Asian-American educational selectivity, scholars initially attributed these high rates of second-generation achievement to Asian-origin immigrant parents' fears of labor market discrimination. Because parents feared their children would confront racial discrimination in the labor market, they favored particular professional and advanced degrees that would guarantee a livable wage regardless of potential discrimination (Pong, Hao, & Gardner, 2005; Sue & Okazaki, 1990). However, later research transitioned away from this cultural explanation and offered another which drew more on the symbolic role of ethnic capital at the community level. Specifically, Zhou and Lee (2017) maintained that "stereotype promise" contributes to socioeconomic gains for otherwise disadvantaged second-generation Asian-Americans because non-Asians enforce the expectation of Asian achievement and thus enable the stereotype to guide youth mobility when students have socioeconomic support to meet the high expectations (Louie, 2004; Zhou & Lee, 2017) of their parents and non-Asian gatekeepers such as school staff. However, those who lack these socioeconomic resources suffer significant mental health consequences because of these stereotypes, which put them at risk for depression (Reynolds & Baird, 2010) and poorer developmental outcomes (Choi, 2008; Choi, He, & Harachi, 2008; Choi & Lahey, 2006; Lee & Zhou, 2014b). Therefore, recognizing the growing diversity within the Asian racial category, researchers began sounding calls for scholars to disaggregate Asian-Americans by national origin to uncover the vast internal diversity in socioeconomic mobility outcomes (Choi, 2008; Kao, 1995; Lee, Lee, & Khachikian, 2016; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Ocampo, 2013; Ocampo, 2014; Okamoto, 2014). Importantly, disaggregating by national-origin would begin to show whether benefits of ethnic capital are observed in all educationally select groups, or only a few.

In addition, Feliciano (2006b) revealed that the commonly observed high academic achievements of Asian-American children compared to native-born Whites have their social and historical origins in the educational selectivity of these immigrant communities. Similarly, Lee and Zhou (2015) extended the comparison of these immigrants to the American native-born, and showed that East Asian origin educationally select immigrants are not only more educated than those in their homeland but also more so than the general United States population, where the college attainment rate is roughly 31%, making these immigrants dually positively selected. Moreover the high levels of

education among co-ethnics are what permit ethnic capital to accumulate in immigrant communities through a series of tangible and intangible resources. These include formal community organizations and informal cultural norms respectively that result in academic gains for even second-generation co-ethnic youth whose parents are *not* highly educated. Additionally, Tran et al. (2018), as well as Jiménez and Horowitz (2013) have argued that ethnic capital among East Asian immigrants leads to racial stereotypes, that is, expected high academic achievement of students presenting with Asian phenotype.

To explain why many Asian-American origin second-generation youth exceed their own parental education levels, scholars have operationalized ethnic capital by investigating ethnic community-based organizations. Often these are concrete, tangible resources such as educational enrichment activities and supplementary education centers that originate in the class-composition of East-Asian immigrants' national origin groups and support educational mobility for co-ethnic youth, even for those youth who come from noncollege educated families (Lee & Zhou, 2017; Zhou, 2009; Zhou & Kim, 2006; Zhou & Li, 2003). Although ethnic capital is implicated in the educational mobility of second-generation East Asian origin youth, most explanations for its existence emphasize demand-side factors, such as immigrant parents' desires that their children enter high-status occupations, but more research on supply-side factors is needed to understand whether ethnic capital develops in other educationally select groups.

3.2 | Second-generation Latinx educational attainment

While U.S. immigration officials judiciously select college-educated Asian immigrants in numbers that replenish and reinforce stereotypes of high academic attainment for descendants of these groups (Lee & Zhou, 2014a; Tran et al., 2018), the irregularly supported and criminalized migration of Latin Americans to the United States has historically complicated the socioeconomic mobility of second-generation Latinos (Gentsch & Massey, 2011; Menjívar, 2006; Menjívar, Cervantes, & Alvord, 2018; Motomura, 2014; Zayas, 2015). As a result, sizeable numbers of second-generation Latinxs shoulder the challenges of undocumented legal status during the transition to college (Enriquez & Saguy, 2016; Gonzales, 2016). Among these immigrants, the largest national origin groups include Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Salvadorans, and Cubans, constituting 63.3%, 9.5%, 3.8%, and 3.7% of the U.S. Hispanic population, respectively (Flores, López, & Radford, 2017). Because the group-level education for adult Mexican immigrants, the largest Latin-American origin group in the United States, is lower than the U.S. national average, and often lower than home country educational levels, these immigrants and their descendants face considerably different challenges in attaining parity with the U.S. mainstream (Feliciano, 2018; Lee & Zhou, 2015; Warren, 1996).

For example, Luthra, Soehl, and Waldinger (Luthra, Soehl, & Waldinger, 2017: p. 27) find that when examining years of schooling completed by second-generation youth, "belonging to a disadvantaged group,

with low educational resources or exposure to prejudice due to darker skin, diminishes overall educational attainment net of individual-level characteristics." According to this research, college-educated families from immigrant groups with low-group level education face more obstacles in transmitting their educational attainment to their children. However, research does show that when the federal government offers policies to legalize, immigrant parents who use these policies see an estimated 0.94 years of increased schooling among their sons and 1.68 years for their daughters (Bean, Brown, & Bachmeier, 2015: pp. 87–88). This underscores the social-structural determinants of immigrant mobility, which are taken for granted in research on authorized immigrant groups where ethnic capital supplies an additional advantage to naturalized immigrants. In measures of absolute mobility, nearly all second-generation Latinx groups outperform their parents in years of schooling completed and English language ability (Tran, 2010; Tran & Valdez, 2015). Hull (2017) shows that first and second-generation Hispanic origin students tend to test lower than White students in reading and math in the third grade, but by eighth grade, they perform at least one standard deviation higher than White classmates. When compared to the socioeconomic status of their parents, these educational outcomes suggest an optimistic portrait for the children of Latinx immigrants in the United States.

However, when compared to second-generation Asian origin peers, U.S. Department of Education statistics reveal that second-generation Latinx students are more likely to be enrolled in a community college than a 4-year

college, and less likely to specialize in a STEM major once they eventually transfer to a 4-year degree granting institution (Arbeit et al., 2016). Additionally, Hispanic students overall are least likely to complete their college degrees (Krogstad, 2016) and the gains made by second-generation Latinx students in primary and secondary school test scores fade across immigrant generations (Hull, 2017). These second-generation outcomes lie in stark contrast to the potentially powerful role of the first-generation's social capital, which research shows is beneficial for the largest Hispanic national-origin group, Mexican-Americans (Aguilera & Massey, 2003; Massey & España, 1987), suggesting the need for research to uncover how these social structures can become an asset for the second-generation.

4 | ETHNIC CAPITAL: A VEHICLE OF SOCIOECONOMIC MOBILITY?

The literature reviewed thus far appears to characterize the average post-1965 immigrant as one who sacrifices premigration occupational prestige developed in the home country (Chiswick, Cohen, & Zach, 1997; Lancee & Bol, 2017) to either join extended family already in the United States (Duleep & Regets, 1996b; Jasso & Rosenzweig, 1995), or less frequently, to complete education and enter high-skill work. Additionally, the disproportionately high levels of college graduates found in specific immigrant communities contribute to ethnic capital, or the potential of co-ethnics of these groups to draw social benefits from one another. The co-ethnic ties that enable ethnic capital also help the first generation find work (Der-Martirosian, 2008), and the second-generation complete college (Feliciano, 2018). Despite significant earnings penalties, documented immigrants eventually converge with the native-born (Chiswick, 1978; Duleep & Regets, 1996a; Ikpebe & Seeborg, 2018; Villarreal & Tamborini, 2018). Rarely, however, do they do so through employment in the ethnic economy, which reduces the earning potential of premigration education for some groups (Xie & Gough, 2011) and reduces wages for others (Logan, Alba, & Stults, 2003).

Based on the preceding review then, research suggests that immigrant intergroup differences will be reproduced by the second-generation (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017), but this research undertheorizes how marginalized immigrant groups can leverage their existing social structures and ethnic capital to overcome these patterns. That is, while research has demystified the demographic origin of why some immigrant communities see higher rates of intergenerational attainment, and offered immigrants' educational selectivity as one explanation, its reliance on quantitative survey data has created significant limitations. Specifically, by eschewing interview or observational data, research on immigrant socioeconomic mobility has remained limited to accounts of contextual attainment (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017), or to categorical identification with the national origin community. For example, contextual attainment assesses mobility by comparing immigrants' premigration percentile ranking in their home country educational distribution with where they fall in the post-migration, U.S. educational distribution. This relative measure shows that all immigrants see a drop in their percentile ranking upon immigration but does not explain how some groups recapture more of their lost premigration socioeconomic status than others, which leads to ethnic capital and subsequently, stark intergroup inequalities across generations.

To that end, recent work has responded to the need for ethnographic research on second-generation outcomes and shown that the mechanism of co-ethnic socialization through community-based organizations, which are not necessarily strictly academically oriented, expose participants to college and career preparation norms necessary for mobility in the United States (Khachikian, 2018). But while this mechanism of co-ethnic socialization describes how immaterial resources such as cultural capital are redistributed across social-class lines, it does not explain *why*. In other words, while existing qualitative research largely resolves the issue of how social capital is coordinated among educationally select groups and offers ethnic affiliation as an organizing principle, unanswered is the question of why shared ethnic heritage and co-ethnic ties predicate access to co-ethnics' socioeconomic resources. To accept ethnic ties as satisfactory explanans for the sharing of social resources is to rely on what Brubaker (2006) has called ethnic "commonsense," where ethnicity "… is a key part of what we want to explain, not what we want to explain things *with*." Here, contributions from economic sociology, particularly those that illustrate how intimate relations and

emotion work intertwine with material exchanges (Bandelj, Morgan, & Sowers, 2015), can contribute to the study of immigrant resettlement and intergroup inequality by illuminating the mechanisms which generate and activate ethnic capital.

5 | FUTURE RESEARCH

Our review of research on the socioeconomic mobility of immigrants has pointed to the potentially crucial role of ethnic capital in understanding why some groups advance and others do not. Given this, we believe this literature would benefit from a stronger engagement with economic sociology's work on social capital, which has identified social ties as central to the understanding of who secures jobs, investment or business collaborations (Burt, 1995; Granovetter, 1985; Uzzi, 1996). However, this literature has also pointed to the downsides of social capital (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993) and the manifold challenges in garnering benefits from our social ties at the specific moment when we invoke them or for particular purposes we may want (Smith, 2005). Indeed, economic sociologists researching relational work (Zelizer, 2007, 2012) have urged investigations into how relations are formed, negotiated, and sometimes dissolved to better understand when our relationships result in desired economic outcomes as well as the implications they have for economic inequality (Bandelj, 2012, 2016). This approach would reveal how existing co-ethnic ties can get activated to bring benefits, and under which circumstances they do not, or can even be detrimental and exploitative.

Moreover, while the sharing of resources among co-ethnics is seemingly altruistic, these behaviors must be interpreted as they are practiced to understand the broader cultural processes (Lamont, Beljean, & Clair, 2014) in which these behaviors are embedded. Such a perspective would leverage recent contributions from the cultural sociology of mobility (Streib, 2017) to observe longitudinally, and in context, how frames, narratives, dispositions, and identities may facilitate the mobility of the disadvantaged and motivate how they form, maintain, or dissolve ties with co-ethnics to produce ethnic capital.

Therefore, we urge scholars to design research that would leverage thinking from economic and cultural sociology to explore variation in ethnic capital across and within ethnic groups. Some of the relevant questions to address would be the following: What are the precise mechanisms that transfer materially beneficial resources across class lines to co-ethnics? For instance, Smith (2007) has shown that interpersonal distrust dynamics between job holders and job seekers make benefiting from social ties less straightforward than we would imagine, even when both parties belong to the same racial group. When might ethnic elites share resources not only with co-ethnics but with *non*-co-ethnics as well, creating spillover effects? Under what conditions does ethnicity prevail as the most salient dimension of identity in guiding the exchange of social resources? Do immigrant elites generate or supply ethnic capital because they expect some reputational compensation, such as status validation? Recently, Zhou and Li (2018) have suggested that this idea deserves greater attention. But can such incentives be used to supply resources across ethnoracial lines? How can immigrant communities with lower levels of education develop and benefit from ethnic capital? Alternatively, how might ethnic capital disadvantage those who use it? This is reasonable to expect given that researchers have identified demands on reciprocity and exclusion of outsiders as potential downsides to embeddedness in social ties (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993). Finally, how would a cross-national or comparative approach contribute to scholarly understanding of the social motivations for producing and using ethnic capital, as well as its implications for stratification? These are but some of the questions we invite future scholarship to examine as it unpacks the potentially crucial role of ethnic capital in the socioeconomic mobility of immigrants.

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